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REPORT

ARMENIA: Between hope and distrust



NORWEGIAN HELSINKI COMMITTEE

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee

Established in 1977

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee (NHC) is a non-governmental organisation that works to promote respect for human rights, nationally and internationally. Its work is based on the conviction that documentation and active promotion of human rights by civil society is needed for states to secure human rights, at home and in other countries.

NHC bases its work on international human rights instruments adopted by the United Nations, the Council of Europe, the Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), including the 1975 Helsinki Final Act.

The main areas of focus for the NHC are the countries of Europe, North America and Central Asia. The NHC works irrespective of ideology or political system in these countries and maintains political neutrality.

How we work

Human rights monitoring and reporting

Through monitoring and reporting on problematic human rights situations in specific countries, the NHC sheds light on violations of human rights. The NHC places particular emphasis on civil and political rights, including the fundamental freedoms of expression, belief, association and assembly. On-site research and close co-operation with key civil society actors are our main working methods. The NHC has expertise in election observation and has sent numerous observer missions to elections over the last two decades.

Support for democratic processes

By sharing knowledge and with financial assistance, the NHC supports local initiatives for the promotion of an independent civil society and public institutions as well as a free media. A civil society that functions well is a precondition for the development of democracy.

Education and information

Through education and information about democracy and human rights, international law and multicultural understanding, we work to increase the focus on human rights violations. Our aim is to influence both public opinion and governments in human rights matters.

International processes

As with our educational work, the NHC seeks to influence governments and international organisations through participation in international processes, meetings and conferences to make human rights a priority.

Front page: Grandmother with flag.

All photos: Lene Wetteland, Norwegian Helsinki Committee.

Map from <http://mapsof.net/map/caucasus-breakaway-regions-abkhazia-south-ossetia-nagorno-karabakh#.UuKQuJzKyig>

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1. Preface

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee (NHC) is a non-governmental organisation working to ensure that human rights are fully respected both in law and in practice. The NHC does this through monitoring, reporting, advocacy, education and support for democracy. A strong civil society is of vital importance to the development of democracy and protection of human rights in a country. For this reason we support civil society organisations in young democracies through financial aid, organisational development and exchanges of experience.

Our method is first-hand contact with key stakeholders in the region we work in. We travel regularly to all the countries we cover, and stay updated when major events occur suddenly, e.g. riots, or are scheduled to take place, e.g. elections. With regards to Armenia we have had democracy support programmes in the country since 2003, with regular visits to the country and close cooperation with local human rights organisations and activists.

Since 2008 this close follow-up with the relevant actors and events in the country has increased in frequency and intensity, and we have been present at all the last elections since the disputed presidential elections in 2008. The main methodology for the current report is meetings and interviews in and outside Armenia since then. All rendering of viewpoints of named persons in the report is based on meetings carried out by the Norwegian Helsinki Committee over the past five years.

The report was drafted by Lene Wetteland, Project Manager and Advisor on Armenia in the NHC, with valuable support from Lillian Solheim, Project Manager in the NHC. Valuable input was also provided by Gunnar Ekeløve-Slydal, Deputy Secretary General of the NHC, and Artur Sakunts, Chairman of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor, Armenia.

Many thanks also to the Norwegian Helsinki Committee's cooperation partners in Armenia over many years and the activists interviewed for the report.

2. Introduction

Elections are a major event in a democracy, but the NHC does not see the monitoring of technicalities on election day as the main indicator of how well or poorly a democracy is performing. Recognising the importance of a thriving civil society in a democracy to maintain checks and balances and improve the situation for marginalised groups, we focus on the conditions for domestic election observation (rather than international election observation) as part of the NHC's multifaceted democracy support component.

Competition, civic participation and respect for fundamental human rights are other essential elements that set the necessary preconditions for a democracy. In addition, trust and confidence in democratic institutions, in particular the government, are crucial.

Situated in the mountains of Eurasia, under the influence of a range of surrounding power factors, Armenia's decision-makers have been eager to maintain the geopolitical balance in the region. To the extent that the country's representatives were negotiating a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement, (DCFTA) with the European Union (EU); apparently it did that in parallel with negotiations with the Russian Federation over membership in the Russia-led Customs Union with Kazakhstan and Belarus.

State representatives negotiate with other high-ranking representatives, abroad and behind closed doors. As there is no censorship, Armenians interested in the latest political developments can in theory find much of the information necessary to stay informed. There are chances to discuss it in a wide range of fora, including social media; to arrange pickets and demonstrations; and to create associations that promote prioritised issues. Six different parties and two independent MPs are represented in the National Assembly, including three fairly outspoken parties mostly in opposition to the government. Armenian youth are active users of social media, and many have studied abroad or have friends or relatives abroad. Armenia was, and still is, considered by many counterparts to be one of the best students in the class of '91, i.e. the countries that became independent states after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Still, the government's simultaneous negotiations with both the EU and Russia and the possibilities and consequences of cooperation with either of them have not been subject to broad discussion in Armenia. State TV channels do not present a realistic picture of the various opinions or consequences of the two alternatives. Economic hardship keeps people occupied with their daily bread, and people also have little confidence in government institutions and media. They do not see President Sargsyan as their representative, mainly because many consider the two last election results fraudulent. Although the parliament has representatives from various parties, these parties are personality-driven and lack a genuine electorate to whom they are responsible. There is also an inherent scepticism

towards actors in civil society, who furthermore lack platforms to engage fully with the general population.

Evelina Gyulyakhanyan from the NGO Socioscope summarises the challenges hence:

When people realise their rights, they leave the country to obtain these rights rather than stay and fix it for all Armenians.

When the September 2013 announcement was made that Sargsyan had signed an agreement with the Russian representative and that the EU DCFTA was off the table after three years of preparations, people were not pleased. But they did not take to the streets in numbers like Ukrainians did after Ukraine's President Yanukovich agreed on a similar deal with Russia.¹ However, the size and engagement of the demonstrations which have taken place in Armenia since then are unprecedented and substantial, especially taking into consideration the country's modest size, population and democratic history. Civic activism has intensified, but has unfortunately also faced correspondingly intensified responses from the authorities.

In this report we will look at Armenian civil society and civic activism today. Civil society is an arena where individuals voluntarily come together to promote views and interests on their own or others' behalf – directly or through voluntary organisations or other kinds of associations.² In the following we will mainly focus on civic activism outside registered organisations and political parties. We will see how certain traditions, structures and trends in Armenian society influence civic participation in the country and consider to what extent the latest elections and social actions and campaigns are manifestations of a changing environment for civil society and civic activism in Armenia. In this context, we will also look at how the Armenian authorities facilitate civic activism and fulfil their international obligations in this field.

1 Please see the [www.nhc.no](http://www.nhc.no/en/countries/europe/ukraine/) on the situation in Ukraine: <http://www.nhc.no/en/countries/europe/ukraine/>

2 <http://www.norad.no/no/tema/demokrati-og-styresett/sivilt-samfunn>

3. Historical and Political Background

Armenia is one of the smallest and poorest countries to emerge from the remnants of the Soviet Union. With its modest territory of almost 30,000 sq. km located in the mountainous South Caucasus to the north of Iran, east of Turkey, south of Georgia and Russia, west of Azerbaijan and on the boundary between the Arabian and Eurasian tectonic plates, it is a landlocked country with scarce natural resources.³ Recent reports illustrate an increase in poverty and unemployment, and a growing number of Armenians also leave the country in search of jobs elsewhere, mainly Russia.

According to some sources, more than a million people have left Armenia since independence.⁴ The last census was taken in 2011, and states that just over 3 million people live in Armenia today.⁵ However, this number is disputed by other sources, which put the number even below 2 million.⁶ The real number of the population influences the country's ability to defend itself in case of war, and this is seen as the main reason why the authorities would inflate it. In addition, these so-called "dead souls" have the potential to increase the number of voters on the voters' list.

Extensive migration and emigration has taken place in several phases over the centuries, due to massacres, numerous wars and economic hardships. Before, during and after World War I and the 1915 genocide in Eastern Anatolia in today's Turkey,⁷ large groups of Armenians with the help of Norwegian humanist Fridtjof Nansen's "Nansen Passport" got safe refuge in the United States or Europe. There are also many Armenians still living in Georgia, Russia, the Middle East and Iran after alterations of borders in connection with wars and occupation.⁸ As a result of the conflicts, the two longest borders, with Turkey in the west and Azerbaijan in the east, are closed. Throughout and because of these difficulties, the small nation has taken great care to maintain its identity – for better and for worse. Today Armenia is one of the most homogenous republics of the former Soviet Union, with its population more than 97 per cent Armenian.⁹

3 Central Intelligence Agency: The World Factbook. Armenia.
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/am.html>
http://earthquake.usgs.gov/earthquakes/world/events/1988_12_07_ev.php

4 See f.ex. http://www.armenianow.com/social/27994/armenia_emigration_russia

5 National Statistical Service of the RA, 2011 census: <http://www.armstat.am/file/doc/99475033.pdf>

6 Recently a newspaper claimed the population is considerably lower in Armenia when one uses figures from the police rather than the National Statistical Data. See for instance Armenian News "Armenia's population is 2 million?" <http://news.am/eng/news/175976.html>

7 According to the 1948 UN Genocide Convention, killings may amount to genocide only if there is "an intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such". Although the Turkish courts started court martials after the end of the war, they were halted and the Turkish authorities deny that a genocide took place. They do, however, acknowledge that a large number of Ottoman Armenians were killed as a result of the war. See f.ex. http://www.nytimes.com/ref/timestopics/topics_armeniangenocide.html

8 For a rough guide to Armenian history, see f.ex. Marsden, Philip: "Armenia: Mellom hammer og ambolt".

9 CIA World Factbook. The other percentages are mainly comprised of Yezidi Kurds and Russians.
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/am.html>

Armenians are well aware of the history of their ancestors. All Armenians know that Armenia adopted Christianity as the state religion in the year 301 AD, that the distinct alphabet created by the monk Mesrop Mashtots was adopted in 406, that more than a million Armenians were killed in the Ottoman Empire's genocide of its Armenian citizens in 1915, that 25,000 Armenians died during the 1988 earthquake in northern Armenia and many were killed and injured during the Sumgait pogroms in Azerbaijan the same year, and that they are considered the winners of the 1991-94 war against Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh and now *de facto* hold approximately 14 per cent of what is internationally *de jure* recognised as Azerbaijan.¹⁰



During the war with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, commentators point to this strong sense of identity and unity as the leverage that helped the militarily weaker and smaller Armenia against Azerbaijan's substantial military equipment and forces. It was also one of the factors that ensured the Armenians certain benefits as part of the Soviet Union. Armenia was one of the few union republics that continued to use its own language, and maintained some traditional elements in architecture and the arts whilst being a regular

10 Armenia occupies 14 (13.62) per cent of Azerbaijan. Tomas de Waal. Black Garden. Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War, page 286.

