

Armenian NGOs and Civic Activists: Seeing Eye to Eye?

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Abstract

Armenian civil society today is unquestionably more complex than ten or even five years ago. Ten years ago civil society in Armenia by and large meant NGOs. Not so today. Since 2007 a new and increasingly visible actor has entered the stage: youth-driven, social media-powered, issue-specific civic activism is a new form of protest and political participation. The so-called ‘civic initiatives’ are loosely organised miniature social movements, mostly confined to Yerevan, but gradually gaining visibility. There have been more than 30 such initiatives in Armenia since 2007, with roughly one-quarter of those resulting in a victory for the activists. It remains to be seen whether and to what extent these movements will grow in scope.

The emergence of this new component of civil society creates some new internal dynamics in the field of civil society, producing new patterns of operation, networking and mobilizing. Both NGOs and the new mini social movements have their distinct modes of functioning, strengths and weaknesses. There are both cooperation and tensions between the ‘old’ NGO sector and the ‘new’ civic activism elements of the Armenian civil society.

The paper examines patterns of interaction and mutual perceptions of NGOs and civic activists, based on five case studies of activist campaigns, 30 semi-structured interviews and ten focus group discussions with activists and NGO leaders. The paper seeks to address the following research questions: (1) how do NGOs and civic activists perceive each other? (2) how do they cooperate?

Introduction

There is an inherent irony in the scholarship of post-communist civil society. The very concept of civil society was popularized in the late 1980s, referring to social movements that challenged Eastern European communist regimes (Bernhard 1996; Cohen and Arato 1994; Geremek 1996). After the collapse of communism, those social movements, initially depicted as THE civil society, lost momentum; NGOs came to replace them. International donors rushed in to support the budding post-communist civil society (equated with NGOs) because it was often believed to be one of the cornerstones of a young democracy. Yet NGO-nised civil society did not live up to high expectations. A decade into post-communism, it became a target of criticism: diagnosed as “weak” and shunned by broader public (Howard 2003). Two decades into post-communism, spontaneous social organization is re-emerging and reclaiming its place in civil society.

Armenia is an example of those phases of post-communist development of civil society. It witnessed dramatic mass mobilization in the late 1980s, an equally dramatic public withdrawal in mid-1990s, paralleled with an artificial growth of NGO sector, and, recently, a rise of spontaneous activism. Ten years ago, civil society in Armenia mainly meant NGOs. Since 2007, a new actor has entered the stage: youth-driven, social media-powered, issue-specific civic activism is a new form of protest and political participation. The emergence of this novel component of civil society changes the internal dynamics in the field of civil society, producing new patterns of operation,

networking and mobilizing. Both NGOs and the new mini social movements have their distinct modes of functioning, strengths and weaknesses. There is cooperation, but also tensions between the 'old' NGO sector and the 'new' civic activism.

The paper examines patterns of interaction and mutual perceptions of NGOs and civic activists, based on five case studies of activist campaigns, 30 semi-structured interviews and ten focus group discussions with activists and NGO leaders. Our research shows a spectrum of interactions. Interestingly, in all five cases, NGOs had at least some role to play, even though some of the core activists claimed NGOs were not involved at all. NGOs seem always to be in the background; sometimes they even choose that role intentionally. In terms of perceptions, NGOs see civic activism in a positive light and consider it very important. The activists, on the other hand, are cautious of NGOs, single out a few 'good' NGOs while dismissing the rest, or are outright negative about the NGO sector at large.

Literature Review

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). Interest in civil society organizations as promoters of democracy can be dated back to Alexis de Tocqueville (2000 [1864]) who hypothesized that associations are 'schools of democracy' where people develop habits of cooperation and public-spiritedness.

In what is by now classic work, 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. Involvement in voluntary organizations contributes to the 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).

Civil society studies often focus on organizations, but there are other players on the civil society 'arena'. Not all activities of civil society are channeled 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). Although studies of civil society and studies of social movements have been advanced mostly through separate schools of thought, there clearly is an area of overlap. Social movements can be seen as an "integral component" of civil society, or, vice versa, a vibrant associational life of civil society can be seen as a part of a "broader social movement dynamics" (Della Porta and Diani 2011, 69).

In our study, we look at interactions (and sometimes elusive borders) between different forms of associational life within current Armenian civil society. We place our study in the framework of examining post-communist civil society, as a peculiar type with distinct legacy.

Post-communist civil society is a subject of many studies. In late 1980s Eastern Europe experienced unprecedented levels of social mobilization (Bernhard 1993; Geremek 1996). However after the collapse of the Soviet regime, citizens of the newly formed states were distrustful of civil society organizations, and reluctant to join them, relying instead on “bonding” (Putnam 2000) types of social capital, such as friends and relatives networks (Bernhard and Karakoç 2007; Howard 2002; Howard 2003).

