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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Manusyan, S. (2017). Civic Processes in Armenia: Stances, Boundaries and the Change Potential. *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, 91, 8-11. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-88311-6>

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Civic Processes in Armenia: Stances, Boundaries and the Change Potential

Sona Manusyan, Yerevan

Abstract

The article addresses the relationships among various actors who are (un)involved in civic processes and the implications of these relationships for socio-cultural change in Armenian society. The article discusses protests in their relation to boundaries, namely, how protests in Armenia affect these boundaries and how the phenomena of boundary work affect protest manifestation and evolution. The analysis questions some assumptions regarding the dynamic and emancipatory nature of movements. ‘Cultural layering’ is proposed as a concept to describe the various ways that socio-cultural factors affect protests. The analysis relies on data from interviews, participant observations and online discussions, and it centers on #ElectricYerevan. Prior and subsequent protests and secondary data on the country’s various social indicators are used to contextualize the findings.

Toward a Problem Statement

Armenia has been undergoing an impressive chain of protest movements during the last several years. The recent activism in the country has been seen by many as a herald of irreversible changes in society, particularly concerning #ElectricYerevan. The changing potential, especially of “the new generation,” goes unquestioned. However, are these grounded evaluations or just hopes? Numerous problems cause citizens to march in the streets and sit, lie, walk and shout in protest, but they keep many more people idle. Protests have been illustrative of the public’s ability to oppose the government. More straightforwardly, subsequent elections have illustrated both the regime’s ability to maintain the status-quo and the inertia of short-term orientations among many voters. Although there is a widespread discourse regarding national unity and “Armenianness”, Armenian society is divided along many lines in terms of socio-economic status and competing ideologies. These are just some of the tensions that urge a more specific reflection concerning the protests’ impact. What do movements change if they do not change society?

The prevailing way to discuss the country’s failures in reforms is to broadly refer to historical circumstances such as Armenia’s Soviet heritage or limited statehood experience, both of which are assumed to explain the population’s passive stance. However, recent political and social experience seems sufficient to contextualize the protests here and now. Migration, for instance, is one current factor that may compromise the change potential, but not from a demographic perspective. Rather, this issue may function as an emergency exit in the dilemmas of dissenting citizens. The discourses and state policies on ever-impending war activate security concerns, also at the expense of mobilization potential. The ambiguous effects of online media, which simultaneously generates and exhausts civic activity, must also be considered.

Because it is not in the realistic scope or objective of this analysis to discuss all the socio-cultural factors that are involved in protest dynamics, I will discuss only some relationship patterns and behavior trends that, directly or indirectly, abate the struggle. This approach implies a focus on the relational aspects of protest— of the processes that occur among various speakers and activists in protest movements.

Interplay Among Culture, Politics and the Individual in Protest Movements: Theoretical Considerations

Appealing to culture is the common way in scholarship to discuss the local specifics of protest movements and to understand the processes and interactions that are involved. Protest movements have both universal and unique aspects. People protest everywhere, but they do it differently, and the form of protest is contingent on the regime type and the culture that assigns the repertoire for contention¹. Protesters appeal to the accepted contention forms and narratives; new forms of contention meet additional obstruction by the authorities². Discussions of the culture-social change relationship must account for how culture is conceptualized, either as a system (of the institutions and norms that underlie the relationships) or these relationships themselves (process view) or as a frame that prescribes both how and what can be articulated in protest (frame view)³. Most inquiries on the subjective and intersubjective aspects of social movements are grounded in either the frame or process approach. However, equally influential is

1 Tilly, C. (2010) *Regimes and Repertoires*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

2 Ibid.

3 Gamson, W. A. (1995) Constructing Social Protest. *Social Movements and Culture*, 4, 85–106.; Johnston, H. & Klandermans, B. (1995) The Cultural Analysis of Social Movements. *Social Movements and Culture*, 4, 3–24.

the system approach, in which relatively stable cultural settings (such as values) are seen as limitations to social change. Thus, G. Hofstede argues for only 'outer-layer', material changes of culture as a result of globalization. Welzel and Inglehart are suspicious of profound democratic changes in transition countries (as long as democracy is just an instrumental preference and is not tied to underlying emancipatory values). Meanwhile, other scholars show how various socio-cultural characteristics predict low political participation⁴. In this regard, H. Johnston provides a useful reminder that culture is not quintessentially stable and movements are not quintessentially changeable, and the dichotomy should thus not be taken for granted⁵.

