

# Civic Activism as a Novel Component of Armenian Civil Society: New Energy and Tensions

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## Introduction

Armenian civil society has undergone some development since the collapse of the Soviet Union. While some aspects and characteristics of civic life in Armenia have changed, others remain remarkably stable. The NGO sector of civil society is consolidated and fairly well developed. It is, however, detached from the broader society. 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. There is both cooperation and tensions between the ‘old’ NGO sector and the ‘new’ civic activism. Civic activism is an important but under-researched element of the Armenian civil society; it has a complex relationship with older, more institutionalized elements such as NGOs.

The research project, discussed in this report, examines patterns of interaction and mutual perceptions of NGOs and civic activists, placing these two actors into a broader perspective of Armenian political culture of participation and (mis)trust. The two-year study pays special attention to the gender aspect<sup>1</sup> of civic activism and the use of social media.

The key tasks of the project are to map NGOs’ and activists’ mutual perceptions, identify successful cooperation strategies, as well as sources of tension, explore the overall political culture of participation and (mis)trust of the broader public and how that affects civil society. The methodology consists of secondary data analysis, case studies of social mobilisation, focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. The novelty of the study is that it will combine ‘NGO oriented’ and ‘social-movement’ oriented approaches to civil society.

This report lays out the theoretical framework of the study and presents some of the findings of the first year of research, based on secondary data analysis of Armenian political culture, in which civic activism is situated.

## I. Theoretical Framework

Civil society, generally defined as a sphere of social activities and organisations outside the state, the market and the private sphere that is based on principles of voluntarism, pluralism and tolerance (Anheier 2004; Diamond 1999; Linz and Stepan 1997; Salamon, Sokolowski, and List 2003), is often considered by scholars of democratization as an element that helps the transition to democracy (Geremek 1996; Karatnycky and Ackerman 2005), strengthens democratic consolidation (Carroll and Carroll 2004; Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti 1994; Tusalem 2007) and improves various qualities of established democracies (Dekker, Koopmans, and van den Broek 1997; Moyser and Parry 1997). Involvement in voluntary organizations contributes to development of civic skills (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995), is linked with higher levels of political activism and higher generalized social trust (Dekker and van den Broek 2005; Howard and Gilbert 2008).

Interest in civil society organisations as promoters of democracy can be dated back to

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<sup>1</sup> Not discussed in this report, except shortly in the secondary data analysis section. The final output of the project, envisions a detailed discussion of this issue.

Alexis de Tocqueville (2000 [1864]) who hypothesized that associations are ‘schools of democracy’ where people develop habits of cooperation and public-spiritedness. Almond and Verba (1963) explored the link between voluntary associations and political culture and demonstrated that voluntary associations, among other institutions, shaped participants’ civic skills and attitudes. Since then there has been numerous studies of various roles associations play in democratic (Fung 2003; Skocpol 1999; Warren 2001) and not so democratic (Antlöv, Brinkerhoff, and Rapp 2010; Beissinger 2005; Geremek 1996; Hashemi 1996) societies.

Civil society studies often focus on organizations, but there are other players on the civil society ‘arena’. Not all activities of civil society are channelled through formal institutions nor all take conventional forms. Social movements are also a component of civil society, although their contentious nature and often unconventional repertoire of action make them a specific object of research with an ad hoc scientific literature (Della Porta and Diani 1999; Kriesi 1995; Tarrow 1994; Tilly and Tarrow 2007).

### 1.1. Civic Activism

The notions of civic activism, civic engagement and civic participation are closely interlinked with the concept of civil society. Specifically, participation of citizens in civic activities and events can be regarded as an important feature of a well functioning state, because civic actions make it possible for citizens to reach common goals in efficient and effective ways (Bellah et al. 2007; Scheufele and Shah 2000).

Some authors discuss civic activism as an element of broader civic and political culture of a given society. The seminal work in this field is that of Almond and Verba (1963). The authors define the concept of “civic culture” as that of a mix between participatory and trustful attitudes towards the state. Cultural approach is also adopted by Inglehart (1997) who links increased citizen participation in mass public activities with growth of post-modernist values, highlighting that “people power has become an unprecedentedly important factor in politics” (Inglehart 1997, 212).

In contrast to the above-mentioned authors, Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas (2001) have used structural approach to analyze the levels and types of civic engagement in various countries, distinguishing among liberal, non-liberal, corporate and non-corporate states. The authors have concluded that polity characteristics strongly influence not only the levels but also the types of civic activism; liberal states enable their citizens to be strong agents in the policy-making processes and actual implementation (Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas 2001).

Scholars have examined links between civic activism and **social capital**, which, it is often argued, is one of the most important features of well-functioning democracy (Putnam 2000; Stolle 1998). Putnam connects the decline of American citizens’ involvement in civic activities and voluntary associations with decline of social capital defined as “features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam 1995, 2; Putnam 2000). Stolle (1998) analyzes correlation between trust and involvement of citizens of Germany and Sweden in voluntary organizations. Noting that the associations with diverse character and membership attract more

trusting people, the study highlights the selection bias in general: citizens joining voluntary associations are generally more trustful compared to people who do not do so (Stolle 1998, Stolle and Hooghe 2004).