Country Context

Armenia is a former Soviet Republic in the South Caucasus, independent since 1991. A tiny landlocked country with an ethnically homogenous population of about three million people, Armenia had a rocky path of re-establishing itself as a nation-state. A rapidly collapsing economy, a devastating earthquake, a conflict with neighboring Azerbaijan, which escalated into a full-scale war, plunged Armenia into what is now referred to as “dark and cold” years of the mid-1990s. Given these conditions, people were not concerned about anything but their daily bread. Although the NGO sector expanded thanks to generous international aid, activism was barely visible.

Gradually, with economic and political situation stabilizing, the non-NGO sector of civil society started to re-emerge. The so-called civic initiatives came into being. These are specific issue-oriented mini-movements, usually with a narrowly defined goal (for example a preservation of a park, opposition to a mine in a pristine forest). They mainly involve individual activists, although some NGOs also take part in activities. These new forms of civic participation have emerged in 2007-2008, have registered a number of victories since then (Ishkanian et al. 2013), and are now an important and highly visible element of Armenian civil society. In addition to small issue-specific initiatives, there have been two highly visible broader protest campaigns: one against upcoming pension reform, another one against electricity price hike (both discussed in this paper)

With the exception of these two, 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. Since 2007 there have been at least 37 such initiatives, 12 of which had at least partial success. The core activists are young educated people; they use social media to organize and to spread information regarding their activities (Bagiyan 2015; Kankanyan 2015).

Methodology

The study aims to answer the following two research questions:

RQ.1: How do NGOs and civic activists interact?

RQ.2: How do NGOs and civic activists perceive each other?

To answer the research questions, we combine case studies of selected civic initiatives with the qualitative method of focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with key participants. The aim of the case studies was to create a detailed ‘thick description’ of main actors, strategies, NGO involvement and interaction patterns. Case studies also helped identify key interviewees and focus group participants.

The following five civic initiatives (in the chronological order of the start year) were selected for the case study:

1. Save Teghut Civic Initiative (thereafter Teghut): 2008 - ongoing
2. Let’s Preserve the Afrikyan Club Building (thereafter Afrikyan): 2014
3. Stop Changes in Maternity Leave Law (thereafter Maternity Leave): 2014
4. Dem Em (I am against): 2013 - ongoing
5. Electric Yerevan: 2015

In selecting the cases of civic activism in Armenia, we aimed at maximizing diversity in terms of scope, issues and outcomes. Teghut case is often considered a landmark: the oldest ongoing environmental camping that continues despite failing to achieve its prime objective, as described below. It is a unique case of persistence in the face of formidable challenges. Afrikyan case exemplifies a short-lived failed initiative, despite employing a variety of creative techniques. Maternity Leave case was a success and a case of clear NGO involvement and support. Dem Em was the largest civic initiative (in terms of people involved) that had made the biggest political splash at the outset of our study. Electric Yerevan happened half a year into the study. It gave us an opportunity to observe firsthand the unfolding events. It quickly overshadowed Dem Em both in terms of people involved and in terms of political resonance. Not to include it would have been a lost opportunity.

Data for each case was collected through analysis of news reports, documents, publications, previous studies, and information available through social media. The understanding of the cases was further enhanced through interviews and focus group discussions with the activists and NGO leaders. It was a two-way process: collecting information on the case helped identify key interviewees, who provided additional insights on the cases and additional important contacts. Eventually, the process of soliciting names reached a saturation point: any name provided was already on the list.

Electric Yerevan is the only case where observation method was utilized. Team members spent at least 30 minutes a day on site at various times of the day. They had general guidelines on what to pay attention to during the observation, but the overall observation approach was kept flexible. Team members were encouraged to engage in casual conversations or join groups. Observers took written notes after the visit; taking notes on site could have been perceived as suspicious by the protestors.

To compliment and enrich the case studies, we conducted ten focus groups and 30 interviews with leaders and members of NGO, civic activists, and skeptical non-activists as representatives of the general public. The fieldwork was not confined to the capital; we conducted some focus group discussions and interviews in the regions as well, particularly in the ‘hot spots’ of activism: the second largest city and a town in the south with a vibrant environmental community. Focus groups and interviews were voice-recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were imported into MAXQDA software. We created an indexing system, taking into consideration both the categories derived from the research questions and themes emerging from the data. The indexes were applied through MAXQDA software, which was further used to enhance the data analysis.

