

REGIONAL POST

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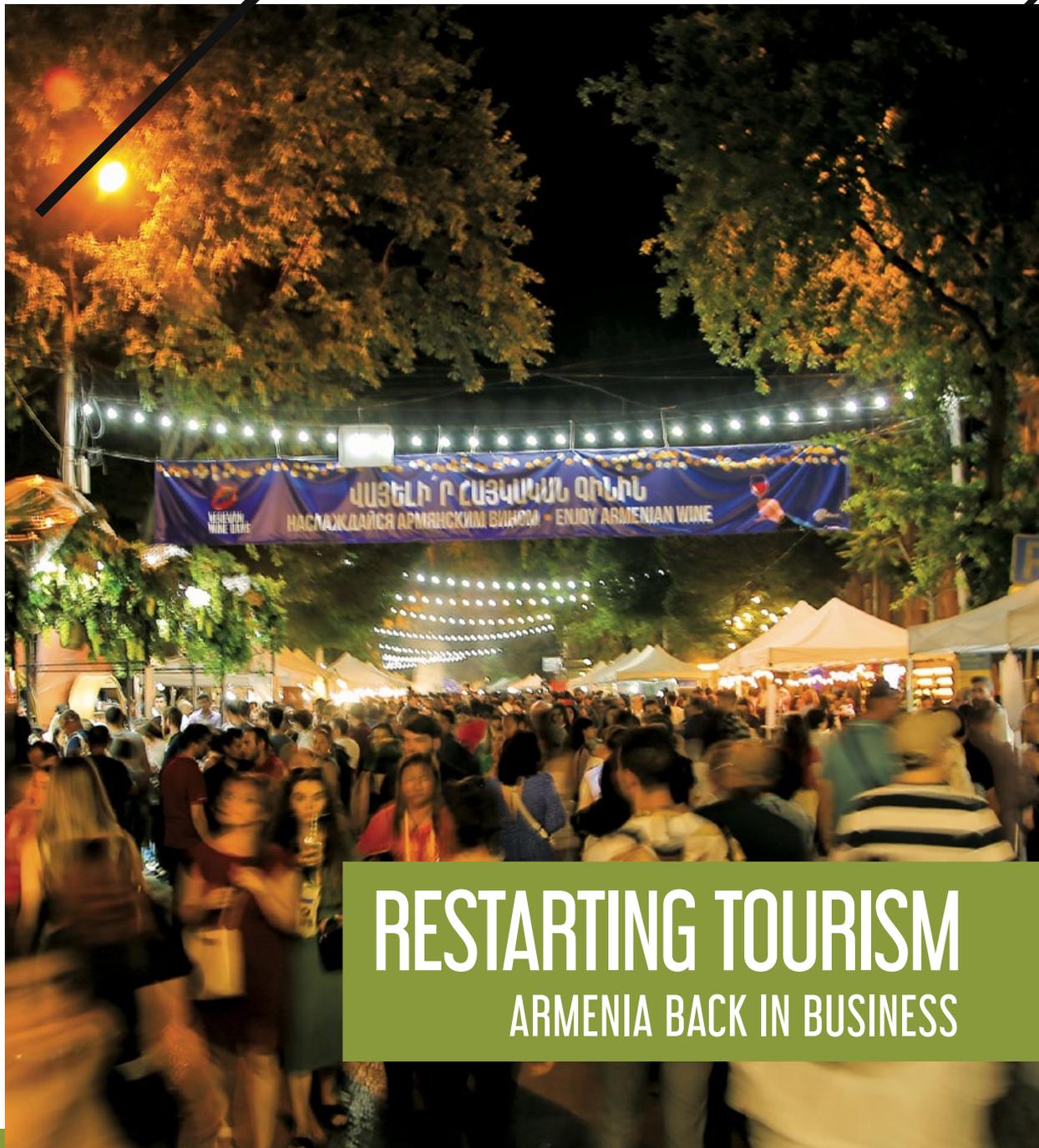
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RESTARTING TOURISM
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MUSCARI
Caring for Land, People & Culture

Gyumri Ceramics

Revival of Armenian ceramics in the 21st century

The Family Care Foundation and the Muscari Association are working together to improve the life conditions in Armenia. Their activities are concentrated especially in Gyumri, which has an invaluable historical, patrimonial and cultural wealth. After the earthquake of 1988, which caused the death of tens of thousands of inhabitants, this city tries to get up and regain its once undeniable radiance.

Following this tragic event, the Family Care Foundation was created by the will of implementing projects for the economic and cultural development of Armenia in the fields of tourism, art, handicraft and restoration of traditional values with a strong ethical requirement.

Regarding Muscari, created in 2016, its purpose is to valorise Armenian culture and French-Armenian exchanges. It works for education in France and Armenia and it promotes a better knowledge of peoples, cultures and languages.

This complementarity gives life to projects such as the ceramics workshop in Gyumri, which allows currently many families to live with dignity, thanks to arts and crafts inspired by among others Armenian potters from Kütahya in the former Ottoman Empire, the golden age of their activity being in the 18th century. Always having the desire of revitalizing and valorisation of Armenian material and immaterial heritage, special energy is devoted to the architectural restoration of the city's historic buildings.

The ceramics of Gyumri's workshop are on sale in the following addresses in Armenia:

- o Villa Delenda : 22 Yeznik Koghbatsi Str., Yerevan*
- o Villa Kars : 182 Abovyan Str., Guymri*

www.familycarearmenia.org / www.muscari.fr

With the support of :



THE RETURN OF THE ARMENIA ART FAIR

ART & THE MARKET:
CAUCASUS & BEYOND

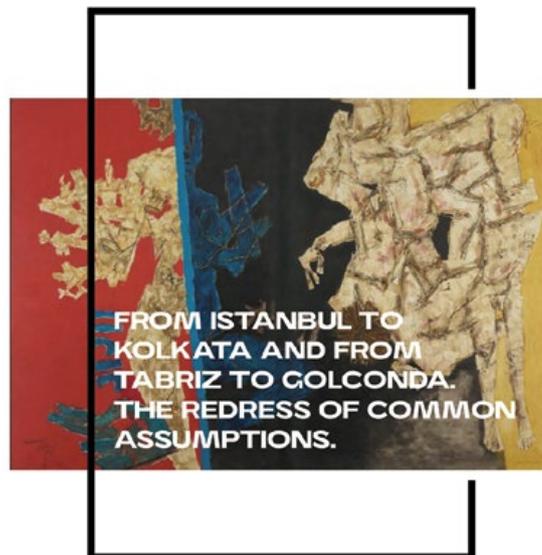
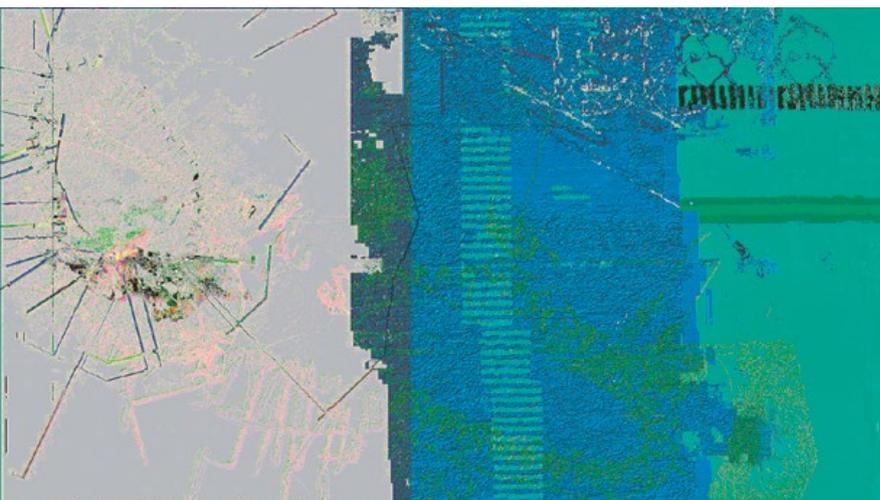


Image Courtesy of Art & the Market: Caucasus & Beyond

ISSUE N.002



MUSPEMOR, Dig Fossil Corrupt.Bait, courtesy of the artist



Open Space Exhibition curated by Eva Hachaturyan

It has been a very difficult year around the world, but especially for Armenia, with both the pandemic and the war. These events have left a big impact on all of us. But every crisis presents an opportunity. In 2020, with the support of the Goethe Institute Relief Fund, we created a digital platform which allowed us to present online programmes such as “Open Space” with a focus on video art and photography from over 30 international artists, as well as the presentation of regional artists and new names in our online Viewing Rooms. We supported the creation of the online journal, “Art & The Market: Caucasus & Beyond” which reviews art from new markets in the Caucasus, the Middle East, India and Asia. The first issue was published in February and focused on the Caucasus region. We are pleased to announce that the second issue is already available. The second edition focuses on the regions of the Middle East and India and features exclusive conversations with leading collectors and explores the varied history of the auctions, exhibitions, and fairs that have served to stimulate this fascinating contemporary and modern art market of that region. And now we are ready to plan the welcome return of the Armenia Art Fair in May 2022 with its mission to promote Armenian and international artists from the Caucasus and

beyond and with a continuation of its aim to be an affordable, inclusive Art Fair, providing a platform for grass-roots development and different art eco-systems as an alternative to the traditional art markets typically presented at art fairs. We are excited to welcome back prominent names from our past fairs and showcase new entrants from the region. The Art and Technology program this year will focus on NFTs, and Art Week will introduce Armenian artists living and working abroad. It’s also a perfect time to reflect on an important date in our art history – as Yerevan’s Modern Art Museum celebrates its 50th anniversary. **This is just the beginning.** We’ve all missed AAF, from the team to the exhibitors and visitors, as well as the buzz and energy of this event with its creativity, entertainment and networking opportunities. We look forward with optimism, always believing strongly in Armenia and our ability to be simultaneously local and international, deeply rooted in history yet also continuously seeking exciting new avenues for art. So stay tuned for our dates announcement in September.

We can’t wait to see you all again at Armenia Art Fair 2022.



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WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP:

PERKS AND CHALLENGES IN ARMENIA

If you want to be a good leader, you should listen! This is the piece of advice that H.E. Andrea Wiktorin, Ambassador, Head of the EU Delegation to Armenia shared with the young ladies at the “Women in Leadership: Perks and Challenges” panel discussion. The event was organised by the Delegation of the European Union to Armenia and was dedicated to the International Women’s Day 2021.



What are the opportunities and challenges for women in leadership roles? What are the winning recipes for overcoming these challenges, excelling in careers while maintaining the work-life balance? The event brought together H.E. Andrea Wiktorin, H.E. Inga Stanytė-Toločkienė, Ambassador of the Republic of Lithuania to Armenia, Mihaela Stojkoska, UNDP Resident Representative, a.i. and Diana Gasparyan, Mayor of Etchmiadzin as panelists. The speakers offered valuable insights for personal and professional growth by sharing life lessons on how to have your voice heard, how to overcome moments of weakness, draw knowledge from failures and become more resilient and successful women. Leadership roles have long been dom-

“ IF YOU WANT TO BE A GOOD LEADER, YOU SHOULD LISTEN”
— ANDREA WIKTORIN

inated by men and it has therefore been quite challenging for women to step into this realm of unexplored possibilities and learn to navigate their careers. Though women comprise more than half of the population in Armenia and many of them have higher education, their representation in decision-making remains low. The EU has been continuously putting efforts into strengthening and improving gender equality in Armenia by reducing sex-selective abortion rates, preventing

gender-based violence, and supporting the political and economic empowerment of girls and women. The EU support has been instrumental in creating more opportunities for women in entrepreneurship, education, agriculture and other sectors. In 2019, the European Union disbursed €18.3 million to support a total of nearly 8,330 SMEs in Armenia, a third of which are owned by women. Women in Business is one of the many projects through which the EU has been fostering women’s entrepreneurship in Armenia. Implemented by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the project provided business advice, training and mentoring to women-led companies, as well as credit lines provided through local banks. More than 2,500 women benefitted from consultancy services, turnover among supported companies rose by almost €36 million, and 1,592 new jobs were created as a result of the support. “Flexibility, listening to people and learning from experts are essential for becoming a leader.” This was the concluding remark that H.E. Andrea Wiktorin shared with the young ladies at the “Women in Leadership: Perks and Challenges” discussion while instilling confidence and the need for perseverance for their career endeavors. ♦



FROM IT TO AGRICULTURE: EUROPEAN UNION HELPS UNLEASH ARMENIA'S ECONOMIC POTENTIAL

Regional Post Caucasus discusses the role of small and medium-sized enterprises in the economic development of Armenia and how the EU helps boost the capacities of local SMEs.

TEXT : MARGARIT MIRZOYAN

SMES – KEY DRIVER OF ECONOMIC GROWTH IN ARMENIA

A successful dried fruit production company in the historic Armenian town of Yervandashat, a mobile application called Chessify with monthly downloads of about 10,000, an active recreation centre in Stepanavan, a honey farm in Alaverdi. What do all these initiatives have in common? Like many other small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Armenia, they have received support from the European Union to advance their businesses and create more opportunities in their communities.

EU4BUSINESS ADDRESSES CHALLENGES AND CREATES OPPORTUNITIES

The EU's EU4Business initiative aims to boost the capacities of SMEs in Armenia and other Eastern Partnership countries. With support from the European Union, the business environment in Armenia has become much more accessible and attractive for new enterprises. Local SMEs have increased access to new opportunities, which fosters integrated community development and connects them to global markets. Generally, the EU supports SMEs in Armenia in the following three directions: Access to Finance, Business Development Services, and Business Enabling Environment.

EU-ARMENIA COMPREHENSIVE AND ENHANCED PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT UNVEILS NEW PERSPECTIVES

The European Union supports the development of SMEs in various areas – agriculture, tourism, information technology and others.

As part of large-scale projects implemented with EU support, a tourist information centre was opened in Dilijan, a ski centre – in Ashotsk, and tourist trails – in Syunik. With the support from the EU, dozens of SMEs in remote communities created job opportunities, which has helped to curb emigration and revitalise the social, economic and cultural life in the regions.

In 2019, the EU disbursed €18.3 million to support a total of nearly 8,330 SMEs in Armenia, a third of which are owned by women. This has resulted in over 4,588 new jobs and €102.9 million in extra income generated by the EU-supported SMEs in Armenia.

Currently a project is underway worth €15 million – the EU TUMO Convergence Center for Engineering and Applied Science. The EU TUMO Convergence Center for Engineering and Applied Science brings higher education and industry together, linking students, researchers, and professionals to each other and with their global peers while fostering innovation and entrepreneurship. As a result of the EU-funded project, a state-of-the art building will be constructed where students will be able to gain hands-on skills to meet the rapidly changing labour market requirements.

Another major project, EU4Business: Innovative Tourism and Technology Development for Armenia, co-funded by the European Union, contributes to ensuring balanced growth in tourism and innovative industries. The project is first and foremost designed to support those with outstanding innovative ideas. As part of the project, the EU-supported Catalyst Foundation in Yerevan has created education, job and collaboration opportunities for more than 1000 beneficiaries in the field of science and technology. The Foundation contributes to the development of hi-tech and entrepreneurship in Armenia.

In 2020, the world was shaken by the global pandemic of COVID-19 and many projects went down the drain. To alleviate the pressures created by the pandemic, the European Union provided rapid response support to different sectors. €300,000 was aimed at the development of the tourism sector supporting 30 enterprises, €400,000 was set aside for technology development supporting 20 enterprises, €70,000 was allocated to the agriculture sector as part of the rapid COVID response (42 SMEs), and €200,000 was provided to microbusinesses (44 companies).

The European Union is committed to providing continued support to Armenia for the development of entrepreneurship, the business environment and investment climate, which, in turn, will contribute to balanced social and economic development. The Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), which entered into force in March this year, provides for a wider range of opportunities. ♦



PRIVILEGE BANKING: COMFORT AND LOYALTY

Banking is no longer about the mere satisfaction of financial necessities. At IDBank it's also about comfort and tailored services handpicked for each client individually. A year ago, IDBank introduced its Privilege Banking service which has a number of peculiar advantages for the clients of the Bank. Regional Post talked to the Head of the Communications Unit at IDBank Tatevik Vardevanjan, and the Head of the Bank's Premium Banking Division Lida Safaryan about the new culture and approaches of banking integrated and fostered by IDBank.

TEXT : MARGARIT MIRZOYAN / PHOTO : IDBANK

As you enter the monumental building on North Avenue, you appear at the flagship office of IDBank. Then you enter the cafe on the right side, take a cup of delicious and freshly brewed coffee and sit at the table by the window. You have a Visa Signature card in your hand which means after you've enjoyed your coffee, you can go to the third floor, open the glass doors by putting your fingerprint on the detector and enter the Privilege Banking zone. The main principle here is "Everything for and around the customer" and these are not just words, this is about the service culture introduced by IDBank. Last year, the Bank presented Privilege Banking service which has become the epitome of comfort and pleasant experience for the clients. Joining the new service enables the clients to enjoy numerous benefits and have all the services tailored specifically for their needs. Once you are a part of this service and enjoy your day sitting on one of the comfy sofas of the premium class service center on the top floor, appreciating the soothing and calm atmosphere of the Privilege Banking hall, the personal manager comes to your help. The main task of the manager is to identify the best possible solutions specific to your needs,



playing the role of a personal concierge. Here, a customer may also find a special conference room for business meetings. Also, the specialists at the kid's corner will look after the children, if needed, while the parents are dealing with their financial needs.

The practical benefits of the service are numerous, including the so-called "one window solution". You no longer have to run from one specialist to the other, as all your financial affairs are in the hands of one universal specialist. You'll be offered the best possible exchange rates, provision with credit in a short period of time, and this is just the beginning. In addition to all these benefits, the Visa Signature card alone (69,000 AMD a year, or 50% less in case of online purchase by Idram&IDBank app or IDBanking.am) has several advantages, which will make the daily life of the client more comfortable and accomplished. For example, 0.5% cashback for each transaction when making non-cash purchases, a deposit box free of charge for 90 days a year, and much more. The service of the international concierge will give the client an opportunity, for instance, to make reservations, to order tickets or purchase anything they want, and all these by just one call twenty-four seven.

THE PRACTICAL BENEFITS OF THE SERVICE ARE NUMEROUS, INCLUDING THE SO-CALLED "ONE WINDOW SOLUTION". YOU NO LONGER HAVE TO RUN FROM ONE SPECIALIST TO THE OTHER, AS ALL YOUR FINANCIAL AFFAIRS ARE IN THE HANDS OF ONE UNIVERSAL SPECIALIST



Comfortable travel is another advantage of IDBank Signature card, namely, over 1200 airports all around the world will open their lounge halls for you four times a year. Pandemic will soon be over and airports will once again become part of our lives, so this is much more important than you may think right now.

The insurance within the service has gained a whole new meaning covering both medical and travel incidentals (up to 750,000 USD), compensation for the delay of the flight or the misplaced baggage and protection of various purchases. When it comes to purchases, here again, special discounts are on the table. Quite importantly, if the customer's individual account joins the Privilege Banking service, the legal account receives the same advantages, consequently, a customer's financial history and mechanisms at IDBank have a centralized management and service. In other words, the key aim of the Bank is to help the client spend minimum time but get the maximum result, and all this with individual approach and comfort.

But premium and privilege don't mean inaccessible. If previously the clients needed to make huge investments to join the service, now, for 69,000 AMD a year, the client can have his/her financial transaction under control without any distress, which is what's important to the customer service management.

The client's family members also can enjoy the benefits of the service and the Bank itself tries to become a family service, covering the customer's needs outside of the financial realm as well. The only thing the Bank expects from the client is loyalty, at the same time, being loyal themselves, while accompanying their customer in their financial journey. The personal manager will become like someone from a customer's family who just knows a great deal of finances and will cover your back in all the relevant aspects. You just need to make one call whenever it's convenient for you. ♦

MIHAEL SOLTER:

“WE HAD A LOT TO LEARN FROM 2020”

Philip Morris Armenia has a new General Manager: Mihael Solter arrived here from Macedonia with brave vision of the future. Regional Post talked to him about the company's future after the pandemic and war.

INTERVIEW : AREG DAVTYAN / PHOTO : PHILIP MORRIS ARMENIA

Mr. Solter, it must be difficult to move to the country after seven years. Tell us about your expectations from Armenia and from Philip Morris Armenia?

— When I learned that Armenia will be the next country in my PMI journey, I was very excited. For me, there are many discoveries in this country. I am quite optimistic after having seen the scientific and technological progress of this country, so it's no wonder that the third Philip Morris R&D center is located here. Imagine that there are only 3 PMI R&D centers, located in Switzerland, Singapore and Armenia. So no doubt there should be a valid and strong reason for an international company to invest in such a small country. Here in Armenia we have unique, smart and talented young scientists, who strive for new discoveries and aspire to bring change. I am pretty sure that as a multinational company with advanced experience in business and significant milestones achieved in technology, PMI can help Armenians by creating shared values together for the benefit of business and for society.

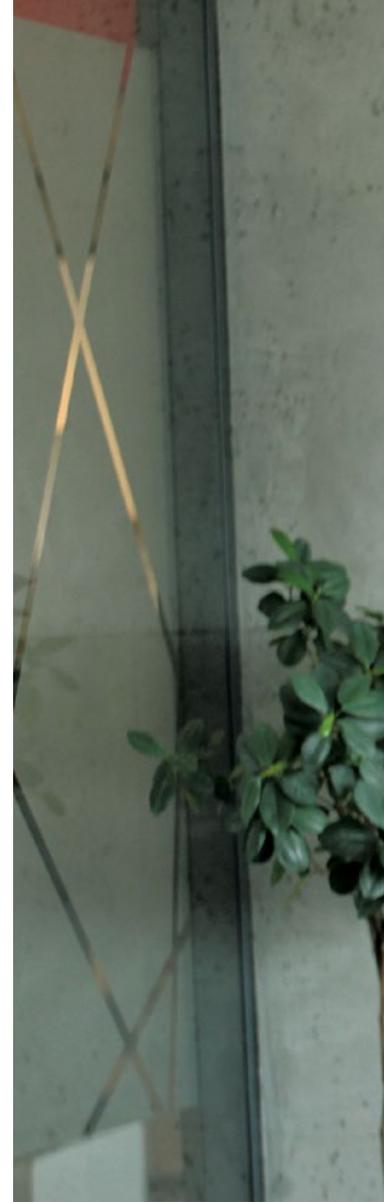
2020 was a tough year globally, but it was even more challenging for Armenia. Does this kind of social-economic situation affect big companies like PMI?

— Last year will remain in the memories of all of us for a long time and we will tell a lot about the challenges it has imposed. We face the challenge of COVID-19 and are afraid for ourselves, loved ones, employees and businesses. We try to see the positives in all of it and as experience shows harsher situations can be transcended. Our main take-away from the pandemic is the care we have developed for each other and for the environment in general. I hope that the difficulties that arise with the virus and the social-economic state have made people more aware: about the environment, about their health, and also about the way they think. I believe that people have become more empathetic, caring, and responsible during these challenging times. There is no other way to bring positive change. Of course the challenges of 2020 also had their impact on PMI, we turned

to work-from-home regime fully, we started to care about the environment even more and made our little input to help the society by creating values and sharing challenges together with the help of various projects.

In an interview you once said: “Market conditions are constantly changing, therefore, never be afraid to face challenges, that’s where we learn the most.” What can we learn business wide from the past 2020?

— I believe that we had a lot to learn from 2020. As the year was unusually challenging for individuals and companies alike, it challenged us to transform and to react to the changes. First, we understood that companies can be change agents – they can take the initiative and push forward, make





decisions that benefit the economy and the society, transforming how we look at conventional market conditions. Moreover, this change taught us to redefine, to rethink almost all of the clichés trends.

For 2021, businesses should start returning to the concept of “we.” The pandemic in the world (and here, coupled with the dire socio-economic situation) showed us that what we should care about the most are families, communities, employees, our friends – those who we love the most. One cannot but arrive at that conclusion after having experienced the hardships of the year we left behind. We should be able to meet these challenges and for that we need to take into consideration what we deem precious in our lives.

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EMPLOYEES, OUR FRIENDS

It is also undeniable that technology is going to play a bigger role in the future. As a technological company, PMI too is transforming and seeking ways to be more in synch with what these times require – to be comfortable with technology and find ways of how it can improve our lives for the better. At PMI, we are diligently setting this example.

