

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF ARMENIA

CIVIC ACTIVISM AND NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN ARMENIA

2013-2014: PATTERNS AND INTERACTIONS IN FOUR SELECTED CASES

**A MASTER’S ESSAY SUBMITTED TO
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Abstract

Armenian civil society is entering a new stage of development, with emerging civic activism. The relationship between civic activism and formal organizations is not yet clear. This Master's essay studies four civic initiatives in 2013-2014 in Armenia, and tries to see what has been the input of NGOs in those movements. In-depth interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis were conducted to investigate selected initiatives. As a result of this, it was found out that civic activism makes Armenian civil society more diverse, also it empowers people. Moreover, it was discovered that NGOs are not the main actors in selected civic initiatives.

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Introduction

During recent years we hear more and more frequently in media about civil society becoming more active in Armenia. However, we do not very often have a clear image of what that civil society consists of. This Master's essay tries to examine civic initiatives that occurred during 2013 and 2014 in Armenia, and to see what the relationship between civic activism and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is.

NGOs are the most common civil society organizations in Armenia. According to the State Registry of the Republic of Armenia, as of February 2015 there are 4,149 NGOs officially registered in Armenia, compared to 3,650 in January 2014. Alongside with the increase of numbers of NGOs, civic initiatives are also becoming more common in Armenia. By saying civic activism in Armenian reality, we mainly mean civic initiatives, which unite people for a certain cause. During last two years (2013-2014) several civic initiatives have taken place. For this study four civic initiatives have been chosen: “We Pay 100 Dram” initiative (July 2013) as one of the most successful cases, “DEM EM” (November-December 2013-present) as one of the largest social movements in Armenia, “Let's Preserve the Afrikyan Club Building” (June-July 2014) as a failed case, and “Stop Changes in Maternity Leave Law” (October-December 2014) was chosen since it was the ongoing movement at the time of the start of this research project.

The essay is based on document analysis, interviews and focus group discussions with initiators, key activists and participants of four movements. It demonstrates that all four are quite different from each other. While there was some cooperation between them, there are still tensions among various groups of activists. As to the NGOs, they did not have a significant contribution to those movements in most of the cases, however, the lines separating NGO

members and activists are still very blurry, since many activists of the selected movements are or have once been members of NGOs.

Chapter 1. Literature Review

Civil society, as a term, has become very popular during recent decades. One of the reasons for this is that after the collapse of the Soviet Union the post-Communist countries, among which Armenia, are having their very first experiences with civil society with increasing numbers of NGOs and civic initiatives on various issues. While some people consider civil society being a “magic bullet” for the solution of various issues present in a country, others believe that in a country with a background and mentality like Armenia, civil society will not function the way it did in the West.

Civil society has several definitions. Among the most known ones is the definition by Diamond (1994), which is the following: “civil society is a realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, (largely) self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules” (Diamond 1994, 5).

The literature review discusses the relationship between civil society and democracy, also social capital, post-Communist civil society, the relationship between NGOs and civic activism. It presents evidence that different forms of association create wider civic participation and demonstrates that there are spheres, where only NGOs can act effectively as the representatives of civil society.

1.1 Civil Society and Democracy

There are some authors, who believe that civil society can foster democracy in a country. Diamond (1994) states that recently the phenomenon of civil society has been observed as one of the main driving forces for democratization. He argues that although most of the transitions to

democracy of recent years have been done peacefully, it is still believed that it was the civil society that forced this transition, even a negotiated one. However, Diamond argues that civil society both may contribute, strengthen democracy, and at the same time it may have contradictions and tensions with democracy, meaning that too much freedom and diversification among the population may lead to instability of the state. Like Diamond, Dash (2001) argues that civil society is needed to maintain government and the private sector accountable, it is the main provider of legitimacy to the government. He mentions that civil society is claimed to be an effective tool for overcoming the difficulties of democratic governments and can foster economic development. He presents the civil society-democracy relationship from the viewpoint of liberals. He states that liberals have come to the conclusion that civil society is required to sustain democratic spirit. According to the liberal theory, voluntary associations need to be created and preserved without the intervention of state, not giving the latter one rights to “suppress the voice of the civil society” (Dash 2001, 248). Only in this case liberals believe that civil society can lead to the common welfare and democracy (Dash 2001).

Unlike the authors discussed above, other scholars believe in just the opposite, arguing that civil society and civic participation do not directly lead to democratization. Among these authors are Ellis (2013) and Risley (2013). The former one discusses the situation in the Indian context and the second author presents the situation in the United States of America, Argentina and in Weimar Germany. Ellis (2013) starts the article by saying that public participation has recently become one of the most effective tools through which good governance is being ensured in India. Civic initiatives are aimed at the democratization of public decision-making process. Ellis (2013) believes that, for instance, in the case of consultations for the Chennai’s Second Master Plan that was designed to initiate new constructions in Chennai, public and civic

initiatives played a crucial role in succeeding to convince public officials to take into consideration environmental issues. However, Ellis (2013) calls on not to idealize the role of the intervention by public participation, as he mentions that the case of Chennai can be an exceptional one and not a norm. Like Ellis (2013), Risley (2013) does not idealize civil society and civic participation and their impact on democratization. He brings examples of white Americans forming associations against African Americans. This way he shows that often engagement in a civil society, in this case in associations, may lead to the exclusion of other groups of people, here African Americans. So, in this particular case associations do not contribute to the democratization at all. In Weimar Germany a vibrant civil society “contributed to the demise of democracy by reinforcing social divisions and disseminating Nazi ideology” (Risley 2005, 180). In Argentina Risley (2013) believes that activities of civil society have hindered democratization. In his opinion, civic initiatives in Argentina reinforce the fragmentation of the society and frustration against the authorities.

1.2. Post-Soviet Civil Society

There are some authors, such as Howard (2002) and Mohanty (2002), who examined the civil society and civic engagement in post-Communist states. Howard (2002) compares the post-communist countries that were part of the USSR with post-Communist countries in Europe. Howard (2002) brings several reasons of why civil society is weak in the post-Communist space. The first reason is that people still have distrust towards organizations and associations, because the membership in associations during Communist era was mandatory and forced. Another reason is that because of mistrust towards the public sector, people created their own networks of friends and/or relatives, and they still do not need associations to replace those networks. And finally, the disappointment in the states after the collapse of the USSR makes people refrain from

participation. Mondak and Gearing (1998) look at whether political and social constraints of the socialist regime have had their impact on civic engagement. The authors compared the city Cluj-Napoca, Romania with South Bend, Indiana, USA. The study concludes that people in Romania are less interested in politics and are less participatory in civil society. Main reasons for these situations are considered to be lack of practice in civic engagement.

1.3. Civil Society and Formal Organizations

Another set of authors look at whether formal organizations are a precondition for the civic participation or not. Sampson et al. (2005), as well as Kirlin and Kirlin (2002) observe formal organizations as a precondition for civic engagement. This set of authors sees formal organizations and institutions as the basis for the success of a civic initiative. For example, the 1989 Chinese Student movement, which consolidated student unions all over China, and the case of Civic Forum Movement in Czechoslovakia, were mainly triggered by independent theatre companies. In case of the absence of formal foundation, it would be impossible to organize those social movements (Sampson et al. 2005). Kirlin and Kirlin (2002) go even further and they argue that the formal organizations through which civic engagement is going to be implemented should be formed by the governments. They claim that only formal organizations can unite people for a common target.

Berry (2005), Malena and Heinrich (2007) and Mohanty (2002) consider that in some cases formal organizations can impede civic participation and they are not the basis for active civil society. For example, NGOs in the United States are regulated by the federal government in such a way that discourages the involvement of their followers in the public policymaking process. This happens because of regulatory standards (Berry 2005). There is a notion which emphasizes that civil society should not be treated as only a set of organizations, since in this

case other forms of expression of civic will, such as protests, demonstrations, and other informal initiatives are excluded. This is important, as in many countries formal NGOs are not that active, and the core of the civil society are civic activists, not necessarily being a part of a formal NGO (Malena and Heinrich 2007). They argue that the core of the civil society are the citizens and not organizations. Mohanty (2002) claims that NGOs observe civil society as an arena, where they implement projects which various donor organizations consider useful at that specific time period. Mainly these projects are designed to strengthen good governance and democracy or other issues that are a part of an agenda of the donor organization or the respective government. This way NGOs frequently become tools for the achievement of goals of donor organizations and governments that sponsor them (Mohanty 2002). So, NGOs may even hinder the development of the civil society.

