**WHAT TO DO WHEN
THE OLD-DAY ACTIVISM
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INTRODUCTION

Yet in mid-2000s, it became evident that globally civil society operated under restrictions and pressure. This phenomenon was first documented in 2006; already a decade later, CIVICUS reported that six out of seven people worldwide lived in a country where the civil society is under a serious pressure (Buyse, 2018). In a 2024 report on the state of civil society in the world, CIVICUS Monitor reported that the situation regarding civil society space was the worst since the beginning of publishing its annual reports in early 2010s. According to this report, only 2.1% of the global population lives in countries where civil society space is free (CIVICUS, 2024).

Civil society space is shrinking because of the political, legal and administrative pressure exerted by states (as well as corporations and large businesses). According to legal scholar Antoine Buyse, who uses the model developed by Chris van der Borghe and Carolijn Terwindt, civil society space is formed at three key levels – institutional channels (laws, procedures, possibilities for contesting), discourse (labeling, framing, discrediting) and capacity to create and maintain new spaces. The violent and non-violent pressure across all three dimensions leads to the systemic shrinking of the civil society space globally (Buyse, 2018).

Another factor that largely contributes to this shrinkage is the geographic proliferation of pressure across time. Governments all over the world "learn" from one another effective methods of curtailing the civil society space, often by literally copying legislative and administrative tools stifling the functioning of civil society. This trend is observed not only in authoritarian, but also in hybrid and even democratic regimes (Buyse, 2018).

Another global trend affecting the functioning of civil society are the changes in foreign financing policy. The most influential of these have been the expansive cuts to foreign aid programs instituted by the executive order of Donald Trump, President of the USA.[1] More specifically, the almost 90% cuts to the USAID projects have led to a sharp decline of the funds of numerous NGOs, 72% of which faced operational difficulties implying significant cuts to their staff and

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1   Exec. Order No. 14169, 90 FR 8619 (2025). https://www.federalregister.gov/d/2025-02091/page-8619

resources, suspension of projects and loss of operational sustainability.[2]

In various countries, pressure against civil society can be associated with both the local context and specific civil society organizations (CSOs), and with the general political atmosphere. In certain cases, these are deliberately targeted restrictions, whereas in others, the civil society simply falls victim of wider political processes (Buyse, 2018). Nonetheless, globally, the use of civil society suppression mechanisms and curtailing their space are reflections of broader and more systemic trends.

These trends can be observed in South Caucasus as well. After the Second Karabakh War, the authoritarian government of Azerbaijan has further consolidated its power by resorting to the nationalist discourse anchored in the longstanding conflict, society's militarization and patriarchal structures (Kluczewska, Luciani, 2025). The pressures against the civil society have intensified with the sealing of the country's land borders under the official justification of COVID-19 pandemic. This has led to further isolation and spread of the sense of fear.[3] Bahruz Samadov, an Azerbaijani peace activist, critical researcher and social scientist, not long ago attempted a suicide in a Baku prison after being sentenced to 16 years of imprisonment.[4]

At the same time, suppression of civil society in Georgia – the country deemed for many years the "oasis of democracy" of the region – specifically, introduction of a law "on foreign agents" which almost literally repeats the 2012 law of Russia, as well as the ruling "Georgian Dream" party's violent crackdown of popular protests, indicate the continuous shrinking of the civil society space in the region.[5] In Russia, the "foreign agents" law has been amended so many times and after the war in Ukraine, it has expanded to such a scope that almost any person or organization falls "under foreign influence" and can

2   EU System for an Enabling Environment for Civil Society. (2025, March 17). *The Impact of the US Funding Freeze on Civil Society: A Comprehensive Analysis by the EU SEE Initiative.* https://eusee.hivos.org/assets/2025/03/Report-The-Impact-of-the-US-Funding-Freeze-on-Civil-Society_def-170325.pdf

3   Shirinyan, A. (2025). *Solidarity without borders: For Bahruz, for Georgia, for all of us.* OC Media. https://oc-media.org/opinion-solidarity-without-borders-for-bahruz-for-georgia-for-all-of-us/

4   Farhadova, A. (2025). *Azerbaijani researcher Bahruz Samadov "attempts suicide in prison".* OC Media. https://oc-media.org/azerbaijani-researcher-bahruz-samadov-attempts-suicide-in-prison/

5   Law of Georgia on transparency of foreign influence. (2024, May 28). *Legislative Herald of Georgia.* https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/6171895?publication=0

be held accountable.[6] Introducing such a law in Georgia indicates once again that states, and particularly authoritarian regimes, are actively borrowing each other's practices of suppressing civil society and are demonstrating a tendency of contagion which spreads in various regions and political systems.[7]

Armenia's civil society is, naturally, influenced by these global and regional challenges and continues to operate in this and the specific context of local issues and developments.

The 2018 Velvet Revolution in Armenia marked the establishment of a new social-political reality in Armenia and enabled wide segments of the society and the civil society to formulate their expectations and demands for change. The growing oppression prior to the Revolution, and the failed attempts of activists and NGOs seeking paths of cooperation with the government for real change, led to the exhaustion of the civil society. Nonetheless, instead of inaction, it continued acting by seeking possible avenues of change. The knowledge and experience accumulated in the course of years, especially during street activism, became a valuable resource that had an impact on carrying out the revolution. Many representatives of the civil society joined the newly-formed government after the Revolution and held various public posts in the state governance system.

In the years following the Revolution, Armenian society in general and civil society in particular have been going through a period of multilayered transformations. These were triggered by a number of crises, which sequentially gave form to the public and civic agenda. The COVID-19 pandemic that started in 2019, the Second Karabakh War of 2020 and the mass displacement of the Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh in September 2023 became the key events around which the civil society followed a course. These local and global crises significantly transformed both the internal and external challenges faced by Armenia's civil society, and the capacities to respond and adapt to them. They have also set out new roles, requirements and responsibilities for the civil society.

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6   Kirova, I. (2024, September 19). *Foreign agent laws in the authoritarian playbook.* Human Rights Watch. https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/19/foreign-agent-laws-authoritarian-playbook

7   Freedom House. (2025). *Georgia: Freedom in the World 2025.* https://freedomhouse.org/country/georgia/freedom-world/2025

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL SCOPE

In this research, we do not provide a definition of "civil society". What we mean, however, is the predominantly "progressive civil society", a term coined in academic and activist circles to describe those segments of the civil society, which actively challenge conservative norms and aim for social and democratic change. This notion covers both formal organizations and grassroots movements fighting systemic injustices. In the Armenian reality, "progressive civil society" encompasses the formal and non-formal groups, individuals whose work, at its core, is to advocate for human rights and democracy. These groups have had an important role during the 2018 Revolution, as not only did they influence the course of political changes, but also demonstrated the dynamic and transformative nature of progressive civil society. Their activities show that civil society may act as a driver of social change, as it forms public demands and redefines formats of political participation.

The local, regional and global polycrises of the recent years have significantly reshaped the role of the civil society and the conditions under which it operates. Erosion of democracy, proliferation of right-wing and fascist policies, deepening crisis around trust toward institutions, disconnect between civil society and public at large, increasing polarization, as well as increasing cases of emotional burnout – all drive an urgent need to redefine the role and agency of the civil society. In this context, we propose an analytical framework and methodological approach aimed at extracting the discussion around civil society out of its traditional narrow definitions and placing it in the larger field of the public sphere. This way, we focus on the conditions that restrict non-governmental organizations and grassroots groups, but at the same time allow them to act not just as civil society actors, but as public actors, who make the public environment more encompassing, engaged and responsible.

