

Inequality Discourse, Populism and Poverty Reduction Policy in Armenia¹

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This article has been developed based on the results of a qualitative study I conducted.

According to the National Statistics Service of Armenia, the level of poverty in Armenia constitutes around 30%. This means that approximately every third citizen lives below the poverty line. Despite the government's poverty reduction programs, data covering the past ten years suggests that there has been no success in this area and not only has poverty not declined, its level today is higher than it was in 2008 at around 27%.

From January to May 2017, based on a qualitative study conducted in various locations in Armenia, my findings suggest that the main shortcoming of the poverty reduction policy being implemented in the country is that it considers poverty to be a purely economic phenomenon related to low income. However, poverty is in reality a multidimensional phenomenon and its causes also vary greatly. According to the study results, one of the main causes of poverty, which is also the cause of income polarity and inequality is the ***almost complete lack of a discourse in society on equality and justice***. In contrast to this, the discourse of inequality is quite dominant, and the lowest layer of unequal people is considered to consist of the poor, who are often isolated.

In this situation, facilitating the development of a discourse of equality is an important factor for overcoming poverty. The poor themselves cannot promote such a discourse, unfortunately, because they do not have the potential or the resources to do so. That means that other actors must be sought who can take on this role. This article will discuss the specific characteristics of the discourse of poverty and inequality in Armenia and the question of whether the other social strata or groups of Armenian society can play a role in spreading the discourse of equality.

¹ This article is based on the research project "Poverty, Inequality and Everyday Life in Post-Soviet Armenia" conducted with the support of the Institute of Armenian Studies at the University of Southern California - USC (USA). The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent opinions of the Institute of Armenian Studies, USC.

The results of the qualitative study I have conducted on the issue of poverty lead to several observations.

One can come across people who are materially poor or live in multidimensional poverty, but do not assess their own situation as one of poverty. The prevalent attitude in this layer of society is also that poverty is shameful. Very often, such people consider poverty to be shameful and rate their own situation as “average” or “normal”.

At the same time, there is another approach when it comes to poverty and shame. According to it, being poor is considered shameful and worthy of contempt, while being rich is good, which is why any path to becoming rich, including stealing, corruption, exploitation, and oppression are considered *normal*. Thus, on the one hand, the poor consider their poverty to be *normal*, without calling it poverty if they manage to cover their basic needs, even though they are really living in poverty. On the other hand, all the illegal and malicious anti-social practices that help people become rich and reproduce their wealth are also considered *normal*. This binary perception of the *normal* seems to be contradictory and paradoxical at first, because ***on the one hand, being poor is considered normal while, on the other hand, so are the practices that form and deepen poverty, due to which the rich grow richer and the state of dependence of the poor on the rich, their subjugation and the inequality all increase.*** It ends up such that, because being poor is considered shameful, people do not wish to assess their own state as one of poverty, so they call it normal while they are actually poor. At the same time, they also consider it normal for their segments of society, the poor, to be oppressed by someone else on the latter’s path to riches, or for that person to plunder state and social resources. ***In this situation, the perception of shame and poverty by society on the one hand, and the perception by society of what is “normal” become key factors in the reproduction of poverty and inequality in society, because they essentially weaken and completely neutralize the possibility of resistance by the poor segments of the population who are being exploited and trapped in poverty by the rich.***

In this sense, one could say that changing the existing perceptions of poverty and shame, poverty and what is normal, wealth and what is normal as well as the related daily discourses and practices could all be important components in the fight against poverty. It is obvious that that the needy and poor segments of society are reproducing the discourse about

what is normal that is produced by the rich. It is the rich who have disseminated the discourse that making one's wealth through deceit is normal and is even an example to be followed. The acceptance of this discourse by the poor facilitates a situation in which they constantly justify the practices of the rich, one of which traps them in this state of poverty and dependence. *This ends up meaning that, by avoiding the recognition of their own poverty, a considerable part of the poor justify the illegal practices of the rich and the discourages borne by them, all of which have trapped them in poverty.*