Uslaner and Brown (2005) also note the strong relationship between trust and civic participation. However, the authors highlight the role of economic inequality, noting that wealthy and more educated people are more engaged in civic activities. Alex-Assensoh (2006) also explains differences in levels of civic participation among various groups by different levels of education and income. The author emphasizes the importance of civic education, which should ideally start from school. Likewise Nie, Junn and Stehlik-Barry (1996) note that with increased levels of education, citizen participation in political and public activities increases. Noting that civic participation is the cornerstone of democracy, Callahan (2007) also argues that civic participation is not representative of the society at large, since it requires systematic and regular knowledge. The acquisition of necessary knowledge requires time and other resources many people simply do not have. In the United States the immigrants, poor and less educated people are not generally engaged in civic activities (Alex-Assensoh 2005).

A reciprocal relationship between civic activism and **volunteerism** is analyzed by a number of authors. Flanagan (2004) examines the notion and practical sides of volunteerism in the context of political socialization and civic activism. The author analyzes volunteerism within the youth, noting that the characteristics that are necessary for development of a democratic citizen are shaped during voluntary school extracurricular activities. Similarly, Wilson and Musick (1997) note that volunteering improves peoples' civic skills making their later civic and political participation more efficient.

Verba (1967) analyzes democratic participation noting that people's participation is shaped and stimulated through certain channels and structures. These include participation in the activities of non-governmental organizations and voluntary associations. Most of the channels that the author indicates embrace volunteerism. Non-governmental organizations, and citizens involved in them, make efforts to influence policies. Thus volunteerism is linked to political participation of people (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Analyzing volunteering of citizens of Sweden, Teorell (2003) also notes that volunteerism positively affects peoples' civic attitude and political behavior.

The afore-mentioned arguments of positive impact of volunteering and civic activism on political participation are questioned by Theiss-Morse and Hibbing (2005) who, based on empirical data, insist that civic activism in any age and of any type does not necessarily bring to wider and more competent political participation. They argue that volunteering citizens generally join homogenous groups, which often take forms of community entertainment, and have little effect on the quality of democracy (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Theiss-Morse and Hibbing 2005). Uslaner and Dekker (2003) note that many organizations are not based on democratic values and are not democratically structured.

### **1.1.1. Youth Engagement**

Though many studies give general overview of citizen participation and its types, there are studies that distinguish the levels of participation among different age sectors. Highlighting the important effect of citizen participation that largely affects the quality of democracy, Zukin, Keeter et al. (2006) compare the level and patterns of political versus civic activism. The authors note that younger citizens are less active in political participation, whereas they exhibit high levels of engagement in civic activities (Zukin, Keeter et al. 2006). Similarly, another multidisciplinary research done in the sphere of civic activism reiterates that youth “has repeatedly demonstrated an enormous capacity for civic leadership and participation” (Sherrod, Torney-Purta, and Flanagan 2010, 2). The outstanding examples that are brought forward by the authors are widespread activities of young citizens of Tunisia and Egypt. Their role is highlighted in mobilization of wide circles of population aimed at bringing change in political and cultural areas of their respective countries. Besides, engagement in voluntary associations or civic activities in young age results in higher level of political activism afterwards. Specifically there are more chances that people; mainly adults would be politically active if they were actively engaged in civic activities (McFarland and Thomas 2006; Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996).

### **1.1.2. Traditional Mass Media and the Rise of Social Media: Impact on Civic Activism**

Various studies highlight the mobilizing role of mass communication media when discussing civic activism. Hoffman and Thomson (2009) emphasize the essential role of TV shows on the levels of civic participation of especially young citizens. In this regard, the content of media should be differentiated: the impact of informational media resources has a positive effect on civic participation, whereas other forms of media like reality shows or TV movies have largely negative effects (Wellman et al. 2001). Likewise, Uslaner and Brown (2005) note that people who spend more time watching television are less likely to be engaged in civic activities .

Gil de Zuniga, Jung and Valenzuela (2012) analyze the impact of social media networks on civic participation, demonstrating that the use of social networks positively affects civic participation, defined as voluntary activities for non-political organization, involvement in charity-raising events and other activities that derive from social values (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela 2012). Another study has correlated the relationship between Facebook usage and social capital, noting that social media improves connection among people who benefit from the academic, community or professional networks (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2007). Valenzuela, Park, and Kee (2009) also argue that Facebook usage promotes peoples’ engagement in civic activities, increases social trust, life satisfaction, self-esteem and even political participation.

The Arab Spring has highlighted the importance of social media, and drew researchers’ attention to Facebook and Twitter (Breuer 2012; Tufekci and Wilson 2012; Eltantawy and Wiest 2011). Some authors approach social networks as a tool for change, especially a political change (Raouf et al. 2013) and the one for empowering ordinary people worldwide to have a public voice (Kirkpatrick 2011). Internet has a positive effect on civic engagement and the social media

is able to facilitate collective action (Yang 2003). Some authors, on the contrary, do not consider social media as significant for movements' success, arguing that activists owe their achievements mostly to the traditional means of protests; social media is good in framing the protest, not in organising it (Metwalli 2010; Theocharis 2011; Tusa 2013; Valenzuela, Arriagada, and Scherman 2012).

Some studies demonstrate that social networking enhances likelihood of citizen engagement in politics (Lake and Huckfeldt 1998) and impacts organisational membership and protest attendance (Schwarz 2012). Overall the importance of internet has been framed as helping to build 'bridging' capital (Kavanaugh et al. 2005) which, in its turn, helps consolidating cooperative mutual engagement and promotes collective action (Granovetter 1973; Putnam 2000). There is also some evidence of the contrary process: some authors suggest that while usage of communication channels is on the rise, it narrows people's mobilising potential and makes them lose contact with their social environment (Nie and Erbring 2000; Van Laer 2010).

