THE POLITICS OF BUILDING CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF GEORGIA AND ARMENIA

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Abstract

This study discusses the development of civil society in Georgia and Armenia after the collapse of the USSR. Both countries in the South Caucasus have unique achievements in civil society activism, but in some ways, they share the same patterns. International donors and foreign assistance have played a crucial role in the development of civil society in both countries. International actors have tried to support civil society activism in these ex-Soviet countries to strengthen democratic values, beliefs, and institutions. While the Georgian ruling elites opened a new dimension of civil society, the Armenian elites did not respond in a way that created space for the development of civil society. One of the main reasons for this is that Armenian civil society has been characterised by the Karabakh issue and the Armenian diaspora has controlled civil society activism for many years. In contrast, relations with the West have become inherent in Georgia, opening up new avenues for the development of civil society.

Keywords: Georgia, Armenia, Civil Society Building, Democracy Promotion, International Influence

JEL Kodları: D72, Z00

GÜNEY KAFKASYA'DA SİVİL TOPLUM İNŞA ETME POLİTİKASI: GÜRCİSTAN VE ERMENİSTAN'A TARİHSEL BİR BAKIŞ

Öz

Bu çalışma, SSCB'nin dağılmasının ardından, Gürcistan ve Ermenistan sivil toplumunun gelişimini ele almaktadır. Her iki Güney Kafkasya ülkesi de sivil toplum aktivizminde özgün başarılara sahiptir, ancak bazı yönlerden benzerlikler de barındırmaktadır. Uluslararası bağışçılar ve dış yardımlar, her iki ülkede de sivil toplumun gelişiminde önemli rol oynamıştır. Uluslararası aktörler, demokratik değerleri, inançları ve kurumları güçlendirmek için bu eski Sovyet ülkelerinde sivil toplum aktivizmini desteklemişlerdir. Gürcistan yönetici elitleri sivil toplumun yeni bir boyut kazanmasını sağlarken Ermenistan yönetici elitleri buna sivil toplumun gelişimine alan açacak şekilde yanıt vermemiştir. Bunun temel nedeni, Ermeni sivil toplumunun Karabağ sorunu etrafında şekillenmesi ve Ermeni diasporasının uzun yıllar ülkedeki sivil toplum aktivizmini kontrol etmesidir. Hâlbuki Gürcistan'da Batı'yla ilişkilerin için hâle gelmesi sivil toplumun gelişmesinde önemli bir rol oynamıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Gürcistan, Ermenistan, Sivil Toplum İnşası, Demokrasi Teşviki, Uluslararası Etki

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INTRODUCTION

The development of civil society in a country may owe to several local and international dynamics. The scholarship has uncovered several determinants in the process, including but not limited to culture, elite structure, state-society relations, class structure, and dynamics of the distribution of economic wealth or political regimes. All these determinants are identified as either creating a similarity in the emergence of civil society or divergences – so, civil society building does not account for a similar outcome in all contexts. In the context of democratisation, for instance, civil society particularly in the European space has been argued to be creating like-minded transnationally operating civil society organisations that are both politically and economically liberal. Yet, the success story here is highly dependent on the presence of regional integration efforts and the power of the European Union seems to be luring countries to become more welcoming towards such efforts. However, in a non-European or peripheral context and with the absence of a powerful and democracy-imposing regional order/structure, how would democratic civil society building function, and what factors would shape civil society's development?

This paper reflects on this in the example of two former Soviet states in the Caucasus, namely Georgia and Armenia, and elaborates on the development of both the similarities and differences in civil society building. For more than three decades, two ex-Soviet countries have tried to take part in modern political life as independent countries. Both countries have their own struggles and successes in their nation-building processes after the collapse of the USSR. Indeed, since both countries shared a political history under the Soviet Union, the expectation would be that their response to civil society and democratisation would be similar, despite their societal differences. Yet, a closer look at the cases reveals that the two ex-Soviet and Caucasus states have differing experiences regarding the development of civil society. We intend to examine and explore the reasons behind the differences (and also similarities) in terms of civil society development in Georgia and Armenia. We particularly study, how these two countries responded to international donors and foreign aid and how their local agendas shaped their receptiveness to external democratisation efforts.

