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# CIVIL SOCIETY AND MEDIA IN ARMENIA

## An Evidence Review for Learning, Evaluation and Research Activity II (LER II)

JANUARY 2019

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Prepared by:

The Cloudburst Group  
8400 Corporate Drive, Suite 550  
Landover, MD 20785-2238  
Tel: 301-918-4400

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# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY<sup>1</sup>

An active civil society and an independent, balanced media have long been thought to be crucial instruments for political change in countries in transition and key components of a successful democratic society. Both civil society and the media played a significant role in the recent Velvet Revolution in Armenia, where a grassroots protest movement was able to unite a wide range of citizens to push a seemingly entrenched authoritarian leader out of power and both are likely to have critical roles to play in the post-transition environment. In this evidence review, we analyze civil society and the media in Armenia and elsewhere in order to understand some of the factors that can contribute to successful development in the future.

We begin by sketching out the academic discourse on Armenian civil society and review the literature on the role civil society can play in transition settings, with a focus on what Armenian civil society can contribute going forward. We then analyze existing knowledge on the role of the media, focusing on Armenia and the experience of other similar countries. We conclude by summarizing the main takeaways from both sections in the context of Armenia.

## 2. CIVIL SOCIETY

### 2.1. SCHOLARLY ASSESSMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN ARMENIA

Most assessments of Armenian civil society stress that while formal, organization-based civil society is present in the country and well supported by donors, significant problems remain both at the level of national politics and at the grassroots. Formal civil society organizations (CSOs) – primarily non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – tend to be heavily donor dependent and have not deeply penetrated Armenian society (Paturyan, 2014; Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018). As a result, NGOs have not been effective at holding the government accountable either alone or by energizing citizens to agitate against government excesses. An umbrella organization that tries to set the reform agenda and to channel pressure on the government has been lacking (Gevorgyan, 2017), which is reflected in infighting among formal civil society organizations (Asian Development Bank, 2011). Moreover, previous authoritarian governments did not seek to involve civil society organizations in the policy making process, and organizations were not very successful at pushing for inclusion in this realm.

Grassroots participation in organized civil society is weak, and trust in NGOs is low (Paturyan and Gevorgyan, 2014; Abrahamian and Shagoyan, 2012; Ishkanian, 2008, 2014, 2015). Armenians have low levels of participation in membership-based organizations, with only 7% of Armenians reporting being members of a civil society organization according to the World Values Survey (Paturyan, 2018). The Caucasus Barometer indicates that trust in NGOs has hovered around 22% for the past ten years. Analyses have consistently pointed out that this lack of trust and lack of engagement may be associated with the fact that these organizations are only weakly embedded in the broader society (Ishkanian, 2008, 2014; Paturyan and Bagiyanyan, 2017; Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018). Many Armenians are not aware of the organizations that are designed to assist them (Paturyan, 2009). The NGO sector is more “engineered” than genuine and lacks grassroots connections (Ishkanian, 2014), with scholars noting that a lot of social activity in Armenia is still concentrated in kinship networks (Aliyev, 2014; Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018). Aliyev (2014) points out that Armenians view participation in formal civil society as less beneficial than

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<sup>1</sup> This Evidence Review was prepared by Graeme Robertson and Simon Hoellerbauer (Department of Political Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill).



continued involvement in kinship networks. This does not mean, however, that strong familial networks are to blame for the lack of participation in formal civil society; on the contrary, the persistence of the importance of kinship networks may be caused by the weakness and disconnected nature of formal civil society.

This also does not mean that Armenian civil society has been inactive. In fact, civil society in Armenia has been characterized by periods of collective action in which loosely organized groups and individuals have come together as actors on the political stage. This has been true since before independence. After all, it was collective protest that helped establish Armenia as an independent state, and there have been a number of protest-based movements that have been active at certain points since. Prior to 2008, however, these protests were more performative than effective (Abrahamian and Shagoyan, 2012). The character and direction of protest changed markedly after the violent repression of the 2008 election protests, when the political system lost any last vestiges of legitimacy (Abrahamian and Shagoyan, 2012; Derluguian and Hovhannisyian, 2018; Iskandaryan, 2018). Iskandaryan (2018) argues that protest became the only way for Armenians to engage politically, a point backed up by the 2018 Freedom House Nations in Transit report for Armenia (Aghekyan, 2018).

Following the protests and repression of 2008, there has been a proliferation of grassroots social movements called “civic initiatives,” some of which have been successful in securing change in specific policies. These initiatives usually focused on particular issues and were loosely organized around individual activists who called people to protest (Ishkanian, 2015; Paturyan and Bagiyan, 2017; Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018). Although not all civic initiatives were successful, they showed an ability to engage with Armenian citizens in ways that NGOs have not. The civic initiatives also demonstrated some of the tensions inherent in Armenian civil society. Although NGO members as individuals participated extensively in the civic initiatives’ actions, NGOs as organizations are generally weakly involved with civic initiatives. Civic initiative activists have tended to see involvement with NGOs as potentially delegitimizing, due to the lack of trust in NGOs among broader Armenian society (Ishkanian, 2015; Paturyan and Bagiyan, 2017). In general, the informal and formal parts of Armenian civil society do not cooperate effectively and can be at odds with one another (Gevorgyan, 2017). Finally, the 2018 Velvet Revolution reaffirmed the protest-based nature of Armenia’s civil society and demonstrated the ability of Armenians to push for changes when the conditions are right.

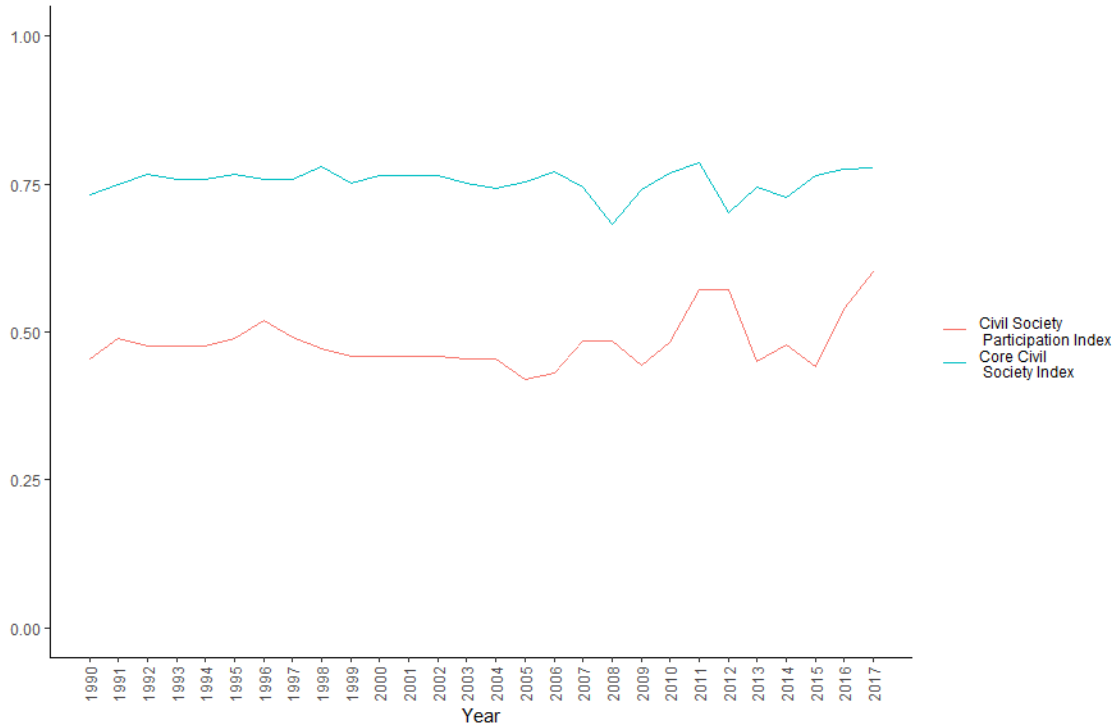
The Varieties of Democracy Project<sup>2</sup> has two indices that measure civil society. The first, the *civil society participation index*, measures both how active citizens are in civil society and how active organizations are within the policy making process. The second, the *core civil society index*, aims “to provide a measure of a robust civil society, understood as one that enjoys autonomy from the state and in which citizens freely and actively pursue their political and civic goals, however conceived” (Coppedge et al., 2018, 237). Both indices are measured from 0 to 1. Figure 1, below, shows that for most of Armenia’s post-independence history, neither index has changed much, with the civil society participation index hovering around 0.5 and the core civil society index hovering around 0.75. The civil society participation and core civil societies indices spike noticeably in 2011. This most likely reflects the 2011 protests, which evolved from a protest by street vendors in Yerevan against a ban on street trading into a broader contentious movement that managed to wring some concessions out of Sargsyan and the Republican Party of Armenia. The civil society participation index remains high in 2012, which may reflect the successful Mashtots Park civic initiative. In addition, the civil society participation index begins to rise again in 2016

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<sup>2</sup> The website of the Varieties of Democracy Project; <https://www.v-dem.net/en/>.