Once you said: “I hope that in completely different conditions from those that were in the passing year, in 2021 we will continue with our intention to see the world one day without cigarette smoke.” Do you think Armenia may become one of the leaders of this non-smoke movement, or it’s too early to talk about it?

— Our goal is to have 40 million smokers by 2025 switch to our

smoke free products. Of course that way cannot be paved by PMI alone, therefore we expect support from regulatory bodies to make the smoke free future more likely. There are lots of studies that prove that the main cause of smoking related diseases is combustion. Science, innovation and technology have allowed the development of a new category of products that eliminate combustion or smoke. You may know these alternatives as e-cigarettes and heated tobacco products. I truly hope that during my time in PMI I will see countries that will stop selling cigarettes, at the same time

having substitutes for the smoking society. This is what keeps me going. Regarding our dedication, we will always persist to see a world without cigarette smoke. The best choice for any adult smoker is to quit nicotine altogether. But the fact is that after so many years of anti-tobacco struggle, there are still over one billion smokers in the world and they should be encouraged to quit smoking. For that we need to invest in science, development and talent that can devise alternative products for smokers. So far PMI has invested USD 8.1 billion into the science and research of developing

smoke-free products. This is also true for Armenia, where large investments in science are undertaken by our company. I absolutely believe that Armenia can become one of the top countries in its demographic of people switching from cigarettes to alternative products. However, for that, we need regulatory support and more awareness that smokers can be informed about better alternative products.

Philip Morris Armenia was named a Top-employer in Armenia for a 3 years in a row. What is the secret of PMI as an employer? What makes it special for people who work there?



Philip Morris International is a leading international company, which was certified as Top Employer Armenia 2020. Thanks to the company's experience in scientific and technological spheres, in 2017 Philip Morris signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Government of the RA, National Polytechnic University of Armenia and Yerevan State University, strengthening the company's goal of establishing a research center in Armenia and supporting educational and research programs, including master's degree and post-graduate studies. Due to Armenia's proficiency in the scientific and technological arenas PMA expressed its readiness to establish PMA R&D facility in Armenia, as well as to support educational and research programs. Within two years, PMA R&D center has provided more than 100 scholarships and grants to Master's, PhD students and Faculty research teams in Armenia to carry their research projects in a number of directions.

— PMI changes to deliver an opportunity for public health – that is of a smoke-free future. We are adamant on providing a healthy, inspirational environment to every one of our employees around the world. Last year, for example, we supported our employees to transition completely to working from home as their health is of utmost importance. That is due to the hard work of our international team that comprises professional experts in science, customer science, IT, sales and much more. PMI is an inviting environment that has a diverse team – each voice is heard and appreciated. The contribution of each is appreciated so that they have their say in the design of the smoke-free future.

To support such an environment, our team is comprised of people of different backgrounds, social status, age, and gender. As a company that envisioned a transformation, change is greatly welcome. That is why the inclusion and collaboration of new voices, new talents that gives us new perspectives of how to better ourselves, how to make PMI a Top Employer for every employee.

You've been working in PMI for over 23 years. What is special about your company?

— Realization of the fact that you are working in a company that spares no

WE HOPE THAT WITH THE OPPORTUNITIES CREATED, YOUNG SCIENTISTS WON'T LEAVE ARMENIA AND WILL CONTINUE TO FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT TO DEVELOP THE ARMENIAN ECONOMY

effort and energy to make the lives of billion smokers and people around them better is already enough to feel special. Philip Morris has changed a lot during these years, we are making history. This is the biggest shift in the history of Philip Morris International and industry, and it's nice to be a part of something as big as this transformation. We are changing entire future of the world. What can be more special than this? Belief in our vision of building a smoke free future and helping the smokers who would otherwise continue smoking is a huge motivation to work for a company so long and never give up.

PMI invests a lot of money and resources in science and innovations, both globally and in Armenian particularly. From the side it may

seem strange: a tobacco company and science. Why is it important for the company and for the world?

— Science should be front and center in policymaking, business, and everyday life, as it can help make significant strides in our collective efforts to address the world's most pressing problems. But society has yet to embrace its fullest potential. On the other hand connection between science and economics is in many cases pronounced and if science develops, then people work, and they have where to show their abilities. It is already clear how important the development of science is for such a small country like Armenia. As PMI is transforming into a tech company, we are starting to build a relationship with the local scientific community. I understand that for a tobacco company, investments in science sound strange, but we truly share the aspirations and the need for a professional environment of the young scientists. We understand the need to transform and the need to nurture the future. That is why we are giving scientists an opportunity to work, we create jobs, and new discoveries begin to serve as interests to the society, the scientific community, and the state. We hope that with the opportunities created, young scientists won't leave Armenia and will continue to fight the good fight to develop the Armenian economy. With the establishment of the center, Armenian scientists were able to exchange experience and develop scientific work in relevant fields. It already has connections with other Philip Morris research centers and laboratories, where there is a scientific community from 30 countries around the world. Philip Morris believes that Armenia has great scientific potential. And using this potential, our country can become a unique center of technological and scientific innovations in the region. ♦

IRINA SEYLANYAN:

“IT IS AN HONOUR, BUT ALSO A BIG RESPONSIBILITY”

In early 2020 HSBC Bank Armenia appointed its first ever Armenian CEO, Irina Seylanyan. Regional Post met Ms. Seylanyan to discuss how she led the bank through the tough year of pandemic and geopolitical tensions, and challenges that female leaders face in Armenia.

INTERVIEW : AREG DAVTYAN / PHOTO : HSBC BANK ARMENIA

This year HSBC Armenia marks its 25th anniversary. How would you describe the bank's development path in Armenia?

— HSBC opened its doors for business in Armenia on 16 March 1996. It was established as Midland Armenia Bank J.S.C. and renamed HSBC Bank Armenia CJSC in 1999. During the past 25 years, we have witnessed essential changes in Armenia's banking sector, with HSBC Armenia playing an important role in contributing to its development by bringing best international banking practices at the early stages of the development of the modern banking system in Armenia and promotion of the standards of corporate governance, customer service and conduct.

We have pioneered many products and services to customers in Armenia. For example, we can't imagine our lives today without bank cards, but not many people will remember that HSBC Armenia was the first bank to introduce cards and ATMs in Armenia in 1996, and the first bank to install an off-site ATM, located at the intersection of Baghramyany Avenue and Moskovyan. In more recent history, in 2016 our Contact Centre was amongst the first in Armenia's banking sector to operate in 24/7 mode and we were among the first to introduce Face ID and Touch ID Authentication for customers and Contactless ATMs in 2018.

We have also utilised HSBC's world-wide network and expertise for the benefit of our customers and our country. HSBC was honoured to play a leading role in the Republic of Armenia's debut Eurobond issue in 2013 and thereafter.

Our achievements were recognised numerous times throughout our 25 years' history by prestigious magazines like The Banker, Global Finance and Euromoney. Most recently, HSBC Armenia was named “Market Leader”

in the local market. The reason for having international CEOs in Armenia and in many other countries where HSBC operates, was to use their knowledge, experience and network from working in different markets for the benefit of our customers in Armenia. HSBC puts lots of emphasis on people development and throughout its 25 years' history in Armenia HSBC gave more than 60 Armenian colleagues the opportunity to work abroad both on short and

BEING A WOMAN IN A LEADERSHIP ROLE IN ARMENIA IS NOT VERY DIFFERENT FROM ELSEWHERE. IT IS NOT A SECRET THAT FEMALE LEADERS FACE GREATER AND BIGGER CHALLENGES AS THEY ALSO HAVE TO BATTLE AGAINST PEOPLE'S PERCEPTIONS

for trade finance in Armenia in 2021 by Euromoney. We were also awarded the Best Cash Management Bank in Armenia for three consecutive years (2018-2020) and Best Bank for Service for Corporates in Armenia for two consecutive years (2019-2020).

You are the first Armenian CEO of the bank. What does it mean for HSBC Armenia and for you personally?

— HSBC Armenia is part of HSBC Group – one of the biggest global financial services companies. This is one of our biggest advantages

long-term assignments, thus allowing them to gain international experience and knowledge. Our employees have worked in a variety of markets, including the UK, France, Poland, Luxembourg, Malta, Channel Islands and Isle of Man, Russia, UAE, Oman, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, India, Thailand, USA and more. Some of them returned to Armenia, bringing home best practice from across various areas. My experience of working abroad for 7 years, coupled with my knowledge of the Armenian market allowed me to become the first Armenian CEO of the bank. >





It is difficult to say what it means for HSBC Armenia, but I think it gives my colleagues inspiration and belief that they can progress to the top of the organisation through hard work, dedication and continuous development. For me personally, it is an honour, but also a big responsibility to be there for our clients and colleagues.

A question we cannot avoid: what is it like to be a woman in a leadership role in Armenia? Is it still challenging, or can we say that there is more gender equality now?

— I think being a woman in a leadership role in Armenia is not very different from elsewhere. It is not a secret that female leaders face greater and bigger challenges as they also have to battle against people's perceptions. I'm fortunate enough to work for an organisation which promotes diversity

and I never really faced any obstacle from that perspective. Overcoming market perception was a challenge though in earlier days of my career. Our business community is still dominated by men and from my experience, at certain levels it takes much more effort for a woman to be accepted and her views to be heard, valued and followed.

I think as a country we have made progress, especially in some sectors that were traditionally dominated by men, for example Information Technology. However, there is still a long way to go. We are seeing more female than male students graduating from our universities, so on a professional level there should be a much higher number of women in leadership positions. However, only circa 20 percent of leadership roles in Armenia are held by women.

Obviously this is also a matter of choice. The question here is whether women are ready to take on this responsibility, or whether they are worried that this will impact on their family life, for example. Are employers worried that women will be less committed as many will have to manage both work and family life? Are men ready and happy to have a strong woman as their partner? All these questions should not be specific to women but they have been posed to women for many years and they have an impact on women's representation in leadership roles. The pandemic helped us to realise how flexible employers can be and how much more efficient employees can be when they have better flexibility to manage work/life commitments. So, hopefully we will see more rapid change in the near future.

In general, how would you assess the involvement of female professionals in the country's financial sector?

— Women account for around 55-60% of the workforce in financial services in Armenia. At the entry-level the representation of women is even higher, so overall involvement of female professionals in the financial sector is high. Despite this progress, women still represent probably only one in five positions in the financial services C-suite. Certain leadership roles are “traditionally” occupied by women, such as Heads of HR, Chief Accountants, Heads of PR / Marketing / Communication, but we still have very little representation of women in other leadership roles. Representation of women on Boards in the financial sector is almost non-existent.

2020 was a dramatic year for Armenia: first the pandemic, and then the latest geopolitical tensions, and we can still experience the grave repercussions of both. What has been HSBC Armenia's biggest takeaway from these challenges?

— 2020 really was a very difficult year for our country and for all of us – I would say an unprecedented year, which will have a lasting impact on our society and economy. From a business perspective there are many takeaways, but our biggest takeaway is the importance of having robust business continuity plans in place. Obviously, nobody could plan for what happened last year, but having a robust operating framework and flexibility to adjust it quickly to the changing environment helped us to overcome challenges. While impacted themselves, banks have a unique role to play in ensuring stability and supporting customers in the challenging environment. Our main challenge was to continue providing uninterrupted and efficient service, while ensuring safety of our employees and customers. I'm very pleased with how we responded to the challenge – we maintained a high level of business

continuity and were able to provide our customers with the support they need. I have been humbled by the dedication and commitment that our employees have shown in incredibly tough circumstances and thank them for all they have done and continue doing for our customers and each other, while managing their own, at times extremely difficult, situations at home. Other aspects that I would like to mention as a takeaway is the importance of caring about the well-being of our employees, regular communication from the top of the organisation and focus on adaptability and resilience. The past year also proved how important honesty and transparency are in developing trusting and supportive relationships and a sense of inclusion and togetherness in an organisation – even when working remotely.

Carrying on HSBC Group's long legacy of implementing different community projects, at HSBC Armenia, for more than two decades, we have supported and delivered projects which positively affect the lives of community residents, open up new opportunities, and bring hope to less advantaged groups of people. A significant portion of our community support is directed towards helping people develop the employability and financial skills they need to thrive. Advancements in digital technology and events such as COVID-19 are rapidly changing how we work and live, and affecting people's finances and livelihoods. That's why we are committed to building future skills – for our customers, employees and people in the communities we serve. In addition to our support of future skills, we also

THIS CRISIS ALSO CREATED SOME OPPORTUNITIES. IT FORCED US TO PIVOT, INNOVATE AND ADOPT SOLUTIONS THAT MAY OTHERWISE HAVE TAKEN YEARS TO ACHIEVE

This crisis also created some opportunities. It forced us to pivot, innovate and adopt solutions that may otherwise have taken years to achieve. So, we should ensure the positive outcomes stay with us on a permanent basis and capitalise on those.

HSBC Armenia regularly implements different CSR projects in the regions of Armenia. Why is it important for the bank to be involved in community development?

— Sustainability underpins our strategic priorities and enables us to fulfil our purpose as an international bank, which is to help businesses thrive and contribute to the health and growth of the communities where we operate. We believe that we do not exist in isolation and that giving back to society is as important as the business we do.

extend support for causes reflecting local needs. We are committed to providing financial and other help in response to unforeseen and sudden challenges including natural disasters, humanitarian crises and pandemics such as COVID-19.

Finally, we also encourage our employees to volunteer their time and expertise to a range of causes. Volunteering makes our colleagues feel part of the projects we support and adds a huge amount of ownership and connection, ensuring that we see the projects through. On top of benefitting the communities we serve, volunteering brings a feeling of great personal accomplishment, enabling people to build connections, develop new skills, and gain fresh perspectives. This makes us stronger as a team and connects us even more closely to our customers and communities. ♦

EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

The EU has always stressed the importance of creating equal opportunities for women in different sectors, including business and social entrepreneurship. Over the past years, the EU has taken major efforts to foster the development of women in the regions of Armenia. EU4Women: Economic Empowerment through Social Enterprise is one of the many EU-supported initiatives that has promoted gender equality via economic empowerment. Regional Post talked to several beneficiaries of the project to learn more about their stories of how they achieved financial sustainability with the support of the European Union.

TEXT : MARGARIT MIRZOYAN



In 2017, with the co-financing of the European Union, the Near East Foundation UK and Women's Development "Resource Center" Foundation embarked on an important mission of fostering the economic empowerment of women across Armenia with a two-year project – EU4Women: Economic Empowerment through Social Enterprise. The project provided support to 12 civil society organisations (CSOs) in Lori, Gegharkunik, Syunik and Aragatsotn. The goal of the project was to help CSOs in these regions establish or ex-

pand their social enterprises and become financially sustainable as a result. The project provided funding to initiatives that would bring tangible benefits to the social enterprises and women in the target communities. Eventually, the stories of CSOs in different communities of Armenia intertwined and transformed into success cases. Some of those women achieved financial stability and a chance to sustain themselves, while others gained new skills and knowledge for their daily work.

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Beneficiary of the Hub House
enterprise cultivating tomato bushes

HARVEST HOUSE IN CHAMBARAK

The story of Harvest House CSO starts 120 km away from Yerevan, in a borderline community. Eighty square metres of production space and one hundred square metres for a greenhouse. Back in December 2018, the EU-supported Nran Hatik (Pomegranate Seed) Community Development Foundation came up with the idea of building the first greenhouse in the town of Chambarak in Gegharkunik region. It is considered one of the poorest communities in Armenia, where farming and cattle breeding are the only source of income for the locals. A year later, the construction of the greenhouse was in full mode.

Gayane Saribekyan, a resident of Chambarak, works at the Harvest House greenhouse. She plants vegetable seeds and sows greens at the greenhouse. Then she harvests them and puts them up for sale. In other words, she knows everything about agricultural production. The greenhouse established with the support of the European Union has created a job opportunity and a source of income for Gayane and many other women in the community.

The social enterprise not only equipped these women with skills and knowledge, but also the opportunity to put them into practice. In addition to growing and harvesting greens and vegetables, the social enterprise has been equipped to produce vegetable pastes and natural juices. The impact is clear for Gayane, who first participated in the training and then had a chance to apply that knowledge in her daily work.

As part of the EU4Women: Economic Empowerment through Social Enterprise project, the team of the foundation participated in a one-year training project to have a better understanding of social entrepreneurship and business planning and to identify the needs of their community. As part of the training, the team conducted research and needs assessment to identify what kind of businesses



would be successful in Chambarak. The goal was to keep the financial flows inside the community and channel them into local businesses.

“What we wanted to achieve was a snowball effect, which would set an example for local farmers and inspire them to create similar income sources on their own,” says the Head of CSO Nune Mirzoyan. “In fact, some of the locals have already created small greenhouses in their own yards.”

Despite the COVID pandemic, the community generated abundant production of greens and beans. They produced over 400 bunches of organic greens grown with organic agricultural practices. Currently, the locals buy these products right at the greenhouse, while people living in the adjacent communities can buy them in several stores.

The employees of the “Harvest House” consist of all the women that participated in the training. There is only one man working in the social enterprise. Nran Hatik is Gayane’s first sustainable workplace.

“Having a job in Chambarak is already a major achievement. I am more confident now that I have my own income, I am able to support my family, as well as bring quality products, greens and vegetables to our table,” says Gayane. >



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Beneficiaries of the
Harvest House CSO work-
ing at the greenhouse

KAPAN WOMEN

Kapan Women is the project of Kapan Women’s Resource Center NGO. Since the day of its establishment in 2009, the centre has had 4262 beneficiaries. The members of KWRC are women with different professional backgrounds. The organisation is open to all those who wish to empower women and eliminate gender inequality. Years ago, the centre came up with the idea of developing the textile industry in Kapan. They had previously implemented social entrepreneurship projects and it was a great opportunity for them to contribute to the economic development of the region, create new opportunities for the women and also cover the expenses of the NGO. When the social enterprise was established and began selling textile, they understood that there’s a demand for sewing quality clothes as well.



Production unit of Kapan Women CSO

Unlike other sewing companies in Kapan that produced only outerwear, the CSO began producing other types of high-quality clothing as well. In order to be competitive in the market and have their own brand, the CSO got involved in the EU4Women: Economic Empowerment through Social Enterprise project. As part of the project, the CSO upgraded its production by setting up a knitting unit. Currently, they offer high-quality sewn and knitted products such as clothing, baby bundles, and toys.

Knitwear produced by Kapan Women CSO beneficiaries

56 women and 17 men got the chance to earn income through the social enterprises supported by the EU4Women: Economic Empowerment through Social Enterprise project, co-funded by the European Union. The project strengthened the partnerships among the private sector, local and national governments, and their stakeholders. Overall, the EU4Women initiative recorded a 296% increase in sustainable income among the targeted 12 organisations. The project beneficiaries

participated in training and mentoring sessions, round table discussions, and community discussions to be able to successfully develop and manage their social enterprises. Eventually, the beneficiary CSOs have been able to diversify and achieve sustainable income and advance their projects towards gender equality and women’s economic empowerment. By means of the sub-grants offered by the project, 8 CSOs eventually developed new social enterprises, and 4 CSOs upgraded their companies.



▼
Beneficiaries of the Hub
House enterprise



▲
Beneficiaries of Hub
House enterprise
collecting herbs

The social enterprise has created a job opportunity for Mareta and many other women in Kapan. Mareta has been working at the CSO for two years now. What she likes about working in this enterprise is the stability and the opportunity for development. “We keep learning every day. We are following the industry trends to cater to the needs of our clients,” says Mareta.

HUB HOUSE

The Byurakan community is famous for its starry nights and gorgeous nature, but never as a hub for the empowerment of women and youth. Established in 2014, Basis NGO has been active in the Byurakan and Antarat communities of Aragatsotn region. With financial backing from the European Union and the Near East Foundation UK, the NGO established the Hub House enterprise, which aims at the development of women and youth through production of agricultural products and agritourism.

The construction of the enterprise building started as the COVID pandemic hit the country. The economic implications of the pandemic paired with those of the war forced the CSO to narrow down the scope of the project. Luckily, some of the milestones of the project have already been implemented and many young women who did not have a chance to complete their education or gain professional experience got a new opportunity to learn new skills as part of this project.

On a practical level, the beneficiaries of the project learned how to make organic soaps from the natural ingredients available in the region. It's still too early to talk about market competitiveness, but the primary goal of the NGO is to teach these women how to produce and promote their quality products.

Syuzanna Torosyan, a beneficiary of the social enterprise, always wondered what the key ingredients of a quality soap are, how it is made and why natural soaps are so expensive.

“I thought if someone can make this type of soap, why can't I?” says Syuzanna.

Currently, Syuzanna works at the Hub House enterprise and is learning how to make soaps. She has even sold some of them. The ingredients for making soaps are all around her as the community is famous for its gorgeous nature and abundant agricultural produce. Syuzanna is confident that even though soap making is more of a hobby for her, it will become her main job sometime in the future.

The herbs for the soaps are harvested from the slopes of Mount Aragats. The beneficiaries of the project learn where to find them and how to collect them. After this phase, they learn about the production chain, from collecting to marketing: how to dry, package and sell their products. Due to the pandemic restrictions in 2020, beneficiary women did not have the chance to properly collect the herbs, but they did not lose time and focused on upgrading their knowledge and skills.

Besides processing of herbs and making soaps, the EU-supported CSO is also looking for ways to promote tourism in their region. The team of the CSO has come up with a unique idea for this. It has trained youth as local guides for attracting new tourist flows to the lesser-known touristic destinations such as the Orgov Radio-Optical Telescope. The CSO has also been offering hospitality trainings for families in the community to help them generate income through tourism. The hub is also organising a camp for children aged 7-14. The profit received from the camp benefits the CSO and their social projects.

These are just a few examples of how women in the regions of Armenia can become economically empowered and bring tangible benefits to their communities. ♦

UNDP FOR THE COMMUNITIES

S IS FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Year 2020 turned out to be quite challenging for countries all over the world, and Armenia was not an exception. According to Mihaela Stojkoska, UNDP Resident Representative of a.i. in Armenia, and Arman Valesyan, “Integrated Rural Tourism Development” and “Sustainable Communities” projects manager, the key to overcoming all the difficulties and becoming a self-sufficient entity as a country and a state is sustainability. Regional Post sat down with them to discuss these issues.

TEXT : MARGARIT MIRZOYAN / PHOTO : HARUTYUN MALKHASYAN

THE GAME-CHANGER

From the first days of the COVID-19 pandemic in Armenia, UNDP tried to tackle the issue on several levels. The organization started by providing food packages to the elderly people living in the communities across Armenia. Their next step was purchasing the much-needed ventilation equipment with COVID-19 patients. However, at some point, the organization realized that this type of solution is not enough to bring a larger change. “To find the solution which would become a game-changer, a more global approach was required. Any further actions should lead to more sustainable, long-term, and diversified results,” says Mihaela Stojkoska.

Under the global umbrella of sustainable development, UNDP started the “Sustainable Communities” project, which is funded by the Russian Federation and implemented by UNDP in Armenia in close cooperation with the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure of RA. Eventually, at some point, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) became more visible in practice and the time had come to turn from theory to practice to witness tangible results.