## **II. Armenian Civil Society**

Armenian civil society after 20 years of post-communist development is a curious mix of achievements and failures. The overall assessment of Armenian civil society depicts it as partially developed, with no major upward or downward trends (Habdank-Kolaczowska, Machalek, and Walker 2012; USAID 2012). It has a relatively strong level of organization but low civic engagement and weak impact (Hakobyan et al. 2010). The Armenian NGO sector is described as donor driven (Blue and Ghazaryan 2004) to the extent of becoming artificial (Ishkanian 2008). Public trust towards NGOs is low (Paturyan and Gevorgyan 2014a). There have also been studies highlighting positive aspects of Armenian civil society, such as high levels of trust in small rural communities (Babajanian 2008) and high potential for informal volunteering (Hakobyan and Tadevosyan 2010). Overall the NGO sector of civil society can be described as fairly institutionalized but detached from the broader public. In that sense Armenian civil society still suffers from the typical post-communist "weakness" (Howard 2003).

The NGO sector of the Armenian civil society today can be characterized as fairly institutionalized but detached from the broader public. The first part (institutionalization) is a comparatively new development, while the second part (detachment from the public) has plagued Armenian civil society for almost two decades. It is a typical 'weakness' of a post-communist associational political culture (Howard 2003) which remains unchanged in Armenia.

Focusing on the NGOs as main actors of civil society, our previous research shows that although many new NGOs are being established in Armenia every year, there is a substantial number of NGOs that have accumulated a track record of activities and have achieved a reasonable level of financial and organizational viability. For instance, if ten years ago NGOs were characterized as mostly dependent on a 'strong leader' who was usually the founder, with only a few NGOs experiencing a leadership transition (Blue, Payton, and Kharatyan 2001), the recent organizational survey conducted by TCPA shows that 75% of NGOs surveyed have undergone at least one change of presidents. A number of other variables (internal NGO

governing structures, number of staff and volunteers, fundraising activities, public outreach and so on) suggest that we can speak of much more institutionalized and stable NGO sector as compared to twenty and even ten years ago. Thus, in terms of organizational structures, there clearly is development of civil society (Paturyan and Gevorgyan 2014b).

However, when placing these organizations in a broader context of public engagement the picture is discouraging. Public trust towards NGOs is low (Paturyan and Gevorgyan 2014a) and decreasing: according to Caucasus Barometer the percentage of those who trust NGOs has remained almost unchanged (from 19% in 2012 to 18% in 2013, which is a change within the margin of error) but the percentage of those who distrust NGOs has increased from 28% in 2012 to 36% in 2013. In terms of membership, Armenian civil society still suffers heavily from the post-communist dislike of formal associational life. The most recent World Values Survey data (2011 for Armenia) show negligibly low membership in various voluntary associations, which has actually declined since 1997 when the previous WVS was conducted in Armenia. Thus, in terms of public attitude and involvement, there is a striking lack of development, and one could even speak of a slight regress in the most recent years.

In addition to public mistrust and disengagement, Armenian NGO sector faces a set of problems caused by an initial rapid donor-driven development of the NGOs after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The manifold challenges of regime transitions, accompanied with an economic collapse, created a demand for social action, while generous international donor support boosted the 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 developmental 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.

Joining associations is one element of civic political culture (Almond and Verba 1963). If that element has remained unchanged in Armenia, it is important to broaden the study by exploring other elements of civic culture such as generalized social trust, conventional (voting) and unconventional (demonstrations, petitions, boycotts) forms of participation. This would provide a better understanding of the overall environment in which civil society functions in Armenia and how that environment is different from that of early and mid-90s.

## **2.1. Civic Initiatives**

While NGOs are an important component of civil society, they are by no means the only 'players' on the 'arena' between the government, the market and the private sphere that is civil society (Linz and Stepan 1997). In fact an important new development in the realm of Armenian civil society is the relatively recent rise of a new type of activities and organizational structures called 'civic initiatives.' The term is a self-description used by a variety of issue-oriented loosely horizontally structured groups of individual activists that unite around a common often very specific cause (such as a prevention of construction in a public park, preservation of a architecturally valuable building set to be demolished, protests against a new mine under

construction and so on). These new forms of civic participation have emerged in 2008, have registered a number of victories since then (Ishkanian et al. 2013), and are by now an important and highly visible element of Armenian civil society to be seriously reckoned with.

Among most populous recent civic initiative was a series of protests against an unpopular pension reform. As a result, the implementation of the reform has been postponed for at least half a year. Additionally the Prime Minister resigned and the government was re-shuffled, although officially the resignation of the Prime-Minister was caused by other, unexplained reasons. The most recent case of public activism was a protest against electricity price hike, mostly referred to in the English-speaking media as ‘Electric Yerevan’, after its twitter hash tag, although the protests spread beyond the capital. In June 2015 thousands of people took to the streets in a non-stop two weeks protests and sit-ins that blocked one of the capital’s main streets, several hundred meters from the Presidential residence and the National Assembly.

With the exception of these two, civic initiatives are mostly 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. While some of these civic initiatives are small in numbers, they do resemble social movements and can be analyzed as such.

### **III. Methodology**

The goal of the research is to study the interplay between the NGOs, as the older elements of Armenian civil society, and the civic initiatives led by activists as the new elements. The project aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ.1: How do NGOs and activists perceive each other?

RQ.2: How do NGOs and activists interact?

RQ.3: How are NGOs and activists influenced by the overall political culture in the country?<sup>2</sup>

The research project combines quantitative and qualitative data analysis, drawing on existing data, as well as collecting and analysing primary data. The study consists of the following components: secondary data analysis, case studies of civic initiative campaigns and focus group discussions.

