

The regions of Armenia

Hello and welcome to another episode of *Article 27: Freedom of Expression*. Last time, we discussed the topic “Yerevan and the issues of the residents of Yerevan.” In this episode, we will discuss the issues relevant to the marzes of Armenia, the regions and the villages, that is - Armenia without Yerevan. This is how I broadly formulate today’s topic, because the relationship between the regions and the capital has been problematic since Soviet times – the 50s and the 60s – as a result of rapid urbanization. The specific characteristic of this topic is the following – when we say “outside the city” meaning “outside Yerevan”, two pictures come to mind. One is that things are beautiful outside Yerevan - there are sights to see, food is tasty and cheap, the air is clean, although there may be some environmental issues. On the other hand, the villages are emptying out, because a number of major issues have come up – there is no employment, poverty is rampant, unsolved environmental and educational problems remain. Our government, international bodies and non-government organizations are making a serious effort to address those problems, but they continue to remain quite severe. I would like to address my first question to Naira Arakelyan from Armavir. Which of those problems are the most serious and what can be done about it?

Naira Arakelyan (Director, Armavir InfoTun) – Thank you. I’m from Armavir, but I don’t want to speak only about our marz today. I feel pain in my heart when I go to communities on the border and when I see what is going on there. All our villages are ageing, only the elderly are left in the villages. When I was doing a cartographical exercise on a work-related visit to the Syunik and Tavush marzes, I will never forget how in Shikahogh, when we asked whether they had a kindergarten, the elderly replied that they have a beautiful, renovated kindergarten, but they did not have any children who could use it. And truly, it pains me that a village like Shikahogh, with such a big forest reserve there and such a rich history, is emptying out; only the elderly remain in the village. There are many issues, but I think that if we have a correct economic policy, we would probably be able to preserve our villages, and keeping the villages intact also means defending the border. After all, aren’t the villagers living in border communities also soldiers, people who defend the border? If the border villages empty out, it would be difficult for us to defend our border. Being a representative of a non-government organization and also an economist by background, I believe that distant villages should have a greater subsidy by the state. As a person from Armavir, I would like to point out that we have those issues as well, but not to the same alarming extent. And it is not right to subsidize all communities to the same degree. Why don’t we consider that one should create conditions in distant villages which would allow their economies to develop, so that people can work in agriculture and animal husbandry? Let me give you an example. In the village of Tzav, there is a milk collection and processing point, which is now closed. It is non-operational; why should that

point have the same tax obligations as the collection point of Ashtarak Kat? It is possible, isn't it, to put some tax limits for distant regions or to run the tax policy for the benefit of the average villager, or such that our large businesses decide to put their milk collection points in border villages and thus contribute to the economic development of these villages?

Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan – All right, thank you. You already noted a few points. The final one related to the development of small and medium enterprises. We talk a lot about them, but nothing changes. Liana, maybe you could talk about that, what is the reason for this, in your opinion?

Liana Gyozyan (economic journalist) – I think that this requires clear political will. Over the last five years, the opinion has been clearly voiced everywhere that small and medium enterprises must develop and that especially distant marzes must be given tax privileges. A few months ago, a bill to this effect entered into circulation in the government but was rejected, with the Minister of Finance saying that such privileges could not be given as they would harm the conditions for competition and would create a shadow economy. I do not agree with that opinion, because today not only the border villages, but the other ones are emptying out as well – only the elderly, women and children remain. Although there is also an opinion that suggests that the villagers are growing lazy, they no longer want to work. A few months ago, I was in the village of Geghasar in Lori marz – which became well known as the epicenter of the earthquake in '88 – and during a conversation with village head Stas Hovhannisyan about emigration, he noted that if the average villager so desired, he could stay in the motherland and make money, but he has grown lazy and does not want to work; he is waiting for a handout from the government, and he added, 'go to the fields and see that they have not been harvested.' So there is also this opinion that people prefer to go abroad and make money in an easier way.

Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan – I would like to pause on this point for a moment. Has the villager really grown lazy? Is that really laziness when you don't want to make money through hard labor? The streets are not paved with gold abroad; there is hard work to be done there as well, that too in foreign conditions.

Liana Gyozyan – I would like to add one thing. We were in Gavar recently; as we know, the people of Gavar are known for their hospitality and generosity. There was a media tour; we

journalists had gone out to bring the issues raised by the people of Gavar to the capital. The elderly men gathered at the square approached us and asked what we had brought for them. We answered that we had come to discuss their problems. They said that if we had not brought anything then we could leave, their issues were well known. So, the mentality of the people has changed.

Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan – Naira, do you agree that the villagers are in this state of expectation or supplication?

Naira Arakelyan – I can only agree in part, I am mostly of a different opinion. I was Gavar recently too. I was very surprised when we visited a school which had 1200 pupils in the past, but now only has 200. That is, people in Gavar have nothing with which to occupy themselves these days. Labor migration has always been common in Armenia, especially in the Gavar and Martuni regions. That is not so bad, what is bad is that the labor migrants are now being forced to take their families with them, because it is more convenient for them to support their families abroad than to leave them here and travel alone. There was a case in Martuni recently where they wrote that the person had potatoes for sale but could not find a buyer. The Minister of Agriculture visited Martuni and said, “Cultivate, sow and reap crops that you can sell.” But what can Martuni grow besides potatoes? After all, aren’t there are climatic and natural conditions to consider? It is not just the villagers, all of us favor an easier lifestyle, working less and making more money. But it is painful to see a villager struggling with the soil and getting a harvest but then being unable to sell it.

Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan – I would like our other participants to also voice their opinions. Sara, would you like to speak?

Sara Petrosyan (Hetq investigative journalist) – After hearing the opinion of our two participants, I agree with some of the points raised, but I am categorically against the opinion that the average villager has grown lazy. We cannot say that for the majority of them; indeed, our nation is not one of lazy people. There is the issue of a lack of organization, which also has its pre-existing reasons. We have villages today, as Gevorg mentioned, which are objects of envy in every sense – with beautiful natural surroundings, historical monuments, captivating locations, attractive in every way both to foreigners and local people. There are villages which

have very good conditions and broad perspectives for the development and advancement of agriculture and animal husbandry. It wouldn't be news to anyone to hear that foreigners who have the experience of starting a business in the same field are managing to come and set themselves up in the same village and start an enterprise, but the locals are being unable to do so. Why is this so? Because in the Soviet period, those villagers who had good perspectives for animal husbandry, agriculture and soil cultivation were all linked to a production unit, they were made to produce mechanical parts – even things like galoshes - and villagers were cut off from working with soil. They made them lazy by linking them with a production unit. He has learned that he should go to work in the morning, get his sixty-seventy roubles and then return home. In this way, they cut him off from working with soil, from growing crops, from cultivation. And now, when it has already been 20 years that those production units are closed, he is still waiting for them to come and offer him work. Very few of them have the self-management it takes to start an enterprise and make a living in this way. The others think that someone from the outside must organize them, because they have no experience of business, they have tried one or two things but have not succeeded. The unstable economic situation in the country and taxes have contributed to this; without being able to get an income or make a profit off it, the villagers gradually left the soil, a sense of despair crept in, and migration gradually gained momentum. The average villager understood that he could make more money by selling in the market than by struggling with the soil, because the costs associated with soil cultivation are much bigger. And this is where the government's support was needed to help the villagers manage themselves. What you said about the Minister's advice - to sow that which one can sell – is important, yes; there are these traditional thoughts that Gavar must grow potatoes, other places must grow grain crops, but that planning should have been done with the government's support, including how much potato should be sown such that it can all be sold. Two years ago, when the potato crop of the previous year had sold very well, there was a huge loss because the villagers could not arrange the sale on their own and the government did not support its export to Georgia. I can mention various cases, both in Armavir and other marzes. The role of the government must be in correct planning and support. Some things are being done now. This year the government decided to support villagers with the rising costs of diesel and other costs, because they refused en masse to cultivate the sowing fields and we nearly did not have any fields sown with wheat. The government distributed diesel and wheat seeds at affordable prices, which was a very good thing. But it was a bit late, because today when I ask the same villager or the head of the village how much diesel or wheat seeds were allocated to them, or nitrogen fertilizers for example, they mention that they have applied to get this support a certain amount of times and then they say, "You know, not enough money was collected, other did not apply to get the support, so that is why I have not been able to receive my share yet." That link has been cut again. And quite a serious situation is created in that sense, because the more they got cut off from the soil, the more of them left their homes

