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## ARMENIAN PROTESTS AND POLITICS

*Special Editor: Alina Poghosyan, Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, National Academy of Sciences of Armenia*

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## The Electric Yerevan between Reproduction and Change

Arpy Manusyan, Yerevan

### Abstract

In reaction to the decision of the government of Armenia to raise the electricity tariff by 16.9 percent, several hundred young people gathered in Freedom Square and protested against this robbery on June 18, 2015. In the early morning of June 23, the police used water cannons to brutally disperse the demonstrators and arrested 237 of them. These events [unexpectedly] brought thousands of citizens to Baghramyan Avenue, which remained closed for approximately two weeks.

As various emerging movements in Armenia, the Electric Yerevan was instantly characterized as “new”, “unprecedented” and sometimes even “revolutionary” by researchers, publicists, the media, and activists who were referring to its scale of involving various layers of Armenian society and the repertoire of the protests.

“The Electric Yerevan between reproduction and change” is the retrospective analysis of the movement that attempts to reveal and rethink its potential of creating social change in Armenian society. To reconsider and reveal the Electric Yerevan’s potential to affect social change, the analysis reflects on two aspects—the question that was targeted by the movement and the methods of challenging it and the links between plurality and diversity in the movement.

*When the world the sun shines on is always new, how could everyday life be forever unchangeable, unchangeable in its boredom, its greyness, its repetition of the same actions?*

Henri Lefebvre, Critique of Everyday Life

### Delineating the Problem

Movements and protests are often the signifiers of modern societies and modernity itself. They frame a new political juncture where the public consciousness of fundamental social change appears. Movements appear tangible and vital especially at a time when political actors do not articulate new discourses, and cultural and social spheres experience transformations that lead to various public debates (Touraine 2006). In this situation, political actors begin to heavily control the social order, and movements are thus forced to become more dynamic and capable of resisting oppressive authorities. On the subtle line of the demarcation of continuity on the one hand and political order and stability on the other hand, subjects experience and participate in the origination of movements and social change.

Societies where movements emerge vary in their political, social and cultural contexts, but the dimension of [discursive] similarity should be acknowledged when analyzing them (Ishkanian, Glasius 2013: 2). In response to rising inequality within a society and among societies, the dominant capitalist system, distrust towards governments and the idea of democracy often lie at the heart of the discursive similarity of various movements and riots worldwide (Ishkanian, Glasius 2013: 2). Furthermore, the birth of a movement often requires a trigger point that Neil Smelser calls an “initiating event”—an event that can lead to a chain reaction and the mobilization of society (Smelser 1962).

Various studies that analyze movements, protests and riots in post-Soviet Armenia often describe them as “new”, “unprecedented” and sometimes even “revolutionary”, which indicates that this society is on its way to becoming a political subject that addresses pressing social, political, and environmental issues in the country.

In reaction to the decision of the Armenian government to raise the electricity tariff by 16.9 percent, several hundred people gathered in Freedom Square and protested against this alleged robbery on June 18, 2015. In the early morning of June 23, police brutally dispersed the demonstrators by using water cannons and arrested 237 of them. These events led to an unexpected flow of thousands of citizens to Baghramyan Avenue, which remained closed for approximately two weeks.

The Electric Yerevan was instantly characterized as “new” and “unprecedented” by researchers, publicists, the media, and activists who were referring to its scale of involving various layers of Armenian society and the repertoire of the protests.

What are the implications of the abovementioned characterizations? Does the engagement of manifold layers of Armenian society in the Electric Yerevan necessarily mean a variety of discourses and social practices? Does the presence of thousands of citizens in the Electric Yerevan protests designate wider social change in Armenia?

“The Electric Yerevan between reproduction and change” is the retrospective analysis of the movement and attempts to reveal and rethink its potential of creating social change in Armenian society. To reconsider and reveal the Electric Yerevan’s potential to affect social change, the analysis reflects on two aspects—the question that was targeted by the movement and the reper-

toire to challenge it and the links between plurality and diversity in the movement.

### Electric Yerevan's Question

“The question is not the park ...”, “The problem is not the electricity tariff ...”, “The question is not about the elections ...”—these claims are continuously repeated by the various groups of the Armenian public who are engaged in protests and movements.