#### **3.1. Secondary Data Analysis**

In terms of available survey data, this research uses data from the following surveys: the World Values Survey (third wave 1995-1998 and sixth wave 2010-2014); the Caucasus Barometer (2008-2013); Alternative Resources in Media 2011 and 2013; and the CIVICUS Civil Society

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<sup>2</sup> This RQ is the focus of the paper. The other two RQs are listed to give the reader an overview of the general project. All RQs will be addressed in the final manuscript.

Index survey 2014. All these surveys were based on nationwide representative samples of adult residents of the Republic of Armenia.<sup>3</sup>

The World Values Survey (WVS) is a global research project that includes a broad range of socio-cultural and political topics. The survey is conducted periodically by local survey organisations or scholarly teams in close cooperation with and under the supervision of the WVS Association.<sup>4</sup> The analysis in this paper is based on data from the third (1995-1998) and the sixth (2010-2014) waves of WVS because these are the only two waves that included Armenia. The specific dates of the WVS in Armenia were 1997 for the third wave and 2011 for the sixth wave.

The Caucasus Barometer (CB) is an annual nationwide representative survey that has been conducted in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia by the Caucasus Research Resources Centres since 2008. Two nationwide representative surveys conducted by CRRC-Armenia in 2011 and 2013 called Alternative Resources in Media (ARMedia), focus specifically on media consumption patterns and media perceptions.<sup>5</sup>

The CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI) is a participatory action-research project assessing the state of civil society in countries around the world. The CSI is initiated and implemented by local partner organisations, in partnership with the CIVICUS World Alliance for Citizen Participation.<sup>6</sup> The CSI consists of a number of assessment tools, including a nationwide representative population survey. Counterpart International Armenia was the local implementing partner of the survey. The database was requested directly from Counterpart.

### 3.2. Other Methods Used

In addition to relying on secondary data, the research project focuses on case studies of selected civic initiatives with an aim of creating a detailed ‘thick description’ of main actors, strategies, NGO involvement, interaction patterns and use of social media. Case studies also help inform the third component of the study: qualitative analysis of activists’ perceptions. Case studies help identify key interviewees and focus group participants, as well as provide insights into topics and questions for subsequent discussions

The qualitative component of the study consists of eight to ten focus group discussions (currently in progress) with civic activists, NGO staff and general public (in the capital and in the regions) to explore mutual perceptions, common grounds and sources of tension. Additionally, 20 to 30 semi-structured interviews with NGO leaders and activists, both in the capital and in the regions are currently underway. Generated qualitative data is analyzed with assistance of MAXQDA software.

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<sup>3</sup> ARMedia included younger respondents of 15+, WVS has 17+ respondents.

<sup>4</sup> More information about WVS is available at: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>

<sup>5</sup> More information about CRRC and the CB is available at: <http://www.crrccenters.org>. Information about CRRC-Armenia and the ARMedia study is available at: <http://www.crrc.am>

<sup>6</sup> More information is available at: <http://civicus.org/index.php/en/>

## **IV. Armenian Public Attitudes and Political Culture: Setting the Stage**

Civic activism takes place against the general backdrop of Armenian political culture, which suffers from a post-communist syndrome of disengagement and cynicism towards the public sphere. Public values and opinions, however, are not static, and not necessarily shared by various socio-economic and demographic groups, present in the Armenian society. In order to accurately assess the odds of increased participation in social movements and other forms of non-conventional political participation, a more detailed analysis of trends and patterns of Armenian political culture is necessary. This section of the report looks at public opinion survey data (World Values Survey 1997 and 2011, Caucasus Barometer 2008-2013 and other nationwide representative surveys) to examine social and political participation (both actual and potential) among the Armenian population, with a focus on age cohorts, gender differences, and other socio-demographic variables. It also highlights the use of social media by various groups. The aim of the analysis is to place the new Armenian social movements in the context of the political culture they operate in.

Armenian civic and political life has gone through several phases: from dramatic and unprecedented levels of mobilisation of late 1980s and early 1990s to widespread cynicism and disengagement around the turn of the century. Some argue that civic and political participation is slowly recovering from a recession, citing 2008 presidential elections as a sign of relatively successful social mobilisation (though unsuccessful attempt at political leadership change).

We also contrast data on various types of political and civic participation in Armenia with data on use of internet and social media. The aim is to juxtapose typical characteristics of a social media user and a potential activist, to see to what extent these two groups overlap.

### **4.1. Descriptive Analysis of Survey Data**

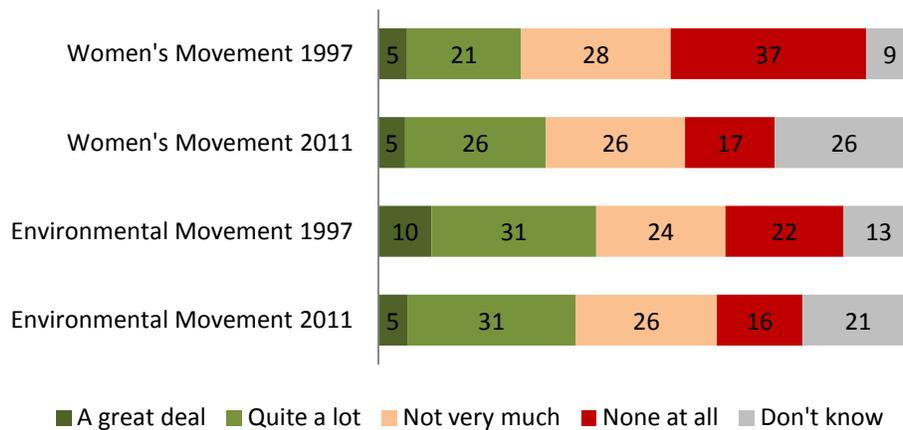
The first part of the analysis presents descriptive data on civic and political activism in Armenia, noting changes over time whenever possible. The purpose is to clarify the overall environment in which civic activism takes place. We assess overall culture of civic participation by looking at overall public perception of social movements, membership in various formal and informal groups and organisations, and volunteering. We then discuss political participation, because civic activism is very often not the end goal but a tool for bringing change, which, at the end of the day, is a political process, often aided by political activism. We look at overall interest in politics, conventional and non-conventional forms of political participation, the latter being the most important, since they are often utilized by civic activists. The third part of the descriptive analysis looks at the media landscape, and particularly at the use of social media as a source of information. The purpose is to assess the potential outreach of social media, which is heavily used by Armenian civic initiatives to mobilise support and inform the public.

