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Self-Determined Citizens? New Forms of Civic Activism and Citizenship in Armenia

By Armine Ishkanian

Abstract

This article examines the recent emergence and growth of grassroots social movements in Armenia which are locally known as ‘civic initiatives’. It considers what their emergence tells us about the development of civil society and the changing understandings and practices of citizenship in Armenia in the post-Soviet period. It analyses why civic initiatives explicitly reject and distance themselves from formal, professionalised NGOs and what new models of civic activism and citizenship they have introduced. It argues that civic initiatives embrace a more political understanding of civil society than that which was introduced by Western donors in the 1990s.

INTRODUCTION

Within the context of the post-socialist transitions¹, civil society building was considered both as a means as well as an end to achieving democracy. Two decades after the collapse of the socialist regimes in Central and East Europe and the Soviet Union, there is a large and growing body of literature which critically examines the impact of externally funded democracy promotion and civil society building programmes in the former socialist countries (Morlino and Sadurski, 2010, Mandel, 2012, Bojicic-Dzelilovic et al., 2013, Lutsevych, 2013, Schimmelfennig et al., 2014). The instrumentalisation, or what some call the NGO-isation, of civil society in the 1980s and 1990s in both the former socialist transition countries as well as in developing countries more generally, has been well documented (Howell and Pearce, 2001, Pearce, 2010, Petras, 1997, Schuller, 2009). Scholars writing about civil society in the former socialist countries have argued that in the 1990s, civil society was turned into a ‘project’ (Sampson, 1996) and that professionalised non-governmental organisations [NGOs], which were the main outcome of that transition era ‘project’, are locally perceived as donor driven, upwardly accountable, and disconnected from their own communities and constituencies (Babajanian, 2005, Greenberg, 2010, Hann, 2002, Hemment, 2004, Henderson, 2003, Mendelson and Glenn, 2003, Bojicic-Dzelilovic et al., 2013).

Despite the substantial investment of human and financial resources in civil society promotion and democracy building from Western donors (Carothers, 1999,

¹ The term “transition” has been problematized by various scholars including Michael Burawoy and Katherine Verdery (BURAWOY, M. K. V. (Ed.) (1999) *Uncertain Transitions: Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc. who argue that “transition” implies an evolutionary development that has a single, well-defined objective and trajectory. While I agree with this assessment, I have chosen to use the term ‘transition’ for the sake of simplicity and because the term continues to be applied to the region by a number of international organizations including the World Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

Hansen, 1996, Simao, 2012, Finkel et al., 2006), when active civil societies and democratic regimes did not emerge, some policy makers attributed the failure to the Soviet legacy (Evans Jr., 2006, Mandel, 2002) or the ‘cultural or political shortcomings’ of the recipients of the democracy aid (Greenberg 2010: 46), rather than the normative model of civil society which was promoted. Today, across the former socialist countries, we find that those civil society groups, including nationalist organizations, veterans groups, and others, which were ignored or marginalized by donors, have come to view themselves as the *real* civil society in contrast to the donor created and supported NGOs (Schwandner-Sievers, 2013, Hemment, 2012, Strazzari and Selenica, 2013). However, in addition to the aforementioned groups, since the late 2000s, new grassroots citizens’ movements, which also distinguish themselves from professionalised, Western funded NGOs, have begun emerging in a number of former Soviet countries including Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine (Evans, 2012, Lutsevych, 2013, Niktin, 2010, Kokichaishvili, 2012, Stop Destroying Gudiashvili Square, 2011, Faryna, 2012).

In this article, focusing on Armenia, I examine and analyse the emergence of grassroots citizens’ movements which are locally known as ‘civic initiatives’ (*kakhakatsiakan nakhatsernutyunner*) and consider what the emergence of civic initiatives tells us about the development of civil society and changing understandings and practices of civic activism and citizenship in the post-Soviet period. I focus on environmental civic initiatives because they have been the most active in recent years, but my findings and analysis also apply to civic initiatives addressing other, non-environmental issues (Glasius and Ishkanian, forthcoming). While, as I shall demonstrate, there are ‘behind the scenes’ links to professionalised NGOs, I ask why civic initiatives

explicitly reject and distance themselves from formal, professionalised NGOs or what they call ‘traditional’ (*avanatagan*) civil society organisations and what new understandings and practices of civic activism and citizenship have they introduced? In my analysis I also examine whether civic initiatives have been able to influence wider socio-political developments in Armenia.

Ever since the first civic initiative, Save Teghut Forest, was formed in 2007, the numbers and types of civic initiatives have grown [see Table 1]. Civic initiatives in Armenia address a range of issues including the environment, cultural preservation, consumer rights, labour and employment issues, as well as human rights [see Graph 1]. Civic initiatives in Armenia are distinct from formal, professionalized NGOs in a number of key aspects including the issues they address; their organizational structures; their repertoires of action; and their lack of engagement with foreign donors. The age range of the participants is between 20 – 45 years of age, with the most active participants being in their mid-20s – mid- 30s. Most participants are middle class, educated, young professionals or university students, some of whom have studied abroad. Civic initiatives usually consist of between twenty to several hundred individuals (in rare instances) who come together to collectively raise awareness of and to address a particular issue. Decision-making within civic initiatives is consensus-based with discussions occurring in person, over email, or in private Facebook groups. Horizontality is valued and active participation of all members is encouraged. While traditional NGO advocacy is structured, non-confrontational, technocratic and expert-based, civic initiatives utilize different repertoires of action that rely on street-based demonstrations, occupations, as

well as creative forms of direct action such as flash mobs, concerts, theatrical performances, and art or photography exhibitions.

I argue that although environmental civic initiatives in Armenia address very specific and sometimes narrowly focused issues (e.g., saving a waterfall, public park, etc.), their emergence is informed by and is an articulation of much broader concerns around corruption, the absence of rule of law, the lack of democracy, the rise of oligarchic capitalism, and the failure of formal political elites to address the concerns of ordinary Armenian citizens. I maintain that the activists involved in civic initiatives, disillusioned with the lack of action and resistance to perceived social injustices by both political parties and formal, professionalised NGOs, are embracing a more political understanding of civil society than that which was introduced by Western donors in the 1990s. The activists, I contend are not only rejecting NGO models of advocacy and campaigning, but that they are also introducing new understandings of civil society and practices of civic activism. The individuals involved in civic initiatives describe their activism as a form of ‘self-determined’ citizenship and place great emphasis on independence, solidarity, and self-organisation. They conceptualise citizenship to mean that individuals have rights as well as responsibilities toward their communities and their country and as such, they encourage people to become the ‘owners’ [*derer*] of their country and active subjects rather than passive and silent bystanders in society who privately complain about problems, but do not take any public action to change things.