SEEDS FOR THE COMMUNITIES

From this starting point, awareness campaigns were implemented, developing and publishing around 100,000

guidelines and spreading them via supermarket chains and drugstores. As the project moved further, it acquired a larger scale. UNDP started implementing works to reduce the expenditure of the communities, placing energy-efficient systems so that these resources could be used to cover the costs related to the social and economic issues within the communities. These solutions would be the placement of solar panels, LED light systems, and many more. But the key solution, which the UNDP team suggested, was the development of a separate model for food security, namely the establishment of a seed reserve with its logistics center. This



would give the community an opportunity to become self-sufficient and independent by reproducing seeds. The seed production in Armenia is not on the highest level, there are only a couple specialized centers working in that direction. The main goal of the program is to ensure the compliance of the seed production value chain in the country. What does it mean? Currently, farmers in Armenia purchase the seeds of the fourth, fifth, and more reproductions, when, by establishing a seed reserve, the farmers could have the seeds of the highest quality at their disposal. These reserves won't be benefiting only the community; UNDP wants to position them at the macro

CURRENTLY, FARMERS IN ARMENIA PURCHASE THE SEEDS OF THE FOURTH, FIFTH, AND MORE REPRODUCTIONS, WHEN, BY ESTABLISHING A SEED RESERVE, THE FARMERS COULD HAVE THE SEEDS OF THE HIGHEST QUALITY AT THEIR DISPOSAL

level so they benefit the whole country. The research centers will provide the reserves with the seeds, the latter will plant and deliver the first reproduction seeds and pass them on to the farmer, integrating a value chain for the entire Armenia. The reserves will have a whole infrastructure under one roof: warehouses, production sights, etc. The pilot reserve will be established in the Chambarak community, Gegharkunik region. But UNDP doesn't want to stop there. The organization plans on building 3-4 similar reserves in other communities. The primary idea is to become an example for the whole country to ensure the self-sufficiency of the communities. ➤

“To have one centralized point for these activities is quite hard and costly for the government,” says Ms. Stojkoska “so we suggest distributing this weight to the communities, each of which will produce its champion product, and an exchange system will be established between the reserves in different communities and, finally, a high-quality diversified food basket will be available for each community.”

PARTNERING WITH THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Continuing to promote the idea of sustainability, during the pandemic, UNDP actively supported small and medium-sized enterprises, which involved both small grant programs and large co-financing initiatives directed mainly to women and youth. The idea was to work directly with people, help them realize their own ideas, rather than give them final products. “This approach will lead us to a more resilient and sustainable plan and results, we will teach people how to resist the hardships in a long run, rather than providing a temporary solution,” says Mr. Valesyan, “No one will understand your issues like you, no one will stand your grounds the same way as you want to, thus one has to do it for himself/herself.”

The logical continuation of these ideas is the two business competitions launched by UNDP within the “Sustainable Communities” project. The first one is the “Start-Me-Up” business competition covering Aragatsotn, Armavir, Kotayk, Ararat, Syunik regions, as well as 34 border com-

munities of Gegharkunik and Vayots Dzor regions. The main goal of the competition is enhancing the development and diversification of offered services in the mentioned regions as well as supporting the already active and brand new business ideas. More globally, the initiative will contribute to the social-economic development and sustainability of the communities as well as create opportunities for young people and women to be more active in their communities. The reduction of poverty and fostering a business environment in the regions will be the final chord of the project.

The second competition under the “Sustainable Communities” project is called “My Village” supporting entrepreneurs in the agricultural sector, covering the same regions and settlements as the previous project. Here the aim is slightly different. The competition will support new and existing small business entrepreneurs to foster productivity, renovate and re-equip innovative ideas.

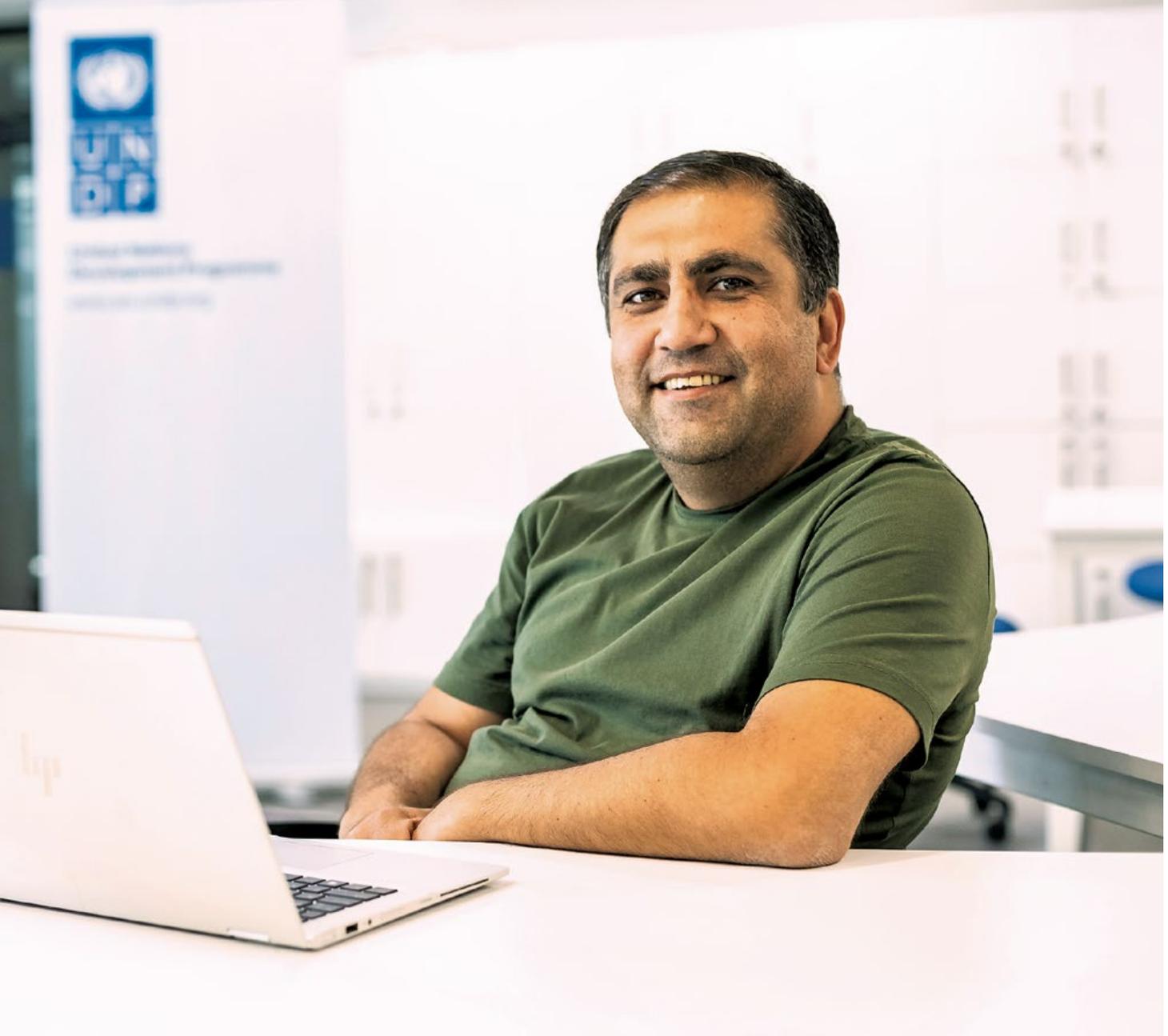
ON THE TOP OF THE HILL, IN THE MIDDLE OF THE FOREST

Under sustainable development, UNDP developed not only the “Sustainable Communities” direction but also the “Sustainable Tourism.” Initially, both the community and tourism projects had the same goal – to help people make their communities comfortable for living and creating. But from here the aims of these two projects went in different directions. Tourism took the road of traditions,



culture, nature, and the preservation of heritage.

In Gegharkunik region, there are three communities – Dprabak, Kalavan, and Antaramej – which spontaneously formed a rural tourism cluster on the top of the hill, in the middle of the forest. UNDP noticed this triangle, which has a huge potential but at this moment operates with half of it. In order to unleash the rest of the potential and position it as the first tourist cluster in Armenia, UNDP decided to come up with a cluster model which could be later on used in other communities as well. Here, inside this triangle, the economic opportunities are limited, and the main source of



income is livestock. However, during the past years, rural tourism has become a more stable activity in these particular communities. “We believe that tourism opportunities can become the main competitive advantage for this region by means of this cluster,” says Arman Valesyan, “What they need is a solid presentation and branding. They need to repair the roads and the roofs of the houses, change the lighting systems, renew the signs, repair the fences, ensure media coverage, train the locals to serve the visitors better, increase the number of guesthouses, invest in the infrastructure of the village and many other details to be taken care of.”

“ WE BELIEVE THAT TOURISM OPPORTUNITIES CAN BECOME THE MAIN COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE FOR THIS REGION BY MEANS OF THIS CLUSTER. WHAT THEY NEED IS A SOLID PRESENTATION AND BRANDING.”

A PLACE FOR LIVING AND CREATING

According to Mr. Valesyan, if the cluster fully operates, it can serve up to 100,000 visitors a year. There are more than 950 villages in Armenia and the locals have no idea about many of them. What if all of them form clusters and make tourism the main competitive advantage of Armenia as a whole? This will contribute to the global idea of sustainability, as it will benefit both tourism and the community. At the end of the day, the main goal of the umbrella concept of sustainable development fostered by UNDP is to help people living in Armenia to form and develop a place where they can happily live and create at every moment. ♦



RESTARTING TOURISM

After the disastrous 2020 - with pandemic crisis and 44-day war in Artsakh - Armenia's tourism sector is back to normal. With bigger ambitions and new approaches.



ANDREA WIKTORIN: “WE ARE IN THIS TOGETHER”

Andrea Wiktorin is not new to Armenia. She was Germany’s ambassador to Armenia in 2007-2009, then she came back here in 2019 as the European Union Ambassador. Regional Post discusses with Ms. Wiktorin challenges our country has been facing since recently and the ways they can be overcome with the support of the EU.

INTERVIEW : ARTAVAZD YEGHIAZARYAN / PHOTO : EU IN ARMENIA



Mrs. Wiktorin, you've been in Armenia for almost two years now. How would you describe this country in two words?

— Well, first of all Armenia is a country with a lot of potential, with very nice people and beautiful landscapes... I have to say, I knew where I was coming. I always liked it here, though I had no idea about the 2020, but who knew!

You worked here in the late 2000s, so you've seen Armenia before and after the Velvet Revolution. Do you see the difference?

— When I came back I had the feeling that this was a totally different country. After the revolution people were much more open, more optimistic, there were a lot of new places to go, new initiatives. Then there was a dramatic situation last year that again brought a change. Fortunately, now I have the feeling that we are slowly starting to look at the future.

Obviously, the part of the dramatic 2020 was the Second Artsakh War. How do you think that 44 days changed life here? What should Armenians do to build a better future?

— The war had terrible consequences for the people, there were losses of lives, incredible troubles of the displaced persons from Nagorno Karabakh. I had the impression that after the war society was still in a deep shock. Of course it will take a lot of time to heal the wounds. I personally

◀
Andrea Wiktorin,
EU Ambassador to Armenia



The European Union and World Health Organization - WHO Country Office in Armenia donate X-ray equipment to the Martuni Medical Center for use in their radiology room as a part of a larger assistance package, provided by the EU to help boost COVID19 response in the country.



believe that we have to stand together to help Armenia to overcome this very deep crisis.

By “We” you mean the European Union?

— Yes, and the member states separately. We are in this together. On one hand we have to show political support, which has been done, obviously. I mean, three high-ranking European officials visiting the country in one month and offering support. I think this activity speaks for itself. But we also need to give hope for the future. With all due respect to the sorrow and to the wounds, we need to look forward. There is a chance that if we act cleverly, we can come out even better than before. I clearly see that potential. With the recent elections that had a clear result, I see the willingness of the government to continue the reform process, which is hugely important, and also to work with the international donor community on the economic and social recovery of this country.

This brings us to the EU initiated EU4Business programme. What is it about?

— In two words, the EU4Business “Innovative Tourism and Technology Development for Armenia” wants to open opportunities for small and medium enterprises in the northern regions – Lori, Tavush and Shirak, both in the field of tourism and innovation. These are the two sectors where Armenia has

IF YOU DON'T HAVE BIG, NATURAL RESOURCES, THEN YOU HAVE TO CONCENTRATE ON HOW TO DEVELOP A COUNTRY, TO MAKE THE REGIONS SUCCESSFUL, GIVE OPPORTUNITIES TO THE PEOPLE TO DEVELOP THEIR IDEAS, WHILE STAYING WHERE THEY WERE BORN AND GREW UP

especially big potential. So, we want to strengthen the private sector. We want to support the development of the economy, and also empower the interested entrepreneurs both with the knowledge and resources, and make them participate in the knowledge-based economy. We need to find more high-tech solutions to help the regions.

How did you choose the mentioned regions?

— Actually, it was decided before I arrived but the main idea was to support the regions that are mostly in need. I think it was in 2017, and at that time three northern regions were in the worst situation. Today we also switched to the South, it happened after the war. We want to offer people in that part access to knowledge and European markets, which is very important for business development. I have to mention a previous commissioner Mr. Hahn, it was his vision from the start. As he said, it's better to con-

centrate the activities in some regions, show how you could work and then produce results in other regions.

Why is it important for the EU to support small and medium businesses in countries like Armenia in times like these?

— Easy, it's based on our own experience. For the European Union, small companies are the backbone of the economy, the engine for success. The more small and innovative enterprises you have, the better you can adjust to the unexpected situations. If you don't have big, natural resources, then you have to concentrate on how to develop a country, to make the regions successful, give opportunities to the people to develop their ideas, while staying where they were born and grew up. You can clearly see this pattern in EU's member states. For example, Baltic states targeted the SME's very successfully. I don't see why this couldn't happen in Armenia. >

I believe, pandemic must have brought some changes in the plans of programme.

— Yes, but I have to say that we adapted very fast to the situation last year. Truly, there was a heavy impact from the COVID crisis, so we gave roughly a million euro grants to SME's to overcome the tough period. I'm happy we did this together with implementing partners, such as GIZ. I hope the companies who got the grants will now finally go on the market and see new opportunities.

The EU has a particular emphasis on that sector; do you think local tourism has enough potential to attract a tangible number of European tourists?

— Armenia has a combination of the cultural heritage, unique landscapes and opportunity to offer different kinds of tourism. When I arrived in 2019 Armenia was in almost every media in the West, as a "secret" destination of the year, it was something new to discover. Then lockdown happened, but again, it pushed domestic tourism. Last year in September I was in Gyumri to give two grants to very interesting initiatives who were focused on the new elements: what are you doing with the kids, what are the offers for the families who want a domestic vacation? It shows that local businesses don't just sit and wait, they try to find new opportunities. In general I am very optimistic that European tourists will soon be back here, until then you have to create a better, more safe and green environment.

You mentioned what we have to offer, but what do we lack?

— Sometimes it is the question of infrastructure and environment. I mean, it is often difficult to find English speaking or French or German speaking guides. Also tourism professionals here must more clearly understand the targeting and the packages they offer. If you have a backpacker, he doesn't want to go to the 5 star hotel, but just a decent

hostel with a shower. Teenagers have different demands than the elderly who are happy just to visit monasteries. When I was in Syunik, I was touched by the beauty of the region, but the roads were, let's say, demanding. And if we go down to the very basics, toilets in restaurants are not in very good condition. It seems just a little detail, but tourism consists of such things. Also, Armenia, just like the whole world, has to recover the service sector. Many people had to leave their jobs to survive the pandemic.

As a foreigner what would you suggest your friends to see in Armenia? I mean not as an ambassador, but as just a European living here.

— I would suggest making a mixed trip to get the spirit of Armenia. First, look at Yerevan, go to certain museums to get the feeling of the culture, but then I would highly advise to visit the regions to see the different faces of Armenia. Start with lake Sevan, it's a must-go destination. Then, Tatev, for me it's one of the most stunning sights. I'm also fascinated by Meghri, but again there is a problem with the roads.

To say COVID-19 has impacted the economy might be an understatement, especially for small countries like Armenia, lacking infrastructure and medical facilities. What does the EU do to support the country in the context of the pandemic?

— At the end of the last year EU and the member states supported Armenia with a significant amount of money, around 90 million euros. It was meant for the midterm recovery plan, we are now finalizing it with the government. If you ask me as a European, the economy of the future must be green – we are putting it as a main priority, this is also our idea on how to overcome COVID in Europe. And it must be social. We have to protect those who were heavily affected by the pandemic. This brings us to another form of assistance – we brought sanitary devices, raised awareness, gave small grants, as



I said, to the companies who needed to keep their employees to overcome the crisis. We are also working on a big economic and investment plan, again, mainly focused on the SME's and geographically, the South, which needs support now more than others. We are in close cooperation with the Health Ministry. We helped with the equipment, distribution of Covax vaccines, and we also brought some medical teams from Europe to help their local colleagues. And it is still very important to have an awareness raised, because vaccination figures are surprisingly very, very low here.

How do you think Armenia handled COVID crisis in general?

— I would say that the government did what it could. There was a right guidance



◀ EU Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi visits Armenia to present the Economic & Investment Plan for the region & its flagship initiatives.

ARMENIA HAS A COMBINATION OF THE CULTURAL HERITAGE, UNIQUE LANDSCAPES AND OPPORTUNITY TO OFFER **DIFFERENT** KINDS OF TOURISM

as I saw it. But sometimes Armenians have their own ideas about things. One thing that I can't understand is why so few Armenians trust the vaccines, it really worries me that this way the numbers will eventually again go high.

Everyone here is interested in the following question: when will the Armenians be able to travel to the European Union countries?

— Based on our recommendations the EU took Armenia out of the list of the high risked countries. There are clear conditions of how the Armenians can

travel, though. One thing is it is much easier if you are fully vaccinated! This could be an incentive for vaccination.

If we go further, to the future where the pandemic is over, can we talk about visa-free travel to EU countries?

— This is on our agenda, there is a willingness from the side of the Commission. However before we start the dialogue we need the consent of all members. At the moment here are one or two members who still have certain concerns, but I know that Foreign Minis-

try is closely working with them and I really hope that we can start the process.

Do you think that it will be possible to go back to normal in the post-COVID world or there will be a new normal?

— The question is what is "normal life"? The world, not only the EU or Armenia, suddenly discovered that we are extremely vulnerable. We discovered that we have to work together. This should stay with us. This situation taught us important lessons. We saw how good sometimes distant working is, how it helps, for example, women with kids who could stay with the family and still work. Pandemic showed us how fast nature recovers when we stop the economy. And we understood that we have to be innovative and build the green future for all of the world. ♦

GIZ: FOR THE PEOPLE AND WITH THE PEOPLE

Madeleine Rauschenberger, Country Director of GIZ Office Armenia, told Regional Post about the tremendous potential of Armenia in terms of tourism, environmental resources, and other fields that she'd witnessed herself since her recent appointment.

INTERVIEW : ARSHAK TOVMASYAN / PHOTO : GIZ

In two words, what is GIZ and what is its mission in Armenia?

— In general, the vision of GIZ all across the globe is to create a future worth living. GIZ is the implementing organization of the German Federal Government for the topics of international and technical cooperation. Particularly in Armenia, the organization works on the behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), as well as the European Union and Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. Consequently, as a public benefit institution of the German Government, our activities always revolve around people. This applies to our work here in Armenia as well. Here, together with our partners, we create prospects for the people and with the people. As far as I know, GIZ came to Armenia right after its independence, and since the early 90s we've been working closely with different partners, both in the public and private sectors, with the government, civil society organizations, etc. to shape the future and improve the situation in the country.

Did the overall mission of the organizations change during the past 30 years of its activity in Armenia, having in mind the changes the country has undergone during those years?

— As a service provider or an institution in the field of international cooperation and sustainable development, we're dedicated to the work with our local partners to generate ideas for political, social, and economic change. And, at the end of the day, our aim is to turn these ideas into concrete action plans and implement them jointly. Certainly, there are obvious changes in Armenia since independence and as GIZ always works at the core of change, we, as an organization, have experienced certain transformations as well. We've been supporting organizations in the private sector, implementing certain projects in the biodiversity field and management of natural resources, and many others. We've also been contributing to the strengthening of accountability, transparency, and capacity of the country's institutions both on local and state levels to improve the services provided to the citizens here in Armenia. In what I've heard from my colleagues, there is serious progress in all these fields. I arrived in Armenia only in April of 2021 but I'm already extremely impressed by the level of digitalization, especially in the field of public services and also all around, by the efforts and approaches in the tourism sector, by the diversity and quality of the wine. Our organization is also very keen on witnessing

the framework conditions set by the government during the past years on the state and local level and the general ambition of the latter to make positive changes in Armenia.

The last few years were tectonic for Armenia: Velvet Revolution, then pandemic, war... Is it hard to adapt to the new situation for such a big organization as GIZ? How do such events impact your work, your global vision?

— We can certainly claim that the past three years have been very "eventful" for each individual in Armenia, for the local society as a whole, for the governmental institutions, and of course, for Armenia as a country. But GIZ staff works in over 130 countries worldwide and that allows us to build a unique and broad spectrum of capacities to be able to work under very difficult circumstances. Working for GIZ always means that you are working for sustainable development, a better future and change. This means we support our partners to implement their reforms and after the 2018 elections, the government set off a broad reforms agenda and we see that also the newly elected government, which is still in the formation process, is eager to continue in this spirit and we're looking forward to seeing how we can provide support with our commissioned mandates, for the better future of Armenia.

The priorities of GIZ are governance and democracy, environment and climate change, economic development, and employment. In your opinion, what were the biggest changes within these spheres in the past decades?

— First of all, these are the directions that the German government has decided to follow with the Armenian partners and commissioned us for this purpose. We worked in these spheres for many years to bring transparency, accountability and to support reliable and quality service delivery at the local levels. We see that this enormous and continuous decentralization process in Armenia has led to substantial improvements. This became possible due to the commitment and ambitions of our partners to strengthen local administrations in the enlarged communities. We also witness an increase of transparency in the service delivery by local municipalities, for example, via utilizing modern digital programs all over the country, which we helped to establish (The Municipal Management and Information system). Another example of change related to our priorities here in Armenia is the protection of the environment, the sustainable management of the resources, where we can vividly see an increase of awareness among the population. Both the government and the private sector work on getting to the core and realizing the potential of the country by finding and supporting innovative ideas and creating the entrepreneurial spirit for those who want to invest and create jobs.

Within a wide range of sectors, GIZ puts an emphasis on tourism, IT technologies, creative industries, and the environment

— The potential that Armenia already has is simply amazing and impressive. Looking at the country there's a huge



WE'VE BEEN SUPPORTING ORGANIZATIONS IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR, IMPLEMENTING CERTAIN PROJECTS IN THE BIODIVERSITY FIELD AND MANAGEMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES, AND MANY OTHERS

history of science, arts, and creativity. Thus we're currently implementing a project on the behalf of the EU, where we're trying to support innovative enterprises that are fostering and using the already existing potential to create jobs, which in turn, triggers the establishment of a sustainable private sector. We're focusing on tech as well as the tourism industry as these sectors of the economy have an extremely high level of potential to involve enthusiastic startups, already

established entrepreneurs and other individuals who create a very dynamic scene. In the tech sector, we do see a high level of potential even beyond the country's borders, becoming a regional role model, standing at the forefront of regional expertise. Just take the example of the Tumo Centers. Everybody is aware of those. The idea was brought up in Armenia, by Armenians. Now it's being exported and implemented in Germany as well as in other countries. >

The environment is another sector that is of particular importance and interest for our country, and for GIZ as well. It's also a very important topic for us as a magazine. Besides purely environmental projects, we've noticed that GIZ seeks sustainability in all of its projects. Why do the organization and the German government put so much pressure on sustainability projects in such a country like Armenia?

— As I've already mentioned sustainability is always at the heart of all our activities. It guides us and we honestly believe that only by combining all three dimensions, namely, social responsibility, the ecological balance, and economic capability, we can ensure a secure and dignified life for future generations, not only in Armenia but all around the globe. We see political participation as a basic prerequisite enabling sustainable development in all three dimensions and we're continuously working to implement those three the best way we can. Regarding the environment, I feel extremely blessed to live in a country, which has such amazing biodiversity. It's not only an environmental or ecological treasure but it's also a great resource for economic development at the end of the day. The sustainable management of the natural resources is very important and thus, within our ECOSERVE and EU4Sevan projects, jointly funded by the German Federal Government and the European Union, we try to ensure that all different interests, all those three dimensions I've mentioned are actually put in balance. At the end of the day, all the players who consider using the environment as a resource should find a compromise.

Let's jump from the environment to tourism. As far as I know, GIZ currently has a huge project in cooperation with the EU4Business program.



WE'RE ALSO WORKING ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF INNOVATIVE TOURISM PRODUCTS, SUCH AS THE CONCEPT OF GASTRO TOURISM, ADVENTURE, SPORTS TOURISM, AND MANY OTHERS

— First of all, GIZ is enormously happy to be a part of this "Team Europe" approach of the EU in Armenia and within this initiative, you've just mentioned EU4Business, we have quite an interesting project called "Innovative Tourism and Technology Development For Armenia". Here we closely work with the Tourism Committee under the Ministry of Economy on improving the marketing to bring more people to this wonderful and fascinating country.