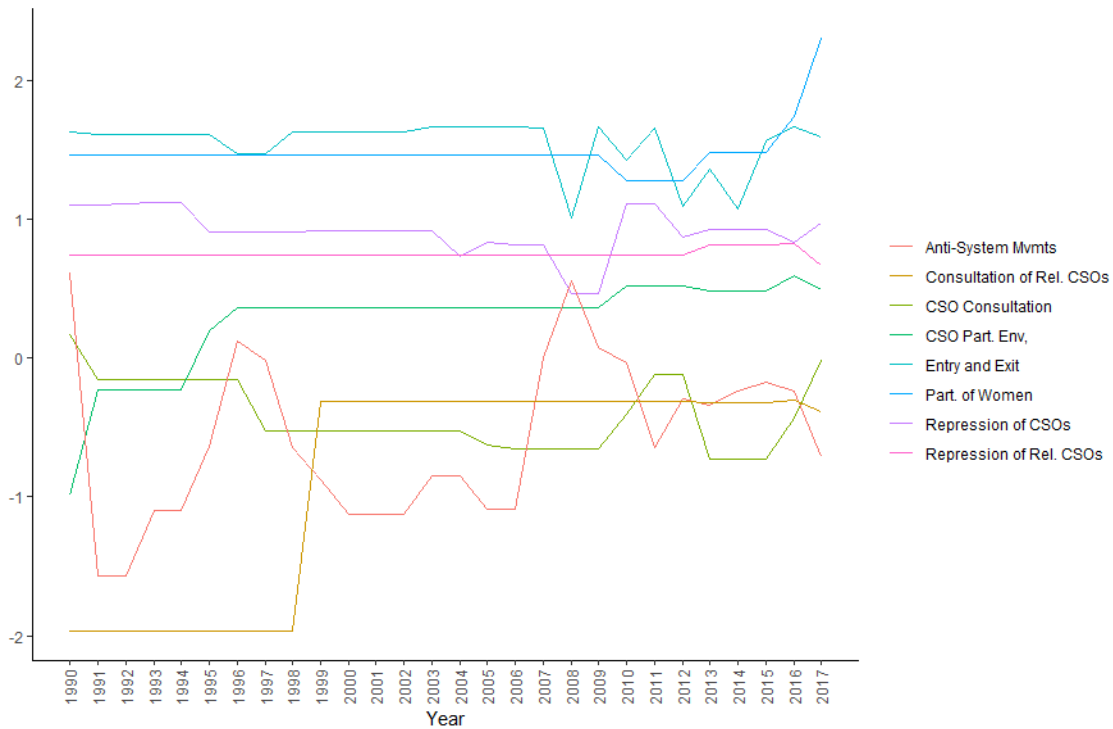
and 2017, which may capture the lead up to the Velvet Revolution. In general, however, although both indices have fluctuated in last decade, the V-Dem indices do not seem to reflect what Armenian analysts described as a clear change in civil society and increase in grassroots activism after 2008. Paturyan and Bagiyani (2017) analyze three successful and one unsuccessful civic initiatives in 2013 and 2014, and Ishkanian (2015) lists 31 civic initiatives that came into being between February 2009 and May 2015, yet the V-Dem civil societies indices generally put civil society participation and robustness in these years at the same level or lower than the same measures in the 1990s.

Figure 1. V-Dem Civil Society Indices for Armenia, 1990-2017



V-Dem coders have rated civil society participation in Armenia as consistently and significantly lower than the robustness of civil society, which does seem to reflect the scholarly consensus delineated above that civil society has been institutionalized, but that citizens do not participate at high levels in formal civil society organizations. Unfortunately, the V-Dem indicators – displayed in Figure 2 (below) – do not allow us to clearly differentiate between formal and informal civil society. This, together with the issues with the lack of responsiveness of the measures to civic initiatives, implies that the core civil society index may overstate the strength of civil society in an organizational sense, yet also understate the increase in civil society activity after 2008.

Figure 2. V-Dem Civil Society Indicators for Armenia, 1990-2017



Comparatively, Figures 3 and 4 (below) show that the robustness of Armenia’s civil society is only a little lower than that of Georgia, but participation is considerable higher in Georgia. Prior to the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003 and 2004, the indices were nearly the same for both countries. Ishiyama, Mezvrishvili, and Zhgenti (2018) show, using survey data, that social and institutional trust are much higher in Georgia than in the other Caucuses states, which they attribute to the existence of a better-developed civil society in Georgia. Azerbaijan lags far behind Armenia and Georgia on both measures, which is understandable given the consolidated nature of Azerbaijan’s authoritarian regime.

Figure 3. Civil Society in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, 1990-2017

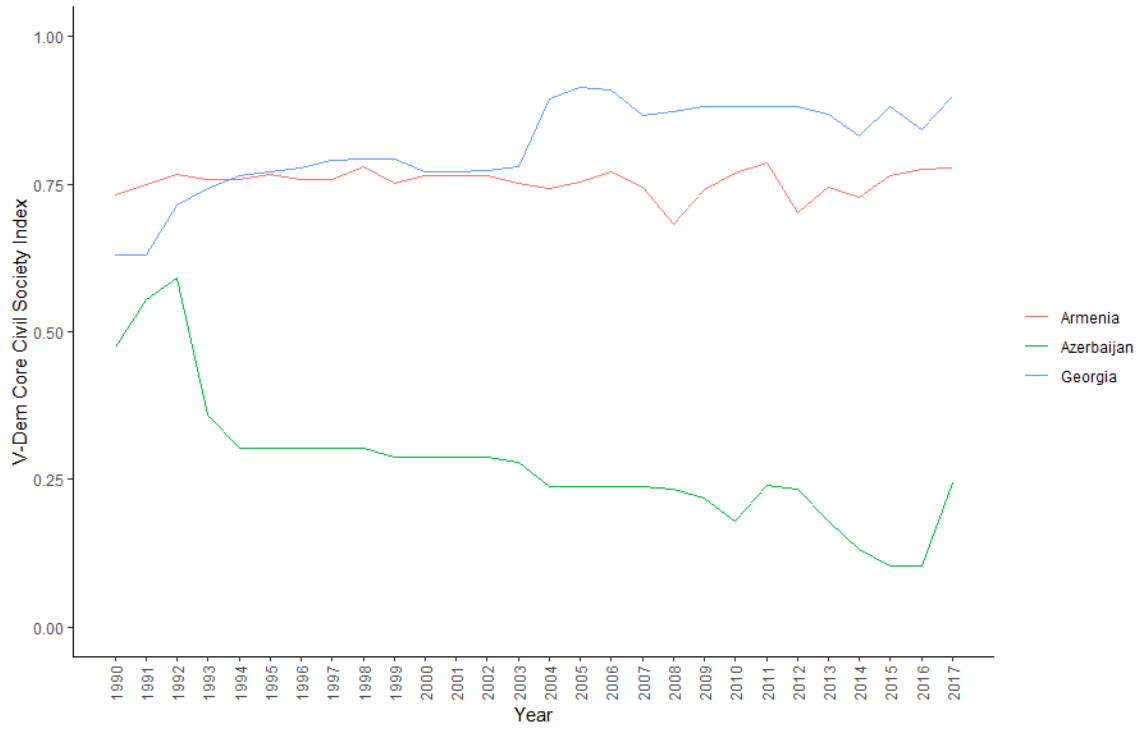
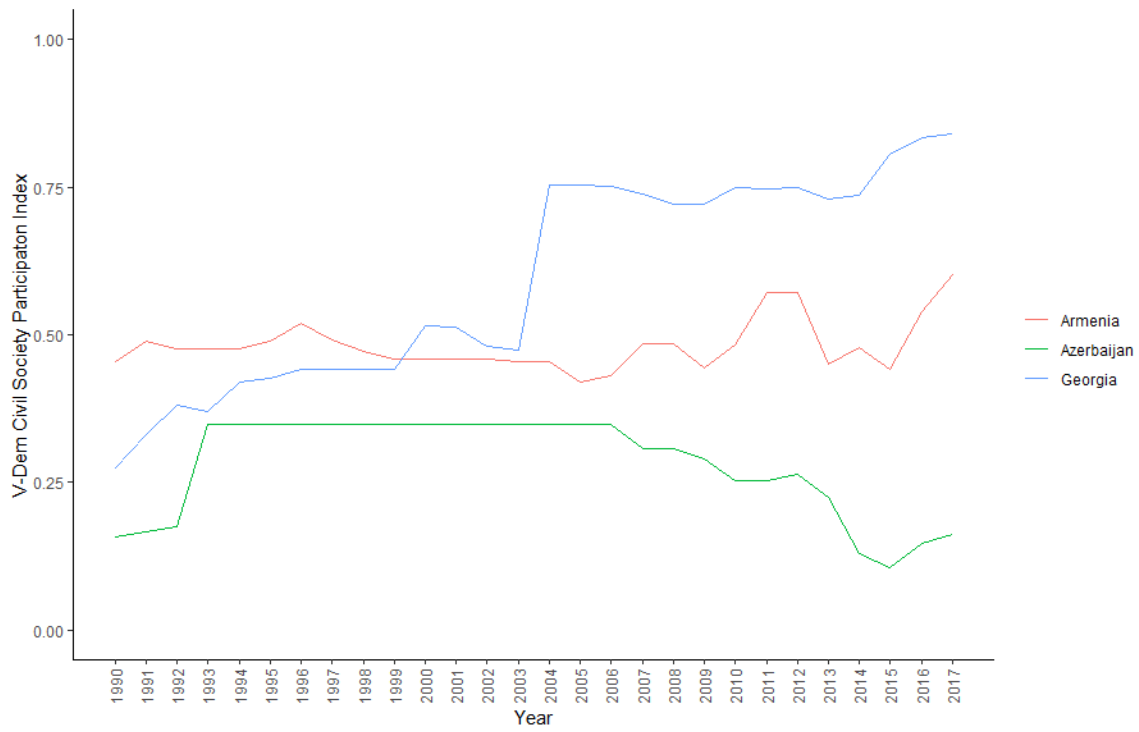


Figure 4. Civil Society Participation in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, 1990-2017





## 2.2. CIVIL SOCIETY'S ROLE IN TRANSITION SETTINGS

Informal civil society played a key role in the Velvet Revolution in Armenia, and research suggests that transitions like this that involve significant citizen participation are different from elite-driven transitions (Karatnycky and Ackerman, 2005; Haggard and Kaufman, 2012; Kadivar, 2018). Although many scholars think protest-driven transitions are more likely to lead to consolidated democracy, the reality is that the results of these transitions vary. Examples of successful civil society-driven transitions include Brazil, Tunisia, South Africa, South Korea, Argentina, Chile, Poland, and the Baltic states. Less clearly successful cases include the Philippines, Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, where transitions stagnated and/or de-democratization occurred, and also cases like Bolivia and Venezuela, where civil society-spurred regime change did not aim at achieving liberal democracy.

Part of the variation in outcomes may be due less to civil society groups themselves than to the broader political environment. Levitsky and Way (2010) argued that civil society movements are only successful when they come up against institutionally weakened regimes. This argument is contentious though. Bunce and Wolchik (2011) disagree, arguing that the Color Revolutions show that civil society movements were able to push authoritarian leaders out of power even in regimes that seemed secure. Others have taken a more intermediate position, arguing that civil society can play a key role when, for one reason or another, authoritarian leaders are perceived as lame ducks (Hale, 2005) or when election fraud focuses discontent at corruption on the regime itself (Tucker, 2007). More recent experience, in Armenia and elsewhere, however, points to the overall unpredictability of the process, as seemingly strong incumbents have been overthrown even without elections or any indication that they were running out of time.