The culture-level analysis of movements has been concerned less with the problem of boundaries, although its relevance should be acknowledged. Most protests explicitly or implicitly question the existing positions, spaces and relationships. In the frames of this analysis, boundaries are understood in a broad sense, including any demarcations, distinctions and differences that are perceived, spoken or practiced and that can be expressed in both symbolic and objectified forms⁶. Boundary-work can be involved in all types of the collective relationships of movements to both maintain and change the existing positions.

Referring to cultural concepts in movement research involves arguing, not necessarily for exclusiveness, but for the statements that pattern the response to social-political issues and that assign frames for the collective relationships around them, which situates the research between the individual and the macro level. This is the perspective that is used in this analysis. Therefore, how do protests evolve in a country where there is simultaneously a strong need for and an avoidance of change?

Between norms and new urges: Ambiguous attitudes toward change are common among Armenian youth. Many focus-group participants reproduced negative clichés regarding change as a threat to the nation ("*Prudence is what has kept our nation alive for so many millennia*"; "*We are Armenians by our traditions and should have respect for them*"; "*One shouldn't really submit to*

the foreign influences"). Positive talk about change and joint action was seldom associated with the impulse to challenge established rules and was instead tied to self-enhancement, personal achievement, friendship values or other beliefs ("*I changed, became more self-confident and kind of skilled*", "*The most fascinating moment was obtaining new friends*"; "*I am fighting for myself*"). This use is consistent with the high scores in Armenia on conformity and security values that have been revealed in recent studies. In examining these attitudes qualitatively, especially apparent is conformity as outward consent ("*Let's say I don't agree, what then?*"; "*Everybody understands everything happening, but speaking about it won't help much*"). Multiple kinship and friendship ties, as well as formal hierarchies, limit the subjective value and the pragmatism of contention in various domains of life.

Cultural norms also discourage some emotions that have been identified in the literature as necessary for the success and longevity of collective protest. One such important emotion is group-based anger, which can be observed to quickly decline⁷ and eventually yield to excitement, admiration, national pride, sadness, and disappointment in response to the declining online and offline activity. The cultural pressure on the expression of opposition or anger is also tied to cultural assumptions of being a "wise, old nation" and to the valuation of prudence. This pressure is why even the large-scale public support of protesters does not imply transformation potential. Thus, many young people who were otherwise unresponsive to politically significant events exhibited intense online activity when "SasnaDzrer"⁸ took hostages at a police station, and these young people expressed their sympathy for the rebels on Facebook. Struggle-related (especially national) vocabulary was involved; however, the primary motivation for this online support was to fit in the mainstream and be positively evaluated (as caring about the nation's heroes, being patriotic, etc.) rather than to oppose the authorities or reflect on a problematic situation. It is very telling that the most widely shared protest-related photo was the photo of a young activist woman hugging a policeman—a selective positive depiction that blunts and obfuscates the existing antagonism.

Ethno-cultural layering of protests: Ethno-cultural perceptions and emotions are a prevalent way in which the events of public significance are reacted to in Armenia.

4 Welzel, C., & Inglehart, R. (2009) Political Culture, Mass Beliefs, and Value Change. *Democratization*, 126–144; Caprara, G. V., 1–28; Hofstede, G., et al (1991) *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind* (Vol. 2). London; Alesina, A. & Giuliano, P. (2009). *Family ties and political participation* (No. 4150). IZA discussion papers.

