

# Armenia 3.0 Understanding 20th Century

## Part 1

December 7, 2016

Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan

### [Video material](#)

**Gevorg** - Hi! Wow! One is supposed to say 'wow' starting this kind of stuff. Bella just suggested I have to do something that is like a teaser, so that it catches attention, maybe I should dance or something like this. I am not a good dancer. But this is the teaser. You are here now in Eurasia Partnership Foundation and this is our first broadcast within stuff that we call Jam Session which is the Eurasia Partnership Foundation's special project, our voluntary project, nobody pays us to do this, and it's based on certain understanding on how to move to discussing some heavier issues, maybe not heavier, but intellectually heavier issues, some issues which are maybe sometimes not being fully discussed among the Armenian civil society.

We have done many sessions like this in [Armenian](#). We have about 1300 addressees right now who are receiving this leaflet. All over Armenia, it's all our contacts. You want to understand what is Eurasia Partnership Foundation? Please, visit our [website](#). I'm not gonna tell you about that, but we work all over Armenia with a lot of people for many years, and 1300 contacts is just a fraction of our usual beneficiaries group.

How do we select them? It's people who participate in our events, who are beneficiaries; partners; collaborators who obviously are Armenians or understand Armenian. How is this different from any other stuff you might be watching? I'll tell you that. So, we have these partners. They are participating in something that we have organized once or twice or three times. Some of them meet, some of them never meet, but they are in different parts of Armenia, and we engage them in different projects.

We decided to create this network, all of whom receives this broadcast; and we are now planning to do the same with English language speaking audience. Particularly with 'western' diaspora or with people who are Armenian by origin, feel themselves Armenian or are very much interested in Armenian issues, and who are English language speakers, and that's that essentially. These are the criteria, but the difference is that we start disseminating this to those who we know personally, or who our very good partners know personally, who have been engaged with us or are our very good partners.

The difference is that if you are watching media, something on the net, for instance a media broadcast, professional media broadcast, you don't know who else is watching. You may know,

but most of the time you don't know the audience. Here at least one thing you know in advance: all those who have been engaged with Eurasia Partnership Foundation at this stage. The next thing we may think about is, if these series continue, we may distribute this list of those who receive this information to all of you, so that you know the name and the place and maybe their profession or even contact details of those who receive this message. We'll think about that, because we also don't want to fully jeopardize not just privacy, but if somebody has given us the contact and if we just put it on the web, they may not be very happy about that. But these are the lines that we are thinking about, somehow strengthening the network, so that people who we get in touch with are connected with each other also via additional contacts. So this is the network that we are trying to build.

Why? You will see on our leaflet that the first line says 'Jam Session', 'EPF', and the second line says 'Armenia 3.0'.

Why Armenia 3.0? Very simple. Let's take the issue of elections, which is one of the pretexts why we started this broadcast. Armenia 1.0 is somebody abroad among the English language audience interested in Armenia, learning the news that there will be elections in Armenia in spring.

Armenia 2.0 is an analysis that again media provides, and analysts provide to the audience about the fact that elections have been very often rigged, mostly rigged and therefore we need to do something about that, and one of the things that can be done is for instance 7000 observers, and it will be good if many among the 7000 observers are people from the diaspora who are acquiring new and refreshed interest in the issues that the diaspora has been so far not very active in, such as elections, governance, corruption and etc. That's all 2.0.

3.0 is what our broadcasts are about. They are not following the rules of the media market. They are longer than a typical media broadcast will be, they are, I hope, deeper, they are gonna discuss the deeper issues, the next level issues, and that's why it is 3.0.

Who do I imagine is our preferred audience? If you are watching this, you probably have time; you may get bored and you may just abandon; you are driving a car, you can just use the audio line; but we will also provide you with the transcripts. So those of you who like reading, and those of you who want to use what is said here in your whatever, research, further thinking, etc., you can use the transcript. Transcript plus the audio-video is, what I think, also makes it different, this kind of approach, the Jam Session approach, from most of the stuff which is done by Armenian media and online. It is done by several international media, but not in Armenia. Particularly making a transcript means somebody is sitting there and typing, and it costs also money, because we don't have the voice recognition software for Armenian, and even for English, though it exists, even if it doesn't work well, but we currently don't have it. But we gonna provide you the transcript as well, and you will see all the links that I will refer to. Like I said, the Eurasia Partnership Foundation, you can see its website, you will see all the links, all

additional materials in that transcript, and I think transcript is very useful, because you can just look at it in a diagonal way and see do you need it or not. And when it is audio, video you just have to watch it and you don't know what to expect next. But I've told you a little bit what to expect next.