As I will demonstrate, since 2010, environmental civic initiatives have introduced new understandings and practices of citizenship and civic activism and opened up discussions, debates and public deliberations around specific issues (e.g., the use of

public space for private gain and mining) as well as governance, corruption, the rule of law and accountability and transparency in policy processes more broadly. They have also achieved small, but symbolically significant victories including halting the demolition of a public park and preserving a waterfall. More recently, non-environmental civic initiatives have prevented transport fee hikes (the 100 Dram civic initiative - August 2013) and temporarily halted the Government's plans for privatising pensions (the *Dem Em* [I am Against] civic initiative – October 2013 - March 2014). Although these victories have inspired participants and brought them greater public attention and added to their numbers and supporters in Yerevan, civic initiatives have thus far not been able to widen participation beyond the capital nor, more significantly, have they been able to achieve structural changes or had an impact on addressing politically sensitive issues such as violence in the army or mining [see Graph 2]. However, if we move away from what Castells calls the 'productivist vision of social action' (i.e., that if no concrete policy impact is accomplished, there is failure) (Castells, 2012: 143), then we can see that although civic initiatives have as yet to achieve any significant structural or institutional level changes, they have introduced new understandings of civil society and citizenship and civic activism and it remains to be seen how they will develop in coming years.

Methodology

This article is based on extensive field research conducted in Armenia in three separate visits: September 2011, May 2012, and October 2012. The majority of interviews were conducted in person, but a few interviews were conducted over Skype. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The respondents' names have been anonymised and they are referred to using pseudonyms. The findings in this article are based on eighty-five individual interviews with the following: civic activists from three

environmental civic initiatives: Save Teghut (2007 – present), Protect Trchkan Waterfall (2011) and Save Mashtots Park (2012); representatives of environmental and human rights NGOs; diaspora activists who support environmental initiatives and campaigns in Armenia; journalists and bloggers who cover ecological issues; academics; and representatives from donor organisations. Additionally, my research team and I organised sixteen focus groups. Of the sixteen focus groups, seven were held in different communities in Yerevan and the remaining nine were held in cities and villages in the Ararat, Lori, Shirak, and Syunik regions. In addition, I conducted an extensive review of relevant Armenian press articles from 2007 – 2012, Armenian NGO and think tank publications, and relevant Facebook groups' pages in order to understand the broader discourses and discussions.

In this article, I primarily focus on the Protect Trchkan Waterfall and Save Mashtots Park civic initiatives for the following reasons. First, they have a distinct beginning and end (i.e., they are not on-going like the Save Teghut civic initiative). Second, they have achieved a significant part of their stated aims and finally, as these two civic initiatives were highly publicized on Facebook and independent internet new websites, this allowed me to supplement and triangulate my interviews with published sources.

Civil Society, Citizenship and Individual Agency

Prior to the 1980s, civil society was rarely invoked as an analytical concept or as a mobilizing discourse and it was dissident intellectuals in Eastern Europe who revitalized the concept in the 1980s to express their resistance to authoritarian rule and their aspirations for a more democratic polity with a continued role for state regulation

(Edwards and Foley, 2001, Howell and Pearce, 2001, Keane, 1988). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe, civil society rose in prominence within policy circles and international development agencies absorbed and appropriated the idea of civil society into their discourses and policies subsequently making it a central part of their aid programmes to the former socialist countries and indeed in developing countries across the globe. The euphoria for civil society arose, Howell and Pearce argue (2002), out of a combination of factors including the growing disillusion of Western governments and donors with state-led development, and the ascendancy of the neo-liberal paradigm of New Public Management, which supported the roll-back of the state and the privatization of social service delivery. While there is much debate over the meaning of civil society, here I use Cohen and Arato's formulation which defines civil society as 'a sphere of social interaction between economy and state, composed above all of the intimate sphere (especially family), the sphere of associations (especially voluntary organisations), social movements and forms of public communication' (Cohen and Arato, 1992: ix).

Although Alexis de Tocqueville did not use the term civil society, he was the first to attribute the importance of associationalism and self-organisation for democracy (Kaldor 2003: 19). The post-socialist civil society building programmes of the 1990s were strongly influenced by the writings of neo-Tocquevillian scholars, such as Putnam, who posited that democracy is strengthened when it faces a vigorous civil society (Diamond, 1999, Putnam, 1994, Rueschemeyer et al., 1992, Lovell, 1991) and argued that civil society organisations would play a major role in building citizenship skills and trust and could also take over many of the functions of the state (Edwards and Foley,

2001: 5). While the neo-Tocquevillian theories linking civil society to democracy became a key element of the post-Cold War zeitgeist, they are only one conceptualisation of civil society and as many scholars suggest, the promotion of this model of civil society carries with it the risk of depoliticisation and technicization (Hann, 2002, Howell and Pearce, 2001, Kaldor, 2003). Moreover, some scholars have criticised the normativity of the neo-Tocquevillian conceptualisation of civil society arguing instead that the nature of civil society is far more important than the existence of civil society alone (Bayart, 1986, White, 2004) and that that the presence of civil society does not necessarily lead to democracy. Nord for instance writes, ‘Civic activism may well be the bedrock of democratic life, but not all civil societies, however dense and vibrant, give birth to democratic polities’ (Nord, 2000: xvi).

In addition to the neo-Tocquevillian conceptualisation of civil society, there is an alternative philosophical tradition which stresses the contestatory function of social organisation beyond the state and which was influential among Eastern European dissidents, such as Vaclav Havel and Adam Michnik in the 1980s (Edwards and Foley, 2001: 6). In this alternative tradition, which is associated with the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, civil society is conceptualised as an ‘ethical political sphere of freedom’ (Bobbio, 1988: 87) or as the ‘superstructural sphere’ where hegemonic ideologies are introduced and where consent is both ‘produced’, but equally where consent can be ‘subverted and overthrown’ (Chandoke 1995: 150). For Gramsci, each social site becomes a site for power relations and through micro-processes and continuous struggle, ‘slow molecular changes’ lead to wider shifts within society and the political sphere (Chandoke 1995: 155).

