

The Role of Civil Society Organizations: Problems and Challenges

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After Velvet Revolution in 2018 representatives of civil society organizations were also involved in the new team of the Government (*Andreasyan et al 2018. 92; Zolyan 2020. 51*). For this and for many reasons the space between the Government and the society was strictly shrunk (*Christofer and Paturyan 2021*). The cooperation of the citizens with different Governmental bodies has become easier at present. According to the Caucasus Barometer data the trust towards the Government in 2019 has increased to 71% in comparison with the 20% in 2017, as to the level of distrust it decreased from 59% to 12% (*TRUEXEC: Trust towards Executive government, 2019*). But with this all, there are significant problems related to the spheres, such as governmental transparency, public awareness, feedback, public participation in policy development and implementation. Moreover, as compared to 2019, participation decrease is noted in 2021 (*CSO meter 2021. 25*). According to some studies it is significant that after 2019 some shrinking for the civic space was noted (*Grigoryan A. and H.Manasyan. 2021*). One of the problematic phenomena is the dissemination of discourse and perception of civil society organizations (CSOs) as if they are imported and are of antinational occurrence. After the war several structures generalized and enhanced this discourse. There was even an attempt to relate the fact that we lost in the war because of the CSOs, as if democracy had weakened Armenia's confrontation (*Misinformation in Armenia 2021, 32-36*). For this and for many other reasons a significant increase of distrust towards CSOs is eminent among the population which is accompanied by decrease in trust. For instance, if according to the Caucasus Barometer there was a significant increase from 18% to 26% in trust in 2019, then recently it has significantly decreased. In 2021 as compared to 2019 the distrust towards CSOs has increased from 25% to 38%. Such decrease of societal trust can hinder the society participation in policy development and decision making. Decrease in distrust can also become one of the negative factors of shrinking civil society space.

Famous political scientists G.Almond and S. Verba come up with three types of political cultures: parochial culture, subject culture and participant culture. In parochial political culture

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people are lead by traditional norms, in subject political culture they are obedient to the laws and state institutions and in participant culture they are more initiators and are inclined to impact the Government and other state institutions (*Almond and Verba 1963*). By virtue it is in political participant culture that we come across to an important phenomenon such as *civic culture*. The most authoritative type of political culture in Armenia was parochial culture, thus 2018 was somehow crucial as during the two following early elections there were significant limitations in parochial type of political culture and there were more possibilities for developing and establishing participant culture. Having a serious impact during the velvet revolution (*Ohanyan and Kopalyan 2020. 31*), CSOs showed their ability that their messages could reach to a wide spector of the society. ***Unfortunately, in post-war period there is a change in the public attitude and CSOs need to give a new interpretation to their public activity.*** The main issue is not only effectiveness in their programmatic activities but also wide range of cooperation with the society as well as promotion of transition from parochial to civic culture. Here come civil society organizations with their important mission to make the society “nationalized”. It becomes evident that this function is considered one of the most important issues of CSOs in civil society related studies and literature (*Verba et al., 1995; Moyser and Parry, 1997; Putnam 2000; Warren 2001; Fung, 2003*).

CSOs and Society Relations.

The cooperation among the CSOs and the society is very important both in terms of dissemination of civil society values and practices as well as a *serious factor confronting the shrinking space for the civil society*. The cooperation of CSOs with the wide range of the society assists them in being less vulnerable, powerful and makes their voice more perceptible (*Hirschman 1970*).