Among other success stories we're very delighted about collaboration, an agreement on which has just been signed with the German Travel Association (DRV), Germany's leading travel trade organization. They are currently planning their central DRV Destination forum, which is a very well-known annual event, for the promotion of destinations to the German traveler. They have chosen Armenia as the event destination of 2021.



We're also working on the development of innovative tourism products, such as the concept of gastro tourism, adventure, sports tourism, and many others. The tourism sector, in general, is of great importance for the potential of Armenia and by supporting our partners through the funds of the EU, particularly in the northern parts of the country, we envision this to lead to more quality jobs, sustainable businesses, and also, coming back to the question, leading to more responsible tourism, taking into account the ecological part of this story.

This is a very difficult time for all sectors of the economy, especially for tourism. Internal tourism is on the rise but still, it's not enough. What are the ways to recover?

— Globally, we're still in the middle of the pandemic and this still is a very difficult period for everyone. Armenia in its turn was hit hard by the impact layers of the Covid-19 – health wise on individuals, the public health system, and the economy of course. Nevertheless, this is why it was important to quickly react to these dramatic changes, adjust the approaches and programs where it's possible and get into discussions with our funding partners as well. In close collaboration with our partners from the EU, we've been able to adjust the programs and include Covid response measures, which enabled the tourism sector stakeholders to go through this crisis with fewer losses. As a quick-reaction financial support, GIZ was able to allocate 30 grants to the tourism-related SMEs, with an overall budget of 300,000 EUR and more than 35 organizations have been supported to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. Many of these stakeholders found time to think of innovations and to come up with new creative ideas for a better future in the sector. They also worked on their business offer, emphasizing the internal tourists as well, which was not the case before. I can tell it from my own experience. I've been traveling around the country since my arrival and I've met tourists from all over the world, often diaspora Armenians, also their friends and families. So I can say that we're slowly but surely recovering. Also, throughout my travels, I've met many locals discovering their own country. What is important here is that Armenia should keep on looking into the future as – and I say it from the bottom of my heart – Armenia has so much to offer. So if we have a more strategic and holistic approach to tourism around the country with joint efforts, we will

recover sooner and will also manage to strengthen the businesses and create new opportunities on top of it.

GIZ has certain expertise in the tourism sector with such success stories as Georgia, which leads the tourism charts in the region. Do you think Armenia can attract a significant number of European tourists and turn the situation in its favor?

— GIZ in general has worked on many tourism projects all around the world, including the South Caucasus, implementing regional projects, which, of course, made us think of cross-border tourism opportunities. Many European tourists coming to the region want to see not only Georgia but also Armenia and it's not a difficult task to accomplish, one can do it by car or a train and in other ways. Thus, I think that working with our partners and starting collaborations such as the one I've mentioned with DRV, will present Armenia well on the international market. You might have noticed that Germans are quite serious tourists traveling here and there, and this is a huge success for Armenia to cooperate with such an organization, with the potential to get the attention of tourists from other European countries.

You've mentioned your travels across Armenia, what is your favorite spot at this moment.

— I would definitely say Lake Sevan as I'm a water person and there are also many things to discover in the area near to the lake. But in general, you have it all great food, extremely hospitable people and sites to see. And I congratulate everyone who arrives here. Armenia has something to offer to everyone both in terms of heritage and nature. What else would one want? ♦

TOURISM: THE BEST-SELLER STORY OF ARMENIA

Armenia has a huge potential to become one of the most popular tourism destinations in the region, says Wilhelm Hugo, the team leader of the EU4Business “Innovative Tourism and Technology Development for Armenia” project. Regional Post talked with him about this.

INTERVIEW : ARSHAK TOVMASYAN / PHOTO : GIZ



Why is tourism of particular interest to the GIZ and EU in Armenia and what does the organization do in that sense?

— Armenia – Hayastan, has a long-standing history and a huge cultural background. It became the first country in the world to adopt Christianity as its state religion under the rule of the Arsacid dynasty. Even much earlier the first wine production in the world was invented in Armenia, in the famous cave in Areni, 4,100 years Before Christ. This historic and traditional background forms the cultural tourism in Armenia and leads us to the more diversified tourism approaches, taking into account the potential of the gorgeous landscapes and the hospitality of the local people.

One of our key objectives is the regional development of Armenia in the sense of economic advancement, local economic development (LED), and the tourism sector has crucial importance in that context.

By the way, as also our second pillar, the Technology Development in Armenia is of high importance for its economic development. Our EU4Business ITTD project is well known for combining Tourism and Technology Development and one example is the “Butterfly” venture, this is a brand new start-up that makes the linkage between these two sectors. They are our partner as the Winner of GIZ and EPIC’s “The Future Innovator” Competition.

What are the concepts and the overall idea of the “Butterfly” venture?

— In general, the EU4Business ITTD approaches include Private Sector Development (PSD), strengthening the entrepreneurial spirit and a focus on education and training simultaneously supporting the local education development in the regions of Hayastan. We follow the idea of raising the performance of the private sector and supporting the growing market in the tourism area to ensure the demand on the one hand, and on the other hand



ONE OF OUR KEY OBJECTIVES IS THE REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF ARMENIA IN THE SENSE OF ECONOMIC ADVANCEMENT, AND THE TOURISM SECTOR HAS CRUCIAL IMPORTANCE IN THAT CONTEXT

we supported our partners from the educational field so that they could provide a good qualified personnel, thus ensuring the offer as well. Here's another example of our holistic approach to tourism development: in our opinion, the most important factor for success and sustainability, let's take the example of wine tourism in Armenia is the quality of the wine itself, because both the foreign and local tourists travelling around the wine spots of Armenia, first of all, expect the good quality of wine combined with other features wine tourism can offer.

It seems like you consider wine tourism as a crucial strategic element for tourism development in Armenia, is that so?

— Wine Tourism combined with cultural and culinary heritage promotion is a crucial element in the Armenian tourism development. In general, the diversification of tourism is an important step forward to bring it to high end tourism products and experiences. And with this example of wine tourism I would like to underline our sustainable and holistic approach with a focus on Quality.

One approach we would like to scale up is the establishment of the wine cube "Momik" in Areni; a tasting room placed in the vineyard itself, the first of its kind in the Caucasus region. Together with our partner CARD Foundation, we've also established the Wine Service Centre and the Wine Tasting in the Achajur community of the Tavush region and many other projects.

Having the above-presented approaches for sustainable development, a larger project EU4Business "Innovative Tourism and Technology Development for Armenia" has been delegated to GIZ PSDTVET Armenia by the European Union, with an overall joint budget of nearly 15 million euro.

With our freshly started tourism project, on behalf of the European Union jointly with the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), we're going even further by combining innovative tourism with technology to shape a future-oriented tourism development approach. We are determined to discover and support new innovative directions of Tourism Development in Armenia.

What is the EU4Business "Innovative Tourism and Technology Development for Armenia" project in particular?

When we started conceptualizing the project three years ago, we didn't have the idea that this combination of tourism and technology would be as relevant as it is now due to Covid-19. We achieve our goals via innovative and transformative tourism ventures in the Northern regions of Armenia, the support of high-tech and innovative entrepreneurs, international knowledge exchanges for high-tech researchers, and networks for the benefit of entrepreneurship culture for students and for the population in general.

EU4Business ITTD concentrates its efforts on the development of enhanced tourism offerings leading to good jobs, sustainable businesses, and responsible tourism. It foresees the conceptualization and implementation of three financial/grant schemes focusing on tourism ventures.

What we basically do is to develop touristic ventures through innovative and creative products using smart technology solutions that would be appealing to international and local tourists.

For GIZ sustainability is a key principle that's why we ensure that the ventures selected within our project will have a long-term impact. Sustainability also includes security insurance of our tourism ventures and products. In general, our envisioned results are more than 100 ventures in the tourism and technology field created or upscaled until April 2023.

Now, after our program has been active for a year, I am very positive about the final outcome. So far, we have already supported 56 ventures, of which 74% are owned by women or having women in managerial positions.

2020 was, let's say, challenging for Armenia – first pandemic, then war... How did the program adapt to this extreme situation?

— Indeed, the year was quite traumatic but we're here with GIZ to support

the development of Armenia. Due to the pandemic, we have adapted our approaches to respond and support ventures operating in the tourism sector in the Northern Regions of Armenia, and right at the start of the pandemic in Armenia in mid-spring 2020, we announced the EU4Business “Innovative Tourism Action Grants in Times of COVID-19”, where we have 30 winners from Lori, Tavush and Shirak regions of Armenia. With a 300,000 EURO budget, the aim of the scheme is to back up the ventures to recover and build on their products through the introduction of inventive and attractive solutions for potential tourists.

We see the private sector as the motive power and implementer for innovation and sustainability, supporting especially the entrepreneurial skills of our partners.

It's a great opportunity to give a picture of how the private sector sees and answers the crisis, as well as to show the eagerness of businesses and start-ups to come up with new ideas and to illustrate the varieties of ideas we support through our grant.

The most important success factor for us is to give voice to the private sector, the tourism ventures, that is why I'm thrilled that your readers will also learn more from and about our partners and beneficiaries in this edition of the Regional Post.

With the Tourism Innovation Academy (TIA) we established an innovative and entrepreneurial partner, who will be a key player for the prosperous future of Armenian Tourism Development in general.

The Tavush Tourism Development Agency (TDA) is an example of Local Economic Development via Tourism Development. I like to compare Tavush Marz with the famous tourism destination “Schwarzwald” in Germany, and we would like to support the same development direction.

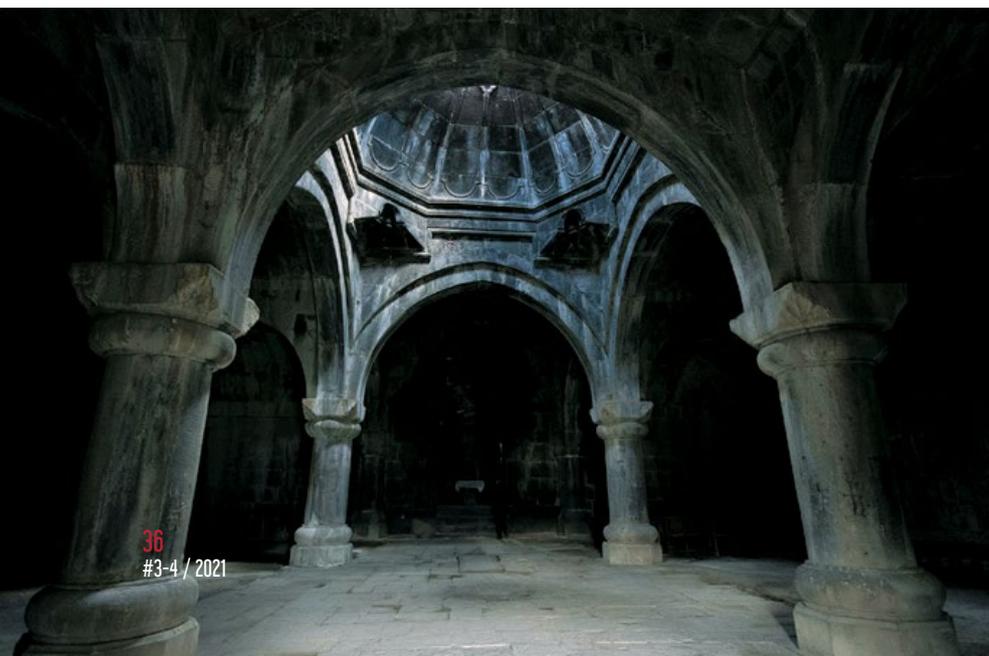
To come back to your question: Of course, the crisis situation was more than just challenging. Those were extremely difficult times for the whole country. Despite all the difficulties, however, I believe that Armenia is now on its way of economic recovery and we are more than ever determined to support the entrepreneurial system.

For this reason, we implement another Grant Scheme to support the Armenian Tourism sector with an overall amount of 1.6 Mio. EUR, which will be completely and directly supporting innovative Tourism ventures in Hayastan's three Northern regions, starting from August 2021.

Why is it so important to support the local tourism industry today?

— We currently witness how domestic tourism is living its momentum and the main reason and one can even say the “advantage” for this tendency is the global lockdown due to the COVID-19. Many Armenians nowadays travel around their own country, discovering its fascinating landscapes and places. Tourism has been identified as a key economic sector by the Government of Armenia, especially following the new idea of local economic and educational development in the regions of Armenia, part of the inclusive approach of the regions we support. A considerable number of studies conducted by local and international experts confirm this fact. The significance of the tourism sector is also reflected in the existence of a specific state agency, the Tourism Committee of the Ministry of the Economy of the Republic of Armenia (our partners), and currently, the sector-specific development strategy is on the discussion table for the period between 2020 and 2030. In numbers, Armenia's travel and tourism industry directly contributed to the country's GDP with 3.9% (WEF, 2019) and indirectly with 11.8% (WTTC, 2020). It also contributed to the Armenian employment conditions directly by 3.4% (WEF, 2019) and indirectly 12.5%. This and the identified potential for tourism is a good reason for the government and the private sector to jointly invest in the development of tourism, potentially pulling along other sectors, and thus, having an impact on the general economic-recovery development. In addition, tourism

TO MEET INTERNATIONAL VISITORS' DEMANDS, BOTH THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE STAKEHOLDERS WILL NEED TO COOPERATE AND PUT STRONG EFFORTS INTO OPENING THE DESTINATION AGAIN



▼
Jermuk waterfall in
Vayots Dzor region



development is a valuable and viable instrument for rural development which offers an alternative source of income to the rural population, thus providing a perspective to stay in their home villages and communities instead of having to leave for jobs in urban areas or abroad.

This factor is of particular importance for the EU, GIZ, and other international and national organizations and stakeholders. Also, tourism helps preserve cultural and natural heritage which contributes to strengthening the local population's pride in their home regions.

We talked about how tourism changed locals' rediscovery. Do you think that the potential of domestic tourism is enough to compensate for the lack of international visitors?

— Yes and no. Domestic demand has been rising over the past months, which is especially beneficial for destinations outside of Yerevan. It's obvious that the domestic visitors replaced the foreign guests to a certain extent, but as the international market remains the central, even though it went through transformations as well, we have to concentrate on the safety and security of our offer. Besides, we

have to put a lot of effort to make the destination open again for the visitors. In this regard,

Do you think the number of local, "internal", can replace foreign tourists, at least for this year?

— Domestic demand has been rising over the last few months considerably, benefiting especially destinations outside Yerevan. The capital and its tourism products mainly focus on foreign visitors, thus suffering strongly, and, looking into a still uncertain future, would need to adapt its offer the same way as other urban destinations such as Gyumri and Goris. It's obvious that domestic travelers replaced foreign visitors to a certain extent, depending on the destination, of course. To even better adjust the offer to this new and now very dynamic market is a challenge to be mastered to keep the demand up. However, the international market remains central to the further development of tourism in Armenia. To meet international visitors' demands, which have also changed, concentrating on safety and security both the public and private stakeholders will need to cooperate and put strong efforts into opening the desti-

nation again. Let me also highlight the importance of Vaccination in this regard. The Minister of Economy Vahan Kerobyan stated clearly "Vaccination helps our economy".

Especially to recover the Tourism sector, Armenia needs vaccinated tourism stakeholders. Let's take the example of the Tour Guide, she/he is the face to the customer. The "face" to the customer should be protected with a mask and vaccination.

Did you have an opportunity to travel to Armenia yourself? What is the best thing that we have and can present to travelers from all around the world?

— I have lived and worked in Hayastan for more than five years now and I have a minimum of two more years to go. Who knows, after seven years, my family perhaps will get Armenian passports.

I traveled a lot in Armenia, and I saw a lot of wonderful places, but hospitality is what I love about this country the most.

It's wonderful in Vayots Dzor enjoying the "Momik" wine cube and then walking through the vineyard grabbing the grapes and tasting them right there. Then you can spend the night in Yeghegnadzor at the beautiful and modern BnB of Karmen.

Especially for the Tourism offers in Northern Armenia, I would like to invite you to follow us on social media, where we always present exciting new tourism destinations.

In General, I suppose, Armenia is the most realistic and undiscovered part of the South Caucasus and from my point of view, this is what also travelers from all around the world appreciated in the past and will enjoy very soon again. One should not forget that before the pandemic, Armenia used to be on a very good path – economy-wise and, especially, tourism-wise. With all the difficulties, challenges, and dangers that the virus brought, we should see this moment as an opportunity for new innovative tourism development here in Hayastan. ♦



TIJAY JEGHELIAN: “WE CHOOSE ANYTHING THAT IS INNOVATIVE”

Regional Post met the head of EU/GIZ funded Tourism Innovation Academy to discuss what changes are needed in the industry to make Armenia more competitive on the world travelers' map.

INTERVIEW : HASMIK BARKHUDARYAN / PHOTO : TOURISM INNOVATION ACADEMY

Ms. Jeghelian, what brought you to this industry and to this project par?

— My background is in the hospitality industry. I used to work in hotels back in Lebanon. So, when I repatriated to Armenia 14 years ago I thought – I'm going to make a big change here in Armenia in the tourism industry. First, I did my Masters at AUA specializing in marketing industry, worked at different events with Deem Communications, and got acquainted with the CBRD program which was the center for business and drool development at the time. One of our projects with CBRD was helping B&Bs in different regions of Armenia: I went there and helped people who were building their B&B houses.

At the time tourism in Armenia was only making its first steps, wasn't it?

— Yes, but eventually it developed, the number of tourists grew, and global hotel brands began to enter. I worked in different hotels, specializing in marketing and the sales. And finally, three years ago, I joined Impact Hub as a program manager. When we heard we had an opportunity to work in a tourism related project, we knew I was going to be the best person to run this project. The project is founded by ITTD project within EU4Business initiative and implemented by GIZ Armenia.



TOURISM INNOVATION ACADEMY

Tourism Innovation Academy, supported by EU4Business initiative, has a goal of boosting early-stage tourism-related startups in their entrepreneurship journey. By nurturing innovative startup businesses, this project aims to support them in their pursuit of becoming scalable, profitable, sustainable and impactful enterprises.

The Tourism Innovation Academy implemented by the Tourism Support Center Foundation and funded by the EU4Business "Innovative Tourism and Technology Development for Armenia" Project, in cooperation with Impact Hub Yerevan supports to drive innovation in the tourism sector and promote purpose-driven entrepreneurs by equipping them with relevant skills, knowledge, access to networks and increasing their capabilities to compete in national and global markets.

Tourism Innovation Academy was supposed to start in March of 2020, but then there was the pandemic, and the war...

— At one point we weren't even sure we would start it at all. To be certain, we actually went to the Northern regions to see if they were still interested in the program. We did that workshop in all three regions, and had a lot of people involved. We basically told them, "OK, this is great – the country is ready to work on the tourism industry. So, whoever has any idea or whoever has a startup or has done some research, or whoever has an existing business, please apply."

What kind of projects are you focused on?

— We chose anything that was innovative, related to the three main priority fields – wine tourism, adventure tourism, and winter tourism. A lot of people here have creative ideas but they are unable to implement them in the right way, because tourism here has always been like – "Whatever, we'll have some "spyurkahay" guests anyway, let's keep it the way it is," and that's it. Instead, we suggest that we focus on innovation. Let's do something innovative, people have so much creativity, let's help them take the idea and try to implement it.

How does it work?

— We validate the idea, we test it, and we tell the applicant if it is the right idea in the right region, after which we teach

him or her how to actually put a business plan and how to write the proposal. It's called an academy for a reason: we are teaching here. It's a two-year program supported by ITTD project within EU4Business Initiative.

How many projects are selected for incubation?

46 projects were selected out of dozens. Applicants have three months to do the incubation. There are workshops and trainings, where the trainer – individually matched for each project – works individually with all their projects and ideas, and guides them through the process.

Who are these mentors?

— We have both local and international mentors from tourism-related expertise, generally from the hospitality sphere. It's amazing how involved they are!

What about matching? How does it happen?

— We do an assessment analysis, so I need to meet all 46 projects one by one. We discuss with the applicants what they have done so far, what is it that they want to do in these three months, then we match them with the mentor who is going to help them the most. Besides, there is another opportunity from EU4Business ITTD project: during these three months they are going to open a Grant scheme so these participants can apply. We are helping

applicants to write the right proposal in the right way and get the support.

In the global world of tourism, what is it that Armenia can really offer to the travelers?

— Experience. Because, when you're coming to Armenia, ok, you have this beautiful, amazing scenery, the rich history with all these fantastic churches, but what is important is the experience itself. When you say we have amazing food, it is the experience of that food. Tourists need to experience and feel the authenticity of all this heritage. When they are going to the regions outside of Yerevan, they feel the authenticity of the people, their hospitality, and the simplicity of things. There they feel who we are and what the essence of Armenia is. Armenians have always been very hospitable, we always welcome guests in our houses, if we don't have anything in the fridge, we can easily borrow something from the neighbors, just to be good hosts. But we need to understand that tourism is a bit different, it's an industry. And a guest in this case is not just a friend, he is a client who wants service. When it is a business, it is a different mindset, and I want these people to just approach it in a different way.

So, can we say that TIA is more about outbound tourism?

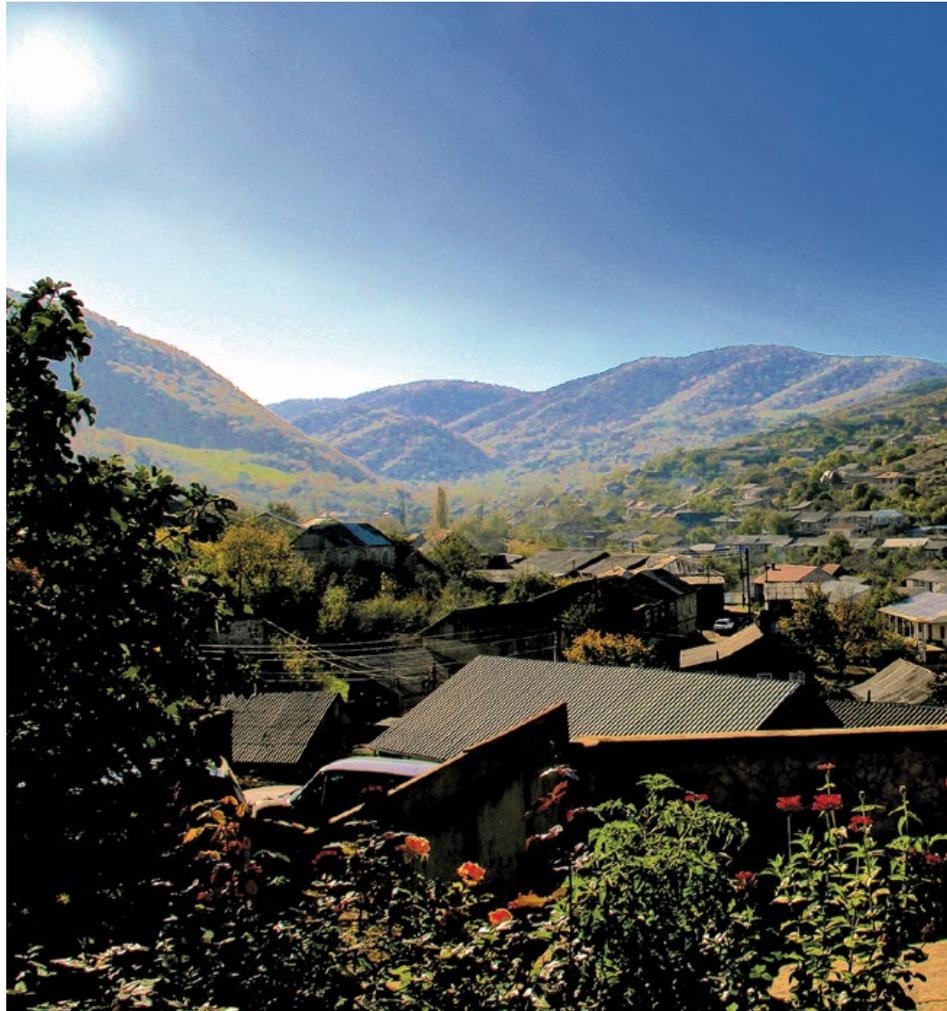
— No, we don't specify, it's the beneficiaries who choose their niche. Anyway, right now it's more about domestic tourism as the borders are mostly still closed. It was really booming last year and uprising: Armenians finally started to value what they have in their own country. So, for our beneficiaries this is an opportunity to start a business and have some practice on the local travelers. Overall, I'm really proud of the amazing project we have in the academy! I'm sure, very soon we are going to have dozens of fantastic options for both foreigners and locals to feel and experience Armenia like never before! ♦



TAVUSH: YOUR NEXT DESTINATION

Tavush Tourism Development Agency (TDA) has operated since 2013 and accomplished a lot of interesting initiatives. In 2020 with the support of EU4Business ITTD (Innovative Tourism and Technology Development for Armenia) project, agency opened a new page in its history. Regional post sat down with the Chairman of TDA's Board of Directors Gor Alexanyan to talk about tourism in the Tavush region, the role of TDA in it, and also about the achievements on their way up.