Besides discussing whether formal organizations or civic initiatives constitute the core of civic participation, research has also been conducted to show which of these two forms of the engagement in civil society creates more social capital. Welzel, Inglehart, and Deutsch (2005) and Hyman (2002) think that civic initiatives generate more social capital than membership in formal organizations. Welzel, Inglehart, and Deutsch (2005) argue that almost all the research that has been done in the field show that the main indicator for the community involvement is the membership in voluntary associations, but the authors think this is not so. They claim that another form of community involvement- participation in elite-challenging actions is neglected by scholars. In their opinion, “elite-challenging action reflects social capital, even though this is a specific form of it: an emancipative form typical of self-assertive publics” (Welzel, Inglehart, and Deutsch 2005, 121). They also argue that elite-challenging actions create greater civic benefits both at individual and societal levels. One of their main conclusions is that self-

expression values are a very powerful motivator for the construction of social capital, and these values, according to the authors, are very productive in elite-challenging actions. They even claim that the strengthening of these values through elite-challenging actions may lead to the strengthening of democratic institutions. Hyman (2002) also gives an importance to civic initiatives in strengthening social capital and building a stronger community. He claims that for the creation of social capital we need to have a civic initiative with a particular goal or purpose and not just an association, where people will spend their free time. He also suggests that “the welfare of communities increases with increases in the numbers of civically active members” (Hyman 2002, 202).

However, there are some fields, where according to authors, like Eade (2000) and Banks and Hulme (2012), only the formal registered NGOs can properly represent the civil society. Both authors discuss the role of NGOs, as representatives of civil society, in the development. Eade (2000) mentions that at the end of the 20th century international donor organizations decided to address NGOs and ask them for support in implementing development projects in developing countries. The donor organizations called on the NGOs to return to their role as social change-makers and holders of non-market values, agents that promote cooperation, non-violence, and protection of human rights. Eade (2000) notes that many international donor organizations simply refer to NGOs as the only civil society units, and are determined in continuing financing NGOs in developing countries. Banks and Hulme (2012) mention that since the 1970s NGOs have played a crucial role in the development agendas of developing countries. They also see NGOs as the only form of civil society that can help the state in the development process. The authors argue that throughout these decades NGOs have proved to be very efficient in handling various development issues, such as the implementation of poverty reduction

programs. The main reason for this, according to the authors, is that NGOs have depoliticized the issue of poverty and treat the phenomenon as a technical problem that can be “solved”. Nevertheless, Banks and Hulme (2012) mention that in order to be able to be the key actors in the development, it is required from the NGOs to make “a shift away from their role as service providers to that of facilitators and supporters of broader civil society organisations through which low-income communities themselves can engage in dialogue and negotiations to enhance their collective assets and capabilities” (Banks and Hulme 2012, 2).

Several authors studied the relationship between NGOs and civic activists in Armenia. Armineh Ishkanian and Marius Glasius looked at civic initiatives of 2011-2012 in Yerevan, and also at the relationship between NGOs and civic initiatives up to 2013. Their main findings were that the civic initiatives were new to Armenia, since there was not such a mobilization of population since the collapse of the USSR (Ishkanian, Glasius, and Ali 2013). Another issue was that the line separating NGOs and social movements is very blurry (Glasius and Ishkanian 2014). In her separate work Ishkanian (2014) argues that civic initiatives have been a fresh air to Armenian civil society that might make NGOs change their functioning style.

1.4. Membership in Civil Society Organizations

Research has also been conducted to show what influence membership in various organizations and associations has on the quality and intensity of people’s involvement in civic initiatives. Alexander et al. (2012) and Terriquez (2011) both have conducted a survey and in-depth interviews to find out what is the linkage between the membership and civic activism. Alexander et al. (2012) argue that the relationship between the membership in voluntary associations and participation in civic initiatives is well established, but there are several questions that still need to be addressed, such as “relative impacts of how much time people

spend on group activities (associational intensity), and the number and type of groups that individuals are involved with (associational scope)” (Alexander et al. 2012, 43). After having surveyed over 4,000 people in Melbourne, Australia, Alexander et al. came to the conclusion that all forms of membership are important in fostering the engagement in civic activism, however, different forms of membership do not generate the same level of involvement in civic activities. The authors found out that more a person is involved in various associations, the more it is likely that he/she will actively participate in the civic initiatives. Another finding was that those people who are members of advocacy-based groups are more likely to demonstrate civic activism. Terriquez (2011) focused her research on Latino immigrant families in Los Angeles, USA. Her research shows that in this particular case membership in a labour union does not mean that people are actively involved in civic initiatives. She claims that while some active members of the labour unions never take part in movements and demonstrations, for others membership is a stimulus to be engaged in further civic initiatives. Moreover, some people find that experience in civic activism enhances their leadership skills. These all, according to her, depend on the level of the involvement in the labour union.

Different authors have observed the relationship between NGOs and civic initiatives from various aspects. Some believe that NGOs are a precondition for civic participation, while others think that NGOs impede the development of the civil society. Others think that there are aspects of life, where only NGOs can represent civil society. It would be interesting to see what the case in Armenia is, whether the occurrence of civic initiatives more frequently during last two years is connected with the rising number of NGOs.

1.5. Hypotheses and Research Questions

To study the selected civic initiatives and also the input of NGOs in them, two hypotheses with their relevant research questions are formulated below.

Hypothesis 1: “Civic activism contributes to the strengthening of civil society in Armenia”.

This hypothesis tries to see whether the intensification of civic initiatives in Armenia during recent years, which was also noted by Ishkanian and Glasius, has contributed to the strengthening of the civil society. By saying strengthening, we mean whether those civic initiatives have raised awareness on the issues they were struggling for, whether they have attracted more people to join their cause, whether there has been a transition of skills and experience among activists. Hypothesis N1 has three research questions:

- ❖ Research Question 1: What strategies do civic initiatives employ to raise public awareness?
- ❖ Research Question 2: How do the selected initiatives relate to each other?
- ❖ Research Question 3: What are the main similarities and differences of selected cases?

We want to examine the relationships between four cases, as well as similarities and differences between them to observe whether there was a transition of skills and experience. By finding out the strategies the initiatives used to raise public awareness, we will not only see the awareness image, but also whether those strategies helped to attract more people.

The second hypothesis is the following:

Hypothesis 2: “NGOs are the key players in civic activism in Armenia”.

It suggests that NGOs have the most important role in civic activism in Armenia. In order to check the hypothesis two research questions are formulated:

- ❖ Research Question 4: What is the role of NGOs in selected civic initiatives?
- ❖ Research Question 5: How are NGOs perceived by civic activists?

The study addresses the inputs of NGOs in the selected four civic initiatives, and looks at how NGOs are perceived by civic activists.

Chapter 2. Methodology

In order to be able to study the selected cases in greater detail, and to answer research questions, the qualitative research design was chosen. The qualitative research design for this Master's Essay features document analysis of news website articles, Facebook group and page posts, 15 in-depth interviews and two focus group sessions.

Document analysis was conducted to have a full grasp of the selected cases, to identify key actors, to see how the activities were organized, what were the goals of the initiatives and what they managed to achieve. Fifteen interviews with key activists and NGO leaders provided insights on how the movements were structured, how they were cooperating with each other and with NGOs, what were the mutual perceptions. Focus group sessions identified whether those activists who are members of NGOs or associations, were encouraged or discouraged to participate in civic initiatives by their organizations. Focus groups also engaged NGO members, who did not participate in selected initiatives, to see what were the reasons that they did not take part in the movements, also to see their attitude towards movements.

The first step was document analysis of newspaper articles. Yerevan Press Club¹ was consulted to choose the news websites. “Hayastani Hanrapetutyun” was selected as a pro-governmental newspaper, “Haykakan Zhamanak” as an oppositional one, “Aravot” newspaper was chosen as more or less neutral, and “Hetq” news website was advised as the investigative and research-based one.

¹ NGO, Professional Association of Journalists in Armenia, <http://ypc.am/>

The document analysis of articles of the news websites helped to reconstruct the chain of events of the initiatives and identified key activists of the movements that were later interviewed. Overall 150 articles were used in writing the summary of initiatives. The number of articles per each movement in all four news websites was counted and is presented in Table 1, Table 2, Table 3, and Table 4 in Chapter 3 of this Master's essay. News websites were also used to find the announcements of the initiatives. Two announcements per each movement were selected: one from the start of the initiative and the other from the ending or latest period. The analysis of the announcements shows how the goals of the movements have changed over time.

During the document analysis several key activists were identified for interviewing. The remaining key activists of the selected civic initiatives were advised by the key activists themselves. All in all, 12 activists were interviewed. Four people were interviewed for “We Pay 100 Dram”, three of them were among the initiators of the movement. Three people were interviewed from “DEM EM”. All of them were members of the coordinating group of the movement, two of them were in the group from very beginning, and the third one joined afterwards. Also, three people were interviewed for “Let's Preserve the Afrikan Club Building” movement, two of which were the initiators and members of the informal coordinating group of the initiative; the other one was a journalist, who observed the events. As to the “Stop Changes in the Maternity Leave Law” civic initiatives, two members of the initiating team were interviewed.

Three NGO leaders were also interviewed. Two of the NGOs were advised by the activist interviewees; the other one was selected based on the fact that currently it is the most active youth NGO in Armenia and has the largest number of members. The other two NGOs deal with

democracy and women rights issues. Among 12 activists being interviewed two people were also NGO leaders, specialized in women rights and cultural affairs.