Whatever the causes of transition, scholars are united in arguing that civil society can play a crucial role once change is underway. Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens (1992) highlight the importance of civil society as a counterbalance to the state, ensuring that it does not become too autonomous from its citizens' needs and demands. Linz and Stepan (1996) say that a dense and robust civil society is necessary for a successful transition to democracy, and that states without such a civil society will be very unlikely to transition successfully. Diamond (1999) and Karatnycky and Ackerman (2005), analyzing the wave of civil society-based transitions after the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), make a similar case, arguing that a strong civil society is crucial for the consolidation of democracy both by helping keep the post-transition government on track and by helping instill democratic values. More recently, Nitsova, Pop-Eleches, and Robertson (2018), investigating reform efforts in Ukraine after the Revolution of Dignity, argue that reform goes furthest when civil society and international donors are able to "sandwich" the government, pressing for reform from above and below. Similarly, Fagan (2011), in his study of Kosovo, finds that technical organizations funded by donors can effectively push for reform in unstable political settings. Each of these analyses suggests different paths through which Armenian civil society could be effective going forward, though in each case there is a lot of work to do to develop the needed organizational capacity.

Other assessments of the role civil society can play in transition settings are not so clearly positive. The nature of the transitions themselves may have important implications for the course of the state's subsequent political development. Fishman (2017) compares the post-transition political development of Portugal and Spain and theorizes that the role or character civil society takes on during the transition process can shape the process of democratization and, crucially, can alter the way politics is carried out after democratic consolidation. A more constrained civil society that seeks to demobilize once

transition occurs (as was the case in Spain) may lead to less inclusive politics, whereas more open, protest-based civil society (as was the case in Portugal) will lead to more inclusive politics and a more redistributive polity. Along similar lines, the inclusiveness of the political settlement that leads to transition – or the inclusiveness of the transition movement – can alter how civil society develops after the transition (Jamal, 2012). A more exclusionary transition movement is likely to lead to a weak civil society that will be unable to hold the post-transition government accountable.

Further work cautions that while democracy-oriented civil society can play an important role during transitions, the tumultuous transition process can give voice to a diverse array of civic actors who do not all make claims and act in ways that are in accordance with democratic norms. Such illiberal and radicalized civic activism can endanger the course and stability of the transition. For example, the important role played by nationalist groups in Ukraine in the Revolution of Dignity and in the fight against Russian-backed separatists in Eastern Ukraine has translated into an active post-transition presence that has complicated reform (Way, 2014; Cleary, 2016). It is especially problematic when these actors portray themselves as “true” civil society in contrast to civil society that has been assisted by Western donors, as has been the case in the Balkans (Schwandner-Sievers, 2013; Strazzari and Selenica, 2013). Veterans and pro-armed forces groups do occupy an important place in Armenian society due to the frozen conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, but they are not uniformly pro-government. In 2016 the nationalist group Sasna Tsrer stormed a police station in Yerevan, taking multiple hostages, an act that gained a surprising amount of public support. The ability of these movements to get grassroots support may make it difficult for democracy-oriented civil society to connect with citizens and thus direct social pressures along more democratic and procedural lines.

In addition, civil society does not have to have a combative relationship with authoritarian regimes (Spires, 2011; Ziegler, 2010; Lorch and Bunk, 2017). Authoritarian governments often set up civil society organizations in order to gain some form of social control over their citizens. In fully closed political regimes such as the USSR, participation in these organizations, often labor unions and youth organizations, is often not voluntary. In hybrid regimes, however, these organizations can effectively mimic “true” civil society organizations (Wiktorowicz, 2000; Hemment, 2012). These organizations could potentially counterbalance genuine grassroots movements. Even organizations that are not directly created by the state but that have been induced to work within the system may not have incentives to actively promote democratic change. Cheskin and March (2015) point out that civil society organizations can practice “consentful contention” by not challenging the regime and by seeking to work within its confines. Civil society in these contexts can actually help maintain regime stability (Wischermann et al., 2018). To date, however, there is little evidence in Armenia to suggest that civil society organizations with broad appeal have successfully been set up or co-opted by the government, although the government under Sargsyan did (unsuccessfully) attempt to co-opt some civic initiatives (Ishkanian, 2015, 1221).

Finally, some scholars even consider civil society in general a potentially negative influence. Encarnación (2002), for example, claims that civil society revolutions could in some cases be considered civil society coups, as they subvert democratic political processes and can result in a government lacking legitimacy post-transition. There is then the danger that appeals to society, and not democratic norms, becomes the modus operandi of the regime. In a classic argument, Huntington (1968) argued that a highly mobilized and overactive civil society can destabilize development and prevent political stabilization as demands and claims outstrip the ability of the state to deliver. According to Huntington, this leads to

wild oscillations in regime type, from unstable democracy to strict dictatorships. Along similar lines, O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986) argue that civil society can push the reform process too far, causing regime elites to seek to reassert control of the political system. According to them, transitions have a higher chance succeeding when civil society demobilizes and takes a step back during the transition process itself. The common theme to these arguments is a civil society that is too active and assumes a role that it does not necessarily warrant. Although the old elite seems thoroughly discredited in Armenia – the Republican Party of Armenia of former president Sargsyan did not make it into parliament the most recent elections – and may therefore be ill-suited to play such a spoiler role, the specter of Russia, on which Armenia clearly depends, does hang over the situation.

In sum, the literature on civil society in transition settings defines varying expectations for civil society. While there is little evidence to suggest that civil society in Armenia has an outright negative effect, it remains to be seen whether it can assume the role assigned to it by normative theories of civil society and democratization. In the next section, we turn to how civil society can be effective at pushing for reform.

### **2.3. CIVIL SOCIETY AND PRESSURE FOR REFORM**

Transitions are not a singular moment; they are a process in which civil society can play a key role. Scholars have argued, however, about which organizational mode of civil society may have the greatest impact in this process. Debate has centered on whether civil society organizations or social movements are better suited for applying pressure on transitional governments to pursue needed reforms. Both scholars and donor institutions have also raised questions about the ways in which civil society can effectively engage in dialogue with the government and, in particular, about the role civil society might play in the struggle against corruption.

Social movements tend to be more contentious than formal civil society organizations, which often are forced to operate within the space given to them by the regime (Irvine, 2018). As a result, social movements are better situated to challenge leaders. Successful social movements are also built on grassroots involvement, which enables them to call on a wider base of support, which can make them appear more legitimate to governments. One particular contribution that social movements have made is in helping expand rights and access to politics to previously disenfranchised groups (Rossi and della Porta, 2015). Along these lines, Robinson and Friedman (2007), investigating civil society in Uganda and South Africa, find that the most effective civil society organizations in these countries do not depend on external funding but draw on membership dues and broad-based involvement, which gives citizens a stake and the sense that they have a say in political developments (Malena and Heinrich, 2007).

There are some cases, however, where civil society organizations can effectively push for reform without having to rely on grassroots bases. Nitsova, Pop-Eleches, and Robertson (2018) find that in Ukraine after the Revolution of Dignity, public involvement with the reform process was neither sufficient nor necessary for successful reform. Similarly, in the case of Kosovo, Fagan (2011) argues that civil society organizations did not necessarily have to have grassroots connections in order to be effective; instead what mattered in Kosovo was technical and organizational capacity and sustainability.

Civil society organizations will likely accomplish more when cooperating with other civil society organizations. Nitsova, Pop-Eleches, and Robertson (2018) found that civil society organizations were

best able to achieve reform goals when they worked in the context of an umbrella organization – in the case of Ukraine, this was the Reanimation Package for Reform. Such umbrella organizations have existed during various successful transitions. Besides concentrating and amplifying voices and setting a clear reform agenda, “umbrella civic coalitions” can help grant legitimacy to the transition process by drawing in a diverse set of actors and can encourage compromise (Karatnycky and Ackerman, 2005, 12). For example, the National Accord for a Full Transition to Democracy was the organization that helped direct the transition in Chile that ended Pinochet’s rule. In Tunisia after the Arab Spring, a series of umbrella organizations ensured that while the progress of the transition wavered in the years following the collapse of Ben Ali, it never collapsed entirely (Ottaway, 2014).

However, umbrella organizations on their own are not enough. Genuine reform seemingly requires a dialogue between governments and civil society (Fioramonti and Heinrich, 2007). Many donors, including the Open Society Foundations, the United Nations Development Program, the European Union, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe emphasize the establishment of dialogue between government and civil society in their program statements and develop projects with that goal in mind. The Open Government Partnership<sup>3</sup> is an organization dedicated to establishing such dialogue, by helping countries develop “action” plans for opening up the government and reducing corruption. Plans are developed by governments in conjunction with civil society and give civil society the ability to hold governments to their word. As the above discussion indicates, social movements and umbrella groups seem best situated to establish such a dialogue, and there is evidence that formal dialogue between civil society and government can work. The series of umbrella groups in Tunisia described above have been successful at pushing for political change because they were connected to the government via first informal and then formal discussion mechanisms. In Ghana, the Ghana Parliamentary Committee Support Project, a group of civil society organizations with the authority to dialogue with the government, has helped successfully monitor the Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy (Gyimah-Boadi and Yakah, 2013). Unfortunately, while policymakers realize that dialogue is important, there is frustratingly little research into the form this dialogue should take.

Scholars have also pointed out significant drawbacks to the dialogue model. A consistent issue is that for a successful dialogue to exist, the government has to be willing to engage with civil society in meaningful ways (Buckland-Merret, Kilkenny, and Reed, 2017; Fioramonti and Heinrich, 2007; Court et al., 2006). This is not often the case in authoritarian states or in weakly democratic ones, especially in the context of weak states with high corruption. In these contexts, governments will be disinclined to listen to the evidence presented by civil society and to adhere to the format of the dialogue (Court et al., 2006). Coston (1998) conceptualizes eight different possible relationships between civil society and government, partially defined by linkages between civil society and government. When these linkages do not exist, and the relationship is more adversarial, neither government nor civil society has an incentive to enter into dialogue. In such confrontational contexts, governments can sometimes attack organizations’ legitimacy to engage in dialogue in order to undermine coordination (Brown et al., 2001).