TEXT : MARGARIT MIRZOYAN / PHOTO : TDA



MARKETING TAVUSH

“To successfully develop and promote tourism, one of the most important preconditions besides possessing the resources is how you use those resources and how institutionalized your approaches are. TDA’s idea is to provide that institutional base for further promotion of tourism in Tavush region and to become the coordinating organization which will gather and lead the beneficiaries in that area and amplify their voices,” says Gor Alexanyan, the Chairman of the Board of Directors of Tavush Tourism Development Agency. The TDA NGO was established based on the initiative of GIZ, in 2013. It is a community-based organization based on the DMO model. The latter opens as “Destination Marketing Organization,” and basically, promotes a certain location as



>
Gor Alexanyan



THE AGENCY PLANNED TO CONTINUE THIS PROCESS NEAR THE BERD COMMUNITY, **BUT FIRST THERE WAS THE PANDEMIC**, THEN THE JULY ESCALATION TOOK PLACE, AND FINALLY, THERE WAS THE 44-DAY WAR



Arman Mshkjan

an attractive tourism destination. TDA was the first organization to apply this model in Armenia. Organizations fostering DMO approaches are of two types; community-based (which is the case for TDA) and corporate (based on business). The Board of Directors is formed correspondingly: in the case of community-based DMO, the Board involves representatives of that particular community and local public institutions; in the corporate DMO, business entities and organizations are included. TDA's Board of Directors includes founding communities, local administration, the Tavush YSU branch, and the Leader of Tavush Diocese. According to Gor Alexanyan, the ideal version is when those two DMOs are combined and that's the primary target of TDA in the future.

PAST AND PRESENT

In the first years of its establishment, the organization mainly focused on knowledge and experience exchange. Gor Alexanyan joined the TDA team in 2019, and they decided to concentrate their operations on the creation of the Tavush Tourism Development Concept. In the meantime, the agency also supported, coordinated, and participated in different festivals in the region. TDA also developed a trail near the Noyemberyan city leading to the Mshkavanq monastery. The agency planned to continue this process near the Berd community, but first there was the pandemic, then the July escalation took place, and finally, there was the 44-day war.

Last year, in the context of the pandemic, TDA applied an interesting

idea to the Innovation program of GIZ. Following the trends set by the new pandemic, the organization came up with an initiative related to the digitalization of tourism processes.

“They say, ‘No tourist – no tourism’. But what if a tourist somehow appears here? The tourism sector representatives themselves have already begun this process realizing the importance of integrating digital solutions and skills into their work”, says Gor Aleksanyan. These skills are public speaking, video editing, publishing, blogging, and vlogging. So, the program proposed the “tour guide logging” (t-logging) term. As a result of their multidimensional project, tour guides received more in-depth knowledge on how to present their actual tours organized



German Lacey

◀ Tavush is famous for its medieval churches and monasteries

in Armenia via digital platforms and with high quality on both technical and content levels.

During the pandemic, TDA also had a chance to develop their website and, currently, they are going to strengthen the website to make it more user-friendly for both the tour guides and the tourists. Another achievement of the organization was the promotional video for the Tavush region as a tourism destination. The video exceeded 100,000 views organically. It's in open access for everyone who wishes to use it for the promotion of Tavush. Additionally, they put together the overall brand book of Tavush, again in free access. Other products of their work are the digital maps of Tavush sites and destinations – including churches, trails, and infrastructures.

THE FUTURE

As Gor Alexanyan highlighted, the perfect DMO model for similar organizations such as TDA is the combination of community-based and corporate types. “At this moment, the main function of TDA is the coordina-



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Beauty of Tavush

THE TOURISM SECTOR REPRESENTATIVES THEMSELVES HAVE ALREADY BEGUN THIS PROCESS REALIZING THE **IMPORTANCE OF INTEGRATING DIGITAL SOLUTIONS** AND SKILLS INTO THEIR WORK



tion of the parties involved in tourism, not management and monitoring, but coordination,” says Gor Alexanyan. “We think that TDA should continue strengthening and coordinating, but additionally put more emphasis on collaborating with business organizations,” he adds.

Mr. Alexanyan also sees TDA as a research center, not only an organization based on cooperation. In other words, the team of the agency wants it to become multifunctional and work in several directions. Finally, TDA doesn't want to coordinate the processes only inside the Tavush region, but it also wants cooperation opportunities outside of the region, strengthening the network inside the RA and also ensuring the solid representation of the country on international platforms. ◆

THE MOST VALUABLE ASSET OF TODAY

Our small land at the highs and lows of Armenian highlands between Asia and Europe is an inexhaustible and genuine resource of touristic offers and opportunities. Regional Post talked to three local representatives at the tourism sector who consider Armenia as their most valuable asset and put their daily work into the realization of tourism via different approaches.

TEXT : MARGARIT MIRZOYAN



“HNOTS” GASTRO-YARD BY AREVI IN GOSH, LORI REGION

Gosh village has now its first gastro-yard, situated in a centennial mansion. The initiator of the project is Gevorg Gasparyan, the founder of “Arevi” agency, who was initially engaged in the promotion of adventure tourism in Armenia. “Arevi” also has its hotel located near Yeghegis river in Vayots Dzor, and now they are planning to put their efforts into the development of Tavush region.

Gevorg has visited Gosh several times – as his hiking and touristic routes run through the Tavush region – and starting an initiative in one of the villages has always been at the back of his mind. Eventually, “Arevi” purchased an old house near Goshavank monastery and renovated it, mainly preserving its style and identity. Quite interestingly, during the construction works they discovered two fireplaces, which brought forth the idea of naming the place “Hnots” – which means “fireplace” in Armenian.

Initially, Gevorg was nurturing the idea of a hotel project, but then he came across this house which was on sale and decided to buy it. This is how the gastro-yard project turned into reality. Currently, it operates as a restaurant, but it’s not a standard place to have a bite. They chose to name the place a gastro-yard because with the amplification of the touristic flows they plan on serving traditional Armenian cuisine including dishes particular to the Tavush region. They plan to build a bakery to go further and offer gastro experiences to its visitors; tourists here are going to have a chance to make their own Tavush puri bread and lavash.

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“Hnots” gastro-yard



PREVIOUSLY, THE TOURISM SECTORS DIDN'T RESEMBLE A STABLE SOURCE OF INCOME FOR THE LOCALS. "HNOTS" GASTRO-YARD IS A GOOD PRECEDENT FOR THE VILLAGERS



"The locals are really fond of the project. However, we discovered that for many years, the area has never realised its touristic potential. The official statistics illustrate that before the pandemic, around 500-700 thousand tourists used to visit Goshavanq and the local areas every year, while there are still no touristic units and initiatives in the village", says Gevorg, "No hotels, no restaurants; there are only the souvenir stands near the monastery which sell the same items you can buy at any tourist site in Armenia. Thus, previously, the tourism sectors didn't resemble a stable source of income for the locals". In his opinion, "Hnotes" gastro-yard will be a good precedent for the villagers to start similar initiatives in their own yards and houses.

When renovating the building, they hired all construction employees from among the villagers; moreover, five of them joined the main staff of the "Hnotes" after its opening. Several other villagers supply the gastro-yard with various goods; for example, forest mushrooms, berries, homemade compost, etc. Additionally, in the frame of another project, in cooperation with CARD, five farmers are chosen to be provided with different seedlings of the plants that will be used while cooking at the gastro-yard. The CARD will instruct these farmers on growing these plants, while "Hnotes" gastro-yard on its turn will procure these goods from these farmers.



ADVENTURE TOURISM CENTER IN DSEGH VILLAGE, LORI REGION

Lori region claims to become a new "outside of Yerevan"; the old school's dormitory in Dsegh village will turn into an adventure tourism center soon. The initiator behind the project is Vladimir Grigoryan, the director of DA tours which has operated as an incoming tourism operator since 2000. Grigoryan has also been the president of the Adventure Tourism Association since 2016. Besides being an internal tourism operator, DA is the company behind the filming of various movies about Armenia – with the most popular one being the

Armenian episode of "Parts Unknown" by Anthony Bourdain, starting from the script and ending with the support for the filming.



Having all this profound background and continuously conducting various tours in the region, Vladimir stumbled upon the problem of lacking tourism infrastructures in those parts of the country which resulted in additional expenses for the tour operators. Thanks to the international and

local organisations working on eradicating the disproportions in the development of the regions, the situation has upscaled somewhat but there are still many fundamental issues yet to be solved. Eventually, Vladimir came up with an idea to open adventure tourism centers in four regions of Armenia that currently face the above-mentioned problems the most.

"The main function of these centers will be not just providing accommodation but, first of all, developing corresponding conditions so that the tourists are able to spend several days in one region", says Vladimir, "and this implies creating or developing local tour products, i.e. entertainment for the visitor". Two types of entertainment are being considered – passive and active. The latter implies hiking up and down the mountains and gorges of the region, the passive is particular "services" offered by the local people; touristic experiences typical to that region. >



◀ Vladimir Grigoryan with kids



▶ Picturesque Lori

In April, they began renovating the non-operating school dormitory in Dsegh village which is set to become the first prototype of the Adventure Tourism center Vladimir envisioned. The center will have also its artistic expression and will even have a huge bright room to exhibit art pieces and host various master-classes by local craftsmen.

Since last year Vladimir has started the construction of the building and the corresponding infrastructures such as electricity and water. The locals are quite enthusiastic about the project as the dorm has been abandoned for the past ten to twelve years and now it is about to come to life again. Additionally, local masters are involved in the construction works and once the center is open there will be a need for over 30 staff members, and of course, they will be hired from the local communities. The format is based on the building they've found in Lori. In other regions, there won't be a need for such large buildings; around 20 sleeping spots will be enough. They are also considering moving this project outside of Armenia – for example, Georgia – and initiating the establishment of similar centres with local partners in rural areas and settlements. They might also create joint tour packages, including these centres in each route.



Ruben Tours and Travels mainly works with French and German-speaking markets hosting tourists from France, Germany, Belgium, and Switzerland





WE PUT A HUGE EMPHASIS ON THE SOCIAL ASPECT OF THE PROGRAMMES AND TRY TO BENEFIT AGRO-TOURISM AND RURAL TOURISM AND ENGAGE PEOPLE AND FAMILIES LIVING IN THE REGION



RUBEN TOURS AND TRAVEL LLC

Ruben Tours and Travels mainly works with French and German-speaking markets hosting tourists from France, Germany, Belgium, and Switzerland. In other words, it presents the Armenian culture and atmosphere to the European world.

Aelita Chobanyan, the founder of the agency previously worked for a Swiss foundation in Armenia where they were going to implement various ecological and humanitarian projects in the Shirak region and adjacent settlements. There she interacted with many tourists and enhanced her knowledge about Armenia: there's hardly a spot in Armenia she doesn't know about.

In 2010, Ruben Tours and Travels was established with its primary focus on adventure tourism. Currently, they provide various tours starting from traditional cultural heritage tourism ending with mountain hiking. Besides Armenia, the routes of Ruben Tours and Travels include Georgia and Western Armenia. "We put a huge emphasis on the social aspect of the programmes and try to benefit agro-tourism and rural tourism and engage people and families living in the region", says Aelita, "The situation hit hard on us, just like on any other one in the field, but we didn't turn to local tourism and decided to use this time working on the development of our tourism products and preparing new tour packages for the next year".

One of the sectors of their interest is beekeeping and Aelita herself practices it. Currently, they work on making this initiative into a touristic experience; however, it's hard as it requires huge financial investments from their side. Via this and other similar projects, they try to put on the map the areas of the countries which have been left out of the tourism routes. ♦

SUPPORTING THE IDEAS OF ARMENIA

Armenian entrepreneurs and business entities generate thousands of great ideas and sometimes only a small jump with support is needed for them to succeed and promote Armenia both locally and internationally. Regional Post talked to the grantees of the EU4Business “Innovative Tourism and Technology Development for Armenia” project co-founded by the European Union and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), implemented by German Development Cooperation GIZ, who had received that small support jump for their ideas.

TEXT : MARGARIT MIRZOYAN

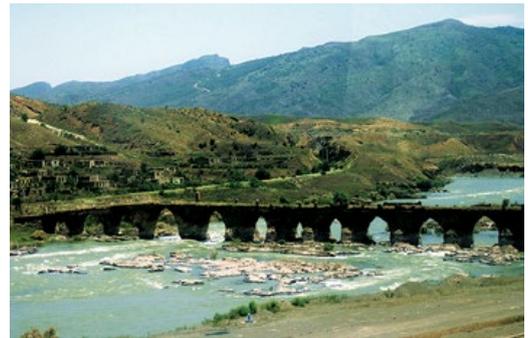


THE SONG OF ICE

Dilijan might become a hub of extreme and adventure tourism in Armenia as the first via ferrata will be established there very soon. A horizontal ropeway will be placed on the rocks with a special fastening mechanism. There was no such type of adventure in the region before. Hayk Kharatyan, one of the initiators of the project has worked in the adventure and extreme tourism sectors for a long time. He has also worked on the preservation of Dilijan National Park, which eventually became the location for their new initiative. The project is called “Ice-wall”. The name is directly related to the area as the park is located at the Sartsapat (which means “covered with ice”) mountain of the Ljevan mountain range. It’s about 15 kilometers from Dilijan – near Haghartsin village, up through the mountains via off-road cars. They discovered Sartsapat while working in the forests and the moment it caught their eye they knew that was it.

“Besides via ferrata, the project will include other options for active rest including rock climbing, paragliding, off-road drives with Jeeps, mountain biking tours, horse races etc.”, says Hayk, “The area used

for the project will also have a camping zone for those who wish to stay in small cottage-like structures that are not very common in Armenia”. Once the adventure is ready, their further goal is to expand and build perhaps the longest via ferrata getting registered in the Guinness Book. Besides the business perspectives, the project has wider purposes, including the development of adventure tourism in Armenia. The team backing the project has all the necessary experience for the implementation of such an initiative. They are going to also engage their friends who were previously involved in the construction of several ziplines in Armenia and the organisation of other extreme and adventure tourism activities. The project has social aspects to it including training for youth representatives from local villages who will be trained to become instructors and work at the site. Another issue the project will address is the environmental element; by bringing a huge number of tourists into the area they will prevent illegal logging. According to Hayk Kharatyan, this project is just one piece of the huge puzzle. ➤



TOURISM IN SHIRAK

After the earthquake of 1988, the Berlin Centre for Mother and Child was established in Gyumri with the support of the German Red Cross, and after the war ended, it gradually turned into the Berlin Art hotel we know today. From the first days of its establishment, the hotel began to organise day tours which resulted in the establishment of the “Shirak Tours” tourism organisation in 2000. Its goal was to explore Shirak’s tourism resources and create a new approach to the Armenian tourism market and human centered tourism. Berlin Art Hotel also has a tourism base in the Krashen village of Shirak region, which is now used for cross-country ski tours, dining, and relaxing. The new project of the Berlin Art Hotel aims to expand the “capacities” of Krashen and turn it into a suitable place for various types of tourism: adventure, healthcare, sports, and agritourism. The area is known for its astonishing nature which has its attraction in all seasons of the year. There are abundant water resources like waterfalls and mineral springs around the area, beautiful pines which are great for those with respiratory issues, not to mention the honey produced from the flowers of Krashen. There are also hiking trails, beautiful snow covers in winter, connections with “gorge villages” (Salut, Bashgyugh, Kakavasar, Dzora-

shen), and the road leading to Trohkan waterfall. The initial plan is to turn Krashen into a recreational area for the whole year. The tourism base, which is a single-story house with a surrounding park, has become an eco-lodge where visiting tourists can rest and relax, taste organic food, take hiking or skiing tours and train in the open-air gym/sports area. The implementation and development of the tourism project had a social function and provide jobs for the villagers. In a long-term perspective the goal of this pilot project is to turn Krashen into an eco-village. This will greatly contribute to the development of domestic tourism which is more important than ever considering the absence of foreign tourists. Cooperation is planned with Krashen livestock and vegetable farms to engage them in rural tourism, food supply, and the establishment of eco-lodges in future. Cooperation has already been established with “Krashen Community Development Initiative Group” NGO and Krashen Eco Farm group. They will organise training courses and master-classes for the villagers in order to provide them with employment opportunities. Thanks to the project, 3-5 people from the village of Krashen will have jobs during all seasons. This number will increase in the upcoming years.



THE ONLY PENSION IN ARMENIA TURNING GREEN

Dghyak was the only registered pension in Armenia. After undergoing a huge transition it reopened as Green Wood hotel. This is a family-led business designed for family rest. The complex also has a conference hall – hosting various trainings, group visits of international students, exchange programmes, conferences etc. Most of the team members are local women who were previously unemployed, but the management of the pension has re-profiled them in different areas and they currently work at the Green Wood. During the global pandemic, the hotel received government support and didn't fire a single employee; on the contrary, they even hired a new one. They also received support from EU4business ITTD project and decided to direct their focus on the new image of the pension. They decided to undergo a re-

branding and started with the name of the pension. “Dghyak” was hard to pronounce for the foreign guests, also the building itself didn't look like a “dghyak” (a castle), so, they chose “Greenwood” as the new name of the hotel and already have a new logo and brand identity with a brand-new slogan – “Comfort is our nature”. Greenwood hotel also support the locals by purchasing goods from local farmers. The lighting of the territory will be implemented via alternative energy sources, which is the environmental aspect of their operation. They will have a website and a promotion via social media. The website will illustrate not only information about the pension but also provide information about the beautiful sites of Dilijan community and Tavush region. ➤



THE PEARL OF LORI

Odzun, located in the greenery of Lori, is one of the major and historic villages in the region. Here, in Odzun, Sergo Davtyan and his wife Azniv Asryan have established their guesthouse. In 2019, the enterprise hosted 920 overnight foreign visitors and provided lunch to 900 day visitors. It all began over ten years ago, when the family was asked to host French tourists for a couple of nights as their house had all the necessary facilities to accommodate foreign guests. It turned out that the visitors were from Marseille and arrived in Armenia with a wish to find new tourist destinations.

As Azniv is a French language specialist and also knows a little bit of English, she and her husband easily found common ground with the visitors and eventually their new French friends asked them if they would want to regularly host tourists and offer them a variety of tourist services. Azniv and Sergo agreed and a couple of years later, in 2013, they officially registered the B&B and it became the job of their lives.

At first they would host the guests in two rooms of their own house, but with time they enlarged the guesthouse, initially allocating for that purpose four rooms of the house and then expanding it to eight rooms. Throughout the time the customer demands

have changed and the owner of Odzun B&B realized that they need to comply with this trend in order to keep a steady flow of customers. The visitors wanted to see hotel features in the guesthouses. Thus they decided to build an additional premise, which allowed to accommodate 16 more guests. Here each room has its own bathroom, there's a huge waiting hall and a resting area. Currently, they offer both the guesthouse and tourist house options. If in the first case one stays in a separate room, in the tourist house visitors can stay at the owner's house and share their daily life with them.

The guesthouse offers the visitors not only comfortable accommodation facilities but also eco and agro tourism experiences, such as hiking, jeep tours, various masterclasses, including of honey production, tea drinking ceremonies, homemade vodka distillation and barbecue making. Here at Odzun B&B you can taste both traditional and modern cuisine.

The team of the guesthouse participated in various trainings starting from cooking to marketing. They took every chance and all this is meant to bring you an exceptional experience. So, what is your next destination?



MATCHBOX LABELS MUSEUM IN THE HEART OF TUMANYAN CITY, LORI

Tumanyan – the city located in the gorge of Debed in Lori region and carrying the name of the famous Armenian author Hovhannes Tumanyan, already has its own small matchbox labels museum. Raffi Kojyan, the founder of the museum, who used to travel to Kobayr village, once appeared in Tumanyan and fell in love with the site. When he found out about the old house available near the main square, he decided to take the initiative and create something there, as he saw a huge potential in this area. Previously, there used to be a museum in that building and he decided to continue that legacy and reopen a museum. But one thing was clear; it had to be an extraordinary museum exhibiting items that were unusual

for the locals. His choice rested on matchbox labels, because Raffi himself is a collector of these labels and currently owns thousands of various designs. “The variety of matchbox labels is enormous, illustrating different themes and styles, and there are designs for all interests and tastes and that’s definitely a material worth having a museum”, says Raffi. So, he decided to use his hobby for attracting and creating interest towards the beautiful city of Tumanyan. The square there looks very European and beautiful and is something worth attracting. The museum has opened its doors, after Raffi renovated the interior and installed a lighting specific to that type of tiny exponents. ♦

HIKING IN THE TIMES OF PANDEMIC

On how Covid-19 restrictions unexpectedly brought forth positive outcomes; the year in Armenia was a boom for expedition groups. To learn more about the new hikers and newly discovered ways, as well as the competition among hiking groups we talked to ArmGeo founder, geographer Tigran Varag.

TEXT : HASMIK BARKHUDARYAN / PHOTO : ARMGEO



WHAT DO HIKING GROUPS DO WHEN THEY CAN'T GO ON HIKINGS?

The year had started well for the hikers, or rather, there wasn't anything out of the ordinary for them, since the concept of touring season is not familiar to the ArmGeo. Every day can be a hiking day for them. The start of the 2020 was not an exception. The team went on tour to Western Armenia and climbed the summits of Grgur and Kapuyt Kogh. By the way, it's the first time these mountains have hosted hikers. In short, the year was promising, however, befell what befell – the pandemic didn't bypass Armenia. Among the many prohibitions prescribed by law there was no specific mention about hiking, moreover, having walks was permitted. However, as hiking assumes not only walking but there are also other components to it, in the aftermath it was also prohibited.

When speaking about the first two months, though, there's no hint of regret in Tigran's voice, as he has managed to use the quarantine time effectively. "We didn't organize any hikings and thus, I finally found time to work on my book "Armenian Highland". I collected all the necessary materials and photo-

graphs and I was working on the book from morning till night. That, too, is a hiking activity. To cut the long story short, like everyone else, I also found a way to work from home." Perhaps surprisingly, the year proved to be quite productive. ArmGeo managed to implement two very long-awaited projects. First, children's hiking expeditions and camps were implemented; it's a very responsible initiative, and there could hardly be a better time for getting prepared for it. Second, ArmGeo Lori was initiated, and from now on hiking expeditions can start also from Vanadzor, both separately and together with those starting from Yerevan. Lastly, Seminars and film screenings were organized.

Of course, like in many other areas, the pandemic had its negative effect too, since ArmGeo used to organize hiking expeditions also outside of Armenia, not to mention, it used to conquer the summit of Mount Ararat in the summers. On the other hand, the flow of the tourists to Armenia stopped, which, again, had a negative impact on the area. In short, For the hikers the year was really controversial.

>
ArmGeo founder,
Tigran Varag

WHAT TO DO IF THERE IS NO WAY TO LEAVE THE COUNTRY?

For Tigran, two months of intense scientific activity passed very quickly and the rapidly changing rules at the commandant's office allowed to resume the expeditions. The registrations started. The Facebook platform got flooded with photos of various beautiful places, and everyone, even those that had never before took part in any expedition, at least thought, "What if I try climbing some mountain?". But that's not as easy as it seems.

"We have an active nucleus of skilled hikers. They are interested in more challenging expeditions and in higher summits. Whereas, the newcomers need lighter ones. However, we found a compromise; we increased the directions, we made the light expeditions more frequent, and, if in the past an expedition in one direction took place once a year, in this case the same direction was repeated every few weeks," tells Tigran.