Soviet republic.¹¹ Secondly, their violent history had dispersed Armenians over a large part of the Soviet territory, including the power corridors of Moscow.¹²

Armenia is a signatory to most international human rights conventions and a member of the United Nations (UN), Council of Europe (CoE) and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). However, the Russian Federation has been Armenia's protective bigger brother for many years, and Armenian officials have been eager to return the favour. Armenia has been part of the Russia-led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) since 1991, and its military offshoot the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) since its creation in 2002. Armenia also applied for observer status in the Russia- and China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in September 2013.¹³

Armenia joined the Council of Europe (CoE) on 25 January 2001 after a process initiated in 1996.¹⁴ Although the main requirements for joining the Council of Europe were not completely fulfilled at that point, the Political Affairs Committee of the Council of Europe recommended they join, and believed that "... Armenian membership of the Council of Europe would reinforce the country's democratic reforms. It would also help to establish a climate of confidence in the region, thus contributing to the peaceful solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict."¹⁵ A decade later, the country is still in conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, and elections have not been deemed completely free and fair. Despite Armenia announcing tolerance as its priority during its chairmanship of the Council of Europe in the second half of 2013, there is still a high level of intolerance in society.

It is believed that there are 12 million Armenians in the world – 2 million in Armenia and 10 million in the diaspora. The Armenian Diaspora still speak Armenian, follow Armenian traditions and maintain their Armenian identity. In fact, they speak the Armenian their grandparents and great-grandparents spoke when they left Anatolia in 1915, and therefore maintain the more archaic Western Armenian language, whereas the Eastern Armenian spoken in Armenia proper has substantial influence from Russian language and culture.¹⁶

11 <http://worldinwords.net/yerevan-armenia-the-most-unsoviet-soviet-city-2/>

12 De Waal, page 6.

13 Armenia seeks observer status in Shanghai Cooperation Organization – PM
<http://news.am/eng/news/170592.html>

14 In order to become a full member of the Council of Europe, Armenia had to sign a number of conventions, agree to pursue efforts to settle the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh by peaceful means, and adapt a number of new laws, including for NGOs and political parties. Since then, Armenia has ratified a number of CoE Conventions and reformed its constitution and domestic laws, and received praise from the international community for its reforms. For the last six months of 2013 Armenia chaired the Council of Europe. For more information on Armenia's accession process, see Natalia Vuotova "The Accession of the Republic of Armenia to the Council of Europe and the Implementation of Its Commitments to the Organisation". http://www.coe.am/en/docs/vuotova_article2.pdf, Jean-Christophe Peuch "Caucasus: Armenia And Azerbaijan Join Council Of Europe" <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1095594.html>, Council of Europe. "Armenia's Membership in the Council of Europe" http://www.coe.am/index.php?cat_id=35&out_lang=eng.

15 <http://assembly.coe.int/ASP/Doc/XrefViewHTML.asp?FileID=8942&Language=en>

16 See f.ex. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_Armenian

A considerable number of Western Armenians settled in and around Los Angeles in the United States, and their relatives today actively engage in lobbying activities to make sure Armenia, and in particular Nagorno-Karabakh, receives development aid from the US government and through a wide spectrum of diaspora organisations. The Armenian diaspora lobby is considered amongst the most influential ethnic lobbying groups in the USA, along with the Cuba and Israel lobbies.¹⁷ Armenian politicians and civil society activists have to take this strong force into consideration in any domestic matter.

The intention behind these diaspora activities is to support Armenia, but many civil society activists in Armenia are critical of their support, calling it a disservice. They say it is not critical enough of the Armenian authorities and it keeps the country dependent on these transfers rather than encouraging and developing economic development in Armenia. Finally, their principled stance on non-engagement with Turkey blocks options that could solve border and trade issues for Armenia.

Today's emigration is mostly related to the poor economic situation and unemployment, and large numbers of Armenians head for Russia and some to Europe in search of work. As with most of the factories across the Soviet Union, Armenia's had to close down in the face of new border regulations, inefficient infrastructure and a lack of competitiveness in the early nineties. In that vulnerable period Armenia also faced an energy crisis, as its Soviet-based gas supply had stopped and the Metsamor nuclear power station had already been closed down. Armenian children had to assist their parents in finding firewood to heat their homes and to cook.

Unemployment and poverty rose as a result. The war over Nagorno-Karabakh and its refugee situation put an additional strain on the Armenian economy. Closed borders with neighbouring countries Azerbaijan, and in particular Turkey, contributed to the economic isolation and made Armenia increasingly dependent on exports and imports with the Russian Federation. Finally, the 2008 world economic crisis hit Armenia particularly hard.¹⁸ Despite continued trade with the Russian Federation and the large number of Armenian businessmen and labour migrants there, the EU is Armenia's main trading partner, counting for 27 per cent of Armenia's total trade.¹⁹ The DCFTA with the EU could have allowed for further economic possibilities for the small country, which has still not fully recovered from the 2008 crisis.

17 See f.ex. Gregg, Heather S.; Divided they conquer: The success of Armenian ethnic lobbies in the US: http://web.mit.edu/cis/www/migration/pubs/rwp/13_divided.html, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armenian_lobby_in_the_United_States

18 According to the Economist, GDP contracted by 14.2% in 2009, the construction sector contracted by more than 40%, diaspora remittances dropped by 30%, around half of the people surveyed stated they were looking for a job and half the population was living under the poverty line. Economist. "Armenia in the vice. Prisoner of history". <http://www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2012/06/armenia-vice>

19 <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/armenia/>

If this multi-vector game of international relations was not complicated enough, Armenia also has to balance gas and energy deals with its southern neighbour Iran against its dependence on good relations with the United States.

Located in the cross-section between the Ottoman Empire, Tsarist Russia and later the Soviet Union, the Persian Empire and the Mongol horde, the small Christian country has had its share of occupation and war, but survived as a state and nation against all odds. Armenians often refer to today's Armenia as being 10 per cent of its original size. The small nation has been through wars over language, faith and territory, genocide, natural disasters and extreme poverty. Despite, or rather because of this, the Armenian language and strong identity remain, and the country is still very much concerned with protecting its people and borders from enemies around it.

In this connection, the recent rapprochement with the EU has been seen to put Armenia at risk by distancing the country from its long-term military ally Russia in case of war. The European values that would necessarily accompany the rapprochement would allow Armenian identity and unity to wither. This view is enforced by the Armenian authorities, which know how to use it to limit criticism. Still, an increasing awakening of civic responsibility is taking shape and expressing itself through actions in Armenia triggered by these last developments.

4. Democratisation at Stake

Recent developments in Armenia have created a sense of increased civil engagement and participation. However, in parallel, the authorities have also increased their efforts to restrict these developments. The current report will assess the democratic situation in Armenia and see to what extent the Armenian authorities are facilitating democratic development and respect for human rights.

The basic definition of democracy is rule by the people. The basic elements of a democracy, as classified by Robert A. Dahl, include *competition, participation and civil and political liberties*.²⁰ Civil and political liberties include “freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom to form and join organisations – sufficient to ensure the integrity of political competition and participation.”²¹

In the report we choose to focus on elections; trust, accountability and transparency; the participation of and role of minorities; and civil society. In the following we will look at how these aspects appear in view of the current developments in Armenia.

