

# **ANTI-GENDER CAMPAIGNS, RHETORICS AND OBJECTIVES IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY ARMENIA**

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1. The English translation is the abbreviated version of the original report, which presents the methodology of research and theoretical framework, brief analysis of the studied cases, the background of anti-gender campaigns and the local trends, as well as the conclusion. The English version does not include two sections of the research, which studies in detail cases of gender-based issues, the denial of women rights and massification of attacks against LGBT persons.

The sociological research has been conducted by "Socioscope" Societal Research and Consultancy Center NGO funded by "Women's Fund in Armenia" NGO.

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# **Brief Summary of Ideological and Methodological Framework of the Research**

The objective of this research is to collect and analyze post-revolutionary rhetoric (including homophobic) related to sexual and gender issues and discursive means available in Armenia, which are being used to target human rights defenders, activists working on women's and LGBT issues, progressive civil society, aiming at shrinking their space of action, trying to turn this theme into a weapon to be utilized against the post-revolutionary government and to impede reforms in this area.

Considering issues of sexuality, more specifically those related to women and LGBT persons as sensitive and easily manipulated when it comes to the power dynamics, meanwhile being symbolic of current ideological cultivation<sup>2</sup>, the research considers those by linking the latter with the global democratic (rights protection) crisis and local socio-political context, anti-gender, and conspiracy campaigns. In this research when referring to anti-gender campaigns, anti-rights protection and regressive ones were considered that particularly targeted the issue of gender equality with which the desire was to keep the LGBT persons on the margins and create homophobic sentiments is unequivocally interlinked.

Given the objective of the research, the following questions were posited:

- 1 | What discursive means and ideological boundaries are underlying the local and international anti-gender campaigns?
- 2 | What political interests and agendas hold people, groups, and forces backing the local anti-gender campaigns?

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2. Andreasyan, Zh., Zhamakochyan, A., Manusyan, A. (2019). Introduction. Andreasyan et al (edited), *Sexuality in Armenian Con[texts]*. Yerevan. Socioscope NGO, 7.

- 3 | What messages and ideas about sexuality and gender issues are being circulated in locally organized campaigns? What are the specificities and commonalities with global anti-gender campaigns?
- 4 | How those, engaged in anti-gender campaigns, are linking the public discussions of sexuality and gender issues to the 2018 revolution and the new political power?
- 5 | How the post-revolutionary power reacts to the anti-gender campaigns and, in its turn, what types of messages and ideas it formulates about sexuality and gender?
- 6 | How anti-gender campaigns impact the progressive, rights defending civil society, and the reforms in Armenia?

Research questions were used as guiding ones to collect and subject to secondary analysis already existing local and international research and analytics related to the theme. Furthermore, a mapping, identifying around thirty cases of the post-revolutionary period, was conducted that targeted in reality or discursively women human rights defenders and activists dealing with gender issues or highlighted manipulations related to sexuality and gender issues. Mapping was conducted via monitoring of online and social media, picking the ones that resonated the most in post-revolutionary Armenia.

Nevertheless, in this analytical piece we will reflect upon discursively more dense and typical cases that are provided in **Table 1** below:

**Table 1. Studied Cases**

Year	Case	Description	Link
August 2018	Attack on LGBT persons in Shurnukh village of Syunik region	On August 3, 2018, in Shurnukh village of Syunik region 9 young people, including LGBT persons, taking a vacation there, were physically and psychologically assaulted by 20 persons from the same village, as well as the city of Goris. The inhabitants had demanded from them to leave the village, had struck them with stones, hands and feet due to their real or alleged sexual orientation and gender identity. The incident was followed by organized support and activities that stirred the violence.	<a href="https://bit.ly/2WI66zx">https://bit.ly/2WI66zx</a>
October 2018	The cancellation of LGBT Christian Forum in Yerevan	"New Generation" Humanitarian NGO that had undertaken the organization of the LGBT Christian Forum of Eastern Europe and Central Asia to be held from November 15-18, 2018, later announced the cancellation of it. It came after the online threats, organized persecutions and possible risks of attacks on the forum, as well as the lack of full protection on the side of the police.	<a href="https://bit.ly/3fDCKUm">https://bit.ly/3fDCKUm</a> <a href="https://bit.ly/3clHITW">https://bit.ly/3clHITW</a>
November 2018	Provocation named "Noah's Pride": Publishing of videos of LGBT parade in Yerevan	In November of 2018, on the walls throughout the city, colorful posters appear stating that "The homosexuals are on Pashinyan's side." The poster also states the name of the initiative, i. e. Noah's Pride. Those backing Noah's Pride try to present themselves as an internationally acclaimed group that works with LGBT issues. On November 19, that group issues a press release with photos and video material that on November 16-17 they have completed an action in Yerevan called "Walk with courage, Nikol" and "Hello, Yerevan."	<a href="https://bit.ly/2YI7sWq">https://bit.ly/2YI7sWq</a>
March 2019	The speech of Lara Aharonian at the National Assembly -CSO cooperation platform	On March 8, 2019, during the event called "Civil Society-National Assembly Cooperation Platform for Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities of Men and Women" human rights defender, cofounder of Women's Resource Center, Lara Aharonian spoke about the violence against women and girls, gaps in legislation and diversity among women. i. e. lesbians, bisexuals, transgender, women that want to become mothers vs those that do not want to, women living in borderline communities, others living in poverty, Yezidi women, women with disabilities.	<a href="https://bit.ly/2yISIfu">https://bit.ly/2yISIfu</a> <a href="https://bit.ly/35KL2W2">https://bit.ly/35KL2W2</a>
April 2019	The speech of a transgender woman, human rights defender Lilit Martirosyan at National Assembly	On April 5, 2019, the Standing Committee on Protection of Human Rights and Public Affairs of the National Assembly along with the Human Rights Defender's Office Head, Mr. Arman Tatoyan, organized the public hearings of the UN Universal Periodic Review under the title "National Agenda for Human Rights: UN UPR." During the hearings, the President of the "Rights Side" NGO, a transgender woman Lilit Martirosyan held a speech on behalf of the transgender community, sharing their experiences and problems.	<a href="https://bit.ly/35Fhxoy">https://bit.ly/35Fhxoy</a> <a href="https://bit.ly/35KKVtA">https://bit.ly/35KKVtA</a>
May 2019	The interception of the book presentation "My Body is Private"	On March 4, 2019, in café Bookinist the Sexual Assault Crisis Center NGO had organized the presentation of the book "My Body is Private" , which is the translation of Linda Walvoord Girard's book. It informs about unwanted touches to the child's body aiming to prevent sexual assaults towards them. The book is for children ages 3-6 and their parents.	<a href="https://bit.ly/2WLd3sE">https://bit.ly/2WLd3sE</a> <a href="https://bit.ly/2SRjgCb">https://bit.ly/2SRjgCb</a>
July 2019	Campaign targeting Lucy Kocharyan and the series "Voice of Violence" initiated by her.	In July of 2019, a journalist of Public Radio, Lucy Kocharyan shared hetq.am article "It is Her Hair to Blame" telling the story of the rape of a Czech girl that was followed by numerous similar letters from different women. Through a page called "Voice of Violence", she started anonymously posting the real stories of women subjected to sexual violence, thus, shedding light on them.	<a href="https://bit.ly/2SSLIZQ">https://bit.ly/2SSLIZQ</a>
November 2019	Attacks on "Excitement&Bell" ("Hoozanq ou Zang") performance.	On November 2, 2019, next to the metro station on Republic Square, the Contemporary Choreography Lab held a performance. It was a re-read of 1920s Armenian futurist authors combining it with modern dance, voice art and body presentation in public spaces. The performance, as the organizers were interpreting, was an attempt at reinforcing the cultural revolution.	<a href="https://bit.ly/2STVg19">https://bit.ly/2STVg19</a> <a href="https://bit.ly/3fAC1DB">https://bit.ly/3fAC1DB</a>
2018–2020	Targeting OSF-Armenia	Right after the 2018 revolution, the campaign against OSF-Armenia intensified. With time, it became more systemic, when the VETO social-political movement was formed. OSF-Armenia and organizations, as well as individuals associated with it, were being accused of "selling the nation," "anti-state actions," "perversion," "LGBT propaganda," continuously finding themselves in the center of targeted smear campaign and incitement of violence.	<a href="https://bit.ly/2Aj2o0R">https://bit.ly/2Aj2o0R</a> <a href="https://bit.ly/2Z1FzsT">https://bit.ly/2Z1FzsT</a>
2019–2020	Opposing the ratification of Istanbul Convention	The ratification of Istanbul Convention approved already on December 28, 2018, and signed on January 18, 2018, in Strasbourg, gained the most traction among right-wing, homophobic, religious and regressive groups through sustained and active campaigns in post-revolutionary Armenia, targeting both civil society and progressive segments of the ruling party.	<a href="https://bit.ly/2zqtwul">https://bit.ly/2zqtwul</a>

It is worth mentioning that both for the research team, as well as for Women's Fund in Armenia financing it, sexuality and gender equality are items on the agenda in its deepest political sense, i. e. these are perceived as a key part of the democratic development in Armenia and justified struggle for equality and dignity for all. Both research team members and members of the Women's Fund in Armenia in their struggles with varying frequencies and intensities have been targeted by homophobic and patriarchal groups pertaining to anti-gender campaigns. Henceforth, the research in itself is an attempt to reflect upon our and other partners' actions.

# **The Overall Background and Local Trends of Anti-Gender Campaigns**



During recent years, several local and Western researches register and analyze the sharp rise in anti-rights, including anti-gender campaigns and the political expansion of homophobic and misogynistic rhetoric in numerous regions of the world, such as Latin and North Americas, Africa, Western and Eastern Europe, as well as in several post-Soviet countries, including in Armenia. The study of local specificities of those campaigns and the comparative inquiry shows both the peculiarities, as well as ideological commonalities, coinciding time frames, political ties of those formulating anti-gender agendas, and their common interests lying in the background.

For instance, in countries ranging from the USA to Russia, from Western Europe to its most eastern border, i. e. Hungary, the initiators of the anti-gender movement mostly have common statements that "gender equality" is an ideology that has been developed to shatter the foundations of a "traditional family" and "propagate homosexuality<sup>3</sup>." Based on this proclamation targeting and rejection of progressive politicians and activists, their human rights actions, feminist groups, LGBT persons and their rights, the struggle for women's equality and rights (including sexual and reproductive rights), domestic violence and discrimination are justified. These features of anti-gender campaigns, however, herald a deeper field of political struggle and a problem<sup>4</sup>. The issue is related to the overall crisis of the liberal democracy and the uprising of right-wing populist rhetoric in the USA, Europe and elsewhere that brings together anti-democratic conservatives (around anti-gender and anti-immigration issues) and question the principles of

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**3.** Kováts, E., Pöim, M. (2015). Forward. In Kováts et al. (Eds.), *Gender as symbolic glue: The position and role of conservative and far right parties in the anti-gender mobilizations in Europe*. Foundation for European Progressive Studies, 11.