Next is this discussion about Armenia 3.0. So what happened? I think what happened... and here, in our room, we have also three people who are asked to join this discussion, because these are people who have quite well-founded and strong opinions about what's going on in Armenia. They have a lot of knowledge, they have a lot of approaches, they do a lot of work on change in Armenia, they are also our team members, and they can intervene any time they feel like that... But I think what happened was that, first of all, there was a message coming from the diaspora that 'we are gonna come down and teach you, because you guys have failed'.

(Atom Egoyan should be cut from video here)

...And there was a response to that from varied parts of Armenian society. Some applauded, some said you don't have anything to teach us, and some, like me, say 'let's learn about each other'. There's something that the diaspora, and particularly the western diaspora, the diaspora situated in the English language world, can teach Armenia, and there's something to learn about Armenia. I think that more these contacts, connections go deeper, the more they accelerate, the more these contacts between the diaspora and the Armenian population proper in Armenia happen, the more this issue becomes obvious: that it's about learning about each other. And of course you have a lot of issues which are raised currently, perhaps not to the extent to become a public discourse. But there are also other, different issues, which maybe do not become a big matter of public discourse as of yet, for instance, what to do with Western Armenian. I think this is also about dialogue between the two languages: Eastern Armenian and Western Armenian, and so on.

Of course, there are other issues as well. For instance, what to do on assimilation, or what to do with migrants, what to do with this or that, etc., etc. There's this assumption among many that 'they have failed over these 20 something years of independence, because they have become very significantly corrupt society'. I think the word 'corruption' weights a lot in these discussions. So I'm gonna write it here, because the question is: 'why they have failed'? And when it comes to the elections, where is corruption? And in order to understand the situation in Armenia I...Just yesterday I was reading about research that "Novaya Gazeta" did about rigging the elections in one big district near Moscow.

The woman who did this, a very good investigative journalism piece, she says: "I was approaching the teachers and asking how can they teach a good stuff and nice stuff, the good values, and at the same time rig the elections". Why teachers? Because in Russia, as well as in Armenia, a huge percentage of the electoral committee heads are teachers, moreover, over the years of moving away from democracy, which maybe wasn't perfect anyway from the very

beginning, both countries have gone in a situation where being an electoral committee head and not being a state employee has become an exclusive case. And we have one example here who is sitting with us, who was one of those cases: Isabella.

**Isabella Sargsyan-** That's because of the law. I don't know how it is in Russia, but in Armenia if you are a party in the parliament you can have sits in electoral commission.

**Gevorg-** You can suggest a candidate or appoint a candidate for one of the districts. But in general the approach is that everybody who is electoral committee head are this or that way linked to the system, are dependent on the system, or dependent on a thing that I call **rhizome**. I am now transcribing it now from French to Russian, I don't know how to write it correctly, can please somebody check it in Google or something, how rhizome is written. I'm gonna write the way I feel it right now. This is a term which I think, not I think, I know that some of French post-modern philosophers have used, maybe Michelle Foucault, and this means the roots of a certain vegetable, certain plant, and it's this.

So, if I imagine this as a network (EPF's contacts), not network necessarily so nice, so harmonic, structured, but this is the network; and different from the network is the rhizome which has been growing in Armenia. And what is the rhizome? The rhizome is the

*Dialogue between Gevorg and Isabella*

-There's just another "H" after "R" and it's a Greek word.

-Okay, and did I explain it correctly? That it is the roots underneath?

-It's mass of roots.

-Yeah. So and here's the tree; this is the surface; and this is underneath.