4.1 Elections

The NHC has been present at all the last four elections in Armenia since the disputed 2008 presidential election. The goal of our involvement is to strengthen domestic election observation through cooperation between local human rights organisations and international organisations with election expertise. The local organisations observe the whole election period, analyse legislation and observations and are active in the media during the election campaigns and election day.²² Their findings are published locally and internationally during and after elections in cooperation with the NHC and other members of the European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE).²³

20 Georg Sørensen: Democracy and Democratization, page 12.

21 Ibid., page 12.

22 See the websites of Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor <http://hcav.am/en/>, Armenian Helsinki Committee <http://armhels.com/en/>, Civil Society Institute <http://csi.am/>, Armenia Helsinki Association <http://www.hahr.am/index.php/en/>

23 The EPDE was established in December 2012 by NGOs supporting or conducting citizens' election observation from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Germany, Poland, Sweden and Norway (NHC). More information can be found on the website: <http://www.epde.org/> A small ad hoc delegation of representatives from the NHC, European Exchange in Germany, GOLOS in Russia and SILC from Sweden were present and worked together with the local partner Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor as well as the Armenian Helsinki Committee during the 2013 presidential election in Armenia, which was the first in the region to take place after the establishment of the EPDE. The report from this mission can be found online. European Platform for Democratic Elections: EPDE Statement on Presidential Elections in Armenia, 18 February 2013. <http://www.epde.org/newsreader/items/epde-statement-on-presidential-elections-in-armenia-18-february-2013.html>

The Armenian electoral code was revised in 2010 and 2011. These amendments included the provision of a judicial remedy for all electoral disputes, the inclusion of quotas for women in the CEC and CSECs,²⁴ clarification on providing assistance to voters at polling stations, and broadening the definition for what may cause an election to be invalidated.²⁵

In its report the CoE Venice Commission was positive about the various amendments to the law, although it noted that some areas could still benefit from improvement:

- candidacy rights;
- ensuring the separation of state and party structures;
- allocating seats to the Marzes (parliament);
- new voting technologies;
- determining election results;
- the complaints and appeals procedure.²⁶

Legislation is one aspect, implementation another. The Venice Commission concluded in its report that:

Although the new code has the potential to ensure the conduct of democratic elections, legislation alone cannot ensure this. It is the exercise of political will by all stakeholders that remains the key challenge for the conduct of genuinely democratic elections in the Republic of Armenia.²⁷

Although one of the central requirements for accession to the Council of Europe was free and fair elections, only the 1991 election of Levon Ter-Petrossyan as president has so far been deemed free by international observers. However, the re-election of the same candidate in 1996 was disputed because of several violations of electoral law, and criticised for the use of violence against demonstrators in the aftermath. After controversy over the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Ter-Petrossyan was forced to step down in 1998, and the acting Prime Minister Robert Kocharyan was elected president in extraordinary presidential elections that same year.

However, the powerful Defence Minister Vazgen Sargsyan's party won parliamentary elections in 1999, and he became Prime Minister with equally popular Karen Demirchyan as Speaker of Parliament. Kocharyan hoped to influence these two in his campaign on the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement, and they were also more popular and powerful than him in practice. However, after the 27 October 1999 terrorist attack in the Armenian parliament that killed eight people, including Prime Minister Sargsyan and Speaker Demirchyan, the

24 Elections commissions

25 European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) and OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ ODIHR). Joint final opinion on the electoral code of Armenia, page 18.

26 *Ibid.*, page 3.

27 *Ibid.*, page 19.

peace process ground to a halt and Kocharyan emerged as the only man in power.²⁸ The perpetrators were arrested and sentenced, but the criminal case is still open, as it has not been determined whether they acted on their own or on someone's orders.

Kocharyan was re-elected in round two of yet another round of a disputed presidential election in March 2003. The incumbent President had thus been in office for two consecutive terms, and was prohibited by law to run for another term in the 2008 election. However, after taking great advantage of government resources in his campaign, the then-Prime Minister Serge Sargsyan had little trouble taking over the post of President from his party colleague.

However, by this point the "First President" Levon Ter-Petrosyan had returned to the political playing field and campaigned enthusiastically for president. After the announcement that Sargsyan had received more than 50 per cent of the votes in the first round of the election and a second round was deemed unnecessary, Ter-Petrosyan initiated a sit-down demonstration with his equally disappointed followers in Yerevan's Liberty Square. He said it would be peaceful for the time being, but promised to "fight till the end". The authorities' reaction to this protest was criticised locally and internationally, but Ter-Petrosyan also failed to answer the needs of his own followers.

When Levon Ter-Petrosyan stood in the Yerevan City Council of the Elderly elections in 2009 and again failed to make any difference, the disappointment in the population was noticeable. One young activist put it like this:

The problem with Armenia is that everything is too open in that there is no direct repression as in other countries in the region, and we have too many possibilities. Every time there are demonstrations or elections I have a small hope that something will change, and then I am disappointed again and again.

28 De Waal, pp 265-266.



Parliamentary election, May 2012

Since May 2012, Armenia has held parliamentary, presidential and Yerevan City Council of the Elderly elections. Marred by systematic vote-buying and intimidation of voters, inadequate opposition coordination and media coverage, voters' lists with numbers higher than the adult population currently residing in Armenia and an all-encompassing distrust of the democratic system, the ruling Republican Party has secured all major power positions in the country. This includes a majority in parliament, the President, a majority in the Yerevan City Council of the Elderly, and the Mayor of Yerevan, the capital where approximately two-thirds of the population live.

The largest opposition parties, Prosperous Armenia and the Armenian National Congress, failed to make adequate use of the presidential campaign in 2013 and decided not to put forward any candidates. However, they also failed to give a clear message to the electorate, as they did not announce a boycott or give any other advice to their supporters. An advisor to one of the lesser-known candidates pointed out that regardless of the reason why the largest parties in the country decided not to participate, this does demonstrate a significant lack of confidence in the electoral system in Armenia even amongst the politicians themselves.

The Republican Party and most observers were taken by surprise when the Armenian people actually went to the polls with a clear intent to show their discontent with the current government. The only genuine opposition candidate, Raffi Hovhannisyanyan from the Heritage Party, got an overwhelming 30 per cent of the vote and actually won in

Armenia's second-largest city, Gyumri. His subsequent campaign to appeal the results did not end in any revolution, though, and again disappointed many of his followers and those who hoped for immediate change.

For the Yerevan City Council of the Elderly elections in May 2013, all the opposition parties ran, and put forward candidates for the position of Mayor. Nonetheless, again the well-organised system of vote-buying, carousel voting and intensive pressure from employers or superiors prevailed, and the Republican Party got 60 per cent of the vote in Yerevan, followed by Prosperous Armenia and the Barev Yerevan bloc fronted by Raffi Hovhannisyán. No other parties made it past the threshold.

Armenian law allows for domestic election observation, and the Armenian Helsinki Committee, a partner of the NHC, covered the Davitashen region of Yerevan. They reported widespread abuse of the domestic monitoring provision. On several occasions the observers would notify Republican Party proxies that they were not allowed to have two people from one party in the same polling station at the same time, upon which one of them would take off his proxy badge and swap it with an observer badge from another pocket. Similarly, when asked which monitoring organisation an alleged NGO observer was from, the answer would be "Prosperous Armenia", a party.²⁹

Several observers noted groups of men outside the polling stations with lists, and distribution of cash as well as bussing of voters. Many polling stations were overcrowded and chaotic during voting, and also the vote count was chaotic and irregular in several polling stations, with peculiar fluctuations in the number of votes for the ruling party as time went by. As Transparency International pointed out, in polling stations where there was over 50 per cent turnout, the result was approximately 60 per cent for Sargsyan and 30 per cent for Hovhannisyán. Where the turnout was smaller, the opposite was the case.³⁰

Despite the violations observed on election day, the main problems with Armenian elections are coordination taking place in advance and a complete lack of trust in the system. A quite complex system of vote-buying and intimidation is activated before elections. Here, regional politicians delegate responsibility for certain election results to head teachers and hospital directors, who intimidate their staff to vote for a certain candidate. Heads of districts delegate responsibility for the collection of signatures in advance of election day, as well as the transportation of signatories and the distribution of cash to them on election day.

29 Election report from Armenian Helsinki Committee, in Armenian:
http://armhels.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Report-Avagani-HCA_kayq.pdf.

A joint statement in English: http://armhels.com/en/publication_category/elections-monitoring/

30 Transparency International Armenia Statistical analysis: <http://elections.transparency.am/2013/index.php>,
http://electionscount.info/2013/kusak_gr-en.php?tk=50

Further, there is no adequate voters' education, candidates and parties fail to introduce concrete platforms to the electorate, and the media does not make adequate use of the opportunities and responsibilities they have to support people in making an informed choice. People expect a bribe for their vote, and independently of whether they vote for the party they received the bribe from or not, the practice illustrates a deep-rooted distrust of the system. Finally, due to poverty and unemployment, a large proportion of the population are working abroad, but the number of voters on the voters' lists is peculiarly high. This opens the way for wide abuse of absentee voting.

Raffi Hovhannisyanyan's participation and performance in both the last presidential and mayoral elections has received substantial criticism. However, his method of campaigning and contact with the electorate aroused a sense of political interest in the people and the opposition. Many people joined his protest campaign after the elections. Hovhannisyanyan has been criticised for being too accommodating in his negotiations with President Sargsyan, and not making the most of the opportunity to go for change when the crowd was ready. However, as Mamikon Hovsepyan from the NGO PINK pointed out, the crowd was there, and ready for change, but as Hovhannisyanyan did not fill the expected role as leader, they did not follow him blindly. This shows an increase in maturity in the Armenian electorate which is quite new and promising, Hovsepyan emphasised.³¹

Regardless of the efforts by Raffi Hovhannisyanyan and the Armenian National Congress in connection with the elections, they have not given Armenians any prospective leader who advocates EU-rapprochement. Levon Ter-Petrossyan is himself Russia-friendly due to his past engagement in the Nagorno-Karabakh war, and Raffi Hovhannisyanyan looks more to the conservative values of the US diaspora, where he has strong links. As described above, there is no adequate discussion around the basic consequences connected with either direction in public, and none of the opposition politicians have publicly stated their support for one or the other agreement.

The activist Tsovinar Nazaryan draws a comparison with recent events in Ukraine:

Ukraine has passed through a couple of years of a relatively free, at least, contesting, environment of parties and the media. Armenia has not. Furthermore, in Ukraine there are political parties advocating for European integration. In Armenia, the main political opposition, the Armenian National Congress (ANC), which is now minor, is also pro-Russian. Heritage, the second-largest opposition party (also in parliament) seems more pro-western, but its leader does not react to these new challenges, and is not taken seriously any more.