ArmGeo is, for sure, not the only expedition group; there are also other skilled ones. Nevertheless, during this time many new groups emerged, which created big but inefficient competition in the expedition market. Many of them offered expeditions in one direction and lowered the prices or tried to capture with beautiful photographs. No matter what, ArmGeo still remains the record holder, and in 2020 it recorded its most populated hiking expedition – climbing the Mount Ajdahak with 90 people.

The pandemic related rules were being observed, of course; thermal screening early in the morning, mandatory wearing of masks in the car – while the backpacks got a bit heavier due to disinfectants. Also, during the actual expedition, while in nature, the hikers don't usually walk very close to each other.



The Armenian Geographical Project (ArmGeo) was founded in 2012 and not only organizes expeditions in Armenia and in the region, but also discovers new expedition directions, studies and maps them, many of which are now well-known and favorite directions in the expedition market.

HOW TO BECOME A HIKER IF YOU ARE A NEWCOMER

The hectic hiking year was challenging especially for the newcomers. Those, who don't quite realize what awaits them during the expedition, often face challenges they're not ready to overcome, and thus the anticipated pleasant pastime unexpectedly turns into a torture for them and instead of enjoying it they get stuck in dreaming of its end throughout the entire day. Expedition is not just walking and pastime, it's a sport that requires certain physical fitness and discipline, and you need to be ready for it also psychologically. All ends well when you are ready and when you set on tour with the right people. That's why Tigran strongly recommends that you call the ArmGeo office before registering for the hiking and inquire the staff who will readily give you detailed information on what is expected during the expedition, and what you need to wear or have in your backpack. "Many fall in love with expeditions for a lifetime, others simply don't come back any more; nevertheless, the number of the hikers increases by each day," says Tigran and adds with a smile, "In the expeditions of 2020 there were often people who decided to join us to replace their annual vacation in seaside countries or European cities where they usually walk casually and take photos, in one word, do without any restrictions whatever their heart desires. As a rule, those people got very disappointed when they realized that as if it wasn't enough they had paid the money, now they had to follow the leader's instructions, as well as not lag behind the group, and had to take less photos due to lack of time. For example, From Ajdahak there opens a stunning view of its crater lake, but the time during the expedition is limited to just 15 minutes, no more, so, you either manage to take photos or you don't."

So, since despite its being already one year the pandemic doesn't seem to want to leave us, and the expeditions also are on a go, the 2021 has all the prerequisites to be an active expedition year. So, let's get going! ♦



ADVENTUROUS ARMENIA

Some people come to Armenia for the exquisite cuisine and the calmness of our fascinating landscapes, or the rich cultural heritage monuments which can be found in all parts of the country. Nevertheless, have you ever thought of Armenia as a destination for adventure tourism? Our nature and mountainous territory perfectly fit into the ideas of this type of tourism. Regional Post presents the top 5 adventure tourism opportunities in Armenia.

TEXT : MARGARIT MIRZOYAN / PHOTO : ARMGEO

HIKING

What's the one thing Armenia has in abundance? Of course, mountains. Pick your peak; you can climb either one of the four peaks of Mount Aragats – the highest mountain in the territory of the country (4090 meters), or Khustup Mount in Syunik province, or hike down to Lake Arpi in the Shirak region. Hiking is the best medium to look at Armenia and have a glimpse of the most magnificent scenes of this small mountain-locked country. Additionally, this kind of tourism provides a certain amount of adrenaline which upscales the overall impression. All you need to do is to take your hiking essentials, clothing and gear and start your way towards the heart of Armenia. Usually, the hiking season in Armenia is July-August, however, if you're a skilled climber you can enjoy it at any season. The most popular hiking and mountain climbing project in Armenia is ArmGeo, which, since its establishment in 2012, has already organized around 3000 hiking trips and mountain ascents in the territory of Armenian Highlands. Contact them and join the numerous hiking enthusiasts in Armenia, who, overcoming their fears, witness something new during each hike. ➤



PARAGLIDING

If you wish to fly like a bird witnessing the edge where the world collides with the sky, paragliding is what you need. It is a recreational and competitive adventure sport of flying paragliders – a non-motorized, lightweight, free-flying and foot-launched glider aircraft with no exact primary structure which enables you to experience the sense of freedom in real-time. The feeling you get while flying with a paraglider cannot be compared with anything, maybe just a jump with a parachute. Flying season is quite long in Armenia – from May till the end of November. In winter flights are rare. The enthusiasts of paragliding in Armenia have started practicing it since 1996, and currently, there are a few companies which provide this type of service – the Sky Club, AeroClub and Armenian Paragliding Club. It's important to note that if you aren't experienced and have a certain fear, the best option for you will be tandem paragliding i.e. a flight with a pilot. The vehicles designed for this type of paragliding are usually faster with higher trim speeds and are more resistant to collapse. If you choose tandem paragliding, the pilot will take care of everything for you and you will just be admiring the fascinating beauty of the Armenian highlands. Besides, in this case, you won't need physical skills or training to paraglide. After a 5-minute instruction, you will make the take-off run, and the next minute you will leave all your fears behind and enjoy the adrenaline rush. Of course, experienced and fearless participants can have a solo flight. The choice is yours. Bring your hiking boots or running shoes, take on some warm clothes, and have some sunscreen on your face. This is all you need.



ZIPLINE

Zipline is the most popular adventure sport in Armenia. In older times, ziplines were a necessity of life, designed, for example, to transport people or supplies across the rivers. Fortunately, with the emergence of new technologies, and after the creation of bridges, the ziplines have become just a part of entertainment. Quite interestingly, the longest zipline in Armenia is located in Yerevan (870 meters), starting from the famous Malakan park, enabling you to fly over the Hrazdan gorge. But the most fascinating one is in Yenokavan (Tavush province) in the Yell Extreme Park. The nature in Tavush is magnificent and ziplining in this area doesn't only make you feel the adrenaline, but your way towards the end of the zipline is accompanied by the picturesque sites typical to this particular region. Zipline has five different lines: 135, 268, 200 375, and 750 meters. The height is approximately 200-300 meters above the ground. There's no need for any technical knowledge or prior experience, and also there's no exact season for ziplining in Armenia. The whole year is at your disposal.

RAFTING

Rafting has only recently gotten its momentum in Armenia. The country has many wild rivers with a powerful flow where the local extreme lovers are currently developing the rafting culture. The main rivers where rafting has become a common tradition are the Dzoraget River (30 km) and the Debed River (152 km) located in Lori province. The first river, even though it's shorter than the Debed River, is more suitable for the professional rafters, as it has the 6th – the highest difficulty level of rafting and has many obstacles along the way which are too hard for the beginner or amateur rafters. The rafting trip here may take from four to seven days, depending on the difficulty of the session. There are several sites to visit while rafting across the river, among which are the Lori fortress and Khnevank monastery. The best time for this activity is May, as the weather conditions during this month are favorable and the water level is high. The Debed River, in its turn, has the fourth difficulty level. The best period here is from June to October. The famous Haghpat and Sanahin monasteries are located near the river, enabling the lovers of extreme tourism to experience also the cultural aspect of the local peculiarity. You might also consider having a hike to the Kobayr Monastery complex to complete your overall impression of the Lori province.



SKIING AND SNOWBOARDING

Skiing has definitely been the most popular extreme tourism in Armenia for many years. Each year, both locals and tourists from all over the world travel to Armenia to visit one of the most popular skiing resorts in Armenia – Tsakhadzor, established in 1967, which was famous even during the Soviet times.

The resort is located on the slope of Teghenis mountain which ranges from 1966-2819 meters above the sea level. On the highest peak, where you get by the ropeway in 32 minutes, opens a mesmerizing view of the whole country, and in good weather conditions, it's possible to witness the magnificence of Mount Ararat. There are three routes taking you to the three height levels. The first route will get you to the 1137 meter-spot, the second one, which includes two ropeways – lines 2 and 4, will take you to the 2476 and 2354 meter-spots, and finally, the third route will bring you to the highest peak of the resort (2819 meters). Even though the resort has a long history, the ropeway was updated several times and currently matches all the international standards, guaranteeing a safe and comfortable trip. Here, you may also find a café-restaurant where you can have a warm soup during cold weather. There are also instructors at your disposal who will quickly train the beginner skiing and snowboarding tourists. You may rent all the equipment that you need and enjoy your ride up and down by the numerous skiing and snowboarding lines of Tsakhadzor resort. ♦

LET THE WINE FLOW IN THE STREETS OF YEREVAN

Yerevan Wine Days is the most anticipated event of the year both for the locals and the tourists. Everyone awaits for the opening of the tourism season to take a glass of wine in their hand and enjoy the summer. In 2019, the event hosted 35,000 wine aesthetes within two days. The situation was significantly different in 2020 due to the Covid outbreak, however, the organizers found another way to keep the presence of the Yerevan Wine Days active and make the year-long quarantine gap less harmful for the winemakers in Armenia. Despite all presumptions, this year's Yerevan Wine Days hit another record, hosting overall 50,000 visitors on 9000 cubic meters, including not only locals but also 10-15000 tourists, more than 1000 bloggers, journalists, media influencers, and wine experts. Regional Post talked to Mary Badalyan, the co-founder of the Yerevan Wine Days, about the hardships of the previous year and the benefits brought by the event this year.

TEXT : MARGARIT MIRZOYAN /
PHOTO : DREAMSHOTS



THAT TIME OF THE YEAR

Each year in May, the Yerevan Wine Days marks the kick-off of the tourist season in Armenia. This two day festivity provides the local winemakers an opportunity to introduce themselves to the visitors from all over the world, applying all their creativity and inventiveness.

“In general, the Yerevan Wine Days targets two primary directions: the development of event tourism and winemaking in Armenia,” says Mary Badalyan, “The event is an amazing opportunity for the winemakers to become recognizable, more visible, sell the product, and – which is more important – to receive feedback from the consumer on the spot.” Usually, it might take a lot of time and resources to get the opinion of the people and see your own production in the consumption process. During the Yerevan Wine Days, all it takes from the winemaker is to put together an interesting pavilion, sip the wine into the glass and listen carefully to what the consumer says. For the visitors, in their turn, this event is a good occasion to get familiarized with some new faces of the wine industry in Armenia or to find out more about their favorites from the founders or the winemakers themselves. Throughout the years, Yerevan Wine Days has united tourism and winemaking at one platform and had quite a positive impact on the economy.

ONLINE

Even though, due to the Covid lockdown, previous year's festival was postponed, the organizing team eventually decided to hold the event online. “At first, we wanted to have a very small live broadcast, where each of us would connect from our phones, but then we realized that the winemakers are in a crisis situation, it is summer ahead and the wine is not selling well. It seemed a bit crazy, as it's hard to taste and smell the wine online but we looked for ways to deal with this issue and found them,” says Mary Badalyan.

Realizing the importance of Yerevan Wine Days for winemakers and acknowledging the impact the event has on the industry, they decided to take a closer look and go deeper than just a simple broadcast. The team hired CivilNet studios and DreamShots production to film the online event. At first, they wanted to rent a studio but they later found a cozy balcony at Saryan street, the main wine spot in Yerevan. Hermine Stepanyan, the host of the online event kept the audience 7 hours long, no one wanted to go offline either. People were sipping wine, and listening to the online conversations, enjoying the quality content about wine presented by different sommeliers, winemakers and other relevant specialists. These seven hours passed in one breath and made the organisers consider educational elements as an integral part of the event.



BACK TO OFFLINE

This year, it feels like everything is back on track, for the past couple of months the winemakers were fussing around, carefully bottling their wines and preparing the ideas to make their pavilions stand out from the others. Quite interestingly, despite the fact that it was a difficult year for winemakers, the latter asked to increase the number of participating companies and have not 25 but 41 wine spots. Even though this extension would make their work much harder, the team decided to increase the number of spots, as the events of 2020 vividly illustrated the importance of helping one another and taking all the necessary steps to support the local producers. As a result, this year, 281 wines were introduced to the wine-lovers from all over the world, who came to Armenian particularly for the Yerevan Wine Days event. The event achieved its primary goals, benefiting both tourism and winemaking. There were a lot of guests from Russia and Ukraine, wine distributors in particular, who used the Yerevan Wine Days as an occasion to come to Armenia, interact with the winemakers directly and sign B2B contracts as well. "Without us knowing, the distributors and wine experts from all over the world arrived in Armenia, approached the winemakers during the event, made deals with them," says Mary Badalyan, "We can say that Yerevan Wine Days has become also an expo, where the

“WE WANT THE EVENT TO BE MEANINGFUL, NOT ONLY ENTERTAIN THE VISITORS, BUT **CONNECT THEM WITH ARMENIAN WINE, TO GIVE KNOWLEDGE NOT JUST THE EXPERIENCE”**

participants represent themselves and sign contracts with the distributors right at the spot.”

WINE CONTENT AND CREATIVITY

During the previous Yerevan Wine Days, the organizers conducted surveys among the visitors and realized that content and education is what was lacking for the event to become truly unprecedented. One can come to an event, drink wine, enjoy delicious snacks and then go home and it doesn't matter whether it was an Armenian wine or not, if it was made from the indigenous grape types specific to this region or not. Quality content and information is what binds the customer with the product and makes him/her choose that particular wine from the abundant assortment in the stores, recommend it to the friends, or take it with them to another country. "We want the event to be meaningful, not only entertain the visitors, but connect them with Armenian wine, to give knowledge not just the experience," says Mary Badalyan, "Thus we decided to hold a series of wine master classes during this year's event." As a result, the wine lovers could enjoy the delicious varieties of wine, paint or participate

in different masterclasses relevant to the topic of the event, such as "the 3 shades of Areni," "wine tasting," "pairing Armenian traditional cheeses and dishes with wine," and so on. The visitors also got acquainted with the ancient history of winemaking in Armenia, in a special pavilion which introduced 4-5 years old artefacts. Quite importantly, six NGOs aimed at the support of the wounded soldiers had their presence in the frame of the event. This year was dedicated to the centenary of Arno Babajanyan and his music was all over the streets during the event. Different artists and the State Philharmonic Hall itself performed in a smaller group during the event on a special stage (while a second one was used by DJ's). "This was our tribute to Babajanyan," says Mary Badalyan, "Every year the event is dedicated to one prominent person, such as Tumanyan, Saryan or to Yerevan's 2800th anniversary, and next year we will dedicate the Yerevan Wine Days to Charles Aznavour." So keep your glass and the small tote bag from this year's Yerevan Wine Days and prepare for the celebration of wine and life on the streets of Yerevan next year while helping the local winemaker to stay afloat. ♦

PROTECTING EVERY ONE OF US: VACCINATION CAMPAIGN FACES SERIOUS CHALLENGES IN ARMENIA

It is not difficult for us, citizens, to stop the coronavirus death toll: Receiving a jab of freely available vaccine is all it takes. However, Armenia faces difficulties administering even moderate quantities of available doses and has the lowest number of vaccinations in the region.

TEXT : KARINE GHAZARYAN

On March 1, 2020, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan announced via Facebook post that the first case of new coronavirus infection had been registered in Armenia. Since then, 230,000 people – around 7,7% of the entire population of Armenia – have contracted Covid-19. This is according to official statistics, which only counts people who took a test. The real number, which includes all asymptomatic patients and those who did not test, is likely to be much higher. More than 4,600 people died from Covid-19. When also counting the casualties of the Second Artsakh War, one can see that in 2020 Armenia registered the highest mortality rate since 1988, when a devastating earthquake took around 35,000 lives.



Ministry of Health of RA

> One of several mobile vaccination points in Yerevan

WHEN IT COMES TO COVID-19, THE DEATH TOLL CAN BE STOPPED

No drug has been invented yet to cure Covid-19. However, humanity was very successful in creating several highly effective vaccines in a record-short period of time. Contrary to popular belief, this was not done by compromising the quality, but by reducing bureaucracy and holding several trials simultaneously.

Armenia provides its citizens with three vaccines. As of early July, 2021, Armenia administers three vaccines: Oxford-AstraZeneca, Sputnik V and Sinovac. While Sputnik V was bought directly from Russia, AstraZeneca was acquired via COVAX Facility program, a WHO-led mediator which ensures access to vaccines for all countries regardless of population size and economic wealth. Tens of thousand more doses of the vaccine are expected to be donated by Georgia and Lithuania. Additionally, Chinese government donated 100,000 doses of the Sinovac vaccine (Georgia and Azerbaijan also received such donations, 100,000 and 150,000 doses respectively).

The Armenian government promised to vaccinate 20% of the population, that is, almost 600,000 people by the end of the year. This is not a big number. Governments need to vaccinate at least 60-70% of the population in order to reach herd immunity, when even those who cannot be



vaccinated due to a health condition are protected. But the moderate goal of 20% looks difficult to achieve due to fears against vaccines.

ASTRAZENECA FEARS PUSHED STRATEGY CHANGES

Mass vaccination started in Armenia on April 13. Those younger than 55 were offered Sputnik V, those older received AstraZeneca. Only people included in risk groups were allowed to get a job. However, just about a couple of thousand people agreed to do so in the first two weeks. Armenians were reluctant, if not afraid, to vaccinate. This is especially true in the case of AstraZeneca, which received a huge wave of negative coverage worldwide due to rare cases of blood clots caused by the vaccine.

Low vaccination rate meant that Armenia could lose most of AstraZeneca doses due to expiration date on May 31, 2021. Therefore, the government changed the strategy and opened vaccination for everyone: starting from April 27, anyone older than 18 could vaccinate with AstraZeneca.

Mobile vaccination points appeared in Yerevan and other major cities. People could approach the Ministry of Health van, receive information about the vaccines, get medical checkup and get their job. This strategy proved to be successful: on the week following the government's decision the vaccination rate doubled. The number of vaccinated Armenians grew steadily but slowly. At the same time, the flow of tourists who came for free vaccination from neighboring Iran increased dramatically. The government does not provide statistics on the number of vaccinated foreigners, but huge lines of Iranians could be seen at the mobile vaccination points in Yerevan nearly every day in June. By July, Iranian officials, facing criticism for slow vaccination rate at home, started voicing dissatisfaction with Armenia's actions. The situation was covered in top international media. Eventually, Armenia changed the vaccination policy: from July 15, a foreigner would need to stay in the country for at least 10 days to be eligible for the vaccine. >

P EOPLE COULD **APPROACH THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH VAN**, RECEIVE INFORMATION ABOUT THE VACCINES, GET MEDICAL CHECKUP AND GET THEIR JOB



^ President of Georgia Salome Zurbishvili vaccinated with AstraZeneca in mid-March

➤ Armenian PM Nikol Pashinyan didn't announce the vaccine he used

DISINFORMATION FROM ALL FRONTS

While foreigners were eager to receive their jab in Armenia, the government faced serious challenges in promoting the vaccination among its own citizens. One of the main reasons for this was widespread disinformation.

In Armenia, vaccination is a political matter. For years, anti-vaccine activism was common in social media. Journalists and government officials have not been addressing the topic properly to inform the public and protect it from misinformation. After the Velvet revolution of 2018, Armenian information space became extremely polarized. Vaccines were one of the easily manipulated, scandal-generating topics. The government's immunization program with the Gardasil vaccine, which prevents human papillomavirus infection and thus reduces risk of cancer, was attacked not only by fringe anti-vaxxers, but also by mainstream media and some politicians. For example, 5TV Channel, affiliated with former President Robert Kocharyan, aired a reportage from a school where girls were "forced" to vaccinate with Gardasil. The information turned out to be completely false.

When Covid-19 vaccines became available for Armenians, the field was already plowed for disinformation to spread. The media attacked AstraZeneca with surprising rigor. While doing little to explain to the general public how the vaccine works, everyone from TV channels to clickbait websites published horrifying stories about AstraZeneca injuries and deaths. While vaccines, just like any other drug, have side effects, these stories were usually manipulated or false.

Anti-government activist, former Artsakh ombudsman Ruben Melikyan went as far as to call his supporters not to take AstraZeneca and leave it for "Nikol people." Interestingly, opposition-affiliated media and activists generally refrained from criticizing Russian-made Sputnik V.

Russian vaccine was also indirectly promoted by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. Unlike Pashinyan, many leaders chose to take AstraZeneca in front of cameras to calm the public and demonstrate that it's safe. Thus, President of Georgia Salome Zurbashvili vaccinated with AstraZeneca in mid-March. Nikol Pashinyan was also vaccinated in front of cameras, but the name of the vaccine was not announced. By studying the footage from his vaccination, journalists found out that Pashinyan received Sputnik V.

WHAT ABOUT NEIGHBORS?

With around 150,000 vaccinated as of July 25, Armenia lags behind its neighbors in the path to protect the public against Covid-19. Georgia started vaccination a month earlier than Armenia, in mid-March. However, this process was far from being smooth for Georgia also.

On March 19, the tragic death of 27-year-old nurse Megi Bakradze shocked Georgian public. The nurse received an AstraZeneca jab live in front of cameras. But shortly after the vaccination she had a severe allergic reaction, was hospitalized and died on the following day. The Prosecu-



WHEN VACCINES BECAME AVAILABLE FOR ARMENIANS, THE FIELD WAS ALREADY PLOWED FOR DISINFORMATION TO SPREAD. THE MEDIA ATTACKED ASTRAZENECA WITH SURPRISING RIGOR

tor's Office of Georgia is investigating the case, suspecting that Bakradze may not have received adequate first aid. As one would expect, Megi Bakradze's death triggered fears among the general public not only in Georgia, but also in Armenia.

Allergic reactions are a known side effect of vaccines, and those who have allergies to any component of a given vaccine should not be vaccinated. Fortunately, no other vaccine-affiliated deaths were reported in Georgia. By early August, the country managed to vaccinate nearly 500,000 people using AstraZeneca, Pfizer/BioNTech, as well as Sinovac and Sinopharm.

While Armenia and Georgia started immunization campaigns only in spring, in Azerbaijan mass vaccination has been ongoing since January 18. Chinese Sinovac is most widely used, AstraZeneca and Sputnik V are also available. Azerbaijan is the absolute leader in the number of vaccinations. More than 2,9 million people received at least the first jab. Around 2,1 million people, 20% of the population, are fully vaccinated.

The South Caucasus was hit hard by the pandemic. Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia saw thousands of deaths from Covid-19. But the countries have now secured access to vaccines from different producers. Resistance to vaccination remains a problem especially for Armenia as the country faces a major issue with politically-driven disinformation about vaccines. It is yet to be seen whether Armenian health authorities will be able to win the trust of the public and push the mass vaccination to the rates necessary to protect every one of us. ♦



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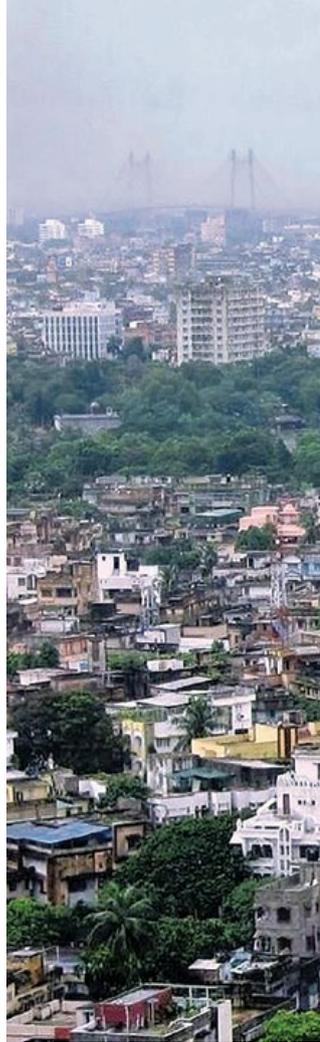
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INDO-ARMENIAN BILATERAL COORDINATION: EXISTENTIAL BASIS

This April a statue of Mahatma Gandhi was erected in one of Yerevan's parks. But a supposed symbol of friendship caused a lot of backlash, because Gandhi's position towards Turkey: it is known that his Indian National Congress took a stand against "the injustices inflicted on Turkey" at the end of World War I by the big powers. But that's history, and what do Armenia and India have to offer each other today? Regional Post dives into the topic.