The question of legitimacy is important. As Papagianni (2013) points out, there are certain tensions inherent in a structured dialogue. Whom, for example, do the organizations represent? How inclusive should the dialogue be? In addition, who makes the final decision regarding the outcome of the dialogue and what powers and rights are given to those engaging in the dialogue? How can *de jure* decisions made

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/>

in a dialogue result in *de facto* political changes? If a dialogue is not inclusive, it can lead to tensions within civil society and exacerbate social divides (Verma, Gupta, and Birner, 2017; Jamal, 2012).

Donors should therefore push governments to enter into dialogue with civil society and to create a more positive environment in which civil society should operate, although they may have little ability to force a government to adhere to its promises. At the same time, while willingness on the government side is clearly one of the most important factors, some scholars have pointed out that weaknesses in civil society itself can lead to ineffective dialogue. Splits and a lack of cooperation within civil society can derail engagement between civil society and the government (Fioramonti and Heinrich, 2007, 22). Court et al. (2006) also point out that organizations can fail to understand the policy making process, to read the political environment accurately, and to communicate effectively the evidence they have collected.

The problem of a lack of willingness to change on behalf of the government also plays a large role in studies of the possible ways civil society can impact corruption. Civil society has been theorized as being one of the key agents for combatting corruption, especially in transition settings (Chalmers and Setiyono, 2012). In combatting corruption, civil society organizations can serve both a “practical,” watchdog role, and a “strategic,” reform-advocating role. The internet, social media, and access to a free media can be crucial for helping civil society push for reform, as they help “spread information and increase[] [civil society’s] ability to mobilise an informed citizenry” (Kossow and Kukutschka, 2017, 460; Themudo, 2013; but see Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013, 110-112). The rise of e-governance can also make it significantly easier for civil society groups to hold politicians accountable (Starke, Naab, and Scherer, 2016). Ukraine is an excellent example of this process in action.

Nevertheless, without genuine willingness to reform on behalf of at least part of the ruling elite, civil society can be ineffective (Verma, Gupta, and Birner, 2017; Fox, 2015; Jenkins, 2007). If efforts to combat corruption meet resistance at the national level, civil society organizations might be able to turn to local level politicians. These may be more susceptible to pressure, especially in new political systems with weakly institutionalized political parties, as was the case in South Korea (Schopf, 2018). Even so, inroads at the local level can only translate upward if higher levels of government have some incentive to change.

In addition, policy changes do not necessarily mean success. In both reform and development in general, and especially in the case of corruption, anti-corruption initiatives can suffer from “isomorphic mimicry” (Andrews, Pritchett, and Wood, 2017, Ch. 2), where governments adopt institutions that worked elsewhere, but do not aim to utilize or empower them (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2006). Johnston (2018) argues that establishing anticorruption agencies is not always a good idea, as they can drain a lot of resources and be co-opted by elites, meaning that fights over corruption become fights over the anti-corruption fighting mechanism. Mungiu-Pippidi (2013) goes further to say that “opening an Internet café in every village may be a more effective approach to anticorruption than the establishment of an anticorruption agency” (114).

Given entrenched corruption, scholars have come to argue that grassroots organizations are the ones best situated to pressure for reform (Johnston, 2018; Verma, Gupta, and Birner, 2017; Halloran and Flores, 2015; Beyerle, 2014; Jenkins 2007; Richards, 2006). Beyerle (2014) explains that citizens can be effective in fights against corruption because they can give anti-corruption initiatives power of numbers. Fox (2015) points out, however, that this type of pressure is useful only via a “sandwich,” where reformers in the government, especially at senior levels, put pressure on officials below them. Beyerle

(2014) and Johnston (2018) also caution that efforts to fight corruption have to be linked to other concrete issues that citizens truly care about for enough popular pressure to build. Fox (2016) also points out that social accountability efforts are only effective when they connect organizations at multiple levels – local, regional, and national – and in different regions. This is important for truly *ending* corruption: Verma, Gupta, and Birner (2017) show that, for example, the Musahars in Bihar state in India were able to end local corrupt practices, when they were able to organize with help from outside donors. At the same time, however, corruption experienced by other groups did not decrease, and the Musahars’ efforts caused other social groups to become more antagonistic toward them. In contrast, the ability of urban social movements in India in 2001-2006 to cooperate with various economic classes and formal NGOs made them much more effective at combatting corruption on a broad scale (Jenkins, 2007).

What is the role of donors in fights against corruption? Donors can attempt to help forge connections between groups and to boost their capacity to hold officials accountable for corruption (Halloran and Flores, 2015). They can also help organizations by pushing for more press freedom and giving them the tools necessary to inform citizens of their work (Kossow and Kukutschka, 2017; Themudo, 2013). However, donor support can also undermine the legitimacy of grassroots groups (Jenkins, 2007; Edwards and Hulme, 1996). In addition, donors’ desire to apply a certain playbook for fighting corruption can backfire and lead to decreased effectiveness for organizations (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013; Brown and Cloke, 2011). Bukovansky (2006), Hindess (2005), and Mungiu-Pippidi (2013) criticize the “neo-liberal,” apolitical nature of most attempts to fight corruption pushed by donors, arguing that fighting corruption is inherently political. Others point out that donors too often tell local movements what the problems in their country are, without listening to what the people are actually concerned with (Johnston, 2013).

What are the implications of these debates for Armenia? Given its recent history, it seems that the social movement model fits the Armenian case better than the civil society organization model. Indeed, in Armenia, civic initiatives have been much more successful at achieving their – albeit specific – policy aims than formalized civil society organizations (Ishkanian, 2015). In fact, umbrella organizations have been missing in Armenia, limiting the effectiveness of civil society organizations (Gevorgyan, 2017). At the same time, the new government under Pashinyan, with its background in civil society – particularly grassroots civil society – does seem well placed to interface with any social movements that may spring up around policy issues. In addition, there does seem to be a willingness on the part of the government to tackle corruption, and a recognition on the part of the Armenian people that corruption is a significant issue. If Armenia is to rely on its social movements, however, the challenge is that often these movements often do not survive the transition, breaking apart under the tensions inherent in transitional coalitions, which can be problematic when concerted effort is required to push for reform and combat corruption. We explore the dynamics behind this process in the next section.

## **2.4. HOW CIVIL SOCIETY CHANGES IN TRANSITION SETTINGS AND AFTER TRANSITION**

The social forces that participate in the initial stages of the transition often face an uncertain future. Some civil society leaders may move into government, while others may continue to press for reform from outside. Crucially – and perhaps worryingly in the Armenian case – it is important to note that a



civil society-spurred transition does not always imply that civil society is really strong, nor that civil society will be strong after the transition (Grotsky, 2012, 151-152).

Research into the fate of democratizing social movements after transitions finds that they tend to fracture once the immediate goal is ostensibly achieved. But of course, fracturing is not the only possibility. Sometimes movements simply go into abeyance, or radicalize, or even revitalize as new movements born out of the ashes of the old ones (Klandermans and van Stralen, 2015). The grand social coalitions that underpin social movements pushing for political change are often built on a mutual desire for a change from the current situation, not on an agreed upon path forward. This means that once power is achieved, these movements can struggle to agree and break apart into factions (Beissinger, 2013). Otpor! in Serbia after the Bulldozer Revolution, Pora! in Ukraine after the Orange Revolution, and Kmara in Georgia after the Rose Revolution all struggled to maintain relevance after a change in political leadership had been achieved and experienced infighting before breaking into factions. However, fracturing is not always the end of the story; Karatnycky and Ackerman (2005) argue that even the fragments of such groups can serve as the seeds for a more plural civil society, creating diverse pressure groups. Fishman (2017) also argues that the social thrust of a transition does not have to be lost afterward – the ability of the transition process to continue to shape politics depends on the extent to which the transition event or revolution becomes mythologized and implanted in collective memory, the extent to which the education system is able to institutionalize participatory dynamics, and the extent to which the practices that shaped the transition process continue to be seen as valid.

However, the experiences of Ukraine and Georgia were not necessarily very positive, although for different reasons. Both cases also show the limits of donors' ability to influence changes to civil society in transition contexts. In Ukraine after the Orange Revolution, instead of gaining a larger role in policy-making, civil society rapidly became alienated from power (Lavery, 2008), and organizations lost relevance and were not accepted by the broader society (Bilan and Bilan, 2011). This was despite considerable donor support. In addition, the coalition that had successfully pushed for a rerun of the presidential elections rapidly broke apart (Beissinger, 2013). Consequently, activists were not able to push Yushchenko in the direction of real reform, nor were they able to oppose Yanukovich's rollback of reforms after 2010 (Way, 2014). Because of their lack of connection to the people, Ukrainian civil society organizations were able to direct protest when protests bubbled up, but they proved incapable of originating it. Civil society also played a key role during the Revolution of Dignity in 2013-14. In contrast to the aftermath of the Orange Revolution, civil society, heavily supported by donors, has remained very active and has seen some successes, such as the implementation of the electronic assets declaration system (Nitsova, Pop-Eleches, and Robertson, 2018). At the same time, the success of the Revolution of Dignity has created similar rifts in civil society; some members have decided to take up an active role in the political system, while others have chosen to remain removed from the political system (Shapovalova, 2019). In addition, donor supported civil society has struggled to connect to local level civil society and grassroots movements – although some of these movements have consciously elected to steer clear of donors (Shapovalova, 2019).

In Georgia, on the other hand, the civil society activists who had helped bring Saakashvili to power in the Rose Revolution, who were also supported significantly by donors, were largely coopted by the state, entering government as part of the new administration (Lavery, 2008). Perhaps partly because of the clear connection between civil society and the new government, Georgian civil society was too supportive of the regime at first, even when the leadership began to show autocratic tendencies.

Donors seemed to exacerbate this issue by continuing to support those elements of Georgian civil society that had been crucial to the success of the Rose Revolution in the face of such tendencies. When protest against the new regime did begin in Georgia in 2007-2008, the participants had little to do with the groups active during the Rose Revolution and lacked the same level of donor support (Muskhelishvili and Jorjoliani, 2009).