Habermas meanwhile envisages the public sphere as a space where people discuss matters of mutual concern and learn about others' opinions (Habermas, 1996). In opposition to de Tocqueville's vision in which public opinion was treated more as 'a compulsion toward conformity than as a critical force', for Habermas, the public sphere is the arena for rational critical debate (Habermas, 1992: 133). Although Habermas saw this potential in the ideal model of the public sphere, he also expressed concern with the colonisation of the 'lifeworld' by late capitalism which he believed undermines its progressive potential (Howell and Pearce 2002: 57). While these political conceptualisations of civil society have been influential among scholars, as Edwards and Foley argue, they were often ignored or 'actively excluded' by policy makers and donors who considered them to be 'divisive' (Edwards and Foley 2001: 6).

The research on civil society in Armenia has examined how civil society has developed from the late Soviet period to the present (Abrahamian, 2006, Abrahamian, 2001) and analysed its role in development (Babjanian 2008), conflict resolution (Ghaplanyan, 2010) as well as democracy building (Ishkanian, 2008/2012). While there was an nascent civil society in the late 1980s, which is well documented by Abrahamian (2001, 2006) following independence in Armenia, as in a number of other former socialist countries, the numbers of NGOs grew rapidly in the 1990s, but this growth in NGO numbers did not lead to greater civic activism or participation (Counterpart International, 2010, Transparency International Anti-Corruption Center, 2011) and there are very low levels of public trust toward NGOs (Caucasus Research Resource Center, 2010). NGOs' lack of strong connections to local grassroots groups and the wider public has meant that they have often been perceived with scepticism and suspicion of being

externally oriented ‘grant-eaters’ who are driven by the interests and concerns of Western donors (Ishkanian, 2008/2012).

While the civic initiatives which have emerged in recent years in Armenia are not directly referencing this alternative tradition or model of civil society, they are explicitly rejecting the neo-Tocquevillian-inspired model of civil society that was promoted by donors in the 1990s which led to the growth of formal, professionalised NGOs in Armenia and which emphasised service delivery and non-confrontational forms of advocacy and campaigning (World Bank, 2004). The activists embrace a more political understanding of civil society and in their bid to ‘reinterpret’ (*veraimastavorel*)¹ civil society, they are not only creating new social spaces for activism but also new understandings and practices of citizenship.

While there has been much work on civil society and NGOs, there has been relatively little attention paid by scholars on the subject of citizenship in the former socialist countries and how understandings and practices of citizenship might be changing in the post-Soviet period (Salmenniemi, 2010, Thelen et al., 2011, Yalçın-Heckmann, 2012). In one such study, Yalçın-Heckmann examines how ordinary residents in the South Caucasus countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia conceptualise citizenship. Drawing on Marshall’s (Marshall, 1950) seminal work on citizenship, Yalçın-Heckmann argues that in the South Caucasus, social citizenship is ‘one of the principle means through which citizens encounter the state, actively practice their citizenship rights, and claim entitlements for having been worker-citizens of the former Soviet state’

¹ The verb ‘*veraimastavorel*’, which does not translate well into English, literally means ‘to give a new meaning and a new interpretation’ to something BARATYAN, N. R., YERZUNKYAN, Y., LAZARYAN, A., HAMBARTSUMYAN, N. & TER-POGHOSYAN, I. 2002. *Armenian - English Dictionary*, Yerevan, Macmillan Armenia .

(Yalçin-Heckmann, 2012, p. 1727). Whereas at the time of her study, she found ‘no obvious and observable social movement for citizenship’ (Yalçin-Heckmann, 2012, 1725) in the South Caucasus, the emergence and growth of civic initiatives in Armenia challenges that finding in that civic initiatives in Armenia are creating new subjectivities, spaces for activism, and practices and understandings of citizenship.

While the respondents in Yalçin-Heckmann’s study had direct experience of the Soviet system and notions of what it meant to be a ‘good citizen’ in the Soviet context (Salmenniemi, 2010), the activists in the civic initiatives I studied, many of whom were born in the 1980s and 1990s, had very little or no direct experience of the Soviet system. And their understandings of citizenship are informed by ideas, including human rights, individual responsibility, active citizenship, and participation, that were introduced and promoted as part of the post-Soviet democracy building programmes (Salmenniemi, 2010). However, as I demonstrate, civic activists are not only drawing on these ideas but they are also adapting, modifying, and reinterpreting them.

As mentioned in the introduction, similar types of groups have emerged in other former Soviet countries, most notably in Georgia, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine. However, as yet, there are few academic studies of these groups. One such study, by Evans, focuses on the struggle in Russia by activists to save Khimki Forest. One of his findings is that while Russians are ‘skeptical about the goals of nongovernmental organizations and reluctant to take part in any activities in the public sphere’, nonetheless people are mobilizing around specific issues that ‘arise out of threats to the self –interest of large numbers of people’ (Evans Jr., 2012: 240). Meanwhile Lutsevych, who examines the rise of civic movements in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, argues that there

has been a backlash against the ‘Western funded NGO-crazy’ and that ‘new civil voices’ have emerged which use ‘mass mobilization strategies and social media’ to address issues ranging from the protection of historical buildings and public squares as well as taxation and labour rights (Lutsevych, 2013: 1). The Armenian civic initiatives I discuss in this article share similarities with these groups in that they also distance themselves from Western-funded or what’s locally called, ‘traditional’ (*avantagan*) NGOs and the latter’s tendency to focus on issues that are popular with Western donors. Moreover, similar to other new civic movements in the former Soviet space, they also rely on direct action and mass mobilization strategies and make extensive use to social media to organise and mobilise. Before turning to discuss the Protect Trchkan and Save Mashtots civic initiatives in the next section, I discuss the governance context against which civic initiatives are emerging and reacting.