NGO leaders and activists interviewed were asked to give contacts of people that are eligible to participate in focus groups. Focus group sessions were designed to include NGO members who have participated in selected four civic initiatives and NGO members that have not. The first focus group session included six participants, three of them were NGO members that participated in the movements, and three have not taken part in the movement. They were from youth and educational NGOs. The second session had ten participants, four of whom have not been part of the movements. Focus group participants were members of youth, women rights and environmental NGOs.

Facebook presence of selected civic initiatives was also observed. Official Facebook groups and pages of the movements were found; the numbers of the group members and page followers were presented in Table 5 in the analysis below. The content of those groups and pages was also taken into consideration: it was noted whether the current topics discussed in groups and/or pages are applicable to their initial cause or not.

Chapter 3. Summary of the Selected Civic Initiatives

In order to be able to restore the sequence of events in all four initiatives, news articles from the websites of “Hayastani Hanrapetutyun” (“Republic of Armenia”), “Haykakan Zhamanak” (“Armenian Times”) and “Aravot” newspapers, as well as “Hetq” were used. These newspapers and websites were recommended by the Yerevan Press Club representative: “Hayastani Hanrapetutyun” as the pro-government one, “Haykakan Zhamanak” as pro-opposition one, “Aravot” as neutral one, and “Hetq” as investigative one.

3.1. We Pay 100 Dram

On July 19, 2013 mayor of Yerevan issued a decree to reconsider the fare rate of public transport of Yerevan city by setting an amount of 150 AMD instead of former 100 AMD. On July 20, 2013 the movement called “We Pay 100 Dram” started to disseminate flyers, calling citizens not to pay 150 AMD instead of 100 AMD, as the 50% price increase is much higher than the increase in the price of fuel necessary for public transport. According to the movement, this increase would cost on average extra 10,000 AMD for an average family living in Yerevan. The initiators of the movement believed that the increase is not justified and if no opposition is shown, this will become a base for future price increases. So, the initiators were calling citizens to join them (Hetq 2013a).

It is hard to estimate how many people took part in this movement, as the forms of participation were various. People participated in the movement by joining the demonstrations, by not paying 150 AMD in public transport, by driving strangers to home in their own cars.

During several days the activists were disseminating flyers, organizing rallies in the center of Yerevan, as well as trying to persuade the drivers and passengers at the bus stops in different parts of Yerevan to join the movement and continue paying 100 AMD. On July 22, 2013 the Police of the RA issued a statement which argued that the activities of the activists especially at the Mashtots Ave. are disturbing the traffic of Yerevan and undermining the psychological stance of the drivers (Hetq 2013b). As a response to the statement, activists of the movement made a statement on July 23, 2013, according to which, the Constitution of the RA allows people to hold peaceful rallies and demonstrations. The statement said that it is the working conditions of the drivers that work more than 8 hours a day, sometimes without any rest, rather than peaceful rallies, that led to many losses of human lives (Hetq 2013c).

Again on July 23, “We Pay 100 Dram” movement published its demands to the Yerevan Municipality. The demands were the following: to keep the public transport fare 100 AMD, to de-privatize public transport and make it public under the control of Municipality, before de-privatization to establish control over private companies operating public transport and to make sure that they provide service in a good quality, to publish the list of all the companies operating public transport and to present their expenses, their gained benefits and paid taxes during last five years; to give an opportunity to public to be informed and to participate before making such important decisions (Hetq 2013d).

Some violent episodes occurred as well. On July 23 an activist Astghik Aghekyan reported that she had been beaten by two unknown people (Hovhannisyan 2013a). Some activists after being arrested and released declared that they suspected Police following them (Hovhannisyan 2013b). On July 25 the activists started a protest in front of the government building and rallied to the Municipality.

On July 25, 2013, Mayor of Yerevan, Taron Margaryan, after six days of the decree about the increase of the public transport fare rate, declared that the decision is suspended, as the public does not need to bear the burden of inflation (Yerevan Municipality 2013). The public accepted this as a victory of the movement. However, this was not enough for the activists. Starting from July 26, several activists started a sit-in in front of the Municipality. They demanded a dismissal of the head of the transport department of Yerevan Municipality, Henrik Navasardyan, and the director of the “Yerevantrans” CJSC, Misak Hambardzumyan (Hetq 2013e). Some of them even said that the decision of July 25, 2013 should not be treated as a full victory (Jebejyan 2013).

There were rumors that soon after July 25 the movement was fragmented. Activist Ruzan Grigoryan said that was not true. Nevertheless, Ani Kaghinyan said that not all members of the movement agreed with the sit-in, thinking that it was too early, since they did not have enough consolidation yet (Simonyan 2013).

One of the very interesting features of this movement was that many people owning a car were helping strangers by driving them to work places or home. Many famous people, like Hayk Marutyan (actor/comedian), Garik Papoyan (singer/comedian), Andranik Harutyunyan (actor), Lala Mnatsakanyan (actress) and others, also joined the movement (Aghbalyan 2013).

The newspaper Hayastani Hanrapetutyun had only one article on this issue. It was the justification of the price increase by Galust Sahakyan. Most articles were published in Hetq. See Table 1 below for the numbers of articles published per source.

Table 1. “We Pay 100 Dram” in media (number of articles)

Hayastani Hanrapetutyun	Haykakan Zhamanak	Aravot	Hetq
1	3	9	23

3.2. DEM EM

At the end of year 2013 it was announced that the new pension reform with its mandatory cumulative part would be enforced starting January 2014. “DEM EM” movement reacted very quickly to this mandatory component and declared its mission to fight against it, as the mandatory component in the opinion of the activists of the movement is against the interests of citizens of the Republic of Armenia (Aravot 2013).

The “DEM EM” team was established by the end of year 2013. The coordinating team consisted of 25-35 people, with some people entering the team and some leaving, but the core 25 people constantly were involved in the movement. On December 17, 2013 “DEM EM” movement published its main demands: to remove the mandatory element from the pension reform, to engage society and consult with different parts of it before making such decisions, and the final one- to hold a referendum before enforcing a new pension system (Aravot 2013).

Similar to the case of the “We Pay 100 Dram” movement, famous people like Arman Nshanyan (singer/actor), Sos Janibekyan (actor), Lusine Tovmasyan (TV reporter), Suren Tadevosyan (director) and others declared that they support “DEM EM” movement (Armenian Times 2014a).

Mass demonstrations started to occur at the beginning of 2014. On January 18, 2014, around 10-12 thousand people attended the demonstration against the mandatory part of the new pension system (activist, female, 29).

On January 31, 2014, “DEM EM” movement spread a statement which called on the employers of the Republic of Armenia not to make a mandatory 5% reduction from the salaries of their employees, as the Constitutional Court of the RA had suspended the process of the enforcement of the mandatory cumulative pension reform, since further investigation was needed (Hetq 2014a).

On February 27 “DEM EM” movement made a statement in which it was said that some members of the movement have been put pressure on and even prosecuted for their activities. They said that in case of necessity they would resort to violent methods (Aravot 2014a).

Already by the end of March 2014 then the president of the National Assembly Hovik Abrahamyan said that they also had recognized that there are several mistakes in the reform (Armenian Times 2014b). On April 3, 2014 the prime-minister of the RA Tigran Sargsyan resigned. Many people believed that one of the reasons for the resignation was the pension reform and the opposition towards it (Barseghyan 2014). On April 18, 2014 the newly-appointed prime-minister Hovik Abrahamyan met with the activists of “DEM EM” protesting in front of the residence of the president and suggested to cooperate (Hayastani Hanrapetutyun 2014). Starting from July 1, 2014, the pension reform entered into force without the mandatory part.

“DEM EM” movement is still very active; it still thinks that the new pension system needs many reviews and corrections. “DEM EM” is taking part in various other initiatives, having a goal to have more prosperous Armenia without having any political aims.

“DEM EM” activities were mostly covered by the newspaper “Aravot”. See Table 2 for detailed information on the number of articles on this movement in four selected media sources.

Table 2. “DEM EM” in media (number of articles)

Hayastani Hanrapetutyun	Haykakan Zhamanak	Aravot	Hetq
7	7	51	10

3.3. Let’s Preserve the Afrikyan Club Building

On June 9, 2014, there was a call by the initiators of the movement “Let’s Preserve the Afrikyan Club Building” to the citizens concerned with the destiny of the building. The place of the building was sold to the “Millennium Construction” LLC despite the fact that the building

was recognized by the government of the Republic of Armenia as a place of eminent public interest in 2007 by the decision N108. It was decided to transfer the stones of the building to the space in the center of Yerevan, where “Old Yerevan” project will be implemented. The statement indicated that the building is more than 130 years old and the stones of the building are enumerated in order to be transported and restored in another place, however according to the same statement such promises regarding other monuments were not carried out. The statement further declared that the initiators of the movement are not only trying to preserve the identity of Yerevan, but they are also concerned with the fate of the residents of Teryan 11 (Building of Afrikyans). The statement ends with the call to people to join the movement as a sign of solidarity and this is mentioned as an opportunity to prevent any other such actions towards monuments of Yerevan (Hetq 2014b).

