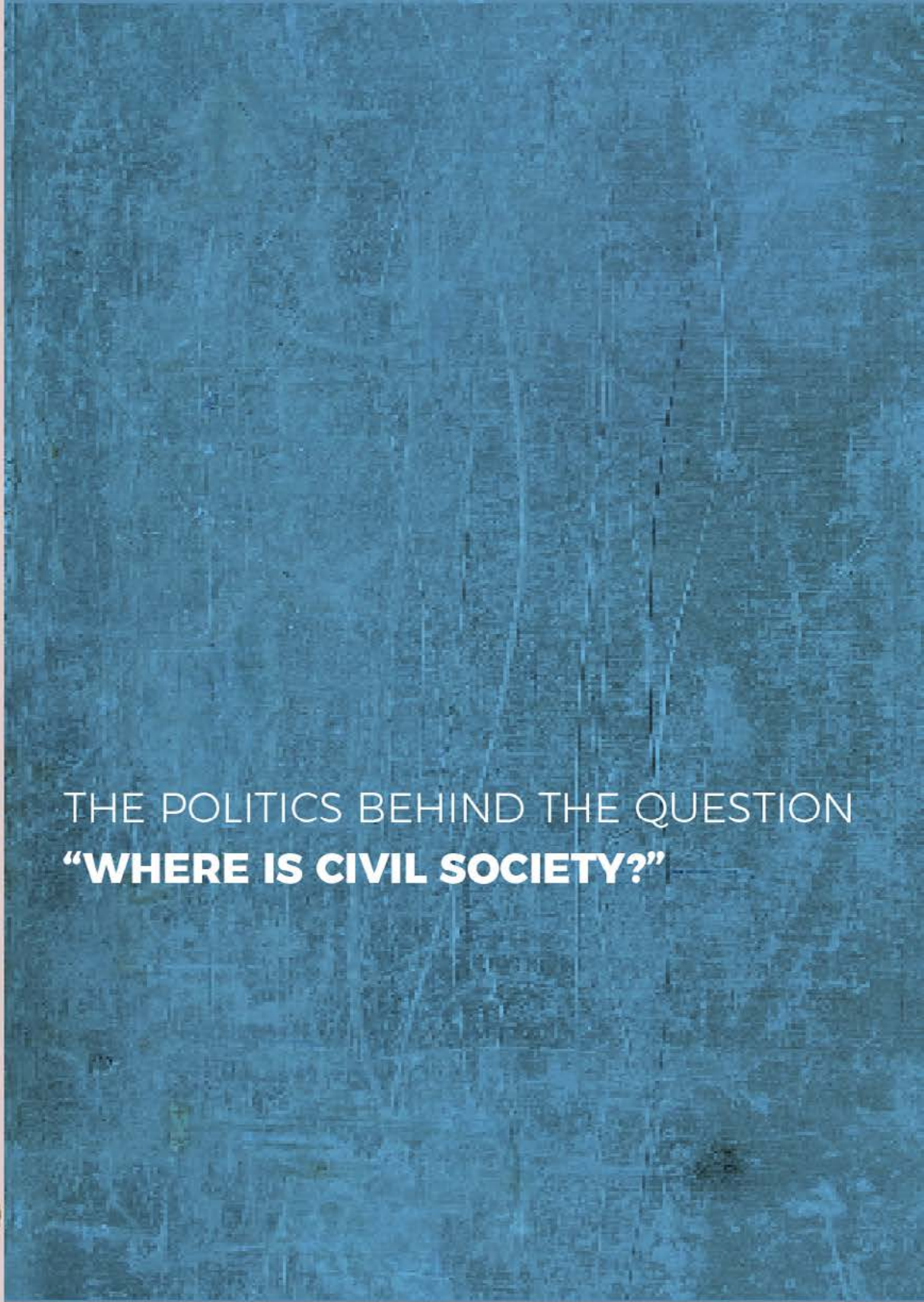


THE POLITICS BEHIND THE QUESTION  
**“WHERE IS CIVIL SOCIETY?”**



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### **Interviews conducted by:**

Mariam Yeghiazaryan

Mariam Khalatyan

Arpy Manusyan

### **Authors of the analysis:**

Mariam Yeghiazaryan

Mariam Khalatyan

### **Content editing by:**

Mariam Khalatyan

### **Final editing and preparation for publication by:**

Arpy Manusyan

### **Layout and design by:**

Tatev Yesayan

### **Translation by:**

Kristine Goroyan



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## INTRODUCTION: CIVIL SOCIETY AT THE CENTER OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE

In recent years, civil society in Armenia has not only undergone profound transformations but has also increasingly become the target of systematic pressure from various actors.

Such pressures tend to intensify particularly against the backdrop of major political developments and heightened tension. The pre-election context and political struggles are fertile grounds for targeting civil society and, more broadly, delegitimizing its activities. The Armenian context, namely, the dynamics of the post-revolutionary period, the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, forced displacement, and subsequent political realignments have collectively shaped an environment in which civil society is instrumentalized and discredited at the level of discourse.

Practices targeting civil society are not a new phenomenon. However, in the context of the June 2026 parliamentary elections, they have become one of the central elements of public and political discourse. Whereas previously such targeting was primarily associated with the ruling political elite and affiliated actors, often through direct forms of pressure, the post-revolutionary period has seen it evolve into a more complex and multilayered phenomenon, a diffuse process of delegitimization. Under these circumstances, targeting is no longer the initiative of a single actor or center of power; rather, it involves the participation of various political and civic actors, community groups, and even former representatives of civil society.

In the pre-election context, the targeting of civil society increasingly goes beyond direct criticism, turning into a prominent discourse that shapes both the public and political agenda.