*Anyway, I think that such initiatives have positive outcomes. The Electric Yerevan was a process of empowerment and development for its participants. Regardless of the outcome, there was a lot of benefit from the movement.*

Excerpt from an in-depth interview, activist of the Electric Yerevan movement

Considering the abovementioned general attitudes towards uprisings in Armenia and their concrete manifestations in the discourse of the Electric Yerevan's activists, a relevant question arises: what is the urgent issue that challenges Armenian society if various economic, political and social problems that affect the daily practices of the general public often appear purely as a means of manifestation, communication, and self-representation for the majority of the movements and their participants? In the activist discourse where problems are not actually defined as such, actions are not truly committed to facing and overcoming problems.

In this regard, the ability to stay in the street was a key point in describing the Electric Yerevan as a “revolutionary” movement. Baghramyan Avenue acted as an occupied space where citizens attempted to redefine its political meaning by converting the seat of illegitimate authorities to a public space through direct action.

When we emphasize the action of blocking Baghramyan Avenue as a symbolic residence of discredited Armenian authorities, the definition of the Electric Yerevan as a unique movement seems to become conceivable. However, it also appears that the symbolic meaning itself was the most important aspect of the Electric Yerevan protests. The active participants of the movement often acted publicly not so much to solve the problem but to problematize it and to demonstrate to both the authorities and themselves that they are political subjects. In the continuous process of movements in Armenia, people identify and position themselves, whereas publicizing social and political issues serves as a means of self-delineation. Thus, the Electric Yerevan's question and the possibilities to target it were developing in the background of a political system that has extensive recourse to oppress emerging protests and movements. Consequently, the symbolic significance and meaning

of resistance in the Electric Yerevan often prevailed and was considered a sufficient and substantial action that led to tangible changes in society.

*“Blocking Baghramyan was the most important action that was done against it during the years of independence: neither Levon [Ter-Petrosian] nor Raffi [Hovhannisian] had ever blocked Baghramyan for two weeks”.*

Excerpt from an in-depth interview, activist of the Electric Yerevan movement

### The Disruption between Plurality and Diversity in the Electric Yerevan Movement

The Electric Yerevan assured that various layers of Armenian society can be engaged in protests and uprisings while they simultaneously shared a public space for several days. Moreover, the uprising could have become more severe with police violence. Still, the Electric Yerevan's potential to bring thousands of people into the streets should be observed in the frames of two questions. First, did the plurality also contain many discourses and social practices within the movement? Second, did the presence of thousands of people on Baghramyan Avenue mean the expansion of the potential for social changes both in terms of the Electric Yerevan and other movements that would emerge in Armenia?

The main discourses that were being circulated during the Electric Yerevan uprising usually separated two main actors—the creative youth who were open to the world and free of stereotypes and the “masses”. This classification was also pronounced during the in-depth interviews that were conducted with the young Electric Yerevan activists.

*I didn't even communicate with the large masses. I communicated with those small groups who were the organizers.*

Excerpt from an in-depth interview, activist of the Electric Yerevan movement

*I'm not going to participate in processes as “livestock”. If I as a thought generator participate in the movements and my ideas are processed, then I agree to be a part of it.*

Excerpt from an in-depth interview, activist of the Electric Yerevan movement

In the discourse of the activists, the “masses” are described as passive consumers of national songs and dances that became an essential part of the Electric Yerevan. The “masses” were not involved in the process of shaping the public discourse of the protest and did not appear in it as oppressed, protesting subjects. This participation by the “masses” was perceived as typical by the active participants of the movement: in the frames of hierarchical public dis-

course, there are “thinkers” and “actors”, and the “masses” are just attendees and individuals in the movement to the extent that they stand behind the “thinkers” and “actors”. In this context, the presence of the “masses” does not indicate the potential to create social change for several reasons.

As Jean Baudrillard mentions, the silent majority does not have any real representation (Baudrillard 2007). The “masses” in the Electric Yerevan were neither the subject nor the object of social change. National songs and dances on Baghramyan Avenue as simple languages of nationalism ensured only the presence of the masses but not their active participation as protesting actors who could rethink their social practices and articulate claims. Moreover, the media was actively involved in the process of uniting the multilayer movement through targeting certain individuals as leaders of the movement and circulating nationalistic rhetoric. As a tool that reproduces the power discourse, the media does not tolerate diversity and applies the discourses of unification. The people who are outside this scope are not represented in the media as real individuals or groups.