Later on the same day as a sign of protest people started to erase the numbers from the stones of the building and pull down the wall made by the constructors, trying to save the building. The police arrived and arrested Vahagn Gevorgyan. After this the protesters showed a great opposition to the police not allowing them to arrest anyone else (Aleksanyan 2014a). The protesters managed to break the wall made by the constructors. They used the yard of the building for musical performances and for other cultural events, like movie screenings.

On June 13, 2014, activists started to disseminate to passer-byes flowers and flyers, which explained why the building of Afrikyans is important for Yerevan and called people to join the movement. On June 17, the activists addressed a letter to the diplomatic missions accredited in Armenia, namely to the Council of Europe, EU Delegation, Ambassadors of Germany, Italy, Poland, Lithuania, Greece, UK, Sweden, Switzerland, Romania, France and to the Consul of Norway. The letter stated that the government of the Republic of Armenia violates

the European Convention for the Protection of Architectural Heritage (Granada, 3.10.1985). According to the 5th article of the mentioned Convention the displacement of a monument is forbidden unless due to preservation issues. The letter asked foreign missions as guarantors of the Granada Convention to react and assist. The letter also mentions that such initiatives as “We Pay 100 Dram” are also supporting the movement.

On June 17, 18, 19 and 20, the activists of the movement organized peaceful rallies in the center of Yerevan. The aim of these rallies was to inform the citizens so that they can join the movement. However, only 30-40 people on average attended those rallies.

On June 23, 2014, “Let’s Preserve the Afrikyan Club Building” initiative made a statement about Helsinki Committee of Armenia and UrbanLab Yerevan NGO having filed a lawsuit in the administrative court of the RA to declare the decision N 1845-U from 26.08.2005 of the Yerevan City Hall and the decision N 108-Ն from 25.01.2007 of the RA government being void.

On June 24, a world-famous piano player Tigran Hamasyan gave a performance in the yard of the Afrikyan club building. The day is called to be the most populous one of the movement because of the performance. Two streets adjacent to the building were almost full with people.

During the following days the protesters continued to climb to the roof of the building, this way expressing their complaint about the construction works going on. There were rumors in media that the building that would be constructed in the place of the building of Afrikyans belongs to the Minister of Finances Gagik Khachatryan (Aghalaryan 2014). However, soon there were articles published, which claimed that Gagik Khachatryan and his relatives have nothing to do with the building.

By the beginning of September 2014 the building was not in its place any more. It is supposed to be later restored in the framework of the project “Hin Yerevan”, but no one is sure when the project will be launched. On September 23, 2014 there was an open letter addressed by Armenian public persons to the president of the RA Serzh Sargsyan asking him to pay attention to the activities endangering the identity of Yerevan and asked his assistance to restore as soon as possible the Afrikyans building (Armenian Times 2014c).

It is very interesting to note that the Hayastani Hanrapetutyun newspaper did not mention this movement in their articles. They only touched upon the Afrikyan club building, talking about the upcoming “Hin Yerevan” project. And “Aravot” newspaper mainly focused on the reactions of different politicians to the issue rather than the movement itself.

This movement was covered in online media in a very detailed way. It had the largest number of articles in the four selected newspapers (see Table 3).

Table 3. “Let’s Preserve the Afrikyan Club Building” in media (number of articles)

Hayastani Hanrapetutyun	Haykakan Zhamanak	Aravot	Hetq
4	12	120	19

3.4. Stop Changes in Maternity Leave Law

In early October 2014 the government of the RA proposed changes in maternity leave law, according to which women that do not work would get more money, while the women that work would no longer get compensation equal to their salaries when they are on maternity leave, instead the sum of the money will dependent on the number of years they have worked (Melkonyan 2014). The “Stop changes in maternity leave law” movement was launched as a reaction to this.

On October 23, 2014, not only working mothers, but also their children were protesting in front of the RA government building. Approximately 150 people took part in the demonstration. The protesters stated that if the Law on Luxury Tax was enforced then not-working mothers

could be financed from those taxes, and not by taking the money from working women (Budaghyan 2014).

On October 29, 2014, the activists of the movement said that they were planning to address a letter to the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. During a press conference organized by the Women’s Rights Center on October 29 the representatives of the center said that if the compensation during the maternity leave will depend on the number of working years, then women will postpone their pregnancy until their number of years is enough for the proper compensation (Babayan 2014).

During the November 18, 2014 session of the RA National Assembly, the latter one stated that it would do everything possible to both increase the compensation of non-working mothers and give to the working women having high income compensation equal to the 100% of their salary (Aravot 2014b).

It should be mentioned that this case is the only one among these four, where both sides of the discussion have been touched upon by the Hayastani Hanrapetutyun newspaper. This civic initiative is the only movement out of the discussed four in this essay that was presented in the pro-governmental newspaper “Hayastani Hanrapetutyun” not only from the official perspective, but also activists’ demands were also covered. See Table 4 for more detailed numbers.

Table 4. “Stop changes in maternity leave law” in media (number of articles)

Hayastani Hanrapetutyun	Haykakan Zhamanak	Aravot	Hetq
3	4	32	2

3.5. Changes in Goals of Civic Initiatives

This section shortly presents how the goals, reflected in the announcement of the movements, transformed from the beginning to the end of the initiative. In case of “We Pay 100 Dram” movement both the announcements at the beginning and at the end had the intention to change the public transport system, however the ones published at the end are more specific in terms of demands to dismiss certain people, because of whom the system is suffering. It is interesting to note that the announcements are not signed in the name of “We Pay 100 Dram”

initiative but it is written ‘members of “We Pay 100 Dram” initiative’. “DEM EM” announcements at the very beginning were addressed to the employers, while in autumn 2014 the announcements were mainly addressed to the government.

“Let’s Preserve the Afrikyan Club Building” initiative at the start of the movement was mainly addressing the citizens, as well as government and business sectors, to try to prevent the destruction of the building. However, closer to the end, the initiative mainly calls on the government to uphold the provisions of international agreements it has signed. “Stop Changes in Maternity Leave Law” movement has been very consistent in its announcements, meaning they were addressing almost the same stakeholders and had certain list of demands that was not changed dramatically.

Chapter 4. Characteristics of Four Selected Civic Initiatives

All the four initiatives are both similar and different from each other. They all addressed issues that were perceived as socially unjust. What is even more interesting is that none of them could reach full success. The key actors of all of them were once a part of Mashtots park preservation civic initiative, which was aimed at preventing the elimination of the park in the centre of Yerevan in 2012. Yerevan Municipality was determined to convert the park into a venue for several boutiques.

This chapter discusses the features of four civic initiatives analyzed in this thesis. We will start from the characteristics of movement participants, organizational structures within the initiatives, then go to the role of social media, and the perceptions of movements towards each other.

4.1. Civic Initiative Members

The interviews and focus groups showed that there is no common definition of a civic activist as a person who is involved in civil society. For some, this is a person who knows his/her rights and responsibilities, for the others it is the one who is active in an NGO or in public arena. Moreover, for some people involved in NGOs and in civic initiatives, the word “activist” was considered as an offense. Such an attitude was explained by the fact that currently that word has lost its initial meaning in Armenia and has a bad image.

The active participants of “We Pay 100 Dram” and “Let’s Preserve the Afrikyan Club Building” have a shared background: previously they had participated in the Mashtots park movement. In a way Mashtots park movement can be considered a training school for the

activists. Key activists from “DEM EM” and “Stop Changes in Maternity Leave Law” also have participated in that civic initiative, but the platform of activists that was created in the result of Mashtots park movement was not used in their cases. “We Pay 100 Dram” initiators were the ones who were very actively involved in Mashtots park. And it is not a coincidence that the park was chosen as their venue for decision-making process. The initiators were not expecting that they would have such large outreach in a very short period of time. Very soon there were activities and demonstrations organized that the core initiators’ team was not even aware of. And, thus, they were mainly busy with preparation of fliers and announcements. In case of this movement at some point of time it was no longer possible to control who joins the movement.

As it has already been mentioned, the core team of “Let’s Preserve the Afrikyan Club Building” was also very active during Mashtots park demonstrations. However, here there were people who have been involved also in previous phase of the civic initiative for the protection of the building in 2011 and those who were engaged in the movement for the preservation of Arami 30 building in 2011 and 2012, also in the movement against the renovation of Yerevan Closed Market in 2013. These people already had some experience before the final stage of the movement for the Afrikyan club building. The outcomes, however, differ. While it was able to preserve the building of Arami 30, Afrikyan club building was deconstructed and Yerevan Closed Market was renovated. During interviews one activist mentioned that after the renovation of the Closed Market, he no longer believed that it was possible to preserve the Afrikyan club building.