Civil society is not limited with CSOs. They are only the organized part of civil society. The associations, initiatives, collaboration bodies that address advocacy, rights and public space protection and/or other significant public issues solutions are also part of civil society (*Theiss-Morse and Hibbing 2005. 229; Edwards 2013; Alscher et al. 2017. 6; Salamon et al. 2017*). The basis of civil society is the institute of the citizen. The identity of a citizen is not formulated in all the societies. In general, in authoritarian and patriarchal societies it is difficult to formulate the identity of a citizen. In post-Soviet societies it was also quite a difficult process to establish the identity of a citizen. In this regard in Armenia different civil initiatives and movements, launched particularly after 2008, played an important role (*Tadevosyan 2013; Ishkhanian 2015; Glasius and Inshkanian 2015*). It is remarkable that these movements being new initiatives in Armenian civil society were not only accepted by CSOs and not actively cooperated with but they were sometimes considered as rivals. Many CSOs engaged in their programmatic activities remained indifferent towards these movements. Surprisingly, these movements were more widely accepted by the public than the CSOs (*Ishkhanian 2015; Tadevosyan 2016; Paturyan and Gevorgyan 2021*). The situation changed notably during those days of Velvet Revolution in 2018 when a number of active and authoritative CSO members could cooperate with wide range of the society. Especially, it played an important role involving the youth in street protests. Yet after the

revolution again the isolated work of CSOs from the population was noted. The problem is that CSOs are mainly engaged in their programmatic activities and as a rule they deal with the beneficiaries in their programmatic activities and they have an impact on the wide range of the population very rarely. That's why it is necessary to review the role of CSOs in formulating civil participant culture and practices on a widescale public level. In this regard, civic culture or *participant type* of political culture is not widely spread, thus the parochial type of political culture is more common in the population (*Almond 1980; Almond and Verba 1963*). This has its negative impact on involving the wide range of the society in participant processes and it is a serious problem in terms of shrinking civic space. ***CSOs have a very important role in transferring Armenian society from parochial to participant type of political culture. Without this it would be impossible to succeed in enlarging civil society space and developing democracy.***

The Issue of Public Trust and Reputation of CSOs.

After Velvet Revolution in 2018 there was a significant increase of CSOs reputation as well as in the trust towards them. But as mentioned above within the last years the reputation rate towards CSOs has decreased and parallel to that the distrust has increased. Some experts relate this change to the 44-days war in 2020. After the war the political powers supporting the previous authoritarian authorities and their supporters disseminated a discourse that one of the reasons that we lost in the war was due to civic and diplomatic values advocated by CSOs. Particularly in this context it was due to the peace-loving campaigns in public areas. Robert Kocharyan, RA second retired president initiated this discourse in his pre-election campaign during 2021 early parliamentary elections. Later for very long period it was circulated by his supporters. Another reason might be that among the Government team members there are a great number of previous members of CSOs who were not able to provide effective management during the war period. In this regard A. Voskanyan, the president of Armenian Research Center in Humanities expressed his opinion that after Velvet Revolution one of the reasons for the significant shortcomings in the governing system was that state authorities with the background in CSOs were used to managing short-term projects and this experience was not justified in the state governing system where more fundamental and strategic approaches were required (*A. Voskanyan, interview*).

Some experts consider that in order to arrange the issue of trust, communication with wide range of the society might play an important role as well as the language of this communication should be changed. Most of the CSO members use lexicology and rhetoric speech typical to Eastern civic culture which in many cases spreads the non-native feeling over their activities.

Interestingly, the study on the experiences of civic initiatives allows us to mention that they were more democratic than CSOs and one of the main reasons for that was the daily communication with people and the style of speaking to them in their own language (*Paturyan and Gevorgyan 2021*). Such communication between the parties generates the feeling of mutual cooperation and unity directed to the same result. The same phenomenon was also typical to Velvet Revolution which was one of the primary reasons for victory.

Nationalistic Groups Campaigns against CSOs and the Problem of Shrinking Civic Space.