Consequently, the “popularization” of the Electric Yerevan and the inclusion of simple national elements created mass public involvement, but these layers of people were initially limited in their ability to act and speak as rebellious subjects.

### The Prospects for Social Change

Change is continuity and as such, refers to endurance. Endurance delineates social change in space and time as a continuous process that cannot be discussed as a completed project. However, in our judgments, we almost always mean certain moments in time and space to which we refer as starting points to describe the transition from one social and political state to another, i.e., to define the past and the present. Usually, the movements refer to great expectations of change, and the social and political processes within them are analyzed in terms of moments or points that extract them from the overall context of continuity. After the extensive development of the Electric Yerevan, various attempts occurred to describe the social-political situation in Armenia before and after its emergence and to approach it as a starting point for social change. The Electric Yerevan was not only a result of various achievements and ongoing changes but also a frame of civic and political partic-

ipation for the people who had never been involved in processes of resistance. Still, skepticism tends to win over optimism when analyzing the Electric Yerevan’s internal potential to engage in various discourses and social practices in the movement.

Within various discourses of the Electric Yerevan and especially in the discourse of the activists, the public itself was not identified as a subject for social change. Conversations with the Electric Yerevan’s activists have revealed the general attitudes towards the masses—they cannot speak for themselves, thus, more or less experienced activists undertake this role. The passive consumption of “national” songs and dances was described as the only way to participate in the processes that were aimed at social change.

Thus, we must consider in movements not only various oppressed social groups (for example, women, LGBT people, etc.) but also the oppression of the public itself. The discourses and social practices of wider layers of the public who are even involved in change-oriented movements in Armenia have little possibility for internal transformation because movements themselves often reproduce socially and politically accepted patterns in the scope of nationalistic and hierarchical rhetoric. From this perspective, we continue to discuss a multi-layered, not diverse, engagement of different social groups. Diversity is often oppressed in movements (also in the Electric Yerevan) to avoid violent and brutal confrontations with the police or the authorities (for example, silencing rock music, banning anarchists or LGBT people who bring their flags, etc.), which reproduces oppression as a power practice.

This situation is continuous as long as the subject and the object of social change are vastly differentiated, such as when the active youth are defined as the subject of the discourse and the action disruption occurs within society. This is a controversial situation. On the one hand, there is a strong desire for social change, and on the other hand, there remains a strong belief that the wider public cannot initiate social change. We should rethink the question of how and why social and political movements in Armenia that are apparently horizontal and are against the system continuously reproduce the relations of dominance and hegemony. The so-called leaderless movements, in fact, often obscure and contribute to the continuation of hierarchical relations that replicate the characteristics of opposition to the political system.

#### *About the Author*

Arpy Manusyan holds an M.A. in Sociology from Yerevan State University. Currently, she is working at the “Socioscope” NGO. Her main research interests are in the fields of social movements and social change in Post-Soviet countries, particularly in Armenia.

*See overleaf for “Further Reading”.*

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## A Self-Repeating Crisis: the Systemic Dysfunctionality of Armenian Politics

Armen Ghazaryan, Yerevan

### Abstract

As much as ‘crisis’, the notions of ‘standoff’, ‘civil resistance’ and ‘rebellion’ also characterize the summer events of 2015 and 2016 in Yerevan. Furthermore, the idea of ‘dysfunctional politics’ can be used to describe these events as well. The “Electric Yerevan” movement and riots connected with the seizure of the police station in Yerevan by the armed group “The Daredevils of Sassoun” reflect some of the fundamental changes in society regarding attitudes and political behavior. They also reflect deep flaws within the political institutions and processes.

### Input Problems

These events can be analyzed and understood with the articulation of one of the classic theories of political science: systemic theory, which was suggested by renowned American political scientist David Easton. In this context, the issues of the ‘input’ and ‘output’ of the political system reveal the fundamental problems of Armenian politics. First, the responsiveness of the political institutions towards the ‘input’ of demands and support of society should be analyzed. Second, this analysis should be coupled with an understanding of the appropriateness and timeliness of the ‘output’ of the political system (in form of decisions and actions) to those demands and grievances.

The basic suggestion is that the political system in Armenia has developed in a way that has eliminated a variety of channels for providing the ‘input’ of the political system. Very few ways for reflecting societal grievances have been left open, particularly cooptation into the ‘ruling elite’ or mass protests. Hence, analysis of the reasons that lead to the dysfunctionality of the ‘input’ of the political system in particular can help in understanding the events of the hectic Julys of 2015 and 2016 in Yerevan.