What civil society is and is not can be seen as a simple question; however, in fact, it is a very sophisticated term and stream of thought as well as being long-standing and complex. In modern times, both among ordinary people and among scholars, there are many essential questions to investigate in civil society. One of the most important of these questions is whether a strong civil society promotes democracy. Is civil society a means or an end for addressing social issues? What is the role of international influence in fostering civil society? Associating the Georgian and Armenian cases with these questions can provide us with some varied civil society concepts than we previously thought. The reasons behind that can be understood in two ways. Firstly, these two cases are relevant to the dissolution of the USSR, which brought

about a new trend of democratisation - a third way of democratisation, as described by Samuel Huntington (1991). Secondly, the efforts of the countries that gained independence from the USSR to become successful democratic nations are now a part of the Western and global political agendas.

To comprehend the evolution of civil society in Georgia and Armenia, the study heavily relies on the CSO Meter Country Reports and the CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI). However, to ensure a more comprehensive analysis, other contemporary data sources such as the World Bank, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and Asian Development Bank (ADB) data are also utilised. During the investigation of the aforementioned sources, this study employs the purposive approach due to the large volume of sources. According to Bryman (2016, p. 410), the purposive approach involves conducting sampling with reference to the research questions, selecting scales of analysis based on criteria that will enable the research question to be answered. Selective secondary data were used in this study due to its scope, efficiency, and language barrier. Materials written in Georgian and Armenian were excluded. The paper begins by presenting the development of civil society theory. The concept of democracy promotion will be discussed as a means of building civil society. Then, the outline and periodisation of Georgian and Armenian civil societies will be drawn. Following that, the findings of the present study are investigated with an emphasis on democracy promotion and international influence in Georgia and Armenia. In conclusion, an evaluation of the importance of civil society in Georgia and Armenia for peace and tranquillity is performed.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRACY PROMOTION

In liberal accounts, a well-functioning civil society is considered an essential component of democracy, human rights, the rule of law, free and fair elections, transparency, productivity, and accountable institutions (Kumar, 1993; Carothers and Barndt, 1999; Edwards, 2009; Jensen, 2011). Civil society involves the relationships between individuals, society, and the state, as well as fundamental values such as freedom, justice, equality, solidarity, tolerance, and human dignity (Aleksanyan, 2020). The relationship between democracy and civil society is a rooted inheritance and the strife among the individuals, interest groups, and states, shortly all civil society components. The term civil society therefore refers to a set of social, cultural, economic, and political practices that challenge state mechanisms and demand for social, political, civil, and individual rights. Following this liberal account, the idea that civil society is crucial to development, democratisation, and successful transition became quite popular among international donors and foreign policymakers in the 1990s (Ishkanian, 2007; Howell and Pearce, 2003). Thus, civil society has been linked with democracy in explaining the post-Soviet state-society relations and it is seen as one of the

major apparatuses for the transformation of former Soviet societies to a liberal world order and international state system.

However, unlike liberal accounts, the historical perspectives associate civil society with the rise of capitalism and its consequences such as class conflict, private property, and market mechanisms. Considering Marx`s beliefs about civil society, Gouldner (1980, p.356) says "the social structures of civil society were not independent entities generating bourgeois society but were, rather, forms in which bourgeois society had emerged; that is, they were the products rather than the producer of the bourgeois class". Gramsci's concept of civil society is an integrated part of the state and does not identify it in the sphere of freedom, but rather in that of hegemony (Bal, 2022). Regarding this perspective, civil society is an area where the ruling class maintains, extends, and reinforces its power over societies by non-violent means (Buttigieg, 1995; Bobbio, 1988). Accordingly, building civil society in post-socialist countries processed as a transformation to a capitalist state system. Following to historical perspective, the building of civil society in the former Soviet countries has been analysed in the context of the transformation process: "the formation of new states, the introduction of market relations and the privatisation of assets, and realignment in international relations" (Lane, 2010, p.294).

In the former Soviet countries, the aims of building civil society for international donors were to assist the transition from socialism as well as to support liberal values such as good governance and free and fair elections, human rights, and the rule of law (Ishkanian, 2007). It was a priori presumed that civil society could facilitate transitions in post-Soviet countries from authoritarian rules to democratic regimes. Western international organisations' development strategy in the post-Soviet space was one of shifting from a centralised state economy to a capitalist market economy through the implementation of neo-liberal reforms (Mandel, 2012). The democratising roles of civil society therefore were mainly developed regarding existing post-socialist regimes and considering the relations between civil society activism and the states in the region, it was thought that the knowledge about established democracies could be applied to processes of regime change. The main priority for social, political, and economic transformations to ensure liberal democracy in the post-Soviet space was considered to be the development of civil society.