What is the rhizome in our country? It is like this. If you are, for instance, a teacher of a public school, a state school, then you belong to the state system. Which means that if you don't do what the state system tells you you'll be out; and if you are a teacher, especially if you are a school director, it may be not much money, not at all much money, but it's some kind of opportunities; it is participation in power. Even if you are not corrupt, but it is opportunities; it is participation, at least, in the proper way, in the social functioning. And if you are out you may not be able to find another job. So you are dependent and you become corrupt. How do you become corrupt? Even if you don't take gifts from the schoolchildren; even if you are very fair as a teacher; but when election time comes the state tells you, you have to do this and this, deliver many votes, or whatever, and that's how you become corrupt. This is one element of rhizome. Let me finish the next element, and then you will make the comments.

The next element. You are a parent of a student in this school. The teacher lets you know... and you don't belong to the rhizome. You are an "independent" medium or small business owner in

the community. But the teacher lets you know, not necessarily telling it directly, but gives you a message: “You know, if don’t vote correctly, your child will not get the right mark”. So, you are also a member of the rhizome.

Then the next element, and I’ll finish, and Isabella wants to say something. Your child is serving in the army. Nobody told you that you should vote this or that way. But you have a scare that whatever you vote they will know it. You have this fear, because there’s a lot of conspiracy feeling in this country and not only in this country, but all over the world. You don’t know how, but you assume that they may find it out, so your child in the army may suffer. Not because of the enemy attack, but he may suffer because of the informal relations in the army: hazing etc. So you are also a member of the rhizome, and your child is also a member of the rhizome. Here I stop explaining what is rhizome.

**Isabella-** Just an echo of what you say: after the last rigged referendum you can see on the internet [the list of people](#) who actually did it; and they are very normal people. That it comes to, I just second you, it just comes to this ‘**banality of evil**’ concept that is quite well elaborated in Hannah Arendt’s book.

**Gevorg-** Banality of evil.

**Isabella-** I think this is ‘Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil’ book. It is just ‘little people’ who do this, I mean it’s not Hitler or Stalin himself or Serzh Sarkisyan himself who come and rig the elections. It’s all these ‘small people’ that when you see them, their photos, they look normal. I mean, they are neighbors, the teachers of your kids, guys in the policlinics, ladies, very ordinary people, but they get into it due to, I think, reasons that you are going to elaborate on: Soviet mentality, maybe not just Soviet, but the thing is, that they don’t feel personally responsible. If you ask the same teacher in another other situation - I think they have this bipolarity in their minds - they would complain about corruption, etc. But they don’t feel this essential link between that and committing a crime, because rigging election is a crime. I think that that’s the part of this rhizome. That these people are constituting the basement of the pyramid. They are the ones that build this pyramid, a system or how you call it. I think these Nazis is an example, of course we are not talking about the Nazis or Stalin, but who were the guys who wrote thousands and millions of “*donoses*” (false allegations)? I don’t know how to translate it into English properly.

**Gevorg –** Afterward check it out, because we need that word, because we’ll be talking about that quite often.

**Isabella -** I think this explains how this system actually operates. Also look to this guy, Eichmann, he was an ‘okay’ guy, an ordinary, banal guy with his family. He even helped, I think, his daughter in law, who was Jewish, to escape. In his daily life he was not out of the ordinary. That’s the problem with these people involved. And these people are quite a lot. There are about 3000 electoral districts, about 7 members of commission. Okay, two people are

opposition, you take them out, and then you multiply. And plus you have all the '*street authorities*', plus you have the school directors...

**Gevorg** – Okay, we'll move in the next issue, we'll mention here some of the things that you said for our future discussions, because one thing that we should remember is the word "**donos**". It's the Russian word "donos": unfounded allegation. But maybe there's another word for that as well, 'fabricated allegation'. Which is, I would say, another basis of foundation of the Soviet society, which hasn't gone fully away. Now people are not being sent to the camps in such big numbers, but the culture of fabricated allegations is very much there. And the other word you used that I want to keep track with is, did you say 'street authorities'?

**Isabella** – 'Street authorities', I don't know how to translate it into English.

**Gayane** - It is 'street authorities'.

**Gevorg** – And we'll have several other concepts.

**Isabella** – Also 'use of alternative power mechanism' or 'street mechanism', that's a little bit... I don't know how to explain it fully.