David Easton suggests that political life is a “system of activity” and mainly what keeps the system going are the “inputs of various kinds” that are later transformed into policy results or outputs as a result of the political process. There are two types of inputs that need to be distinguished: support and demands. These two types of inputs should be analyzed separately.

In terms of support, various political institutions and the Armenian political system in general have long lacked public support. This lack can be traced by looking at the trust of the people towards various political institutions, as far as support is usually generated as a result of trust. The trends are not encouraging either; the polls show that public trust in the President decreased from 54% in 2008 to 19% in 2013, with some deviations along the way, and trust in the government during the same period decreased from 42% to 14%. Meanwhile, trust towards the political parties has never been particularly high but still shows decreasing tendencies, from 12% in 2012 to 10% in 2013 (Iskandaryan, CAD, 2015). It is difficult to predict this situation improving in the foreseeable future, particularly taking into account the economic hardship in the everyday life of citizens and general macroeconomic trends in the country.

While speaking of demands, it should be emphasized that the channels for transferring them into the political system do work. The political parties that are supposed to be the main structures that channel public demands into the political system are rather underdeveloped. The ruling Republican Party of Armenia (RPA), which is heavily entrenched in the government system, is rather a conglomerate or mega-party. It includes different “parties” and factions, for instance the party of influential economic actors, or oligarchs, or the party of technocratic youth, etc. This situation creates self-enclosed circles of interests that exclude the demands of



those parts of society that are not affiliated with them. The other parties are not influential enough to make any significant changes in the way the political system operates. The opposition has regularly been shattered after almost all elections since the early 2000s.

*Other structures that are supposed to reflect public demands, such as different state institutions, the media, certain CSOs, etc., have been overloaded with special interests and informal practices.* The influence of special interests has been especially evident regarding the economy. According to different estimates, the size of the informal economy in Armenia lingers between 30% and 45%. Informal institutions (kinship, informal economy, etc.) are often used to avoid any interaction with state structures. In a properly functioning political system, a significant chunk of demands and grievances would come from the economic actors. As this is not the case in Armenia, the result is that direct input into the political system is avoided.

As a result of the described situation with the political institutions, the debates on certain social, economic and other policies that were supposed to take place in the parliament or in/among the political parties currently take place in the media (including social media platforms), civil society organizations and, of course, in the streets. In such a situation, where the main channels of transferring public demands into the political system are informal, the ruling party operates in a so-called “Thatcherite” “TINA—there is no alternative” policy environment.

### Are There Alternatives?

Social protests have become one of the main channels to overcome dysfunction in the political system in terms of providing inputs to the system. In fact, in a way they tried *to use human agency to counter the system or to offer certain alternatives to different policies.*

A series of protests during almost a decade have included environmental movements. Since 2008 Armenia has seen a steady activation of those movements. An effort to preserve the “Trchkan” waterfall from having a hydro-power plant built on it was a success and provided an impetus for further movements. One of the most important movements was a rather long protest to preserve “Mash-tots” park in central Yerevan. Before the protests began, the plan was to build private boutiques in the park. Later, during 2013–2016, Armenia saw a series of protests every summer. In 2013, there were protests against the transportation price hike. 2014 saw protests against the new pension system, while in 2015 people took to the streets to protest electricity price hikes; this later event became famous with its Twitter hash tag of #ElectricYerevan. Finally, in 2016 a group of armed militants seized a police station in the Erebuni district of Yerevan and took hostages, yet

in a counterintuitive way were supported by large protests. One of the stable mantras of the movements until 2016 was that they operate at the civil dimension and do not want to be associated with politics or political structures. In fact, any association with politics was regarded as a “spoiling the purity of a civil cause”.