A growing number of civil society representatives see a need for the long-term establishment of a voters' culture rather than following the last-minute campaigning and

31 NHC interview with M. Hovsepyan in Oslo, November 2013.

personality cult of the candidates, and this is a promising trend. Many Armenians showed in particular during the presidential elections that they do see the inadequacies of the current system, and objected in the way they could by making their ballots invalid. One voter even ate his ballot in protest.³²

A new initiative was launched in December 2013 – the Civil Contract, headed by former editor and ANC member Nikol Pashinyan and consisting of a board of young activists and experienced war veteran and politician Sasun Mikaelyan. At the launch, Pashinyan told the press the aim is to “see to it that Serzh Sargsyan and his team are not in power and that power in Armenia belongs to a political team that has won a popular mandate in free, fair and transparent elections.”³³ They promise to work hard towards this goal and the initiative has already received some praise in the media. It remains to be seen to what extent this new initiative will gain ground in the Armenian population, although Pashinyan has been held in quite high esteem since his participation in the 2008 demonstrations and his time in prison afterwards.

On the other hand, the OSCE/ODIHR, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), the EU and the European Parliament (EP) struggle with their reputation. The process around the EU DCFTA was undemocratic. On several occasions the Armenian people have felt that international observers have demonstrated double standards in their assessment of elections in Armenia. The criticism is that the electoral rights of Armenians suffer as European institutions try to create the impression that Armenia is on the “right track to fulfil its obligations”³⁴, leading to EU DCFTA negotiations and potential business opportunities for the members of the European Parliament and PACE.



Picket outside OSCE Office in Yerevan after presidential election 2008.

32 <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66572>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=061faCdi0MY>

33 <http://www.azatutyun.am/content/article/25195049.html>

34 Joint ODIHR/PACE/EP press conference 19.02.2013.

<http://www.assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/News/News-View-EN.asp?newsid=4331&lang=2&cat=31>

4.2 Corruption, Transparency and Accountability

According to the Council of Europe's Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation, a constructive relationship between NGOs and public authorities in an open and democratic society "is based on honest interaction between actors and sectors." Further, "acting in the public interest requires openness, responsibility, clarity and accountability from both the NGOs and public authorities, with transparency at all stages."³⁵

Corruption, in which powerful people engage in illegal or dishonest behaviour, will weaken a liberal democracy and lead to distrust of the system. Like many other former Soviet countries, Armenia struggles with widespread corruption, nepotism and cronyism. According to the latest report by Policy Forum Armenia, Armenia lags behind in its overall anti-corruption legal framework.³⁶ Transparency International paints an equally negative picture: "Corruption in Armenia is endemic and widespread, permeating all levels of society."³⁷

Corruption at such a high level is bound to be connected with international agreements, trade and transfers, and the Armenian population is well aware of this. The names of the former Prosecutor General, various ministers, judges and even the Prime Minister are frequently mentioned in this context. The large transfers originating from the Armenian Diaspora in the United States offer a large opportunity for kickbacks for the civil servants involved. Similarly, it is well known that oligarchs distribute monopolies between themselves and benefit from various trade agreements.³⁸

In this context praise from international election observers is seen as part of a game to create lucrative business deals between foreign members of parliament and Armenian politicians and oligarchs, and it is believed that all the observers, including ODIHR's, take bribes to make these positive assessments.

Understandably, this situation of blatant corruption combined with a lack of trust in international as well as local institutions has led to an atmosphere of resignation in the people and an attitude that nothing helps; one is better off focusing on oneself and one's closest family. According to Transparency International, "the governance deficiencies of Armenia are made worse by and, at the same time, feed a pervasive political apathy and cynicism on the part of citizens, who do not see an impactful role for themselves in the fight against corruption."³⁹

35 Council of Europe Code of Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation

36 Policy Forum Armenia (October 2013): Corruption in Armenia.

37 Sofia Wickberg, Transparency International, Overview of Corruption and Anti-corruption in Armenia, page 1.

38 <http://www.business-anti-corruption.com/country-profiles/europe-central-asia/armenia/show-all.aspx>

39 Ibid., page 1.

The European Bank of Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) measures the impact of economic crisis on people's lives in the transition countries where they work.⁴⁰ The *Life in Transition* survey from 2011 demonstrates that Armenia ranks at the bottom of indexes illustrating satisfaction and trust. Only 22 per cent of those surveyed were satisfied with life in 2010 – two per cent lower than in 2006 and 20 per cent lower than the average in the transition region. Optimism about a better future has fallen by 10 per cent since 2006. And finally, the level of trust in others is down to eight per cent from 20 per cent in 2006.⁴¹

In addition to direct disappointment with the state's handling of the 2008 economic crisis, much of this lack of trust is related to the disputed 2008 presidential elections and the events of 1 March 2008 as described below. State violence and the abuse of the courts against demonstrators have not been addressed adequately by the authorities, and a certain climate of fear in connection with demonstrations still exists.⁴²

After the 2008 elections, the country's first president and runner-up that year Levon Ter-Petrosyan from the opposition Armenian National Congress arranged for a sit-in in the central Liberty Square. Although state media portrayed the demonstration as a chaotic gathering of drug addicts and alcoholics, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee found the participants to be of sound mind and confident about change. That is, as confident as one can be during political activity in Armenia. One of them said: "I know that LTP⁴³ is not a better person and that there will still be corruption, but at least there will be corruption for another group of people..."⁴⁴

The demonstrators remained until the early morning of 1 March 2008, when police forces entered the square with truncheons and weapons for what they called an inspection. The NHC was present and witnessed police officers with blood-covered sleeves holding home-made wooden four-angled truncheons, also covered in blood, telling bystanders to move on. Special police forces arrived and started beating the people present, including in the vicinity of members of the NHC, who also were forced to run. Later in the day the crowd moved to another part of town, and grew in size as more people joined despite restrictions on movement all over the country. Large police and military forces were gathered in the centre of Yerevan, and towards the evening people started arming themselves with whatever they had available.

40 The Transition countries are according to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development: Central, South-Eastern and Eastern Europe, Baltic States, the Caucasus and Central Asia.
<http://www.ebrd.com/pages/research/publications/special/transitionII.shtml>

41 European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. *Life in Transition Survey. Armenia*.
http://www.ebrd.com/pages/research/publications/special/armenia_lits2.shtml

42 The NHC was present in Armenia during these events and the reports can be found online:
http://www.nhc.no/no/land_og_regioner/europa/armenia/

43 Initials of Levon Ter-Petrosyan

44 NHC interview with male demonstrator, Liberty Square, Yerevan, 22 February 2008



Tanks in the streets during state of emergency in Yerevan, March 2008.

The following morning the citizens of Yerevan awoke to streets covered in burned-out vehicles, looted stores and the news that eight people had died – later revised to 10. A state of emergency was initiated until 21 March, and armed personnel carriers patrolled major crossroads in Yerevan. A total of 127 individuals were arrested in connection with their participation in the violent demonstrations of 1 March. Later an additional 106 people were arrested and charged with participation in the events. The OSCE/ODIHR monitored 93 criminal cases with 109 defendants and concluded in their final Trial Monitoring Report that there were substantial shortcomings in that the “Armenian authorities could have invested more efforts to ensure [the trials’] fair and impartial adjudication” and that “In cases where police witnesses are the only witnesses to testify, and their testimony is of decisive nature, the defence should be given sufficient opportunities to examine them in court. In the absence of such examination, the court may not rely on their written testimony.”⁴⁵

Although all the people arrested and sentenced during this period were later released, the Armenian public is not convinced that they have been given all the necessary answers. The circumstances surrounding the deaths remain unexplained, the perpetrators have

45 OSCE/ODIHR trial monitoring project Armenia final report: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/41695>

not been identified, the command responsibility has not been investigated, and no compensation has been provided to the victims' relatives.⁴⁶ The criminal case remains open. Artur Sakunts and the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly are among the organisations that have tried to formally follow up on the case, without any success:

We can state that so far there have been no real actions taken to reveal and hold accountable those officials who ordered the police and military detachments to use excessive force and arbitrary detention against peaceful protesters, and who failed to instigate criminal cases against the perpetrators of the violence in Yerevan on 1 March 2008.

Similarly, the criminal case on the 27 October 1999 parliament shooting has still not been closed, and theories as to who commissioned the shootings and how the judicial system has failed to establish responsibility flourish. The lack of closure on these two issues contributes to the lack of confidence and trust in state institutions in Armenia.

In a democracy, a free press is pivotal in ensuring democracy and checks on the other powers. It also provides the population with the information necessary to take informed decisions and to uncover abuses of power, corruption and so forth. Although Armenia's media is relatively free compared to other states in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS),⁴⁷ Freedom House states in its 2013 report that press freedom is restricted in Armenia.⁴⁸

There are few cases of physical violence against journalists and editors and no official censorship, but increasingly incidents do occur.⁴⁹ Also, due to very strong public opinion on certain topics, oligarch financing of media outlets and a period of extensive use of defamation lawsuits, self-censorship is common. Libel was decriminalised in Armenia in May 2010. However, whereas the provision in the Criminal Code was dormant, the administrative provision was implemented frequently for a period after decriminalisation. The fines were disproportionately high, and often put the media institution in question out of action for a substantial period of time.