The Governance Context and the Rise of Civic Initiatives

Currently, Armenia is considered a ‘semi-consolidated authoritarian regime’ (Freedom House, 2014) or what some have called a ‘managed’ or ‘imitated democracy’ (Zolyan, 2010: 84). ‘Managed democracy’ (*upravlyayemaya demokratiya*) is a phrase that was introduced by the Russian authorities in the early 2000s and is increasingly used to describe the situation in other former Soviet states (e.g., Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan etc.) where the formal/procedural institutions and practices of democracies (e.g., elections) exist but are controlled and managed by the authorities (Colton and McFaul, 2003). The Republican Party of Armenia (*Hayastani Hanrapetakan Kusaktsutyun* – HHK), which has been in power since 1998, presides over a political system which is characterized by corruption, clientalism, the absence of the rule of law

and an independent judiciary (Cheterian, 2009, Stefes, 2006). Opposition political parties have failed to build a credible and serious challenge to the regime's hold on power through elections and apart from the 1991 presidential elections, all subsequent post-Soviet period elections (both presidential and parliamentary) have been beset by claims of vote rigging and violations and many have been followed by massive street demonstrations and protests (Zolyan 2010).

While the Armenian Government has not introduced the oppressive legislation found in other former Soviet countries, including Azerbaijan, Russia, Uzbekistan, and others, it has supported the perpetuation of a discourse which accuses NGOs of being 'grant eaters' who are driven by foreigners (Ishkanian, 2008/2012). The government has until now tolerated the protests by civic initiatives and not attempted to actively suppress their activities. In some instances, which I discuss later, it has also attempted to co-opt these movements and to use them as evidence of the regime's democratic credentials.

The boundaries dividing political and economic elites are porous and blurred as many oligarchs also hold posts in the government or are Members of Parliament (MPs). Powerful oligarchs including Gagik (Dodi Gago) Tsarukyan, Samvel (Lfik Samo) Aleksanyan, and Mher (Tokhmakhi Mher) Sedrakyan are all MPs, while Hovik (the Mouse) Abrahamyan is the current Prime Minister. Their political positions not only grant them immunity from prosecution, but also provide them with the opportunity to adopt and alter legislation in order to serve their economic interests (Ishkanian et al., 2013). Oligarchs are widely described as 'people above the law' because they operate with impunity.

In the post-Soviet period, the rise of oligarchs and their monopolization of the economy have been accompanied by growing levels of poverty and inequality. Currently, over 35% of Armenians live in poverty [i.e., live on less than \$3/day] (World Bank, 2013, Armenian Statistical Service, 2012, National Statistical Service of Armenia, 2012). According to a UNDP report, in its transition to a market economy Armenia experienced a ‘precipitous fall in the average standard of living and a dramatic increase in inequality in the distribution of income and wealth’ and the ‘proportion of the population living in poverty has risen to unprecedented levels’ (Griffin et al., 2002: ii). The authors of the report go on to write, ‘Where once poverty was uncommon, today it is widespread’ and demonstrate that inequality is not limited to consumption and wages, but there is inequality in access to healthcare, education and other services (Griffin et al., 2002: ii). Moreover, the country is beset by very high levels of corruption and according to Transparency International, corruption in Armenia is ‘endemic and widespread, permeating all levels of society’ with the public administration, particularly the judiciary, the police and the health sector, very vulnerable to corruption (Transparency International, 2014).

This is the socio-economic and political context in which civic initiatives are emerging and that which they criticise and seek to transform.

Two Successful Civic Initiatives

Protect Trchkan Waterfall Civic Initiative

Trchkan Waterfall is located in the Lori region in northern Armenia. On 7 April 2010, the Ministry of Nature Protection adopted Decision Number 179A of the Public Services

Regulatory Commission, granting Robshin LTD a license to build a hydroelectric station (HES) at the top of the waterfall. When the construction of the HES began in September 2011, activists, who were part of Save Teghut civic initiative, established the Protect Trchkan Waterfall civic initiative so as to prevent the construction of the HES. They argued that government officials who had granted the license to Robshin LTD had violated the law by ignoring the fact that Trchkan waterfall was included among the recognised water landmarks of the Republic of Armenia. Citing the illegality of the construction, activists from the newly created Protect Trchkan Waterfall civic initiative held a protest on 8 September 2011 in front of the Ministry of Nature Protection in Yerevan and simultaneously created a Facebook page to expand the network of supporters. Within two weeks, the initiative's Facebook page had over 5000 followers and more than 10,000 people had signed a statement circulated by the group condemning the construction of the HES. Following a second demonstration in front of the Ministry of Nature Protection, a group of twelve activists, including both men and women all in their mid-20s and early 30s, set up a protest camp adjacent to the waterfall which they continuously occupied from 25 October – 3 November 2011. The camped protestors received support and encouragement from the residents of adjacent villages as well as supporters in Yerevan and diaspora Armenians who could follow the protests via Facebook, YouTube and Live Streaming technology. During the period of encampment, a number of human rights and environmental NGOs based in Yerevan, Gyumri and Vanadzor, which were not involved in the direct action, provided material support and solidarity to the protestors at the camp including issuing statements to the press, etc. The protest ended on 3 November 2011, when the Prime Minister at that time, Tigran

Sargsyan,² announced that the construction of the HES at Trchkan Waterfall was to be temporarily halted pending further investigation and there would be consultation on how it could be built in a more ecologically friendly and sustainable manner. By the end of December 2012, construction had been entirely called off and Trchkan Waterfall was granted ‘protected’ status.

The phenomenally rapid success of the Trchkan civic initiative captured the attention of the public and attracted many new supporters. One male civic activist from the Save Mashtots civic initiative explained, ‘After Trchkan people saw that success could be achieved through concerted, collective action’ (Gevork, interview 13 October 2012, Yerevan). While another activist stated, ‘After Trchkan, I realised that if you don’t do anything, then you deserve what you get in life. So you should either try to change things or don’t speak and complain when things are bad.’ (Rosa, interview 11 October 2012, Yerevan). Shortly after the victory of the Trchkan activists in November 2011, the occupation and protests aimed at saving Mashtots Park began in February 2012.