The promotion of the Western model of civil society aims to diffuse liberal values beyond Europe (Tabak, 2021). Therefore, after the collapse of the USSR, building a normative model of civil society based on Western values has been considered crucial for achieving the goals of democratisation and liberal values in the post-Soviet space, where authoritarian or even totalitarian political regimes have long existed (Aleksanyan, 2020). The instrumentalisation of civil society in building a liberal democracy in the former Soviet countries therefore has been well-glorified by the Western European countries as well as the US.

Building civil society in the post-Soviet space is perceived not only as an establishment of democratic values but also as a special way of development, or decisive break from the Soviet legacy (Aleksanyan, 2020).

To facilitate the transition of the post-Soviet countries to the Western normative model of civil society a great deal of financial investment, grants, training, and human resources was provided in civil society building by Western donors. Such assistance was mostly framed in the language of democracy promotion and during and after the 1990s many civil society organisations were supported and/or built by Western donors and transnational NGOs (Hahn-Fuhr & Worschech, 2014). The existing literature therefore also examines the impact of democracy promotion on building civil society processes in former socialist countries (Ishkanian, 2015; Hahn-Fuhr & Worschech, 2014; Lutsevych, 2013). Strengthening the civil society in the post-Soviet countries subsequently became a central part of democracy promotion policies and Western development agencies funded those countries for strengthening civil society, training civil society activists, and funding their projects as a means of promoting democracy (Ishkanian, 2007).

In the literature on democracy promotion, the 1990s marked the take-off point for promoting democracy after the end of the Cold War. According to Burnell (2000, pp. 39-41), the enlargement of democracy promotion in the 1990s can be attributed to four factors. Firstly, because of the decline of Soviet Union power, Western governments were now able to implement a diplomatic agenda which they were unable to do prior to the decline of Soviet Union power. Secondly, democracy assistance allowed a relatively low-cost means of increasing the image of foreign aid. Thirdly, rather than push factors of the world politics of the 20th century, there were pull factors applying to international support for democratisation. This democratisation process occurred in some countries in Africa, Central and Eastern Europe, and elsewhere due to the domestic pressures of political changes. Lastly, there was a sea-change in the way people thought about the relationship between political and economic development. Two doctrines have been particularly influential in this regard: i) stable democracy requires social and economic development, and ii) developing countries cannot simultaneously democratise and develop their economies (Burnell, 2000, p. 40).

The implicit acceptance of the relationship between democracy and civil society is highlighted, while the current situation in society is revealed through the examination of the conflicts among individuals, interest groups, and states. In the last century, colonial studies played a crucial role in comprehending democracy promotion, as indicated by Wejnert (2005) and Brown (2005). According to Burnell (2000), France and Britain implemented decolonisation practices in Africa and Asia, resulting in a change of model. This involved amending the constitutions of these countries, improving their ruling elites, civil society, and institutions. These were all essential factors in the decolonisation process. However, it is important to note that some critics in the current literature are challenging the rationale of international donors and questioning

the role of civil society in the development of democracy. Democracy promotion programs often lead to civil society becoming donor-orientated and disconnected from their own communities, which is an unintended consequence of democracy promotion for civil society-building strategies (Ishkanian, 2014; Fagan, 2006; Mandel, 2002). According to Ishkanian (2014), civil society initiatives funded by donors tend to overlook corruption, the absence of the rule of law, the lack of democracy, and the failure of formal political elites to address citizens' concerns. As a result, a new form of civil society is emerging that is critical of such organisations.

Upon closer examination of the cases at hand, it becomes apparent that international actors shared a common interest in promoting civil society as a means of establishing democracy in both Georgia and Armenia. The Open Society Foundation, USAID, and OXFAM were among the international partners that sought to support the democratisation processes in both countries, facilitating the transition from Soviet-era traditions and legacies to liberal democracy and related issues, such as open society (Shapovalova and Youngs, 2012). The economic contribution of international donors to the civil society environment of both countries is significant. The financial influence of international donors on the financial resources of civil society organisations (CSOs) in both countries is evident. According to CSI data, in Armenia, 17% of CSOs' financial resources came from individual contributions, 22% came from membership fees, and 43% came from international donors and resource centres. In Georgia, approximately 80% of organisations rely on international donors for 50-100% of their annual income. While one-third of NGOs charge membership fees, this only accounts for 5% of their annual budget.