These movements have generated in essence somewhat leftist discourses in Armenian political and public debates, inferring the importance of the common interest over private gains, public spaces over private business interests, etc. *The protests, however, civic or social as they may be, are political at their core, and not simply political, but to a certain extent leftist.* Meanwhile, regardless of the fact that these movements, at least at the level of discursive practices, offer certain alternatives to the ruling policies, *they are still incapable “of fixing the input problem”* discussed above. Why is that so? Why did these movements fail to transform into larger forms of alternatives to the ruling party elite and its policies? First, they never transformed into institutional structures that could yield real political results and participate in the institutional political life of the country. Second, they lacked the human and financial resources to achieve the first goal. Therefore, these movements remained in limbo—there were not enough energy and resources to tackle every issue in the country via civil resistance, nor were there enough resources and will to transform those movements into political structures. Hence, it turned out that these movements were, in fact, *trying to fix the systemic dysfunctional problems of Armenian politics via non-systemic means.* This approach yielded some results in certain cases and none in others, but it certainly cannot be underestimated or downplayed in the sense of creating the basis for new forms of political discourses, notably leftist.

At the same time, it should be mentioned that the situation in July 2016 with the group of armed men (“The daredevils of Sassoun”) seizing a police station in Yerevan was somewhat different and complex. It goes without saying that the group presented its actions as an ultimate form of countering the corrupt regime and demanded the resignation of the incumbent president Serzh Sargsyan. The most obvious political demand, and the fact that the armed group was connected with the political structure called “Founding Parliament” led by Nagorno-Karabakh war veteran Jirayr Sefilyan, left no chances for depoliticizing a political movement. In comparison with previously mentioned social movements, this time the situation was rather different, though the idea that social movements had political connotations and were largely generated by the notion that the people are politically disenfranchised and disenfranchised showed up more clearly than in previous occasions.

Still, it goes back to the idea that ‘input’ of the political system is not working properly and the grievances that are brought about by every movement are not being addressed.

### The Larger Context

Recent developments in the Western political systems, i.e., the upsurge of far right political forces in many countries from Europe to the United States and of some far left movements in some parts of Europe, a general frustration with political elites, etc., can also be attributed to the idea that political systems are having problems securing stable, consistent and institutional ‘inputs’. Of course, this process has been growing in the West for at least a few decades and notably has very different reasons and applications in practical politics than in the post-Soviet area. Nevertheless, there is one similarity that is vocal and outspoken: *the growing gap between what is called “the ordinary” people and the “elites”*. Many social and political movements have adopted this line of thought across the world. Armenia is no exception; it was one of the most important mantras of opposition forces ever since the inception of the republic. So what is the difference now? Why did this idea recently find new life? It would be tempting to say that because Armenia also adopted this line of political thought, the country entered into the general maze of Western political discourses, which is definitely right to some extent, but there are other reasons as well. Armenia was one of the most industrial republics of the Soviet Union, with almost total literacy and a well-educated population that could be generally described as a “Soviet middle class”. After the collapse of the Union, war and almost total breakdown of the Armenian economy, a huge gap appeared between the educational capabilities and over-

all awareness of the population and real life economy. As in all post-Soviet countries, newly formed political and economic elites emerged and became intertwined, controlling a large segment of the economy that still survived the changes, creating a real gap and depriving many from getting their share of the economic pie. Another specific reason has shown up recently. April 2016 saw the most severe clashes between Armenian forces and Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh since the 1994 cease-fire, to the extent that it was characterized as a “4-day war” or the “April war”. Some misgivings by and shortcomings in the army were largely discussed in the context of “Why have taxes not been spent properly?” and the like.

Thus, there are specific, locally generated reasons for the idea of the divide between the public and the elites but that also fits into the overall trends of the post-Soviet transition and of international political trends and discourses as well.

### Conclusion

The input channels of the Armenian political system have been predominantly dysfunctional for almost two decades. This dysfunction does not provide possibilities for securing the necessary inputs in the form of demands and support in order to later produce relevant outputs in the form of actions and decisions, which has a great deal to do with the underdeveloped political party system and with the parties themselves as structures, as well as with the fact that the other structures (state institutions, etc.) that are supposed to provide inputs are overloaded with special interests and informal practices. Recent social movements, which are essentially political, are a means of trying to use human agency to overcome the dysfunction of the system.