The question *“Where is civil society?”* is a recurring one in public discourse, attempting to present the alleged absence, silence, or inaction of civil society as an indisputable fact. As a result, civil society actors find themselves at the center of polarized political discourses. The legitimacy of civil society is constrained not only through direct pressure but also through deeper structural and discursive mechanisms.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Heinrich Böll Foundation. (2026, April 29). *Armenia before the election: What kind of democracy will prevail*. <https://www.boell.de/en/2026/04/29/armenia-election-what-kind-democracy-will-prevail>

The targeting of civil society is not solely a local phenomenon. It also has regional and broader international dimensions, particularly amid the rise of right-wing political forces. Consequently, civil society often finds itself in a reactive position, forced to continuously defend its legitimacy and right to exist, rather than advance its own political agendas and values. This leads to a gradual shrinking of space for civic agency, and contributes to the marginalization of democratic and human rights agendas.

For instance, in Georgia, once considered a model of democratic development in the South Caucasus, the growing influence of conservative and pro-Russian political forces in recent years has been accompanied by the introduction of political and legal mechanisms aimed at restricting civil society activities. These include the adoption of laws targeting civil society's sources of foreign funding,<sup>2</sup> portraying civil society organizations as actors that "serve foreign interests,"<sup>3</sup> and restricting activities that challenge state-promoted ideological and policy agendas.<sup>4</sup>

Particularly in the context of electoral processes, notable parallels can be observed between Armenia and Moldova in the context of targeting of civil society. Interviews conducted with local and international experts as part of this study indicate that civil society actors in both countries face challenges in relation to developing their own agendas in rapidly changing environments, securing sustainable support for those agendas, and maintaining public trust and acceptance. In Moldova certain unifying agendas - particularly those related to European Union integration and countering FIMI (Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference) - have facilitated broader cooperation. In Armenia, by contrast, formats of cooperation tend to develop around diverse thematic agendas and are often more fragmented and situational in nature.

Alongside the targeting of civil society during the pre-election period, it is also important to address cases in which the ruling party has targeted independent media. Comparative analyses suggest that, in both Moldova and Armenia,

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2 "GD Announces New Restrictions on Receiving Grants, Party Membership, 'External Lobbying'." (2026, January 28). *Civil Georgia*. <https://civil.ge/archives/719193/>

3 Gogia, G. (2026, February 9). *Georgia initiates laws severely curtailing civil and political rights*. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/02/09/georgia-initiates-laws-severely-curtailing-civil-and-political-rights>

4 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2024, September 17). *Georgia: Call to rescind new anti-LGBTIQ+ law*. OHCHR. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/09/georgia-call-rescind-new-anti-lgbtqi-law>

low trust in the media and its targeting by various actors can further reinforce distorted perceptions of civil society.<sup>5</sup> Media discourse surrounding civil society during the pre-election period reflects not only manifestations of targeting and disinformation but also debates concerning the need to rethink the role and modes of operation of civil society in a rapidly changing environment. Instances of civil society targeting are, indeed, directly linked to declining democratic indicators.<sup>6</sup> As a result of global transformations around rights, social justice, and equality, civil society organizations working to protect and advance democratic values have become increasingly vulnerable, facing challenges related to their institutional sustainability, existence, and development.

This article seeks to identify the structural causes underlying the crisis of agency of civil society, examining them within the broader interplay of diverse factors and narratives.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to undertake a systematic examination of the discursive and structural instruments used to target civil society and the media in the lead-up to the upcoming parliamentary elections. The study analyzes the content of narratives disseminated by both domestic and external actors, their impact on the agency of civil society and democratic processes, as well as the resilience mechanisms employed by civil society, situating the Armenian context within broader regional developments and experiences.

In this context, the research is structured around the following objectives:

1. To identify, map, and analyze the actors targeting civil society and the media, and reveal the motives behind the narratives they produce and disseminate, the communication strategies, and their potential impacts.
2. To conduct a qualitative analysis of the dominant narratives directed against civil society and the media, revealing the mechanisms through which these narratives are constructed and the scope of their influence.

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5 Socioscope. (2026, January 28). Private online discussion among Armenian civil society representatives and international partners.

6 Freedom House. (2026, March 19). *Global Freedom Declined for 20th Consecutive Year in 2025*. <https://freedomhouse.org/article/new-report-global-freedom-declined-20th-consecutive-year-2025>

3. To situate these narratives within regional and global contexts by drawing comparisons with experiences from other countries.

During the first phase of this study, we conducted a discourse analysis of the media landscape, focusing on key actors targeting civil society across media and social media platforms. As part of the analysis, we collected and examined publications on their social media and official platforms, as well as media appearances and interviews concerning civil society. The study covered the period from **November 2025 to May 2026**, enabling an assessment of targeting dynamics in parallel with the intensification of electoral processes.

Alongside the media analysis and based on the identification of preliminary narratives and their scope, we conducted **expert interviews with five civil society representatives** and **one politician**. The interviews were aimed at identifying the main narratives targeting civil society in the pre-election context, assessing their scope of influence, examining responses to incidents of targeting, and mapping the range of domestic and external actors involved. The selection of civil society representatives took into account the specificities of their activity in Yerevan and in the regions.

The study was not limited to local experiences only; it also includes comparative reflections on the targeting of civil society in Georgia, Eastern Europe, and the Western Balkans. To facilitate a deeper understanding of these examples, we conducted online discussions with international partners.

## **1. CIVIL SOCIETY IN A CRISIS OF LEGITIMACY**

Civil society is often subject to delegitimizing narratives. Before examining these narratives, it is important to understand the specifics of the institutional and public perception of civil society. Civil society is multi-layered and heterogeneous, encompassing diverse actors, objectives, and modes of operation. Delegitimizing narratives advanced by both domestic and external actors tend to oversimplify this diversity by portraying civil society as a single entity and narrowing the scope of its activities. As a result, even the targeting of individual organizations can affect the legitimacy and public perception of civil society as a whole.

According to the experts interviewed, high trust enjoyed by organizations operating within local communities does not necessarily translate into trust in broader civil society. Rather, it remains individualized and directed toward specific organizations that are perceived as representatives of the community rather than as part of a broader sector. This trend can also be observed with respect to civil society organizations operating in Yerevan. Trust in individual organizations rarely evolves into sector-wide trust. This suggests that the wider public tends to perceive civil society not as a cohesive public sphere but as a group of separate actors. Trust is formed primarily through work on the ground and direct engagement with communities, often without a deeper understanding of the sector's institutional features and underlying values.