In fact, the Georgian experience seems quite typical in that civil society organizations may often become too closely linked to the transition process itself. Holthaus (2018) finds that in post-transition Tunisia there has been a trade-off between pluralism and stability in civil society; the same groups that helped bring about the transition may try to control the reform process too tightly, to protect their position within it. The demands of the transition on the organizations involved are enormous, and this can have important consequences. Cleary (2016) conceptualizes the creation of a “hybrid civil society” after a transition, especially in contexts where a state is ill-equipped to deal with social and economic issues. Civil society groups can be forced to take on state-like roles in terms of service provision and policy development. Although this may be seen as a natural role for civil society, it remains to be seen how sustainable it can be. For example, experimental research from Nigeria shows that individuals who receive services from community-based organizations are less likely to pay taxes (Bodea and Lebas, 2014). In autocratic regimes where civil society organizations receive significant outside aid there is less unrest (DiLorenzo, 2018). Both of these findings suggest that when civil society organizations are effective at providing services, citizens may be disinclined to hold their own government accountable. In the case of Armenia, given that institutionalized civil society organizations do not perform much of a service function, stabilization of the status quo by such organizations seems unlikely. At the same time, the lack of organizations may mean that as the transition goes on, reform pressure might fade away.

Although civil society leaders sometimes enter government after the transition, the case of Georgia shows that this does not guarantee that these transitions will be successful. In fact, the connections that social movement activists who transition into politics have with their movements can actually become liabilities (Grotsky, 2012). The institutional realities and demands of government clash with the expectations and demands of former movement colleagues, creating conflicts. At the same time, the experience of the Movement Toward Socialism in Bolivia shows that if a movement remains united, does not fracture, and maintains an identity separate from its leaders, it can hold leaders that entered government accountable and check potential excesses (Anria, 2016). Furthermore, Kadivar (2018), examining all transitions since 1950 that involved significant mobilization, finds that protest- and social movement-based transitions result, on average, in more stable democracies, although this is dependent on the length of the mobilization period. He explains this finding by theorizing, against Grotsky to a certain extent, that a movement can help create “an organizational structure capable of providing a group of leaders with democratic convictions and leadership experience for the new democratic regime ... [and] state-society linkages and reinforces checks and balances on the government” (410).

Despite the fact that protest played a big role in the Armenian revolution, there was no umbrella organization or clearly reform-oriented movement like *Otpor!*, *Pora!*, or *Kmara*. It remains to be seen what the fate of the societal coalition that brought Pashinyan in Armenia to power will be, though the lack of a unifying organization may cause it to fracture into diverse groups more easily. Pashinyan’s *My Step Alliance* did win the December 2018 election in a landslide, ensuring it the ability to enact its preferred policies without major opposition – although it is not quite clear where Pashinyan stands ideologically (Edward, 2018). Although the new government has yet to be officially formed, Pashinyan’s

first government consisted of quite a large number of young, educated individuals with ties to his Civic Contract party and the NGO scene in Armenia.<sup>4,5</sup> Given that this first government was a coalition with parties that are now in opposition or out of government, it is likely that the new government will be even further tied to civil society. Yet, if civil society returns to the issue-oriented, apolitical protest mode that characterized it before the Velvet Revolution, reform pressure may dissipate, and a situation similar to that in Georgia may arise. So, the question of how to promote the work of civil society in the absence of organizations is a critical one for donors and policymakers. In the next section, we investigate the lessons of the literature on donor support for civil society.

## 2.5. SUPPORTING CIVIL SOCIETY DEVELOPMENT

According to AidData, international donors committed 49.4 billion dollars to “strengthening civil society” in the period between 1990 and 2013. Donors from the West have strongly supported civil society development in Armenia. The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) has granted 5 million dollars to organizations active in Armenia since 2014. Between 2013 and 2016, the United States obligated 9.4 million dollars to supporting civil society in Armenia.<sup>6</sup> In fact, since 1994, international donors have committed around 160 million dollars to strengthening civil society in Armenia.<sup>7</sup> Thanks to theories about the relationship between civil society and democratization, supporting civil society development, either as a goal in and of itself or as a means to achieving some secondary goal, has long been seen as a non-political way of promoting democracy (Ottaway and Carothers, 2000; Bush, 2015). This does not mean, however, that donors have employed the same methods or have had the same rationale behind their actions.

Hadenius and Ugglå (1996) divide donor strategies roughly into three groups: financially supporting civil society organizations, helping civil society organizations form networks with one another, and pressuring regimes. For Hadenius and Ugglå, donor pressure on regimes remains important throughout the transition process, even as the goal changes from forcing a state to open up the civil space in the beginning, to forcing the state to carry out administrative reforms that make life for civil society organizations easier as reform progresses. In addition, network building is not particularly important early, but matters a lot later.

A different way of thinking about aid strategies is laid out by Schimmelfennig (2014). For Schimmelfennig there are three different civil society promotion models: leverage, linkage, and democratic governance. Leverage, similar to the pressure discussed by Hadenius and Ugglå (1996), refers to a more indirect form of civil society promotion, where donors push states to become more democratic, thereby opening up space for civil society activity. A potential issue with leverage is that for leverage to be most effective, a state should be subject to conditionality agreements, to which not all states would be willing to agree (see Vachudova 2005 for the role of leverage on civil society and democratization in the

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<sup>4</sup> As of January 13, 2019. The website of the Government of the Republic of Armenia; <http://www.gov.am/en/structure/>. A new government must be appointed by January 29, per Armenian law.

<sup>5</sup> It is interesting that Pashinyan, in contrast to Poroshenko in Ukraine after the Revolution of Dignity who brought individuals from the Baltics, Georgia, and Poland into his government, has thus far refrained from turning to the outside for policy assistance. This may be partially because of the difference in political systems, but it may also be tied to the fact that both countries in the general region from which Armenia could draw such experienced individuals, are Ukraine and Georgia, both of which have strained relations with Russia. Pashinyan may want to avoid antagonizing Russia.

<sup>6</sup> From [ForeignAssistance.gov](https://foreignassistance.gov/); <https://foreignassistance.gov/>.

<sup>7</sup> Through 2013. From AidData, “Aid Project List”; <http://dashboard.aiddata.org/#/advanced/project-list>.

context of EU expansion). Linkage, on the other hand, represents the traditional monetary grants that donors provide to civil society organizations – primarily NGOs – in recipient countries, with the goal of helping these achieve more immediate aims. Democratic governance, which is a newer form of civil society promotion, promotes civil society by targeting specific policy issues and then drawing civil society organizations in recipient countries into transnational networks with civil society organizations in donor countries. The European Union often relies on this form of civil society promotion when conditionality is not viable (Rommens, 2017).

Finally, Howell and Pearce (2001) identify three different pathways for civil society promotion: institution and capacity building, partnership development and network building, and sustainability. In the first, donors support civil society organizations by providing opportunities to improve technical and strategic capabilities so that these organizations can more effectively pursue their goals – service provision, accountability encouragement, information distribution, etc. The purpose of network building is to connect civil society organizations to other organizations both domestically and in donor countries, to strengthen their capacity for collective action. Sustainability involves helping civil society organizations diversify their funding sources and find more domestic monetary support.

Capacity building and network development are common goals of donors in Armenia. In 2013, for example, the NED provided funding to a variety of organizations working toward these goals, including a think tank in Yerevan that sought to carry out meetings to promote democratic norms in rural Armenia<sup>8</sup> and the Caucasus Center of Peace-Making Initiatives, with the goal of “encourage[ing] cooperation and understanding among prodemocracy NGOs throughout the Caucasus”.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the clarity of the goals and means of civil society promotion, in reality there are significant obstacles to success. The most often raised problem is the possibility of donor dependence, which is a common theme in analyses of civil society promotion (Chaplowe and Enjo-Tjéga, 2007, 265). Sustainability of civil society in Armenia is generally seen as very low, with many organizations relying on donors for funding (USAID, 2016, 25; Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018). Even besides questions of sustainability, however, civil society promotion has a mixed track record empirically. Capacity building can work, and outside assistance can help organizations become more active, as the experience of women’s groups in Latin America and the United States (Markowitz and Tice, 2002), women’s groups in Russia (Henderson, 2003), and civil society organizations in Albania (Quadir and Orgocka, 2014) attest. A large-scale analysis of USAID aid support for democracy showed that USAID aid was statistically associated with improvement in civil society (Finkel, Pérez-Liñán, and Seligson, 2007). A considerable amount of research, however, shows that the assistance to civil society organizations, both when they are entirely created by donors and when they are just supported financially, can lead to organizations that are more disconnected from grassroots needs, are more beholden to donors, and are insular and uncooperative with more grassroots organizations (Ottaway and Carothers, 2000; Howell and Pearce, 2001; Mendelson and Glenn, 2003; Hemment, 2004; Ishkanian, 2008; Aksartova, 2009; Shapovalova and Youngs, 2014; Bush, 2015). This is even true in the three cases mentioned previously (Markowitz and Tice, 2002; Henderson, 2003; Quadir and Orgocka, 2014). The case of women’s groups in Russia in particular demonstrates the potential danger of the network building approach to civil society

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<sup>8</sup> “National Endowment for Democracy Grant to Armenian National Committee of the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly,” AidData Project Entry, <http://dashboard.aiddata.org/#/project/50079056>

<sup>9</sup> “National Endowment for Democracy Grant to Caucasus Center of Peace-Making Initiatives,” AidData Project Entry, <http://dashboard.aiddata.org/#/project/906000508600>

promotion; Henderson (2003) explains that while these groups grew closer together and were able to put on events within the network, this network excluded groups that did not receive support and did not reach beyond the network itself, in effect creating an isolated echo chamber.