### About the Author

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

Sona Manusyan, Yerevan

### Abstract

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

### Toward a Problem Statement

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

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

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

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

Appealing to culture is the common way in scholarship to discuss the local specifics of protest movements and to understand the processes and interactions that are involved. Protest movements have both universal and unique aspects. People protest everywhere, but they do it differently, and the form of protest is contingent on the regime type and the culture that assigns the repertoire for contention<sup>1</sup>. Protesters appeal to the accepted contention forms and narratives; new forms of contention meet additional obstruction by the authorities<sup>2</sup>. Discussions of the culture-social change relationship must account for how culture is conceptualized, either as a system (of the institutions and norms that underlie the relationships) or these relationships themselves (process view) or as a frame that prescribes both how and what can be articulated in protest (frame view)<sup>3</sup>. Most inquiries on the subjective and intersubjective aspects of social movements are grounded in either the frame or process approach. However, equally influential is

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

2 Ibid.

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



the system approach, in which relatively stable cultural settings (such as values) are seen as limitations to social change. Thus, G. Hofstede argues for only 'outer-layer', material changes of culture as a result of globalization. Welzel and Inglehart are suspicious of profound democratic changes in transition countries (as long as democracy is just an instrumental preference and is not tied to underlying emancipatory values). Meanwhile, other scholars show how various socio-cultural characteristics predict low political participation<sup>4</sup>. In this regard, H. Johnston provides a useful reminder that culture is not quintessentially stable and movements are not quintessentially changeable, and the dichotomy should thus not be taken for granted<sup>5</sup>.

The culture-level analysis of movements has been concerned less with the problem of boundaries, although its relevance should be acknowledged. Most protests explicitly or implicitly question the existing positions, spaces and relationships. In the frames of this analysis, boundaries are understood in a broad sense, including any demarcations, distinctions and differences that are perceived, spoken or practiced and that can be expressed in both symbolic and objectified forms<sup>6</sup>. Boundary-work can be involved in all types of the collective relationships of movements to both maintain and change the existing positions.

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

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

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

Cultural norms also discourage some emotions that have been identified in the literature as necessary for the success and longevity of collective protest. One such important emotion is group-based anger, which can be observed to quickly decline<sup>7</sup> and eventually yield to excitement, admiration, national pride, sadness, and disappointment in response to the declining online and offline activity. The cultural pressure on the expression of opposition or anger is also tied to cultural assumptions of being a "wise, old nation" and to the valuation of prudence. This pressure is why even the large-scale public support of protesters does not imply transformation potential. Thus, many young people who were otherwise unresponsive to politically significant events exhibited intense online activity when "SasnaDzrer"<sup>8</sup> took hostages at a police station, and these young people expressed their sympathy for the rebels on Facebook. Struggle-related (especially national) vocabulary was involved; however, the primary motivation for this online support was to fit in the mainstream and be positively evaluated (as caring about the nation's heroes, being patriotic, etc.) rather than to oppose the authorities or reflect on a problematic situation. It is very telling that the most widely shared protest-related photo was the photo of a young activist woman hugging a policeman—a selective positive depiction that blunts and obfuscates the existing antagonism.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Interactions, Stances, Boundaries

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

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

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

### Toward Conclusions: Implications for Further Research

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

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

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

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

#### *About the Author*

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

#### *Further Reading*

- Abrams, D., & Hogg, M. A. (2006). *Social identifications: A social psychology of intergroup relations and group processes*. Routledge.
- Johnston, H. (Ed.). (2009). *Culture, social movements, and protest*. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.
- Stetsenko, A. (2012). Personhood: An activist project of historical becoming through collaborative pursuits of social transformation. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 30(1), 144–153.

#### BOOK REVIEW

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

Reviewed by Armine Ishkanian, London

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

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

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

the four day war in April 2016 between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Zhamakochyan's analysis is based on her research which analyzed the discourses and practices of well-known and emerging civic initiatives and activist groups: "Facebook activists", political commentators and experts as well as independent or opposition media outlets. She describes how the nationalist, populist discourse of "national unity" is a common feature of the discourses of individuals and groups from across the political spectrum. In other words, Zhamakochyan contends, that the discourse of "national unity" is not only promoted by the ruling elite and individuals, groups, and media institutions that are loyal to it, but also by many self-professed independent experts, opposition politicians, and some activists who challenge the ruling regime on many other issues and fronts. She illustrates how when the conflict erupted in April 2016, even independent journalists and news outlets, advanced the need for "national unity". Her analysis is also grounded in and informed by the historical development and use of the discourse of national unity. By taking a long-term view, Zhamakochyan indicates the resilience of this discourse and asks: how does the persistence of the discourse "national unity" obstruct opportunities for socio-political change in Armenia? This question is just as pertinent today as it was a century ago.