***“In my view, if an organization wants to promote what is called local participation—and participation is not unipolar, it takes many different forms—it simply has to be in those communities, on the ground. It does not necessarily have to be based there, but it must be there, come and go, and understand, listen to what people genuinely want and what they actually need.”***

Human rights and environmental activist

The divisive and delegitimizing narratives surrounding civil society not only deepen public distrust,<sup>7</sup> but also seek to redefine the role and legitimacy of civil society within the political and social sphere. This process is further reinforced by internal disagreements within civil society and the public debates that emerge around them.

According to certain perceptions that have developed at the state level, “legitimate” civil society actors or organizations are those that maintain closer cooperation with the government. Such an approach challenges civil society to reflect on questions of its own autonomy and agency. Civil society risks becoming a body that continually reacts to political and discursive frameworks defined by opposing forces, rather than an independent actor capable of shaping its own agendas and generating public meaning. In this regard, the remarks delivered by Armenia’s Foreign Minister, Ararat Mirzoyan, at the opening of the EaP Civil Society Summit are particularly noteworthy:

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<sup>7</sup> Socioscope. (2025). *What to Do When the Old-Day Activism Does Not Work: To Radicalize Democracy*. socioscope.am. <https://socioscope.am/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/What-to-Do-When-the-Old-Day-Activism-Does-Not-Work.pdf>

*“And this brings me to the civil society representatives gathered here today. The state cannot act alone. We rely on you, our civil society, to be the immune system of our democracy. We rely on you to combat disinformation with facts and to ensure that our reforms remain irreversible. You are the guardians of the values of democracy.”<sup>8</sup>*

Consequently, examining the dynamics of the shrinking and targeting of civic space is important not only from the perspective of safeguarding civil society’s autonomy, but also for assessing the institutional resilience of the democratic system, which is central to this article.

The challenge of preserving the independence and impartiality of civil society at the intersection of setting agendas, responding to attacks, and strengthening resilience is not unique to Armenia. Similar challenges have emerged in a number of other countries. For example, civil society in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which initially coalesced around humanitarian issues and later around human rights protection during the 1990s, is now confronting comparable difficulties related to resources and ideological priorities. These include questions like how to withstand discrediting attacks, maintain financial and institutional sustainability, and at the same time identify innovative and practical ways to engage broader segments of society and secure public trust.

*“Although civil society organizations provide vital services to the people, such as legal assistance, support for survivors of violence, and humanitarian aid, ongoing propaganda campaigns that label them as ‘spies,’ ‘foreign agents,’ or ‘traitors’ have a significant impact on public perceptions of these organizations. At the same time, citizens often have high expectations of civil society that are impossible to meet in practice. NGOs frequently lack the political space or access to decision-makers needed to implement the reforms they advocate for, which limits their ability to translate service provision and advocacy efforts into meaningful systemic change.”*

Representative of a human rights organization, Bosnia and Herzegovina

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8 Mirzoyan, A. (2025, December 3). *EaP Civil Society Summit*. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia. [https://www.mfa.am/en/speeches/2025/12/03/Mirzoyan\\_EaPspeech/13653](https://www.mfa.am/en/speeches/2025/12/03/Mirzoyan_EaPspeech/13653)

## 2. WHAT CONSTITUTES “REAL” CIVIL SOCIETY AND WHO DEFINES IT?

In the pre-election context, debates surrounding the legitimacy of civil society are often devoid of substantive criticism and instead have a distinctly political and instrumental character. Various centres of power, media actors, and former civil society representatives seek to redefine the institutional and normative boundaries of what constitutes “real” civil society. In this context, the resentment discourse plays a particularly important role, as it is employed by former civil society actors to discredit the current civil society and question its local agency.

Examining the role of civil society within electoral processes requires an operational redefinition of concepts such as “political” and “apolitical,” as well as “real” and “not real.” In Armenia’s current political environment, civil society’s agency is confronted with a dilemma, where the protection of public interest necessitates engagement in the formation of political agendas, yet that very engagement is subsequently used by different political camps as grounds for delegitimization. Today, the legitimacy of civil society is assessed not through its operational efficiency or the nature of its relationship with the public, but rather through its positioning with regard to various political forces. Within the discourse of the government, the opposition, and even former civil society representatives, civil society has increasingly come to be perceived as a direct party to the political struggle. The in-depth interviews conducted as part of this study indicate that there is a concern among civil society that various groups are attempting to instrumentalize civil society activities for different purposes.

*“...We are a ‘commodity’ for politicians; they ‘buy’ and ‘sell’ us. If we write that police actions were disproportionate, then for some we become the apple of their eye, while others start hating on us. We are tossed around like a ball. [...] But it is also inevitable, because there is no neutral text you can write without ending up on one side or another. It is simply impossible.”*

Civil society representative working on democracy issues

The political atmosphere is such that any statement or action inevitably receives

not merely a politicized but a partisan interpretation. The boundaries of civic responsibility become particularly fragile in such an environment: actors are often compelled either to adopt the ineffective strategy of accepting criticism from all sides or to consciously remain silent to avoid falling into a trap of manipulation.

***“People say, ‘Let’s issue a statement saying that both sides are wrong.’ But I respond that society expects something different from us. Therefore, if we do not genuinely have a message to convey, it is better not to issue a statement at all.”***

Civil society representative working on democracy issues

This position highlights a fundamental challenge civil society faces during the pre-election period: how to maintain public trust in circumstances where any positioned assessment or comment may be targeted in a politically polarized environment. As a result, civil society finds itself confronted not only with an operational dilemma but also with a legitimacy paradox: silence is often interpreted as indifference or as a selective approach, while speaking out is perceived as political bias or acting upon a political instruction. In such contexts, the problem extends beyond external criticism. More profound structural effects emerge, whereby civil society actors are compelled to continuously rethink boundaries of their speech, forms of public presence, and response strategies.