In 2003, Georgia underwent a revolution in civil society, while Armenia further strengthened its unipolar state-society relations. According to USAID (2017), similar programs were conducted in both countries, but Armenia did not experience the same societal improvements as Georgia. This was due to political criticism, which diverted all social efforts towards a different agenda (Ishkanian, 2015). During the Pre-Rose Revolution period, the Georgian community made some improvements in civil society. Cadres of these civil society actors, who were well-educated and mostly had Western ideas, influenced society. However, the unfair election in November 2003 led to opposition groups coming together to protest the situation. International observers and media also participated in this process (The Economist, 2003). Despite the difficulties, Georgia has made progress in developing its civil society. On the other hand, in the Armenian case, it is important to discuss the role of the diaspora in Armenian civil society promotion. The main goal of civil initiatives is to achieve success in their ongoing projects, without any hidden or alternative agendas. In Armenia, the diaspora supports civil initiatives and campaigns for their projects (Ishkanian et al., 2013). Therefore, the diaspora plays an important role in the development of civil society in the country.

THE EVOLUTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN GEORGIA AND ARMENIA AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF THE SOVIET UNION

This section briefly discusses the civil society-building process in Armenia and Georgia from the 1990s to the present. The historical context of Armenia is emphasized, resulting from its unique conflict-centered civil society construction. Additionally, the relationship between the Armenian diaspora and civil society is examined. The section also discusses how the change created by the civil conflict in Georgia was reflected in civil society. In addition to the impact of Western influence on the building of civil society, this statement reveals Georgia's unique practices.

Armenia: Diasporic state-civil society relations

In the Soviet system, grassroots movements were organised from above and thus controlled by the state. These activities were carried out through organisations supported by the government, and many public sphere activities took shape through these institutions (OSCE/ODIHR, 2000; Aliyev, 2013). However, it would be misleading to claim that there were no independent activities in communist Armenia. It is recognised that certain underground organisations and activities are influenced by nationalist ideologies and a desire for independence. Additionally, there were individual social movements, such as the gathering of approximately one hundred thousand people in Open Square in 1965 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Armenian events. Across the entire Soviet Union, there were no social enterprises of this magnitude that lasted for 24 hours (Karlsson, 2007). The Armenian Helsinki Watch, founded by dissident Armenians in 1977 (Dudwick, 1995), deserves mention. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw the establishment of the first NGOs. Citizens gathered around various issues, including the protection of the environment and nuclear power plant pollution. Similarly, after the devastating earthquake of 1988, voluntary groups and organisations were established to aid in the recovery process. However, the transformation of activism into a nationalist and socio-economic movement reduced its impact on society (Geukjian, 2007). In 1988, there were mass demonstrations by those who supported the annexation of Karabakh to Armenia (Ghaplanyan, 2009; Paturyan and Gevorgyan, 2021). Under Soviet rule, civil society emerged through underground organisations and mobilisation. Allowing organisations in the final years of Soviet power not only made social movements visible but also shaped the country politically and engaged people in this process.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, civil society found itself in a new and unpredictable environment. The war, the refugee problem and the severe economic problems that emerged with the Karabakh issue caused newly established NGOs to include these issues in their agenda. This period marked

a new phase for civil society and provided an opportunity for international aid organisations and NGOs to meet humanitarian needs in Armenia. It also served as an example for the country (Blue, Payton, and Kharatyan, 2001). In the mid-1990s, a civil society was established in Armenia, but social movements experienced tension and decline. This was mainly due to people being burdened with daily survival and withdrawing from the streets. In addition, promises of increased democratisation that were not fulfilled caused disappointment in society. Although the number of NGOs increased rapidly, their ability to represent the public interest and influence decision-making processes was highly questionable. As Dudwick (1997, 98) argues:

"...most of them are short-lived and diffuse, led by one or two members of the political or economic elite (or their wives), with a small and fluid membership. At best, they are clusters of friends and acquaintants interested in pursuing a common goal… The groups frequently split over competition between leaders or changes in their mission. Similar organisations tend to compete for resources … rather than collaborate or share resources.".

NGOs in Armenia were established by financial support from Western funds and charities (Ishkanian, 2003). However, these funds were generally provided through social and political elites (Dudwick, 1995). Although NGOs have made efforts to influence legal regulations, these initiatives have been limited and have not yielded significant results. Typically, these NGOs were centralised around a powerful actor and were managed by leaders who set the agenda and ensured fundraising. The government did not engage with NGOs significantly (Danielyan, 2001). Additionally, the authorities hindered NGOs with development potential (Abrahamian and Shagoyan, 2012). NGOs encountered various challenges, including economic difficulties and insufficient public attention (Dudwick, 1997). Ordinary citizens were unable to achieve effective results by organising themselves into formal or informal groups and acting independently. Instead, leaders with social connections and influence were relied upon to benefit their communities (Babajanian, 2005). This situation has also provided some insight into public awareness of and attitudes towards NGOs in Armenia, as demonstrated by the survey conducted by the International Electoral Systems Foundation between 2001 and 2004, which revealed that the majority of Armenians are not familiar with any NGOs in Armenia. According to the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (2004), only a quarter of the respondents were able to name an NGO, and one-fifth did not know what an NGO was.