Another strange situation after Velvet Revolution in 2018 was the campaign against CSOs initiated by different nationalistic groups. Even Open Society Foundations and Azatutyun TV offices were attacked and ravaged. CSOs leaders working for women's rights protection were intimidated. As a reasoning for such tensions conspirational arguments: such as CSOs serve western agencies with the aim of diminishing national values in Armenia, degeneration and decomposition of Armenian families and in the long run undermining Armenian society, depriving their will power, amorphization of the identity, exposing them to western superpowers (*Misinformation in Armenia, 2021, 30-35*). Such incriminations as western superpowers brought these "revolutionary" team members through CSOs so that they use their authority in their "conspirational" projects. Of course, civil society intelligent people with democratic views defended for civil society, but it was not sufficient enough for several reasons. First, as M. Hovhannisyan, civil society expert mentioned as civil society did not have general subjectivity and acted through different CSOs they became quite vulnerable in front of nationalistic unions who utilize cruel and manipulative tools (*M. Hovhannisyan, Interview*). The second pivotal reason was the public background of the support coming from parochial system of values having a significant weight in the society. The latter didn't take any measures yet they liked the nationalists ideology more than that of CSOs. *One of the reasons of this situation was CSOs insufficient activities in dissemination of civic values and practices as well as formulation of civic identity among wide range of the society.* And finally, the third reason was unequivocal response towards the nationalistic activities on behalf of state bodies starting from the prime minister and finishing at judicial system, frequently turning a blind eye and not taking relevant preventive measures according to laws and ensuring the atmosphere of undisciplined (*Misinformation in Armenia, 2021, 32-33*). All these things greatly harm and restrict CSOs operation particularly in the fields of human rights protection as well as protection of minorities and the shrinking for civic space. As a fundamental solution of the issue naturally state institutions should protect CSOs from such infringements and should eliminate the atmosphere of lack of discipline. Another very important tool that could also provide a longlasting result is the dissemination of civil society values among wide range of the population as well as activating CSO-society mutual relations.

Problems of "NGO-isation" or Non-Profit Organizations and Civic Space Shrinking.

One of the negative phenomena affecting the shrinking for civic space is the problem of "NGO-isation". This is also a way of shrinking CSOs space which happens in the result of CSOs isolation from the society rather than state unfavorable policies and legislation. The fundamental problem of "NGO-isation" has several characteristic features:

- a. Some CSOs in Armenia operate more together rather than with the wide range of the society. In some spheres within the years a situation has emerged where CSOs beneficiaries are

frequently other CSOs. For instance, in the context of poverty reduction the debates on the needs of the poor people are frequently conducted with other NGOs rather than with the poor.

b. Some CSOs focus on their programmatic activities in their sphere and do not go out of their framework to actively affect the formulation of civic mentality and behavior in the society. For instance, they create youth civic teams consisting of 7-10 members in their communities who lock themselves from the youth of the same community and are content with the list of the “scheduled events” defined by the program and they operate only within the area of their CSO office.

Cooperation among CSOs and the Problem of Shrinking Civic Space.

According to international experts the close cooperation among CSOs is quite important so that CSOs can confront the shrinking for civic space with their joint efforts (*Juech 2017*). During those years in Armenia different partnership associations and networks were formulated among CSOs. CSO DePo: Civil Society Development Program is quite effective. The establishment and implementation of the program is cooperative as it is implemented by Eurasia Partnership Foundation in a consortium with Caucasus Research Resource Center, Media Initiatives Center, Goris Press Club, Support for Noyemberyan NGO, Martuni Women Community Council. The goal of the program is to expand the pool of local CSOs, to strengthen their capacities in building more engaged, prosperous and democratic society. *Coalition to Stop Violence against Women* is famous for uniting influential organizations dealing with women’s rights protection. There are different networks and coalitions also in spheres of social policy, social workers, media, human rights protection, etc. A number of effective cooperation examples among CSOs could be mentioned also in the process of providing support to the displaced people during the war and post war period. Though there are a number of formulated cooperation unions in Armenia the latest researches and measurements in CSO sphere showed that, broadly speaking, CSOs in Armenia are more competitive rather than cooperative (*CSO Sustainability Index, 2020*). According to the experimental interviews, the competition among them and sometimes the formulation of unhealthy atmosphere is mostly related to the issues of being influential in their fields, position formulation as well as due to the issues of receiving grants from donors. One of the reasons of this phenomenon is considered that CSOs operate not in the context of Armenian society fundamental problems but in the problem areas suggested by donor organizations. It is true that the issues suggested by donor organizations are also important for the Armenian society development and solution to different fundamental problems but because these issues were suggested by donors rather than by CSOs then the primary issue here becomes getting the funds rather than solving the fundamental problem and the solution of the problem becomes the suffix of the funding. The fact that CSOs do not urge their primary activities due to the result of the issues originated while communicating with different spheres of the society, they are not able to find alternative financial resources from the inner society as well. That’s why the financial issue for the CSOs becomes a reason for competitiveness rather than cooperation. Frequently cooperation is formed in the cases when donors suggest it as one of the conditions of financing.

