

Armenian Civil Society: It is Not All about NGOs

Paturyan, Jenny

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Paturyan, J. (2015). Armenian Civil Society: It is Not All about NGOs. *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, 73, 2-5. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-90544-3>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivatives). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

Armenian Civil Society: It is Not All about NGOs

By Yevgenya Jenny Paturyan, Yerevan

Abstract

For the past two decades, Armenian civil society was largely equated with the NGO sector. International development organizations, public officials, scholars and the few informed among the general public saw NGOs as the core element of Armenian civil society. The NGO sector is by now fairly developed and institutionalised, but it is detached from the broader Armenian society, remaining a post-communist civil society in that sense. However, recently a new actor has entered the arena of civil society and made its presence very visible. The so-called “civic initiatives” are on the rise since around 2007, and have already registered a number of successes in impacting government decisions, despite the small numbers of people involved. Armenian civil society is no more simply about NGOs, though NGOs unquestionably remain a very important component of civil society.

Introduction

When discussing contemporary Armenian civil society, it is important to distinguish between two interconnected yet very distinct types of actors: the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the civic activists. Civic activism in Armenia is a relatively new phenomenon; it is distinct from the “NGO approach” in a number of ways. Civic activist groups maintain minimal levels of formal organisation and explicitly reject foreign funding. Largely confined to Yerevan, consisting mostly of young educated people, the so-called “civic initiatives” have registered a number of successes since 2009 despite low numbers of participants. Civic activism seems to be the arena where civil society is able to overcome the post-communist syndrome of disengagement, but it remains to be seen if civic activism will gain momentum and engage more people.

This article discusses these two dimensions of Armenian civil society: the NGO sector and civic activism, describing the current situation and the main strengths and weaknesses of both. It first looks at the NGO sector in Armenia today, highlighting some of its achievements and main challenges. After that, civic activism, as the new component of the Armenian civil society, is described, focusing on how it is different from the NGO sector. In the conclusion some observations are offered as to how these two elements of Armenian civil society can (and sometimes do) complement each other.

Armenian NGO Sector

Since independence, Armenia has witnessed rapid growth of its NGO sector, but the exact numbers of truly functioning organisations have remained elusive. As of June 2014, there were 3,981 officially registered NGOs. The most recent research estimates that most of these exist on paper only, with some 500 to 800 NGOs actually operating in the country.¹ Focusing on those

NGOs that do operate, it is clear that the Armenian NGO sector has by now achieved a fairly good level of institutionalization. Many organisations have overcome the “one-person show” problem when their founding leaders dominate. Roughly two-thirds of actively functioning organisations have undergone leadership changes and, interestingly enough, are doing slightly better than those run by their old founding presidents in at least one aspect: they tend to attract more grants per year (Paturyan and Gevorgyan 2014). Most surveyed NGOs exhibit fairly well-developed organisational structures: they have staff, volunteers and basic decision-making bodies in place, as Table 1 on p. 4 and Table 2 on p. 5 demonstrate.

However, the Armenian NGO sector faces the typical problems of post-communist development.² These problems can be divided into two broad categories. The first category is about individual attitudes and behaviour of citizens: disdain towards volunteering, distrust towards associations, and low membership in associations. These are mostly a legacy of communism (Howard 2003), under which people were forced to join organisations and “volunteer” on a regular basis. The second category of problems faced by NGOs in post-communist countries has to do with the rapid donor-driven development of the NGOs after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The manifold challenges of regime transitions, often accompanied with an economic collapse, created demand for social action, while generous international donor support boosted supply. This process led to a mushrooming of NGOs heavily dependent on external donors. While this influx of funds helped to establish a vibrant NGO sector, it created a set of constraints that NGOs currently struggle with. If international develop-

1 The report can be found online here <[http://tcpa.aua.am/files/2012/07/Armenian_Civil_Society_after_Twenty_Years](http://tcpa.aua.am/files/2012/07/Armenian_Civil_Society_after_Twenty_Years_of_Transition_Manuscript_November_2014-fin.pdf)

of_Transition_Manuscript_November_2014-fin.pdf>
2 This article discusses “internal” problems of civil society, rather than the “external” problems, such as the poor socio-economic conditions of the population, corruption, lack of political avenues of representation and so on.

mental aid is withdrawn, most NGOs have only questionable organisational sustainability. More importantly, the legitimacy of civil society organisations to represent local voices is often disputed on the grounds that many NGOs are funded from abroad.