Description of the Cases

Save Teghut Civic Initiative (2008 – now)

What is the issue? Teghut is a forest in the north of Armenia, rich with flora and fauna, including endangered species. In 2001 the Armenian government granted a 25-year exploitation license for what was to become Armenia’s second largest copper-molybdenum mine. Pristine forests covered 82% of the territory allocated for mining; the exploitation of the mine would result in significant loss of forests and toxic waste creation. Activists sounded the alarm and employed a broad repertoire of actions (described below) to no success. The mine already operates, including the tailing dump. Nevertheless, activists do not give up.

Chronology and main developments. Several NGOs and independent activists got involved as early as 2005, mostly by collecting information and raising awareness (Kankanyan 2015). This period is marked by the active involvement of Diaspora Armenians who sent approximately 2,500 letters from different corners of the world to the President of the republic. Despite concerns both inside and outside Armenia, the project moved forward without any changes. Diaspora's involvement gradually weakened and never returned to the levels of 2006. However, early activities paved the way for the emergence of the Save Teghut Civic Initiative in 2008.

The activists moved from information gathering, and awareness raising to a demonstration of discontent and attempts to engage the government. In spring 2009, the activists picketed in front of the government building every day for almost a month. A petition with 5,000 signatures was delivered to country's top leadership.

Starting 2009 court litigation strategy was added to the repertoire. Several NGOs attempted to dispute the legality of the governmental approval of the exploitation of the mine. The attempt failed. The court dismissed the case, arguing that NGOs are not eligible to defend rights of other citizens or communities in court. The NGOs appealed the court decision at a higher level, which started a long chain of judicial decisions, ultimately leading nowhere. Having no success in domestic courts, the Teghut group sought out international expertise, appealing to the Aarhus Convention Committee of the UN Economic Commission for Europe. The Committee ruled that the government of Armenia failed to make its citizens aware of its project, as well as to involve the parties affected into the decision-making process (Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee 2010), giving the activists some reassurance.

In 2011 the project halted, citing the ongoing global economic crisis. The mining company was seeking funding, mainly in banks, hoping to get loans from the Russian Vneshtorgbank (VTB) bank. Activists responded by a change in tactics: protesting outside banks, particularly the VTB Armenia bank and the Yerevan office of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. In the same 2011, the attention of both the activists and the public was diverted to another case of environmental activism: a brief, intense and successful struggle to preserve a scenic Trchkan waterfall from disappearing under a hydropower plant dam. After saving the waterfall, there was "euphoria" among the activists. The victory gave them hope, and they doubled their Teghut efforts (Kankanyan 2015). In January 2015, 200-300 marched towards Teghut. Upon arrival, the activists were confronted by a large group of local residents working for the company, opposing activists and claiming they need the jobs.

In 2013, alternative economic development emerged as a new vector of strategy. The major argument for the opening of the mine was an economic benefit it would bring to local communities and the country in general. To counter that claim, the activists proposed an alternative eco-friendly development strategy. They argued in favor of honey and natural cosmetics business as examples of environmentally sustainable products. To promote their ideas the activists organized several honey fairs in nearby villages in 2013 and 2014. Some families provided paid accommodation for visitors from other cities. Activists advocated developing eco-tourism in the region to create an sustainable alternative source of income.

Mining operations started in Teghut in 2014. There was no change in the initial plan of exploitation of the mine, but the activists continue their struggle.

Current status. In terms of outcome, the initiative is clearly a failure. It failed to achieve its main goal: the prevention of the mine construction. Despite that the initiative is characterized as ongoing, due to continuing activities, and particularly due to the fact that the initiative has reached

a new institutional level: it rents and maintains a small office space in the center of Yerevan. Its www.teghut.am website is well developed and saturated with information. In general, activists continue disseminating information about the mine, contacting the relevant government bodies and providing them with evidence of the damage to the environment and people living near the mine.

Scope and spread. This is the longest civic initiative in Armenia so far. Despite addressing a regional issue, it is spearheaded from Yerevan and found little to no local support in the area affected by the mine. It can be characterized as of moderate scope: 200-300 people participating in a march and 8,000 members of Facebook are good numbers given the Armenian reality, but the initiative is definitely smaller than the two large ones discussed later in this paper.

NGOs engaged extensively and provided substantial support. Some of the most prominent environmental, human rights and anti-corruption NGOs were involved at all stages. NGOs helped sound the alarm, they gathered and presented evidence, appealed to international organizations and tried (unsuccessfully) local court litigation.

Let's Preserve the Afrikyan Club Building (2014)

What is the issue? The 11 Teryan Str. Building in Yerevan was built at the end of the 19th century by a rich Afrikyan family. It has later become known as the “Afrikyan club” building: a gathering and debating place of the town’s intellectuals and the elite. In 1926, the building was taken over by the Soviet security apparatus. One of the most renowned 20th-century Armenian poets Yeghishhe Charents was imprisoned here as an “anti-Soviet element” in 1937 during Stalinist purges. Later the house became an apartment block for 30 families.