**4.** Ibid. See also Mouffe, Ch. (2018). *For a left populism*. Verso.

human rights and equality, pushing forward the political agendas<sup>5</sup> of cultural and national "uniqueness", in the meantime, putting forward questions aimed at captivating the local political field. The anti-gender campaigns unite center-right and far-right political parties and religious servants (in various countries catholic and orthodox churches are the most active initiators of anti-gender campaigns), conservative initiatives and organizations<sup>6</sup> under one umbrella, including diverse small and big groups and individuals with political interests and agendas, depending on the socio-political context of a given country. If we are to look at the problem from a broader perspective, then there is a need for progressive political parties and groups of civil society to pose a self-reflective question: What is the problem of the political, social and economic system that causes the anti-gender rhetoric and ideas to find support not only among the far-right, but also among those segments of populations that traditionally supported the center during elections<sup>7</sup>. In the case of Armenia, the study of deeply embedded problems of political, social and economic systems that create a conducive environment for right-wing populist groups' establishment and public expansion along with reaching an understanding of those matters, carries a practical meaning.

Several researches confirm, that starting from 2008, disconnected anti-gender campaigns take place in Western and Eastern Europe that have transitioned into a more continuous and well-embedded phase, starting from 2013, exactly at the time when the anti-gender processes entered the Armenian political landscape.

In August of 2013, the Police of RA published the Draft Amendments to the Administrative Offences Code of the Republic of Armenia suggesting adding two articles stipulating responsibility for the "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations." According to the justifications put forward by the Legal Department of the Police of RA, the amendment was guided by the need to "to protect "the model of

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5. Ibid, 127.

6. Zacharenko, E. (2019, November 20). The neoliberal fuel to the anti-gender movement. Retrieved from <https://www.degrowth.info/en/2019/11/the-neoliberal-fuel-to-the-anti-gender-movement/>.

7. Ibid.

the traditional Armenian family" against "phenomena alien to national Armenian mentality"<sup>8</sup>." Several days past the publication of the draft, the Head of the Police, Vladimir Gasparyan called it back, justifying that it was incomplete and that the issue at hand was not one of the priorities of the police<sup>9</sup>. This episode was an internal political emanation of geopolitical developments taking place in the region.

Within the same year, in 2013, on the backdrop of anti-European propaganda and the already operating Customs Union among Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia, parental committees were created in Ukraine, Russia, Moldova, as well as Armenia. These were those post-Soviet countries, that in 2013, had to choose between joining the Customs Union or signing the Association Agreement with the EU<sup>10</sup>. As these studies show, the family committees or alliances<sup>11</sup> in all of those countries were directly interlinked. Through a strange coincidence, the press conferences and statements of the All-Armenian Parental Committee<sup>12</sup> established in 2013, followed the activities of the Russia based equivalent Committee<sup>13</sup>. For instance, starting from 2013, several initiatives and coalitions that regularly injected into the social and political discourse the need to introduce "the prohibition of non-traditional sexual relations" legally, started being noticed locally, thus, in reality, turning the protection of human rights, gender equality and

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**8.** A1Plus. (2013, August 7). Fine for "propagating non-conventional sexual relations". Retrieved from <https://a1plus.am/hy/article/75136>.

**9.** Hovhannisyan, I. (2013, August 8). The Police withdrew the draft related to non-conventional sexual relations. RFL. Retrieved from <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/25070379.html>.

**10.** Babayan, N. (2013, December 25). Anti-European propaganda or fight against "gender"? *Aravot Daily*. Retrieved from <https://www.aravot.am/2013/12/25/418278/>.

**11.** Within the same timeframe, "No to gender initiative" and "One Nation" nationalist-conservative groups were also in the center of anti-gender "struggle."

**12.** "All-Armenian Parental Committee" was also linked to the earlier established (2012) network of "Putin" clubs in Armenia, which aimed at spreading the ideas of Vladimir Putin and was implementing the propaganda of the Putin plan to establish the Eurasian Union (a sort of a reincarnation of the Russian Empire). For further information on the linkages of the committee with the Putin Clubs, see Jilozyan, A. (2017). *Gender Policy in Armenia: An Exploration of Legislation, Anti-gender Rhetoric and Community Strategies*. Yerevan. Women's Support Center NGO.

**13.** Babayan, N. (2013, December 25). Anti-European propaganda or fight against "gender"? *Aravot Daily*. Retrieved from <https://www.aravot.am/2013/12/25/418278/>.

identity into leverages for sustaining Russian geopolitical influence and/or platforms for escalation of it<sup>14</sup>.