Since the late 2000s, a civil society has emerged to address serious environmental problems. Mining and related activities have been presented as a means of economic development, but they have also led to numerous environmental concerns among civil society. These concerns range from the preservation of historical buildings to the protection of urban green areas (Ishkanian et al., 2013). After 2005, several

networks emerged and mainly grew in the capital. The real growth of these networks, called 'civic initiatives', occurred in 2008, opening a new avenue for social movements in the country (Ishkanian et al., 2013). Civic initiatives were volunteer-based, non-partisan groups that came together to campaign for raising and addressing specific issues. These initiatives used social media tools to make decisions and lead campaigns. The relations between structured NGOs and international donors in Armenia are limited and informal, as noted by Paturyan and Gevorgyan (2021). However, some studies present a more positive outlook on the development of civil society in Armenia. Babajanian (2008) discussed the high level of trust in rural communities, while Hakobyan and Tadevosyan (2010) studied the potential of informal volunteering. It is argued that civil initiatives have adopted a more political understanding of society than NGOs in the post-2010 period. Additionally, these initiatives reject the donor-supported civil society model of the 1990s and instead prioritise citizenship that emphasises self-organisation, independence, and solidarity. Although these initiatives are small and have symbolic value, they have not yet led to significant structural changes or addressed sensitive issues such as violence in the military and mining (Ishkanian, 2015).

In 2018, the Velvet Revolution ousted the kleptocratic ruling elite from power. The protesters, who were inspired by the 2008 post-election protests that the government violently dispersed, formed the basis of the newly established government. This government faced significant challenges in fulfilling its foreign policy commitments, addressing security concerns, and implementing reforms to rectify illegalities (Lanskoy and Suthers, 2019). According to Giragosian (2019), the Velvet Revolution had little impact on relations between Russia and the West. However, the recent Karabakh War II and territorial issues between Armenia and Azerbaijan have shifted the regional balance of power and the role of external actors, potentially increasing the chance for regional cooperation (Neset et al., 20123).

The Armenian diasporas with ties to their homelands are facing international legal challenges and highlighting procedural aspects of democracy. In this case, it only becomes meaningful in the way it filters international pressures. Armenia has used the procedural aspects of democracy to advance unresolved nationalist goals in a legitimate way that is accepted by the international community. Additionally, the Armenian diasporas have used the procedural aspects of democracy to advance the cause of self-determination of the proto-states with which they are associated. Although they did not develop liberal aspects of democracy, they continued to view ethno-national issues in the homeland purely from a nationalist perspective (Koinova, 2009).

Georgia: Western-oriented civil society

Georgia, as a former Soviet republic, experienced ethnic conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia following the collapse of the USSR. From 1992 to 1995, the country struggled to establish control over its territory. Additionally, corruption among officials and bureaucracy was prevalent during this period (Stefes, 2006). The weak civil society hindered progress towards addressing corruption among leaders and bureaucracy. NGOs, which did not possess the fundamental characteristics of traditional NGOs, were composed of professional NGOs funded by Western countries (Nodia, 2005; Wheatley, 2010). The civil society field was mainly composed of individuals with basic knowledge and documentation skills who were pro-Western with neoliberal ideas and spoke English (Muskhelishvili and Jorjoliani, 2009; 700). From 1995 to 1999, civil society was commonly referred to as the 'oasis years' by Losaberidze (2010) due to the steps taken by NGOs towards the political sphere. During the period from 1999 to 2003, civil society was considered the third sector, and NGOs were sufficiently mature to propose ideas and take action against authorities. International organisations, including the Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA), the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), and Transparency International Georgia (TI), played a significant role in encouraging governments to act on constitutional grounds (Mitchell, 2015). The media also played a notable role in mobilising social protests.