According to the data from the individual interviews, one of the causes of poverty consists of several characteristics in the thinking of poor people. One of the frequently seen expressions is that *the poor have their own brains to blame for their poverty*. According to a commonly held opinion, one of the main problems in the thinking of this segment is considered to be *the short-term thinking of the poor*. In the individual interviews, one could often see the blame being placed on the poor because they do not have strategic thinking and often prefer short-term solutions to their needs instead of long-term approaches. For example, they can take an agricultural loan, but then use it to buy fuel for the winter, clothes and food. Or, for example, they can take an electoral bribe to solve an issue today and vote for the political power that is keeping them in poverty. The poor are also often blamed for the fact that they have gotten used to living in poverty, getting by with little, not looking far ahead into the future, not planning the future, always complaining about life and asking others for help, not making an effort, and for other similar things, which are considered to be the cause of their poverty.

In essence, the expressed opinions on the specific characteristics of the poor are often true. According to experts, the issue is related to another specific point in the discourse. The problem is that the poor themselves are blamed for all this, while the upper class of the ruling rich, who use their privileged position to subject these classes to deprivation for years on end and to force them to resign themselves to their situation and accept short-term solutions, are not considered in that discourse at all to bear any responsibility. This is important because it can affect the policy being implemented regarding poverty. If the ones to blame are the poor, then by blaming them for their own situation, one can satisfy oneself even by only providing some social assistance. *But if the ones to be blamed for poverty are*

not the poor, then this could radically change the political emphasis, since the causes leading to poverty become visible in the policy of the government aimed at protecting the interests of the rich, and the objective becomes a review of the policies of inequality and discrimination that give the rich a privileged status as well as the prioritization of the interests of the poor and other classes in future policies. In case of such an approach, the strategies for overcoming poverty might radically change and this might encourage the reflection and implementation of ideas of justice and equality in social policies.

Despite the mentioned reasons, some expert assessments believe that, in case of people who consider poverty to be shameful but do not consider themselves poor although they live in poverty, they are unable to adequately assess their own situation, as a result of which they also cannot set themselves any objectives or ambitions of overcoming poverty. This in turn leads to the situation where there aren't any forces in society that are sufficiently active or motivated enough to form a claim based on their needs and present it in the political arena. In these conditions of non-existent social demand, a situation had arisen when political forces do not come forth with program proposals directed at the demands of society, but satisfy themselves with providing aid to some poor people in society, which helps tackle this or that specific issue at that moment in time for the selected individuals, but does not address the generally existing issue of poverty.

This discourse is characterized not only by the fact that it is dominant in all segments of society, but also by the phenomenon that inequality is considered natural in its everyday features by the poor themselves. It is considered natural to the extent that, according to the opinions voiced during the interviews, it is somewhat of a habit that a wealthy person does not interact with one who is poor. Considering any phenomenon to be natural makes it much more difficult to change it in any way. In such cases, resisting the dominant discourse of inequality with a discourse of equality can become an important factor for changing practices of inequality.

According to expert opinion, the poor cannot overcome the situation in which they exist by themselves, because the ruling wealthy class keeps them in complete dependence, not allowing their abilities to be assessed from the point of view of their own interests. In such a situation, any action that is not met with resistance from the poor classes and those

protecting their interests, even if it is being implemented in the name of reform, will be directed at the protection of the rich and increased inequality, because power has ended up in the hands of the rich and is being used to serve their interests.

According to some experts, in such situations, the main power that can defeat the wealthy and take on the role of protecting the poor can be the middle class, which is more aware and can act to develop the interests of the poor and defend them. However, the problem is that the middle class in Armenia is also very small in number and it lacks any ideological or political organization. NGOs and civil initiatives can play a certain role, perhaps replacing the middle class that is yet to be established. But NGOs are not sufficiently influential and not active enough to change the current discourse. In such a situation, left-wing political forces and intellectuals can also bear certain responsibility to join the discourse.