#### **4.1.1. Civic Participation and Civic Activism**

First, let us consider the overall public attitude towards civic activism. WVS survey has data on levels of confidence towards two types of social movements: environmental movement and women's movement. For both of those movements there are more negative than positive

opinions: in 2011, 31% say they have either ‘great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of confidence in women’s movements as compared to 41% saying either ‘not very much’ or ‘not at all.’ For the environmental movement the percentage of positive vs. negative answers were 36% and 42%, respectively. The good news, however, is that WVS data shows a clear increase in confidence towards women’s movement: the mean, measured on the scale from 1 ‘a great deal’ to 4 ‘none at all’ has changed from 3.05 in 1997 to 2.74 in 2011 (note that higher numbers mean less confidence, due to the way the responses are coded). Judged by the simple measure of the mean level of confidence, environmental movement has not gained in the eyes of the general public. Nonetheless, when examining the response categories in more detail, a slight shift in attitudes is noticeable: fewer people hold strong opinions (either on the positive or on the negative side), while the percentage of those undecided has increased, as depicted in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Confidence in social movements (WVS, %)**



Membership in various associations in Armenia remains dismally small and has even decreased compared to 1997: 7% of the population was active in at least one organisation in 2011 as compared to 17% in 1997. Art, music and educational organisations have membership of 1.5% of the population in 2011, other types of organisations have even lower numbers (see Paturyan and Gevorgyan 2014b, 58 for the details based on WVS data). According to a survey conducted within the framework of CIVICUS Civil Society Index Rapid Assessment in Armenia in 2014, 2.4% of the population reported being a member of an informal civic group or a movement. Unfortunately no earlier data on participation in informal civic groups are available.

Unlike formal membership in associations, some informal types of civic engagement in the community seem to be on the rise in Armenia. Volunteering, particularly informal volunteering has increased in the recent years: according to CB data 31% of the Armenian population reported doing voluntary work in 2013 as compared to 22% in 2011.

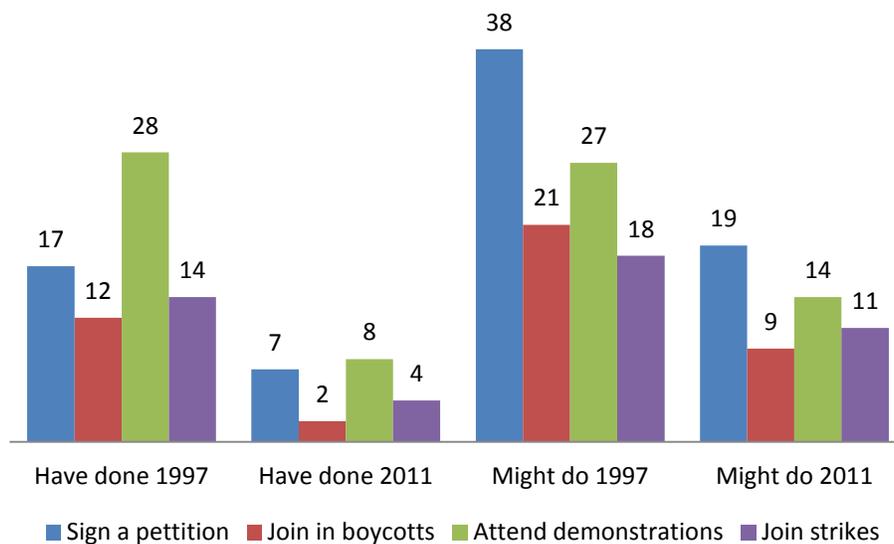
#### **4.1.2. Political Participation**

According to WVS data most Armenians are not interested in politics: 65% said they are either ‘not very’ or ‘not at all’ interested as compared to 35% who are either ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’

interested. Moreover, people today are a lot less interested in politics than they were in the early years of the newly independent Republic of Armenia: in 1997 13% stated that they are ‘not at all’ interested in politics while in 2011 the number of those completely disinterested had reached 35%.<sup>7</sup> While voter turnout remains relatively stable around 61% (International Foundation for Electoral Systems 2015) membership in political parties and labour unions remains dismal: 2.1% and 0.6% respectively as recorded by WVS.

Non-conventional political participation in Armenia today is lower than in mid-1990s. For all the four types of non-conventional political actions measured in WVS (signing a petition, joining in boycotts, attending demonstrations and joining strikes)<sup>8</sup> the percentages of both those who reported having done it and those who said they might do it have declined from 1997 to 2011, as evident from Figure 2 below.