and their soil; that led to a catastrophic demographic picture which has resulted in the closure of kindergartens and schools.

Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan – So to educate, to guide – is that the approach you propose? And is it possible that this is irreversible? Maybe some villages will disappear or shrink as a result of economic developments. I always use the example of the US city of Detroit, which is completely empty in its center. There are empty skyscrapers – economic development has left that area, and although automobile manufacturing has once again started to develop I am not completely convinced that the empty center of Detroit will be reinhabited. Lusine, what is your opinion?

Lusine Vayachyan (writer, public figure) – I am more inclined to think that this is linked to the collapse of the Soviet Union, a society which had collective farming, where villagers did not have their own land - they may have had a small plot adjacent to their homes, but not large pieces of land – as a result of which they were not prepared to development an individual plan of action, the state did the main work. The truck came and took the harvest for processing – where did it take it, what did they do, the average villager had no idea. Now the generation they have raised is completely unprepared – the child of a collective farmer does not have a villager’s thinking, does not have a farmer’s sense of awareness. That, combined with a monopolistic attitude and this distribution of fields of activity, does not leave the villagers with a place to sell their goods. They must be helped, at least through the creation of collectivization again or through some other alternative cooperative unification, so that they can sell the goods together.

Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan – So we should go back to industry?

Lusine Vayachyan – No, we should not go back. There is a process of emptying villages going on now. The villages will empty out, rich people will buy that land and will become big farmers, like Monsanto in America. I think that is how things will develop.

Sara Petrosyan – I have noticed in general that that is what some government representatives are openly saying, that perhaps we don’t need villages to keep our borders. In my opinion, this is a very dangerous idea. My current research into rural areas has led me to the belief that such

a policy was already implemented in the 70s, when people were brought down to the valleys from mountaintop villages, and as a result some villages were emptied. In 2006, during the first study I conducted in the marzes and published, I discovered that here are a number of villages in Armenia which were really deserted due to that policy, although some people had decided not to leave their birthplaces and their ancestral homes, so the village was kept together by just four-five families. No communication, no roads, not even a functioning school. In the whole Soviet period and to this day - the example I use is from the villages of the Aragats region – they have kept the village together up to these recent years, sending their children to various relatives' homes, so that they can attend school. Those children have not grown up in one family, they have been separated from each other, but as a result they managed to keep the village intact despite not having any resources. There were some births, but not in large numbers. Today that same unjustified policy is in effect. In that sense, the brave example of the Kajaran village head was an exception – I say this knowing almost all the village heads of the country. Like the hero in the Lone Walnut Tree, he did everything to keep those few hundred households in the village, so that the exploitation of the mine would not be a reason to leave the village, so that the community consolidates itself and keeps our border strong. Those who have been active in keeping our borders during the war are continuing that work today by not leaving the village. And for those who have been indifferent - they have not had much proximity to the border - the ore mines have greater importance today.