Consequently the lack of political restrictions does not rule out financial or societal restrictions. Whereas certain politicians and government representatives can be criticised in the media, investigative cases about economic actors are less likely to be published. The media are dependent on funding from advertising, and this leverage is crucial for

46 Joint mid-term statement on Armenia's obligations to the UPR:
http://nhc.no/no/nyheter/Armenia+urged+to+implement+UPR+commitments+and+recommendations.b7C_wlfQ0_ips

47 See Freedom House's 2013 Freedom of the Press Data:
<http://www.freedomhouse.org/regions/central-and-eastern-europeeurasia>

48 Freedom House: Freedom of the Press 2013. Armenia.
<http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2013/armenia>

49 <http://hcav.am/en/publications/situation-of-human-rights-defenders-in-armenia/>,
<http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/armenia>

oligarchs in Armenia. The link between financial and political actors is obvious, and clearly limits the media sphere.

The internet is not subject to blockages of websites or state control, and a range of independent newspapers and media outlets operate freely online and in print. However, TV is the most common source of information for most citizens, and this field is controlled by the state and the oligarchs. The Republic of Armenia Public Broadcaster does not ensure pluralism and does not allocate adequate air time to the opinions of political and civil activists. On the contrary, it is known to engage in negative campaigning about activists and members of the opposition.

The most well-known case in terms of media freedom in Armenia over the last few years is the ban on the independent TV channel A1plus, which has not been allowed to broadcast since 2002. This despite a 2008 ruling in the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) that they should be allowed to participate in the tender for TV broadcasting and be paid compensation.⁵⁰ Today A1plus broadcasts online and in a 20-minute slot as part of Armnews' TV broadcast.

The media in Armenia suffers a great deal from its own limitations, and the government risks little in allowing a more or less open field. Many say a fundamental challenge for freedom of speech is the lack of well-qualified journalists in the country. The wide range of web-based media outlets creates a high demand for journalists, who focus their work merely on being first with the news. In addition, journalism education has some shortcomings. The editor of A1plus, Mesrop Movsesyan, puts it bluntly⁵¹:

In Armenia we do not educate journalists, we educate stenographers. There is no training in analysis and critical questions; the main issue is to be the first to publish what was said at a press conference. There is no time for critical follow-up questions or deeper understanding of the circumstances. We have had vacancies here at A1plus for many months, and I have candidates for interview, but they are not good enough, to be honest. They have no understanding or interest in political or social issues, and can easily go to another media outlet that can pay them more than I can for less complicated work.

Media Kentron (Media Centre) is a fairly new institution created in connection with the election cycle of 2012/13. The centre has streamed debates on a wide range of issues, from political debates to human rights and social issues. They do see some positive trends in the media sphere, in that multimedia creates more possibilities for civic journalism. Twitter, Facebook, taking photos of incidents and sharing them online, live streaming and other electronic options do provide for a wider range of access to information for those

50 European Court of Human Rights: *Meltex and Mesrop Movsesyan v Armenia*.
<http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/sites/eng/pages/search.aspx?i=001-87003>

51 Interview with Mesrop Movsesyan A1plus, Yerevan, Armenia, May 2013.

who are interested. However, the slow internet speed in most parts of Armenia and a lack of interest in politics still leaves TV the most common choice for information for most Armenians.

4.3 Minorities and Gender

In addition to the distrust and a certain climate of fear, an additional climate of shame is prevalent, in which large parts of the population see participation in unconventional demonstrations and discussions as treason, or shameful – *Amot*⁵². The safety and security of Armenia is seen to depend on strong Armenian unity, from which it is very uncomfortable and sometimes even dangerous to deviate. Even high-ranking political figures use derogatory language and encourage discrimination against people who deviate from the set norms.

In the absence of procedural or legislative restrictions on civil society activities so common elsewhere in the region, societal condemnation is a highly effective tool. As has been described above, Armenia is a small and tightly-knit nation, where appearances and image is important. Like the self-censorship in the media, the expansion and flourishing of civil society activism regulates itself in terms of keeping within the set boundaries of what is shameful and what is not.



Men at demonstration,
1 March 2008.

52 The Armenian word for shame, *amot*, is frequently in use about people who act outside the set norms. See f.ex. Garbis, Christian (8 December 2013). Armenia's "Amot eh" Complex – Living in Shame. Hetq. Retrieved from <http://hetq.am/eng/opinion/31266/armenias-amot-eh-complex---living-in-shame.html>

Nationwide demonstrations in support of genocide recognition, against Azerbaijan or anything related – be it the transfer and release of sentenced axe murderer Safarov from Hungary to Azerbaijan⁵³ or the construction of monuments to Heydar Aliev in Mexico – are acceptable within the limits. Diversity marches that advocate equal rights for all members of the community are not accepted in a similar way, including by opposition politicians who merely protest against the acting government and fail to have a principled programme.

“NGOs collect and channel views of their members, user groups and concerned citizens”, according to the Council of Europe’s Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process. The document also states that “this input provides crucial value to the political decision-making process, enhancing the quality, understanding and longer term applicability of the policy initiative. A pre-condition for this principle is that the processes for participation are open, accessible, based on agreed parameters for participation.”⁵⁴ In Armenia, minorities’ and women’s representation in politics and civil society is very low.

As mentioned earlier, Armenian identity is closely related to war, faith and survival. In this regard, an Armenian male who is Christian, able and willing to reproduce and ready to defend his homeland is the ideal Armenian. He needs a supportive wife and mother of his children and subordinate soldiers. Many minorities are perceived not to fit into this image, and we will look at some of them: the sexual minorities, religious minorities, national minorities and women.

Sexual Minorities

Armenia is a society with strong social control, and being different, in clothing, style or behaviour, is easily frowned upon. This societal morality also frowns upon kissing in public, expects a girl to be a virgin on her wedding day, and makes sexuality, in particular female sexuality, something hidden, unknown and shameful.⁵⁵ Lesbians, Gay, Bisexual and Trans (LGBT) people do not fit into these set boundaries, and the combination of homosexuality and sexuality creates an image of something exceptionally unknown and threatening.

Lesbians are perceived to break with the ideal of an Armenian wife and mother, whereas gay men break with the stereotype of the macho Armenian man who is ready to fight and is the head of a large family. Neither of them is likely to have many children that will sustain the Armenian nation and army. Such opinions are commonplace in Armenia and

53 See f.ex. New York Times. A Hero’s Welcome for a Convicted Killer Reignites Tensions. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/05/world/europe/pardon-reignites-azerbaijan-armenia-tensions.html?_r=0; BBC News. Armenians hold anti-Hungary rally over Azeri killer pardon. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-19450438>

54 Council of Europe: Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process

55 See for example <http://www.armenianweekly.com/2010/03/07/aharonian-nationalism-and-sex/>

even recited in the media or by government representatives, or expressed directly on the streets. In some cases they incite and result in violence.

On 8 May 2012, two men were videotaped as they fire-bombed the DIY Rock Pub in Yerevan, known as a gay bar. Luckily no one was harmed. At a later stage, when the place had been cleared up, someone returned and painted swastikas on the façade of the bar. The two men were identified and arrested, but one of them was later bailed out by a Member of Parliament from the nationalist party ARF.⁵⁶ The young guys "...acted the right way, in the context of our societal and national ideals," the MP said.⁵⁷

In the discussion that followed, even Deputy Speaker of parliament and Republican Party spokesperson Eduard Sharmazanov said that all those who "attempt to protect degenerate faggots in our society defile the national portrait of us Armenians" and that the action was "completely right and justified." He continued by saying that the youth who carried out the misdeeds were showing their Armenian roots by reacting against homosexuals "who have created a den of perversion in our country and have the goal of alienating society from its moral values."⁵⁸

Similar reactions occurred in Armenia when a peaceful march celebrating the World Day for Cultural Diversity was organised in the capital on 21 May 2012. The participants had prepared posters on ethnic, racial and cultural diversity, as well as varieties in Armenian nature. The scarce number of attendees was soon met by a larger group of counter demonstrators, angry young men shouting obscene words and appearing threatening towards the participants by pushing and shouting.

The police were present, but did not intervene in a professional way, leaving many of the participants in the march feeling insecure and eventually having to seek refuge in a nearby gallery and escape through the back entrance as the police no longer seemed intent on protecting them. The crowd included young men who were shouting to passers-by that they should protect their kids from these gays. Priests from the Armenian Church were also among the counter demonstrators. The focus of the march was deliberately turned from diversity to homosexuality by the counter demonstrators, whose rumours about a Gay Pride Parade taking place escalated the situation and contributed to the further complication of work towards more tolerance and diversity in the conservative country.⁵⁹

One year after these incidents, Armenia still suffers from widespread intolerance and discrimination of minorities. The lawyer Lusine Ghazaryan is engaged in the legal process of the DIY bar case, and emphasised during a round table in May 2013 that what

56 Armenian Revolutionary Federation Dashnaktutyun, Artsvik Minasyan.

57 http://pinkarmenia.blogspot.no/2012_05_01_archive.html

58 See for example <http://www.epress.am/en/2013/10/09/armenian-mp-against-racism-xenophobia-a-year-ago-he-justified-hate-crime.html>

59 See f.ex. <http://www.boell.de/en/2013/07/11/armenia-closed-society>

happened was a hate crime. The act was aimed at destroying not only property, but at intimidating and threatening the owner of the pub as well as the safety of her supporters. “However, the criminals were charged under Article 185 of the criminal code, which does not include hate crimes,” said Ghazaryan, referring to the fact that Armenian legislation has no provision on intent. She also underlined that this case, where an appeal has been submitted after a loss in the first instance, might be of great strategic importance in this regard when it reaches the European Court of Human Rights. It could possibly bring about significant positive changes in Armenian legislation – in particular to include intent.⁶⁰