The period following the 2003 revolution until 2008 saw a significant increase in civil society activism. The Rose Revolution was primarily driven by civil society actors such as NGOs, the media, and political parties (Jones, 2015), who peacefully protested and forced Eduard Shevardnadze to resign. All components of civil society, including media, NGOs, and political actors, worked towards promoting democracy and the development of civil society, with or without state support. Georgia was once considered a beacon of democracy during the period mentioned by Daniëls and Nanuashvili (2007). However, the Rose Revolution revealed that the democratic discourse was not as expected. International and domestic observers have highlighted the weaknesses of civil society in determining and transforming state policies. This has resulted in widespread distrust, skepticism, and indifference towards civil society (Lutsevych, 2013). Despite the lack of democracy in the Mikhail Saakashvili's administration, the international community regarded him as a dependable partner in implementing reforms. They assisted in capacity building and maintaining political dialogue (Lebanidze, 2014). Following the period of weakness that arose after the Rose Revolution, NGOs regained their influence as a significant force. The 2012 election results were influenced by both the conservative and Western-funded wings of civil society. Despite facing political difficulties, they were also dealing with structural problems.

The 2011 CIVICUS report states that 37% of NGOs in Georgia relied entirely on donor funds, while another 59% received half of their funding from donors. These organisations faced significant challenges in diversifying their funding sources (CIVICUS, 2012, 198). Following the revolution, the civil society community managed to reorganise itself and partially regain its power. In 2012, media organisations and NGOs exerted pressure on the government through the 'This Affects You, Too' campaign. The pressure was based on a bill addressing the financing of NGOs (Freedom House, 2013). The government followed and accepted the recommendations. After the change of power, many members of the nationalist civil society who supported Bidzina Ivanishvili joined the government. Although NGOs have a low public profile, their trust and popularity have increased. According to CRRC (2014, 4), NGOs have started to create a positive image. It is noteworthy that 35% of those who do not participate in NGOs express a desire to do so, despite only 2% of the population currently participating. Additionally, there is a high rate of unorganised social volunteering in Georgia. In 2015, a large number of young people united to restore the damage caused by the flood (Mitchell 2015). Another form of volunteer-based mobilisation that began to develop in Georgia is guerrilla gardening (Lomsadze, 2014).

Freedom House reports (2018; 2019; 2020; 2021) indicate that following the parliamentary elections in 2016, the parliament announced its intention to change the constitution. In 2017, a constitutional amendment was adopted to switch the parliament to oral elections by 2024. However, this move was met with objections from civil society organisations and the opposition. This decision was also met with objections from the opposition and civil society. In 2018, protests occurred due to events such as the police raiding two nightclubs and the release of a murder suspect. The following year, the Georgian public protested against a Russian MP who was in the Georgian parliament for an Orthodox Christian inter-parliamentary speech (Freedom House, 2018). This situation led to the police using excessive force, which resulted in further protests in the following months. The protests were based on concerns about Russian influence in the country. In 2021, the parliamentary boycott between the Georgian Dream Party and the opposition party, which has been ongoing since last year, was temporarily resolved through the European Council. However, the Georgian Dream Party later reversed this decision. In July, anti-LGBT rioters vandalised the offices of non-governmental organisations that were planning to march, and also injured 53 media workers who were covering the pride march (Freedom House, 2021).

Overall, the civil societies of both countries demonstrate that the structure of Armenian civil society is stricter than that of Georgia. This difference can be attributed to the long-standing territorial conflict in Armenia and the influence of the diaspora. These territorial issues also reveal that the state-building processes of Georgia and Armenia are distinct from each other. Armenia has regulated its society around

the territorial conflict, whereas Georgia has not done so. When examining the political figures in Armenia, it is important to note that many of them have a political background related to the Karabakh issue. In contrast, the political atmosphere in Georgia is more pluralistic and less focused on nationalist conflicts. While both countries have faced similar social struggles that have impacted their political landscapes, Georgia has been able to move past these issues thanks to its new ruling elites and pre-existing civil society. Due to the lack of an elite fragmentation in Armenia, ex-Soviet elites have played a crucial role in organising newly established civil society platforms and social activism. The mono-ethnic structure of Armenian civil society has had a decisive impact on political actors and state relations. Ishkanian (2009, p. 27) argues that the international support for building Armenian civil society has not been successful due to a lack of civic participation, engagement, inclusion, and debate. In contrast, political fragmentation in Georgia after independence has created a more pluralistic environment for its multi-ethnic civil society.

DEMOCRACY PROMOTION AND BUILDING CIVIL SOCIETY IN GEORGIA AND ARMENIA

In the political atmosphere mentioned above in both countries, civil society raises three questions. Firstly, how does the legal environment of a country regulate the civil society atmosphere? Secondly, how do people perceive civil society, and does civil society have socio-ethnic diversity? Lastly, how do socio-economic life standards affect civil society in both countries?