**Figure 2: Political activism in Armenia (WVS, %)**



However, if we consider a more recent period in more detail, there is a reason to believe that there might be an increase in non-conventional political participation. According to CB data, the percentage of those who believe people should participate in protest actions has increased over the course of the past few years from 59% in 2008 to 70% in 2013.

#### 4.1.3. Media Landscape, Use of Social Media

Since civic activism often relies on internet and particularly on social media to spread information, mobilise support and organise some of its activities, it is important to understand

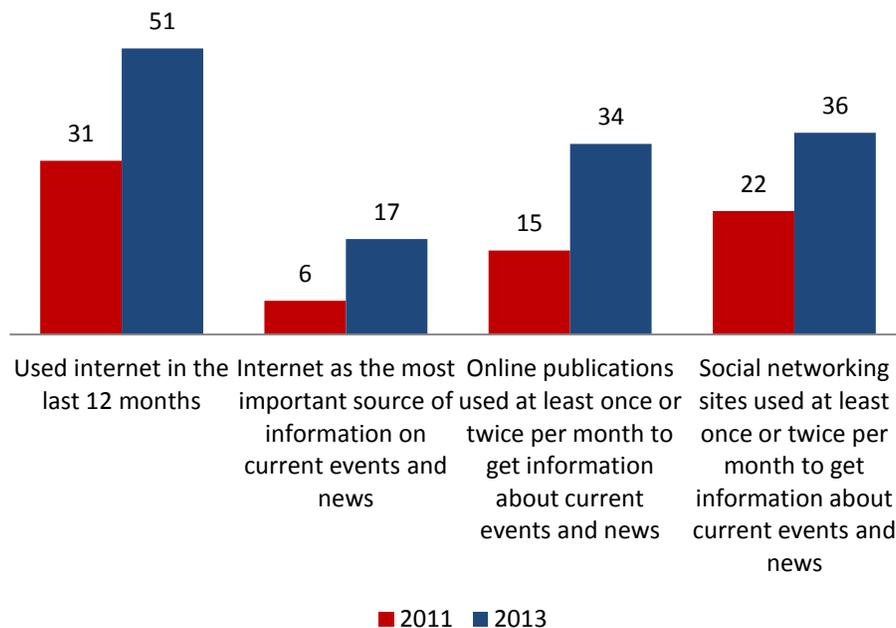
<sup>7</sup> The mean score for this question on a scale from 1 ‘very interested’ to 4 ‘not at all interested’ has changed from 2.47 in 1997 to 2.93 in 2011. Note that higher score means lower interest in politics.

<sup>8</sup> There are minor discrepancies in the wording of questions. In 1997 respondents were asked if they ever attended a lawful demonstration, while in 2011 it was ‘peaceful’ demonstration. In 1997 they were asked about ‘unofficial strikes’ while the word ‘unofficial’ was omitted in 2011.

Armenian online media landscape and its recent trends. ARMedia surveys provide a wealth of data in that respect.

The surveys show that the role of TV as an information source has somewhat diminished recently: 79% of people in 2013, as compared to 90% in 2011 name it as ‘the most important source of information on current events and news’. The importance of Internet as a source of information has grown from 6% in 2011 to 17% in 2013. In general, Internet usage has increased from 31% of those saying they have ‘used internet in the last 12 months’ to 51% reporting having done so. Online publications are used at least once or twice per month ‘to get information about current events and news’ by 34% of the population in 2013 as compared to 15% of the population in 2011. Use of social networking sites for the similar purpose has increased from 22% in 2011 to 36% in 2013. As Figure 3 below illustrates, the importance of internet in general, and social networking sites in particular has grown. Trust towards these alternative sources of information has increased as well. On a four point scale (where one means no trust at all and four means ‘trust very much’) online media sources received an average score of 2.63 in 2011 and 2.73 in 2013. Trust towards social networking sites has increased slightly: from average 2.54 in 2011 to 2.59 in 2013.

**Figure 3: Increased importance of internet as an information source (ARMedia, %)**



Odnoklassniki remains the most popular social networking site (with 17% and 23% of the population using it in 2011 and 2013, respectively), but Facebook is catching up: in 2011 only 3% of the population reported having a page or a public profile, while in 2013 the number grew to 12%. Among social network users the percentage of those who use it for sharing political

and/or social news has increased from 16% in 2011 to 21% in 2013 (3.4% and 7.5% of the general population, respectively).

## 4.2. Inferential Analysis: Are Online Media Users same as Activists?

Descriptive data analysis in the previous section of the paper helps us understand the overall context in which civic initiatives operate in Armenia today and provides some comparison with recent and more remote past. This section looks at some variables in more detail. In particular, our goal was to understand who is more likely to partake in activism and to what extent potential activists are being targeted through social network information campaigns. Unfortunately, we have no single database that would contain information both on use of social media and on activism, so we are unable to directly compare these two elements. ARMedia has data on use of social networks but no data on activism, while WVS has data on activism but not data on use of social networks. To enable us to piece these two bits of information together, we project those onto standard variables that can be compared. We used basic socio-demographic variables: age, gender, education and income to depict a ‘typical Armenian social network user’ and compare that socio-demographic portrait with a ‘typical Armenian political activist’ to see whether there is a match between these two groups. Settlement type is included in the analysis of internet use but not in the analysis of activism, because WVS does not have a comparable variable.