Moreover, during the second focus group there was a slight tension between people who were involved in both stages of the movement (2011 and 2014) and those, involved only in the

second stage (2014). Each of the sides was convincing that they are better informed of the movement.

“DEM EM” also had some members who took part in Masthots park movement, but the majority of the organizing team was new to social movements. This movement had a more specific target: working people who were born after 1974. And this mainly touched upon the people who have high salaries. According to people that were interviewed, mainly people working at IT sector, top managers, accountants were the ones who first reacted to the pension reform. The coordinating team members claim that the majority of the members of their movement have completed higher education. As to the discussions in the media that this was a struggle of IT sector, the coordinating team members said that it is natural, as this sector is among few that are free and privileged in Armenia. People are mainly working not for Armenia in that sector, and they are in a very high demand, meaning that if the employer would decide to dismiss his/her programmer, he/she will very easily find another job quickly.

Interestingly enough, people that participated in the focus groups, who took part in the “DEM EM” demonstrations, but were not a part of “DEM EM” team, expressed doubt on whether what “DEM EM” has achieved so far is a success. They think that what was achieved is just convenient for people who have high salaries and not for the others.

“Stop Changes in Maternity Leave Law” movement was in a way a continuation of 2010 October movement on the Law of Social Expenses. The women that were involved in 2010 movement became the initiators of 2014 one. New actors also got involved. Mainly working women and people who were working in NGOs, dealing with women rights joined. Although it was very difficult to mobilize working mothers, the movement core team was established, which was coordinating the movement. The movement even succeeded to have some male participants.

One of the activists said that she could observe a unity between ordinary citizens, activists and NGO representatives during the movement. This was explained mainly by the fact that maternity issue is very sensitive in Armenia.

Focus group participants who took part in this movement are not sure whether this was purely their victory or not. They think that if the government did not have decided beforehand not to adopt that law, they would not let the activists win. This was designed, according to them, to somehow show the citizens that sometimes they also can win; this was a means for the government to calm down the civil society actors.

It can clearly be noticed that movements were not perceived the same way by the coordinators of the initiatives and the participants. Initiators seem to be more idealizing their work and achievements, while common participants also pay attention to the drawbacks of the movements.

4.2. Organizational Structure

The movements studied in this thesis were structured quite differently, despite the fact that there were several people who have been involved in a few of them. First and foremost, none of the initiatives had a unitary leader. In all cases, except for “We Pay 100 Dram”, there was however a certain group that was trying to design a strategy for the whole movement. In case of “We Pay 100 Dram” the team of initiators consisted of several groups, and each had their own task to do. They were gathering in Mashtots park, each “group sitting under a tree and deciding its responsibilities” (key activist, Male, 31). However, as it was already mentioned previously, at a certain point of time other people not related to the team started their own activities. This kind of organizational structure was called by one of interviewees a net structure, meaning there is a horizontal decision-making platform. And the same person said that he even

does not know whether this “net-like” structure was the one that led to the success of the movement, or it would have ended in a complete failure, if the movement lasted a bit longer.

In case of “Stop Changes in Maternity Leave Law” and “Let’s Preserve the Afrikyan Club Building” there was a small group that was in charge of the design of the movement strategy and there was a clear separation of work, like people, responsible for legal aspects, people responsible for press, for recruitment, for social media, for writing announcements, for preparing and disseminating flyers. Still, the activists during both the first and second focus groups stated that in case of Afrikyan club building the main initiators at some points could not come to the consensus over their joint strategy.

Unlike the above discussed three cases, in “DEM EM” we have a clear hierarchy among the coordinating team. The people interviewed even said during their meetings they have a certain fixed “protocol” who speaks when and for how long. They believe that this was one of the reasons that their initiative has been one of the most populous and successful in Armenia. Nevertheless, this did not prevent the participants of the first focus group to say that “DEM EM” made the situation with pension reform even worse.

4.3. The Role of Facebook in Civic Initiatives

Social media has become a wide social platform for discussing various ideas, phenomena, for organizing events, demonstrations, riots, for signing petitions and various other interactions. After the Arab Spring, the role of social media in civic activism and in social movements was discussed all over the world. Armenia is not an exception.

First, presence of these civic initiatives on Facebook is discussed in a chronological order. There are several groups on Facebook that are related to the increase of the public

transport fare in Yerevan in 2013, but the one, named “We Pay 100 Dram” (Վճարում ենք 100 դրամ), is the official open group, created by the initiators, and has 9,248 members as of March 2015. In the description of the public group it is written that all members of the group can express their ideas, and if people would like to be involved in the working group that was dealing with organizational issues of the movement, they should indicate in it by writing a post about their desire. There are posts in the group that address other civic initiatives.

“DEM EM” also has several pages and groups on Facebook. The official public group, named “DEM EM (I am against) the obligatory cumulative pension system of the RA” (ԴԵՄ ԵՄ ՀՀ Պարտադիր Կուտակային Կենսաթոշակային Համակարգին). The page has 20,775 likes as of March 2015 and is still very actively posting about the pension reform. In the description of the page it is written that because of the pension reform people that were born after 1974 will have to lose 5-10% of their salaries in return only getting promises of safer senility. Nothing else is written, and the website of the initiative is mentioned. There is, however, another official page as well, called “DEM EM Team” (ԴԵՄ ԷՄ թիմ). It was opened in the beginning of 2015 and has posts that criticize the pension reform. The page has 2,362 likes as of March 2015. It also notifies about the upcoming “DEM EM” meeting in Yerevan, in front of the building of Matenadaran, in June of 2015.

In case of the movement demanding the preservation of the Afrikyan club building, there is a page and a public group. The page “SOS! Let’s Preserve the Afrikyan Club Building” (SOS! Պահպանենք Աֆրիկյանների ակումբի շենքը) has 1,970 likes as of March 2015. The page started functioning since 2011, when the first threats for the building emerged. The page calls the residents of Yerevan to help save one of the oldest buildings of the city. The public group has 1,003 members, it was opened in 2014. Both the page and the group are very active currently,

they not only post articles about the future of the building itself, but also discuss and inform the public about other buildings in Yerevan that might be deconstructed.

The public group of “Stop Changes in Maternity Leave Law” on Facebook in March 2015 has 2,361 members. The group calls upon citizens to contribute to the struggle against the change in the maternity law. The group is still very active. Women keep posting questions regarding their maternity leave; posts concerning other civic initiatives are also being published.

Throughout the interviews it became obvious that all four movements gave great importance to the social media, namely Facebook. First of all, Facebook was mentioned as the basis for all the initiatives discussed. It was described as a tool that implemented multiple functions. One of those was maintaining the discourse. It was very useful for spreading the information about the demonstrations plan, for informing the public in detail what activities are being held. It was used as a mobilizing tool as well. It made it easier to recruit and mobilize the public for “We Pay 100 Dram” movement, for instance. It was mentioned that due to Facebook people learnt that there are people who continue paying 100 AMD instead of 150 AMD. As noted by one of the activists, if there were no posts about this fact that some people do not obey the decision by paying 100 AMD, then the public might get used to paying 150 AMD, which would have made the task of the initiative harder. Again continuing with “We Pay 100 Dram” movement, it should be mentioned that through Facebook pages people were being made aware at which bus stop activities are taking place, they knew that every evening there is a meeting at Mashtots park, where further actions were being discussed. One activist even mentioned that the movement owes its success to Facebook in a way.

Facebook was also mentioned as an organizational tool. The key actors of the movements were designing the announcements through Facebook, and disseminating them through

Facebook, as well. Here “DEM EM” is an exception, as a special website was designed for the initiative, since many IT specialists were involved in the movement. All the initiatives created events on Facebook to inform about demonstrations.

The activists of all the four movements stated that they started the discussions on Facebook and then the initiatives began. There were open groups and pages for the broad public, while there were closed groups for the main actors. However, Facebook actions of the movements were different from each other. In case of “We Pay 100 Dram” the discussion started on Facebook among activists of Mashtots park right after the decision of the Mayor of Yerevan was issued. A day after it the activists already gathered in the Mashtots park and decided over the future plan of actions, which was later published in a newly-created Facebook group, and the following day the movement started.

In case of “DEM EM” the pre-demonstration period on Facebook was much longer. A Facebook group was created in October 2013, by a group of people who accidentally heard of the upcoming pension reform. The discussions were initiated to inform the public of the pension reform and see what the general moods are. This period lasted 1-2 months. The initiators used this time to do research and find out what is the experience of other countries with pension reforms. Journalist also got involved in the group, and they started to cover the Facebook discussions. This way public got informed that such a reform is planned. So, the actual movement started by the end of November only. During the demonstrations period people were taking photos with their thumbs down and/or with placards, where it was written DEM EM/Դեմ եմ (I am against), or they were photographing the stickers on their phones or cars with the same expression. This way, people were showing that they join the movement online, and it is not known how many of them eventually joined the real demonstrations.