Regarding legal obligations, the civil societies of both countries have distinct characteristics that result in different approaches. Foremost among them is the role of law in civil society. According to the CIVICUS (2022a; 2022b), self-regulation mechanisms for Georgia and Armenia have different pathways. The existence procedure and activities of civil society organisations (CSOs) in Armenia are constrained by law whereas the same regulation for Georgia does not exist due to the USAID framework. International donors contributed a large variety of legal programs related to CSOs in both countries. At this point, confirming the democracy promotion project in both countries, it might be highlighted that international donors such as the Open Society Foundation, Soros Foundation, and developed organisations specialised in civil society capacity building set up some legal programs to provide opportunities to CSOs.

Secondly, the challenge of establishing civil society actors remains a significant issue in Georgia and Armenia. According to data from CSO Meter (2021a; 2021b), Armenia's score for freedom of association is 5.7 out of 7, while Georgia's score is 6.1. In Armenia, the legal system permits anyone to establish and/or participate in a CSO. However, the legal procedures for NGOs in the Armenian state system present some challenges, such as registration with the Ministry of Justice, payment of state fees, opening a bank account, and obtaining a taxpayer code. Political parties, on the other hand, have additional obligations, such as the

requirement of 200 members and the need to open branches in at least one-third of the regions (CIVICUS, 2014). In Georgia, the Georgian Constitution guarantees freedom of association. The Georgia Civil Code grants CSOs the freedom to determine their internal affairs, and the state cannot interfere in their activities (CSO Meter, 2021b). However, the Georgian case also reveals similar government practices, although for umbrella organisations such as trade unions, a minimum number of member organisations make progress more complicated through the public rotary system.

Thirdly, the tax regime for civil society organisations is another indicator of legal obligation. The tax systems for CSOs in Armenia and Georgia differ from each other. Armenia does not have any tax laws favourable for CSOs, while Georgia has tax exceptions for them on grants. In Armenia, there is no equal tax treatment for CSOs implementing economic activities, which prevents them from benefiting from the turnover tax or the microenterprise tax. In contrast, Georgia has specific tax regulations, and in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Georgian government has implemented a temporary tax regime for CSOs (CSO Meter, 2021a; 2021b).

The perception of civil society in Georgia and Armenia also differs significantly. According to data from the Asian Development Bank (2020, 2021), 23% of the Georgian population trusted CSOs, 10% did not support them, and 39% did not express any opinion. Although the level of trust in CSOs remained low, it had improved, having risen from 18% in 2011. In contrast, the image of CSOs has improved in Armenia, and the Armenian population has become more familiar with their activities. In Armenia, 52% of the population trusts the activities of CSOs, while only 32% distrust them. According to the Global Change Data (2022), the membership of CSOs in Armenia increased from 0.49 in 2000 to 0.74 in 2021. Similarly, in Georgia, civil society participation increased from 0.48 to 0.83 between 2000 and 2021. Despite the increase in participation, the functionality of CSOs remains a major concern in the development of civil society in Armenia. Based on data from CSO Meter (2021a), there are 5,532 public organisations and 1,451 foundations in Armenia. However, only 15% to 20% of the registered organisations are active, indicating that most of these CSOs are non-functional (Asian Development Bank, 2021).

However, the rate of volunteer work for CSOs is significantly higher in Armenia than in Georgia. In Armenia, volunteer activism was focused on humanitarian assistance and infrastructure rehabilitation during and around the Karabakh issue (CIVICUS, 2022a; ADB, 2021). In contrast, voluntary activities were not as popular in Georgia, with almost two in five of the population expressing their willingness to participate in voluntary activities. According to ADB (2020: 12), voluntary activism in Georgia is "still associated with the forced labour days of the Soviet period, known as subbotniks, during which school children, university students, and other groups were compelled to do community work".

The internal democracy within CSOs in both countries can be described by five themes: freedom of association, equal treatment, freedom of peaceful assembly, the right to participate in decision-making, and freedom of expression. Based on data from CSO Meter (2021a; 2021b), Armenia scores 5.7 for freedom of association, 4.9 for equal treatment, 5.3 for freedom of peaceful assembly, 4.8 for the right to participation in decision-making, and 4.7 for freedom of expression. In contrast to Armenia, Georgia has a higher score for freedom of association (6.1), equal treatment (5.6), right to participation in decision-making (4.8), and freedom of expression (4.9). However, Georgia's score for freedom of peaceful assembly (4.5) is lower than Armenia's. Based on the CSO Meter data, it can be concluded that civil society activism is more participatory in Georgia.