### 4.2.1. On the Receiving End of Online Information

As we have demonstrated in the descriptive section of the analysis, internet usage is on the rise in Armenia. Assuming that civic initiatives rely on internet, and particularly on social media, to spread information about their activities and mobilise support, who are the people on the receiving end of civic initiatives’ information campaigns? To understand that, we ran a number of statistical tests with the standard socio-demographic variables (age, gender, education, income and settlement type) and four of the variables described above: use of internet, trust towards online information sources (online publications and social networking sites in particular), and frequency of use of social networking sites to gain information about current events and news. We conducted tests for both years 2011 and 2013. Unless specified otherwise, we report results of statistical tests for the year 2013 only, while discussing a pattern that applies to both years, not to clog the narrative with too many numbers.

**Age:** Younger people use internet more. The average age of those who report using internet in the past 12 months is 38 as compared to the average age of 56 for non-users for the year 2013; this difference is statistically significant.<sup>9</sup> Almost one third (27%) of those who reported having used Internet in the past 12 months, are between 25 and 34 years old; another 23% come from the age cohort of 15-24. Thus, people up to 34 years old make up half of the internet users for the year 2013. There is a statistically significant correlation between age on one hand and trust both towards online media<sup>10</sup> and towards social networks<sup>11</sup> as sources of

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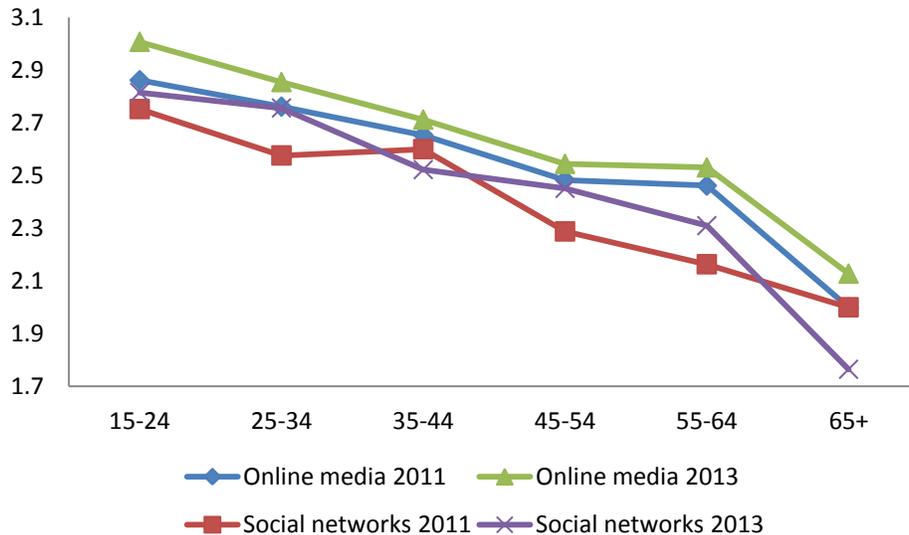
<sup>9</sup> T-test:  $t(1397) = -20.997$ ,  $p < 0.001$  for year 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Pearson’s correlation:  $r = -0.274$ ,  $N = 677$ ,  $p < 0.001$  for year 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Pearson’s correlation:  $r = -0.283$ ,  $N = 647$ ,  $p < 0.001$  for year 2013.

information: younger people are more trustful. The pattern is very clear and runs steadily through age cohorts, as depicted in Figure 4. Younger people are also more frequent users of social networking sites as a source to get information about current events.<sup>12</sup>

**Figure 4: Average trust towards online information sources by age cohorts (ARMedia, mean on the scale from 1 'don't trust at all' to 4 'trust very much')**



**Gender** has no influence of the likelihood to have used internet in the past 12 months, neither does it influence trust towards online media and social networks. Interestingly, in 2011 males reported using social networking sites as a source of information for current events and news more frequently than females, with the difference being statistically significant.<sup>13</sup> By year 2013 however that discrepancy between genders has disappeared: females use social networking sites as a source of information as frequently as males.

**Education** influences the usage of Internet. Those who reported having used the Internet in the last 12 months have higher education.<sup>14</sup> For the year 2011 those more educated tend to be more trustful of online media<sup>15</sup>, but the relationship disappears in 2013. Education does not seem to affect levels of trust towards social networks, but it does affect the frequency of using those as a source of information about current events and news: the higher the education, the more frequently the respondent will use social networking sites as a source of information.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Pearson's correlation:  $r = 0.527$ ,  $N = 1383$ ,  $p < 0.001$  for year 2013.

<sup>13</sup> T-test:  $t(1375) = -2.106$ ,  $p < 0.05$  for year 2011.

<sup>14</sup> T-test:  $t(1398) = 13.896$ ,  $p < 0.001$  for year 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Pearson's correlation:  $r = 0.128$ ,  $N = 468$ ,  $p < 0.005$  for year 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Pearson's correlation:  $r = -0.272$ ,  $N = 1384$ ,  $p < 0.001$  for year 2013.

**Income:** Respondents from households, which perceive themselves to be relatively better off,<sup>17</sup> are also more likely to report having used internet in the last 12 months.<sup>18</sup> They also report higher levels of trust towards online media<sup>19</sup> and social networks,<sup>20</sup> and are more frequent users of social networking sites as a source of information about current events and news.<sup>21</sup>

**Settlement type:** Majority of people in Yerevan (58%) report having used Internet in the past 12 months, while this is not the case in other urban settlements and rural areas, where 45% and 36%, respectively reported doing so. The difference is statistically significant.<sup>22</sup> People in Yerevan are less trustful of online media and social networks, compared to residents of rural areas,<sup>23</sup> although they use social networking sites more frequently to get information about current events and news.<sup>24</sup>

#### 4.2.2. Actual and Potential Activists

Civic initiatives need popular support. If they want to attract more people to their cause, it is logical to target people that are more inclined towards taking political action. We use WVS data on four types of non-conventional political participation, discussed above (petitions, boycotts, demonstrations and strikes) as measurements of political activism. To simplify the analysis, we recalculated original variables into new dummy variables, grouping ‘have done’ and ‘might do’ response categories together thus creating a simple dichotomy between people who said they would never engage in the type of political activity mentioned and those who are willing or have already done so.