Public trust towards NGOs is low and declining, but NGOs do not seem to be aware of it. They overestimate public trust towards them, as can be seen from Figure 1 on p. 5. Participants in an organisational survey were asked to estimate public trust towards NGOs, replicating a Caucasus Barometer question in a study conducted by the Turpanjian Center for Policy Analysis (TCPA) within a research project funded by the Academic Swiss Caucasus Net. The comparison with public opinion data clearly shows that NGOs overestimate the amount of trust towards them. According to Caucasus Barometer 2013, one-fifth of the Armenian population fully distrusts NGOs, yet NGOs themselves are not aware of this negative attitude. NGOs also clearly exaggerate the percentage of people with moderate levels of trust: while only 15 percent of the Armenian population somewhat trusts NGOs, NGOs estimate that percentage to be around 43 percent. This is yet another example of the sector's detachment from the broader public.

Civic Initiatives

An important new development in Armenia is the recent rise of a new type of activities called “civic initiatives.” These are various grassroots issue-oriented groups of individual activists united around a common, often very specific, cause (preventing construction in a public park, preserving an architecturally valuable building, protesting against a new mine, among others). Usually civic initiatives are small in numbers and are often confined to Yerevan, or spearheaded from Yerevan, if a regional environmental issue is at stake. The core activists are young educated people; they use social media to organize and to spread information regarding their activities. These new forms of civic participation have emerged roughly since 2007 and have registered a number of victories since then. Examples are preserving an old open-air cinema amphitheatre (Kino Moskva, 2010) set to be demolished, preventing a hydropower station from being constructed at a scenic waterfall site (Trchkan, 2011), and the most recent mass protests against a mandatory component of a pension reform (2014).³

³ The reform has been delayed and re-formulated and the mandatory component was dropped (at least for the time being). The prime minister resigned from his post. Although officially the resignation had nothing to do with the opposition to the pension reform, many believe that widespread public discontent with the proposed reform was at least partially the reason for the resignation.

There are also examples of failures despite mobilisation, or inability to sustain momentum.

In their report, Ishkanian et al. (2013) list a total of 31 civic initiatives for the period 2007–2013. Of these, seven were resolved positively (i.e. the activists achieved their aim), four were resolved negatively, six were abandoned and the rest were continuing. Since then the TCPA team has updated the table, adding two new initiatives and checking the status of ongoing initiatives. Table 3 on p. 5 presents the most recent snapshot of civic initiatives in Armenia. It is worth highlighting that nine out of 33 cases, i.e. more than a quarter of issues taken up by the activists were resolved positively. Given their small numbers, the overall apathy of the population and lack of cooperative culture on behalf of the government, this is not a small achievement on behalf of the activists.

Civic initiatives are distinctly different from NGOs. First and foremost, activists engaged in these initiatives explicitly refuse any foreign funding. They do not want to risk de-legitimation in the eyes of the public and government officials by accepting funding from international development organisations and thereby becoming accountable to a force, which is ultimately outside of Armenia. They believe that relying on foreign funding (in some cases on any funding except voluntary labour and personal contributions) would diminish their ability to speak on behalf of themselves, and people affected by decisions they attempt to overrun. Another difference is a strong preference to maintain organisational structures at a minimum and avoid hierarchies, thereby encouraging a “participatory democracy” style of self-organization that can tap into the creative energies of all people involved and create experiences of empowerment and ownership. On the negative side, such structures are hard to maintain on a large scale and over extended periods of time. Institutionalisation does not happen; groups are at a constant risk of “petering out” if participants become disillusioned, busy, interested in something else, and so on.

Several other weaknesses of civic activism can be noted here. Most civic initiatives are reactions to government decisions or events, rather than pro-active goals of changing the Armenian reality. Many activists position themselves as “outside of politics,” although some of the issues they raise are inherently political, such as the opposition to the government-proposed pension reform. The rejection of politics also means rejection of political players, such as the opposition political parties, who could be valuable allies in many cases.

Conclusion and Discussion

Armenian civil society has undergone some development since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The NGO sec-

tor of civil society is consolidated and fairly well developed. It is, however, detached from the broader society and largely donor-driven. In that sense, Armenian civil society still suffers from the typical post-communist “weakness” in Howard’s (2003) terms.

Focusing on NGOs when talking about civil society in a post-communist context is somewhat ironic, since the concept of civil society was popularized in the late 1980s, referring to mass mobilization and social movements that challenged the communist regimes of the respective countries. As those lost momentum, NGOs came to replace them as the main “substance” of civil society. Empowered mostly through foreign development aid, rather than grassroots involvement, NGOs perform a wide range of tasks, from humanitarian assistance to advocacy, but fail to attract most Armenians’ trust or interest in their cause. An entirely new development is the rise of civic activism of a novel type: case-focused, largely spontaneous, mostly driven by youth, and powered by social media.