For example, the local parental committee declared about the need to unite against the "gender attack" and for the cause of "preserving the family and traditional values<sup>15</sup>" and started a campaign against the Law on Gender Equality<sup>16</sup>, starting a thread of manipulation linked to the term "gender" as well as those progressive individuals and civil society that worked on gender issues along with the final adoption of a watered-down version of the Law with many contentious formulations. Similar to the committee, later, members of initiatives and organizations supported by (mostly shadow) structures close to Kremlin, continued targeting activists, human rights defenders and civil society organizations (CSOs) working with issues of sexuality and gender. As we can already record, these groups through various alterations of the term "gender" and the Law on Gender Equality, succeeded in turning it into an agenda for anti-European propaganda, the polarization of the society and targeting of the progressive civil society, in other words, creating a media noise and a pseudo-cultural platform for the political decision to join the Customs Union instead of the Association Agreement with the EU, presenting

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**14.** The fact that, starting from 2013, issues related to gender and LGBT rights is turned by the Putin regime into tools of geopolitical influence, becomes clear from his public speeches. For example, in June of 2013, during the joint press conference with the President of Finland, Sauli Niinistö, answering journalist's question on homosexual propaganda, Putin stated that "Several European countries are of an opinion that children do not need to be protected from such information, let then not, we do not tell Europeans what to do. Instead, we have decided, the State Duma of RF has decided that we need to limit it, thus, I request not to intervene into the internal matters." RT. (2016, July 1). *Press Conference of Vladimir Putin and President of Finland upon the conclusion of the meeting*. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3c8egR0>.

**15.** See All-Armenian Parental Committee. *Manifesto*. URL: [http://hanun.am/?page\\_id=107](http://hanun.am/?page_id=107).

**16.** The Concept Note on Gender Policy has been adopted by the Government of Armenia in 2010, the inter-agency commission against gender-based violence has been established, and in 2011, the National Program against Gender-Based Violence has been adopted along with the 2011-2015 Strategic Program. As we see from several analyses and researches, during those years, neither the concept nor the strategic programs caught the attention of the public, not to mention that there was no criticism. See Abrahamyan, G. (2015, August 19). *The Struggle against Gender or Anti-European Propaganda? Aravot Daily*. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2YCMSH8>; Harutyunyan, A. (2016). *Discovering the Gender Discourse in Armenia: From Hysteria to Constructive Dialogue*. G. Shahnazaryan (edited) *Gender Discrimination: Media, Army, Education, Marriage, Politics* (26–48). Yerevan. Women's Resource Center NGO.

it as the sole "political option" for the "salvation of the traditional Armenian family." In such a seemingly internal, but, in reality, also in the geopolitical fields, the intervention of Russia created consequences for all aspects of life in Armenia, including on all of the civil society. Gradually, financial flows from Russia increased, aiming at the formation of devotees to the Putin political agenda that were Russian organized initiatives or NGOs (RONGOs), in the meantime, being a partner to the ruling power of the time<sup>17</sup> (closely controlled by the latter), propagating the neo-Stalinist, paternalistic myths and social constructs of the late period of the Soviet era. If before this, the overall objective of active NGOs was the advancement of democracy and protection of rights, now the RONGOs were aiming at buttressing the anti-democratic, anti-human rights protection and deeply Stalinist morality and paternalism under the premise of instilling conservative values and ideologies among the public, thus, legitimizing the perpetuation of protectionist oversight of Russia over Armenia and the latter's dependence on it.

Not only problems caused by parties that are close to RONGOs and Putin regime are part of the current situation, but they rather prosper, which the sovereign and democratic Government that has come to power after the Velvet Revolution has to take in hand.<sup>18</sup>

Targeting American billionaire George Soros and the local office of Open Society Foundations established by him has become the new direction for pushing forward agendas of right-wing populist political forces globally, as well as pro-Putin forces and RONGOs in Armenia. This allows easily creating a certain image of an "external enemy" and linked to that locating "internal enemies" to formulate political messages against those, as to put the existing or bogus problems on the shoulders of those "foes."

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**17.** For example, the manager of the network of Putin Clubs that also included the oversight over other NGOs and online informative webpages, Andranik Nikoghosyan was appointed as the Assistant to the Republican MP Hermine Naghdalyan upon the successful organization of Kremlin propagandist Dmitry Kiselyov's visit. He had established ties with several influential members of the ruling elite, had received gifts and state regalia. In 2015, Nikoghosyan's infamous call to join into a union with Russia through a referendum did not receive even the support of those with whom he had established close ties.

**18.** Andreyan, Zh., Zhamakochyan, A., Ishkanian, A., Manusyan, A., Manusyan, S. (2018). *From Shrinking Space to Post-Revolutionary Space: Reimagining the Role and Relations of Civil Society in Armenia*. Yerevan. Socioscope NGO, 23.

The most aggressive policies against OSF that have received massive public support in his birthplace-Hungary. Already in 2015, right when the migration crisis started in Europe, the right-wing autocratic Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orban blamed George Soros for "being responsible for the migrant crisis" and a "threat to the traditional European lifestyle."<sup>19</sup>

In 2018, the Hungarian Parliament per the election campaign promise adopted the so-called Stop Soros legislation, which targeted civil society organizations and legalized Orban's aggressive anti-migration policy.<sup>20</sup>

In Russia, actions against OSF took a tougher turn. In 2015, the General Prosecutor's Office of RF declared OSF offices as *persona non grata* and simply got closed along with other civil society organizations receiving funding from abroad.<sup>21</sup> Here, Soros and OSF are blamed already from 2003-2004, for collaboration with opposition groups (like YUKOS's president Khodorkovsky) and per Kremlin's take, organizing color revolutions in the FSU republics, such as Georgia and Ukraine.<sup>22</sup> Targeting Soros and OSF, it makes it easier for them to "explain" as to why the revolutions have occurred.