We raise the following fundamental question: *Does the Armenian civil society have sufficient potential for promoting the public sphere toward social change, social justice and radicalization of democracy?* We look at the question both from a broader perspective, meaning the general capacities of the civil society, and a narrow one, in the context of the upcoming parliamentary elections in 2026. We are interested in the agency of the civil society to overcome social

apathy, to repair social connections and create genuine opportunities for the public to raise its voice and be engaged.

By saying radicalization of democracy, we mean enhancement and transformation of democratic processes by allowing them to exit the confines of formal institutions and electoral mechanisms and aim for elimination of structural injustices and empowerment of all, especially of those who are marginalized and most vulnerable. This implies expanding the scope of democratic demands and covering not only political rights, but also issues of economic, social and cultural justice.

In this sense, the role of the civil society is to push democracy toward its full liberating potential by demanding a kind of democracy that is built on justice, genuine inclusion and accountability and not merely representation.

In the meanwhile, for discussing the concept of public sphere, we anchor our approach in the theoretical conceptualizations of Jürgen Habermas and his critics too. We argue that the concept of public sphere greatly contributes to radicalizing debates around democracy by enabling the civil society to rediscover the meaning of public engagement and social responsibility – foundations upon which it actually rests.

The term 'public sphere' was coined by Jürgen Habermas, later representative of the Frankfurt School, in his 1962 book titled "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere." Habermas defines public sphere as a deliberative site where private citizens come together to give voice to public concerns and general interests and contribute to forming a common opinion (Habermas, 2021).

Habermas imagines a system where associations act as public actors who collect and disseminate the voice of citizens by creating platforms of public engagement. At the same time, Habermas centers on the empiric weight of the constitutionally prescribed circulation of power and argues that this weight primarily depends on whether "civil society, through resonant and autonomous public spheres, develops impulses with enough vitality to bring conflicts from the periphery into the center of the political system" (Habermas, 1996).

While this approach was later criticized, especially for failing to paying sufficient attention to the existing power inequalities in the public sphere (for example,

unequal distribution of knowledge and resources; different levels of access to media; disproportionate political participation), nonetheless, this conceptual framework has made a large impact on social sciences and political discourse (Azatyan, 2007). It were especially the feminist theorists who re-emphasized that the public sphere is not a homogenous and hegemonic arena, that it is necessary to speak not of only one public sphere, but of multiple public spheres, covering the voice of marginalized groups too (Fraser, 1990).

Thus, we rely on Sabine Lang's theoretical proposal, who offers two paths for redefining the concept of "civil society" – historical and theoretical (Lang, 2013). Lang contends that the early modern civil societies did not grow exclusively from prepollitical, non-political or other associations separate from the state. Their roots are deeply extended into the demands for public voice, citizen engagement and political protection (Lang, 2013). The civil societies of late 18th century and early 19th century Europe were formed as arenas voicing public engagement and justice. This historical and theoretical redefinition shows that the civil society and modern nation-state were initially tied to each other and without publicity and public agency, justice-making would not have been possible (Splichal, 2002).

Against this backdrop, the existence of independent associations and networks of trust is a necessary but not sufficient condition for fully understanding civil society. In order for civil society to form, it is vital to have not only institutional organizing, but also public voice and defensive capabilities.

Removing the public sphere from theoretical approaches related to civil society, especially in liberal interpretations, often aims at protecting it from over-politicization. However, this also disrupts the possibility for civil society to be formed as a public actor and for its full political vitality. Liberal theories often delineate between the civil society and the political system and imagine public participation as participation in electoral processes and engagement in "elite publics" comprised of experts. Nevertheless, such understanding limits the arenas for public engagement and disrupts the role of the public sphere as a main component of democracy.

A viable public sphere is one of the most important indicators of a civil society from the perspective of a functional democracy. It allows the people to shape its own future, a capability that became so urgent and contentious after the

Second Karabakh War. Public sphere operates through communication by combining cultural creativity and well-founded debate with the potential to create knowledge and impact state or institutional politics.

The vitality of the public sphere is conditioned upon the nature of engagement – the more diverse, innovative and active is the participation, the more does the public sphere match its purpose. It weakens when it is limited to passive responses to the actions or failures of the state. Comparative research shows that civil society, conceived within the liberal framework of pre-political or apolitical arena exclusively based on association, loses its essence of being public. The fundamental notion that civil societies were initially formed based on publicity and political demands, vanishes. These two factors speak to the deep interconnectedness of civil society and modern nation-state.

Marginalization or deliberate ejection of the public sphere may often be perceived as an attempt to protect the civil society from "too much politicization", however in reality this threatens the foundations upon which its impact and meaning rest.

To conclude, analysis of the public sphere brings to the fore the conditions under which civil society actors can act as public actors. They become central communication circuits in predominantly professionalized, constituent-lacking public platforms. At the same time, they form an organizational environment, where citizens have an opportunity to express and publicize their voice. They also direct civic concerns towards influencing various levels of political or economic systems. And eventually, this influence is expressed both verbally and through non-verbal communication channels.

CHOICE OF THE METHOD

Socioscope positions itself as a research and civil society organization actively engaged in the processes aimed at civic, political and social change made through research, translation and educational initiatives which boost production and proliferation of public knowledge. In this sense, the examination of civil society developments and problems is Socioscope's field of self-examination too. At the same time, Socioscope tasks itself with revisiting and rethinking the role of social science in politically unstable, turbulent situations, polycrises and transitions. Our organization challenges the notion that social research is "neutral" and stresses that there are power dynamics between the researcher and the researched and acknowledges that research is not only a neutral learning process, but also a political one (Edwards, Mauthener, 2012).

From this perspective, the current research is not merely documentation of the current state of the civil society. Instead, it offers a participatory and self-reflecting platform to think about the current problems, challenges and solutions together with other civil society representatives. In other words, this is not about civil society as a "research object" but a self-critical examination together with and inside another civil society.

The research was comprised of five group discussions held with the representatives of the progressive civil society. The goal of the first two discussions was to identify the concerns and issues raised by civil society and to establish the scope of the main research questions. During the last discussion, we presented the preliminary research conclusions and our theoretical-methodological perspective and invited discussion around one main question, that of the possible role and strategies of the civil society ahead of the 2026 parliamentary elections.

This research has limitations, and it does not capture all the segments of civil society, despite our efforts to reach out to many in order to ensure broad participation. Also, given the exhaustion we experienced by the time we would complete the analysis of the findings, the time restrictions and lack of resources, we cannot insist that we have been able to ensure a fully participatory methodology. This fact in itself is a sign of the structural and institutional challenges the civil society is currently facing in Armenia, as it reveals the practical complexity of conducting participatory research in our current social-political context.

CIVIL SOCIETY IN TRANSFORMATION

Civil society has undergone radical transformation in the past decade. This transformation has been induced not only by domestic political events, but also by global and regional crises. Nonetheless, our discussions showed that the fundamental driving force for the transformation of Armenian civil society has been the 2018 Velvet Revolution, which, it seems, was a marker not only for the political field's identity but also for that of the civil society.

The revolution has turned a vast part of the civil society into political actors. It has put the differences in political positions and perceptions within the civil society into the spotlight and has deepened the polarization. Despite acknowledgement of problems of varying nature and depth and retrospective reconsiderations of the past, it was stressed during the discussions that the revolution should not be discredited and it was important to take note of the positive changes.

Overall, the civil society of Armenia operates in a state of burnout, depletion of internal resources, institutional instability – all exacerbated by omnipresent uncertainty. Along with physical and mental exhaustion, the context within which the civil society operates is fraught with financial challenges, with various CSOs facing the problem of financial instability.

The transformation of the civil society can be conditionally divided into several phases. These phases are in line with both the public sentiments and the ideological restructuring and the quakes that shook the society.

1. **Phase of excitement (2018–2019)**

   The revolution opened a window of social opportunities and change when civil society representatives – activists, researchers, human rights defenders – started to fill in the ranks of state governance system.