When expert assessments partially coincide with either government or opposition narratives, they are often automatically classified as political positioning or propaganda, regardless of their substance, thus depriving civil society of its capacity to formulate an independent agenda and discourse.

***“Ultimately, the objective reality around us is not shaped by the interpretation of the Civil Contract party, is it? Regardless of what they say, we can analyse what the objective reality is and what possibilities there are. Either that position is absent, or, if people attempt to conduct such analyses and these happen to coincide in some respects with what the government is saying, they are again targeted as propagandists.”***

Civil society representative, researcher

The highly partisan peace agenda even infiltrates into sectors that, at first glance, appear unrelated to the peacebuilding process. For example, judicial reform and environmental protection are also subordinated to or contrasted with the narrative of “dignified peace.” Particularly noteworthy is the targeting of environmental movements in the post-war and post-revolutionary context,<sup>9</sup> where the protection of natural resources is portrayed as an obstacle to Armenia’s economic growth and as serving the interests of Azerbaijan.

*“For example, mines are supposed to make Armenia stronger, and, you see, there are environmental activists who are being directed, so to speak, by Azerbaijan to prevent Armenia from becoming stronger. This is a narrative that is conveyed to the entire nation in the context of national security.”*

Human rights and environmental activist

This position represents an attempt to normatively redefine the civil sector, whereby the criterion of legitimacy is shifted from the ideological and functional domain to the sphere of political alignment. In essence, it advances a concept which defines civil society not by its values or social mission, but by its exclusively antagonistic relationship with the government. “Real” civil society is legitimized through serving nationalist narratives, while civil society groups that uphold liberal-democratic values or whose agendas partially intersect with the government agenda are “disqualified” as instruments of political power.

*“They are not civil society. Civil society itself is formed within states not against, but in opposition to, the government. Civil society takes the interests of particular groups and works to advance those interests. Now, the government and civil society may stand in opposition to one another. [...] Who are the most vulnerable in Armenia today? The people of Artsakh; those who participated in the defence of Artsakh; parents of those who were killed; now clergy have become vulnerable; the servants of the Armenian Apostolic Church have become vulnerable groups. Those who have worked to defend the interests and rights of these people have, in a sense, become civil society. But if the*

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<sup>9</sup> Citizen’s Voice. (2025, November 15). *What False Narratives Are Being Spread Against Environmentalists in Armenia?* Youtube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_BviVTvnBhI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_BviVTvnBhI)

*government sends someone to Baku to advance their agenda and objectives, that cannot be called civil society. We may call it the Civil Contract Society.”<sup>10</sup>*

Criticism and targeting directed at the “Crossroads of Peace” initiative have, in some instances, also come from actors who were themselves previously involved in Armenia–Azerbaijan exchange initiatives between civil society representatives and journalists, including visits to Baku in 2019.<sup>11</sup> In such cases, their participation in the peacebuilding process is framed as an act undertaken from a position of power and linked to victory in the First Nagorno-Karabakh War. This creates a normative framework whereby a journalist’s or civil society representative’s visit to Azerbaijan is considered legitimate only if it serves the purpose of reproducing the winner’s discourse. Any alternative approach that seeks to move beyond power hierarchies and pursue a more realistic dialogue grounded in current realities is labeled as “non-civil” in nature.<sup>12</sup>

In this context, civil society finds itself in a new “intellectual blockade.” The partisanization of the peace agenda (or the exclusive identification of it as a government project) challenges civil society’s ability to formulate its own independent and institutional agenda on matters of security. This leads to a situation where any intellectual or analytical effort aimed at overcoming the conflict is viewed as a loss of legitimacy, as certain political actors continue to circulate narratives that sustain the continuation of the conflict and favour military solutions.

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10 Hayq News. (2025, November 24). *There Are No Azerbaijani Enclaves in Armenia: Aliyev, Through Pashinyan, Is Tightening the Net Around Yerevan*. Youtube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=vcoheipFfP0&fbclid=I-wVERDUAOSnwpleHRuA2FibQlxMABzcnRjBmFwcF9pZAwzNTA2ODU1MzE3MjgAAR7\\_MqCx7BaRwrZC-CUGVHlcWo-q6NYPd-hyxj5\\_7S1lr3zKShKYeDOceewBN1g\\_aem\\_clzYU8CALqa7Q0hy0uGpXQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=vcoheipFfP0&fbclid=I-wVERDUAOSnwpleHRuA2FibQlxMABzcnRjBmFwcF9pZAwzNTA2ODU1MzE3MjgAAR7_MqCx7BaRwrZC-CUGVHlcWo-q6NYPd-hyxj5_7S1lr3zKShKYeDOceewBN1g_aem_clzYU8CALqa7Q0hy0uGpXQ)

11 Shant News. (2020, January 8). *Summary of Armenian Journalists’ 2019 Visit to Baku in the SHANTNEWS Studio*. shantnews.am. <https://www.shantnews.am/news/view/571332.html>

12 168.am. (2026, November 26). *Those People Are Not Civil Society: They Spread Aliyev’s Narratives: Edgar Elbakyan.* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hKdGSclrrEk>

### 3. MAPPING THE TARGETING ACTORS

In the systemic processes aimed at discrediting civil society, paradoxical as it may seem, a key role is often played by actors who were once representatives of civil society and are now positioned within the political sphere.<sup>13</sup> Notably, the experience of such actors in civic and human rights protection rarely becomes the subject of critical discussion in the media, particularly from the perspective of why approaches grounded in human rights, democracy, and civic participation do not continue to serve as guiding principles in their political activities. As a result, attention shifts away from value continuity toward political realignments and role changes. The narratives shaped and disseminated by these actors are frequently based on the divisive logic of “former versus current” actors, which is automatically translated into the civic sphere as well.