The essay by Zhanna Andreasyan, which follows, is an excellent analysis of how justice is defined, conceptualized, and instrumentalised in Armenia by a range of actors. Analysing the public speeches, press releases, and articles of political leaders, activists, analysts, and even members of the Sasna Tsrer (Daredevils of Sassoon) group, she identifies two primary conceptualizations of justice and examines how these understandings and demands for justice are framed and articulated. The first iteration is the historical conceptualization of justice, by which Armenians demand justice from actors that are located external not only to the Republic of Armenia, but to the wider Armenian diasporic, global community. In this conceptualization of justice, all Armenians are framed as seekers and claimants for justice in response to the crime of genocide. Such demands for historical justice which are directed to external audiences are juxtaposed with the second conceptualization of social justice which targets internal audiences. Andreasyan analyses the ways in which these interpretations and conceptualizations of justice (and their myriad combinations) are deployed by different actors for different purposes. She argues that there is a hierarchy between these conceptualizations such that the internal/social demands "must be sacrificed" (պէտք է զոհվի) in favour of the primary, historical demands of justice (page 47). She maintains that while much is said about injustice, far

less is done to indicate who (i.e., which actors) and how (i.e., through which steps) those injustices can or should be remedied. Andreasyan's essay gives us much food for thought and it will be important to examine how these ideas and demands for justice will develop in the coming years. In particular, given the toxic legacy of state socialism which still makes it very difficult to formulate a progressive left discourse or critique of capitalism, how will movements frame and pursue social justice demands in Armenia?

Embracing a slightly different approach, Sona Manusyan's contribution draws on theories of culture and psychology as it focuses on the relationship between the personal, cultural, and political. She asks, why, despite the widespread discontent and the rise of specific social movements, participation in mobilizations and movements is not expanding to include a wider public in Armenia? Drawing on research conducted with focus groups, interviews with key actors, observations at protest rallies, and the analysis of relevant Facebook groups, Sona Manusyan analyses the different forms of coercion (internal and external to the individual) which shape and limit participation in protest activity and mobilizations. She examines the existing discursive tropes of national identity and mentality and how those shape understandings and behaviours, at times generating inner conflicts within individual actors. On page 69 she asks: "what is unique about protest in a country where there simultaneously exists desire to change the situation alongside fear of change?" Again and again she returns to this conundrum as she seeks to explain the absence of a widespread sense of active agency and willingness to participate in movements. At one point she refers to this as a "resistance against resistance" ("դիմադրություն դիմադրությանը"—p. 83). This is an excellent framing of the paradox, but in the end the essay never really provides an answer as to why there is so much "resistance against resistance". Instead, Sona Manusyan writes, that these are questions and issues which require further consideration. I sincerely hope Sona Manusyan will further pursue this question of why, despite the widespread discontent and demands for change, there is "resistance against resistance" in Armenia.

The volume is completed by Arpy Manusyan's insightful essay on Electric Yerevan. In the essay, Arpy Manusyan analyses the characteristics, discursive practices, and repertoires of action of Electric Yerevan and considers the movement's potential for social change. Drawing on first hand observations and qualitative interviews with participants, Arpy Manusyan asks: what was "new" and "unprecedented" about the Electric Yerevan movement? She argues that what was new and unprecedented was the occupation of a public space—Bagh-

ramyan Boulevard—by a large and diverse group of people. In other words, the repertoire of action (i.e., occupation) and the participation of new actors, beyond experienced activists, was what made Electric Yerevan new and unprecedented. Arpy Manusyan analyses what happened inside the movement during the occupation of Baghramyan Boulevard, examining the ideas and demands, as well as the dynamics and organisational practices emerging from that space. In doing so, she provides the reader with an incredibly detailed “thick description” of the movement. Rejecting a productivist approach, Arpy Manusyan acknowledges the impact Electric Yerevan had, particularly in widening the space for participation and introducing new modes and practices of mobilizing. However, she also recognises the obstacles to change, specifically the absence of a widespread sense of agency and empowered sub-

jectivity among the public. Similar to Sona Manusyan, Arpy Manusyan ends her essay by reflecting on the paradoxical situation in which there is a strong desire for social change that is coupled with the “conviction” (համոզվածություն) that the wider public/community is incapable of being an agent for change.

The book ends with Nazareth Karoyan’s translation of an interview with the French sociologist and philosopher Edgar Morin titled “The Time Has Come to Change Civilization”. The translated interview is beyond the scope of this review, but I found it helps to situate the issues discussed in the essays in a much broader context.