The scheme of anti-gender campaigns in Armenia is an exact copy of the ones targeting Soros by American<sup>23</sup>, Hungarian<sup>24</sup> and

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**19.** Ukraine Today. (2015, November 5). *Soros vs Orban: Hungary's most influential figures argue over refugee crisis*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5Ns-SgBT9eQ>.

**20.** According to this law some types of support, including legal counseling got criminalized and an extra 25 percent tax as levied on NGOs providing support to illegal migrants. See Open Society Justice Initiative. *Protecting democracy, freedom of expression, and freedom of association in Hungary*. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3fspTo7>.

**21.** Егоров, И. (2015, ноябрь). Генпрокуратура признала Фонд Сороса нежелательным в стране. Российская газета. По ссылке – <https://rg.ru/2015/11/30/fond-site-anons.html>.

**22.** Сабов, А. (2004, июнь 1). Не бархатный сезон. Российская газета. По ссылке – <https://rg.ru/2004/06/01/soros.html>.

**23.** Coaston, J. (2018, June). George Soros is not a Nazi, explained. *VOX*. Retrieved from <https://www.vox.com/2018/6/11/17405784/george-soros-not-a-nazi-trump>.

**24.** BBC News. (2018, October 18). Who is George Soros?. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nXHfPBHeOJU>.

Russian<sup>25</sup> anti-rights right-wing populist forces and actors. For instance, they were publicly reiterating the staging of a "state coup" by OSF, already in 2017, before the Armenian revolution, thus, directly linking civic resistance and internal political transformations in former USSR countries with external forces. They had overall targeted the OSF-Armenia office, but were attacking all progressive civic groups and human rights defender NGOs. Recently, they were being accused of serving the "Donald Trump Doctrine," engaging in "anti-Russian propaganda" and supporting the conspiracy plan of "perversion."<sup>26</sup>

In post-revolutionary reality, the members of anti-gender campaigns received a new, fully oppositionist stance that opened the possibility for assuming a more aggressive role. Gender and sexuality, as well as progressive civil society organizations working in that area, found themselves in the limelight of manipulations, falsifications and conspiracies the main goal of which was to discredit young politicians linked to civic activism and the revolution, as well as polarize the Armenian public on such a sensitive topic.<sup>27</sup>

The local populists, for their political representation, employ various anti-democratic, anti-gender unwarranted and simplistic political technologies and tools tested in several countries. When speaking of local human rights defenders and particularly those that are advocating for gender equality, most of the times, it is not their names that are called out, but rather the widely used local versions of "sorosists" tags employed in anti-rights campaigns, such as "pro-soros" or "local representative of Soros", which is spiced up with "judeo-masonic" anti-Semitic vocabulary. In this way they try to present the work of human rights defenders as materially driven and influenced by external (presumed enemy) forces, thus, totally treacherous, trying to present it as something diabolic, thus, limiting and narrowing the actions of democratic organizations and initiatives instead of taking up their space.

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**25.** Сабов, А. (2004, июнь 1). Не бархатный сезон. Российская газета. По ссылке – <https://rg.ru/2004/06/01/soros.html>.

**26.** Hovhannisyan, A. (2017, October 3,) Soros foundation as a sponsor of state coups and perversions. *Irates.am*. Retrieved from <http://www.irates.am/hy/1507004499>.

**27.** Zhamakochoyan, A. (2019, May 17). Queer rights are being weaponised by Armenia's counter-revolutionaries. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3bbvgEM>.

After the 2018 revolution, the campaign against the OSF-Armenia escalated. Currently, the anti-gender groups blame OSF-Armenia in "Soros Action," according to which the organization has supported the revolution as later on to have its representatives ("agents") in the new power. For example, all those of young politicians that received the tag "sorosist", previously, in the reality of capture of the political field, either engaged in civic activism or had work experience in civil society organizations, and more specifically if it was in OSF-Armenia. All senior political appointees that had such a track record of civic struggle, currently, are being presented as "Soros's pocket politicians" by anti-gender movements. In the frame of conspiracy logic, the operations of OSF are "anti-state", which implies that "the pocket ministers and parliamentarians of Soros," "Soros mercenaries" are going to "destroy" the Republic of Armenia. Using the statement that "Soros is a shareholder of the current power" they try to devalue the 2018 revolution and its popularity. In the short run, the right-wing populists try to sow the seeds of doubt towards the revolutionary government (about their intentions to serve the country and society), whereas in the long run, they shatter the confidence of the society to build the future of their country through their own will and again exhume the "behind dad's back" or "big bother's" (by default referring to Russia) need for support.

Henceforth, during the campaign activities against OSF-Armenia several targets are chosen for threats, hate speech, calls for violence, defamation and humiliation: (1) George Soros himself and particularly Larisa Minasyan, the Director of the local OSF office; (2) well-known actors engaged in protecting child rights, the rights of women, LGBT persons, persons with HIV/AIDs and struggling for gender equality; (3) young politicians in the Government and the National Assembly that are being incriminated for having ties with the foundation and generally, the entire government headed by Nikol Pashinyan and as a consequence the idea of the revolution they lead.