*“...The overwhelming majority of donors provide funding when, in addition to submitting a project proposal, you are able to cooperate with the government, regardless of who is in power. At one point, the West believed that changes were taking place here. Those people remained silent because they did not want to lose funding. Others, frankly speaking, are so few in number that they do not even want to speak out. They disagree with the situation, they are not ok with it, but they are only a handful of people now.”<sup>14</sup>*

This not only reformulates the language used to refer to civil society but also redefines who may be regarded as a legitimate civic actor. Such processes undermine perceptions of the autonomy of current civil society actors and create favorable conditions for anti-democratic narratives through references to “foreign influence,” “financial interests,” or “political instruction.” Particularly problematic in this context is the instrumentalization of the term GONGO (Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organization) as a mechanism for labeling civic actors. While in its classical meaning the term refers to organizations that maintain structural or financial ties with

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13 As part of the research, we attempted to interview Nina Karapetyants to discuss the trends in targeting civil society. However, the interview offer was declined on the grounds that her position on this issue has already been presented in the media.

14 Armcomedy, LnpqCast. (2026, January 11). The crisis of civil society, elections in 2026, Youtube.<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CvV2MUFjZII&t=2215s>

state institutions, within the current polarized discourse it often loses its descriptive character and turns into a political label. Any position that aligns with government agendas or deviates from opposition narratives may be interpreted as “pro-government” or “controlled,” thereby assigning civil society the status of a politically accountable actor.

***“Now these GONGOs somehow contributed to the surrender of Artsakh, and now they will also continue contributing to the surrender of Armenia.”<sup>15</sup>***

On the other hand, in its election program, the ruling Civil Contract party also approaches civil society from a highly utilitarian perspective. In the program,<sup>16</sup> civil society is portrayed as a support chain for the “institutionalization of peace,” whose function is limited to promoting humanitarian and cultural dialogue aimed at establishing interstate relations.

Particularly noteworthy is the mechanism envisaged under Clause 65 of the program, which would allow donations to NGOs and media outlets through a social credit system. Senior government representatives<sup>17</sup> have indirectly framed this initiative as a means of demonstrating public support for “real” media and civil society. However, from an analytical perspective, this may be characterized as an attempt by the government to differentiate legitimacy. By creating favorable conditions for the “real” civil sector, the state effectively appropriates the mechanism for determining who qualifies as a “legitimate subject.” Thus, civil society becomes subject to dual epistemic pressure. Opposition discourse “GONGO-izes” civil society by questioning its independence from the government. Government discourse, in turn, seeks to integrate the issue of civil society legitimacy into state agendas by linking criteria of “being real” to preferred funding mechanisms. At the same time, the media, which is one of the principal institutions for generating public meanings, often participates in the selective reconstruction

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15 Hayq News. (2025, November 24). *There Are No Azerbaijani Enclaves in Armenia: Aliyev, Through Pashinyan, Is Tightening the Net Around Yerevan*. Youtube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=vcoheipFfP0&fbclid=I-wVERDUAOSnwpleHRuA2FibQlxMABzcnRjBmFwcF9pZAwzNTA2ODU1MzE3MjgAAR7\\_MqCx7BaRwrZC-CUGVHlcWo-q6NYPd-hyxj5\\_7S1lr3zKShKYeDOceewBN1g\\_aem\\_clzYU8CALqa7Q0hy0uGpXQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=vcoheipFfP0&fbclid=I-wVERDUAOSnwpleHRuA2FibQlxMABzcnRjBmFwcF9pZAwzNTA2ODU1MzE3MjgAAR7_MqCx7BaRwrZC-CUGVHlcWo-q6NYPd-hyxj5_7S1lr3zKShKYeDOceewBN1g_aem_clzYU8CALqa7Q0hy0uGpXQ)

16 Civil Contract Party (2026, April 3): The pre-election program of the Civil Contract Party for the 2026 parliamentary election. Retrieved from <https://www.civilcontract.am/news-inner/924>

17 Ruben Rubinyan: (2026, May 9). *How to solve the complex problem of creating independent media and NGOs*. Video. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/reel/904343602652290>

of civic struggles. For example, in CivilNet’s documentary *From Mashtots Park to Trchkan and the (Post-)Revolution: The Rise of Civil Society and...*,<sup>18</sup> historical representations of civic movements are at times framed in ways that narrow their political and social significance, presenting them as relatively “neutral” or “permissible” forms of protest. Such approaches contribute to the partial editing of civic memory, omitting, for example, the role of women’s movements and other long-term struggles. These selective representations demonstrate that the issue is not merely one of historical interpretation, but also of who has the authority to define what constitutes civic struggle and who qualifies as its legitimate subject. Moreover, in another CivilNet podcast titled *The Politics Behind Pashinyan’s Public Outbursts*, the narrative of “real” civil society is reproduced once again, this time specifically targeting women’s organizations. They are portrayed as “silent” and “inefficient” actors in relation to social and political developments, thereby reintroducing the question, “Where is civil society?”<sup>19</sup> At the same time, the podcast reinforces the narrative of “GONGO-ization” of NGOs by claiming that “very few NGOs today can truly be called non-governmental organizations.” Several women’s organizations responded to the assessments and criticism voiced in the program by issuing a critical statement and characterizing such representations of their activity as problematic.<sup>20</sup> The Human Rights Defender of the Republic of Armenia also issued a statement concerning similar practices of targeting and public pressure directed at civil society, particularly in the context of “informal censorship” cases.<sup>21</sup>

In this process, media and political discourses mutually reinforce an environment where civil society is compelled to continually justify both its existence and independence. The primary beneficiaries are anti-democratic or populist forces, as the vacuum of trust emerging between the civil sector and the media is gradually filled by controllable and simplified propaganda narratives. In such circumstances, attempts within the media and expert community to present

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18 Civilnet. (2026). *From Mashtots Park to Trchkan and the (post-)revolution: The rise of civil society and...* Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZELfZuX-Ak>

19 CivilNet. (2026, May 19). *The politics behind Pashinyan’s public outbursts* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p9rwlOq9NB8>

20 KRK. (2026, May 21). JOINT STATEMENT OF WOMEN’S CSOs ON DEFAMATORY AND HOSTILE DISCOURSE AGAINST WOMEN’S ORGANIZATIONS. Women of Armenia. <https://womenofarmenia.org/2026/05/21/statement-on-hostile-and-defamatory-rhetoric-targeting-women-led-ngos-arm/>

21 Human Rights Defender of the Republic of Armenia. (2026, May 22): Representatives of civil society and human rights defenders ... [Facebook]. <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1GcPyeH2hQ/>

the author's opinion as "absolute truth" not only restrict public pluralism but also appropriate the legitimacy to interpret realities, tightening opportunities for alternative readings.