CSO -Society Communication Issues

The experts express an opinion that among the negative factors affecting CSOs space shrinking is that they don't communicate effectively not only among one another but also with the wide spectrum of the society. In comparison with the government or other political powers they use less media to inform the society about their activities, their programs and ideology directed to enhancing democratic society and the growth of prosperity. ***In general if the democracy and civic values are not related to prosperous life among wide spectrum of the society that is mainly the shortcoming of the CSOs activities.*** This problem was among the CSOs vulnerable spots before 2018 as well (*Gevorgyan 2017. 11*). It seemed that Velvet Revolution would promote the understanding among them that one of the most important issues of their mission is the enhancement of civic society and in this regard the enlargement of their activities. But the majority of CSOs did not go out of the spectrum of their programs and did not communicate with the wide range of the society.

It is important to note that during the pandemic CSOs have somehow improved their abilities to use social media platform. But according to the researches on this issue CSOs haven't effectively enough illustrated their activities in terms of providing humanitarian aid during the pandemic, war and post-war period. Thus as an outcome the society was not informed about their role and it did not have equivalent result in terms of public image increase (*CSO Index, 2020*). The fact that CSOs are not able to increase the quality and effectiveness of their communication negatively affects the initiative of communication of different layers of the society with CSOs on the opposite side as well. CSOs do not effectively conduct awareness campaigns about their activities so that people could be informed what issues they deal with and if there are any such they could turn to them. That is why CSOs are frequently considered and interpreted as dealing with issues which are among important issues that Armenia faces. Thus CSOs are considered less important and frequently they are simply ignored. There are very few citizens that consider applying to CSOs in case of facing any issues. The main reason for that is the low level of communication with the wide spectrum of the society.

One of the reasons of the above mentioned problems is that CSOs were not able to formulate a comprehensive and acceptable ownership for the wide spectrum of the society thus in public interpretations they are mostly accepted as a foreign phenomenon for the Armenian society.

CSO - Government Relationship.

After 2018 the relations between the Government and CSOs were considerably weakened for some period. According to the experts opinions a great number of authorities appeared in the Government who were members of different CSOs before that and without any official communication with CSOs they were aware of CSO approaches. Yet already in 2019 CSO representatives started to complain about the low level of the participant type of government activities (*Sona Ayvazyan and Gayane Abrahamyan, interview*). The activities of the Government and different Ministries were criticized many times regarding Covid-19 pandemic in terms of participation and transparency (*CSO Meter, 2020*). Due to the amendments to RA

Law “On Local Self-Government” in 2020 there is a positive change in the local self-government level in terms of information availability and participation in decision making (*RA Law “On Local Self-Government”, 2020*). Yet, during the last two years no progress was registered in the Ministries regarding participation in the governance (*CSO Meter 2021, 25*). According to the expert opinions some positive change is notable in involving CSOs in discussions and hearings for the process of drafting different projects. But the process of participation is restricted with that stage and they were not involved in implementing changes in decision making process. In this regard, public councils under the ministries (*Public Participation Platforms in Armenia 2022, 6*) as well as Open Government Partnership started to operate (*DATA Podcast. Open Government Partnership/ Arpine Hakobyan / Lilya Afrikyan*).