5 Johnston, H., & Klandermands, B. (1995) The Cultural Analysis of Social Movements. *Social Movements and Culture*, 4, 3–24.

6 For a comprehensive discussion, see Lamont, M., & Molnár, V. (2002). The study of boundaries in the social sciences. *Annual review of sociology*, 167–195.

7 Remarkably, the photo of a protestor who showed his middle finger to the police water cannon became an iconic symbol of #ElectricYerevan after group anger had peaked.

8 An armed group calling themselves the "Daredevils of Sassoun" took hostages at a Yerevan police unit on July 17, 2016, demanding the president's resignation, the release of political prisoners and the formation of a new, publicly trusted government.

This method continues to be productively used by (pro) governmental actors and the media to stifle collective dissent. National sentiments can be easily exploited for several reasons, one being the very habitualness of discussions of national matters. As a topic with ready-made rhetorical templates, these discussions easily channel surface communication, but they may hinder purposeful communication for joint action. Because its reference point is the idealized, not present-day, Armenia, these discussions can hardly have a mobilizing effect for addressing current issues. Furthermore, these discussions soon bring to the surface the highly contradictory meanings of national identity among different opinion groups. Electric Yerevan was one example among many in which the declining dynamics of the protest corresponded with increasing national thematizations of the protest both in positive terms of national unity (“*We Armenians proved that we can be a power*”) and negative terms of its failure (“*Again Armenians failed to unite*”). In addition, disagreements have often been experienced and expressed in the language of cultural differences, which highlights the relative boundaries among different opinion groups (“*I doubt we are of the same nation*”, “*How can an Armenian not like this music and want to turn on some rock?*”).

Interactions, Stances, Boundaries

#ElectricYerevan once again revealed the existing tensions between the civically active and inactive segments of Armenian society, as well as the ideological gaps among various participants. One boundary-related pattern was the generalized mutual perceptions of protesters and the wider public. Whether positive or negative, these perceptions are typified. Little if any attempt is made by the activists to discern the groups with engagement potential and sensitivity to various messages. Likewise, protesters are widely perceived by over-generalized features (e.g., strugglers, heroes, or agents of external interference, etc.). The social perception of activism has somewhat improved amid recent protests. Upon closer examination, however, the public support resembles a distanced consumer stance from which evaluations are made (“*These guys and girls are cool, we will be owing them our future*”, “*Why couldn't they do anything in the end?*”). Thus, public criticism has been mostly concerned with the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the activists, and the public perceives them as specialists who are in charge of performing services (improvement, struggle, destroying the regime, etc.). Likewise, many activists initially used Facebook for motivating and mobilizing and for discussion; later, however, statements that made the platform appear similar to communication between media personalities and an audience became more prev-

alent. There have been, of course, calls to “*come to Baghramyan*” or “*Join*”, but hardly any messages appealed to the targets’ sense of agency, usefulness, or ability to express an opinion. On the one hand, identifying and being identified as a distinct group is an almost inevitable and functional identity process for activists. However, if the relativity of the distinction is not reflected on, it can and does become a dividing line that discourages new activists. An “observer” is reassured that there is no need or space for her/him.

Humor as a boundary-marker: Humor has had a major role in forming the main messages and logos of protests, as well as in the reactions to pressure, official speeches and violent acts by (pro)government figures and units (consider “*My (water) cannon is bigger than yours*” or the funny wordplays on the government’s promotions “*Say Yes to the new Constitution*”). Far more than being a style of criticism, it has currently become a habitual form of responding to events. Humorous attacks on political or other figures decrease the civic pressure on them, because they symbolically enact this pressure. The caustic jokes used in protesters’ discourse have also been an important boundary marker. These caustic jokes not only make positive communication unlikely but also, more importantly, act to rupture any, even conflictive, communication by making it unnecessary.