Naira Arakelyan – I would like to give a specific example related to what Sara said. A few Moscow-based natives of the village of Tzav in Syunik marz – who lived in Tzav during the years of the war – saw that no children were being born in the village and created a Fund which has allocated money for each newborn, up to when they turn seven years old, if they live and stay in the village. Seven children were born in Tzav last year. So a small motivational step, a small caring look and we are able to revitalize the village. And if the state were to implement the correct policy, we would be able to revitalize the villages.

Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan – But it wasn't the state who did this.

Naira Arakelyan – It was just a group of four people, whose philanthropy has resulted in the birth of seven children in Tzav last year. I have been to the village of Voskevan near Noyemberyan, I have been to almost all communities. Why should the doctor, whose obstetric unit is under danger of enemy fire, have employer's tax kept from her or have a salary

equivalent to a doctor working in Yerevan? She is a young doctor who is endangering her life each and every second. There is a kindergarten in Voskevan, but it is not functional because it is in danger of enemy fire. They have set up a pre-school for the children, from where they move on to school. So the village heads are finding solutions and are doing everything they can to keep the village intact. So a gesture in response from the government is very important. There was the opinion today that the villagers may be getting lazier, because the retailers are making more money than the person who cultivates the soil.

Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan – But maybe that is not the future. Why shouldn't we imagine that agriculture should be more and more mechanized and the thing on which the survival of the village will depend may no longer be agriculture? There is the internet now and so on. I would like to give the floor to Yevgenia Paturyan, who will present us with figures about emigration processes, after which we will pass the floor to Artashes.

Yevgenia Paturyan – Good evening. I will present today some figures from the International Labor Organization's 2009 study, which establishes that the major part of emigration from Armenia consists of labor migration. Sixty thousand people from Armenia go to Russia annually to find work. The vast majority of these migrants visit Armenia once a year to see their families. According to data from the National Statistical Service, over the past years, around six thousand people a year emigrate from Armenia once and for all, while the figure for immigration is around a thousand people a year. And, according to their data, the number of people emigrating has been decreasing from year to year. According to another study, which was the result of a public survey done by the Caucasus Research Resource Center – the data of the Caucasus Barometer – given the opportunity, around one-third of the Armenian population would leave Armenia once and for all, to live in another country. And the desire to leave has been growing in recent years, especially in Yerevan and other cities. As you can see, the picture for the villages has not changed in particular from 2008 to 2010, but the number has grown for Yerevan and other cities. So there are two different tendencies, based on two different sets of data. In one case, the number of people leaving is decreasing, in the other the number of those who wish to do so is growing. Almost everyone cites their material situation and not having a job or the perspectives for employment as the main reason. The other reasons are their children's opportunities for education and finding a job, securing human rights and security, the feeling of being unwanted in Armenia and the smallest numbers cite having a relative abroad as the reason. According to another study, done in 2011 – so these are the most recent data – again one-third of our population wants to leave the country, and once again it is Yerevan which has the highest percentage of these people who are thinking of leaving. According to the

data of the Caucasus Research Resource Center, around nineteen percent of the Armenian population received income from abroad and, for eleven percent, these remittances are their main source of income. This is what I had planned to present to you today, thank you.

Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan – Very well, we saw that the statistical data does not necessarily match up with our predictions. We know that villages are emptying out, we have factual data about this, but we see that the tendencies for emptying out - migration and emigration - are much more focused on the capital. Artashes, what opinion do you have on the topics discussed so far?

Artashes Sergoyan (Youth Bank, Vanadzor) – I would first like to address the opinion that perhaps there is a direct policy to empty out border villages. To be honest, I did not want to believe that viewpoint until this moment, when in the pre-election period, the opinion was voiced by officials that it would be good for people residing near the borders to come down and reside at the foot of the mountains, so that they can arrange to install gas and water supplies, after which the villagers can go uphill again at a later time. That was quite surprising to me, but that is our reality unfortunately. I would also like to talk about the issues related to solving the job creation issue. I don't think that there is really a lack of jobs there. Jobs are being created, people are going, working for their seventy or eighty thousand, but the meaning of life is not just in work. I think that cultural organizations are necessary, education is necessary. As a young person, I would like to mention some education issues that are relevant to me. One would think that the Agricultural Academy would have a branch of some kind in Vanadzor, but they do not have one for on-campus education. What is the problem? After all, aren't experts supposed to be produced locally for the development of agriculture? People in the regions also have a need for a cultural life, while cultural institutions or leisure options are almost non-existent. Over the past years, a number of famous artists were invited to Yerevan, part of the money spent on this could also have been diverted to revitalizing cultural life in the regions.

Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan – But do the regions have concert halls which are of the level needed to host international artists?

Artashes – Maybe there aren't any. I don't consider this to be necessary, because first of all we need to get our own culture out to the regions. Do we really need luxurious concert halls to host international artists?

Liana Gyozyan – The problem is that these halls must be built. They've been talking about uniform regional development for so many years.

Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan – Maybe not luxurious, but could one at least find a normal hall or stadium that can seat one thousand people?

Artashes Sergoyan – That is also a problem. We should not think about bringing artists from abroad, but rather of creating houses of culture in the villages, because children in villages have no opportunities to attend activity clubs and developing their skills. I don't think that the television channels that they have easiest access to show the most cultural of programs.

Sara Petrosyan – We spoke about the emptying of villages, I can talk about the village of Teghenik in Kotayk marz. It is not so far away; their kindergarten has been renovated by some philanthropic foundations but was closed because there were no children. The school was renovated through government-allocated funding and the villagers themselves were saying that they have a very well renovated and heated school. The village has the entire necessary infrastructure, which very few villages can claim to have. But there are no people there. It is mainly the elderly who live there. The number of children has gone down in the village and it is now around fifty – they are so few that they group some of the grades together during class. The people are already anxious about the quality of education their children are receiving. A school where the sixth, seventh and eighth grades are grouped together in one class – where the whole class is only six people – cannot provide quality education. They are always compared to the capital, where besides basic education the children also have the opportunity to do various sports as well as arts and crafts – so they do not have the opportunity for self development. And that leads to internal migration, when the family thinks that they need to move to Yerevan.

Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan – Now there are a series of initiatives when local organizations – those in the capital – go to the regions and organize different events there to increase those opportunities. We can note, for example, the “One Square Meter” festival and other events. Of course, they are few in number, but maybe that is the direction to take – to bring the concept of supporting the villages to the masses, to introduce a so-called capital obligation, so that the capital pays special attention to the marzes and all the programs which take place in the capital are also organized in the regions. What do you say, Lusine, what creative approaches can be taken?

Lusive Vayachyan – The year before last a conference of sorts dedicated to modern art was organized in Ijevan – unfortunately, I don’t remember what it was called. I was also a participant. The reaction of the local people was not normal, because they were largely unable to understand what was going on. They did not know why events held here were being given names incomprehensible to them like Npak and Biennale, but there was a certain enthusiasm, a buzz, that people from the outside had arrived. Boys in black suits and girls in shiny dresses were coming and going – that was how they were taught to behave, how television had conditioned them – but it seemed like they got used to it in the end. Such events must be organized. When providing grants, international organizations must include a mandatory point that a part of those events must be held in the regions. I have participated in trainings in the marzes – one specifically was dedicated to training women peacelovers, and the girls were again quite enthusiastic because there had not been any events organized in their area. These things are very commendable. If you organize a training here, five people would barely sign up but there many people would like to participate.

Liana Gyozyalyan – You know, it is not right to say that nothing is done in the marzes today. The state is trying to revitalize agriculture, some steps are being taken, but the problem is that there is no strategic approach to all of this. One international organization might organize something aimed at the management of migration flow, another does something else and the state does yet something else in turn. If there were a common concept and a united plan of action, with steps taken in a specific sequence, we would receive a result. Until then, we will have what we have – emptied villages, despite that fact that everyone wants to do something to overcome the current situation.