Public then discuss a fake agenda thrown at by the campaign initiators that talked about manipulative myths of "the danger of foreign agent networks, the spread of perversion, pedophilia, LGBT propaganda, anti-national and anti-state activities, destruction of founding pillars of the state, such as the family, army, judiciary, church



and education system." The falsification scheme of problems and public agenda includes the reshuffling of whatever idea is being discussed to the security end of the discussion spectrum, i. e. for the formulation of the fake agenda an attempt is thus made to speculate with sensitive points and cultural fears, use the fact of the society not knowing much in relation to taboo topics and hope for the possible weakness of the human rights culture, as well as hope for the support of the possibly existing belligerent nationalism. In using the fact of the unsolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and manipulating the public concerns around the issue of security, these groups use the alleged friendly ties of George Soros with Ilham Aliyev. This fact "allows" anti-gender groups to "suppose" that OSF-Armenia puts forward the interests of Azerbaijan and for further persuasion they show the "pro-Azeri" stance of OSF-Armenia partner NGOs, blaming them for "taking photos with the Azeri flag, refusing heroizing the soldiers killed during the April War."

Starting from May of 2019, the actions organized against OSF-Armenia moved to have a more systematic and public nature, when a political technologist and a PR specialist well-known from the previous regime, Narek Malyan<sup>28</sup> established anti-democratic and anti-gender VETO<sup>29</sup> branded campaign. According to the VETO Facebook page, their objective is to "close down all the funds and NGOs in Armenia associated with George Soros." The acronym of VETO stands for "Vanquish Externally-led Traitors' Orbit" (literally translation reads as "ultimatum to those handing the country to outsiders"), which is formulated based on the "external interference" canons of Putinistic myth. This clique was organizing different flashmobs, motorbike rides throughout Armenia, obstructions of the OSF-Armenia office's entrance, the group was targeting OSF and its employees by holding performances at the

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**28.** During 2011-2017, Narek Malyan was the Adviser to the Head of the Police, Vladimir Gasparyan, against whom right after the revolution a criminal case was opened on the grounds of abuse of authority and deliberate inaction. During the revolution, Malyan was one of those smearing the popular movement, and already after it, he became an active member of anti-government and anti-gender media projects and campaigns, and is currently, suffused with court cases filed against human rights defenders, activists, members of the new government. He has authored "The PR of Sodomy" (2014), "Ground Zero" (2017) and "The Queen of Hearts" (2019) books.

**29.** VETO stands for "Vanquish Externally-led Traitors' Orbit" (literally translation reads as "ultimatum to those that hand the country to outsiders"). The objective is to "close down all the funds and NGOs in Armenia associated with George Soros."

entrance, making fun of them, writing different targeting messages on their walls, etc. Other well-known anti-human rights and anti-gender groups and activists echoed those actions, including ex-police official and notoriously well-known newspaper editor. Among VETO sympathizers there was even an extreme right-wing neo-Nazi from Belgium.<sup>30</sup> VETO's attacks against OSF-Armenia served the anti-gender and anti-government rhetoric, which was being circulated via media and Facebook pages. The gem of the Facebook campaign was the wall of targets developed by political technologist Malyan (as he called it "The Wailing Wall of Soros"). On the wall of VETO's office, he had pinned the photos of activists, human rights defenders, political and public figures, which according to his myth are the "Agents' network of Soros in Armenia" ("the list of vile people that have received funds from Soros to sell their country").<sup>31</sup>

Even this level of targeting, hate calls, threats and high density of denunciation did not win the attention of the state system, but first of all the police, only certain figures from the new power have expressed their personal opinions and have taken supportive steps condemning the attacks against OSF-Armenia.

Although the siege of OSF-Armenia's office initiated by VETO had a protracted nature, during which the employees and visitors were being attacked by insults, a physically threatening tense atmosphere was being created, the normal working life of the office was being interrupted, however, the law enforcement bodies were not providing adequate protection measures, were not ensuring the uninterrupted and safe entry of employees and visitors. In response to the prolonged blockades, practically only the partners and civil society figures came to the support of the office by organizing solidarity meetings in front of it to protect the space and people working there with their presence.<sup>32</sup> Maria Karapetyan was amongst the very few from the majority faction

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**30.** Fip.am. (2019, June 14). Who are anti-sorosists?. Retrieved from <https://fip.am/7220>.

**31.** Among the photos pinned on that wall are the numerous partners and 3 members of our research organization.

**32.** Zargaryan, R. (2019, September 30). Members of civil society had organized an action in front of the OSF Armenia Office. *Azatoryun*. Retrieved from <https://www.azatoryun.am/a/30191414.html>.

of "My Step" of the National Assembly that participated in the OSF support actions, stressing in her words the fact of assaults against the civil society by VETO.

Prime Minister Pashinyan had also had opportunities to respond to the attacks of the anti-gender campaign, targeting OSF-Armenia's actions as "threats" and "sorosists." Although in various responses Pashinyan puts himself and the 2018 revolution aside from "Soros" labeled ideas and delineates it, on the other side he continues the discourse within the frames defined by the anti-democratic forces that use the rhetoric of vile Soros. Besides, building his political positioning by contrasting it with the previous regime, the Prime Minister omits the current urgent issues and items on the agenda that require political judgment and solutions concerning the attacks inflicted on progressive civil society and NGOs.

Overall, the anti-democratic campaigns seem to reach their objective by weaving such a myth that discredit progressive and human rights defense actions, using the ghost of the Soros label, which forces members of the new Government and National Assembly to avoid any type of neutral or positive association. By avoiding to take a stance related to the actions of anti-human rights groups, state institutions and actors in a way support them, allowing the narrowing down of the space for progressive groups, but instead leading to the domineering of anti-human rights groups and their discussions.