Recently, in a surprising occurrence during two recent marches, the first against the Customs Union on 2 December 2013, and the second during a march on International Human Rights Day 10 December 2013, a rainbow flag was carried in the procession next to anarchy flags and other posters.⁶¹ Taking into consideration the attitude against LGBT people amongst the majority of Armenians, including those who might take to the streets in demonstrations, this was a rare development that illustrates another feature of maturity in Armenian civic activism. According to activists and bloggers, these two incidents were unprecedented in Armenia. The second occasion only provoked one small discussion which did not escalate, even if a female war veteran had supporters as well as opponents in a discussion with activist Lala Aslikyan holding the rainbow flag, which took place in the middle of the demonstration.⁶²

Religious Minorities

The Armenian Apostolic Church has played a central role in the Armenian nation since Christianity was adopted as the state religion in year 301. The distinctive Armenian alphabet was developed by an Armenian-Apostolic monk in 406, and led to an influx of Armenian literature, in particular related to the Armenian-Apostolic Church. The small Armenian nation was also surrounded by hordes and empires of other faiths, in particular Muslims, and had to defend itself against several attacks. The killings in the Ottoman Empire were carried out by Muslims, and the latest war over Nagorno-Karabakh was also against largely Muslim Azerbaijan. Armenian-Apostolic Armenians had to fight to defend their nation and faith, and with several of these conflicts still unresolved, this feeling remains strong.⁶³

In Armenia today, as much as 94.7 per cent⁶⁴ of the population is Armenian Apostolic. Four per cent belong to other Christian faiths, and Yezidi Kurds comprise 1.3 per cent. The other Christian faiths are mainly Russian Orthodox who still live in Armenia. Traditionally

60 http://www.nhc.no/no/nyheter/Hate+culture+prevails+one+year+after+violent+attacks.b7C_wlfU07.ips

61 The rainbow flag is a symbol of LGBT pride and movements.

62 <http://gayarmenia.blogspot.no/>

63 Meri Yerosyan, Vahan Ishkhanyan & Avetik Ishkhanyan (2010). Freedom of Religion in Armenia.

64 Central Intelligence Agency. The World Factbook. Armenia.

Molokans⁶⁵ have made up a small part of this group, and recently more charismatic churches, some Mormon missionaries and Jehovah's Witnesses. Molokan believers mainly keep to themselves in more remote, traditional villages and are pacifists, as are Jehovah's Witnesses. With their refusal to serve in the army they contradict the basic image of the Armenian soldier prepared to take up arms to protect his nation, and several have served long prison sentences.⁶⁶

In addition to the imprisonment of Jehovah's Witnesses who refuse to serve in the army, the media contributes to the negative impression of them in Armenian society. In several news items Jehovah's Witnesses are accused of murder in their families, or called a sect that is dangerous to the family. In a survey carried out by the Armenian Helsinki Committee, non-Apostolic religious organisations were covered in a negative manner in a third of the articles surveyed.⁶⁷

After several rulings in the European Court of Human Rights⁶⁸ and criticism from the international community, legislative changes were adopted in June 2013. A new commission is in place to review applications for alternative service, and started its proceedings in October 2013. Despite minor issues with the new law, such that the civilian service lasts for three years compared with two years of regular army service, there is hope that the changes will improve the situation for conscientious objectors, and that this will eventually also improve society's perception of these religious minorities who happen to be pacifists, and others.

National Minorities

In addition to being a religiously homogenous country, Armenia is also very close to being a pure nation state. An overwhelming 97.9 per cent are Armenians, and in addition to the half percent Russians, the 1.3 per cent Yezidi Kurds make up the largest minority.⁶⁹ The Kurds have lived in the border areas between Armenia, Turkey, Iran and Syria for centuries, and inhabit mainly a number of villages in the western part of Armenia. Kurds were known both to support and attack the Armenians in 1915, and so Yezidis in Armenia today disagree amongst themselves about whether they are better off naming themselves Yezidi Kurds or only Yezidi to avoid bad historical connotations.

65 Molokans are a Christian group who split from the Russian Orthodox Church in the late 16th century and were exiled in the 19th century to remote regions of the Russian Empire, like Armenia. <http://www.rferl.org/media/photogallery/village-armenia-molokans-christians/24974599.html>

66 There has been one Molokan conscientious objector imprisoned in Armenia, and several hundred from Jehovah's Witnesses, reports Forum18. Today, no Jehovah's Witnesses are imprisoned for conscientious objection for the first time since 1993, but a number of young men who have applied for alternative service under the new law have been without their passports in the period while the authorities are considering their application, and there are reports that some of the applications have been lost. See f.ex. Felix Corley: ARMENIA: "Jailed conscientious objectors freed – but alternative service applications missing?" http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1901

67 Meri Yeranosyan, Vahan Ishkhanyan & Avetik Ishkhanyan. Freedom of Religion in Armenia, page 28.

68 See e.g. Khachatryan and others v Armenia: <http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/sites/eng/pages/search.aspx?i=001-114785>

69 CIA World Factbook

In many ways they enjoy religious freedom and have no direct conflicts with the majority society. However, many children do not go to school, and the villages have challenges with water, gas and basic infrastructure.⁷⁰ In summer 2013, a relative of an MP was accused of violating Yezidi graves when he was expanding his winery.⁷¹ Apart from the Sinjar Yezidi National Union, there is hardly any representation or mention of them in public life, and little discussion around these challenges.

Some comments in public are of a derogatory character, and in December 2013 a Sinjar Union activist appeared in the Armenian parliament with toilet paper and a photo of a donkey to ask Member of Parliament (MP) Manvel Badeyan from the ruling Republican Party to clean his mouth. During a session in parliament the MP had responded to a question by a journalist by referring to Yezidis: “If this question was asked by some Yezidi on the street I wouldn’t be surprised, but do you as a journalist really think like that?”⁷² According to the Sinjar Yezidi National Union, the MP later apologised to the Yezidis, and said that he will gladly deal with “smart journalists” in the future, while he won’t speak to “fools”.⁷³

Gender Equality

Another marginalised group, though not a minority, are women. Armenian women are traditionally strong matriarchs who take good care of their family and household as well as working outside the home. The mother is highly respected in Armenia, but this requires that she has obtained a certain age, and maintains the role of mother at home.

Armenian women work outside the home, but continue to carry the main responsibility for the household and family. An Armenian girl can thus take higher education and work, but the main goal and achievement in life should be a family. The bride-to-be is expected to be a virgin, and if she marries the youngest son of the household she should move in with the in-laws and assist them.

Domestic violence is common, with one in four women victims of this at the hands of their husbands or even mother-in-laws, and a surprisingly large number of both men and women in Armenia find this to be perfectly acceptable. A draft law that would prohibit the practice was last rejected in January 2013.⁷⁴

Women and girls who aim for a higher education, a career, and are not planning to marry early are subject to scrutiny from society, as are organisations and individuals that fight for equal rights. Sex-specific abortions and gendercide are also common in Armenia and

70 <http://www.epress.am/en/2011/09/05/poverty-education-ethnic-identification-main-concerns-for-armenias-yezidis-yovanovitch.html>

71 http://www.armenianow.com/society/51344/yezidis_cemetery_armenia_sinjar

72 <http://www.epress.am/en/2013/12/10/armenia-yezidi-group-delivers-toilet-paper-to-mp-for-racist-remarks.html>

73 <http://www.epress.am/en/2013/12/13/mp-who-offended-journalists-is-confident-he-wont-be-punished.html>

74 Domestic Violence Survey in the Republic of Armenia <http://www.osce.org/yerevan/88229> Armenia: Domestic Violence Taking High Toll <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66484>

illustrate the role of women in Armenian society.⁷⁵ The situation is improving in Yerevan, but many of the traditional perceptions remain throughout the country.

The intentional confusion of terms described in connection with the diversity-turned-homosexuality march above also influenced the recent debate on a new draft law on gender equality in Armenia. The new law on gender is called “On Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Men and Women” and follows an array of similar draft laws, concepts and the signing of international conventions on women’s rights.

However, in the debate that followed the adoption of the law in 2013, the definition of the term “gender” as “acquired, socially fixed behaviour of different sexes” was deliberately twisted to imply “homosexuality”, thereby causing a great deal of controversy in conservative Armenia. MPs, religious leaders and citizens opposed the law, which they allegedly fear will destroy traditional values and national identity. Some also see the controversy in the context of the discussions on the agreements with Russia and the EU as part of a campaign to move Armenia closer to Russia and away from Europe and the “European values” of gender equality and LGBT rights.⁷⁶

Following the heated debate around the law, the Women’s Resource Centre received threats and was forced to take measures to protect itself. A group of Armenian NGOs wrote a statement reminding Armenia of its international obligations in the field.⁷⁷ Some NGO representatives find that the authorities deliberately encourage such skirmishes in order to set the NGOs up against each other and keep them preoccupied with other issues, for example during the negotiations with Russia and the EU.

4.4 Civil Society

In a democratic society, civil society plays a central role in safeguarding the rights of citizens. Civil society representatives should act as a filter between the authorities and the people, in the sense that they have contact with both groups, have particular knowledge of certain topics, and have the know-how to make recommendations to decision-makers. Civil society is a resource when a parliament is discussing draft laws, and when procedures and established practices fail to meet expected goals and should be evaluated. Civil society actors should be within reach by the people as well as the authorities, and contribute actively and positively to discussions in society.