TEXT : ZAREH-SEVAG SARKISSIAN



◀ Indo-Armenian Friendship NGO's members



^
Kolkata, one of
the centers of the
Armenian diaspora
in India

TIES THAT BIND

The Armenians of yore had always been present within the Indian subcontinent since the days of early antiquity. They had been connected with India as traders travelling there through the overland route, through Persia, Bactria (modern Afghanistan), and Tibet. These traders had established themselves well in all the commercial centres long before the arrival of any European counterpart, most notably the English. Nevertheless, being skilled and valuable traders, it was not until at the behest and invitation of the Mughal Emperor Akbar (1556-1605), that the Armenian merchants were enticed and encouraged to permanently settle down in many provinces, chiefly in Agra and 15 other major cities.

Also, the two first Christian churches in Agra and Calcutta were Armenian, the former's having been erected in 1562. The Armenian traders were highly valued and looked upon, as they were characterised as civil, polite, and dedicated to their trades; as well being able to connect India to other trade sites such as Venice, Livorno, England, and Holland where other Armenians lived. They were also given immense tax exemptions, trade privileges, and travelling freedom within the empire, unlike other foreigners, with a great lasting impact on the Indian subcontinent as a whole.

During the modern era, Indian President Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi both visited Soviet Armenia in 1964 and 1976 respectively. Shortly after Armenia's independence, in August 1992, India became one of the first countries that established a diplomatic relationship with Armenia. Moreover, Presidents Levon Ter-Petrosyan and Robert Kocharyan each made courtesy visits to India in 1995 and 2003 respectively. Nowadays, after Armenia liberalised

NEW BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES PARTICULARLY IN THE IT AND
MEDICAL SECTOR, AND HIGHER-EDUCATION AVAILABILITY HAS
LED TO A **NEW WAVE OF INDIAN IMMIGRATION** WITH AROUND
2,200 INDIANS LEGALLY WORKING AND RESIDING IN ARMENIA

the visa regime to Indian citizens in 2017, new business opportunities particularly in the IT and medical sector, and higher-education availability has led to a new wave of Indian immigration with around 2,200 Indians legally working and residing in Armenia.

Though, not all has been smooth sailing. Only recently, the Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned the vandalism in the form of burning that took place on Mahatma Gandhi's statue in Yerevan. Of the many likely reasons, it is safe to assume that this is due to the fact Gandhi and the Indian National Congress disregarded the Armenian Genocide and went further by taking a stand against "the injustices inflicted on Turkey" at the end of World War I by the allied powers. Nonetheless, statues do not build stronger relations, proper diplomacy and mutual interests do.

Nevertheless, despite coming far, as Indian immigration was almost exclusively comprised of students, Indo-Armenian relations have not exceeded the limits of cultural and scientific cooperation. These relations must evolve, as both countries have common if not similar geopolitical needs and threats.

MUTUAL SECURITY IN THE WIDER GEOPOLITICAL ARENA

The Second Artsakh War has been an outstanding testament to Armenia's need for reliable allies. A true "Axis of Evil" comprising Azerbaijan-Turkey-Pakistan had been formed in the recent war, and all three participated in it one way or another. Each country's leadership seeks to fulfil its expansionist ambitions through this trilateral union, but Armenia remains the focal point where these ambitions live or die.

Many Indians realise that Armenia is a buffer for those threatening aspirations and were quite vocal on diverse media expressing solidarity with Armenia, albeit many were also careful and referred to the Republic of Artsakh as a "separatist entity." Indian newspapers also reported the high possibility of Pakistani military personnel on the ground during the war providing logistical and strategic assistance to the Azerbaijani military as they had in 1994 during the first war.

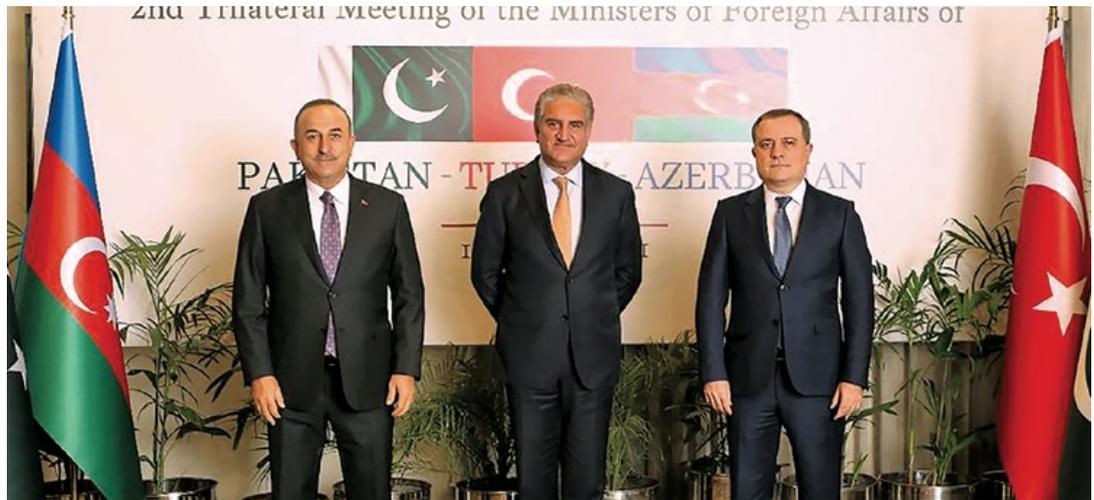
Among the many military interventions, instigations, and illegal occupations Turkey has undergone within these few years, most concerning to India should be the implications of the recent Armenian defeat, and the following January 2021 declaration to pursue a joint strategy be-



tween Azerbaijan-Turkey-Pakistan. With Turkey's considerable gains at the expense of Armenian by heavy support to Azerbaijan, it will look to repeat the same scenario in India's Kashmir region by assisting Pakistan. Kashmir has continuously faced Pakistani-sponsored jihadist threats and attacks since the end of the British Raj in 1947. Now, Turkey, though thousands of kilometres away from Kashmir, is forcing its way into Central and Southern Asian affairs by championing and encouraging Pakistani expansionism into Indian territory; as well as garnering influence within the Central Turkic states through many cultural diplomatic efforts and lucrative trade agreements. All these to establish a Turkish hegemony within the region and create less dependency on Russian oil while getting a fair share of profit by integrating the "Middle Corridor" within the framework of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

↑
 Indira Gandhi in Soviet Armenia, 1970's

<
Prime ministers
Nikol Pashinyan
and Narendra Modi



>
Foreign ministers
of Pakistan, Turkey
and Azerbaijan

INDIAN NEWSPAPERS ALSO REPORTED THE HIGH POSSIBILITY OF PAKISTANI MILITARY PERSONNEL ON THE GROUND DURING THE WAR PROVIDING LOGISTICAL AND STRATEGIC ASSISTANCE TO THE AZERBAIJANI MILITARY AS THEY HAD IN 1994

The phenomenon of Turkish and Azeri assistance to Pakistan in Kashmir is neither far fetched nor unusual. During his speech at the 75th session of the United Nations General Assembly, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated that the Kashmir “conflict” must be discussed and it is a “burning issue” that threatens the stability of the region. In response, India’s permanent representative to the UN condemned Erdogan’s statement and replied that Turkey should “learn to respect the sovereignty of other nations.” President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev has also stated on several occasions that Azerbaijan sees Pakistan as a brotherly nation and supports its claims as its own. Meanwhile, time and again, the Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan declared that Armenia fully defends India’s position on Kashmir, the last time being a day before the recent Artsakh War. Turkey’s growing influence over the past decades within Central Asia has also raised some issues in New Delhi, as this threatens the security interests and integrity of the Indian republic.

Despite many analysts suggesting that India should take its cues with its approach to Armenia from Russia, it nevertheless manoeuvres with a degree of autonomy. This is because

India remains Russia’s largest arms purchaser (even though most of its arms are locally produced), accounting for 23% of Russian arms exports in 2020, as well as having many future projects together, thus able to apply leverage on Russia. This can be achieved only if the Armenian officials pursue it by developing relations with India to a degree that enables Armenia to break free of dependence on Russia to a certain extent. Moreover, to strengthen the military ties in March 2020, Armenia signed a \$40 million deal for the purchase of four Swathi weapon locating radar (WLR) stations from India. As it is quite limited presently, much more can be achieved with increased cooperation, sharing of military technology, and exchanging student officers.

INTERNATIONAL NORTH-SOUTH TRANSPORT CORRIDOR (INSTC)

On March 8th, Indian Ambassador Haddam Jarmendran Iran stated that India plans to connect the western part of Chabahar (a highly Indian-invested seaport in South-eastern Iran) and the Indian Ocean with Eurasia and Helsinki through the territory of Armenia, creating the North-South corridor. He added that New Delhi is planning to make Chabahar the most important and busiest port in the region. This initiative is being further endorsed by Russia and India. For Russia, as it is already constructing infrastructure as part of the BRI project, an ever-growing India (the World Economic Forum forecast that India’s economy would grow 7.5% a year over the next decade) seems like a viable option to create less dependence on the

Chinese market and keep Chinese influence at check. New Delhi, on the other hand, might be more interested in developing the INSTC as a counterweight, given worsening Sino-Indian relations, to the BRI's China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). It also obviously presents an opportunity for high revenue that cuts losses over distance and tariffs as opposed to other established routes such as the Suez Canal. The Armenian government, however, has done little in the way of investing in this project throughout the years as its infrastructures remain underdeveloped and in need of restoration and development. If Armenia joins the project and INSTC passes through its territories, it would enable passages to both the Black Sea and the Persian Gulf. This would facilitate Armenian shippers in entering international markets and exporting their products through simplified procedures over both sea and land. Armenia has aimed, albeit with incredible delays, to construct the "North-South" transport road, 556-km long, to connect Georgia with Iran through its land. Part of the construction in the Shirak region is being implemented by the Chinese company Sinohydro Corporation, though the funding has been undergone in several tranches over time. Yet the anticipated cost is estimated to be \$1.5 billion with funds provided by multilateral financial institutions. The bulk remains in Armenian hands.

Recently, the Azerbaijan-Turkey-Pakistan Axis has pushed India to increase its interest in Armenia and seeing the INSTC in effect within the Armenian territories, keeping in mind that Armenia is also the only country in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) that has a land border with Iran. Taking into account Iran's aspiration to become a full member in the EEU, as well as India's interest in the EEU structure and possible future membership, Armenia's chances of joining regional trade projects would be high.

By joining such a project, Armenia would not only be freed of trade isolation imposed by Turkey and Azerbaijan, irrespective of the unblocking of trade routes between Yerevan and Baku according to the November 9 trilateral statement but also become a crucial player in international trade routes and attract the interest of rising regional powers.

➤
Armenian church
in Kolkata

ARMENIAN DIASPORA OF INDIA TODAY

After Armenia's independence from USSR, many Armenian-Indians chose to move to the Republic of Armenia. Kolkata still has about 150 Armenians. The Armenian Church of Holy Nazareth, located in Brabourne Road was constructed in 1734 and is the oldest Church of the town. The best known Armenian institution in India is the Armenian College and Philanthropic Academy (est. 1821). The management of the college was handed over to the Armenian Holy See of Echmiadzin of the Armenian Apostolic Church a few years ago. There are presently around 125 children studying there from Armenia, Iran and Iraq and the local Armenian population.

RECENTLY, THE AZERBAIJAN-TURKEY-PAKISTAN AXIS HAS PUSHED INDIA TO INCREASE ITS INTEREST IN ARMENIA AND SEEING THE INSTC IN EFFECT WITHIN THE ARMENIAN TERRITORIES





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Mahatma Gandhi's
statue in Yerevan,
that caused
controversies

Such a project should be a top national security priority for Armenia as it must take serious measures to end its isolation and attract foreign investments in the surrounding road and railway projects.

EURASIAN DEMOCRACY

American-Armenian political consultant Eric Hagopian had once made a suggestion, during one of his interviews on CIVILNET, to what he perceived as the best formula for a practical working Armenian democracy. He coined the process as “Eurasian Democracy”. A democracy that has balanced the rich cultural traits of the Armenian civilisation with the impartial and rudimentary infrastructures of liberal democracy. Thus, a nuanced division between tradition and modernity, East and West. One country that has been able to create such a balance, according to Lebanese-Armenian political analyst and scholar Yeghia Tashjian, is India. A trait Mr. Tashjian discovered within Indian society during his conferences and forums in New Delhi. It is often when two countries develop close ties, that cultural spillovers occur. In this case, the balanced Indian approach between democracy and traditional culture would penetrate Armenian society and give rise to a potentially better-functioning system.

Opening up with the East, in all cases, is what Armenia needs. Most of its allies and potential long-term partners lie there. There has been a problem of lack of ambition and long-term

strategy with all of the previous and incumbent Armenian politicians. As Eric Hagopian describes, the Armenian politicians and community, in general, have a “silly intoxication with the West...”, all the while missing out on vital opportunities with its many important neighbours and Eastern partners. The latter of which Armenians would identify more with in terms of culture and heritage, and have long supported Armenia in its struggles, as opposed to the West. As its Armenian cultural flexibility, not rigidity, that has allowed Armenians to survive and prosper for as long as they have.

CONCLUSION

Much connects the fates of the Indian nation with the Armenian one. From old cultural ties, current geopolitical challenges and threats, to a colossal yet achievable economic project that presents the opportunity of stable revenue and interconnectivity. Armenia's politicians remain the ones who must seize this opportunity to rebuild the country and regain its sovereignty which it tremendously lost during its recent military defeat. As Paul Antonopoulos wrote, Bureau Chief for the Greek City Times, India must join the “Coalition of Civilisations” – a body of countries that are threatened by Pakistan and Turkey. The coalition includes Armenia, Greece, Cyprus, Syria, Egypt, and Iraq. In particular, however, India and Armenia must develop deeper relations to consolidate a better future for themselves in the regional and international struggles of the present era. ♦

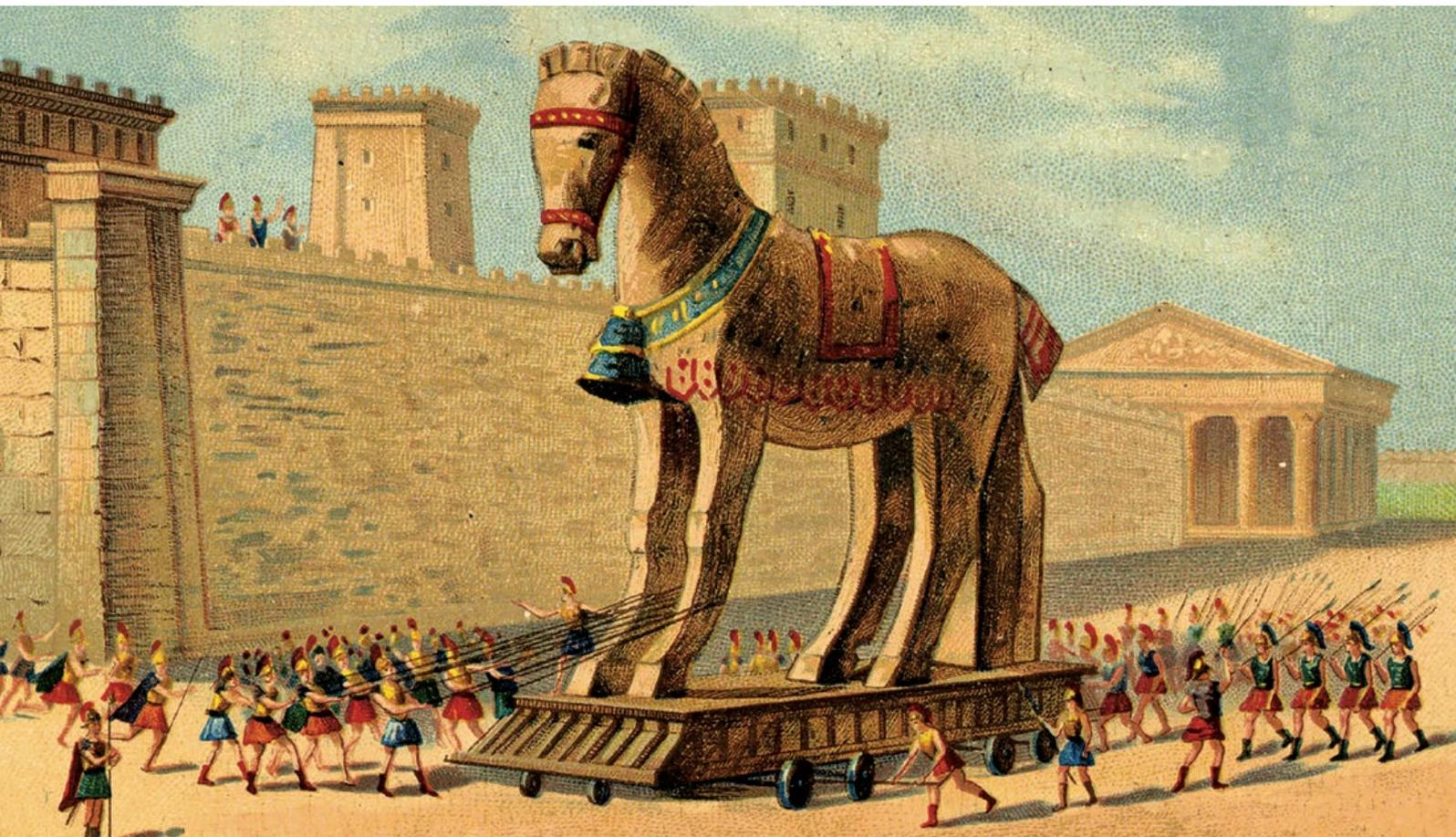
ARMENIA AND EUROPE:

A HISTORY OF LONG CENTURIES IN EIGHT EPISODES

Armenia and the Armenians have been playing an important part in the European cultural, social and political life since the beginning of their history. By Europe we mean not a mere geographic term, but first and foremost an idea. Europe has its roots in Ancient Greece, expanding into East and West thanks to the invasions of Alexander the Great and the Romans, and Armenia was among the most affected by those movements. Armenian-European contacts in culture and politics of the recent period are known to many, however it would be interesting to unearth some less known facts and details referring to this topic.

TEXT : TIGRAN ZAKARYAN

▼
Trojan war was also reflected in old Armenian historiography



WHICH TEAM ARE YOU IN AT TROY?

Homer's classical poem Iliad, which tells the story of conquering Ilium or Troy by the forefathers of the European civilization – the ancient Greeks – was one of the bases of the classical and medieval European identity. A story on the Roman genealogy suggests that Aeneas, who was fighting among the defenders of Troy was the forefather of Romulus and Remus, who founded the Eternal City. This story became popular and spread wide in medieval Europe giving birth to a number of pseudo-historical genealogies or alternative narration in places as remote as Iceland, for instance. Even William Shakespeare was among those who adopted this topic, portraying in his play Troilus and Cressida the Trojans as the “good guys” versus the Greeks, and particularly Achilles as a repulsive figure. All this is known, but did you know that the Trojan war was also reflected in old Armenian mythologized historiography as recorded in early medieval Armenian manuscripts. And guess what – Armenians there also play in the team of Trojans. Unfortunately only a small part of an originally substantial story was preserved, thanks to the “father of Armenian history”, Movses Khorenatsi, who mentioned a certain Zarmair in service of the Assyrians and commanding a regiment of Ethiopians, who fought and was killed at the hand of the “brave Hellenes”, as the text says.

NON-IDENTICAL COPIES OF CONFERENCE TRANSCRIPTS

In 325 CE, Roman emperor Constantine held a clergy conference at the city of Nicaea in Asia Minor (Today's city of Iznik in Turkey). The agenda of the conference was to establish the holy Trinity as we know it today and excommunicating all those who opposed that idea. The Council called “Universal” included lots of clergy representatives from various parts of the Christian world then, including for instance Alexander of Alexandria (funny name, isn't it?) and some representatives from Armenia, namely Aristakes, brother of Gregory the Illuminator, as well. The final documents adopted by the Council, called as Nicene Creed, which later became the cornerstone of many traditional churches, including the Roman Catholic and the Greek Orthodox is preserved in three somewhat different versions, including one in Latin, another in Greek and the third one in Armenian.

TROJAN WAR WAS ALSO REFLECTED IN OLD
ARMENIAN MYTHOLOGIZED HISTORIOGRAPHY
AS RECORDED IN EARLY MEDIEVAL ARMENIAN
MANUSCRIPTS



QUI LANGUE A, À ROME VA (LITERALLY FROM FRENCH: THE ONE KNOWING THE LANGUAGE GOES TO ROME)

Philosophy was one of the attributes of the European culture throughout centuries. While being born in Ancient Greece it spread throughout the Roman empire during the classical period, involving others who made part of the first universalistic culture. Among the well-known philosophers of the late Roman period was Paruyr Haykazzn (or Prohaeresius in Latin version, ca. 275 – ca. 367). While the details of Paruyr's biography are somewhat known, no manuscript of his has survived to our days.

Paruyr, a son of an influential Armenian family was able to reach his dream of studying with the renowned philosophers of his time. First he studied in a major cultural and economic hub of the eastern Mediterranean Antioch, after which he moved to Athens where he reached fame and renown. Although he was Christian and remained so even during temporary persecutions of the Christians during the short-lived reign of emperor Julianus (The Apostate, as the later Christian chronographers liked to call him), he was an organic continuer of the philosophers of the late antiquity, and had a quality that could be called “broadmindedness” these days. Make no mistake, he taught in his school to both Christians and “heathen” alike. >

When Paruyr-Prohearesius died at the age of about 90, a bronze statue of the philosopher was erected in Rome, with an inscription in Latin “Regina rerum Roma, Regi Eloquentiae” (From the Queen of the cities to the King of Eloquence)

RELIGIOUS TOURISM FROM TSORTSOR TO SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA

In the medieval period the range of purposes for travel was not too wide: trade, diplomacy, sometimes diluted with religion and things alike. The presence of Armenian clergy in European “club” was marked since long.

Just an example – Armenians were mentioned among the pilgrims to the famous Shrine of St. James in Spain’s Santiago de Compostela, who also had a hospice in the city called Jerusalem. It was no coincidence, since it was believed that the Armenian Church of St. Hakobos (the Armenian version of the name James) in Jerusalem is the site where the Apostle James was decapitated and his head was buried.

Among the famous Armenian pilgrims of Santiago de Compostela was a theologian, Hovhannes Garnetsi (John of Garni), who first visits Rome, then with a reference letter from the Pope, continues his travels through France, Germany, Flanders, England and finally, Spain. According to chroniclers, he worked “miracles” along his way, in one case, for instance, saving the life of a young man falling down from a high tower.

The religious tourism was not one-way though. There were ecclesiastics who visited Armenia in the later period of the medieval era. They even had an established center in Armenia in the province of Artaz in modern-day Iran, from where they were engaged in translating religious texts from Latin into Armenian, transforming it into a center of spreading Catholicism among Armenians. In 14th century the renowned abbey of Tsortсор was a major center of such an enterprise with certain prominent figures such as Fra Poncius (corrupted from ‘Bonifacius’) from the region of Aragon in Spain, whose fluent translations into Armenian are kept in our days in the Matenadaran in Yerevan.

A BAVARIAN KNIGHT’S JOURNEY ACROSS TIME AND SPACE

The life of the protagonist of this chapter, Johann Schiltberger, who was born in Bavaria and lived in the end of the 14th and the first half of the 15th centuries resembles very much a Chivalric romance, a genre still in vogue in medieval Europe of the time. He was first captured by Ottoman Turks in a battle in the Balkans and enters into service of Sultan Bayazet, who in turn was captured by victorious Lenk Temur (Tamerlane) in 1402. Schiltberger, once again changed his master and had an opportunity to travel across his last capturer’s empire from Asia Minor to Iran, southern Russia and Central Asia crossing Armenia several times. In his memoirs he gives somewhat mythologized and embellished picture of Armenia of that period, just like the other travelogues of his time did. He described the “benign attitude of Armenians towards Germans” (though it was



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 First Council of
 Nicaea

hardly possible that Schiltberger had an opportunity to see many Germans treated one or another way by Armenians) and gives a rather odd version of the story of Gregory the Illuminator travelling all the way to Rome and meeting the emperor Constantine and receiving blessing from the Pope Silverster which was a clearly inaccurate tale, invented probably by the Catholic Armenians to underline their link to Rome and Western Europe.

What shocked the Bavarian knight and could come as a surprise to many “traditionalists” nowadays in Armenia, was Armenian women’s freedom, who unlike their peers in Catholic Europe could chose to divorce from their husbands.