In 2014, the place of the building was sold to a construction company, despite the fact that the building was recognized by the government as a place of eminent public interest in 2007. The stones of the building were supposedly earmarked for transferring to a space in the center of Yerevan, where “Old Yerevan” project was to be implemented at some unspecified future point in time.

Chronology and main developments. On June 9, 2014, the initiators of the “Let’s Preserve the Afrikyan Club Building” campaign issued a call to the citizens concerned with the destiny of the building. The statement indicated that similar promises of rebuilding other historic buildings at a new location were not fulfilled so far; there was a real concern that the building would simply disappear. The statement ended with the call to join the initiative, mentioning this as an opportunity to prevent further destruction of Yerevan historic landmarks. Later on the same day, people started to erase the numbers from the stones of the building and pull down the wall made by the constructors. The police arrived and arrested one of the activists.

On June 13, activists were disseminating flowers and flyers to passers-by, explaining why the building was important, and calling people to join the initiative. On June 17, they addressed a letter to the diplomatic missions accredited in Armenia, stating that the government violated the European Convention for the Protection of Architectural Heritage, and asking for assistance. On June 17- 20 the activists organized peaceful rallies in the center of Yerevan, but the attendance was very poor: 30-40 people.

On June 23, the Afrikyan initiative announced that two NGOs filed a lawsuit in the administrative court against the City Hall’s and the government’s decisions regarding the dismantling of the building.

On June 24, a famous Armenian piano player gave a performance in the yard of the building. That was the most populous day of the campaign; the nearby streets were filled with people. This was not the only case of such activities. While they could, the activists used the yard of the building for musical performances and other cultural events, like movie screenings.

During the following days, the protesters continued to climb to the roof of the building, this way expressing their complaint about the construction works going on. By the beginning of September 2014, the building was gone. On September 23, 2014, there was an open letter addressed by a number of Armenian public figures (including actors, singers and artists) to the President of the republic, asking him to pay attention to the activities endangering the identity of Yerevan, and asking his assistance in restoring the Afrikyan building as soon as possible.

Transparency International NGO filed a complaint with the police on June 16, 2014, regarding the demolishing of the building. The police refused to initiate a criminal case on the ground of absence of corpus delicti. In September of the same year, the NGO tried to bring the case to court, but these tactics also led nowhere. By April 2015, the appeal was dismissed, and the case was dropped.

Current status. The initiative has stopped. There are no news reports since 2015. No activity on social media could be observed. It is classified as a failure since the building is gone.

Scope and spread. The initiative was the smallest in scope among the five cases under study. Judging by social media (1,958 likes on Facebook) and the accounts of rally participants, it mostly failed to attract public attention, with the exception of a concert by a famous piano player. It was also very limited in scope, which is partially explained by the fact that it was targeted at a particular site in Yerevan, although the activists did make an effort to frame it as a larger issue of preserving Yerevan's "historic face."

NGOs. This case is a good example of fluidity and uncertainty of something as seemingly simple as NGO involvement in a civic campaign. NGOs were clearly involved: at least three NGOs provided support, were involved in designing press releases, helped organize cultural events, and attempted court litigations. Several of the core activists were NGO members and leaders. Interestingly enough, this formal participation went unnoticed by some activists, who claimed no NGO involvement (Bagiyan 2015). There was also some confusion among the participants as to which capacity they participated in. NGO member participants made contradicting statements: while one member of an NGO stated that s/he participated as an individual, another member of the same NGO stated that their participation was that of an NGO involvement (Bagiyan 2015).

Stop Changes in Maternity Leave Law (2014)

What is the issue? In early October 2014 the government of the RA proposed changes in maternity leave law, according to which non-working women would get more money while working women would no longer get compensation equal to their salaries while on maternity leave; instead, the sum would depend on the number of years they had worked. The "Stop Changes in Maternity Leave Law" initiative was launched as a reaction to this.

Chronology and main developments. On October 23, 2014, not only working mothers but also their children were protesting in front of the RA government building. Approximately 150 people took part in the demonstration.

On October 29, the activists gave a press conference, organized by the Women's Rights Center NGO. They prepared a letter to the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. One of the potent statements made was that if the compensation during the maternity leave depended on the number of working years, women would postpone their pregnancy until their number of years is enough for proper compensation. In a tiny country, faced with demographic challenges, the statement sounded like a threat, rather than a personal choice of each woman.

During the November 18 session of the Parliament, the latter stated that it would do everything possible to both increase the compensation of non-working mothers and give 100% of salary compensation to high-income working women.

Current status. The government decision was reversed; there is no need for active engagement now. However, the initiative cannot be considered as fully dissolved. There seems to be some organizational inertia present, people involved are still active to some extent. As one of the leaders mentioned in one of the interviews, it has been like a "spontaneous volcano" which based on circumstances has a potential to burst into action again.