> *"The excitement was that we all, at least myself, were actively engaged in the revolutionary processes… and I had a big hope that we would walk the path of democracy."*

Independent researcher, man

During this period, civil society was perceived as a driver of the revolution, its representatives were seen as forerunners of systemic and institutional change in the government.

2. Phase of doubt and crisis (2019–2020)

With time, it became clear that the system as an institutional structure, was resisting and was bigger than the intervention or effort made by an individual.

> *"The post-revolutionary time was about structure vs agency – the extent to which you can impact and to which the systems are stronger."*

Independent researcher, woman

The doubt was deepened by not only the resistance of the system, but also by the barrier slowly emerging between former colleagues recruited in the government and the civil society.

3. Phase of war and disappointment (2020–2023)

The Second Karabakh War was not only a shock from a political and security perspective, but a culmination of "disappointment" for the civil society. It was a disappointment from not only the acting authorities, but also the politics and political rhetoric of the former authorities produced in the preceding decades.

> *"2020 was a time of debunking of a large scale for me. Everything we lived with was shattered in front of our eyes."*

Yerevan based NGO employee, woman

During this period it became clear that even after the revolution, having such vast public support and trust, the authorities failed to implement radical institutional reforms bringing up various reasons, but particularly demonstrating in practice that the old system was functional.

4. Phase of sobering and normalization (2023 – present)

The period following the forced displacement of Karabakh Armenians is viewed as a phase of sobering and normalization from a social and political perspective, a description to be attributed to the civil society too. During this phase of normalization, it becomes clear that people with various interests

cannot have one single position. In this context, the divisions within the civil society started to be viewed as something natural – an expression of plurality.

One of the key marks of civil society's transformation is the blurring of boundaries or dispositions between the authorities and the civil society. After the revolution, the "civil" actors started appearing in various governmental ranks. This brought up not only practical, but also ethical issues, including issues of accountability in terms of where the functions of the civil society start and where they end.

Besides, such blurring of boundaries resulted in political assaults against the civil society. Civil society representatives state:

"The civil society, in its definition according to which we have been brought together around this table, became part of the political struggle after 2018. I believe that after 2018 or perhaps starting at some point in 2018, it became part of the political struggle for political figures. Remember the protests in front of the Soros office with the chants: "You brought to power this man, this traitor…"

Editor of independent media, man

After the revolution, it became evident that being civil society no longer means simply being an opposition to the government. Before 2018, civil society was predominantly exclusionary, but now many civil society representatives are involved in joint activities with state institutions and are cooperating with them on various issues and in various contexts. This cooperation, naturally, is promoted by Western donors who often provide financial support and expect that the civil society organizations will be more conforming to both the state politics and the international obligations the state has taken. Thus, civil society actors act both inside – within state institutions, and as watchdogs demanding accountability. This duality in itself causes inner clashes and polarization.

Moreover, according to some research participants, the shattering of disillusionment of expectations from the revolution led to being realistic.

"The Soviet model of a quasi-state that was instituted since the 90s, had no chance of being rapidly changed."

Representative of international foundation, man

Armenia's civil society, especially its progressive segment, has been undergoing powerful internal and external crises. These crises exposed the limits of civil society impact and agency, and led to rearrangement of actors, reconsideration of principles and ultimately, to a sense of identity loss.

However, within this uncertainty, civil society is trying its best to find its place, and this often depends on the agendas and policies of the authorities of the day, so usually civil society remains within the limits of these agendas and policies. This is in a way a strategy of conforming to the situation and resorting to a survival mechanism under the established configuration, instead of imagining its own new and radical strategies and agendas. Civil society transformation, as well as political revolutions are often accompanied by ambivalence, risks and losses. However, in this journey, the Armenian civil society can take up the role of not only and not simply an oppositionist, but also of one who reorganizes the setting and relations within the public despite its own challenges and the overarching uncertainty.

THE DYNAMICS OF CIVIL SOCIETY POLARIZATION AND COHESION

Politics is never an ideal "neutral" arena in democratic societies. It creates fields of cohesion and conflict, where boundaries are drawn between "us" vs. "them" on various decisions and positions. This understanding is especially important in the context of civil society studies, as civil society is perceived not only as a network of human rights institutions or an arena of civic initiatives, but also as a field fraught with struggle for values, power, mission and public representation.

As emphasized in the theory of agonistic pluralism (Mouffe, 2024), there is a fundamental difference between an enemy and an "adversary." In liberal democracy, the enemy is to be eliminated, whereas an adversary is a legitimate opponent who is different from us. Looking at the dynamics of the Armenian civil society, it becomes clear that the opportunity of making politics in the newly-created situation after 2018 started to induce internal polarizations. The civil opposition was turned into an actor within the system, which changed not

only the positional arrangements within the society, but also the foundations for value-based commonalities.

Our analytical scope evolves around three axes of civil society polarization:

1. **The 2018 Revolution** as a pivotal moment for systemic change. It created a new illusion for representation, however this transfiguration at the same time changed the externally oppositional, internally cohesive nature of the civil society. For numerous organizations, the revolution turned into a platform of expectations, and when they never came true, it brought about not only disappointment, but also polarization around how to be positioned in relation to the new authorities.

2. **The Second Karabakh War and its consequences** – the deepest trauma that exposed the impotence of the state governance system, and brought around value-based frictions within the civil society. Some were not prepared to accept the legitimacy of the defeated authorities; others were trying to reevaluate the defeat as something normal in the context of a lack of a democratic statehood under sovereign control. New boundaries of cohabitation were drawn at that point, not based on shared ideas, but rather on a cohesive response.

3. **Donor agendas and conforming to them,** inducing sectoral fragmentation and a need to maneuver. Local issues, which can be of systemic, deep and conflict-fraught nature, fail being in the spotlight because they do not seem to be attractive for the donor community or do not fit the "commodified" project-based logic. Donor requirements for reporting, evaluation of deliverables – all feed formality. As a result, a significant part of the civil society turns into a management entity, instead of being politically engaged and aspiring for public change. With lack of self-reflection, civil society loses its critical weight. It stops viewing itself as a party or reproducer of power dynamics, it stops asking itself: what kind of knowledge is it producing, in what kind of a language and for whom?

The discussions within the civil society show that polarization is not always a result of deep value-based discord. It is also obvious that despite there being no direct political suppression, there are internal configurations of relations, more specifically the practice of self-censorship caused by the fear of being targeted and in order to conform to expectations for internal loyalty.

> *"... Within the civil society, we censor ourselves because we know that there is a powerful, strong group inside that is going to target us. Even if it is not done explicitly, you know that there will be a lot of discussion about your "talking points" in internal chats, during various meetings."*

Human rights activist, man

Some would conclude that this is due to a lack of debate culture where plurality would be welcome. However, what comes to the surface here is agonistic pluralism in practice, i.e. divergences within the civil society are not viewed as enmity, but rather as a legitimate opposition. Nonetheless, this divergence is often rejected as something intolerable or is left invisible.

Our research shows that the war, the trauma coming from the defeat in the war and the overall crisis have turned into an opportunity for consolidation. Many organizations responded to the issue of displacement, they mobilized and got together despite differences in their methods or ideas of operation. This speaks to the fact that often times some forms of solidarity are a result of an essential mission, and not of converging opinions.

The psycho-social measurement of polarization (Prooijen, 2021) emphasizes that the transformation of the information environment through emotions, fear and expectations is deepening group divergence. Rational perception of various types of information is replaced with a selective and often instinctive response paving way for manipulative communication that takes form of disinformation, provocation and cynical comments. This is a sign of exhaustion, emotional burnout, inability to make politics and a psychological state of reactivity.