As to the “Let’s Preserve the Afrikyan Club Building”, and the movement was again using Facebook as a means to inform the public about the events that were occurring in front of the building. People were mainly uploading as their profile pictures placards calling to preserve the Afrikyan club building. While interviewing key activists from the movement, there was a feeling that they preferred face-to-face communication in the yard of the building, and all the organizational matters were mainly discussed there rather than on Facebook.

Activists from the “Stop Changes in Maternity Law” civic initiative told that they also used Facebook as a platform to inform the public about their activities and the responses of the state. Here Facebook mainly served as an effective means for spreading the petition, created on Change.org, calling for the RA National Assembly to change the draft law. The petition got more than 5,000 signatures, while the number of participants in the movement on the ground was 200 maximum.

As we can see, all the four civic initiatives used Facebook as an organizational, mobilizing and discourse-maintaining tool. However, it should be noted that activities of the movements were not equal on Facebook. “We Pay 100 Dram” and “DEM EM” were the most active and attracted more people on Facebook. While some people considered “We Pay 100 Dram” the most active civic initiative on Facebook, now its page and groups are the most passive ones, and the other three movements keep their presence on Facebook alive. The findings discussed above are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Features of Civic Initiatives

	We Pay 100 Dram	DEM EM	Afrikyan Club Building	Maternity Leave Law
Primary target group	Public transport users in Yerevan	Working people, born after 1974	No primary target group	Working future mothers
Impact on people	Direct (have to pay more)	Direct (have to pay more)	No or indirect	Direct (will receive less)
Likes and members on FB	9,248 members	20,775 likes, 53,197 members	1,970 likes, 1,003 members	2,361 members
Coverage in online media (number of articles)	36	75	130	41

4.4. Mutual Perceptions

During the interviews with the key actors of the social movements, discussed in this essay, it became obvious that there is some criticism towards each other. People that were involved in the “We Pay 100 Dram” were skeptical of the tactics and strategies implemented by “DEM EM” team, and the members of the latter one were also critical towards “We Pay 100 Dram”. The main points of disagreement are presented below

“We Pay 100 Dram” about “DEM EM”

The key actor from “We Pay 100 Dram” social movement said in an interview that although “DEM EM” movement tried to do something similar to the “We Pay 100 Dram,” it ended up being a very different movement. As the issue of pension reform is also a social

problem (like the case of public transport fare) “DEM EM” was able to raise mass discontent as well. But, according to the key actor of “We Pay 100 Dram”, “DEM EM” has made mistakes, though some of it was not the fault of the coordinating team. In his opinion, “DEM EM” failed to frame the issue correctly, and partly as a result of this, the movement went from social to a political platform, as political parties and the prime-minister got involved.

The key actor from “We Pay 100 Dram” wanted to clarify that in spite of the fact that the movements are often compared to each other, and people think they are similar, in fact they are very different; the organizational process of two movements was extremely distinct from each other. “DEM EM” team was a small closed group of people, which coordinated the process of the movement. This was not the case with “We Pay 100 Dram”, which was a dynamic and open movement that did not have a strictly defined coordinating team making all the decisions. He admitted that “DEM EM” has managed to introduce some new movement tactics, like the stickers and the motor race². However, they were heavily relying on the old political tactics as well, like demonstrations, which he thinks cannot cause much change in the Armenian social life in the 21st century.

Another issue that the key actor from “We Pay 100 Dram” movement notes that members of “DEM EM” did not have experience, and that people who were actively involved in “We Pay 100 Dram” were not later engaged in “DEM EM” and vice versa. However, people from the “DEM EM” coordinating team said that they had participated in “We Pay 100 Dram”, and one of them said that he had participated in various civic initiatives before “DEM EM”.

² DEM EM initiative has prepared stickers that have Դ!ԵՄ ԵՄ (I am against) written on them, and they were stuck on telephones, computers, cars by various people. The initiative also has organized several times a motor race in Yerevan, when DEM EM flags were raised out of cars. This has the intention to inform public, and anyone was free to join the motor race.

“We Pay 100 Dram” movement member also said that their members were meeting with “DEM EM” team members at pubs during the movement, trying to convince them to change their tactics, but this all was in vain, as the coordinating team was too closed. As a conclusion, he mentioned that there are certain things to learn from “DEM EM” except for how to transform a social movement into a political one. It should be mentioned here that from the interviews of all three people from coordinating team of “DEM EM” it was clear that they had some inclination to direct the movement to the achievement of political goals, such as the regime change, which, however, they did not consider a political issue.

“DEM EM” about “We Pay 100 Dram”

As to the members of “DEM EM” coordinating team, three of them were interviewed, and two of them have made comments about “We Pay 100 Dram” without even being asked about the movement. “DEM EM” coordinating team members said that “We Pay 100 Dram” movement was very spontaneous, it was not even organized and they cannot consider it to be a social movement, as it lasted only five days. The fact that it was spontaneous made the government, in this case the municipality, to give in.

“DEM EM” team members also noted the distinct organizing styles of two movements. In their opinion, because of the fact that there was not a defined group of organizers in “We Pay 100 Dram”, the movement suffered.

The selected two cases are an example of the most numerous mass civic activities in Yerevan, which as we found out, do not approve actions of each other. We can see that these two movements did not have any common background, unlike the cases of the movement “Let’s Preserve the Afrikyan Club Building” and the movement “Stop changes in maternity leave law”. In “Let’s Preserve the Afrikyan Club Building” movement key actors from “We Pay 100 Dram”

were present, and in case of “Stop Changes in Maternity Leave Law” movement women of “DEM EM” were involved.

Moreover, the tension was also present during focus group sessions mainly between the participants of the movement “Let’s Preserve the Afrikyan Club Building” and the others. Non-participants of this movement were accusing “Let’s Preserve the Afrikyan Club Building” civic initiative of not being rational enough, not being able to react on time. For some people, the issue the initiative was fighting for was too trivial, meaning that the building was not worth struggling for, since it had dirty surrounding and was damaging the image of the centre of Yerevan. Another issue that was raised was that, cultural activists only become active, when a building is already in a critical condition, i.e. it is being sold or destroyed. Cultural activists could start acting much earlier, calling for the renovation of the buildings.

The study shows some cooperation between the civic initiatives in terms of participants of one movement engaging in other ones. However, there are also some tensions not only between the key activists of different movements, but also within the participants of the same movement.

Chapter 5. NGOs and Civic Initiatives

As it has already been mentioned in the literature review, many authors consider that in civil society there should be formal actors, civil society organizations (CSOs), and in case of Armenia this mainly refers to non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Through in-depth interviews with both key activists and NGO leaders, as well as two focus group sessions, where members of NGOs participated, we tried to find out the role of those NGOs in the selected civic initiatives and also what the mutual perceptions between activists and NGO members are.

What has been common among activists is that they think in fact NGOs are not needed in social movements. NGOs can intervene when their services are required. By saying services the interviewees said that there are some things that civic initiatives cannot implement, because they are informal groups. These include doing research, providing legal consulting. The NGOs need to support the movement, standing next to it and not being within the movement. There are some spheres of life, where social movements cannot be effective, such as monitoring elections.

5.1. Involvement of NGOs in Civic Initiatives

Let us now go through how the activists described the role of NGOs in selected cases. In “We Pay 100 Dram” activists said that no NGO had direct involvement. What is interesting here is that the majority of people that were among the initiators were either working for an NGO at that time or were once involved in an NGO. NGOs allowed their workers to attend the demonstrations at the working hours. However, one activist reported that he was once warned at an international NGO he was working for not to abuse the time allocated for work.

Representatives of this movement think that if an NGO thought that their mission coincided with the mission of the movement, then they would not mind NGOs implementing their direct responsibilities, meaning that an NGO would do its routine work, at the same time assisting the civic initiative. Moreover, during civic initiatives people unite and a collective identity is being formed among the participants, a thing, which according to the activists, cannot be reached by NGOs, because in Armenia they look like professional organizations. The NGO workers are not engaged in social issues just because of their citizen duties, this is also their job for which they are being paid. Moreover, activists mentioned that there exist certain differences among NGOs, since they are competing for getting funding, so it seems not realistic that NGOs can unite to advocate one joint cause.

All the key activists that were interviewed said that if they were to organize the movement again they would not like to involve NGOs. They believe that civic initiatives are not the job of NGOs. They are happy that finally NGOs in Armenia are not perceived as the only component of civil society, and they believe that social movements, like “We Pay 100 Dram” make Armenian civil society more organic.

Moreover, this movement happened very spontaneously. NGOs have certain hierarchy and procedure rules, which they need to take into consideration before making important decisions, such as official (direct) involvement in a social movement, let alone leading a movement. “We Pay 100 Dram” needed instant involvement and mobilizing, and the NGOs could not react fast enough. One of the activists did not exclude the fact that if the movement lasted longer, then they would need support of NGOs, for instance in terms of providing research to the initiative.