75 The Economist (September 21, 2013). Gendercide in the Caucasus. <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21586617-son-preference-once-suppressed-reviving-alarmingly-gendercide-caucasus>

76 For a good overview of the development, see: <http://www.armenianweekly.com/2013/09/20/the-gender-equality-law-hysteria-in-armenia/> or Grigoryan, Marianna (15 October 2013). Armenia’s Fight against Gender Equality Morphs into Fight Against EU. Inter Press Service. Retrieved from <http://www.ipsnews.net/2013/10/armenias-fight-against-gender-equality-morphs-into-fight-against-eu/>

77 http://www.pinkarmenia.org/en/2013/08/wrca/?fb_action_ids=10151708070654272&fb_action_types=og.likes&fb_ref=UiA-gAf93bk.like&fb_source=aggregation&fb_aggregation_id=288381481237582

The Council of Europe's "Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process" offers a range of good practices when it comes to cooperation between civil society and decision-makers. According to the code, a constructive relationship between NGOs and public authorities is based on principles like participation, trust, accountability and transparency and independence.⁷⁸

Activism and social movements in Armenia are not a new phenomenon, but intensified just before and after independence and concerned mainly participation in the processes to release Armenia from the USSR and Nagorno-Karabakh from the Azeri Soviet Socialist Republic. Armenians took to the streets in large numbers to participate in these demonstrations. Similarly, a large number of Armenians participate in the commemoration of the Armenian genocide and the anniversary of the Sumgait events every year.⁷⁹ Some activists suspect the authorities have been keeping people preoccupied with the genocide issue in order to prevent social revolution, blaming Turkey for Armenia's isolation and poor economy.

These demonstrations continue even today, but are all organised by the authorities and aimed at strengthening Armenian unity. Civil society activists who advocate other values, in particular the rights of minorities and alternative thinking, do not receive the same support in society. But, most importantly, people do not think they can make any difference.

Now, despite a small surge in activism surrounding an increase in public minibus fares, people are back to just thinking that it's not worth it, and the authorities do not even bother to try to distract people through genocide marches any more. They focus on their own profit and that's it.

Artsvi Bakhchinyan, civic activist.

Civil society in Armenia has traditionally not been subject to the restrictions that have become so common in the other countries in the region. Legislation and procedures allow for genuine activity in civil society. Creating and registering an association in Armenia is not a great challenge and there are more than 3,000 NGOs registered in Armenia, although most of them are not very active or just a front for other activities, mainly corruption.⁸⁰ Some NGOs cooperate and advocate directly with the appropriate government representatives, some campaign through media and letters, other organise public demonstrations and actions. But this is mostly the choice of the civil society actors themselves. A number of Diaspora organisations also run programmes and activities in Armenia.

78 Council of Europe. Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process

79 De Waal, Black Garden page 40. Sumgait is a city on the Caspian Sea in Azerbaijan. In 1988 nearly 30 Armenians lost their lives, hundreds were injured, and 14,000 left the city of Sumgait. The events have since been referred to as the Sumgait pogroms/ massacre/ killings/ events.

80 For more information on how to set up an NGO or association in Armenia, see the following websites: OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights "Armenia. NGO Legislation". <http://legislationline.org/topics/country/45/topic/1/subtopic/18>, Bulgarian Center for Not-for-Profit Law. "Registration and operation of NGOs and Taxation of NGOs" <http://blacksea.bcnl.org/en/articles/15-registration-and-operation-of-ngos-and-taxation-of-ngos.html>

Due to the high level of corruption there are organisations or activists that receive money from state donors and do little constructive work. These GONGOs have traditionally been content with their money and not very active in media and civil society, unlike for instance in Central Asia.⁸¹ Lately, organisations fronting so-called national, traditional and patriotic values have emerged to a larger extent and might soon grow into a substantial problem for the civil activists. Diversity activists warn that the working environment might get even tougher for them if these organisations get to play a greater role in setting the public mood. Finally, another recent trend also originating in Russia where NGOs are called *foreign agents* and *grant eaters* is starting to gain ground in Armenia as well. The additional practice of calling them traitors has always been there.

Some of the NGOs manage to highlight their core concerns with the government or parliament. However, the established NGOs have not succeeded completely in engaging and inspiring the people they are expected to represent. Many fail to function as a link between the authorities and the people, thereby failing to create the necessary civic fundament supporting their advocacy for change in society.



Crowd at Liberty Square after 2013 presidential election.

81 GONGO stands for Government Organised Non-Governmental Organisations. GONGOs in Central Asia frequently present inaccurate facts that put their respective governments in a positive light in international arenas and dismiss or try to divert attention away from criticism from independent NGOs.

Politicians have not succeeded either, exemplified by the failed campaigns of Levon Ter-Petrossyan and Raffi Hovhannisyán referred to earlier. In an interesting development, some of the latest civic initiatives in Armenia have not been organised by the established NGOs or parties, but have emerged as more evolving campaigns of activists. The activist Anna Shahnazaryan shares her analysis:

NGOs tend to try to be apolitical and not interfere with so-called dirty politics, or risk their cooperation possibilities with the government. Opposition politicians have not recovered after their defeat after 1 March 2008, but more importantly have failed to reform in order to gain more public trust and acknowledgement. Because they are more interested in gaining power than resolving issues and ignore fundamental challenges in society. In this field, creative and courageous civic activists in their non-alignment dare to address the controversial issues and take to the streets.

This is a trend that might be a sign that civic activism is becoming more rooted in and stemming out of the general population. A few examples below will illustrate this trend and the changing civil society in Armenia.

Teghut Forest Campaign

Environmental campaigns are seen as a sign that activism is developing, and such campaigns became more institutionalised in Armenia from 2007 onwards. Amongst these was the Teghut Forest Campaign in early 2012.⁸² Civic activists in Yerevan point out that environmental campaigns have the potential to develop broader civic engagement, as they not only concern daily life, but being a citizen of a country. Armenians do take to the streets for issues that concern them directly, like decreased pensions, petrol prices or sons who have died in the army, but the engagement has not developed into a principled campaign for human rights in general or a change of government. Environmental issues do not concern only the individual, but also society, communities and ultimately the world, and it illustrates another trend of maturity in Armenian civic activism.

The Save Teghut Civic Initiative is an interesting example in this regard. The initiative consists of a wide range of activists in Armenia and abroad. They are not part of any established organisation or political party. They merely defend their main principles of regulations and taxes in the mining business; public participation in such decisions in accordance with the Aarhus Convention; the development of environmentally sustainable development projects for the inhabitants of the region; and stopping the planned copper-molybdenum mine in the Teghut forest. The activists have day jobs and take turns being present at demonstrations and pickets, and use social media and open letters actively to promote their viewpoints widely.⁸³

82 Ishkanian, Armine, Gyulkhandanyan, Evelina, Manusyan, Sona and Manusyan, Arpy (2013). Civil society, development and environmental activism in Armenia. City Print House, Yerevan, Armenia. Retrieved from http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/54755/1/Ishkanian_Civil_Society_Development_Environmental_Activism_America_2013.pdf, p 10.

83 <http://teghut.am/en/>

Mashtots Park Campaign

The Mashtots Park campaign in spring 2012 was one of the first to engage a wider range of activists. The park in the centre of Yerevan was a green lung next to one of the main streets, and was supposed to remain like that until the Mayor allowed the construction of small kiosks in the park, removing green grass and erecting concrete, metal and glass kiosks. Activists did not want this to happen and joined forces by singing and demonstrating, spending the night in the park and physically hindering the construction work.

Activists came from various groups and mainly agreed only on one thing – that the park should remain a park. As it turned out, many of the participants would not adhere to a more principled stand on human rights, and for example anti-gay sentiments were noticeable, explains Kirk Wallace, an American teacher who came to Armenia for a short trip but stayed and got involved in environment activism in the country he learned to love. Still, he sees this campaign as a turning point in civic activism in Armenia.

After three months, only a few days before the parliamentary elections in May 2012, President Sargsyan turned up and announced that the Mayor was wrong and that the park should remain a park. The kiosks under construction were to be removed. Whilst this solved the issue in the short-term and pleased some of the activists, it again demonstrated that this was a one-man decision and not discussed and decided through the appropriate procedures. The protesters later issued a statement demanding proper handling of the issue.⁸⁴

Election Monitoring and Diaspora Participation

During the presidential election in February 2013, several young Armenians from the United States diaspora came to Armenia to participate in election monitoring. These are youths who have grown up and participated in a democracy, whilst maintaining their knowledge of the Armenian language and culture. This particular combination of skills and motivation from the diaspora has been greatly in demand from civic activists in Armenia for a long time, and several groups of them have worked hard to include young diaspora Armenians in activities run by local organisations. By inviting the diaspora youths to Armenia and involving them in activities they get a more realistic picture of the situation on the ground, and their participation in activities in the recent election was very welcome.

Activists involved in this election observation program were very pleased with the results. They are looking forward to how it could serve as an example for positive diaspora engagement in Armenia in general and be developed further in the period leading up to the next cycle of elections in particular.

84 http://www.armenianow.com/society/environment/37720/mashtots_park_serzh_sargsyan_taron_margaryan

Another positive element during the last election cycle was the increased activity level of the regular voter. Having received a bribe, many went ahead and voted for whatever candidate they preferred, or made their ballots invalid by voting for celebrities like Kim Kardashian or Chuck Norris. One even ate his ballot and posted the video on YouTube.⁸⁵

Public Minibus Price Increase Campaign

In June 2013, the Yerevan authorities announced that the fare for public minibuses, marshrutkas, would increase from 100 AMD to 150 AMD.⁸⁶ This decision was very unpopular and a demonstration was arranged in front of the Yerevan municipality on the day before the announced increase. On the first day, the 20-odd demonstrators who had turned up complained to the NHC that not surprisingly there were only the usual suspects there. The rest of the Yerevan population would complain about the increase in price, but do nothing about it, they explained.