> *"... When I look at Facebook and mass media, I think that what dominates is the policy of devaluing – everything is derided."*

Vanadzor based NGO employee, human rights defender, woman

There is a serious clash within the civil society between ideals and political realism: often times, civil society expectations match neither public sentiments, nor the capacity of the state. This induces internal clashes especially around issues of financing, strategic positioning and relations with the public. However, at the very same time, crises are an opportunity for re-consideration. Cuts to external financing are forcing civil society to rethink fundamental questions,

such as: who are we, what do we defend, how much effort and resources can we invest in our struggles?

The polarization of civil society is not simply an internal division; it is part and parcel of modern democracy which indicates both an ideological diversity and the capacity of mobilizing public response. What matters in a democratic system, is not the agreement, but rather the legitimacy of the form of disagreement. Civil society polarization, no matter how painful or disruptive it may seem, harbors an opportunity for growth, rethinking and self-reflection with the condition, however, that the deliberative culture develop and not stagnate under silence, self-censorship or devaluation.

Thus, the civil society sector stands at a fork in the road of either turning into a platform of debate of ideas and initiatives and healthy competition, or to divide into mutually excluding camps. The philosophy of agonistic democracy suggests that the primary task of democracy is not to extinguish emotions from the public sphere in order to make rational mutual agreement achievable, but to guide these passions towards radical democratic programs (Mouffe, 2024).

THOUGHTS AROUND THE "CRISIS" OF ACTIVISM AND SEARCH FOR NEW FORMS OF STRUGGLE

Any mentioning of activism, civic activeness and participation in Armenia brings up a flashback of its origin story and the "Save Teghut Civic Initiative"[8] formed in 2007 as a symbolic example of grassroots civic movement and a baseline for the contemporary activism in Armenia.

The campaign against the copper-molybdenum mine in Teghut, the story of the formation of the activist group and its activities are considered a landmark in the growth of the environmental movement in Armenia, accumulation of activist experience and political self-consciousness. This movement symbolized not only a fight for environmental justice, but became exemplary in terms of civic resistance and self-organization, and inspired several other civic

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8   Ecolur.com. (2008, January 21). *Teghut forest defenders demand suspension of mining.* Ecolur. Retrieved from: https://www.ecolur.org/hy/news/teghout/34/

initiatives. The Teghut campaign consolidates and symbolically presents the key contradictions and concerns around mining in Armenia (Ishkanian, 2013).

After the Save Teghut civic Initiative, several other activist-led movements and civic groups emerged with the goal of addressing environmental, social and urban development issues. These movements and initiatives continued to enlarge the arena of civic participation by deepening the foundations of democracy.

Looking back, we can state that at the roots of the establishment of Armenia's civil society are predominantly the environmental struggles and campaigns for conserving public spaces.[9] These developments can be associated with the peace-making efforts of the 1990s, when individuals, social groups and peace-making movement initiatives took front stage after the war. They sowed the preconditions for the activism of the years to come, whereby individual initiatives were transformed into coordinated civic movements.

The methods of civic campaign and activism have always been diverse in Armenia taking form of public events, statements, manifestos, statements addressed to state authorities – all the way to direct action, such as protests, rallies, sit-ins, petitions and other modes of public communication. An important element in those campaigns have been arts as a means of manifesting social-political positions and forming a culture of defiance.

With time, the activist movements defined a clear method of campaign – that being grounded in an ideology and clear civic and political demands. The latter were mainly in defiance of systemic injustices, corruption, extractivism, exploitation of nature and other forms of economic exploitation. The key actors of the campaigns – the grassroots groups, individual activists, youth initiatives and environmental NGOs, formed self-organized civic platforms aimed not only at raising certain issues, but also at achieving structural changes.

With time, these movements and modes of campaigning shaped a sense of agency among supporters and participants, deepened their political engagement, and contributed to the maturity of the civil society (Socioscope, 2016). The accumulated experience and the intolerance towards unlawfulness

9   The Teghut campaign was followed by the "Save Trchkan Waterfall" in 2011, Mashtots Park campaigns in 2012. A cornerstone of civic activism has been the "Amulsar Campaign" waged since 2013 to these days.

paved way for the NGOs, human rights defenders and activists to play a crucial role during the 2018 Velvet Revolution.

The revolutionary events of spring 2018 opened a new page in the history of civic campaigning by introducing new methods of campaigning that were rarely used before. These included decentralized simultaneous actions in Yerevan and marzes of Armenia, including blockades of streets and highways, barricading state buildings, mass self-organization, strikes in school, universities and other institutions, and other new mechanisms of mobilization.

The media toolkit of information dissemination was also substantially transformed at this stage. Social media, and particularly Facebook turned not only into a platform for organizing, but were a key source of revolutionary information. The modes of mobilization, the ideological framing of dissent, the potential for instigating commitment to the movement (revolutionary identity) and the progressive civil society groups stood at the forefront of the revolution becoming a source of inspiration for the masses and democratizing the various modes and methods of defiance (Socioscope, 2018).

Speaking about the changes in the modes and techniques of civic activism after the Velvet Revolution is inevitable. It was impossible to expect that after the political regime change, the civil protest would continue with the same intensity and dynamics, especially under the circumstance that there was a broad consensus that Armenia's future development would take the democratic path. However, as it often happens in phases of transition, ruptures emerged between political expectations and real changes which led to disappointment. Not long after the revolution, it became clear that the expected reforms had to face up to structural and systemic resistance, as well as populism and political infantilism.

Nonetheless, the contention that the civil society stopped its fights after the revolution is not true. Activism simply took on a new phase and redefined itself to the new realities of response. In this context, the Amulsar campaign is of special significance, as it reemphasized the continuous nature of civic struggles and showed the capability to reorganize defiance.

The campaign against mining on Mount Amulsar started yet in 2013; however, in spring 2018, after the Velvet Revolution, it reached a momentum. The revolution enabled new possibilities for the mobilized local communities

and environmental activists on the one hand, and for escalating the agenda of the struggle to higher levels of government, on the other. Many activists and movement participants held the belief that the success of the revolution against the former corrupt system would pave way for restoring justice and winning a victory for environmental rights.

However, the reality was more complex. Despite the attempts of cooperation between the government circles and movement participants, the hesitation of authorities in relation to Amulsar, the uncertainty and delayed decision-making exposed the limitations of the revolutionary authorities. The Amulsar campaign became the first big clash between the civil society and authorities and exposed not only the lack of political will, but also the hegemony of local and global neoliberal politics.

While seven years have passed since the revolution, the Amulsar struggle lives on. Activists are consistently voicing about the issue both within Armenia and beyond. They are facing strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP) and other litigations.[10]

The Velvet Revolution enabled new opportunities for the cooperation of the ruling power and civil society towards joint activities aimed at reforms in various sectors, however this also gave room for rethinking about the place and role of the civil society under these new circumstances. The new political environment that emerged as a result of the Revolution offered a new level for public political participation, especially in the processes of developing and implementing the reforms agenda. The civil society, which was before that acting more as a watchdog and often times a defiant force, now received an opportunity of acting as a partner.

Nonetheless, the new situation also presented a number of new challenges. The role of the civil society as a key institution that holds authorities accountable, often came into conflict with its new status – that of being a partner. In this context, the relevant question arose on how to combine the roles of a critic and supporter of reforms without losing independence and adhering to cherished principles?

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10   Gharibyan, T. (2024). *Strategic lawsuits against public participation in Armenia.* Human Rights House, Yerevan, https://hrhyerevan.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/SLAPPs-report-2025en.pdf

Thus, the Velvet Revolution both created new opportunities for cooperation and a need to rethink the foundations of the identity, mission and practices of the civil society in the conditions of the new political reality.