In this context, state and opposition discourses, despite differences in language use, often converge on the same point: the struggle over the monopoly on defining civil society's legitimacy. Within opposition discourse, civil society may be portrayed as "government-aligned" or "GONGO-ized," while at the government level it may be framed as a controlled or guided sphere that should ideally be integrated into predefined political objectives. Under these conditions of dual pressure, civil society finds itself operating in an environment where its autonomous positioning is constantly called into question. Thus, through media and political discourse, as well as various labeling mechanisms, an environment is shaped in which civil society is not only struggling to advance its agendas but is also continuously compelled to defend its agency and legitimacy.

### **3.1. When silencing comes from within**

Narratives targeting civil society are disseminated not only by external actors but also manifest internally. Interviews conducted with experts indicate that "silencing" practices emerging from within civil society are often expressed through attempts to regulate the boundaries of legitimacy, determining who may speak, on what issues, and within what limits.

Expressing positions on political developments is frequently perceived within civil society as a breach of "neutrality," leading not only to the questioning of particular actors' professional credibility but also the legitimacy of their public speech. "Neutrality" has become one of the central concepts in both public and internal discussions surrounding civil society, evolving from a descriptive notion into a normative requirement. Yet, particularly in politically polarized and conflict-affected environments, neutrality can hardly be regarded as a practically attainable position. Civil society operates around issues of human rights, democracy, justice, and peace, all of which are inherently political. Consequently, the challenge is not staying "clean" and avoiding politics, but rather transparently articulating one's values, responsibilities, and positions.

Under such circumstances, demands for "neutrality" often serve as a regulatory

mechanism, determining not only the content of speech but also the legitimacy of the speaker. Experts note that even criticism voiced by civil society actors is often expected to fit within internally established boundaries of “acceptability.” In other words, not only is the diversity of viewpoints expressed restricted, but also which positions are recognized as having the right to be expressed at all. According to the experts interviewed, such silencing practices frequently blur the line between professional opinion and political positioning. Professional observations are reinterpreted as political statements, leading to self-censorship and limited public expression.

*“I think these coordinated actions exist and, as a rule, are directed primarily against people who try to make assessments precisely from an independent position. It is no coincidence, for example, that the word ‘impartial’ has become something of a sarcastic label, an adjective. ...Most of the criticism and targeting concerns the statement that the authors of those impartial analyses are not impartial.”*

Civil society representative, researcher

Negative reactions to alternative opinions in public debate are not always driven by ideological disagreements. More often than not, they are perceived as threats to already established narratives. When opportunities for substantive counterarguments are limited, discussions shift into the realm of legitimacy of speech, manifesting through direct or indirect appeals such as “do not address that topic” or “do not write about that issue.” Thus, it is not only about disagreements between opinions but also the processes through which the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable speech are established. Under such conditions, not only a particular position is targeted, but also the very right to shape public discourse. Research participants expressed particular concern regarding attempts at labeling within close professional circles and manifestations of silence in response to external targeting. This exacerbates the environment of intolerance and limits opportunities for building internal trust. One of the central polarizing themes within civil society concerns positions on peace. There is also a prevailing fear of being “harmed” or “tainted” if one decides to address sensitive and politicized issues publicly. As a result, actors

advocating for peace often find themselves in a more vulnerable position than those promoting narratives of war or “dignified peace.” At the same time, experts note that civil society narratives are often constructed around a logic of being “against something” rather than “for something.” This is particularly evident in discussions of the peace agenda, where support for peace is often equated with political loyalty to the government.

*“If there is a discussion in the political sphere about ‘overcoming the conflict or continuing the conflict,’ I cannot imagine civil society supporting the latter. Yet, unfortunately, in our context, claims such as ‘this is not peace’ and other similar approaches effectively suggest that the conflict should continue until we achieve a ‘dignified peace.’”*

Civil society representative, researcher

The experts who participated in the study consider pluralism as an essential precondition for healthy discourse. Their criticism, however, concerns the fact that such discussions and labeling practices often occur within closed internal environments, without transparency or opportunities to react. This undermines internal trust and disregards the shared history and collective experience accumulated around human rights protection and democratic processes.

Attempts at internal silencing and polarization within civil society also affect broader segments of the public, deepening the already existing distrust and undermining the relationship between civil society and the public at large.

### **3.2. Media and civil society under political scrutiny**

One of the main platforms for delegitimization of civil society is the media, particularly online news outlets. The media not only reflects existing narratives but also actively participates in their construction and reproduction, functioning as a carrier of discursive power. Journalists also enter into these discussions, asking “where is civil society?” and “why is civil society’s response delayed?” - questions that have been artificially pushed into the agenda.<sup>22</sup> Equally noteworthy are instances where actors presenting themselves as experts on

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22 Sukiasyan, A. (2025, November 24). *What kind of civil society are you? You are tools serving the West’s agenda in exchange for grants.* Suren Surenyants.168.am. <https://168.am/2025/11/24/2317888.html>

media platforms claim the authority to determine who constitutes the “real”<sup>23</sup> civil society and who does not, or to announce the “demise” of civil society.<sup>24</sup> Distinctions between “real” and “not real” civil society in the media became particularly pronounced following the mutual visits between representatives of Armenian and Azerbaijani civil society organizations after the initialing of a peace agreement in Washington.<sup>25</sup> On the one hand, these developments provided an opportunity for certain civil society groups to openly demonstrate that the peace agenda aligns with their own priorities and objectives. On the other hand, they created new grounds for targeting civil society, as openly speaking about peace and participating in dialogue increasingly came to be interpreted as serving the government’s agenda, despite the fact that some civil society actors had been strongly advocating for peace<sup>26</sup> immediately after the end of the war, well before peace became part of the state agenda.