Toward Conclusions: Implications for Further Research

#ElectricYerevan, and its antecedents “Save Mashtots Park” and “We pay 100 dram”,⁹ have surely had long-lasting effects, but these effects primarily affected the “culture of activism” itself rather than the country’s general political or cultural context. Protests have communication patterns that compromise the protest’s dynamics—both in terms of intensity and extent. Prevailing schemes of interaction in society, namely, the tendency to form groups and exclude other people, also affect protesters, who claim to contest these schemes. Furthermore, what often occurs in protests is the thematic shift from the specific cause toward ethno-national sentiments. Finally, protests here are a twofold task: in addition to pursuing the cause itself, activists must challenge the very norms that discourage contention. Thus, culture, understood as both a value-normative system and a symbolic-expressive resource, layers and ‘encapsulates’ protest movements in Armenia in several senses.

⁹ The movement against the illegal construction of boutiques in a park in Yerevan’s city center began in the winter of 2012; 2. Public city-wide protests against the rise of public transportation fees began in the summer of 2013.

Analyses regarding the effectiveness of specific movements seem to be untimely against this backdrop. The civic sector has yet to enable protests in society in their most general sense. It would be misleading to conclude, however, that ‘culture itself’ must be changed. From what we have observed so far, civic discourses and actions that target culture have triggered even more cultural resistance. Changing “activism itself” as if performing a program update also does not seem to be an effective approach. There is already an unnoticed subject shift in social research from problems that cause protests to protests as problems themselves. To add value, fur-

ther research on activism should also discuss what can be done to work toward change beyond activism. One junction among the various problems that are discussed above is the social agency that must be enhanced alongside individual agency. This approach puts two interconnected goals in perspective: to seek modes of collective action that make individual effort meaningful and to seek modes of individual agency that make collective action meaningful. Individual, social and political conditions are reciprocal and should be addressed in their interconnectedness through cross-disciplinary efforts.

About the Author

Sona Manusyan holds a doctoral degree in psychology and is an assistant professor at Yerevan State University Department of Personality Psychology. She teaches cultural psychology and qualitative methodology in psychology. Sona’s research interests center on identity questions, national subjectivity, the personal-public relationship, and online behavior. Her current research focuses on civic initiatives and larger societal processes in Armenia.

Further Reading

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- Johnston, H. (Ed.). (2009). *Culture, social movements, and protest*. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.
- Stetsenko, A. (2012). Personhood: An activist project of historical becoming through collaborative pursuits of social transformation. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 30(1), 144–153.

BOOK REVIEW

Anna Zhamakochyan, Zhanna Andreyan, Sona Manusyan, and Arpy Manusyan (2016): Փոփոխության Որոնումներ (Quest for Change), Socioscope NGO

Reviewed by Armine Ishkanian, London

Quest for Change, written in Armenian, is a compact yet incredibly rich collection of essays. The main questions addressed by the collection of essays are: how to change the situation in Armenia; what does change in this context mean or entail; and what are the obstacles to change? Written from different perspectives and reflecting on recent movements (e.g., Electric Yerevan) and events (e.g., the April 2016 conflict; the Sasna Tsrer siege), the essays examine the current context, the politics and dynamics of activism and protest, and the obstacles to change in Armenia. The essays are written by researchers who, on the one hand are well-versed in the contemporary academic debates and literatures around sociological theories, but who on the other hand are also partic-

ipant observers of the unfolding processes which they describe and analyse. This positionality provides them with insights which may elude outside observers, yet I found that it did not prevent them from embracing a critical distance from which they analyse the unfolding processes and events. Overall, the essays provide an informed, critical, and incisive analysis of the current socio-political situation in Armenia and also offer new perspectives on some perennial issues and questions (e.g., the nature and impact of Armenian nationalism; the nature of the Armenian State, etc.).

The first essay, by Anna Zhamakochyan, examines the different and, at times, contradictory articulations of the discourse of “national unity” which emerged after