

# Self-determined citizens? A new wave of civic activism in Armenia | openDemocracy

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'When people on the street approached us and asked, "What NGO are you from?" We replied, "We are not from any NGO. We are citizens of the Republic of Armenia.'



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Since 2010, protests sparked by civic initiatives have become very common in Armenia's capital Yerevan and, to a lesser extent, in the smaller cities of Gyumri and Vanadzor. Civic initiatives in Armenia address a range of issues including the environment, cultural preservation, consumer rights, labour and employment issues, as well as human rights. However, they are distinct from formal, professionalized NGOs in a number of key aspects, which include the issues they address, their organizational structures, their repertoires of action, and their lack of engagement with foreign donors.

Similar to the movements discussed by [Kerstin Jacobsen](#), [lonel Sava](#) and others recently in [openMovements](#), civic initiatives in Armenia represent a new wave of civic activism in the post-Soviet period.

Examining the rise of civic initiatives, what does their emergence tell us about the development of civil society and the changing understandings and practices of civic activism and citizenship in the post-Soviet period? Quite a lot. Although civic initiatives in Armenia address very specific and sometimes narrowly focused issues (e.g. saving a waterfall, public park, etc.), their emergence is informed by and articulates much broader concerns around corruption, the absence of rule of law, lack of democracy, rise of oligarchic capitalism, and the failure of formal political elites to address the concerns of ordinary Armenian citizens.

While at times there are 'behind the scenes' links to professionalised NGOs, which [Marlies Glasius and I](#) have examined in Armenia and elsewhere, and which we refer to as 'surreptitious symbiosis', the activists involved in civic initiatives embrace a more political understanding of civil society than that which introduced by western donors in the 1990s, and they often distance themselves from NGOs.



Yerevan 'No to Plunder' protest march 27 May 2015, against proposed electricity fee hikes. Narek Aleksanyan. All rights reserved

Traditional NGO advocacy in Armenia is structured, non-confrontational, technocratic and expert-based. Civic initiatives utilize different repertoires of action that rely on street-based demonstrations, occupations as well as creative forms of direct action such as flash mobs, concerts, theatrical performances, and art or photography exhibitions. Moreover decision-making within civic initiatives is consensus-based and horizontality is valued and encouraged.

Civic initiatives, therefore, are not only rejecting the 'NGOization' of civil society, but they are also introducing new understandings of civil society and practices of civic activism. The individuals involved in civic initiatives describe their activism as a form of 'self-determined' citizenship and place great emphasis on independence, solidarity, and self-organisation.

They conceptualise citizenship to mean that individuals have rights as well as responsibilities toward their communities and their country and, as such, they encourage people to become the 'owners' of their country and active subjects rather than passive and silent bystanders in society, privately complaining about problems, but not taking any public action to change things. But why have these groups emerged now and what is their capacity to influence wider political processes?

## **Why are civic initiatives emerging now?**

Many of those I interviewed in Armenia explained the emergence and growth of civic initiatives as a new 'awakening' (*zartonk*) in societal consciousness, and argued that this was due both to the coming of age of a new generation who did not directly experience life under the Soviet regime, as well as the availability of new information and communication technologies. Indeed the vast majority of activists are people in their 20s and 30s, suggesting a marked generational aspect.

However, while the introduction and spread of social media, including Facebook and YouTube, as well as live-streaming technology has allowed civic activists to access information more easily and to organise and mobilise much more effectively and rapidly, we should be wary of exaggerating the impact of social media, especially when there is evidence that social media has also been a tool for government surveillance and even provocation (see [The Net Delusion](#) by Morozov). Furthermore, the availability of social media may explain *how* activists are organizing; but it does not explain *why* they are taking to the streets. Moreover, we should analyse the rise of activism in Armenia within the wider context of recent global protest movements.

Although Armenia is politically isolated and there are very few links between Armenian civil society

groups and wider global movements, activists do have access to information about global developments, as reflected by their use of slogans, practices, and discourses. For example, Occupy Mashtots Park, a civic initiative that in 2012 saved a public park from being demolished for the construction of luxury boutiques, self-consciously described itself as part of the global Occupy movement and incorporated many of Occupy's repertoires of action. However, activists have been keen to point out that the situation in Armenia is very different to that in other countries. One activist said, "Neoliberalism in Armenia manifests itself in a slightly different way than traditionally. The private interest is also your oligarch interest which translates into political power which translates into state power."