ARMENIAN KINGS, WHO ARE NEITHER ARMENIAN NOR ALWAYS KINGS

To most of Armenians the last dynasty name of Cilician Armenia – Lusignan sounds just like Petrosyan or Poghosyan and there are no few jokes among Armenians, that d’Artagnan, the famous fourth musketeer of Dumas, was Armenian too. The fact is ... yes, both d’Artagnan and Lusingnan are easily recognizable French surnames, which initially having their ancestral domains somewhere in the western-central part of France in Poitou, later during the crusades came all the way to the Middle East, becoming kings of Jerusalem, Cyprus and Cilician Armenia. The reign of the last dynasty of Cilicia was short-lived (1342-1375) and ended with taking the last king Levon (Leo) VI prisoner by the Egyptian mamluks. After spending several years in captivity the king was ransomed and left to Europe, ultimately being buried in Paris, along with the French royals.

The title of “King of Armenia” was transferred to the Lusignans in Cyprus, who carried it as long as the end of the 15th century.

The further fate of the title remains somewhat arguable, however after a while it could be found among the Italian House of Savoy’s titles, who were the ruling dynasty in the united Italy until the abolition of monarchy in 1949. Well, in fact the Savoyard royals could be considered just as much Kings of Armenia, as the Austro-Hungarian emperor-king was the “King of Jerusalem”.

THE QUIRKY AMBASSADOR OF SWEDEN

Ignatius Muradzea d’Ohsson, behind this kaleidoscopic name of Latin, Turkish, French and Swedish components stands Armenian Muradjan Tosunyan (1740-1807). Being born into a catholic family and studying in the local catholic institutions in the Ottoman empire, he started his career in the Swedish embassy in Constantinople, in 1784 becoming charge d’affaires and being bestowed a Swedish nobility rank. He was a keen connoisseur of not only a whole bunch of eastern and western languages, but also of the Ottoman empire’s internal life, including his own nation, the Armenians. The work of his life was the 7-volumed book called “Tableau Général de l’Empire Othoman” (Panorama of the Ottoman Life) the publishing of which was intermitted by the French Revolution of 1789, and resumed only two decades after, when its author had already passed away.

By the way his son Abraham Constantin Muradzea d’Ohsson who established himself in Sweden since his young age, followed the footsteps of his father becoming a diplomat, historian and being awarded membership of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences.

SING ARMENIAN, SING EUROPEAN

To reproduce an Armenian traditional melody in a song or acoustic piece does not mean to be outside of the European musical tradition – this was a main point which theoretically and practically argued for and proved the father of the modern Armenian music, Komitas (Soghomon Soghomonyan). Studying in Berlin in 1896-1899 where he familiarized himself with various types and traditions of classical and folkloric European music, he became famous and interesting for the local public with his presentations and lectures on Armenian folkloric and ecclesiastical music. He became the first non-European member of Berlin’s Internationale Musikgesellschaft (International Music Society).

Komitas became a popular and his talent was much appreciated by people like the French composer Claude Debussy, novelist Romain Rolland, musicologist Louis Lalois and other prominent figures of his time.

Through his deep association with the European musical traditions, Komitas ushered a new age in Armenian music, extracting the essentially Armenian elements from the folkloric music and developing it, in the meantime exclud-

ing from it more recent oriental themes, considered as non-genuinely Armenian.

Komitas’s musical legacy was so significant that the great soviet Armenian composer Aram Khachaturyan later said that he and other Armenian composers owed first of all to Komitas for the presence of Armenian national themes in music they created.

A BACKDOOR ACROSS THE IRON CURTAIN

The Soviet totalitarianism and the Iron Curtain which isolated it from the rest of the world severed some vital links of political, cultural, scientific, human and so on between different parts of Armenians living across the world. If political links were a most taboo thing, some cultural ties, interestingly were not so as more an exception than a rule. One of such prominently exceptional cases was that of Yervand Kochar, painter and sculptor who was always perceived as a White Crow in the Soviet Union. In fact he was indeed a personality of international consequence, who has left a deep trance in the history of modern art. After establishing [as a young artist] in Paris in 1923 then young artist drew very quickly the attention of the artistic community

KOMITAS BECAME A POPULAR AND HIS TALENT WAS MUCH APPRECIATED BY PEOPLE LIKE THE FRENCH COMPOSER CLAUDE DEBUSSY, NOVELIST ROMAIN ROLLAND AND OTHERS

and connoisseurs of art. In 1925 he took part in the international exhibition “L’art d’Aujourd’hui” (Contemporary Art), where works of Picasso, Miro and other modern artists were exhibited.

In 1936 he moved to Soviet Union never returning to Paris. His background were more than enough to be accused of promoting “bourgeois art” and indeed he was charged of it in 1941, however thanks to interventions from high ranking officials and some fortunate turn of events he was released and even permitted to pursue a professorial career, but his access to public through his “politically faulty” works was strictly limited. His first personal exhibition took place only in 1965, after 30 years of residence in the Soviet Union.

Kochar in his works strictly differ from the so-called socialist realism, which was announced to be the orthodox way of art in Soviet Union. He was both an innovator, revolutionary as well as deeply national. His famous sculptures of the epic hero Sasuntsi David and historical figure Vardan Mamikonyan are currently part and parcel of the familiar city landscape of Yerevan. ♦



AUNTY ARMENIA

A short story by Artavazd Yeghiazaryan initially featured in "The Stories from Armenia" book. The book was prepared in cooperation with the Delegation of the European Union to Armenia.

TRANSLATED : NAZARETH SEFERIAN / ILLUSTRATION : WILLIAM KARAPETYAN

"Why so sad, sister? Go into the museum and wander around until the bus gets here. I'll tell you about Hayrapet the Short and you'll learn something new about the people of Gavar." Anahit was reading a book on her Kindle, seated on a bench at the main square of the Geghargunik regional capital, and it was a while before she realised that the man with the three-day beard was talking to her. When she grew aware of this, she replied that she already knew a lot about Hayrapet the Short – when she was little, her grandfather had told her all kinds of real and not-so-real stories about that legendary wealthy man from Gavar. There no longer were any extremely wealthy people in Gavar anymore, or rather, there were some from Gavar who lived in distant places like Tolyatti and Frankfurt. There were no moderately wealthy people either – anyone even close to that status was in Yerevan, in the best case, and was probably thinking about emigrating to Tolyatti or Frankfurt. Over the past two days, Anahit had seen many of the locals who still remained in Gavar. In reality, she could have limited her trip to just a few hours, but she had decided to use the job interview as an opportunity to return to her village (which had actually long become one of the districts of the regional capital). It was a good thing that she could spend those couple of days in the two-floor house belonging to her grandparents, which had been standing empty and unused for a long time.

A Gazelle minibus wrestling with many inner moral and mental issues rolled lazily to the bus stop assigned to Yerevan-bound transportation. Anahit settled into the seat behind the driver and continued to read – there was another half hour to go before the minibus would set off. And before she got to Yerevan, it would probably be a good idea to figure out how she would explain her decision to Armen.

Only two hours after arriving in Yerevan, she sat with her girlfriends at one of the wine bars on Saryan Street (the third one already, because her friends liked to move from place to place during one evening). Their traditional Friday evening girl talk was supposed to help her relax a bit before her serious conversation with Armen.

"No, everything is much simpler," Armine continued the argument that had begun in the previous restaurant on the best way to use the one life and limited time given to each of us. "You only do what you enjoy doing, and you only interact with the people you like. That's what I've been doing for the past seven years, and my only regret is not realizing this sooner."

"It sounds good, but it doesn't work that way," Lilith quoted an American President, biting into one of the tapas on the table. "Whatever you do, you can't be completely independent."

"Yeah?" Armine did not agree with Lilith's disagreement. "Watch me and learn," and she took a sip of her white wine.

"That means you shouldn't have a job either, so that you don't have anyone bossing over you," Lilith would not give up, "And you should

avoid talking to some of your relatives..."

"No, you simply choose a job that you enjoy, rather than only base your decision on the salary. Or even start your own company and be your own boss. Relatives

are a bit more complicated, but there's always a solution... Anahit? Anahit, are you here? You haven't made a sound in half an hour."

"Yes, yes, I'm here. I've been listening very carefully so that I can learn at least one thing from your intellectual debate," Anahit explained.

"No, in reality, Anahit is trying to figure out how to explain to everyone that she has decided to move to..." Lilith played a drum roll on the table, as if preceding an important announcement, "...Gavar!"

Anahit's glass hung in the air halfway to her mouth. The next thing everyone heard was the "WHAT?" of surprise that she produced. Anahit rolled her eyes and took out a pack of cigarettes from her bag.

"Yes, we're losing her," Lilith continued, "Little Anulik heard the call of her native region and is returning to her ancestral land."

"Her ancestral orchard."

"Don't you make fun of my ancestral orchard," Anahit declared, her tone more serious than joking, and she lit a long and slim Winston.

"Okay, okay, don't hit me or anything," Armine proposed a truce as she held her hands up with the palms facing forward. "If that's what you need to do at this moment, then you're making the right move. Do what I do, and don't pay any attention to what anyone says."

Anahit blew her liberally-minded girlfriend a kiss.

"But seriously, An? Gavar?"

Anahit blew her liberally-minded girlfriend a slap.

"You're making it sound like I'm going there to grow potatoes or something. I'm going to do serious work – do you know anything about women's rights? People outside Yerevan think it's a swear word or something."

"It's not that different in Yerevan either," Lilith remarked, "Here, let me take a picture of you, my heroine, my Wonder Woman, my Joan of Arc – the beacon of hope and support for the women of Gavar!"

Lilith picked up her camera from the table and immortalized the half-angry half-worried look on her friend's face and the swirling puffs of smoke that twisted like the rays of the sun with the black curls on both sides of Anahit's head.

IT WAS A GOOD THING THAT SHE COULD SPEND THOSE COUPLE OF DAYS IN THE TWO-FLOOR HOUSE BELONGING TO HER GRANDPARENTS, WHICH HAD BEEN STANDING EMPTY AND UNUSED FOR A LONG TIME

"But, more specifically, what will you be doing?" Armine asked.

"There's a European Union project there on women's issues. The aim of the project is to involve NGOs in the regions and help them engage women

in social and economic initiatives, to empower them a bit, basically. For example, helping them start their own business, so they don't have to emigrate."

"Yeah, I've heard about this. I know a girl win Gyumri who launched her own startup, I think it was through an EU-funded project."

"Yes, Women in Business and IT," Anahit confirmed, "But it's not just IT. They've helped a woman in Vanadzor start a business making handmade souvenirs, another woman has set up a guesthouse in Alaverdi, and so on. We're going to mobilise the women in Gavar this time."

"That's great. That's exactly what I'm talking about – being independent and living your own life," Armine remarked, "So why are you so worried?"

"Well..."

"I know the answer! I know the answer!" Lilith raised her hand like a third-grader and without waiting for the teacher to acknowledge her, went on, "Because she doesn't know how Armen will react to this."

"Oh..."

"Uh-huh..." >

There was silence for a while. Then the waltz from Amélie could be heard from the speakers and Anahit recalled the special way that she and Armen had met, in a trolleybus following an accident, accompanied by the surreal sounds of this very piece of music. And she felt guilty.

"I guess I should've talked to him first, then decided..."

Anahit said, more to herself than her friends.

"Don't feel sorry for yourself, Anahit," Armine jumped in, "You need to talk to him about this, no doubt about that. You're not moving to Gavar in secret. But if you really need that job and your ancestral land, then Armen will understand." And then she added in a more threatening tone, "He better understand, at any rate."

"And if a new branch of Gazebo opens up in Gavar, we can all move there together," Lilith proposed.

The issue was no longer discussed for the following hour and a half, because Armine provided strict instructions – "Sleep over it, wake up, think about it with a clear head – you're not in the right frame of mind at the moment." She had a date with Armen the following day.

Armen and Anahit met at Gazebo and started by talking about everyday insignificant events. Anahit would say something about how the radio in the bus had played a song

that she had last heard when she was seven, and Armen would talk about how he had seen the headstock of a guitar sticking out of a trash can near the Garegin Njdeh metro station and was still feeling sorry for the abandoned instrument and the forsaken aspirations of its previous owner. For Anahit, talking to each other about these little things created an atmosphere between the two of them that felt like the most intimate and cosy thing in the world. They attached more importance to the graffiti saying "I'm tired" on the wall of the Gazebo building and the text added below it with a permanent marker – "Don't sweat it, everything's going to be great" – than to climate change, the Islamic state, or the surging price of butter. Because those things belonged only to the two of them.

"I'd gone to buy bread in the morning and there was a woman standing in line with an 8-9 year old boy," Armen said, taking a slurp of coffee, "The boy hung his head low and was playing the air drums. He was so carried away... And then he stopped for a second, shook his head slightly, and started again. I guess he had a class yesterday and was practicing today."

DURING HER YOUTH, ANAHIT'S GRANDMOTHER HAD DREAMED OF GOING TO THE CITY (I.E. TO YEREVAN) AND TO BECOME A LAWYER, BUT HER FAMILY HAD NOT LET HER, SAYING THAT IT WAS SHAMEFUL TO THINK THAT WAY

Anahit felt the warmth contained in the story. And she responded with one of her own.

"I was looking over the library at my grandmother's house yesterday and came across an old copy of Heghnar Fountain. I opened it and saw that the title page had a bit of text in half-blurred ink – 'To Amalik, from the David of Sasun cinema bookstore in Yerevan, 1947'. I guess my grandfather had brought it for her from Yerevan."

During her youth, Anahit's grandmother had dreamed of going to the city (i.e. to Yerevan) and to become a lawyer, but her family had not let her, saying that it was shameful to think that way – get married, Amal, and take care of the house. So she got married and took care of the house. And while taking care of it, she collected a library of hundreds of books. When she was little, Anahit read those books and felt sorry for the unfulfilled dreams that her grandmother had cherished even though things had ended in a happy and harmonious wedding with her grandfather.

"Aw, that's sweet," Armen confirmed, "But I can't stand that book. It's like a bad Armenian soap opera... Wait a second,

wasn't your grandmother's library in Gavar?"

"Yes..." And so the conversation had come to the trip she had taken the previous day, "I'd gone to Gavar yesterday..."

"Really?" Armen was surprised, "That's

great! One shouldn't abandon an ancestral home."

"There was something related to this that I wanted to tell you," Anahit turned away, but felt the warmth of Armen's palms on her hands at the same time.

"Hold on, I've got something to say too. But not here. Let's go to the Stork."

"Where?"

Armen grabbed Anahit's hand and almost ran out of the place with her behind him. There was a sky blue Vespa parked outside Gazebo, the kind of scooter that Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn had used to ride along the streets of Rome.

"I bought it on credit. I saw it and couldn't say no," Armen said with a smile that stretched from one ear to the other, "Climb on!"

For the next half hour, the sky blue Vespa rolled through the modest streets of Charbakh. Another forty minutes after that, the scooter stopped in front of the entrance to Victory Park.

"Don't tell me we're going for a ride on the carousel here," Anahit sounded concerned.

"No, no, no carousels. Come on!"

The couple who had started their relationship in a trolley-bus strolled through the crowds enjoying the decades-old amusement park rides and took the path on the right side, then turned right again, shifting left on to footpath that had been abandoned a long time ago and a few steps down... suddenly, they were face to face with Yerevan. Yerevan, Anahit, and Armen. But all under the watchful eye of Mother Armenia. This was the abandoned space of the café called The Stork.

"When I was small, I was afraid of the Mother Armenia statue," Armen said after quietly looking out at the panorama of Yerevan for a few minutes. "I used to think that if I did anything to upset the girls in the courtyard of our building or in class, or even my mom, Mother Armenia would come with her sword and give me a sound beating. She has such a stern look on her face..."

"Right. A woman must either take care of things at home, or pick up a sword and fight side-by-side with men," Anahit said sarcastically, "I never liked this statue because there was nothing feminine about it."

"Oooh, I feel a trace of women's rights sentiment in your voice..."

"No, seriously. Look, everyone says that women are sacred in Armenia, blah blah blah, but they only praise women who become soldiers or those who bear soldiers. A woman living a normal life is still considered quite unusual."

"Okay, okay, fine, let's not fight over this," Armen tried to calm her down by placing a hand on her shoulder, but Anahit went on.

"We're sitting here in our bubble, but almost nothing has changed for Armenians in the country. You know about the case that was being heard in a Gavar court last week? A young girl, probably my age now, had been married back when she was 17 and had two children. She wanted to get a job and feel a little more useful. When her husband and mother-in-law found out that she'd gone and got a job, they had beaten her up so badly that she had two broken ribs. And then they shut her up inside the house. Can you imagine? And when she refused to give up and took them to court, half the village had shown up to defend the husband."

"That's not good," Armen expressed genuine concern, "But it's a good thing that we're in our own bubble here. Oh, and about our bubble. I mentioned I had something to tell you. What do you say we move in together and live in the empty place my family has in Charbakh? We need to do a little work on the place, of course, and improve it, but I think we'll manage."

Armen looked at Anahit with bright eyes. Anahit's eyes were bright too – they always were when she was with Armen. But she recalled her job in Gavar at the same time. And she

knew that she would never forgive herself if she did not do what she could to improve the lives of the women who lived outside the bubble.

"Armen, I've got a job offer to live and work in Gavar for a year. Actually, I was the one who applied, because I felt like it's important work and I'm the one who should be doing it in our village. I applied and they made me an offer. They want me to start in a week."

"Oh," Armen pulled back in surprise, "In your ancestral village?"

"Please, no jokes about farming and agriculture..."

"No, no, no jokes. But..."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you earlier, I wasn't sure myself. But I went there yesterday and realized that I need to do something."

Armen plunged deep into thought. Mother Armenia had her twenty-meter sword ready and would mete out the right punishment if he upset Anahit.

"About what you said – I would get my things together and move in to your uncle's empty place in Charbakh right now, I'm serious. But a few days later, I'd regret not being in Gavar and not helping the girl with the broken ribs so that she could go to work without fear and feel economically independent and self-assured. And you would grow bitter and angry, living with an Anahit who was not happy with herself. Arm..."

Anahit put her hand on Armen's, trying to understand what was going on in his mind. Armen suddenly looked up at Anahit.

"What if my Vespa and I come to your ancestral village.

Would people find that really awkward?"

Anahit did not really understand what he was asking. Armen continued.

"I can work from anywhere. What difference does it make whether it's your grandfather's house or ours? And there's always your grandmother's library, isn't there?"

Anahit could not believe what she was hearing, she thought Armen was making fun of her. She looked carefully into the eyes of the man she loved and only grew certain of the truth in a few minutes. The next moment, the two of them were locked in an embrace, twirling around the abandoned space of The Stork, as Mother Armenia gave a barely noticeable smile.

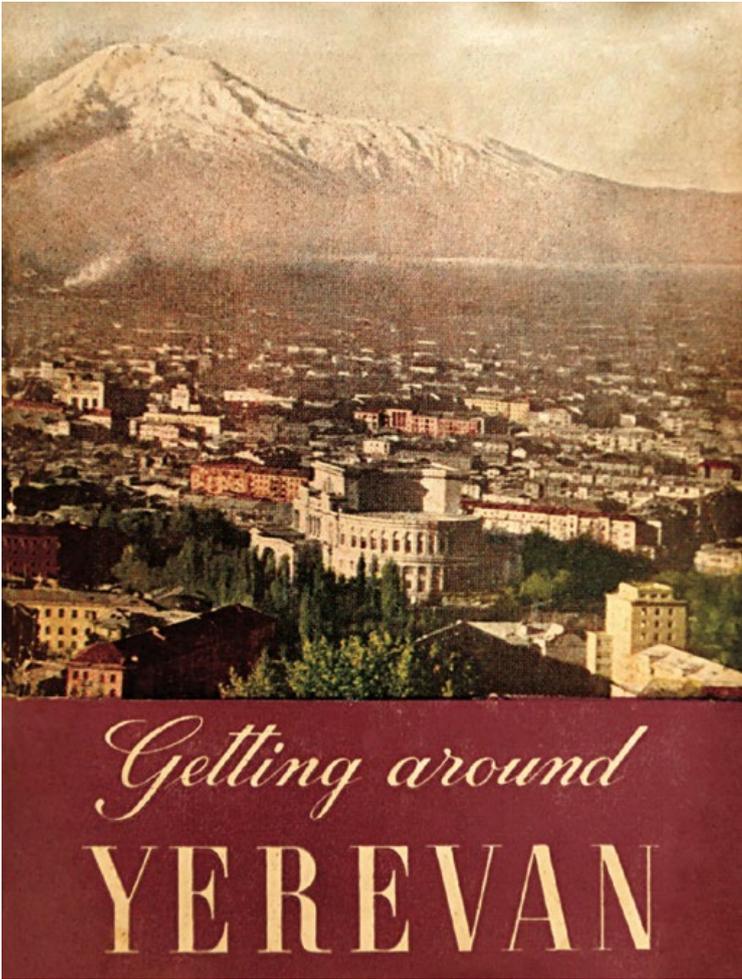
A week later, Armen's sky blue Vespa rode into the central square in Gavar and parked in front of the black statue of Hayrapet the Short.

"Wow, who's this?" Armen asked, "A local celebrity?"

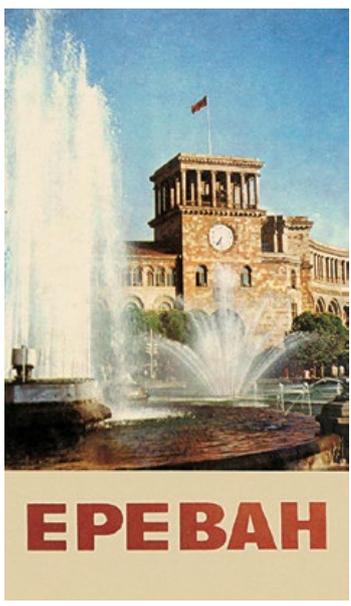
"Yes, that's Hayrapet the Short. Let's go and see the house, and then we'll go to the museum and you'll learn something new about our village."

"Whatever ya say, m'dear," smiled Armen, trying to imitate the local accent. ♦

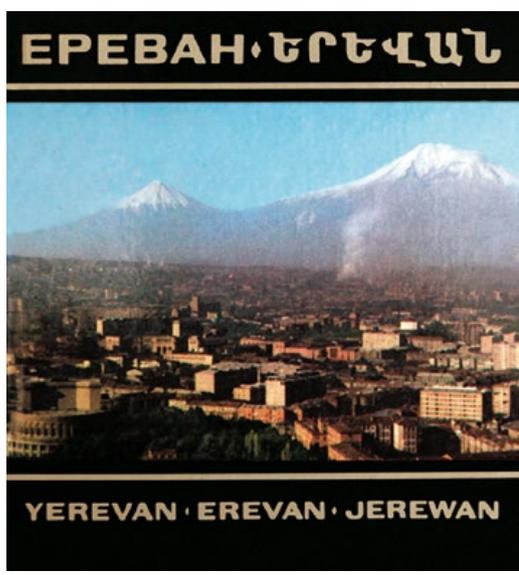
MULTILINGUAL TOURISTIC GUIDES OF ARMENIA FROM SOVIET ERA



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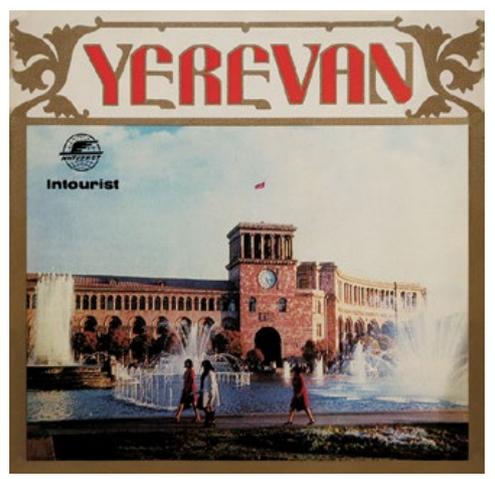


^ 1983



> 1975

> 1974



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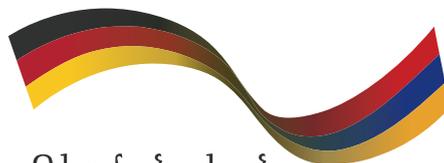


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