Scope and spread. The initiative can be characterized as relatively small-scale, despite the fact that it raised issues relevant for all working women planning to have children. It did not spread beyond the capital and did not attract even moderate numbers of participants in the streets.

NGOs. This is a case of close and clearly acknowledged cooperation with NGOs. Besides the fact that the majority of the core activists were members of women rights and/or gender equality NGOs, the organizations also provided space for the coordinating team meeting, supported the initiative with printing and legal consulting. The previous study of this initiative found that NGO leaders made a conscious choice of not assuming a leading role in the initiative, but providing logistical support instead. The strategy was motivated by NGOs' concern about existing anti-NGO stereotypes among the general public (Bagiyan 2015).

Dem Em (I am against)

What is the issue? At the end of 2013 a new pension reform with mandatory cumulative part was announced, to be enforced starting January 2014. Any citizen born after 1973 would have to pay 5% of his/her income to a special personal savings fund, controlled by the government and the Central Bank. The money would be kept, invested and made available to the individual upon the retirement.

Chronology and the main developments. The Dem Em team was established by the end of 2013; its main objective was opposing the mandatory component of the reform. The coordinating team consisted of 25-35 people (Bagiyan 2015). IT sector specialists were particularly influential in the core group and in the initiative in general. At first, it was confined to social media discussions, spreading information and probing the general moods. The initiators also took some time to research the experience of other countries. Journalists got involved and covered social media discussions.

On December 17, 2013, Dem Em initiative published its main demands: to remove the mandatory element from the pension reform, to consult with the society before making such decisions, and to hold a referendum before enforcing a new pension system.

Mass demonstrations started beginning of 2014. According to participants' estimates around 10,000 people attended the January 18, 2014, demonstration against the mandatory part of the new pension system (Bagiyan 2015).

On December 16, 2013, MPs from four non-governmental political parties filed an application to the Constitutional Court, challenging the of constitutionality of the mandatory component of the reform. On January 31, Dem Em published a statement which called on the employers of the Republic of Armenia not to make a mandatory 5% reduction from the salaries of their employees, while the Constitutional Court is considering the case. On April 2, 2014, the Court agreed that the mandatory component violated the right to property.

In February 2014 the most influential advocate of the pension reform, prime minister Tigran Sargsyan, admitted that the law contains shortcomings. "Our young partners" of the Dem Em were invited for dialogue.¹ By the end of March, the Chair of the Parliament also acknowledged several mistakes in the reform. On April 3, 2014, the prime minister resigned. On April 18, the newly-appointed prime minister met with the activists of Dem Em protesting in front of the presidential residence and suggested to cooperate.

Starting July 1, the pension reform entered into force without the mandatory part. The introduction of the mandatory part is not completely removed from the government's agenda, but it has been postponed for several years; the government is refining the reform package and some of the relevant legislation. Currently, the pension reform affects those who voluntarily opt for inclusion. The mandatory component will not enter into force until 2017.

Current status. The delay of mandatory component implementation would hardly happen if not for the Dem Em and highly visible public demonstration of discontent it mobilized. We consider it as a partial success because the mandatory component has been delayed, but not removed completely.

Currently, the search of news on the initiative does not reveal much. There were some events in spring 2014, but nothing since then. However, Dem Em initiative is still active. The activists take part in various other civic initiatives, including Electric Yerevan, discussed below. The Facebook page is active and is posting relevant information (as of May 2016). The initiative is therefore classified as ongoing.

Scope and spread. The initiative can be characterized as rather large, given the Armenian context. The Facebook group has more than 50,000 members; the Facebook page has more than 20,000 followers. There is also one regional "Dem Em Alaverdi" Facebook page with 656 followers, reflecting the fact that the initiative spread beyond the capital (Alaverdi is a small town in the north). The number of social media followers gives an idea of the "online" aspect of activism and at least the minimum level of awareness and involvement. According to participants' estimates demonstration turnouts reached into tens of thousands at some point. The initiative was mostly Yerevan-based, but some activities took place in the regions as well. The already mentioned Alaverdi Facebook page shows some awareness and solidarity in the north of Armenia. Photographs of demonstrations in Kapan (a small town in the south) were posted on the official Dem Em web page while the page was operational. The active phase of the initiative (demonstrations and so on) lasted for about four months.

¹ Caucasus Report "Is Armenia's Government running scared , or Playing for Time?" April 03, 2014, available at: <http://www.rferl.org/content/armenia-pension-reform-protests/25319747.html>

NGOs were barely involved and largely invisible. There was one instance of cooperating with a Bicycle Plus NGO. The bicycle tour within the central area of Yerevan was a way of publicizing the initiative.