Analyses of peacebuilding opportunities are instantly labeled as part of “government propaganda” or as “serving the enemy’s agenda.”

***“...The most prominent narrative is that speaking about peace today means being a government propagandist because it is some fake process [...], against which they put forward the notion of ‘dignified peace,’ on which, naturally, no one actually elaborates.”***

Civil society representative, researcher

At the same time, both civil society and the media, including journalists, frequently become targets of criticism by public and political actors, particularly during election time. The politicization and polarization of the media sphere create a dual challenge. On the one hand, departure from the principles of objectivity and pluralism may undermine the credibility of the public information environment. On the other hand, criticism of media activity requires caution, as it can easily transform into a tool of pressure or delegitimization.

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23 HayaQve. (2025, November 25). *A real civil society. Tools for protecting human rights*. Youtube. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3a2RdhMyUE>

24 Civilnet. (2026). *From Mashtots Park to Trchkan and the (post-)revolution: The rise of civil society and...* Youtube. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZELfZuX-Ak>

25 Azatutyun (2025, October 22): *The Secretary of the Security Council met with participants of the dialogue between representatives of Armenian and Azerbaijani civil society*. azatutyun.am. taken from: <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33566987.html>

26 *Peace without exceptions* (2022, May 8). *Epress.am*. [https://epress.am/2022/05/08/peace\\_has\\_no\\_altrnative.html](https://epress.am/2022/05/08/peace_has_no_altrnative.html)

Prominent representatives of the ruling party regularly assume the role of evaluators of the Armenian media landscape, subjectively distinguishing “real” media from “not real” media and “good” media from “bad” media.<sup>27</sup> Such public targeting practices, as well as the account provided by a politician in the interview conducted during this study, suggest that the current government has adopted a strategy of “redefining the legitimacy” of the media.

*“For many years, our media was perceived as a ‘sacred cow.’ That was not necessarily a bad thing, because at least under the previous government, the media - especially those positioning themselves as independent or oppositional - were at risk: journalists were beaten, editorial offices were raided, and so on and so forth. As a result [...] the media came to be viewed as something that should not be touched and could not be touched. By ‘touched,’ I mean verbally criticized. [...] And I realized that, well, apparently our media are not going to self-regulate, they are not going to adhere to ethical standards, they are not going to disclose sources of funding. In other words, they consider themselves sacred cows and believe they should be allowed to do whatever they want.”*

Politician

This practice carries systemic risks, as it implies the use of state leverage in a sphere where stability is grounded in professional self-regulation and independence. When the government claims the right to determine the authenticity or legitimacy of media actors, a precedent is created that may extend to other spheres of public life, such as civil society, where similar patterns can already be observed in the pre-election political context. The interference of state officials in the internal domain of the NGO sector is often justified by concerns regarding the quality of media services and financial transparency. In practice, however, it may weaken the independent institution exercising democratic oversight. This political rhetoric finds legal expression in the recent

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27 Rubinyan R., Aleksanyan V., (2026, January 15): *The cowardly formalists and the patriotic petrol dealers* | PIECE 6. Civic News. Youtube. Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1dirOCId2pg&list=PLsDQ6dyAs\\_k0lrFyZLC-Bie3evWgpAww7l&index=2](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1dirOCId2pg&list=PLsDQ6dyAs_k0lrFyZLC-Bie3evWgpAww7l&index=2)

amendments to the Law of the Republic of Armenia on Audiovisual Media.<sup>28</sup> The new regulations, which prohibit the dissemination through foreign television and radio programs of content deemed to interfere in Armenia's domestic political life, create broad opportunities for selective oversight. Although the justification for the law is framed in terms of protecting state sovereignty and information security, concerns raised by the professional community focus on the broad interpretation of the term "interference in domestic political life".<sup>29</sup> The rhetoric used by political actors in targeting civil society and the media often contains problematic and polarizing language. Its use in the public sphere may contribute to hate speech and undermine the public image of human rights defenders, civil society actors, and media representatives, while also fostering doubts regarding their legitimacy. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that civil society is multi-layered and non-homogeneous, encompassing diverse actors, groups, and ideological and operational approaches. Nevertheless, targeting narratives circulating in public discourse often overlook this diversity, portraying civil society as a single and homogenous system. As a result, their impact extends beyond individual actors and affects the sector as a whole, contributing to a generalized climate of distrust toward civil society. In a Facebook post,<sup>30</sup> Arayik Harutyunyan, Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister of Armenia, referred to former human rights defender and candidate for prime minister Nina Karapetyants as a "pro-oligarch human rights defender," emphasizing her political bias. However, it is noteworthy that the positions of actors involved in such discourses are often far from being certain. For example, actors targeted by government-affiliated circles with labels such as "pro-oligarch human rights defender" may themselves disseminate critical or targeting narratives against former colleagues and other representatives of civil society. This demonstrates that targeting and delegitimization mechanisms often operate not in a single direction but as reciprocal and circulating practices, further complicating debates surrounding the boundaries, roles, and legitimacy of civil society.

The recurring question "Where is civil society?", posed by various government-

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28 arlis.am. *Law of the Republic of Armenia on Audiovisual media*. Retrieved from <https://www.arlis.am/hy/acts/193040>

29 Azatutyun (2026, February 3): *Law that could close broadcasts: draft bill tightening media control approved by NA committee* Youtube. Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/pCIBi6-PQVU?>

30 Harutyunyan, A. (2026, April 3). The pro-oligarch human rights defender... [Facebook post]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/reel/1659516132162880>

affiliated actors, often extends beyond the realm of simple public inquiry and begins to function as a normative expectation, prescribing when civil society should react, how and what position it should adopt. Such an approach may create a situation in which the state not only expects a reaction from civil society but also indirectly defines expectations regarding the content, form, and permissible boundaries of this reaction. At the same time, the language and discourse directed toward the media reveal similarly concerning trends. Remarks by political actors referring to journalists and media often move beyond the scope of professional criticism, turning into labeling or targeting rhetoric. In this regard, the response of National Assembly Speaker Alen Simonyan to a journalist's question is particularly illustrative, demonstrating how discussions about the media can shift from a professional domain to debates over legitimacy and credibility.