**Gevorg** – We'll have another session on these issues. Now, you see how our conversation evolves. We are pretty well educated, I should say, people who are sitting here. This is not a scholarly debate, it is not academia. This is the stuff that we take from the scholarly stuff and try to explain the world for us. So that's our method, if you wish. We are theorizing, trying to generalize in some extent, trying to be fair, not to generalize in an unfounded way. But to give a picture of the stuff that usually is left out of the conversation. Gayane jan you wanted to say something.

**Gayane** - I wanted to say two things about this kind of a social structure, and maybe go deeper into the 'root system' we were talking about. People who become victims of the so-called "rhizome", they see the masses as an important element in making the decisions for the societies, but they think of themselves as an unimportant unit in the mass. There's this thinking: "okay, now I was forced to make a false choice, but others most probably were not ...". So this feeling: "okay, I am a victim and others most probably are not". What comes to the teachers, I think it goes back to the Soviet times. Because overall we were thinking that we were a happy society, 'we are powerful, we are free, we are on top of the world'. But each one of the individuals separate meant nothing. So you didn't have your freedom, you didn't have mobility, you couldn't travel, you had no money. And so, this disparity between the person's power and the power of society, I think, comes from these times. That's why teachers to this nowadays, even those who are very honest, and I have personally witnessed this. And you feel sorry for them, because they are struggling between losing their job on one side, and losing the trust of the parents and the respect they have developed on the other. So, anyway this comes back to the

root, which is again in disparity between personal power of someone and the power of masses which they believe in.

**Gevorg** – It may be quite an imaginary thing (this power of society). Now that's very interesting, because there's this imagination we are talking about: this things of a 'society', of a 'community', of a 'nation'. And there are the realities of this. And when I'm trying to get to 3.0 model of the reality, I use the word rhizome; and I used the alternative word and at this stage I called it a 'network', but eventually I am bringing another key word to this discussion. It's gonna be called 'network-state'. And we will be, at some point in time, discussing what does it mean.

But coming back here. You heard a lot references to the past, to the Soviet times; and I think we have not only this group which is sitting here with me, but also several other people, who made comments **particularly on Atom Egoyan's words**, and who feel maybe not comfortable about the diaspora arriving and helping, but who feel that it may generate also additional problems, if it's done in an unprepared way. This people have one keyword, or a clue, or a suggestion.

**If you want to understand Eastern Armenia; if you want to understand the current Armenian state; if you want to understand people who live in current Armenia, you have to go to the past.**

**You have to study 20<sup>th</sup> century Armenia, and you have to study 20<sup>th</sup> century Soviet Union, the soviet life, the soviet world. And if the center of your attention is Armenia, it doesn't mean that you should forget that it was part of the Soviet Union; and many things that were peculiar for Soviet Union in the same way or in a slightly modified way were also applicable to Armenia.**

**When we are talking about Armenia I think it is very important to remember Soviet Union, because sometimes, when you are young, you think that nothing happened before you.**

I have experienced it myself: when I was away from Armenia for 14 years. As you know I left Armenia in 1993. I was visiting, but I was not here, and I came back in 2007. So, when I came back, I had a feeling that nothing has changed, not from 1993, but, say, from 1998. Like it was a big hole, no history happened there, no big events happened; that the 2003 appraisal was a small thing, the elections and the stuff; that the constitution changes referendum of 2005 or 2006 wasn't a big significant thing. And even when I came back, immediately before that were the parliamentary elections in 2007, in May, and even that was nothing that really changed anything. There's a certain objectivity to that, a certain phenomenon, what I call a 'déjà vu of zastoy'. 'Zastoy' is the 'stagnation' era of the Soviet Union history, usually referred to the time from the moment when Khrushchov left the office, was it 1964? Brezhnev came to the office, until 1985, when Gorbachov started perestroika.

**Isabella** – There was Andropov somewhere in between.

**Gevorg** – Well, it was all in stagnation in fact. But the point is it was the period when it seemed that nothing was happening in the public sphere, or no changes were happening. When I came

back I had this feeling: nothing has changed, so I don't have to learn much. And it was exactly the same way as it was before I left. And of course it was not at all true.