In-depth understanding of the newly-created political context is essential for discussing the waning activeness of the civil society or the "crisis" of activism. The experience and toolkits of civic campaign that was forged over the years – along with its language and vocabulary – were appropriated by oppositional forces and their satellite media pursuing very concrete political gains. The language of the civil society that was used in the struggles against the authoritarian regime, is used by the representatives of now former authorities acting as opposition and its satellite media in order to criticize the current authorities and that same civil society. Before the revolution, the civil society also took on the role of an opposition posing demands for public justice and democracy. However, in the current complicated context, sharing the same arena with the political opposition, especially in the leadership of the former regime representatives, is perceived as a political and value-based contradiction which is unacceptable for the civil society. Here, it is important to touch on the changes in the modes of campaigning. There are multifaceted reasons for this – starting from the fatigue that the civil society experiences after years of incessant struggles; lack of a new generation who will take over these struggles – all these factors that are limiting introduction of new approaches and strategies. Another factor are the sentiments among certain groups of "still expecting changes." A common sentiment is that "there are no more resources and inspiration for coming up with new techniques of struggle" and in certain cases this leads to closeting.

> *"There were too diverging opinions within the same group, many conflicts, but they were organized somehow, and there were people there. Now, these people are no longer there, and there is no new generation to come and join ideological things. I think we still need to come up with new techniques, new tools, and I think the mode of activism has completely changed or does not exist."*

Co-founder of Yerevan based art NGO, woman

One of the group discussions on activism in Armenia focused on whether "there was or there wasn't a method", especially from the perspective of long-

term strategy-making. It is commonly believed that the local activism always waged its campaigns under the conditions of "methodological weakness" or lack of coordinated approaches. This thought is often reemphasized within the civil society as a reflection on lack of organized or targeted action.

Various civil society representatives state that before the Velvet Revolution, the divergences, conflicts and disagreements around modes of struggles and ideological platforms did not deter consolidation around a common goal. These movements were ultimately aimed at creating space, becoming heard and what is most important, at pushing public demands into the political arena through concerted effort.

However, the post-revolutionary developments, especially the Second Karabakh War and its consequences not only reshaped political agendas, but also caused dramatic shifts in terms of techniques of campaigning and ways of mobilizing. It is often emphasized that civil society faces not only a methodological crisis, but also a problem of managing internal plurality and upholding its principles. To be more specific, there are some observations that there is often a lack of tolerance for plurality, which is augmenting the risk for polarization.

In this context, the methodological instability of the civil society is viewed by our research participants not only as a problem of instruments, but a deeper challenge, that of values and structure. They tie this challenge to the capacity of organizing, holding internal dialogue and forming unity all at the same time. The capability of consolidating the civil society – a multilayered and multivectored structure – is fraught with internal and external challenges, overcoming which is a task achieved by the effectiveness of activism and its long-term viability.

The issue of the transformation of civil society's activist methods in the context of post-revolutionary Armenia's political developments is regarded as an outcome of not only strategic adaptation, but also as a logical continuation of systemic changes. According the research participants, the reshaping of the methods of campaigning is tied, first of all, to the opportunity of partnership that emerged after the revolution between the new political force in power and the civil society. Many of the civil society representatives joined the government and other decision-making institutions and directed their expertise in state reform-making and implementation.

According to some observations, such engagement has substantially changed

the practice of the traditionally "campaigning" civil society. Now, advancing issues and achieving change is done not with public pressure or protests, but by engagement in legislative initiatives, shaping educational contents, developing policies and reforming public services. On the other hand, however, the question remains: to what extent are these more institutionalized modes of struggle effective, especially in areas that beg deep and often radical solutions? These areas include conservation of nature, social justice and systemic fight against poverty or the sensitive issues around sexuality and gender identity. These topics are often left out of the agendas of the state and international partners, therefore addressing them in the framework of institutional approaches often fails. As a result, a duality emerges wherein there is a conditional financial stability and participatory politics on the one hand, and a restriction of opportunity on the other, manifested in the restriction to act in a radical and not conventional manner.

In this backdrop, a new, more institutionalized activism emerges, whose goals may remain the same, but the toolkits and modes of expression may differ from the publicly open techniques of the street actions that were known before the revolution. Research participants also notice that the newly emerging activism often takes place within "narrower and more professional circles", which makes their public comprehension even more complicated. In other words, activism as is, goes on, however it has become less visible to the wider public and especially mass media.

This way, the current forms of activism are transcending simplified definitions of campaigning and are reformulated as tools of participatory politics pushing to the surface a number of fundamental issues, such as, whether this transformed activism can uphold its principles and public influence, and to what extent is this accessible and representative to those groups that were previously the main driving force of civic movements?

> *"I have participated in many discussions and heard perhaps the question four times on why are you complaining that there is no activism? There is activism, of course, it has just changed its mode and today's drag shows are the new mode of activism… The modes of activism are changing, but they are changing and going underground."*

Founder of Yerevan based cultural NGO, man

However, the question remains: whether this transformed, institutionalized or, to the contrary, underground manifestations of activism are commonly perceived as a natural development of civil society positioning, sphere and practice that emerged after the Velvet Revolution. It is this question that reveals the deep polarization within the civil society. It is obvious that such a practice is not perceived in a uniform manner by all; some view it as an expansion of opportunities, others as a weakening of defiance and threat to independence.

The institutionalized versions of activism, i.e. engagement in policy development, legislative initiatives or state reforms, in many cases remain inaccessible and less visible to broader segments of the people that used to be participants of civic movements. This is often perceived not as an expansion of civic space, but somewhat a limiting process. Therefore, the point is not about the change of techniques, but the differences in comprehending them.

Here, we come to address the question of personal experiences and self-transformation. Research participants often speak that the events of past years – the Velvet Revolution, the Second Karabakh War and their psychological and social consequences – have formed a new personal positioning both from the perspective of the civic role and the response to public phenomena.

The notion of "personal change" is attributed various interpretations. For one, this is expanding tolerance for political disagreements, for others, it is the opposite, a sign of fatigue, closeting and self-isolating. The mechanisms in which people respond to public events is also different; some retract from public platforms, but often participate in less visible platforms, such as professional or community-based ones.

Research participants view all these changes as a natural flow associated with political and social shocks. However, this naturalness, according to them, should not remain a self-contained explanation or excuse for not changing anything. On the contrary, these changes should become new spaces for creativity, should boost new ways of thinking and acting. In this regards, transformation of techniques is viewed not as a complete or instituted process, but as a movement towards constant rethinking, re-evaluation and opening new opportunities.

The transformation of activism is taking place not as an institutional or structural move, but as a personal rethinking at the levels of identity, role and practice. Research participants do not view this change as a reaction or a retreat from

former militant or publicly open positions, but to the contrary, as a new phase where an individual is attempting to make change in other platforms, with new tools and a new language.

It is possible to describe this change as a transition, where struggle stops being something associated with loud and visible actions and moves to express itself in political processes, educational programs, legal reforms, cultural interventions and other, often less visible, but no less impactful platforms.

In this regard, the transforming techniques become a change for the purpose of making impact more realistic. This is also an experience for shaping more stable and influential models of campaigning and participation by taking into account both the changes of the political environment, and the demands seen in the society. A significant part of civil society representatives views such transformation under a positive light – as a sign of growth and maturation.

This does not mean that the techniques of the past are no longer relevant, but rather points to the fact that activism is not a homogenous process, but a changeable and multilayered action, which should be able to respond to changing times and situations. Here, we also mean the dynamic modes of struggle, which can take form of both loud and silent, both public and inward-oriented engagement.

> *"… I was constantly imagining based on my own example, how have I personally changed? And I am thinking that now my position is more positive just because I think that in the areas which I deemed important to make a change in, I have myself changed a lot."*

Vanadzor based NGO employee, human rights defender, woman

Part of the criticism for civil society and activism techniques is directed at the growing institutionalization or as is common to call it, "NGO-ization." This change is interpreted as a development, the consequence of which is the replacement of methodological diversity and creative dynamics of campaigning with project-making, thinking in terms of indicators and operating in terms of deliverables.