Sign claims 'High Voltage' for the protest movement from this civic initiative. Narek Aleksanyan. All rights reserved.

So, while recognising that neoliberal policies have global reach, we should not forget that the resistance to those policies is shaped by local histories and existing social and political realities.

In Armenia, as indeed elsewhere in the post-socialist region, the socialist legacy and the politics of the post-socialist transition continue to shape how people organise and mobilise.

This new wave of civic activism in Armenia is informed by the recent wave of global protests, but is more directly driven by the anger caused by the lack of action by local political parties and NGOs. Activists spoke angrily about the growing impunity of oligarchs and the absence of rule of law, adding that individual citizens have a right and responsibility to protest, and adding that people should not expect 'others' to act for them. Of course individual responsibility is a key feature of neoliberal rationality which stresses the self-responsibility of individual subjects. However, in the context of civic initiatives in Armenia, individual responsibility is not concerned with getting people to maximize their economic self-interests, but rather with individuals exercising responsibility through acting in solidarity with others for the greater common good. Activists frequently say to people, "You are a citizen; you have a voice, exercise it".

Beyond activist circles, however, such understandings of citizenship and responsibility are not widely shared. As one prominent, young female activist from Yerevan who has been involved in a number of environmental civic initiatives explained:

*"People call me all the time and say they are cutting down trees or destroying such and such. I tell them, "Thanks for letting me know, but don't just call me. You can address*

*that problem yourself. Of course I will help you, but it is your yard, your community, your park and you must act for yourself as well.”*

One reason for the lack of wider participation and activism is the prevailing ‘climate of fear’ in which people are afraid they will lose their jobs and livelihoods. Another reason is the lack of trust and belief in civil society as a force for change. NGOs have very low levels of public trust in Armenia and in the post-Soviet region as a whole. Thus many civic initiatives actively distance themselves from NGOs. For example, one activist told me, “When people on the street approached us and asked, “What NGO are you from?” We replied, “We are not from any NGO. We are citizens of the Republic of Armenia.”

A pamphlet printed by activists from the We Are Owners of the City civic initiative, which was involved in the occupation at Mashtots Park, contained the following message: “We are individual citizens...Our civic initiative is not a NGO and does not receive any financial assistance”. This distancing makes strategic sense given the widely shared perception, actively fuelled by the Government, that NGOs are ‘grant-eaters’ who singularly promote foreign (i.e. western) agendas, as I’ve argued in my book [Democracy Building and Civil Society in Post-Soviet Armenia](#) .

## **Can they influence wider political and policy processes?**

In recent years civic initiatives have achieved small but symbolically significant victories including preserving a waterfall (Save Trchkan Waterfall 2011); halting the demolition of a public park (Occupy Mashtots Park 2012); preventing transport fee hikes (the 100 Dram civic initiative - August 2013) and temporarily halting the Government’s plans for privatising pensions (the *Dem Em* [I am Against] civic initiative 2014). More recently there were very large demonstrations against the proposed electricity rate rises organised by the No to Plunder civic initiative in May 2015.

While Armenia’s Public Services Regulatory Commission is expected to rule on the proposal to raise the energy tariffs in mid-June, following mass protests, the Energy and Natural Resources Minister indicated that the regulatory body would approve a more modest price rise than originally stated. Although these full or partial victories have inspired participants and brought them greater public attention, civic initiatives have thus far neither been able to significantly widen participation beyond the capital nor, more importantly, led to structural changes or had an impact on politically sensitive issues such as violence in the Armenian army or mining.

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

There are advantages and disadvantages to each of these choices, but it remains to be seen how civic initiatives will develop in the future and whether and how they can change politics in Armenia.

*This article is based on a much longer article titled “Self-Determined Citizens? New Forms of Civic Activism and Citizenship in Armenia” accepted for publication in *Europe Asia Studies* (forthcoming in 2015).*