Save Mashtots Park

The Save Mashtots Park mobilization began on 11 February 2012 when two young civic activists, one of whom had been one of the camped protestors in Trchkan, walked up to construction workers in Mashtots Park and told them they did not have the right to build the boutiques in a public park because a public consultation and environmental impact assessment (EIA) had not been conducted. A row ensued and the activists turned to Facebook and began calling people to Mashtots Park. Over the following three months, from 11 February until 1 May 2012, activists occupied the park

² Tigran Sargsyan, no relation to President Serzh Sargsyan, resigned from office on 3 April 2014 without citing a specific reason.

on a daily basis. The initiative's immediate aim was to save Mashtots Park from being cemented over for the construction of boutiques, but the larger objective was to critique the policies and decision-making procedures, which have consistently put the interests of powerful oligarchs and corporations ahead of people and the environment. Despite numerous freedom of information requests lodged by activists, the names of the boutique owners has never been disclosed by the Yerevan Mayor's office. But according to information obtained by some of the activists, the boutiques are said to have belonged to state officials and two oligarchs, one of whom is the well-known oligarch nicknamed *Khujuj* (Curly) Edo and the other is the brother of former Yerevan mayor Gagik Beglaryan (who is better known as *Chornii Gago* [Black Gago]).

This was hardly the first instance in which oligarchs had taken over, legally or illegally, public spaces for private use. Therefore, for the activists, their protest and occupation of Mashtots Park was as much about process (for example consultations, EIAs) as about actual policy. Activists argued that their goal was to advance an agenda, which encourages civic participation, respect of rule of law, and sustainable development (Wallace, 2012).

While occupying Mashtots Park, the activists organized concerts, exhibitions, theatrical performances, and even a 'funeral' for the fictional 'Olig Garkhian' (that is Mr Oligarch). In the 'funeral', a *papier-mâché* figure of Olig Garkhian was placed in a cardboard coffin, which was then paraded around the streets of central Yerevan followed by lamenters and drummers. The activists walked behind the funeral cortege handing out leaflets describing their demands. On 3 March 2012 activists held an event at the park celebrating the Birth of the Self-Determined Citizen (*inknoroshvats kakhakatsu tsnunty*).

Finally, the activists organized and held an Just and Independent Civic Court in which they examined the legality of the boutiques' construction (Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, 2013). Prior to organizing the civic court, the activists had made numerous attempts to meet with the Yerevan Mayor's office and to have their case heard in court. Following the 'inaction' of the authorities, the civic court was convened on 13 March 2012 with the mandate 'to examine *the problem of the seizure, theft and privatization of public property and national wealth* in our state.' (Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, 2012) [emphasis in original].

The opening statement read,

We, RA [Republic of Armenia] citizens and residents,³ are implementing our constitutional rights and duties and being the masters of this public space, the masters of our town and our state, we have demanded that our servants, the representatives of the city and other bodies, perform their constitutional functions and responsibilities, for which they are paid by the public. They have not given a clear and legal response to our clear and lawful demand for a long time now, but have avoided it, trying to complicate or prolong the process. (Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, 2012).

The 'verdict' reached by the Just and Independent Civic Court found that the municipal government was obliged to dismantle the boutiques and restore the park to its previous form, adding that if this 'verdict' was not carried out in 10 days, the activists would begin dismantling the boutiques themselves.

While the Save Mashtots Park initiative was organized and led by young activists, as the parliamentary elections in May 2012 drew near, opposition politicians began to descend on the park to presumably engage with the young activists and to carry out the 'verdict' of the civic court. One group of middle aged male opposition political activists from the Sardarapat and Pre-Parliament movements, who called themselves the 'Brigade

³ 'Residents' here refers to the diaspora Armenians who have repatriated to Armenia but who do not hold Armenian citizenship.

of Dismantlers' (*apamontazhognneri brigad*), began to come to the park once a week from 31 March, carrying tools and dressed as builders. Although their attempts to dismantle the boutiques failed, they used the opportunity to make political speeches to the crowd. The presence of the political activists at the park led to intense debates among the civic activists. While some welcomed the opportunity to build alliances with political parties, other activists argued that this politicization of the protest movement would only hurt their cause and allow the government to label them as an opposition political movement rather than a broad-based civic movement, which was not affiliated with any political party or politician.

The situation in the park came to an abrupt end when on 1 May 2012, just a few days ahead of the parliamentary elections, President Serzh Sargsyan, accompanied by the mayor of Yerevan, visited the park. While touring the park, Sargsyan told the Mayor, Taron Margaryan, 'Taron, they don't look pretty. Dismantle them'. He ordered Margaryan to dismantle the boutiques 'as soon as possible' and just like that, the construction was halted, the boutiques were dismantled overnight and it appeared as though the activists had achieved their aim (Avagyan, 2012; A1+, 2012).

But had they really achieved their aims and was this a success for the Save Mashtots Park initiative? Yes and no. While the activists achieved their stated aim of halting the construction of the boutiques, their larger aims of addressing the failure of the rule of law, the impunity of oligarchs, and corruption within the system were not met. I will return to the matter of impact later.

Self-Determined Citizens?: Redefining civil society and citizenship

A number of respondents explained the emergence and growth of civic initiatives, as a new ‘awakening’ (*zartunk*) in societal consciousness and argued that this was due to both the coming of age of a new generation which had not directly experienced life under the Soviet regime as well as the availability of new information and communication technologies. Indeed, I discovered that the vast majority of activists are people in their 20s and 30s, thus there does appear to be a generational aspect. And as one of my respondents, a representative of a human rights NGO, said,

I would call this activism an outburst period of the new generation which was not born and raised in the Soviet times. This generation is more open minded than the previous generations and obviously this new generation is going to have an outburst when it experiences injustices (Hayk, Skype interview 27 July 2013).

With regard to the impact of new information and communication technologies, the introduction and spread of social media, including Facebook and YouTube, as well as the greater availability and affordability of broadband technology which allows for Live Streaming, has allowed civic activists to access information more easily and to organise and mobilise much more effectively and rapidly. Much has been written about the role of social media and its use by young activists in recent protests around the globe (Mason, 2013, Castells, 2012, Center for Liberation Technology, 2010) and indeed, civic initiatives in Armenia also extensively use social media in their campaigns, however, we should be wary of exaggerating its impact when there is evidence that social media has also been a tool for government surveillance and even provocation (Morozov, 2011). Moreover, while the availability of social media may explain how activists are organizing, it does not explain why they are rejecting NGO models of advocacy and campaigning and are instead choosing to create new spaces for and practices of activism.