> *"The techniques have become more sterile, more project-aimed, more associated with indicators and concrete deliverables."*

Executive director of Yerevan based NGO, man

These observations are not limited to the Armenian context only. Criticism of the NGO-ization of the civil society is actively present in the international discourse too. According to many critical studies, program-based operation with external funding often detaches the civil society from the broader masses of the society and weakens their potential for long-term struggle and erodes their grassroots foundations (Lang, 2013; Fisher, 2006, Hearn, 1998).

The short, time-bound nature of financing through grants is forcing organizations to constantly focus on searching new resources and diverts their strategic attention from the long-term and value-based causes related to social justice, human rights, equality to donor-bound project-based mechanisms. As a result, some organization become more accountable to their donors than to their local base, often not having an agenda developed on their own and losing touch with their constituents whose interests they were trying to represent. Civic movement, complying with donor requirements, become more professionalized, outcome-oriented and bureaucratic, which significantly erodes their participatory nature. This transition, according to Lang, transforms activism from its grassroots techniques to a dimension of more mechanical activities, wherein popular engagement and agendas based on local identities are pushed to the background (Lang, 2013).

In this regard, similar opinions are voiced within Armenia's civil society too, according to which institutional growth – despite its positive aspects such as stability, professionalization, political influence – can jeopardize the social roots of civic movements if it is taking place detached from the broader constituents. Some research participants state that especially ahead of the upcoming elections, when the public's political activeness is elevated in a natural way, it is important to "return" the civil society to its bases and its direct connection with the public. This thought is not just a noted challenge, but a reminder about the need to return to the identity, values and goals of the civil society.

QUESTIONS FOR RETHINKING THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PUBLIC

Several disciplines address the issue of trust, including sociology, psychology and political science, and each has a distinct approach and interpretation of this notion making it possible to frame the studies on measuring trust towards institutions and systems with broad theoretical and methodological concepts.

In his seminal work titled "Trust and Power" (1979), German sociologist Niklas Luhmann writes:

> *"Without trust only very simple forms of human cooperation which can be transacted on the spot are possible, and even individual action is much too sensitive to disruption to be capable of being planned, without trust, beyond the immediately assured moment"* *(Luhmann 1979, 88).*

Such a perspective on trust makes it possible to show how trust at the micro level is contributing toward forming a more abstract, systemic trust (Luhmann, 1988).

Trust bridges the interpersonal and systemic levels, and in that role, studies and analyses of trust have become particularly pertinent in modern times – times characterized by uncertainty, risk, or, as British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman puts it, "liquid times" (Bauman, 2007). Under conditions defined by the fluidity of uncertainty and risk – such as the coronavirus pandemic or never-ending wars – public distrust and skepticism toward political systems and institutions, political figures, the media, and international institutions, have made the breakdown of communication and dialogue between them and the public glaringly apparent across countries all over the world.

In this regard, Luhmann proposes that the key function of trust is to reduce the complexity of reality (Luhmann, 1979). The challenges of the modern world – as demonstrated by the COVID-19 crisis, wars, and the uncertainty that follows – are often unexpected, both in their nature and in their consequences. At the same time, distrust is also important, again in terms of engaging with complexity and ensuring the healthy functioning of democratic institutions.

Distrust reduces the complexity of reality by injecting suspicion and vigilance into the political context and by encouraging institutional change. In this context, the social search for trust becomes a reflexive project, based on the knowledge that the world is not merely a given, but the result of transformative human activity (Giddens, 1991). It is generally acknowledged that modern societies are becoming risk societies, but the main issue is not the number of risks, but their inevitability in both public-political and individual lives (Giddens, 1990). We witness this inevitability of risks in our own lives and day-to-day experiences, but also globally – from the coronavirus pandemic all the way to endless wars.

Under these conditions, risks and their consequences become globalized and turn into an inseparable part of public life. This situation diminishes public trust toward professional communities and negatively affects individuals' sense of personal security (Giddens, 1990).

Public trust in institutions and systems is relevant when there are public expectations of them. In the absence of such expectations, what we often have is hope – which can easily be mistaken for trust. Unlike hope, trust – despite existence of uncertainty – takes into account unpredictable or random circumstances and constantly requires a self-reflexive effort. Otherwise, trust can turn into continuous disappointment. Public trust does not necessarily imply that the trusting actor seeks to know all truths; the point is to engage with the complexity of reality in the most manageable way possible. What matters more here is the awareness that others also trust the system or the institution.

The issue of trust between civil society and the public is often discussed at an abstract level – without clear references to the factors that actually determine the presence or absence of that trust. Frequently, we fall into discourses detached from logical dialogue – failing, in some sense, to respond to global trends and to clarify the mechanisms for measuring the concept of "trust."

In the Armenian context, civil society organizations and other actors in the public sphere have for years been labeled as "grant-eaters," "jobless," "idle," "promoters of European values," "underminers of traditional societal values," "foreign agents," and other similar labels. This stigmatizing language and mindset not only influence public perceptions, but also restrict the role of CSOs in public-political discourse.

Various studies and surveys attempt to measure public trust toward CSOs, but is the concept of "trust" alone sufficient to describe the inter-relationship between civil society and the public? If not, what other ideas and criteria could be applied? What role does trust, as a mechanism of social cohesion, play in this context? As sociologist Niklas Luhmann emphasizes, trust is formed where there are expectations. But does the public have expectations from civil society? If so, what is the content of those expectations, and how does civil society respond to them?

These questions open up a much broader discourse, going beyond the quantitative measurement of trust levels. Civil society organizations, which by nature serve, on the one hand, as a bridge between vulnerable groups and state institutions, and on the other hand, as actors that raise public issues and bring them to the attention of decision-makers, must consider whether they are sufficiently represented in public platforms and whether they are truly able to establish meaningful connections with different segments of society.

Ultimately, a question arises: what kinds of resources, platforms, or mechanisms exist for such dialogue? Are CSOs capable of engaging in self-reflection to understand whether they truly know the society they supposedly serve and operate within?

The relationship between civil society and the public should not be viewed through a one-dimensional "trust/distrust" binary, but rather as a multi-layered interaction anchored in value systems, expectations, lived experiences, and communication platforms. It is precisely this inclusive and critical analytical approach that can contribute to a re-evaluation of public perceptions toward civil society.

Gaps in public communication often lead to situations in which the broader population has a very limited understanding of the role, functions, and the nature and scope of civil society's work. As a result, the public either lacks a clearly formed attitude toward civil society, or holds deep-seated distrust that has been fueled for years by discrediting narratives, propaganda campaigns, and stereotypes proliferating in the media.

Research data indicates that only 18% of people are aware of civil society organizations (CSOs) operating in their community, while the vast majority – 82%

– have no such information.[11] Even more striking is that the level of awareness is lowest in Yerevan: only 10% of respondents in Yerevan reported being aware of their local CSOs, whereas in regional towns this figure rises to 31%.[12]

With such low levels of awareness, it will not suffice to just discuss whether trust "exists" or not. What matters here is not the degree of trust, but rather the issue of whether CSOs are known and whether there is contact with the public.

These figures offer a deeper understanding of the fact that within public perception, civil society remains something obscure and distant. The role of CSOs in public deliberation is either ignored or misunderstood. The aforementioned study reveals that public perceptions of civil society are often either unclear or biased: only 18% of respondents defined civil society as "a broad range of formal and informal civic activities, the so-called 'third sector' outside the state and private sectors," 15% selected the option of "political parties and political organizations," and nearly 12% defined it as "groups and organizations funded by foreign powers or 'foreign agents.'"[13]

These notions, aside from the void of information, are embedded in public perceptions with the help of narratives shaped over the years by public discourse, the media, and certain political groups. One of the consequences of civil society being perceived as "separate from" or even "foreign to" the broader public is that public expectations from it are often exaggerated, detached from reality, or confusing. One of the key reasons for this uncertainty is the absence of dialogue.