Thus, "being dangerous" and "sorosist" in the key campaigns led locally against human rights defenders, through its protracted nature and by spreading from anti-gender groups to wider circles, impacts the physical vulnerability of human rights defenders, leads to the limitation of their actions and overall narrowing of the progressive civil society space, as well as it impedes the progress of much-awaited and needed reforms in the country.

## Conclusion

Our analysis of anti-gender campaigns and rhetoric in Armenia shows that being formulated in concurrence with the upward wave of anti-human rights and anti-democratic campaigns are still mostly affiliated with Kremlin circles and the agenda of maintaining and developing the influence of Russian Federation (RF) in the post-Soviet countries. Starting from 2013, groups associated with anti-gender campaigns apply the groundless and simplistic tools of anti-human rights campaigns of several countries (USA, Hungary, Poland, etc.), however, in the meantime they are mostly repeating the activities applied in RF, i. e. trying to put forward anti-gender legal initiatives tried by Kremlin, halt legal initiatives aimed at increasing gender sensitivity (stemming from international obligations of the Republic of Armenia), circulate the same slogans formulated in RF and even use the same fliers. Gradually, the increasing financial flows from Russia formed an agenda loyal to Kremlin politics via Russian supported partner initiatives and RONGOs controlled and trusted by the local authorities, advocating the safeguarding of neo-Stalinist paternalistic myths and social structures. If before that, the objective of civically active NGOs was the establishment of democracy and the protection of rights in Armenia, instead RONGOs are aiming at strengthening anti-democratic, anti-rights, paternalistic morality under the disguise of conservative ideology and values. Through this, it is attempted to legitimize the reproduction of Russia's patronal politics of control over Armenia and the perpetuation of the latter's subordinate dependence from it. Through the application of various falsifications employed in anti-gender campaigns led by RONGOs, over these years, they succeeded in turning term "gender" and the law on gender equality into an agenda for the polarization of the society, targeting of progressive civil society, and anti-European propaganda, thus, creating media noise and pseudo-cultural foundation for the political decision to join the Customs Union instead of the European Association Agreement

on the premises of the union being the only feasible "political" path for the "salvation of the traditional Armenian family."

In this respect, the activities of anti-gender groups can leave, no matter how influential, a false impression of temporary campaign that is conditioned by mere external factors.

Nevertheless, after the 2018 revolution, in the internal politics, in the context of the formation of an anti-government pole jointly with the oligarchs loyal to the old regime, these anti-gender groups assumed a more independent and local role, serving the internal political agenda. Left without adequate legal and political judgment by post-revolutionary Government of Armenia, they succeeded in mobilizing (around second and third presidents of Armenia Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan and like-minded oligarchs) anti-government forces through their anti-democratic and anti-rights actions, multiply their resources (including in the media) and act under a more complex internal political logic. They have now transitioned into a more public collaboration with the Armenian Apostolic Church, have expanded in the public sphere and discourse and consequentially, in their attempts to set the own public agenda have drawn ordinary citizens and at times such groups that in general are supporters of democratization of Armenia.

Henceforth, it is important to record that the failure of adequate reaction to anti-gender campaigns by the state institutions can lead to internal polarization that is being based on the escalation of public fears and distress held about sensitive issues of sexuality and security. Factually, inside the societal issues of rights protection, gender equality and identity have transformed into platforms of internal political and RF's geopolitical sustained influence and/or escalation, which puts at greater risk the already vulnerable and marginal LGBT persons, the defenders of their rights and gender equality advocates' life and actions.

Thus, campaigns against gender equality and LGBT persons rights simultaneously works towards the following political directions:

- Target activists and rights defenders of women and LGBT persons, progressive civil society and even artists with progressive initiatives, devalue their already underestimated actions and devalue the concept of human rights,

- Aim at shrinking the space of progressive and rights protection figures and impeding the progression of legal awareness of the public, as well as the development of the culture of democratic cohabitation,
- Aim at overtly halting the democratization of Armenia and much-awaited rights-based possible institutional and legal reforms,
- Target state figures through their alleged or real ties with rights defenders and civil society that they simultaneously target and discredit,
- Create preconditions so that state figures avoid collaborating with progressive civil society and rights defenders, as well as decisive reforms through their potential for denunciation and targeting by those groups,
- Aim at fighting against the reformist and progressive factions of the ruling authorities in Armenia, instigating anti-government sentiments among the public, increasing their influence in the internal political life,
- Seed doubts in relation to the fact of the revolution being popular, alleging that it was an implanted plan by external forces,
- Aiming at lowering the public trust towards the government by doubting the popularity of the revolution, as well as in the long run, shattering the confidence of the society towards the formation of autonomous public life and sovereignty of Armenia by exhuming the "big bother's" need for support,
- Create resistance against European (Western) legal, political and cultural field in a broader context and based on this resistance argue for the unequal and subordinate structure of the relations between Kremlin and Armenia, as well as the continuance of tangible geopolitical influence,
- Exploit democratic mechanisms and conditions, particularly those of free assembly and free speech to act against the democracy that ensures those public freedoms,

- Use anti-gender, homophobic, fascist rhetoric, organize mediated targeting campaigns through gender and LGBT rights themes (sometimes even provoked or fake media events) against the post-revolutionary Government and the leader Nikol Pashinyan to diminish their public trust in reality, when they lack substantive political say and temporarily shun from directly targeting the Prime Minister, who so far holds high public standing,
- Attract the attention of the Government and the public, as well as response resources, through provocative initiatives taking over space for constructive debate of reforms, formulation, and development of public political agenda, replacing it with a fake one.