Civic initiatives, which operate in the public and social spaces that are often referred to as the sphere of ‘civil society’ (Bhatt and Seckineglin, 2012), are nevertheless very reluctant to embrace the term ‘civil society’. In an effort to differentiate and distinguish themselves from ‘traditional’ NGOs, civic initiatives engage in a process of re-interpreting existing terms and inventing a new vocabulary to describe their work. As one activist, Rosa, who is involved in the Save Teghut civic initiative and was also involved in the Save Mashtots Park action said, ‘There is very little trust in Armenia toward civil society because that word, ‘civil society’ (*kakhakatsiakan hasarakutyun*) is used by international donors, such as the US embassy.’ She went on to add,

If we [the civic initiatives] were to describe ourselves as “civil society”, then the Government would immediately say, “Oh they are grant-eaters” (*grantagerner en*). Of course we are part of civil society, but the words “NGO” or “civil society” are so compromised so that they are immediately associated, in the minds of many people in Armenia, with grant-eaters. For that reason, we must use a different word and avoid waving around **the red flag**, [which is the term ‘civil society’], to describe our actions. [Emphasis added] (Interview 11 October 2012, Yerevan).

In order to avoid waving the ‘red flag’ that is civil society, they describe themselves as individual citizens and their groups as ‘civic initiatives.’ A respondent from an environmental NGO explained, ‘It is not accidental that they [civic activists] refer to themselves as ‘citizens’ and ‘civic initiatives’. It is a deliberate choice. They are wary of the NGOs and are reluctant to be identified with us [NGOs]’ (Anzhela, interview 2 May 2012, Yerevan).

When I interviewed representatives from environmental NGOs, several NGO representatives told me that while they admired the young activists for their enthusiasm and courage, they believed that their protests were ‘too radical’. One respondent who works for a local environmental NGO said,

The civic initiatives are freer than us [NGOs]. We can't make such radical statements and we must act in a sensible [professional] manner. They are freer to express themselves and often do so rather boldly and crudely (Martiros, interview 14 October 2012, Yerevan).

As one male activist who was involved in the Protect Trchkan civic initiative and the Save Teghut civic initiatives said the following with regard to how environmental NGOs engage with civic initiatives on mining issues. He said,

The issue is that some international environmental NGOs that are already working in Armenia, such as X NGO, have transformed from the robust organisations that they are on a global level into 'frightened baby chicks' (*kurkuri tsak*) in Armenia. They are afraid to say anything that will offend the Armenian Government. As if that was not bad enough, they also try to silence our protests [around mining] and to dictate to activists what we should or should not do. That is why we don't work with them (Suren, Skype interview 11 January 2013).

Despite the differences in organisational and operational styles, this does not mean that there are no connections between civic initiatives and professionalised NGOs. On the contrary, individual NGO representatives often join civic initiatives in their personal capacity and in certain instances, for example in the case of Trchkan discussed earlier, NGOs provide advice and support to activists. That said, these NGO employees/activists also recognise the limits of NGOs and describe their participation in civic initiatives as a matter of personal choice and expression of their citizenship and not part of their NGO work. Many activists who are employed by NGOs argue that NGOs are often constrained in their actions and reluctant to engage in what would be construed as confrontational or radical forms of action. Instead, they argue that NGOs prefer to engage in less contentious forms of advocacy and campaigning, including writing letters to officials, conducting research, preparing reports, and organising conferences. For instance, Narine, who works for a human rights NGO and was active in the Save Mashtots civic initiative

and has also been involved in the Save Teghut civic initiative for several years, expressed frustration with NGOs in the context of Mashtots Park and a belief that activists can actually be more effective than NGOs. She said,

[NGOs] were not able to, [and] did not seek to demonstrate activeness in the street. The fact showed that some things are changed by young active citizens, who are more persistent, more mobile. They are free from documentation, from writing grants, reports; they are free (Narine Skype interview 5 April 2013).

Meanwhile, Erik, who works for an international NGO and was active in Save Mashtots Park stated at the start of our interview 'I am not speaking to you as a member of staff from X NGO. I actually got into a little bit of trouble [at my job] for writing a newspaper article about our movement'. For Erik, Mashtots Park was about 'values' and 'redefining' citizenship. He said,

It's about redefining what it means to be a citizen...the biggest problem in Armenia is that the average citizen doesn't see the solutions to today's problems within themselves. So whatever is happening now, the core of it is taking responsibility for the problems and saying here on out I am going to maximize my agency as a citizen and do whatever I possibly can to make sure that this bad thing doesn't happen...The two biggest values for us are solidarity and self-organisation. Those are the two things that are pointed out in every single meeting, in every single action. (Erik, Skype interview 6 August 2013)

Beyond rejecting the traditional NGO model of advocacy and campaigning that was introduced by Western donors in the 1990s, the activists involved in civic initiatives encourage and promote new forms of civic activism and citizenship which recognise that individuals have rights as well as responsibilities towards their communities and the wider society. Activists speak about the responsibility of individual citizens and argue that people should not expect 'others' to act for them. As scholars have demonstrated, the concept of 'individual responsibility' is a key feature of 'neoliberal rationality' (Ong, 2007: 4) which stresses the self-responsibility of individual subjects (Rose, 1996, Harvey,

2007). However, in the context of civic initiatives in Armenia, individual responsibility is not concerned with getting people to maximize their economic self-interests, but rather for individuals to exercise responsibility through acting in solidarity with others for the greater common good. Thus activists say to people, ‘You are a citizen; you have a voice, exercise it’.

Beyond activist circles, however, such understandings of civic activism and citizenship are not widely shared. A number of activists spoke about having to continually clarify that they were acting in their own personal capacity as citizens and not as members or employees of NGOs. For example, one male activist from Save Mashtots Park civic initiative told me, ‘When people on the street approached us and asked, ‘What NGO are you from?’ We replied, ‘We are not from any NGO. We are citizens of the Republic of Armenia’’ (Gevork, interview 13 October 2012, Yerevan). In a pamphlet printed by activists from the We Are Owners of the City [*Menk Enk Ays Kakhaki Deruh*] civic initiative, which was also involved in the occupation at Mashtots Park, it states:

We are individual citizens...Our civic initiative is not a NGO and does not receive any financial assistance (We are the Owners of This City, 2013)[emphasis added]

The pamphlet has a section titled ‘What You Can Do’ in which the group makes nine recommendations to individual citizens. These range from familiarising oneself with the Armenian Constitution to encouraging citizens to approach construction workers working in public parks and squares and demanding to see their building permits (We are the Owners of This City, 2013). But as one prominent, young female activist from Yerevan who has been involved in a number of environmental civic initiatives explained, it is not so easy to get people to exercise agency and to take responsibility. She said,

People call me all the time and say they are cutting down trees or destroying such and such. I tell them, “Thanks for letting me know, but don’t just call me. You can address that problem yourself. Of course I will help you, but it is your yard, your community, your park and you must act for yourself as well” (Anush, interview 18 September 2011).