> *"Our society does not understand what civil society is. The public sees us as someone in the middle – neither government nor opposition – who is expected to maintain an independent and neutral stance, and even to criticize the government."*

Yerevan based NGO employee, woman

In public perceptions, civil society is often not viewed as part of the public itself, but rather as a separate, independently operating entity. This is not an issue

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11   CRRC- Armenia (2022). *In the triangle of awareness – perceptions – engagement; Armenia's civil society in a nutshell.* Open Society Foundations (OSF) – Armenia.

12   Ibid.

13   Ibid.

unique to the Armenian context, but is quite manifest here (McMahon, P. C., Pickering, P. M., & Pietrzyk-Reeves, D., 2024). The media, all sorts of politically vested entities, and the lack of direct dialogue between CSOs and the public – all contribute to reinforcing public distrust toward civil society.

Participants in the study repeatedly noted that, regardless of the sector or specific groups of people they work with, the disconnect between civil society and the public is evident. According to them, this disconnect is primarily manifested in the mismatch of language and vocabulary, i.e. between how civil society frames issues and how the public understands them.[14]

"Do we really recognize the society on whose behalf we are speaking? Do we really voice the issues or seek solutions that really matter to the public? If yes, then do we speak the same language in which the public is framing these issues?"

Posing such questions allows us to detect not only the importance of language as a means of communication but also as a tool of political and cultural influence. When the issues of the public are formulated in a language or agenda not owned by it and without its active participation, then not only does the communication breakdown, it simply is not even established.

> *"The lack of this dialogue [between the public and civil society] is because in some cases the public does not really share our ideas and has its own goals."*

Founder of Yerevan based cultural NGO, man

> *"To my understanding, our society does not broadly share all these ideas."*

Managing director of media organization, woman

In other words, the problem is not only what civil society is saying, but also who is speaking, on whose behalf, and what opportunity exists for that voice to be heard? When different segments of the public lack the ability to articulate their issues and escalate them to the level of a public agenda, civil society loses its legitimacy as a force expressing the public will.

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14   YouTube. (2023) *Boon chat: Anthropology | Aghasi Tadevosyan | Olya Azatyan;* retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fmcuwBy8eYo

Therefore, it is essential for civil society to resist the temptation of speaking instead of or on behalf of the public. Such a change is only possible when a dialogue is established – one that is grounded in mutual recognition, a shared language, and trust built around common goals.

> *"In Armenia, the entire peasantry, as a class, is in the most oppressed and demeaned condition. If you want to enter a rural community and be heard, the first thing you need to do is to listen. Which NGO is taking note of the problem of inequality faced by peasants? Their land is being seized, large-scale farming businesses are being established, everything is being agglomerated – there are all sorts of issues."*

Activist, woman

At the same time, the role of civil society in the area of social assistance is more visible to different segments of the public. This perception became particularly dominant during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the context of the humanitarian assistance provided to Armenians forcibly displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh after the Second Karabakh War. This demonstrates that increased public awareness and positive perceptions are possible only when the work of civil society accurately responds to people's real problems. The reality, however, is that civil society has been continuously operating under conditions of change and political uncertainty.

> *"We're at a loss too; we also don't know what to do or where to go. We are, after all, part of this society as well. I think it's very important that we evaluate ourselves."*

Co-founder of local foundation, woman

In the context of a disconnect with the public and a search for new positioning, civil society representatives are re-evaluating modes of cooperation and potential platforms for dialogue. The goal is to identify the mechanisms and resources that can contribute to rebuilding trust between civil society and the public.

These ruptures are often legitimized by making references to global geopolitical developments. Specifically, the international discourse around human rights and the role of civil society, such as the 90% cut in USAID funding under Donald

Trump's administration, and the spread of ultranationalist political agendas in European countries has contributed to the rise of "anti-gender" groups. These have become factors that place additional pressure on the already fragile relationship between civil society and the public, and are often used during propaganda by media.

INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION: CIVIL SOCIETY AHEAD OF THE 2026 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

Since the 1990s, elections have been considered a key component of democracy-making, a process particularly promoted by Western states and donor organizations. Elections carried an accentuated importance in Eastern European and post-Soviet countries, where they were seen as a primary indicator of democratization. How elections are organized, along with their transparency and fairness, have been viewed as fundamental conditions for institutional development and to that end, significant resources have been allocated building the technical capacity of the electoral system and establishing monitoring institutions (Ishkanian, 2008).

For years, Armenian civil society has consistently worked toward ensuring free and fair elections, viewing them as a cornerstone of democratic governance. After the 2018 revolution, holding free and fair elections was often presented as one of democratic Armenia's most important achievements. While this indeed is a meaningful progress, the ruling political force has at times instrumentalized this fact as an all-inclusive indicator of democracy – overlooking the fact that democracy is not limited to elections alone. As is often noted, *"Democracy should be more than free and fair elections, but it cannot be less"* (Pastor, 2004, as cited in Ishkanian, 2008).

From 1995 to 2018, both Armenian society at large and civil society during its operation, continuously faced unjust and non-transparent electoral practices. During that period, myriad resources were invested in the effort to achieve free, fair, and transparent elections—core features of democracy. The 2018 Velvet

Revolution marked an important milestone on this path, reinforcing democratic expectations.

However, the upcoming 2026 parliamentary elections are no longer yet another political process. They remind us of the role of civil society – one we also need to rethink too – particularly in times of the need to uphold and strengthen out fragile democratic values. Domestic political polarization, geopolitical tensions, and the growing disconnect between civil society and the public present new challenges. These demand a clearer, more coordinated, and self-reflective approach from civil society actors.

In these conditions, it is necessary to reframe civil society's demands and strategies for engagement – both with the authorities and with broader segments of the public – with the aim of rebuilding trust. In particular, it is crucial to address the already mentioned challenges of public polarization, the crisis of legitimacy, and growing pessimism toward civic initiatives, while cultivating a new culture of dialogue.

Discussions with representatives of civil society are crucial – especially prior to the parliamentary elections. These discussions bring to the surface a number of issues that require not only strategic rethinking but also thinking of concrete actions. What role does civil society envision and is ready to undertake in this fragile phase of upholding democratic values? Does it consider holding fair and transparent elections sufficient in the democratization process, or is a multi-dimensional approach necessary, such that would also include reclaiming the public space and seeking new ways of dialogue with society?

Perhaps one of the primary tasks of the civil society in the context of the upcoming parliamentary elections is to reassess its role as a watchdog. In recent years, particularly during local elections, the abuse of administrative resources, the reactivation of former criminal-oligarchic forces, and the intensification of their public influence have highlighted the necessity of public oversight as a tool upholding democracy.

These issues become more acute against the backdrop of global geopolitical developments, where foreign political and financial influences can significantly impact the country's internal stability. A case to remind is that of Romania, where electoral processes were accompanied by attempts to weaken

democratic oversight through external interference.[15] Armenia's civil society also faces the challenge of upholding and further developing institutional oversight mechanisms.

Our research participants unanimously emphasize that civil society must reclaim its true role not only as an observer of electoral processes, but also as an active entity that oversees and analyzes the process of policy-making and public decision-making. However, such a position becomes increasingly complicated as anti-democratic actors aiming for limiting the public oversight space and oversight are mobilizing too.