We look at each of the four types of political actions, assessing whether age, gender, education and income influence the likelihood of participation. We also note whether the picture in 2011 is different from that in 1997. Table 1 below summarizes the results of T-Test and Chi-square analysis. Only statistically significant results are reported.

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<sup>17</sup> The survey does not include questions on respondent or household income levels. Instead the following question was used to estimate relative well-being of respondents: ‘Please look at this card and tell me the answer which best reflects the current financial situation of your family/household? Money is not enough for food, Money is enough for the food, but not for clothes, Money is enough for food and clothes, but it is not enough for buying expensive things such as a TV and washing machine, We can afford some expensive goods (e.g., TV set or washing machine), We can afford expensive goods, to have summer vacation, to buy a car, but we cannot buy an apartment, We can buy even an apartment’.

<sup>18</sup> T-test:  $t(1373) = 14.289$ ,  $p < 0.001$  for year 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Pearson’s  $r = 0.212$ ,  $N = 661$ ,  $p < 0.001$  for year 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Pearson’s  $r = 0.163$ ,  $N = 629$ ,  $p < 0.001$  for year 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Pearson’s correlation:  $r = -0.364$ ,  $N = 1359$ ,  $p < 0.001$  for year 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Chi-Square:  $X^2 = 46.946$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.001$  for year 2013.

<sup>23</sup> ANOVA:  $F(2, 675) = 3.684$ ,  $p < 0.05$  for online media variable and  $F(2, 645) = 3.906$ ,  $p < 0.05$  for social networks variable for year 2013.

<sup>24</sup> ANOVA:  $F(2, 1381) = 19.400$ ,  $p < 0.001$  for year 2013.

**Table 1: Non-conventional political participation by socio-demographic variables, WVS**

	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Income</b>
<b>Petition</b>	-	-	2011: more educated are more likely to participate	1997: better-off are less likely to participate
<b>Boycott</b>	1997: younger are more likely to participate	1997 and 2011: men are more likely to participate	1997 and 2011: more educated are more likely to participate	1997: better-off are less likely to participate
<b>Demonstration</b>	1997: younger are more likely to participate	1997: men are more likely to participate	1997 and 2011: more educated are more likely to participate	1997: better-off are less likely to participate
<b>Strike</b>	1997: younger are more likely to participate	1997: men are more likely to participate	1997 and 2011: more educated are more likely to participate	1997: better-off are less likely to participate

It is clear that in 1997 the distinction between those willing and unwilling to participate in non-conventional political activities was more pronounced: except petitions (for which age, gender and education did not matter) participants were likely to be younger more educated less earning males. In 2011 the differences have all but disappeared, with the exception of education, which matters for all four types of political participation now. Age and income do not matter anymore, gender matters only for participation in boycotts: men are more likely to do so.

Thus, education is the most important predictor of activism. In that sense there is a good match between the ‘portrait’ of an activist and a ‘portrait’ of a typical internet and social networks user: more educated use internet more often and turn to social networks to get information more often. Use of social networks as a tool to spread information and attract potential activist seems to be a good strategy to target those most likely to answer the call. In terms of other socio-demographic variables there is less of a match. For instance, we found that younger people use internet and social networking sites as a source of information more often. But older people are just as likely to participate in demonstration as younger people. Hence, information spread through social networks misses out some potential joiners of older age. Same can be said about the income: better-off are more likely to be on the receiving end of internet spread information, but worse-off are just as likely to partake in various types of activism. Our analysis shows that the ‘right’ people to target in an attempt to mobilise support are very heterogeneous, while internet is only targeting a part of those.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

The picture of Armenian political culture, depicted by the survey data discussed in this paper is not very encouraging for emerging civic initiatives, but there are silver linings as well. Factors that are potentially negative include low public confidence in social movements, extremely low

membership in formal and informal organisations, and public attitude towards politics and political participation. People are disinterested in politics, even more so than in the early years of the newly independent Republic of Armenia. Given that attitude, it is probably a clever tactics of various Armenian civic initiatives to frame their activities as strictly non-political.

Non-conventional political participation in 2011 is less common than in 1997, but there is more heterogeneity in terms of participants: in 1997 young educated males with lower incomes were more likely to sign petitions and partake in boycotts, demonstrations and strikes. In 2011 age, gender and income levels lose their predictive power. Education still matters: the higher the education, the higher is the likelihood of participation.

Among good news for civic activism is the fact that confidence in social movements has increased since mid-1990s. Volunteering is on the rise. TV remains the main information source, but internet is spreading fast. One third of the population uses social networking sites as sources of information about social and political events, making social networks a good venue for civic mobilisation. Drawing parallels between social media users and potential activists, we can see that social media reaches younger, more educated and financially better-off people, while potential activists come from all walks of life. Thus, if civic initiatives aim to mobilise larger public support, the organisers need to think how to reach those potential participants who are not users of social networks, or who are distrustful of them.

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 Armenian civil society is no more simply about NGOs, though NGOs unquestionably remain a very important component of civil society. 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.

Each of these two elements of civil society: the NGOs and the activist groups, have their 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 unfavorable 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.

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