Taken together, we might summarize the key advice to donors in promoting civil society as follows:

- First, donors need to be aware that they can push civil society organizations in non-useful (for local purposes) directions without meaning to, simply based on biases in funding processes. For example, international donors in Cambodia favored organizations that were not “embedded in the local context,” even when these had comparable capacity to non-local NGOs (Suárez and Gugerty, 2016, 2617). Looking at NED funding, Bush (2015) finds that the NED, due to its funding decisions, essentially pushed organizations to take on tamer projects and to professionalize in a Western-centric way, sacrificing the ability to actually challenge authoritarian leaders. Chaplowe and Engo-Tjéga (2007) came to a similar conclusion in the context of monitoring and evaluation elements of aid to civil society organizations in Africa.
- Second, civil society promotion has to consider local demands and local cultural conditions. Research on civil society organizations in Albania (Quadir and Orgocka, 2014) and Ghana (Porter, 2003) and on an internet-based program to promote civil society in the Middle East (Bardhan and Wood, 2015) underlines the importance of adjusting programs to the local context – programs were more successful when they took into account local understandings of concepts like civil society and poverty. This also may mean that donors have to avoid using terms like “civil society,” which have been somewhat tainted by overuse by international donors, when interacting with civil society organizations (Ishkanian, 2015, 1217). Many studies stress that Western donors cannot simply impose their vision of civil society on other countries (e.g., Howell and Pearce, 2001).
- Third, civil society promotion cannot be just be directed at stereotypical civil society organizations like NGOs. This, in effect, is forcing a version of civil society onto a country that may not fit (INTRAC, 1998; Mercer, 2002; Challand, 2005; Robinson and Friedman, 2007). Funding should also flow to social movements or other types of interconnected groups of organizations (Irvine, 2018), and donors should attempt to further cooperation between various elements of civil society (Karatnycky and Ackerman, 2005).
- Fourth, donors have to be wary of furthering divisions within civil society. Research shows that civil societies in countries where the transition process itself was more inclusive end up being stronger than those where the transition was exclusive; donors might exacerbate this process because their support for exclusive participants of the transition entrenches societal divisions (Jamal, 2012).
- Fifth, donors must avoid assuming that the forces that brought about the transition will continue to be the forces that push for effective change, as they may eventually seek to impede reform to protect their positions within the new regime. In Georgia, donors supported actors in civil society that became part of the increasingly autocratic Saakashvili government even when it became apparent that the transition had not developed in the way that donors had hoped. This hindered civil society development in subsequent years (Muskhelishvili and Jorjoliani, 2009). The German foundations’ experience in Tunisia shows that groups highly involved in the early stages of the transition can become conservative when their favored position is threatened by further development (Holthaus, 2018).

- Sixth, donors need to be prepared to invest in long-term support, must be patient, and cannot expect immediate results (Robinson, 1995; Robinson and Friedman, 2007; Munene and Thakathi, 2017). In this context, donors must not assume that once a capacity-building event – or even a series of events – has been held, that capacity has been built. Capacity-building is a long, time-intensive process that does not only involve teaching skills, but also changing people’s attitudes, behaviors, and habits (James and Wrigley, 2007).

Each of these points should be taken into consideration when making funding decisions in the post-transition environment in Armenia. Considering that this is clearly a time of change in Armenia, donors must be careful and cognizant of the fact that their actions can have both positive and negative consequences.

## **3. MEDIA**

### **3.1. INTRODUCTION**

Politics has always been about communication, and this is truer than ever today. As a result, journalists and the media always play a crucial role in political developments. However, that role is varied and highly context dependent. In this section, we survey the literature on media use and the relationship between media and democratization in Armenia and beyond. We focus on a number of issues that are important and (relatively) well covered in the literature – the role of media during and after democratic revolutions, the reactions of people to different kinds of media, the specifics of the media environment in Armenia and the challenge of developing public service broadcasting in country. While we refer to the broader experience of developing countries on occasion, the focus of the review is on the experience of small, post-Communist countries with limited media markets and languages that are not much spoken outside of the country.

### **3.2. WHAT IS THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTIONS?**

The so-called “Velvet Revolution” in Armenia in April and May of 2018 has many unique features, but the peaceful protests that led to the resignation of Serzh Sargsyan and the political system around him bear some interesting resemblances to other peaceful revolutions in recent years. One of the most interesting features that distinguishes the most recent round of pro-democracy/anti-corruption revolutions is the role of journalists or former journalists on center stage, despite (or perhaps because of) efforts on the part of repressive states to marginalize independent journalism.

In Ukraine, many of the most dynamic political leaders – and certainly those closest to a civic, anti-corruption version of the revolution – came directly from the media. The protests that ultimately led to the so-called “Revolution of Dignity” were initiated by a journalist, Mustafa Nayem, and key influences in the post-revolutionary period have included journalists like Sergey Leshchenko and the civic television station Hromadske, run by Katya Gorchinskaya (Szostek, 2014).

Reports of the events in Armenia often mention the fact that Nikol Pashinyan is a former journalist. However, it is the case that many more journalists than Pashinyan played a role in building both the political coalition and the broader climate of revulsion to the corruption of the regime that resulted in



the Velvet Revolution. For years, journalists had highlighted the corruption of key figures associated with the regime, as the regime itself tried to muzzle them. Commentators seem to agree that these “dress rehearsals” played a key role in creating the apparent cross-class coalition that ultimately ousted the Sargsyan regime, giving the Armenian revolution more of the air of the uprisings against Communism in Eastern Europe than the politically contested colored revolutions in the former Soviet space (Derlugian and Hovhannisyan, 2018).

Although the Ukrainian and Armenian experiences are particular, they are not unique. Journalists and media have played a key role in contemporary transitions, even in cases where much of the action was driven from the top down. For example, in Burma, whose tentative transition out of autocracy has largely been led by the regime itself, the Myanmar Press Council has been instrumental in both drafting new legislation covering the media and in critiquing and amending government drafts of legislation (Brooten, 2016). On the other hand, the Burmese example also illustrates the potential dark side of the media in a revolutionary environment where the proliferation of hate speech in Burma after liberalization of the media has been a key factor in the persecution of minorities (Brooten, 2016).

This potentially double-edged role of the media is at odds with the traditional perspective on media in much scholarship, where it is assumed that media will be a major bulwark of democracy. For many media scholars, especially those with a normative focus, liberalization of the media and the protection and institutionalization of media freedoms are supposed to be a key part of the initial process of democratization itself. Then, once free, the media should play a major role in promoting openness and accountability, while consolidating democracy through the political socialization of the citizenry (Jebril et al., 2015). Where political freedom flourishes, the media will also have greater opportunities to flourish. Where there are autocratic restrictions on politics, the scope for media freedom will be limited.

So far, so obvious. However, while the relationship at the autocratic end of the spectrum is reasonably straightforward – in heavily authoritarian countries like Azerbaijan or Belarus there is little to no media freedom – the same is not in fact true at the other end. Despite the normative theory, pluralistic politics do not translate directly into pluralistic, responsible, public service-oriented journalism and media. Rather, pluralistic politics can – and in many countries in Eastern Europe and Eurasia does – lead to highly polarized media. Journalists often do not act like guardians of the public interest, but instead play the role of advocates and campaigners for different political factions, individual politicians or oligarchs. Rather than emerging as strong bulwarks of democracy and promoters of enlightened political debate, in the post-Communist period, media have tended to fragment, to be of low quality, to be less diverse and to provide more polarized and relativistic coverage of the news. The result in most countries has been a media environment dominated either by the state or by private and partisan interests (Van Aelst et al., 2017; Chan, 2019). Consequently, the great corruption-exposing investigative journalism of the late Communist and early post-Communist eras quickly faded – a phenomenon not limited to Eastern Europe, but one that is actually more global in nature (Jebril et al., 2015). Worse still, even in those countries where there has been vigorous political competition and muck-raking investigative journalism, the result has been less to root out corruption but rather to discredit the political class as a whole and lead to a general lowering of political trust (Ceka, 2013).

The result is a world characterized less by free and independent public service media than by, what some scholars call, “media capture”. In a special edition in 2018 of the academic journal, *Journalism*, Anya Schiffrin characterized media capture as the control of media content by government or politically

connected elites without the need for prepublication censorship. The sources of that control include traditional tools such as funding and licensing, which have been extensively used amongst the smaller post-Communist countries where budgets are tight and advertising revenues are limited (Dragomir, 2017). However, in recent years it has even easier for governments and powerful private interests to exert control over the media due to the effects of the digital revolution and the emergence of near monopoly sellers of advertising space like Facebook and Google. These trends have severely damaged the profitability of all but a handful of outlets in a small number of countries. As a result, few media houses are now run as an end in themselves, but rather as loss-leaders for businessmen and politicians with goals other than high quality news and information. Broadly, the effect of the changes has been to exert downward pressure on quality, to eliminate news in favor of “infotainment”, and to make the few remaining investigative journalists extremely dependent on a small number of sources of funding with their own agenda.

The story that Schiffrin and co-authors tell is truly global in nature, but the problems are much more acute in poorer countries like Armenia who have experienced some kind of political transition and so who have to build new institutions and new relationships. Consequently, in looking at the literature on East Central Europe and Eurasian specifically, in case after case, studies of particular countries tend to tell the same negative story. Peter Gross (2015) writing about Romania sees the mutual dependence of political elites and the media as breeding common values and behaviors that ultimately lead to “a corruptible, corrupt and corrupting relationship, between two corruptible, corrupt and corrupting institutions”. Moving further east, the situation is even worse. In Ukraine, despite independence and not one but two further post-Soviet revolutions, mass media remains dominated by oligarchic interests and control.

Unfortunately, Armenia does not represent an exception to the general post-Communist story. In the first two decades of independence, despite statistics suggesting a vigorous and varied media environment, the reality was an environment dominated by poor quality, entertainment-focused tabloid newspapers and television. Moreover, while there was significant private media and competition in Yerevan and the mid-sized cities, the rural half of the population had limited access to non-state media. Moreover, where media was accessible it quickly became highly politicized, either behind a perceived need for national unity in the early days of independence or later as politicians and powerful business interests exerted control over content (Kurchikyan, 2006).

Nevertheless, while mostly gloomy, the picture is not entirely negative. First, there is still variation in the degree of media freedom in different parts of Central and Eastern Europe. If overall, the picture is worse than in the West, data from Freedom House and other sources still suggest that media freedom is better in the Czech Republic and the Baltic states than it is in Hungary or Bulgaria and Romania. Bajomi-Lázár (2015) argues that this variation is largely due to variation in the degree of centralization of political parties. Where the ruling party is highly centralized, one party has tended to dominate the media. Where politics is more fragmented, there has been more scope for multi-party control of the media, making for a subservient media, but at least in the context of multiple different and competing masters.

Second, within the broader picture there are also a number of bright spots. Real, engaged, professional and independent broadcasting, albeit to relatively limited numbers of viewers and readers, may not have been the overall result of the introduction of digital and online technologies, but it has flourished in

some cases as the optimists had predicted. Even in Russia, where one of the hallmarks of the Putin regime has been state domination of the largest media outlets, online television stations like *Dozhd* or media projects like *Meduza*, have continued to provide high quality content largely free from state or corporate influence. Moreover, they have been able to generate significant resources from online subscribers who help to make their continuation possible even in the face of government hostility.