In the same way, if a new person arrives to Armenia, they think their knowledge of Armenia starts from this point of their immersion into Armenia. Maybe they have some theoretical knowledge, but they give preference to what they see right now, they don't go deeper down. But they also have this radical view, among some western inhabitants who inhabit Europe, or in the Northern part of the Western hemisphere. And I myself, somebody who has lived in Europe mainly, in UK, or in United States, most of these 14 years, so I can say that: They think there is nothing valuable and worthwhile in this part of the Armenian history (happened before them), and that is what is quite irritating here in Armenia for some people, maybe people like me.

I should confess that unfortunately, because of this rhizome, because we have failed in many respects, many people who are now in Armenia also think this way. They don't know what has happened there before to an amazing degree. Those who try to reform our educational system complain that people may not recognize who is Hovhannes Shiraz or Victor Hambardzumyan. The young generations are illiterate according to these street vox populi. Of course, there's a lack of education, but what is lack of education? It means you may know the names but you haven't systematized the knowledge. And they don't play a significant role, this knowledge doesn't play a significant role in your life living today. We have quite a significant amount of people who are as lacking knowledge about 20<sup>th</sup> century in Armenia proper as they are outside.

So, coming to this issue, rhizome, we should say that we have a relatively small group of people who are concerned about the 20<sup>th</sup> century past. Who say "Let's learn 20<sup>th</sup> century Armenia, let's keep 20<sup>th</sup> century Armenia, let's understand 20<sup>th</sup> century Armenia with its good and bad, with its pros and cons, with all of its changes". And there is a big, quite a significant group who don't know about that. Who should be educated by this smaller group.

I drew here something that may seem hierarchical, it shouldn't be like that. I didn't mean that (the small group is not higher in any hierarchy than the larger group). I'll just take another color to make it funnier.

And there are these people who don't want to learn anything, there are also people who don't know anything about 20<sup>th</sup> century, but they want to contribute to Armenia. So they should learn. There should be some groups who are learning from 20<sup>th</sup> century, taking lessons from it, passing them to the others.

I'll give you another example of this psychological bias of not knowing what happened and not even caring about what happened. For instance, when the earthquake of 1988 happened, I was in Moscow, December 7.

This is the day, isn't it, it's today. So it's the anniversary. I didn't remember that. It was just a coincidence.



I was in Moscow. It took me two or three weeks... I was an aspirant, a graduate student in Moscow State University, very much immersed in my work. And it took me, despite the fact that all the Armenians at that time there were communicating, it took me 2-3 weeks to realize what has happened. Because I didn't have much money. You could only call, there was no internet, you could only call, and it was very expensive phone calls. My parents couldn't call me. I didn't have a phone in my dormitory room, it was only me who could call them. So I just learned about the scale of that event very late. And before I learned that, for me that was just another thing in the stuff that was happening. Well, OK, there was an earthquake. And the scale of the tragedy became clear to me only near the New Year's Eve. So when you don't know something it doesn't seem significant to you.

We have now Eastern Armenians of very different shapes. Many of them left, and now many of them are residing in the West, many of them reside in Russia. We have now less population than we had during the Soviet times.

The other element about the lack of knowledge and about the hidden context, and afterwards I'll stop and you'll speak.

I was trained as a teacher of Turkish language in the Yerevan State University. After graduate studies I came back as a teacher of Turkish language. In the Soviet times our group of students was very small, it was 4 to 6 students who wanted to study Turkish. People who studied with me in my time, none of them had anything to do with Turkey. It was all people very much from Eastern Armenia; even if their ancestors suffered from Genocide they didn't bring that into the discussions. They were just studying Turkish language because they wanted to become specialists on Turkey.

And then Soviet Union starts collapsing, the universities reform. It becomes private education, also allowing students who pay fees to join the class. The class expands, and instead of 5 or 6 people we have 30 or 40 people.