> *"I see the role of NGOs more in the function of a watchdog rather than encouraging public engagement and participation. Oversight should take place even before the electoral campaign, ahead of the elections themselves."*

Yerevan based NGO employee, woman

Participants almost unanimously agreed that the civil society's role as a watchdog has been waning and restoring it remains a priority. However, the discussions went beyond the oversight function, touching on whether there are other platforms, resources, or opportunities where civil society can act not only as a watchdog, but also as one that shapes public values, reclaims public spaces, and a reinvigorates dialogue.

The discussion evolved across different dimensions. Some participants emphasized the need for efficiency and focus, noting that civil society should work within areas of its own competence without trying to "reinvent the wheel." Others, on the contrary, stressed the importance of developing new approaches and toolkits, highlighting that upholding democratic values in the current geopolitical and domestic environment requires innovative approaches, expansion of the scope of issues addressed, and new models of public engagement.

In this regard, the participants emphasized that the 2026 parliamentary elections should not be seen as a one-time event or merely an occasion for

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15   Dempsey, J. (2025, February 15). *Russian interference: Coming soon to an election near you.* Carnegie Europe. https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2025/02/russian-interference-coming-soon-to-an-election-near-you?lang=en

temporary action. On the contrary, civil society should foster continuous involvement in political and public processes both before and during the elections and especially in the post-election phase. Efforts to build public trust, protect human rights, and establish social justice are long-term, all the while requiring restoration of relations with the public.

The participants also stressed the need to not only change current practices but also the language. Public engagement methods must be inclusive, comprehensible and connected to the day-to-day lived experiences of different social groups. The language in which civil society operates should be not only fact-establishing and overseeing but also proximate, explanatory, and listening. This implies conscious and continuous work with the public, something that is by nature a component of political and public processes, as opposed to campaign-like actions.

The topic of education, particularly political education, came up in the discussions around restoration of dialogue with the public. Representatives of civil society viewed their own role as messengers of democratic values and shapers of public education. The period prior to the elections is seen as an opportunity for educational initiatives, dissemination of knowledge, and raising public awareness. However, this approach was somewhat criticized too, as the risk was highlighted that educational efforts might turn into elitist propaganda without delicate understanding of the public context. This is why the point of language comes back: it is important to find new ways and methods of engagement based on mutual learning and trust.

> *"People understand very well what is happening; they can very well assess the reality they have lived in and the reality they are in now. They can also formulate their problems largely related to inequality and systemic injustice. Perhaps this should be the starting point for engaging in a conversation with the people. We also need to reconsider ourselves – our teaching role."*

Yerevan based NGO employee, human rights defender, woman

In the contemporary global context, where anti-democratic forces attempt to appropriate the language of human rights and democracy by tailoring it to their political goals, representatives of civil society often become targets of assault (Margaryan, 2022). Activists, human rights defenders, and civil society actors in general become the main victims of this process.

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Before every significant political event, the same scenario repeats over and over: civil society is used as a target of assault by means of disinformation, hate speech, direct or indirect attacks. The capability of civil society to defy such assaults, respond quickly, and build clear and trustworthy communication with the public becomes primary.

Many discussion participants see their role not only as watchdogs or think tanks, but also as actors sharing democracy-supporting knowledge. They emphasize the importance of political education, promoting critical thinking, and developing a culture of public debate as means of strengthening democratic resilience.

> *"...Political education will better prepare the society for the elections, and we will go through that election phase with greater ease without much fear that the society can be easily manipulated into a tool for establishing dictatorship through the electoral process."*

Independent researcher, man

The research participants note that education should be viewed not merely as a process of conveying information but as an opportunity to boost and awaken agency, especially under the current conditions of uncertainty. Civic educational initiatives can become a tool for promoting public participation and reaffirming democratic values; however, this work cannot be limited to electoral periods alone. Particularly in recent years, as the public sphere has been flooded with other actors, including anti-democratic forces, the continuous engagement of the civil society with various social groups becomes vital.

The discussions also highlighted current limitations in civil society activities that can be observed currently, specifically the lack of intersectionality and the low level of cohesion. Some institutionalized entities and NGOs within civil society often operate in isolation, focusing on their narrow organizational agendas and target groups. This leads to a lack of interconnectedness and shared responsibility in the sector, which in turn hinders organizing broader and more coordinated actions.

The institutionalization and "NGO-ization" of civil society sometimes also turn into mutual alienation, creating an environment where partnerships, joint agendas, and practices of solidarity are no longer a priority. Considering this, it

is necessary to give an impetus to the culture of cooperation by breaking the isolation of civil society actors and reinvigorating the shared values.

> *"We lack this solidarity of standing by the side of others. This is a very, very big problem that weakens [civil society] and also raises the issue of trust on the part of the public."*

Yerevan based NGO employee, women rights defender, woman

Respect for pluralism and mutual patience are key to stabilizing relationships within the civil society. Civil society should be anchored in the principles of acceptance of pluralism and inclusivity.

While the research participants consider pluralism important for the civil society, in practice, the tendency not to express one's own opinion or the position of one's organization sometimes hinders the effective functioning of the civil society. This is especially relevant in the run-up to the parliamentary elections when anti-democratic forces surge.

> *"We also need to learn the ways of how to live with diversity and perhaps be a little more tolerant within ourselves. But from the perspective of values, it is very difficult."*

Yerevan based NGO employee, human rights defender, woman

The issue of civil society's political participation ahead of the elections is often left out of active discussions or remains insufficiently considered. Although this topic is seemingly present within certain circles, civil society primarily seeks to maintain its position as a "watchdog," avoiding involvement in political processes as an active political force. This is partly due to a lack of willingness to take on a political role and partly due to a desire to remain independent from the system and "sterile" in a "safe, comfortable environment."

In recent decades, the drastic growth of civil society organizations is, according to some observations, seen as a sign of the revival of global democracies. While in some analyses, NGOs are portrayed as saviors of civic participation, other more critical analyses question their representativeness.

At the heart of these conflicting views lies an important question: what makes NGOs, and civil society in a broader sense, legitimate actors in the contemporary public sphere?

Within this discussion, legitimacy becomes more significant not as a formal or organizational characteristic but as something determined by public engagement. The paradox is that the very opportunity to form publics and communicate with them is often overlooked or overshadowed by civil societies for whom project deliverables and political expertise outweigh (Calhoun, 2011).

However, the public nature of civil society's activities centers on one fundamental question: on whose behalf do NGOs speak, and whom do they represent? Although this may seem like a straightforward question at first glance, it contains serious ambiguities. If civil society acts as a spokesperson for the "public interest," the legitimacy of their demands must arise not only from their claims but also from forming the publics on whose behalf they act.

Therefore, the legitimacy of civil society must be determined by its capacity for communication and engagement in the public sphere. Our key contention is that the foundation of civil society's legitimacy lies in its ability to create and sustain "publics." That is, not merely being accountable to beneficiaries or donors, but developing public accountability understood as accountability to broader, multilayered public audiences – simultaneously representing and shaping those audiences.

Ahead of the parliamentary elections, reflections on the role of civil society, though diverse, often repeat the so-called "trap" of previous years. The fundamental question is whether it is possible to maintain the watchdog role while at the same time radicalizing the demand for democracy. How can civil society mobilize in this volatile and complex reality in order to reconnect with the public, get to know their problems in depth, and make their voices heard?

It is vital to incorporate issues of social justice, equality, and social safety into the democracy agenda. Democracy built around the axis of social safety and justice can truly advance forward and exit the limits of formal, monolithic democracy, which is confined to individual rights, free and fair elections, and freedom of the press. While these issues and demands are fundamental, dialogue with the public and the authorities needs to delve into the issues of social and economic justice, structural poverty, equality, political apathy and indifference. The liberating potential of democracy needs to be anchored in these issues. This may become be the core of Armenia's civil society's long-term task both before and after the parliamentary elections of 2026.

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