***"If not for Nikol Pashinyan, most of you would now be 'foreign agents'."***<sup>31</sup>

Speaker of the National Assembly, Alen Simonyan

The term "foreign agent" carries a specific political meaning and has an established history of application in several countries, including Russia and neighboring Georgia, where it has been used to directly restrict the activities of civil society actors through inspections, searches of offices and homes, and measures that threaten their existence in the country. The introduction of this term into local public discourse poses significant risks to civil society's activities, contributing to its shrinking and increasing pressure on its representatives, particularly in a post-election context. At the same time, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has interpreted the use of the term "foreign agent"<sup>32</sup> as referring to certain political actors. Political discourses, once formed within a particular historical moment, tend to persist in public memory and reproduce as political narratives regardless of changes in government. Over time, they may acquire broader political functions, evolving into targeting instruments that can be employed by various actors across different contexts. On the other hand, judicial proceedings initiated by both state and private actors are

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31 A1 Plus. (2026, April 14). *If not for Nikol Pashinyan, most of you would be "foreign agents."* Alen Simonyan to journalists: Youtube. <https://a1plus.am/hy/article/500438>

32 First Channel News (2026, April 15). *We have reached agreements of strategic importance with Russia, the expression of which we will see in the near future: Pashinyan.* 1lurer.am. <https://www.1lurer.am/hy/2026/04/15/1/1496636>

sometimes transformed into instruments of pressure against activists, civil society representatives, and journalists. This is reflected both in lawsuits filed by political actors against media outlets, which affect the environment related to media freedom,<sup>33</sup> and in the use of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), which are particularly often used against environmental and community-based movements. Such practices may restrict spaces for public participation and weaken the foundations of local democracy.

## **CONCLUSION: PROSPECTS OF CIVIL SOCIETY RESILIENCE**

In the context of the upcoming parliamentary election, attempts to delegitimize civil society extend beyond mere criticism and reveal a broader epistemological targeting of civil society, one that has the potential to erode the foundations of civic agency by reducing it to an object of instrumentalization. The impact of these narratives and their consequences may be far more profound, extending well beyond the electoral process. The targeting of civil society is becoming a prolonged discursive struggle over the authority to define what is “real,” what is “legitimate,” and what constitutes the public interest - a struggle whose effects may persist into the post-election period regardless of the outcomes of political realignments.

This is particularly dangerous for Armenian civil society, as such epistemic pressure may lead not only to the reframing or erasure of its institutional memory and contributions, but also to the redefinition of its public role. When the long years’ experience and achievements of civil society are subordinated to current political interests, the need for its existence and its public value are also called into question. During the pre-election period, media and civic platforms find themselves at the intersection of internal professional challenges, tendencies to redraw the boundaries of their legitimacy by opposition forces, representatives of pseudo-civil society and state apparatus. At the same time, external targeting mechanisms have undergone significant transformations in recent years. Whereas previously the primary focus was on financial sources, targeting has now shifted toward questions of political positioning, loyalty, and security-related responsibility.

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33 Reporters Without Borders. Armenia. (2026, April 30). <https://rsf.org/en/country/armenia>

This toolkit creates a framework in which the professional activities and public positions of civil society actors are interpreted through the lens of political interests. In this context, it is particularly important to question prevailing assumptions about “neutrality.” In politically polarized environments, “neutrality” is often presented as a desirable or even mandatory position. In practice, however, it often becomes a normative requirement, regulating who is considered a legitimate speaker and who is not. Civil society does not operate in a vacuum outside politics; it is constantly engaged with issues of public values, rights, democracy, peace, and justice, all of which are inherently political. Consequently, the objective is not to be “neutral,” but rather to clarify one’s own positions, values, and spheres of responsibility while maintaining independence and public accountability. Under these circumstances, the delegitimization of civil society takes on an ontological dimension, where the “peace agenda,” which in the context of a post-war crisis could have served as a unifying narrative, is transformed into a divisive instrument that further deepens polarization. Civil society actors’ attempts to confront existing realities and articulate a vision of peace often encounter prejudiced perceptions. As a result, the public sphere surrounding peace turns into a battle between competing narratives. On the one hand, peace discourse is equated with the government’s political agenda; on the other hand, anti-democratic actors promote concepts such as “dignified peace,” “strong peace,” and similar formulations as normatively “proper” alternatives. In these circumstances, independent civil society actors advocating for peace are often targeted, while their positions are portrayed not as autonomous civic expression but as manifestations of political loyalty.

Given the intensification of targeting and delegitimizing narratives during the pre-election period, establishing stable, long-term relationships with broad segments of the public is critically important for civil society. This extends beyond improving communication strategies or increasing public visibility; it requires the development of genuine, continuous, and reciprocal forms of engagement with diverse social groups. The legitimacy of civil society is not derived solely from institutional recognition or external support, but also from the extent to which it is perceived as a space for articulating and representing public experiences, concerns, and needs. In this context, maintaining continuous engagement with communities, consolidating public trust, and remaining accessible and credible to broad sections of society can become not only instruments of resilience but

also essential conditions for the reproduction of civil society's public foundations. This is particularly important in circumstances where delegitimizing narratives seek to portray civil society as detached from the public, driven by external influences, or motivated by narrow interests.

At the same time, resilience cannot be limited to responding to external targeting alone. It also requires critical self-reflection on issues of representation, inclusivity, language, and forms of public participation. For civil society, the central challenge is not only to counter the narratives forming around it, but also to create public spaces around its own activities where pluralism can be preserved without reproducing mechanisms of internal silencing or policing of legitimacy boundaries. Under these conditions, the fundamental prerequisite for civil society resilience is maintaining its agency as an autonomous actor that enjoys public trust and actively participates in democratic processes. This is not a matter of maintaining a position outside politics or preserving a "neutral" stance. Rather, it is about the capacity of civil society to act as an independent public subject - shaping agendas, raising issues, and engaging in political and social processes without the constant need to justify its legitimacy.