And I come to that class and I suddenly learn that among them there are twenty or so, a lot of people who know Turkish. They know Turkish in a way better than I do, because I wasn't a native speaker, and most of them knew Turkish because in their families their grandparents spoke Turkish in the household. But in the Soviet times this wasn't public knowledge. All these communities all over Armenia, who had people who came as survivors of Genocide, they continued on using the Turkish language. But it wasn't on the surface. That's why when we put this big antenna tower for TV in Yerevan, and the Turkish Channels became accessible to Yerevan, a lot of people were watching them for a certain reason. Some to watch football or foreign films or stuff even without understanding the language, but also a lot of people were watching it because they also understood the language without going to the Turkish language department, to the oriental studies department.

That was very surprising.

So you have this hidden, niche-like situations in the society.

Another element. I am very much from the East: Russian Armenia, Karabakh, Iran. My ancestors are coming from these parts, none from Western Armenia. Once my friend, whose ancestors are from Western Armenia, invited me to the celebration that takes place in [Musaler](#) (a small village near Yerevan). I was extremely surprised. It was still in the Soviet times, so it wasn't advertised or publicized in media etc., but it was a huge crowd, a lot of people were from Musaler, as well as from all over Armenia, all those who felt themselves who belong to Western Armenia, who wanted to keep the memory up. And you see these big 'kazans'(cauldron) making 'harissa' there, and distributing 'harissa' in the plates for everybody, and dancing everybody; and people with these mustaches pointed up, which was very surprising for me to see so many people with these mustaches in Armenia. I never could see it in the streets of Yerevan and even if I visited a village or another community. You wanted to say something.

**Robert** – I think what is important to realize about the Soviet Union is that it had 2 major influences on Armenia; one very positive and one very negative. The positive one is that after centuries of having no statehood, Armenia received a tradition of statehood with all its institutions, construction of cities, with all positive and negative aspects of it. And the Soviet system. We had many negative things, but Armenia received a tradition of statehood, and today's Armenia is moving according to that tradition. I do not know what would have happened to Armenia if we did not have this tradition of statehood inherited from the Soviet Union.

The most negative thing, in my opinion, is that the Soviet influence somehow distorted the moral coordinates of people, not Armenian, but all the Soviet people. Because in soviet times they legalized things which were perceived as not good and condemned in other countries. For example, the same 'donos' that we talked about. People were writing false allegations about their neighbors, friends, for them to be arrested or deported from their community, so they could get the house or the apartment. So it was the distortion of moral coordinates. Many people in today's Armenia are having problems of distortion of moral coordinates. Corruption is a bad thing, but if we ask people on the street how they perceive corruption, we might get many different answers, from very negative to very positive. And when talking about corruption, I don't think it is only the problem of the government. There have been cases when some opposition appointees in election polling stations have also been corrupt and, you know, dishonest, so it is more a societal problem, in my opinion.

**Gevorg** – Thank you Rob, I think we are coming to the end of this first session and I want to say that our message to those Armenians and maybe also non-Armenians who want to understand Armenia deeper than just a superficial understanding and these expectations from this national feeling of unity is: we should be studying the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Soviet times. We should understand how did it impact today's Armenia. And there were good and bad things during that time. And we'll be talking about these good and bad things as the time comes.

The one, I would say, difficult to grasp, but methodological issue is that there is an assumption... And when you were saying it, Rob, the assumption was also there... that it was a 'good nation' and the Soviet Union came and spoiled it, made it bad, the moral qualities went down. But sociology and more like a positivist approach doesn't accept such an assumption. This is an ideal of good people or good nation. They are never really there. We can only talk about the way the existing popular or mass or social-societal values changed over time under the influence of the Soviet not even power, but circumstances. Sociologically speaking we are talking about the change. And that nation which was as if there, the 'ideal nation' which became 'worse' - it wasn't like that. To the contrary, when looking at this, you are absolutely correct, that it was thanks to this, you can call it 'model statehood' or 'pseudo statehood' or 'rehearsal of statehood' that we have today, which is independent Armenia.

So I'll put here this word: 'rehearsal of statehood'.

And we end here our first broadcast and will continue on discussing the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Thank you all for your attention if you are there until now. Thank you!

*Transcribed by Ani Babayan*

*Transcription completed on December 16, 2016*