Electric Yerevan

What is the issue? Electric Networks of Armenia (ENA) is the exclusive provider of electricity in Armenia. Russian “Inter RAO UES” company owned it since 2006. It had raised electricity prices thrice: in 2009, 2013 and 2014. As a result, in 2015 people were paying for the electricity almost twice as much as they were paying in 2008: about eight US cents per kWh. According to data released by an Armenian NGO, it was the highest price among all post-soviet republics, except Lithuania and Latvia (Epress News 2015). In May 2015, ENA applied to Armenia’s Public Services Regulatory Commission with a request of raising the electricity price even more, citing low profits and accumulated debts. The Commission did not approve the requested increase of 41%, but it did approve a more modest price increase of 17% (about 1.5 US cent) on June 17, 2015. The price increase sparked the protests.

Chronology and main developments. According to some news sources (Baitarian 2015), the first protest was staged by a group of youth activists affiliated with the ARF-Dashnaktsutyun political party. On June 17, the same day of the decision to raise the prices, activists gathered in front of the Public Services Regulatory Commission’s office. Clashing with the police, several activists were arrested and released hours later.

On June 19 a larger crowd, describing themselves as “concerned citizens” not affiliated with any political party, gathered at the Liberty Square in the center of the city. They protested the price increase and announced that the government had three days to reverse the price hike decision.

The three days passed, the demands were not met, so the activists made the next move. On June 22 in the evening, they marched to Baghramyan Avenue: one of the central streets that houses the presidential residence, the Parliament, the Constitutional Court and a number of embassies. News reports and other accounts (Avedissian 2015) put numbers of participants into thousands, and mention the activist group “No to Plunder.” The police warned the protesters that their march was illegal. Nonetheless, the demonstrators proceeded towards the Presidential Palace where they faced the riot police blocking the street, backed by water cannons. At this point, the activists made a decision, later described by participants as spontaneous. They decided to “sit on the street” and stay the night. In the early hours of the morning the riot police began dispersing the crowd (which now consisted of only a few hundred people) using water cannons and batons. There were scores of plainclothes officers participating in the dispersal and rounding up activists. Journalists were mistreated by the police; some recording equipment was damaged. A total of 237 people were detained (Movsisian et al. 2015). According to the Armenian police, 29 people suffered injuries, including 11 police officers.

Police violence during the dispersal clearly backfired. On June 23, the morning after the use of water cannons, there were various statements from organizations and officials condemning police violence, interference with journalistic work, etc. Protests resumed and grew in numbers. Police held its positions but did not hinder the demonstrations. Some estimate the number of the crowd gathered at Baghramyan Avenue the evening after the water cannon dispersal at 15,000 (Baitarian 2015). The protesters erected a makeshift barrier, to separate them from the police lines. The protesters used one single line of empty plastic garbage bins. Interestingly, that barrier is

almost always referred to as a “barricade” in the media, although it barely reached a meter high and could have been easily moved aside or jumped over.

Two weeks of standoff ensued and became widely known as the Electric Yerevan, although the protests spread beyond the capital. The hashtag #ElectricYerevan went viral on twitter. Hundreds would be present on Baghramyan Avenue during the days; thousands were joining in the evenings, some of the hard-core camping on the street overnight. High level of self-organization was evident. People were bringing and distributing food and water, and cleaning after themselves. In a matter of days several “working groups” (such as legal, logistics, PR) have appeared; posters were attached to the trees and light poles signaling the places where the groups were to meet. The atmosphere was peaceful during the day and rather festive in the evenings: singing, dancing, and drumming were a constant feature of evening gatherings. There was a strong national element in all of these. A couple of weddings took place on Baghramyan, adding to the festive mood. Humor was used extensively by the protesters: on posters and in dressing up in swimming suits (a pun towards the water cannons). The protesters repeatedly tried to emphasize peaceful attitude towards the police: those on the other side of the “barricade” were regularly offered food, sweets, and fruits.

On June 28, the President called for an audit and state subsidy to cover the increased price for individual (but not for the businesses). People would not have to pay until the results of the audit. Some interpreted this as a partial success and suggested to re-locate to the Opera square, while others insisted on staying put. What followed was a split, which later on the leaders tried to mend and even deny. Nevertheless, there were eyewitnesses and a media report of the split. The “No to Plunder” activist group, that had been in charge up to that point, led a small group of followers towards the Opera square amid cries of “shame” and accusations of betrayal. Radio Liberty reported “...some visibly shocked activists of the group said that their movement has been hijacked by more radical elements.”