First picket against increase in marshrutka fares, July 2013.

⁸⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHW-cplsrbg>

⁸⁶ 100 Armenian Drams equals approximately NOK 1.50 or EUR 0.18.

However, over the next few days, even celebrities who most likely have not used a marshrutka for many years also joined in the campaign. It is hard to say why they decided to join, as they have already sold DVDs and CDs in numbers higher than the population of Armenia, but it is very likely that the participation of the popular comedian Hayk Marutyan⁸⁷ increased the profile and status of the demonstrations, in an unprecedented way. After a while, the price was reduced to 100 AMD again, although a Yerevan bureaucrat recently announced that the matter was yet to be finally solved.

Customs Union Protests

The President's decision to sign an agreement with the Russia-led Customs Union and the resulting setback in negotiations with the EU are but elements in a long line of disappointing decisions made by the government that influence the population in a negative way. Following the signature in Moscow, it became known that the Armenian parliament was going to discuss the government's proposal to sell the state's last 20 per cent of shares in HayRusGazArd to Russia's Gazprom. In addition, a new pension reform was introduced.

With the lack of public debate and trust in decisions made by the government, these last incidents have managed to provoke a wider range of people. For reasons described above, the parties have been hesitant to mobilise people, and have failed to let the people and government know where they stand on the Customs Union. So civic activists with experience from the above initiatives have stepped up and mobilised a wider range of participants, and large demonstrations have taken place in the streets of Yerevan, outside parliament and even inside parliament during the debate on the gas deal.⁸⁸ Participation in some of these demonstrations is unprecedented in Armenia, and pundits warn that social unrest is not as unlikely as it has been.

Responses from Police, State, Population

Since the mass trials and arrests following the 1 March 2008 events, human rights defenders in Armenia have occasionally been subjected to threats or harassment.⁸⁹ For example, in April 2012, a crowd attacked the offices of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly in Vanadzor (HCAV) with eggs and stones after they had opened for the screening of a movie by an Azeri movie director.⁹⁰ One staff member injured her leg; others felt intimidated by the situation.

The head of the HCAV, Artur Sakunts, is an outspoken man and is frequently cited in media on sensitive and unpopular issues. On several occasions he has been the target

87 Marutyan is one half of the popular comedy duo "Hayko Mko", the other half is Mkrtych Arzumanyan.

88 <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2013/12/russia-gas-deal-angers-armenians-2013122320021309118.html>

89 <http://hcav.am/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Report-English.pdf>

90 http://www.nhc.no/no/nyheter/NHC+concerned+with+attacks+against+partner+human+rights+organisation.b7C_wlBKWO.ips

of defamatory statements on Facebook and other social media saying that he is a traitor and foreign agent. Another outspoken human rights defender, the head of the Armenian Helsinki Association Mikael Danielyan, has had similar experiences and was verbally assaulted and shot at with a gas gun in May 2008, for example.

Some of these verbal and physical attacks on human rights defenders and activists in Armenia seem to be supported and encouraged by the authorities. On several occasions the police have stood idle, watching attacks on peaceful demonstrators or property without interfering, and have failed to open a criminal investigation afterwards.



Woman in front of Ministry of Justice searching for her son after 1 March 2008 mass arrests.

Also, in a more recent development, more than six activists were subjected to violence by unknown individuals in connection with the demonstrations against the increase in marshrutka fares and for the dismissal of the involved bureaucrats. Similarly, returning home from a demonstration against the Russia-led Customs Union in September 2013, activists Haykak Arshamyan and Suren Saghatelyan were beaten in the courtyard of Arshamyan's own building. There is reason to believe the activists were not victims of random violence, but the police investigation has not resulted in any charges so far.⁹¹

Juxtaposing the authorities' recent actions against peaceful demonstrators through house searches, arrests, blockades and limitations on movement with their laissez-faire approach over the past few years, there is reason to believe that demonstrators and civic activists are approaching the upper limit of the civic activism the authorities feel comfortable with.

91 <http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/25103142.html>

Artur Sakunts is concerned that police arbitrariness is being used as a weapon against civic activists, and he is supported by activist Anna Shahnazaryan:

Along with the increase in civic activism, the termination of this activism is also growing. The biggest problem is the challenge to freedom of assembly. As soon as some activists gather in a public place, they experience limitations to their freedom of movement through restrictions as to where they can be, police officers push them or turn lawn irrigation systems on them, or police officers will detain some of them and keep them for 3-6 hours. In addition, the police try to intimidate participants by visiting authoritative persons in the activist's family or workplace who can talk them out of activism.

The Armenian authorities seem now to have taken a step back from their obligatory task of protecting citizens' fundamental human rights, including the rights to freedom of movement, assembly and free speech. After a period of passivity from the security forces and the international community allowing violations to take place in a possible trade-off to provide progress for EU DCFTA negotiations, the police now directly limit these freedoms by their own actions at an increasing rate. It remains to be seen which forces will succeed at this crucial stage, and it is important to pay close attention to developments in Armenia in this regard.

5. Recommendations and Conclusion

Taking into consideration the issues and developments described in the report, the 2 December 2013 demonstrations with up to 1,000 participants and later demonstrations were unprecedented and of substantial size in Armenia. Together with a wide range of activists coming together in joint demonstrations these are welcome signs that civic participation is on the rise in the country.

However, the concurrent harsh police treatment of protestors, arrests, fines and home searches that followed the peaceful demonstrations are equally warning signs that Armenia's authorities are in danger of returning to a more restrictive line. The international community should pay close attention to this development and hold Armenian authorities accountable to their international obligations.

The authorities have failed to adequately inform and include the population on potential benefits resulting from either the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with the EU or the Customs Union with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, the two agreements on the table in 2013. They have also failed to provide an explanation for their decision afterwards. This lack of transparency and accountability contributes negatively to the already deep distrust in the population, fuelled by poverty and pessimism. The participation of all concerned groups in an informed public debate on fundamental development issues for society should be welcomed and encouraged rather than repressed by the authorities.

Despite some promises and reforms in connection with Council of Europe membership and the European Union integration processes, Armenia still has a long way to go to meet its international obligations. The Norwegian Helsinki Committee urges the Armenian authorities to;

Facilitate civic activism and civil society:

- Ensure that peaceful demonstrations are allowed to take place without interference;
- Ensure that the police are present to defend the security of the demonstrators;
- Establish safe working conditions for all activists, in particular those advocating controversial issues, in particular on diversity;
- Implement their legislation on freedom of expression and ensure that the public have adequate access to information on matters of their concern;
- Guarantee a fair chance of access to public television for activists and human rights defenders in order to present alternative views on the political and human rights situation in Armenia.

Build trust and confidence:

- Take immediate and concrete steps to combat corruption at all levels of society, in particular the judicial system;
- Investigate and adequately explain the circumstances surrounding the 27 October 1999 parliament shootings;
- Investigate and adequately explain the circumstances surrounding the 10 deaths on 1 March 2008, including:
- identify the perpetrators; investigate the command responsibility; and provide compensation to the victims' relatives.⁹²

Ensure free and fair elections:

- Refrain from extensive use of administrative resources and pressure from employers in connection with elections;
- Consider election-related complaints in a timely manner;
- Grant domestic election observers the possibility to submit complaints;
- Remove the compulsory exams for domestic election observers and replace the system of permission by a system of notification;
- Legal provisions for civic election observation should be further improved and methodological support reinforced in order to further develop civic scrutiny and control over electoral processes;
- Ensure that voters' lists are accurate and do not allow for abuse of absentee or multiple voting.

Promote tolerance:

- Follow up on stated intentions on tolerance during the Council of Europe Chairmanship;
- Include civil society activists in the process of developing effective anti-discrimination legislation that also addresses intent and hate-crimes against all minority groups;
- Officially discourage and persecute homophobic and intolerant statements by public figures and derogatory terminology in the media;
- Prosecute offenders of hate crime;
- Protect representatives of minority groups and their defenders.

Although Armenians have not taken to the streets in the same numbers and with the same intensity as the Ukrainians in their similar situation after the decision to join the Customs Union, there is noticeable, unprecedented and growing discontent with the President and his decision. The EU and the international community must not turn its back on the Armenian population and their rights at this crucial moment.

92 Joint mid-term statement on Armenia's obligations to the UPR: http://nhc.no/no/nyheter/Armenia+urged+to+impleme nt+UPR+commitments+and+recommendations.b7C_wlfQ0_ips

The international community should:

- Condemn actions by the Armenian authorities that are counter to their international obligations;
- Not leave Armenia to be forgotten in the shadow of its more volatile neighbours Azerbaijan and Georgia, the demonstrations in Ukraine and the leadership's rapprochement with Russia;
- Hold the Armenian authorities accountable for failing to implement the recommendations made by the OSCE/ODIHR and other authoritative institutions, in particular PACE Resolutions 1609, 1620, 1643 and 1677⁹³;
- Institutionalise civil society participation in the development of agreements on cooperation and projects, as well as in monitoring of the implementation of such agreements;
- Involve civil society in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh in the Minsk Group's work to create an appropriate framework for conflict resolution.

In particular, the EU should:

- Continue negotiations with Armenia on potential trade and cooperation agreements;
- Demand concrete implementation of promises and reforms made in bilateral projects, e.g. on judicial reforms;
- Ensure that information on the benefits and challenges in connection with EU rapprochement is adequately introduced and discussed in Armenian society;
- Cooperate with a wider range of Armenian civil society in the instigation of new agreements; including those not part of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum.

93 <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta09/ERES1677.htm>

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