In the next section I discuss the challenges facing activists in widening participation and impact.

The Limits of Civil Society: the impact of civic initiatives on wider socio-political developments

One reason for the lack of wider participation is the prevailing ‘climate of fear’ (*vakhi mtnolorty*) which was mentioned by many focus group respondents. For instance, all the participants in the focus groups we conducted were told that the discussions are anonymous, and that their names would not appear anywhere. Even so, at the end of some discussions a few participants refused to sign their names, arguing that they feared that what they had said to us in the focus group would be leaked and that they could lose their jobs. One focus group participant said,

If you talk about something you don’t like and government officials hear about it, you could lose your job. This is what Armenia is. (Female, 18-30, city of Alaverdi).

But fear is not the only obstacle. A large number of focus group participants said they would not join civic initiatives, not because they did not share their concerns, but because they did not believe that their actions could lead to change.

Do you know why this [environmental] movement does not have a massive character? Because 70% of our citizens fight for their own survival, it is a struggle for the material; their minds are busy only with this. No one thinks they can change anything. (Female, 36 and above, Yerevan,)

While another, much younger focus group respondent said,

The sad thing is that we all think we don't have future in Armenia, most of the young people think so. All of us would like to live abroad, to have a good education, professional growth, and social security. (Female, 18-35, Yerevan).

And indeed, many Armenians continue to vote with their feet as emigration continues unabated (News.am, 2013, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2010).

While scholars recognise the importance of civil society for creating spaces for rational critical discourse, participation, and expression, there remain questions of whether and indeed, how civil society can lead to social transformation and structural changes. For instance, Young writes about the importance of civil society in exposing injustices in state and economic power and for making the exercise of power more accountable, but goes on to argue that civil society has its limits and that those who wish to undermine injustice cannot turn their backs on state institutions (Young, 2000: 8). She argues against those who suggest that civil society 'serves as a preferred alternative to the state today for promoting democracy and social justice' and maintains that 'state institutions have unique capacities for co-ordination, regulation, and administration on a large scale that a well-functioning democracy cannot do without' adding that 'social movements seeking greater justice and well-being' should work on two fronts (i.e., within civil society and at the level of state institutions) (Young 2000: 156). Even Walzer, who enthusiastically celebrates the power of civil society, recognises that civil society activism is not enough and that in order to achieve changes within society and in the political domain, a transformation of the state is required (Walzer, 2003).

For the activists their major accomplishments have been introducing new ideas, values, and practices, including those of self-organisation, autonomy, and solidarity as

well as in opening up issues to greater public scrutiny and debate. As one activist who had been active in Mashtots Park said,

People are trying to live a more collective life; they are trying to establish a democratic culture. The collective life means that when I do something, it affects to others' as well ... People realize that they are the owners of this country. It is a change of values for me (Davit, interview Yerevan, 9 May 2012).

However, both activists and other observers recognise that civic initiatives have as yet made little impact at the structural, political, or policy levels. One NGO respondent said, 'So far, the civic initiatives have been working on an issue *tochichni* (specific) scale. They are not addressing the systemic issues that need to be addressed. You need a political movement or a party to address those issues' (Sirvart, interview 10 October 2012, Yerevan). Indeed, the lack of impact of the Army in Reality and Save Teghut civic initiatives which are addressing violence in the army and mining respectively, demonstrates the challenges of using this form of activism to achieve larger objectives and in taking on more powerful vested interests (Ishkanian et al., 2013).

An academic, who was a supporter of the Mashtots Park civic initiative said,

Impact is happening on a case by case basis. But to have implications on policy conduct and to affect policy making *ex ante* as opposed to *ex post*, takes a different kind of pressure. It not only takes the grassroots activism to sound the alarm and raise the flags, but you also need structures that will identify the alternative policies (Shant, Skype interview 25 November 2012).

Indeed, several NGO representatives and representatives from political parties have criticized the civic initiatives for being unwilling to engage with political parties. One respondent from a diaspora based political organisation said that he recognised that 'civil society is the only outlet for the young for expressing their ideas' but went on to add,

My bone of contention with them is the lack of connection between civic activism and political activism. There is a **rabid paranoia** of established politics from the

civic activists. And I would blame both sides for that...But it also creates a ceiling in terms of their effectiveness of policy change (Raffi, Skype interview 23 November 2012). [Emphasis added]

While civic activists recognise that they may have hit the so-called ‘ceiling’ of effectiveness, they are also wary of becoming too closely aligned with political parties for fear of being co-opted or exploited. The fear of co-optation is not unfounded. During the 2013 presidential campaign, President Serzh Sargsyan attempted to represent the activists’ victory in Mashtots Park as his own and in one of his election campaign videos, Sargsyan is presented as the defender of civil society and the rights of citizens, instead of as the leader under whose administration oligarchic capitalism, inequality, and corruption have persisted and expanded. But it is not only Sargsyan who has attempted to appropriate the success of the movement in order to bolster his democratic credentials, opposition political parties and movements, such as Sardarapat and the Pre-Parliament have also claimed responsibility for the success of Mashtots Park. As one activist said,

The attitude of opposition political parties towards civic activism is very consumerist. They want to tap into and benefit from the political and social capital accumulated by civic activists. For example, there is a video where representatives from the Pre-Parliament claim to not only have taken part in the developments of Mashtots Park, but they claim that they were ‘coordinating’ it (Narine, Skype interview 5 April 2013).

Narine went on to add that this approach did not inspire trust in political parties or their leaders. The concern that political parties will exploit their actions for their own political gains is of concern to many activists, but following the successes of Trchkan and Mashtots Park, disagreements have begun to emerge among activists over how and indeed whether to scale up. Some activists are for building alliances with political parties

while others argue that this will lead to co-optation and de-radicalisation and instead advocate maintaining their distance from political parties.