In case of “DEM EM” the situation is similar. They reported that no NGO was involved in the movement. However, the consensus among the key activists in “We Pay 100 Dram” on the possible involvement of NGOs was not present in this case. Two of the activists said that NGOs in Armenia have a very bad image, and they accept that this might be only a stereotype, but they do not want this kind of stereotypes to damage their initiative. Still, one of the activists that was interviewed said that he is for the engagement of NGOs in “DEM EM”, since this would have attracted the followers of those NGOs to the movement as well.

They all, however, commented on the format of the engagement of NGOs. Similar to the “We Pay 100 Dram”, “DEM EM” activists think that NGOs should just support the movement and not be the leading party. So far, they said there was no necessity for an NGO. For example, they said that they have several lawyers in their team and they did not have to turn to an NGO for legal consulting. Also they were able to conduct research on pension reform by their own means.

In case of the movement of Afrikyan club building the picture is somewhat different. Although the activists being interviewed said that no NGO was involved, several NGO leaders and members were involved, who however do not share a common opinion of whether they were involved as NGO representatives or not. During two focus groups two members of one NGO who participated in the demonstrations expressed contradicting thoughts. During the first focus group the NGO member said that they were involved in the movement as an NGO, since the preservation of the building directly addresses the mission of their NGO. But, during the second focus group another member of the same NGO rejected the fact that they were involved as an NGO, saying that rather they were involved as individuals. The head of that NGO was also interviewed and he also said that he was not engaged in the movement as an NGO leader, and stated that he did not have an intention to make other NGO members to follow him and join the

movement. As we can see, there has been confusion, since the NGO members themselves do not know in what capacity they were involved in the civic initiative.

The “Let’s Preserve the Afrikyan Club Building” civic initiative encompassed people interested in various aspects, like cultural-historical heritage, architectural image of Yerevan, also human rights, since activists believed that the rights of the residents of that building were being violated. Here it should be mentioned, however, that during the second focus group one of the activists of the movement told that they had an impression that several residents of the building had been damaging the building continuously on purpose for several years. The above mentioned aspects of life were being represented by activists as well as by NGOs. “UrbanLab Yerevan”, for instance, was concerned with the architectural value that the building had, while “Transparency International Armenia” was mainly worried about the improper procedure the Municipality followed while deconstructing the building. Both of them have filed law suits on that case, but have not reached positive results yet. “Helsinki Committee of Armenia” also have filed a law suit on this matter.

Some cultural NGOs were also involved in the movement, and they were helping in designing the press releases, and organizing various cultural events. These NGOs did not want to be named in this Master’s essay. They also rejected any direct involvement in the movement. Even the leader of one of those NGOs said that he would not like more NGOs being involved, as NGOs are “grant-eaters”. And he mentioned that it would be great if the number of NGOs is dramatically reduced in Armenian civil society. He even stated that if he could do what he wants to do without an NGO, he would give up his NGO. NGOs are needed only for formality, i.e. in order to have various activities, to hold cultural events they need a license from the state, for some transactions seals, blanks are necessary. He believes that individuals matter more than

NGOs. In case of the movement it was the same, in his opinion. It was the individuals who united for the cause, even though they were heads and/or representatives of various NGOs.

It should also be mentioned that the members of the main coordinating team (even though it was an informal one) of the movement of Afrikyan club building were the most skeptical not only of NGOs, but of the civil society as a whole. They think that there is no civil society in Armenia. Instead what we observe are mini-movements that involve the same people everywhere, who are detached from the public. However, a journalist that was observing the movement told that this feeling of detachment was felt at the yard of Afrikyan club building as well. Focus group participants also mentioned several times that they had an impression that this movement was for a special “elite” part of activists, and they thought that the initiators did not even try to invite more people to join.

Out of the discussed four civic initiatives the movement “Stop Changes in Maternity Leave Law” had the closest cooperation with the NGOs. None of the parties try to hide the involvement of NGOs, such as “Women’s Resource Center” and “Society Without Violence” NGOs. As it has already been mentioned in a previous chapter, this movement was described as a good example of a productive cooperation among activists, NGOs and public. Both members of the coordinating group of the movement said that except for the fact that the majority of the members of the initiative were the members of NGOs that deal with women rights and/or gender equality, the above mentioned NGOs also provided location for the coordinating team meeting, supported the movement with printing issues and legal consulting.

In this case the NGOs purposely chose not to have a leading role, since they believe that because of the stereotypes that exist in Armenia about NGOs, people would not have joined the movement if it was purely NGO-driven, so they provided mainly logistical support. One of the

interviewees who was a member of a coordinating team and head of an NGO said that NGOs have more skills, while movements can exercise more radical activities. All the people interviewed agreed that two NGOs that supported the initiative are not typical Armenian NGOs, since they have certain values and motivation, which is not present in the majority of Armenian NGOs. The activists' perception of NGOs is that NGOs in Armenia are in a deadlock, they are no longer a part of civil society, since they cannot present the interests of the public to counterbalance and watchdog the government. The large parts of NGOs, according to them, have become professional organizations that are serving the needs of donors.

It can be observed that in all four cases even the activists, who are engaged in NGOs or even are heading NGOs, are very skeptical about NGOs, and do not consider that the involvement of more NGOs in movements would make them more successful. The main findings of this subchapter can be found in the Table 6.

Table 6. NGO Involvement in Civic Initiatives

	We Pay 100 Dram	DEM EM	Afrikyan Club Building	Maternity Leave Law

NGO involvement	Indirect involvement	No involvement	Involved ("UrbanLab Yerevan" NGO "Transparency International Armenia" NGO "Helsinki Committee of Armenia" NGO)	Involved ("Women's Resource Center" NGO "Society Without Violence" NGO)
Services provided by NGOs	NGO members participating as individuals	No service	Legal consulting	Legal consulting, technical assistance

5.2. NGO-Civic Initiative Perceptions

Now let us turn to the focus groups, where the participants were NGO members who participated in the selected movements, and NGO members who did not. During first focus group the participants were from cultural and youth NGOs. Out of six people, three participated in the selected civic initiatives and three did not. All the participants defined civil society to consist of individuals who are active, know their rights and responsibilities. All the youth NGOs members mentioned that they attended the demonstrations as individuals, and even though they did it together with other members of their NGOs, it was not an official involvement of the NGOs. One member of cultural NGO said that their NGO was officially involved, which was later denied by the head and other members of that NGO.

The NGO members think that NGOs are not free enough to get engaged in even those movements that touch upon the causes they are advocating for. The main reason is again mentioned as the non-independence of NGOs. Even NGO members think that NGOs exist just for receiving grants.

Throughout the whole session of the focus group, one idea was being discussed, the fact that those civic initiatives need to be somehow formalized, this would give the movements more authority and trust, and even an opportunity to apply for funding. This was described as a controversial statement, since other participants thought that this would transform those initiatives into something similar to NGOs, and they would stop serving public needs. Social movements should be spontaneous, according to them, and NGOs can act at the backstage by providing their skills to make movements more literate.

In the second focus group there were ten participants from youth, women rights and environmental NGOs. Four of them had not participated in any discussed movement. Out of ten people only one mentioned that by saying civil society she understands NGOs. Other participants again mentioned individuals, who are aware of their rights, and do not need associations for the protection of their rights, as main drivers for civil society.

The NGO members here again said that because the majority of NGOs in Armenia are perceived in a negative light by public, NGOs generally lack trust, except for the ones dealing with environmental issues and women rights, that is why very often NGOs help the movements in a hidden way, not advertising it in order not to damage the civic initiative public image. Moreover, people expect more from NGOs than from individuals. This is one of the main reasons of why NGOs cannot freely be engaged. However, participants that took part in the movements said that they did not see the necessity of their NGOs' engagement in the civic

initiatives, since the movements seem to be self-sufficient already. Still, they said that there are many movements, where people are not educated enough to know how to present their demands to the governments, and here comes the turn of NGOs to act and to assist those people.

NGO members themselves said that they would like their NGOs and the majority of Armenian NGOs to be back to their initial goal that is to be a bridge connecting citizens and governments, to be authorized representatives of the citizens to advocate certain causes. They also acknowledged that because NGOs are not doing what they are supposed to do, it is natural that they lack trust.

As for the participants of both focus groups who were NGO members but did not participate in any of the discussed social movements, they said that the main reasons for their not participating was that they did not believe that their involvement would change anything. Some of them even were not informed about such issues, as the upcoming changes in maternity leave law and Afrikyan club building deconstruction before the respective movements happen. Also they mentioned that those issues were not touching directly upon them and their families that is why they chose not to participate in those movements.

Unlike key activists and NGO members, NGO leaders include both NGOs and civic initiatives in civil society. All the NGO leaders being interviewed see NGOs and civic initiatives cooperating. Except for the leader of youth NGO, others consider movements and NGOs equal components of civil society. The leader of the youth NGO considers movements the top level of citizen participation. He sees involvement in NGOs as a good training for later engagement in a social movement.