The relative success of projects like *Dozhd* is predicated in Russia on the existence of a relatively large and prosperous middle class, a slice of which has an appetite for good quality, public service style broadcasting. This situation, sadly, is more the exception rather than the rule in the region. Alternatives, however, do exist. One notable case is that of the media project, *Hromadske TV*, in Ukraine. Though Ukraine is relatively large and populous, it is poor even by the standards of the region, and so while there are efforts to raise money from subscribers, much of the support for the public service style broadcasting produced on *Hromadske* has come from foundations and international donors. Moreover, *Hromadske* has received funds from a broad range of different international donors and foundations, reducing worries about media capture by philanthropic foundations (such as the Soros Foundation or the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation) who finance journalism and reporting dedicated to reporting on their own causes.

Armenia has its own examples of highly independent, public interest media outlets, notably *Hetq* and the *EVN Report*. Funded largely from grants – including support from the NED – and from the diaspora, these websites are havens of independent, ethical reporting in Armenian and English. Building on examples like these going forward and helping such outlets reach a larger audience will be important tasks in encouraging media development in Armenia.

### **3.3. WHAT IS THE ROLE AND RESPONSE OF CITIZENS TO VARIOUS DIFFERENT KINDS OF MEDIA?**

The next stage in thinking about the relationship between the media and democratization is to examine the effect of media on citizens themselves and their attitudes. The classical normative theory of media and democratization places a heavy emphasis on the role of media in socializing the public into democratic norms. It seems obvious that citizens who are exposed to more pro-democratic media would adopt more democratic values and attitudes. The problem, however, is that actual evidence for such a relationship is mixed at best.

In one of the broadest studies of media effects in post-Communism, Loveless (2009) looked at data from Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia to see if citizens who frequently accessed foreign media would have different attitudes to those who consumed only domestic media. Across these countries, which vary themselves in the quality of the domestic media, Loveless could not find any relationship between consuming international media (either television or radio) and pro-democratic values – even without taking into account selection effects that might lead us to expect that those more supportive of democracy might also be more likely to choose to access international media. Loveless's results also fit studies by Kern (2011) and Kern and Hainmuller (2009) that use natural experiments to eliminate selection effects but still do not find a relationship between access to western media and democratic attitudes – this time in the Deutsche Demokratische Republik (DDR).

On the other hand, there are some well-designed studies that do find an impact of access to different media on such activities as protesting (Tertychnaya and Lankina, 2018) and voting (Enikolopov et al., 2011). In each of these cases, access to media reports on television of protests or access to more or less independent press was associated with differences in behavior across different regions of Russia. Thus, it seems that media can sometimes have an effect and sometimes not. The key, of course, is to work out the conditions under which it does have an effect. Unfortunately, the literature on this is still very limited. Robertson (2017) used a survey experiment in Russia to demonstrate that preexisting opinions and ideas are absolutely critical in shaping the effect that media is likely to have. Government supporters are likely to discount negative or critical stories about the incumbents, while opponents will believe them, whether they are true or not. In this case, the effect of media will differ across different individuals and polarization is a likely outcome. This research is consistent with a much more voluminous set of studies on the media and attitudes in long-standing democracies, and, in particular, the United States.

In Armenia, the population has been similarly polarized in its attitudes to the media. In 2011, a nationally representative survey of Armenians found that state television was both the most trusted and distrusted source of news in the country (Pearce, 2011). Overall, however, trust in the media has been in secular decline. According to the latest Caucasus Barometer data (2017), only 22 percent of respondents expressed any trust in the media. This placed media outlets on par with NGOs in public esteem, but higher than the president (17 percent) or parliamentarians (12 percent).

While there is no more recent nationally representative data available comparing trust in different kinds of media, Gushchyan (2017) found using a convenience sample of online and face to face interviews that trust in social media and online news sources was higher than trust in television news sources. Nevertheless, even here there was a broad spectrum of opinion with a third or more of citizens distrustful of both social media and online sources. Gushchyan's research also sheds some light on preferences with regard to different media platforms of Armenians. Here it is clear that although Odnoklasniki seems to have more registered users than any other platform, it is not the preferred medium for sharing news stories. Some 85 percent of Gushchyan's (non-representative) sample used Facebook when sharing news. In second place, was Twitter with a mere 2.5 percent. Thus, while the accuracy of the specific numbers might be open to question, the dominance of Facebook over any other platform for communicating about politics seems obvious.

The dominance of Facebook over other platforms in the political realm became clear in the course of the revolution, when interest in news and videos appears to have led to a large-scale migration to Facebook (and Telegram), away from Odnoklasniki. Following the revolution, Facebook now has some 1.3 million active users in Armenia (Martirosyan, 2018). There was also an explosion in the YouTube audiences for Armenia-based and diaspora channels.

The proportion of Armenians frequently using the internet has skyrocketed in recent years with the diffusion of mobile internet access. In 2011, only 32 percent of Armenians reported having access to the internet – by 2016, this proportion had doubled to 64 percent. Although early data suggested that age, education, urbanization, income and knowledge of English were correlated with likelihood of using the internet in Armenia and the south Caucasus more broadly (Pearce and Rice, 2014), broader diffusion is inevitably reducing this gap. Nevertheless, clearly the internet looks different to different users

depending on their knowledge of languages – the Anglophone internet and the Runet are, after all, quite different places.

Most detailed and systematic evidence about the media sector in Armenia predates the Velvet Revolution of 2018. Nevertheless, the evidence is important and useful because it helps to illustrate the substantial challenges that need to be overcome moving forward. According to the Media Sustainability Index (MSI) of 2017 (IREX, 2017), there was no public broadcasting in the country. Instead, both state and private media sources were closely related to governmental structures and strongly susceptible to influence from those structures. In 2017, the most popular television channels were HI (public), Shant TV (private), Armenia TV (private), and A TV (as assessed by the panelists).

According to the MSI report, Armenia is not immune from the problems facing media all over the world and in relatively poor small markets in particular. Pressure for quick stories, for infotainment over real carefully fact checked news, low salaries and poor training for journalists all contribute to generally low-quality journalism. While ethical, high quality journalism does exist in Armenia, it is constantly under competitive pressure from “yellow” journalism. Self-censorship has also long been a problem in the media, as has partisan coverage of political issues, with coverage of issues (or silence on issues) differing greatly between television and online sources.

### **3.4. WHAT IS THE OWNERSHIP STRUCTURE OF MEDIA OUTLETS AND DOES IT MATTER?**

The structure of media ownership in Armenia, both broadcast and internet, seems murky, and reliable data on ownership is not available. Most outlets are part of broader political projects and are not intended as self-standing commercial projects. While hard data on advertising revenues and markets are extremely hard to come by, experts estimated total annual advertising revenue to be of the order of \$40-50 million (IREX, 2017). Moreover, this already limited market is progressively shrinking as advertising on television loses ground to the more targeted marketing strategies offered by companies like Facebook. As a result, sustaining a commercially viable private media sector will be very difficult going forward, despite the existence of a range of USAID and other agency projects in the area.

Looking forward, however, as Armenian politics opens up there are many different possibilities. In authoritarian states like Belarus, or Kazakhstan, there is effectively no private media, with non-state-owned outlets in reality being extremely closely tied to the state. In countries like Armenia with more pluralistic politics, however, there is a broader menu of options. Jakubowicz (2008) describes a range of options for media ownership and structure, ranging from purely market-driven options in which all media are private and profitability is the only concern, to pure public interest media where the space is dominated by well-intentioned public broadcasters. Neither of these extremes has come to characterize media in the post-Communist space. Instead, even in those countries that seemed to be relatively successful early democratizers, such as Hungary and Slovakia, what came to dominate was a system of party oriented media in which the one-party media of Communism was replaced by a multiparty media in which each substantial political bloc enjoyed access to its own private media (as was the case in Hungary) or to a part of the publicly owned broadcasting space (as in Slovakia). In the Polish case, state resources were used to support private media supportive of the ruling party.

Foreign ownership of media is also quite common. While some have worried about foreign ownership as representing colonization, others have argued that foreign ownership has been crucial in providing distance for journalists from local interests. There is good evidence of this, for example, in the case of Latvia (Salovaara and Juzefovics, 2012). Another way in which foreign media can contribute to the development of a capable and constructive press is through exile media, which is able to retain and preserve national values (Brooten, 2016).

In Armenia, the question of Russian owned and Russian language media cannot be ignored. In a context in which Russian is widely spoken, the importance of the huge news and cultural output coming from across the border cannot be denied. There are no studies to-date that systematically examine what effect watching Russian media has in Armenia. Studies in the Baltics suggest that people who watch Russian television have different understandings of political events than people who watch Estonian language television (Jõesaar, 2015), but it is not clear if the relationship is causal. In Russia itself, there are clear differences between people who watch state television for news and people who do not, but even taking that into account there is some evidence that media coverage in and of itself has an independent effect (Greene and Robertson, 2018). More research, however, is needed to understand the effects of the large role of Russian television in the Armenian market.

### **3.5. WHAT ARE SUCCESSFUL MODELS FOR PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING?**

A series of technological and cultural changes across the world have created a crisis in public service broadcasting. What is the role of public broadcasting in the more horizontal world of online media and faced with the much broader choice that digitization offers? Who should pay for public broadcasting and why? What kinds of programming should be supported, and should public broadcasters be expected to be commercially successful too? These are all problems that have plagued the most established public broadcasters in the long-standing democracies even as countries emerging from the state dominated news and media of Communism and post-Communism.

There is good scientific evidence to suggest that public broadcasting remains an important service that can help to contribute to the consolidation of democracy. Studies suggest that exposure to public broadcasting is important in the acquisition of factual political information (Strömbäck, 2017; Soroka et al., 2013). Moreover, while the size of the effects on the quality of information citizens have tends to vary from country to country, depending in part upon the extent of the *de facto* independence of the public broadcaster (which is in turn quite well related to the extent of *de jure* independence (Hanretty, 2010)), the public broadcasting effect does seem to be robust even when we take into account selection effects – the fact that people who are more interested and more knowledgeable already are more likely also to access public service broadcasting. As a result, the research suggests that less politically interested people can catch up with their more interested counterparts if they access public service broadcasting (Fraile and Iyengar, 2014).