Regardless of the internal political and geopolitical objectives that those groups pursue there are also cultural-axiological, thinking, behavioral and ritualistic samples that are either well thought through or are intuitively exploited, distorted or falsified and used by organizers of anti-gender campaigns as foundations. Using accepted cultural samples or mechanisms or their inverted manipulation helps these anti-gender campaigns to come across as "natural and sane, patriotic and Christian, nationalist and loyal" when these pursue very clear political, thus, not "natural" objectives and interests, while through their acts of hate and violence are anti-Christian, and reproduce a state and national ideological cycle dependent on RF, but close to the rest of the world.

Thus, the anti-gender messages in Armenia are built on the following interlinked, complementary, cultural and ideological rational axes that sometimes repeat each other.

- The meaning of "tradition" is distorted, as a monolithic, immutable and genuine tradition is being offered through such a model that is presented as being in conflict with the evolution of these traditions in modern times, it also denies the real stories attesting to the richness of the diversity of traditions in Armenian culture.
- Armenian ethnic identity, Christian identity, national and state security are placed in fake opposition with principles of human-



ism and protection of rights, manipulating the cultural fears and sensitive points of the public in Armenia, preying on the lack of knowledge of so far taboo topics of sexuality and hoping that the culture of rights protection in Armenia is weak.

- Armenian ethnic identity and values are being presented as monolithic, immutable and traditional, which in their true meaning reveal the paternalistic, unequal and unjust ideas that are found not only in Armenia, but are spread in post-Soviet space (and elsewhere).
- Through the manipulations of nationalist values and thoughts, patriotic sentiments, family values and fears explained by the state of unfinished war, they strive to breed extreme nationalism with anti-rights protection (as anti-European) attitudes, which is being nourished by fascist, anti-Semitic, homophobic and anti-gender blend.
- Falsify the spirit of human rights: putting the recognition of minority rights at cross-roads with the rights of the others, i. e. depriving the majority of a given place of its privilege of arbitrary treatment of minorities through violence, expulsion, denigration, and humiliation is being interpreted as a violation of the "majority rights."
- World Outlook and Armenian landscape: complex and interconnected relations are continuously re-narrated, preserving the ghost of Stalin's iron curtains. In other words, Armenia in its "inside" schematically is divided from the world (mostly from the Western World) or the "foreign", which is the same as the "external enemy", whereas the Armenian culture as an allegedly monolithic ethnic, original, pure, traditional is presented to stand against the infiltrations of the outside, i. e. new, foreign, tainted and conniving.
- The rightful demands of people for dignity and equality, protection of human rights and democratization of Armenia and their progressive struggle, where the activists and human rights defenders live and strive in Armenia, is descended to simplistic national-anti-national, traditional-new/modern (thus foreign, thus,

enemy, thus, unclean) struggle of identities, where they present themselves standing on the heights of the protection of national identity while demonizing rights defenders as lucratively motivated plotters whose strings are pulled from the outside forces.

- Sexual orientation and/or gender identity are defined as the core and principle property, identity and status of the human (mostly meaning men), which is being presented as hostile to all other masculine properties, identities and statuses widespread in public, thus, automatically generating intolerance and legitimizing the grounds for violence.
- Conspiracy theories are being woven that are based on building the image of an "external enemy" (plotting West, Europe, Soros, etc.), linked to this are the "internal enemies, anti-state forces, agents" (rights defenders, LGBT persons, progressive reformists in the new government) that are being targeted, allowing to consolidate the public around a fake agenda and exhuming nostalgia for anti-democratic Kremlin, legitimizing campaigns (media rhetoric, events, performances and rituals) that contain violence, hate, teasing and cynicism.

Although rhetorically anti-gender campaigns deny gender equality and the real, existing issues of LGBT persons' rights in Armenia, presenting it as a conspiracy inserting foreign problems, however, through their violent and hateful actions (hate speech, attacks on rights defenders, activists and public cultural, political figures along with the attempts to stop activities organized by the latter) factually serve as live evidence of the issues they vehemently deny. Through their organized anti-gender agenda attempting to fail the efforts of democratic developments in Armenia and the strengthening of sovereignty, they in away confess that the recognition of gender equality and rights of the LGBT persons carries a liberating force, against which they fight. Thus, anti-gender campaigns both through their ideological frames and practices are much brighter proofs of the urgent need for massive cultural, educational, legal and political reforms, as a protection of the democratization path of Armenia. The anti-democratic and aggressive advancement of anti-gender campaigns needs clear and decisive interruption through:

- 1 | Non-systemic, but rather through the application of legal mechanisms and commensurate punishment,
- 2 | The fundamental reforms of the judiciary and law enforcement systems, which would integrate gender sensitivity among the professionals of that sphere,
- 3 | The integration of gender sensitivity component in the legal-judicial field,
- 4 | The complex legal reforms that uproot discrimination, hate speech and violence.

All of this is possible through the execution of uncomfortable revolutionary reforms in public life to be assumed by the ruling power through the display of responsibility and needed political will.