According to data from the Asian Development Bank (2020; 2021), faith-based CSOs operate under Georgian law and many religious institutions are represented in the country. This information highlights the cultural and ethnic diversity present in Georgia. The highest number of religious foundations are Muslim (40 organisations), followed by Orthodox, Catholic, and Baptist organisations. In Armenia, diaspora-based organisations in Europe, the Middle East, and the United States engage in Armenian civil society activities. The primary goal of these organisations is to preserve Armenian national identity abroad through the establishment of Armenian schools and community clubs that support the Armenian Apostolic Church. While these organisations have been associated with a nationalist perspective, such as the Karabakh conflict, they may lack ethnic and cultural diversity.

Overall, the perception of civil society in Georgia is more optimistic than in Armenia. The distribution of civil society and participation of ethnic groups in civil society indicate that Georgia provides more space for these groups, and its civil society environment is more decentralized than Armenia. It can be stated that the ruling elites in Armenia currently have control over the civil society environment. This has resulted in a more centralized structure and oppressed ideas regarding the concept of civil society.

The improvements in civil society in both countries can also be understood in terms of socio-economic conditions. When comparing the socio-economic situations of both countries, it is clear that Armenia has faced economic difficulties due to the breakdown of the central planning system and industries after the dissolution of the USSR. As a result, living standards in Armenia have decreased and poverty has increased (Sarian, 2006). Two additional factors were raised in the social-economic context, namely the impact of the 1988 earthquake and the Karabakh conflict with Azerbaijan. The earthquake destroyed industrial resources and left hundreds of thousands homeless (Suny, 1993: 210). The Karabakh conflict resulted in economic blockades imposed by Turkey and Azerbaijan, as well as a wave of migration from

Azerbaijan. As a result, the economic situation was hindered. In 1993, the GDP per capita was below $1000. However, over time, it has improved and reached over $4.67 in 2021 (The World Bank, 2022).

Since gaining independence, Georgia has faced economic challenges, particularly due to the 2003 Rose Revolution and the Russo-Georgian War in 2008, which had a significant impact on the country's economy. Looking at the GDP per capita progress of Georgia, it can be stated that it was a thousand dollar in 1995 and has since increased to $5.04 in 2021 (The World Bank, 2022). The current situation on socio-economic development appearing in USAID (2022) data shows that although both countries appear in upper-middle income group, Georgian's economy is more stable than Armenia. While Georgia's annual GDP growth is 10.36 %, Armenia's is 6.43 %. Similarly, Gross fixed capital formation (percentage of GDP) is 20.45 in Georgia, 17.24 in Armenia. Both states of CSOs however are highly dependent on international donors, and the biggest issue for CSOs is their financial stability and sustainability. Some 95% of funding for Georgia's CSOs comes from foreign agencies (Asian Development Bank, 2020). Similarly, foreign and diaspora support is highly effective on Armenian CSOs. Clearly, similar economic problems occurred in both counties` history, and those seemed such a problem for civil society effectiveness for Georgia and Armenia.

CONCLUSION

Armenia and Georgia were both under Soviet rule for an extended period. The USSR's state-centric ideology dominated the public sphere, impacting individuals' lives and their relationship with state authority. The experiences and knowledge of Armenia and Georgia regarding modern civil society differ but are also associated with each other for two reasons. Both Georgia and Armenia began building their nations independently. Their different and similar approaches within the context of the USSR played a significant role. Democracy promotion and international influence have been crucial in the development of civil society in both countries since the dissolution of the USSR, resulting in varying outcomes for their civil society agendas. In 2003, Georgia underwent the Rose Revolution, which led to the development of a healthy civil society environment. The civil initiative played a significant role in the revolution. In contrast, in Armenia, civil society activism has been primarily focused on the Karabakh issue, and the state has maintained control over civil society for many years.

In this political atmosphere, Georgian and Armenian civil society has developed around three main questions. Firstly, how does the legal environment of the country regulate the civil society atmosphere? Secondly, how do people perceive civil society, and does it have socio-ethnic diversity? Lastly, how do socio-economic life standards affect civil society in both countries? All three questions demonstrate that

despite facing similar social, political, and economic challenges, Georgian civil society has been established on stronger foundations. In the coming years, civil society activism may lead to a new wave of protests in both countries. Recent developments in the Karabakh conflict since 2020 could present new challenges and opportunities for Armenian civil society. However, it will take time for these changes to be reflected in civil society. Therefore, further studies could include these challenges and opportunities. Estimating the direction of this change is difficult, but analyzing, democracy promotion and international influence in detail can provide clues about its direction.

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