There are of course serious challenges that face countries hoping to establish high quality, independent public-sector broadcasting. And these challenges exist even for countries that have appear to have significant advantages in the process – that is countries that are large, wealthy and already members of the European Union and Council of Europe (Jakubowicz, 2008). However, the problems that Armenia is likely to face in this area are more severe and relate to the size of the population and the media market



itself, both of which are likely to act as serious constraints on public service broadcasting. In this section, we focus on the experience of relevantly similar small countries with languages that are not widely spoken in other countries, highlighting both the challenges and potential success stories from experiences in the region.

While its relative size and ethnic homogeneity mean that Armenia is spared some of the problems of democratic development, even richer, homogenous but small states like Slovenia have struggled to establish independent public-sector broadcasters. As the research of Broughton Micova (2013) demonstrates, the very fact of being small makes it extremely difficult to establish an impersonal rules-based regime for handling the media. In Slovenia, commentators agreed that only about ten people in the entire country were qualified to be involved in the drafting of the legislation and, since these very same people were either players in the media market or were connected to players in the media market, it was almost impossible to generate and implement a legal framework that was truly impersonal in nature. Moreover, ethnic homogeneity and relatively low levels of corruption did not protect Slovenia from the politicization of media laws. Media laws and laws on public broadcasting have been changed following every alternation in power in the democratic era (Broughton Micova, 2013).

The difficulties of developing public broadcasting in the smaller Eastern European states have been experienced well beyond Slovenia. Studies of the seven countries of the Western Balkans suggest that even where public broadcasters are mandated by European Union accession requirements, protecting them from capture either by the political sphere or by the market has been extremely challenging. Milosavljevic and Poler (2018) list the following reasons for the failure of public service broadcasting in the Western Balkans: problems with public financing, small media markets, languages with relatively few speakers, weak overall economies, problems with administering license fees, political interference, competition from commercial broadcasters, and a journalistic culture that does not have a strong public service tradition. While Milosavljevic and Poler's study focuses on the Western Balkans, it is not hard to imagine a very similar list of problems facing Armenia.

Nevertheless, being small does not necessarily condemn a country to failure in developing public service broadcasting. Despite the fact that it is the smallest by population of the three Baltic States and that even that small population is linguistically divided, Estonia is generally perceived as having had the most successful experience on public service broadcasting over the last decade or so (Rožukalne, 2017). Both the quality of the programming and the size of the audience are considered strong, and despite the enormous challenges of the global financial crisis, the fiscal basis of public service broadcasting is regarded as quite stable. In fact, despite having a smaller population and lower gross domestic product than the other Baltic States, Estonian public service broadcasting has consistently received higher dollar amounts of funding than in their neighbors (Jõesaar, 2011). Over the course of last decade, the financial model for Estonian public broadcasting has had to evolve. In its original design, there was no direct support for public broadcasting from the national budget. Instead, fees paid by commercial broadcasters provided the primary funding for the public system. However, when one of the commercial stations almost defaulted on its fees, throwing the survival of the public system into doubt, a system of direct public subsidies was introduced. Through a board selected from a range of parties in parliament, along with experts from civil society, consistent public funding has been provided and broadcasting has been quite effectively insulated from political interference.

While public broadcasting represents a real success in Estonia amongst Estonian-speaking citizens – in a 2014 poll public broadcast channels accounted for some 30 percent of Estonian speakers’ viewing time – the picture is very different amongst the Russian-speaking population, who primarily watch Russian state television. As noted above there is some evidence that this may lead them to have a different perspective on politics than the Estonian speakers (Jõesaar, 2015) – though there are many factors that might account for differences in perspectives between the two groups. This polarization of media habits along a political sensitive cleavage is clearly undesirable.

Beyond issues of budgeting, the factors that lead to the development of successful public broadcasting are poorly understood. In one study from the London School of Economics comparing Russia and the Czech Republic, the author identified “11 interacting factors” that explain differences between the two countries, while noting that even these 11 factors could not be considered “comprehensive” (Toepfl 2013). It seems clear that insulating journalists from politics as much as possible and attempting to retain a consistent legal framework even as power alternates amongst different political parties are important elements of the mix. However, to state the challenge this way is, in a sense, merely to push the question back one level – how to insulate journalists and the legal framework from holders of power is one of the oldest questions we have, and compelling evidence about how insulation can be achieved is hard to find.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS FOR ARMENIA**

The Velvet Revolution in Armenia was accomplished by a broad coalition of citizens who were tired with the state of the political system. In keeping with recent trends in Armenian civil society, it was the people, not organizations, who took center stage. Civil activists applied lessons learned during the previous protest cycles and the experience of the civic initiative during the protests that marked the Velvet Revolution in April and May 2018 (Derlugian and Hovhannisiyan, 2018). The Velvet Revolution followed a similar blueprint to those of the civic initiatives, although it was of course much broader in scope. The protests, spearheaded by Nikol Pashinyan, were non-violent and relied on blocking roads, but also allowed regular Armenians to participate in non-confrontational ways, such as by honking when driving by the protestors and by banging pots and pans at night. NGOs similarly took a backseat during the whirlwind of the Velvet Revolution, which was propagated via social media. Pashinyan became both the leader and the symbol of the protests, sparking the creation of decentralized protest groups (Iskandaryan, 2018). Therefore, the Velvet Revolution, while surprisingly successful given the apparent entrenchment of Serzh Sargsyan and the Republican Party of Armenia, was not surprising in its organization and progression.

While protests and mass participation were effective in bring about the revolution, the protest-based nature of Armenia’s civil society presents challenges going forward. While an International Republican Institute poll<sup>10</sup> in October 2018 showed that over 70% of Armenians believe that they can “influence decisions made in Armenia,” indicating that individuals are highly mobilized and optimistic, turnout in Armenia’s first free and fair elections in years was only 49%, lower than in the April 2017 parliamentary elections (Edwards, 2018). At the same time, protests in Armenia around specific issues, in the vein of civic initiatives, continued after the May 8 prime minister elections, showcasing that Armenians have sought to continue to use their power where possible (Melkonian, 2018). It is difficult to say how stable or sustainable a civil society that is so heavily dependent on protest is. The organizational structure that

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<sup>10</sup> Center for Insights in Survey Research, *Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia October 9–29, 2018* (International Republican Institute, 2018); [https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2018.11.23\\_armenia\\_poll.pdf](https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2018.11.23_armenia_poll.pdf)

leads to successful post transition democratization that Kadivar (2018) discusses simply does not seem to exist in Armenia.

Although the country seems united behind Pashinyan, there are cracks already appearing in the coalition that brought him to power. One of the parties, Bright Armenia, that formed part of the Yelk coalition in 2017, which also included Pashinyan's Civil Contract party, has entered parliament as the opposition. In addition, the lack of ideological platform for the My Step Alliance – it campaigned mainly around the image of Pashinyan, whereas Bright Armenia laid out clear policy goals in its campaigns (Oganesyan, 2018) – makes it difficult to determine how long it can stay together (Edwards, 2018). The longer he is in power, the more likely it is that Pashinyan's civil society connections may become a millstone around his neck as he faces the reality of rule (Grodsky, 2012; Iskandaryan, 2018). The experience of other post-transition social movements in Eurasia in the past few years shows that the forces that brought down Serzh Sargsyan may fragment in the near future. At the same time, this may depend on whether or not the story of the revolution becomes institutionalized or not, as this could help the movement survive longer. Another weakness is the fact that an umbrella group of civil society organizations to direct reform is still missing. This means it is possible that the thrust of the revolution will dissipate before necessary reforms are reached.

In addition, there are social forces in Armenia that are dissatisfied with how much has stayed the same and want more radical change (Melkonian, 2018). Complaints about the lack of change speak to Ottaway's (2014) point that civil society-based transitions can only be successful when the movement successfully dismantles the mechanisms and structures of power used by the previous regime. It remains to be seen how much is new and how much is old in the new Armenia. Unfortunately, the experience of Ukraine shows that while developments can initially seem to portend positive change, the old power structures can quickly reassert themselves.

Stability in this context is not always negative, of course. Thus far, Pashinyan has been careful to act within existing institutional norms. Indeed, the path of the transition in Armenia up to this point is rather unlike the tumultuous and twisting ones taken by the transitions during the Color Revolutions (Ohanyan, 2018). This stability may help Armenia in its relations with Russia, on which it is heavily dependent economically. It remains to be seen how Russia will act in the future, but thus far it has largely stayed quiet. Russia has the potential to play the role of an autocratizing black knight (Levitsky and Way, 2010) and could easily attempt to upset the playing board if it begins to feel threatened by political developments in Armenia (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986).

Donors seeking to support the transition in Armenia face a difficult task. Civil society organizations that receive outside support are not very popular in Armenia. Therefore, donors must engage with the other parts of civil society in the country. While civil society organizations can successfully push for reform without grassroots input, this may not be the best way forward in a country so reliant on collective action as Armenia. At the same time, donors must be careful to not become too bogged down in the euphoria around Pashinyan. While Pashinyan seems dedicated to reform and fighting corruption, experience indicates that it is not good to put all the eggs in one basket in the delicate transition environment.

One key challenge will be the development of alternative sources of information. Much of the literature on media on democratization that we have surveyed in this review stresses the challenges facing Armenia in making a transition to a media environment that is supportive of democratic political

development. The challenges are wide-ranging and real. Armenia has a culture of media capture that will be hard to overcome, a small media market placed next to a large Russian market that presents a quite different set of political values, and a weak budgetary environment that will make it challenging to support high quality public service broadcasting. International experience suggests that there are a number of ways to promote independent voices in a context like Armenia. One is donor-funded media – but critically, this needs to be supported by a range of different donors each contributing relatively small amounts in order to avoid either the appearance or the reality of donor capture. Another possibility is opening up to foreign owned media, though the challenges of making such broadcasting in Armenia profitable might be prohibitive.

Perhaps the most important challenge of all is establishing independent public service broadcasting. The literature is awash with the challenges and difficulties of achieving this in a small, relatively poor state like Armenia. However, if consistent and reliable funding can be ensured, with no political strings attached, there is the creativity and journalistic talent in the country to make such a broadcaster work and the benefits to Armenia would be great.

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