About the Author

Yevgenya Jenny Paturyan has a PhD in Political Science from Jacobs University Bremen. She is teaching at the American University of Armenia and works at the Turpanjian Center for Policy Analysis at the same University.

References

- Howard, Marc Morjé. 2003. *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Ishkanian, Armine, Evelina Gyulkhandanyan, Sona Manusyan, and Arpy Manusyan. 2013. *Civil Society, Development and Environmental Activism in Armenia*. The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/54755/>.
- Paturyan, Yevgenya, and Valentina Gevorgyan. 2014. *Armenian Civil Society after Twenty Years of Transition: Still Post-Communist?* Yerevan, Armenia: Turpanjian Center for Policy Analysis. <http://tcpa.aua.am/files/2012/07/Armenian_Civil_Society_after_Twenty_Years_of_Transition_Manuscript_November_2014-fin.pdf>.

Table 1: “Does Your Organisation Have...” (yes answers)

	N	%
President	182	97
Board	146	78
General assembly	137	73
Accountant/financial manager/cashier	129	69
Working groups	114	61
Secretary	82	44
Executive director	68	36

Source: TCPA ASCN Organisational Survey of NGOs

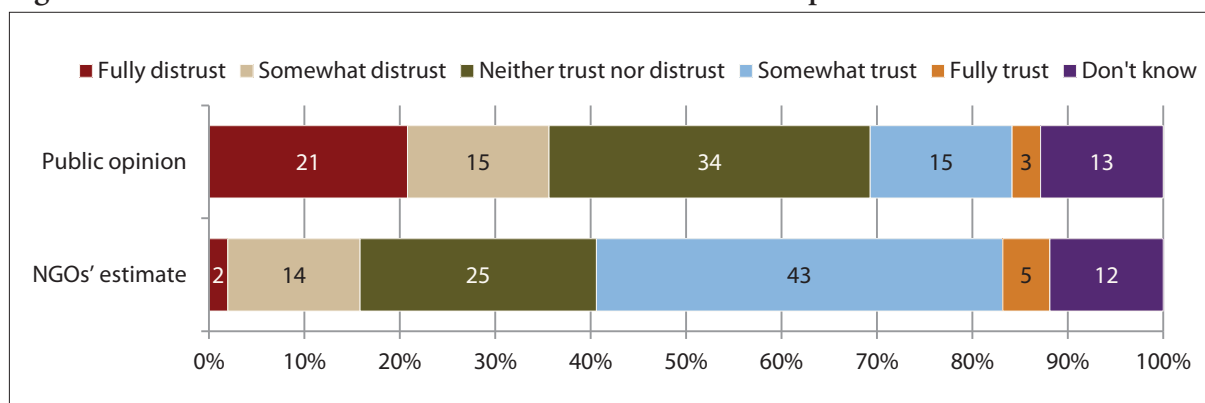
Each of these two elements of civil society has its strengths and weaknesses. They could complement each other. For example, NGOs could offer their expertise to the activist groups, while the civic initiatives could energize NGOs and provide the much needed link to the public. There is plenty of evidence of NGO members actively participating in civic initiatives as individuals. NGOs as organisations have so far remained behind the scenes, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

Spearheaded by young activists, often acting outside of the formal NGO format, Armenian civil society has recently registered several victories in overriding unfavourable governmental decisions and in voicing mounting public concerns. These examples are sources of inspiration and optimism for those engaged with Armenian civil society. The challenge for civil society actors now is to learn and multiply these positive experiences, while being more self-reflective and thoughtful in attracting citizens, in addition to attracting grants.

Table 2: Number of Paid Staff and Volunteers in Organisations

Number of staff/volunteers	% of NGOs that have <i>x</i> staff	% of NGOs that have <i>x</i> volunteers
0	37	10
1–5	26	29
6–20	22	28
21–30	6	13
31 and more	9	19
Total	100	100
<i>N</i>	188	188
Mean	11	58
Median	3	8

Source: TCPA ASCN Organisational Survey of NGOs

Figure 1: Trust Towards NGOs: NGOs' Estimate vs. Public Opinion

NB: "Public opinion" refers to the Caucasus Barometer 2013, "NGOs' estimate" refers to the TCPA ASCN Organisational Survey of NGOs.

Table 3: Outcomes of Various Civic Initiatives, 2007–2014

Outcome	Number of initiatives
Resolved positively	9
Resolved negatively	4
Abandoned	7
Continuing	13
<i>Total</i>	33

Source: Current TCPA ASCN Research Project