According to “CSO Meter 2020” some active participation is remarkable particularly in developing different strategies and policies in 2019-2020 (*CSO Meter, 2020, 16*). The most frequent discussions were organized in RA ESCS Ministry. Three sessions were conducted in 2019, one was conducted in 2020 and two sessions were conducted in 2021. Then Ministry of Health comes. During the last two years MOH has organized as many sessions as ESCS but in 2019 ESCS organized one session more. RA Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs conducted three sessions in 2019 and did not organize any sessions during the last two years. Ministry of Economic Development and Investments, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Justice did not conduct any sessions during 2020-2021 (*Public Participation Platforms 2021, 65*). As we see the situation is not courageous at all. The main problem here is that even if some ministries organize discussions and hearings with CSOs their suggestions and opinions are not reflected in the final documents. Thus the participation process is mainly limited with the participation in the discussions for developing government policies and strategies and seldom involves CSOs in the stages of implementing and monitoring government programs. CSOs mainly participate in the monitoring of National Assembly elections which doesn’t have any influence on participant type of the system. In general, monitoring of elections is considered to be political and not of public participation type (*Campbel 2004, 7*). In this regard, the shortcomings in the government participation might be assessed as an obstacle to enlarge civic space.

According to some studies assessing the CSO sphere the unequal attitude towards CSOs in the Government and in Ministries is strictly criticized. In terms of partnership CSOs are divided into “preferable” and “non-preferable” categories in the Government and in Ministries. Thus “preferable” CSOs are those whose previous members hold higher positions in the Government, in Ministries and in other state institutions (*CSO Sustainability Index 2020, page 15*).

Other Problems in Participation Sphere.

Participation process is a chain of activities with the aim to grant different layers of the society with possibilities to have impact on the governing processes. It is not complete if it only provides CSOs participation. One of the main fundamental problems in this sphere in Armenia is that in terms of participation CSO-Government works better than CSO-Society. The main reason is CSO-Society insufficient level of communication. Another reason is the prevalence of parochial

type of political culture over participant type in the society. According to the latest studies lack of knowledge and motivation in participation is a serious problem (*Yeghoyan A. and Yeritsyan G, Interview*). By the way this characterizes not only wide spectrum of the society but also authorities in the Government (*Public Participation Platforms in Armenia, 2022, 6*).

There is an important nuance related to participation in the discussions: it is rhetoric. *In general, participation implies CSO-Government relations in rhetoric and the citizen as an essential role player in the society is not given enough importance.* Moreover, it is due to the rhetoric that the citizen is often considered not as a role player in the participant process but as an object in CSOs activities. This means that CSOs first need to realize the importance of this issue and only then to increase participant level in the society and to strengthen CSO-society connection in the participant process.

It is also important to understand how and how much the social networks affect participation. Among the researchers dealing with civil society and participation issues the opinions lead to the fact that people's involvement in social networks promotes to increasing their active participation (*Jurkevičienė J. and E. Butkevičienė 2018, 10*). It is difficult to say whether we can express the same opinion for Armenia. We can simply note that this is an issue that cannot be ignored and there is need for further research.

The Problem of Shrinking Civic Space.

In recent years the fundamental issue of shrinking space for CSOs is frequently discussed (*Juech 2017; Civicus Monitor 2021, Youngs and Exhague 2017; Ayvazyan K. 2019*). Many countries in the world face the issue of making restrictions of CSOs activities by the governments. Diminishing CSO-State relations, restricting CSO activities, adopting laws that negatively affect CSOs activities fully describe them (*Youngs and Exhague 2017. 8*). In some cases it is also described by pressures and attacks towards CSOs on behalf of different extreme unions who act by the permission of authoritarian governments (*Juech 2017; Alscher et al.2017*). According to the research findings, by 2018 the rate of CSO shrinking space in Armenia was quite high in comparison with Eastern Partnership Countries: Georgia, the Ukraine and Moldova and it was close to the high rate of such postsoviet countries as Azerbaijan and Belarus (*Ayvazyan 2020, 11*). But after the revolution now Armenia holds quite a good position and according to *Civicus Monitor* latest report Armenia has somehow improved and now holds the rank between open and closed countries. As compared to the neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Azerbaijan, Iran and countries of Central Asia it has better rates and is inferior only to Georgia (*Civicus Monitor 2021*).