One strategy, which has been utilised, is that activists have sought to build links with diaspora Armenians. As one female activist from the Save Mashtots Park civic initiative told me,

If we try to build links with global environmental movements, the Government will accuse us of ‘working for foreigners’. So our only option is to work with diaspora Armenians because while they live abroad, they are not considered ‘foreigners’ (*odar*) (Gayane, interview 11 May 2012, Yerevan).

Both the Protect Trchkan Waterfall and Save Mashtots Park civic initiatives had strong support from various diaspora Armenians living in Europe and North America who followed the protests on Facebook and YouTube. Diaspora Armenians signed petitions, wrote open letters to the Prime Minister and other government officials (including the Minister of the Diaspora) and even collected funds to purchase tents and other camping equipment for the protestors (Raffi). One such open letter to the Minister of Diaspora Hranush Hakobyan states,

The most sacred duty and responsibility of the armed forces of any country, is to defend the borders of the said country and protect the safety and the security of its citizens. It is not, to control, silence or terrorize innocent citizens protesting the illegal use of public spaces, i.e. Mashtotz Park, Teghud Forest or the unlawful and criminal exploitation of the resources of the country, causing long term damage to the environment and the ecology of our Homeland. (Misakyan, 2012)

While there is no evidence to show that diaspora support has had any influence on the authorities, it is clear that activists are gaining recognition from the international donor community.

For instance, in June 2012, then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton joined the US and British Embassies in Armenia, as well as the EU Delegation and the Counterpart

International NGO to ‘highlight the contributions of Armenia’s civil rights activists’ involved in Save Mashtots Park civic initiative to the ‘promotion of human rights’ by awarding them the Universal Rights Award (Embassy of the United States, 2012). Moreover, in March 2014 the World Bank recognised the Save Teghut activists as ‘stakeholders’ in mining (Save Teghut Civic Initiative, 2014, World Bank, 2014).

While some civic activists celebrated the award arguing that this demonstrated that they had become a force to be reckoned with, others argued that the attention and publicity would only open them up for criticism and charges of being ‘grant-eaters’ and under the influence of foreign powers (focus group with activists on 9 October 2012, Yerevan). Indeed, success comes at a cost, as a NGO respondent said, ‘The government recognises that the public is beginning to respond positively to the new activist groups and applauding them for their perseverance and courage. So it’s now begun a concerted campaign to denigrate and label activists as being this, that or the other’ (Sirvart, interview 10 October 2012).

Activists recognise that if they are to achieve more structural and political level changes, they will need to widen participation, fight the reigning fear and apathy and encourage a greater sense of agency among their fellow citizens, but it remains to be seen how civic initiatives will develop and what form activism will take in the future. Can and will the Yerevan-based activists build links with communities and individuals outside the capital so as to widen participation? Will they continue to remain as autonomous, loosely organised, informal groups or will they begin to ‘scale-up’ their efforts by either institutionalising and becoming NGOs themselves or by creating alliances with NGOs or political parties? On my last field visit in November 2013, I

discovered that some changes were already taking place. For example, some activists involved in the on-going Save Teghut civic initiative (2007 – present), which is opposed to the opening of the Teghut copper-molybdenum mine, had created a new radical NGO while others were forming a trade union to organise miners and some of the activists had joined a newly created (December 2013) opposition political party called Civil Contract, which is led by the former political prisoner and current MP Nikol Pashinyan. Meanwhile several activists who had been involved in the Save Mashtots Park civic initiatives created a website in the autumn of 2013 called ‘Political Discourse’, with funding from the German Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, where they publish original articles about political philosophy, civil society, and other social and economic issues. In addition to original articles, they also publish Armenian translations of the writings of scholars such as Jurgen Habermas, David Graeber, Susan Strange, and others. Their aim is to ‘introduce new ideas so as to shift the political discourse and thinking’ (Diskurs, 2014).

Conclusion

In this article I examined the emergence of civic initiatives in Armenia and focused on two civic initiatives, Save Mashtots Park and Protect Trchkan Waterfall. I analysed why civic initiatives reject NGO forms of advocacy and campaigning and how they are creating new spaces for mobilization and understandings and practices of citizenship, civic activism, and civil society more broadly.

My objective was to consider what the emergence of civic initiatives tells us about the development of civil society and the changing of understandings and practices of citizenship in Armenia in the post-Soviet period. I argued that civic activists are rejecting the neo-Tocquevillian-inspired model of civil society that was promoted by donors in the

1990s and which emphasised service delivery and non-confrontational forms of advocacy and campaigning. Instead, I demonstrated how the activists are embracing a more political understanding of civil society and embracing a concept of citizenship which emphasises self-organisation, independence, and solidarity. I argued that while civic initiatives focus on specific issues, their actions are driven by broader concerns around corruption, oligarchic capitalism, the absence of rule of law and the disillusionment with politics as usual.

I also considered whether civic initiatives have been able to influence policy and wider socio-political developments in Armenia. I argued that while activists involved in civic initiatives have achieved small yet symbolically significant victories, thus far they have not been able to widen participation beyond the capital nor, more significantly, have they been able to achieve structural changes or had an impact on addressing politically sensitive issues such as violence in the army or mining. The government, as I discussed, has thus far tolerated civic initiatives and not initiated a crackdown on activists, but that there have also been attempts by officials to appropriate the success of the civic initiatives in order to demonstrate and boost the regime's democratic credentials.

Civic initiatives have introduced new ideas as well as understandings and practices of citizenship and civil society which are important, but it is clear that achieving substantive change at the structural and political levels and on wider policy issues will not be easy or quick; it will take time, perseverance and perhaps a less exacting attitude towards scaling up and building alliances with other stakeholders including progressive NGOs, opposition political parties, and where appropriate (e.g., on the issue of mining), global civil society activists and networks.

Although the activists at Mashtots Park who celebrated the birth of the Self-Determined Citizen did not draw on this, but the ideas of self-determination and autonomy can be traced back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Neuhouser, 2011). Rousseau conceptualized autonomy as ‘citizens joining together to make laws for themselves that reflect their collective understanding for the common good’ and autonomy in this sense required citizens to possess the ‘capacity for independent, self-determined judgment’ (Neuhouser 2011). I would argue that it remains to be seen how civic initiatives will develop and how the Armenian government will respond in the future before we begin to celebrate the birth of the self-determined citizen.

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