Artashes Sergoyan – I do not really agree with the opinion that they must bring in all kinds of events from Yerevan. We are creating an illusion that that will contribute to stopping the flow of emigration towards Yerevan, because elements of the life of Yerevan will be brought to the marzes. This seems to suggest that living in the capital is easy and pleasant; people will think up new ways to relocate here. I also don't accept the other point of view, when they say that they should come from Yerevan. I don't think everything must be centered around Yerevan, the cultural center could be Gyumri and the culture could be exported to Yerevan from there.

Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan – Doing so through decentralization – that is, through an administrative decision – can be useful sometimes. And the US has such examples. That is the reason why, although all of us are skeptical towards Dilijan becoming a financial center, one shouldn't rule out that possibility. If the rich, the bankers, move the banks to Dilijan - it is just one or one and a half hour's journey from Yerevan - it is quite possible to do if everything else were to work well.

Sara Petrosyan – I have noticed an important shortcoming in this sense. It is not that nothing is done in the marzes. It is that one is not succeeding in involving the people in those events, those celebrations, they remain alien in a way. I was born and raised in Garni where, in my school years it was a common thing to organize folk celebrations in the courtyard of the temple, even when such folk culture was not considered very acceptable here during the Soviet years. But it was done in a wonderful way and that huge village would be fully involved and engaged in that event, it was fully a participant of those celebrations from start to finish. There are interesting events today as well. The same courtyard hosted a concert by the A. Gharabekyan ensemble, which was by invitation only and for the elite – the village and its residents were not participants, there were obstacles put up to prevent their entry and they cannot consider that event to have been a change in their cultural life because they were not involved in the whole thing.

Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan – My question is the following – as experts in that issue, do you know of a community outside Yerevan that in this time period, contrary to the rest, has flourished, prospered and serves as a positive example?

Lusine Vayachyan – I am from Kapan, where life today is incomparably better than it was ten years ago. The Copper-Molybdenum Plant, although a source of environmental pollution, has created a large number of jobs and the people are willing to stay. Kapan is a distant community – while someone from Gyumri can come to Yerevan in their free time, the people of Kapan cannot travel six hours here and then another six hours back. Let me also add that the healthcare facilities in villages and marzes are of a very low quality. Anyone can fall ill; it is especially difficult for people living out their last days, since there are no specialized health units that provide care to patients with cancer, in particular. Must the patient's caregiver bring him or her to Yerevan to get morphine? That is another reason why I would not prefer to live in a village. It is better to live in the city which is easier on my dear ones as well.

Naira Arakelyan – It is unfortunate, but probably in all cities, buildings and shops are being built instead of parks and gardens. If that is considered progress then yes, we have it. But I want to mention cultural centers. It is very important that their financing is organized correctly, that rural communities have free sports and music lessons, that culture houses start functioning again and become accessible to villagers. The examples we gave prove that if we manage things correctly, we will be able to support the villages.

Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan – A range of proposals were voiced here. It is encouraging to see that there is no dearth of suggestions. All of the suggestions are, in my opinion, implementable and that too within the limits of the budget of Armenia today, within the support received by international organizations. Educational institutions, cultural and healthcare centers must be developed, conditions for jobs must be created, the tax system must be reformed, infrastructure improved, but there are two main ideas, both of them are theoretical, but they were voiced today and they are important. All of us feel the need for a united vision, because we see that the problems are plenty, and while many things are being done, the problems are not being solved, not even any tendencies towards solutions are being seen. Let us think about how to bring that vision to life. The last thing, which is a very pleasant idea or development for me is that working in the regions or marzes, in the villages, is a thankful job. The people there are also grateful for the work done for them. It was said here today that they accept with gratitude the fact that people come from outside and do something for them, and we on the other hand feel that gratitude and that readiness towards work. Thank you and good night.