This comparative progress is related to several legislation amendments made in 2018. The Law on "Legal Acts" was adopted in 2018 according to which it is mandatory to conduct public discussions on drafting legal acts (*RA Law on "Legal Acts" 2018*). In October, 2018 Government decision "On Defining the Procedure of Organizing and Carrying out Public Discussions" was made (*The procedure of organizing and carrying out public discussions 2018*). This also serves as a legal basis to promote participant type of governance. Armenia has also signed under

numerous international conventions that promote public participation procedures (*Public participation platforms in Armenia 2022, 10*).

Though in terms of legislation there are no restrictions over the shrinking space for the civil society, the latest studies showed that however some legislation amendments might negatively affect CSOs activities (CSO Index 2020; CSO Meter 2021). This refers to the level of making the reporting of CSOs more stringent. Particularly, making obligatory to submit annual reports to the Government or the requirements to undergo audit is problematic.

Among other negative phenomena for the shrinking space for civil society are also the aggressive activities against civil society by the extremist nationalistic organizations and unions activated after Velvet Revolution in 2018. They openly act against organizations working for human rights protection, particularly those from vulnerable groups.

It is remarkable that the above mentioned fact became a serious obstacle particularly for the shrinking space for CSOs working for human rights protection.

Conclusions and Recommendations

To sum up we can say that after the Velvet Revolution in 2018 in the beginning CSOs were somehow active. There was also a positive tendency in terms of democratic progress in Armenia. First, there was a significant progress during the two early elections in the revolution period. Second, the governance-society space was shrunked which increased the accessibility of the governance for ordinary citizens. Officials who are close to the citizens with their civic values appeared in the Government and National Assembly. This promotes the civic participation in governing bodies, democratic government and generally in increase of positive inclination towards democratic and civic values.

During the last two years several laws were adopted which are favorable for the level of participation increase in governing.

Parallel to the above mentioned positive changes starting from 2019 quite an active campaign was initiated from extremely different unions trying to diminish the reputation of CSOs and newly formulated government among the population. Widely speaking, a campaign was launched against civic and democratic values which were qualified as “antinational” (*Armen Grigoryan, interview*). Unfortunately, this campaign had its results. The newly formulated governing bodies in order to avoid being qualified as antinational kept special distance from CSOs and in some cases they were even indifferent to the aggressive campaign towards civil society and civic values. All these activities and the atmosphere had its negative consequences on CSOs reputation. The pandemic and 44-days war in 2020 intensified this atmosphere.

All these things have negatively affected the increase of distrust towards CSOs in wide spectrum of the society. Except the above mentioned “external” reasons promoting the increase of distrust, there are some “internal” reasons as well. They can be categorized into three main groups:

The first group of the reasons is related to CSO-society relations. CSOs are mainly focused on the programs in their scope and on the program beneficiaries in this narrow sphere. They are not able to interpret and present their activities as investment for the society.

CSOs activities need to be improved in terms of disseminating civic values among wide range of the population. This shortcoming also serves as a reason that CSOs activities are not considered as providing an outcome and CSOs are reviewed as less dealing with Armenian fundamental problems and even serving foreign countries.

The second group of the reasons is related to CSOs internal problems. Despite the existing networks and unions among CSOs in different spheres the relations among them are more competitive rather than cooperative. For this and for other reasons they do not have common ownership understanding: as they are for themselves, they are for the society. Here CSOs have important mission. It will be necessary to develop CSO collective identity and strategy for formulating ownership positively accepted by wide spectrum of the society.

Though there are some positive changes in participant type of governance, there are lots of things to do here as well. First of all, it is necessary to increase the motivation and the understanding of participation willpower both in the society as well as in governing bodies. Secondly, it is important to increase participation quality and effectiveness. Particularly, it is important that CSOs not only participate in the Government sessions, but also their suggestions presented during those sessions are reflected in policies and decisions. And finally, it is important to participate not only in the policy drafting stage, but also in the stages of implementation and monitoring (*Handbook on transparency and citizen participation, 2020*).

As to the issue of enlarging CSOs space it is important to work not only for creating more favorable environment in terms of legislation and institutionalization for CSOs activities but also for making the society “nationalized” because one of the most important ways of overcoming CSOs space shrinking and restrictions is to enlarge civil society (*Juech 2017*).

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Laws

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Video Materials

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