The NGO leaders also mentioned the fact that currently many Armenian NGOs are creating a “pseudo civil society”, meaning that they are presented to the donors and international

community as true representatives of Armenian civil society, while in reality they are disconnected from the public.

As we can observe from the interviews and focus groups conducted, NGOs in the majority of cases were not directly involved in the movements; rather they helped by consulting or technical assistance. However, another issue is that the majority of participants of the movements has been or still is parts of various NGOs. So, indirectly, yes, NGOs play a role in civic initiatives, but they are still perceived quite negatively by civic activists.

To sum up this chapter, it should be mentioned that while NGO leaders seem to be more open to civic initiatives, civic initiatives are cautious towards NGOs and cooperation with them. For the majority of key activists of the movements NGOs should not be involved in civic initiatives, since they have bad image and will not contribute to the initiative. However, for some key activists NGOs could be involved for bringing their members to the initiative, though even those activists do not want NGOs to be leading in the process.

Conclusion

After studying the selected four initiatives through document analysis, interviews, and focus groups, we can certainly say that civic initiatives have diversified Armenian civil society. Today, while saying civil society, one does not necessarily mean only NGOs; a citizen who is informed about his/her rights and responsibilities is also considered to be a part of civil society, and this is partly thanks to those civic initiatives.

What was also found in the Master's essay was that both activists and NGO members have different functions to implement in order to have an effective civil society. Although, there were some people among focus group participants and interviewees that were both activists and

NGO heads or members, NGO representatives generally seemed to be more open for cooperation with civic initiatives than activists.

Hypothesis N1, “*Civic activism contributes to the strengthening of civil society in Armenia*”, is partially proven, because not all the components that we defined earlier as the parts of “strengthening” were present in selected four civic initiatives, as can be seen from more detailed answers to the Research Questions. Research Question 1 is the following: “What strategies do civic initiatives employ to raise public awareness?” In the discussed four cases both traditional as innovative strategies were used. All the movements had demonstrations, protests. They came up with modern ways of information dissemination as well, such as stickers, carpooling, motor race, petition, Facebook groups and pages. All the initiatives had much more followers in the online sphere than in the offline real movement. So, it can be claimed that they manage to attract more people online, but the real on-ground movements still remained not so numerous in terms of participants.

Research Question 2 is the following: “How do the selected initiatives relate to each other?” Results of document analysis and interviews show that there were links between “We Pay 100 Dram” and “Let’s Preserve the Afrikyan Club Building”, while women who were active in “DEM EM”, got involved later in “Stop Changes in Maternity Leave Law”. Tensions were present between “DEM EM” and “We Pay 00 Dram”, since the organizational structures of them were too different. Also, there was a resistance from the side of “DEM EM” to accept advice from “We Pay 100 Dram” activists. Some participants of the focus groups were very critical towards the movement on maternity leave law and Afrikyan club building. So, we can state that the transmission of skills occurred in some cases, while the tensions between the initiatives are still visible.

Research Question 3 has the following formulation: “What are the main similarities and differences of selected cases?” The main similarity is that they all had coordinating groups, either formal or non-formal ones. The structures of all four are different from each other; they also used different strategies. Out of discussed four cases, only one, “Let’s Preserve the Afrikyan Club Building”, was a failure.

The second hypothesis refers to the role of NGOs in the selected initiatives: “*NGOs are the key players in civic activism in Armenia*”. It is rejected, since we found out that NGOs have had some inputs in the movements, except for “DEM EM”, but they were not the key initiators and implementers in the selected cases. The answer to the Research Question 4: “What is the role of NGOs in selected civic initiatives?”, is that it differs from case to case, and is usually in the form of legal advice and/or technical support.

As to the Research Question 5: “How are NGOs perceived by civic activists?”, most of the activists did not see the necessity of active NGO involvement in the civic initiatives, since NGOs are not trusted by the public and do not fight for the causes that are of interest to the citizens, for the majority of activists NGOs are highly donor-driven.

To conclude, we cannot strictly claim that civic activism strengthens civil society, however, it makes Armenian civil society more dynamic, organic and diverse. People feel empowered; they believe that if they try they can make a change. More research should be conducted in the direction of future civic initiatives to see whether the empowerment created by the movements discussed in this Master’s essay helps their conducting and whether NGOs start involving in them more often or not. Another very helpful dimension would be to interview donor organizations to see how they would react to the more active engagement of the organizations they finance in civic initiatives.

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Appendix 1. Interview Guides for Key Activists of Selected Movements

We Pay 100 Dram

1. Please, tell me about your involvement in the movement.
2. What were the main reasons that you decided to coordinate/take part actively in the movement?
3. How in your opinion this movement was different from other initiatives happening in Yerevan?
4. This movement is still being quoted as the most successful civil society initiative of recent years in Armenia. Why in your opinion it is so? (No exact leaders, the issue touches the majority of people living in Yerevan)
5. Please, comment on the role of social networks in this movement.
6. How did the involvement of famous people transform the movement?
7. What was the role of NGOs in this movement? If you could engage more NGOs, would you do it? Why would you do (do not do) that? How?
8. There are different views on what civil society consists of. Was this movement a part of it, what do you think?
9. And, in your opinion, do this kind of events foster democratization process in Armenia, even if they do not succeed? Why?

DEM EM

1. Please, tell me about your involvement in the movement.
2. What were the main reasons that you decided to coordinate/take part actively in the movement?
3. How in your opinion this movement was different from other initiatives happening in Yerevan?
4. Why, in your opinion, DEM EM succeeded to become one of the largest (if not the largest) social initiative in Armenia?

5. What are the main outcomes of the activities the movement has already have, in your opinion?
6. How did the involvement of famous people transform the movement?
7. What was the role of NGOs in this movement? If you could engage more NGOs, would you do it? Why would you do that? How?
8. There are different views on what civil society consists of. Was this movement a part of it, what do you think?
9. And, in your opinion, do this kind of events foster democratization process in Armenia, even if they do not succeed? Why?

Let's Preserve the Afrikyan Club Building

1. Please, tell me about your involvement in the movement.
2. What were the main reasons that you decided to coordinate/take part actively in the movement?
3. How in your opinion this movement was different from other initiatives happening in Yerevan?
4. "Let's Preserve the Afrikyan Club Building" initiative has been very well covered by online media, do you think it helped to attract as much people as you wanted/targeted?
5. The initiative was also very rich with various cultural events, what was their main purpose?
6. What was the role of NGOs in this movement? If you could engage more NGOs, would you do it? Why would you do that? How?
7. There are different views on what civil society consists of. Was this movement a part of it, what do you think?
8. And, in your opinion, do this kind of events foster democratization process in Armenia, even if they do not succeed? Why?

Stop Changes in Maternity Leave Law

1. Please, tell me about your involvement in the movement.
2. What were the main reasons that you decided to coordinate/take part actively in the movement?
3. How in your opinion this movement was different from other initiatives happening in Yerevan?
4. This seems to be one of the very few civic initiatives where the pro-governmental media is covering both sides of the issue. Why is it so, in your opinion?
5. What are the next steps of the initiative?
6. What was the role of NGOs in this movement? If you could engage more NGOs, would you do it? Why would you do that? How?
7. There are different views on what civil society consists of. Was this movement a part of it, what do you think?
8. And, in your opinion, do these kind of events lead to more democratic Armenia, even if they do not succeed? Why?

Appendix 2. Interview Guide for NGO Leaders

1. Please, tell me about the activities of the NGO you are coordinating. What is its target group? How many members does it have?
2. What is civil society, in your opinion?
3. What role do NGOs have in the development of civil society in Armenia?
4. How would you evaluate the role of your NGO and its target group in the development of civil society in Armenia? Any examples?
5. How many provisions are present in the Charter/mission part of your NGO regarding democracy/ democratization? [If any provisions: what are those provisions?] Evaluate the role of your NGO in the democratization process of Armenia. Any specific examples?
6. Have your NGO been involved in the civic initiatives? If yes, which ones and what were the reasons, and what did your NGO do? If no, why have you decided not to participate?
7. Have the members of your NGO participated in the movements that I have mentioned? Have you ever encouraged their participation?

8. How do you see the interaction between these concepts: civil society, NGO, civic activism (social movement)?

Appendix 3. Focus Group Guide

1. What do you understand by saying civil society?
2. What are the ideas that come to your mind while you hear about the following civic initiatives: “We Pay 100 Dram”, “DEM EM”, “Let’s Preserve the Afrikyan Club Building”, “Stop Changes in Maternity Leave Law”?
3. Why did you decide to take part or not to take part in those initiatives?
4. What was the reaction of the NGO you are a member of to your decision to join or not to join the initiatives?
5. Please, elaborate on the relationship between NGOs and social movements.
6. If you could what will you change in the conducting of the mentioned civic initiatives? Would you like to engage more NGOs? Why would you do that?
7. What are the effects of the mentioned civic initiatives on Armenian society, in your opinion?