On June 30, the groups reunited. The crowds and the festive mood were back in the evenings, but the numbers were gradually declining over the next days. “No To Plunder” publicly renounced whatever coordinating responsibilities they had so far; a new leadership seemed to be emerging. Young leaders affiliated with political opposition became more visible and vocal. The mood was shifting towards a more political one; anti-government posters started to appear, some of the speakers on an improvised podium made statements like “we will have a liberated Armenia at the end of this struggle.”

On July 04, the new leaders of the protests issued an ultimatum about advancing to the presidential residence within the next two days, if their demand of reversing the electricity price hike was not met. This was probably more than what the authorities were willing to tolerate. Besides, the numbers have clearly dwindled: at some hours there were barely 50-60 people in the street. On July 06, Baghramyan Avenue was unblocked, 46 people were detained but released shortly afterward. At the time of unblocking, there were about 100-200 people. No use of water cannons or batons was reported. This happened in the early afternoon, hours before the expiry of the ultimatum.

The unblocking of the street marked the end of major visible activities. A few more attempts at organizing people and blocking streets in July and September failed. The protests petered out.

The government ordered an audit by an international company Deloitte&Touche in mid-August 2015. The audit report revealed mismanagement, but also justified the price hike: the company was bordering bankruptcy. In an interesting twist of developments, days after the

publication of the audit report an Armenian-born Russian businessman announced purchasing ENA. The new owner pledged to continue subsidizing electricity price for another year and to implement “anti-crisis program” and modernization of the company (Danielyan and Gabrielian 2015).

Current status of the initiative. The latest post on the “No to Plunder” website is from December 2015. The activities on the corresponding Facebook page also stop at around that time. News search reveals no new articles.


Scope and Spread. The active period lasted for two weeks and involved tens of thousands of demonstrators. This was the biggest activist campaign in Armenia, not counting the Karabakh Movement of 1988-91. The action spread beyond Yerevan. Protests took place also in at least three regional towns, including the second biggest town of Gyumri. Facebook page had more than 8,000 “likes.”

NGOs were not visible during the protests, not at any other stage of the activism. They did play a role of information providers: a report by an NGO was used as a base for an argument that Armenians already pay too much for the electricity, as compared to other post-soviet countries. Transparency International publicized a few facts exposing ENA’s mismanagement and shady procurement deals.

How do NGOs and civic activists interact?

Our five cases reveal very different patterns of interaction between NGOs and civic initiatives: from close cooperation to being barely visible and involved on the margins. On the positive end of cooperation are cases like Teghut and Maternity Leave where NGOs were explicitly and extensively involved. In the case of Maternity Leave, NGOs intentionally preferred to remain at the backstage but were instrumental in providing coordination, logistics and ‘foot soldiers’ (i.e. NGO members participating in demonstrations). In the case of Teghut, NGOs performed a wide range of activities: from awareness raising to court litigation. The Afrikyan case is a curious example of confusion about the role of NGOs: while they were involved, their involvement went unnoticed by some core activists. This is a good example that NGOs could be doing work that goes unnoticed and easily dismissed. Dem Em and Electric Yerevan are on the other side of the continuum, with barely any NGO involvement. In the case of Dem Em there was an isolated minor episode of a sports club helping publicize the case once. In the case of Electric Yerevan, NGOs were not involved, but the information they provided was used to strengthen the arguments of the protestors. Table 1 below schematically presents NGO involvement in the five cases of civic activism, with some examples of types of activities.

Table 1. NGO involvement in civic activism

Level of involvement	Minimal involvement	Moderate involvement	Active involvement
			
Civic Initiative	Dem Em; Electric Yerevan	Afrikyan	Teghut; Maternity Leave
Types of Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Publicise the case; - Fact-finding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Court litigation; - logistics; - participation in demonstrations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Court litigation; - logistics; - coordination; - participation in demonstrations; - legal consulting; - fact-finding

Although Teghut is a case of reasonably good working relations with NGOs, at some point the activists felt the need to establish their own NGO in order to apply for a donor grant for a specific activity they wanted to carry out: a satellite shooting of the area to monitor the mining contract implementation.

Those activists that have experience interacting with NGOs usually describe it as positive and useful. As we found out, leading activists are often also NGO members (currently or in the past). Many of them mentioned NGO affiliation or work as part of the story of how they got involved in civic activism. Many activists, however, have dismissive or negative attitudes towards NGOs, as discussed below.

NGO leaders and members describe their interaction with activists as positive and fruitful. NGOs have financial resources, whereas activists have human resources. According to NGO members, the two groups coming together benefits the larger society. The majority of NGO leaders and members interviewed recall examples of successful cooperation between the two groups, describing the cooperation as “a natural development.” NGOs see their role as professionals guiding and providing support to civic activists.

Some NGO interviewees pointed out difficulties in cooperation between the two groups due to lack of consensus and mutual understanding. They lamented a certain amount of “conspiratorial thinking” on who does what and represents who. This (in the words of one NGO leader) has become a social disease, reflecting the overall deficit of social trust.

How do NGOs and civic activists perceive each other?

Many activists indicate the importance of distinguishing several NGOs operating in the country today from the rest. There are some strong and committed organizations, which should not be judged together with the rest of the sector.

You need to filter NGOs and understand which ones are pocket NGOs, in the government's pocket, which ones are just donor NGOs, doing only donors' projects, particularly foreign government donors' projects, and which ones are NGOs with social interests and large membership. Female activist, 32.

The 'real' organizations are few; aside from those, more than 4,000 NGOs registered in Armenia today are perceived as highly restricted by their donor commitments at best, or worthless and even harmful at worst.

The perceptions of activists' towards NGOs range between positive and negative. Many activists with positive perceptions have experience of being involved with an NGO and highlight that because of that experience they have developed into active citizens today. These activists highlight the importance of NGOs for the success of activist campaigns, mentioning specific examples of cooperation in addressing a common cause. Some activists are negative towards NGOs, seeing them as unhelpful, or even harmful to the general development of the country. This group of activists advocates the role of activist campaigns as the only one in delivering a change nowadays. They believe the role of NGOs has become secondary in the republic, if visible at all. This group believes more can be achieved via informal measures, rather than with the help of formal entities.

Some activists point out that it is hard to detect the reasons for NGOs joining civic campaigns.

Because organizations are funded, one never knows if they join the protest because they believe in the cause, or because they are paid for it (Female activist, 38).

This undermines the legitimacy and the sincerity of NGO participation in the eyes of the activists. There is also a visible lack of knowledge and understanding of what NGOs do, particularly given that their work is not always visible and almost never advertised. As a result, sweeping dismissals of NGO work are not uncommon among activists.

To me, their [NGOs'] activities are characterized by printing a brochure. Nothing else. But I believe they could have done more. (Female activist, 38)

The quote above belongs to an activist who was involved in Maternity Leave campaign: the one that had probably most coordinated and substantial NGO support. Recall that NGOs chose to remain at the backstage in this case.

NGO leaders and staff have overwhelmingly positive perceptions of civic activism, its importance in the country today, with exceptions that have to do with specific individuals and their particular behavior. They call civic activists "the progressive part of the public," some claim that civic initiatives are able to set the agenda for the country, on par with the government. Civic initiatives are lauded for breaking stereotypes of public helplessness in the face of government decisions.

Conclusion

Our study reviews five cases of civic activism in Armenia. All five are very different in almost any aspect: the scope ranges from tiny to huge, there are failures, triumphs and partial successes, stories of persistence and cases of running out of steam, egoism and suspicion, altruism and money-driven concerns. Some patterns can be discerned from the diversity.

Firstly, in terms of attitudes, NGOs are consistently positive in their perceptions of activists and supportive to the extent possible. Of course, we had been talking to specific sub-set of the NGO sector: those who choose to get involved. We believe this approach is justified, because we

wanted to understand the patterns of interaction, so it made sense to seek out those organizations that attempted to interact. Contrary to our expectation (and despite probing and explicitly asking) we received very few accounts of negative experiences from the NGOs. The rare criticism was about specific instances of individual behavior.

The positive attitude of NGOs is contrasted with the guarded attitude of the activists. Although many of them have experience working in the NGO sector (and cite that experience as a reason for becoming active), their attitude towards NGOs is cautious. Some activists differentiate between “good” and “bad” NGOs and point to the fact that the NGO sector as a whole is dominated by donor-driven NGOs and is tainted by GONGOS. Many activists fail to notice the work of NGOs, even when NGOs are actively involved in the very campaigns the activists join. Blanket dismissals of NGOs as “grant eaters” and “brochure printers” are not uncommon.

In terms of interaction patterns, our five cases reveal a spectrum from one-time minor involvement to well-working collaboration. It is worth noting that success of activist campaigns is not related to NGO involvement. Our two failed cases, Teghut and Afrikyan, both had prominent NGOs involved. Dem Em and Electric Yerevan were the two most populous campaigns, which pushed the government to at least temporarily reverse its decisions; those had almost no NGO involvement. Maternity Leave is a curious case of a short, small yet effective campaign with a high level of NGO involvement and low public involvement.

It is probably safe to assume that both sides, the NGOs and the activists, are still learning and discovering each other’s strengths. Civic activism seems to be the arena where civil society is able to overcome the post-communist syndrome of disengagement. Civic initiatives are a locally invented term to describe new forms of participation since 2007. There have been more than 30 such civic initiatives in the past years, with roughly one-quarter of those resulting in a victory for the activists. It remains to be seen whether and to what extent these movements will grow in scope and how they will maintain connections with each other and with the NGO sector.

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