Overall, I believe this collection of essays makes a valuable contribution to the study of politics, activism, social movements, and civil society in Armenia. I highly recommend it to those who wish to understand the current socio-political situation in Armenia.

#### *About the Reviewer*

Dr. Armine Ishkanian is a Post-Major Review Tenured Assistant Professor and the Programme Director of the MSc in Social Policy & Development in the Department of Social Policy, London School of Economics (LSE). Her research examines the relationship between civil society, democracy, development and social transformation. She has published numerous academic articles on Armenia and is the author of two books, including *Democracy Building and Civil Society in Armenia* (2008).

## **Paturyan, Yevgenya Jenny and Gevorgyan, Valentina (2016): Civic Activism as a Novel Component of Armenian Civil Society, Turpanjian Center for Policy Analysis, American University of Armenia**

Reviewed by Karena Avedissian, Los Angeles, CA

Yevgenya Jenny Paturyan’s and Valentina Gevorgyan’s study aims to examine the evolving nature of contemporary Armenian civil society. The authors—well-established scholars of civil society in Armenia with a considerable body of work on the subject, do this expertly. They shed light on the growing significance of civic activism, the reassessed position of formal civil society organisations, and the tension between spontaneous activism and organised civil society. Importantly, the study sheds light on understudied aspects of civil society in Armenia—in particular, on the gender dimension of activism, the use of Internet Communication Technologies (ICTs), and the perceptions of individual activists and NGO representatives themselves.

The study is well organised and is divided into ten sections. It begins with theoretical and methodological considerations and a background. The subsequent sections are each dedicated to an element crucial to the

developing nature of civil society in Armenia. The discussions capture Armenian civil society as a dynamic, rather than static, phenomenon shaped by the prevailing political and social culture. The authors save a deeper discussion about social movement theory for the end.

The authors use primary and secondary sources and combine qualitative and quantitative analysis, allowing for a multidimensional account of Armenia’s political arena to then tease out the dynamics of Armenian civil society. This allows for a more detailed and contextualised inquiry into the case studies under examination. Because secondary sources about civil society in Armenia are so few, the research data provided in this study is absolutely invaluable for its up-to-date empirical data from Armenia. The inclusion of well integrated interview excerpts which support the authors’ arguments provide an even greater level of depth than found in most similar studies. In this way, the study goes beyond the



theoretically driven explanations for activism, while still maintaining a theoretically informed inquiry.

The study takes a fairly broad view of the subject of Armenian civil society, sometimes at the expense of depth. This structure however suits a descriptive study of this nature, elucidating the context in which Armenian civil society operates—an important contribution of this work to studies of post-Soviet and post-communist civil society. A novelty of the study is its combination of NGO- and social movement-oriented approaches to civil society in Armenia, which sees formal and informal structures of civil society as operating in one broad “ecosystem”. As such, this research is an example of the wealth of knowledge that can be uncovered by zooming in on one understudied context such as the Armenian case.

Those looking for an introduction to contemporary civil society in Armenia will find this study extremely useful as much for the definitions and conceptual clarifications offered as for the detailed yet concise information about the five chosen cases: The Save Teghut Initiative, Stop Changes in Maternity Leave Law, Dem Em, Let’s Preserve the Afrikyan Club Building, and Electric Yerevan. The inclusion of unsuccessful civic initiatives helps to fill the knowledge gap about failed movements given that the social movement literature is generally focused on the “lucky” parts of the world with successful movements. The study however curiously omits the 100 Dram initiative.

A most welcome aspect of this study is its approach, which restores autonomy and agency to social actors

in Armenia, building the possibility of change into the analysis of Armenia’s political structure. The authors account for peoples’ motivations in their discussions of perceptions, helping readers understand the process that leads actors from understanding a problem to undertaking action to address it. With an agency-focused approach that captures the relationship between Armenian society and collective action, the study contributes to a more holistic conceptualisation of Armenia’s polity a quarter century after independence. The authors give substantial evidence to the belief that informal politics really do shape formal politics in Armenia; that actors actively engage in identity and meaning construction as well as learn about strategies and tactics as they go, reflexively adapting tactics and strategies as needed. Protests are seen not just as taking an issue to the street, but rather as a serious classroom of development for better and more informed engagement.

In summary, the study under review represents a great contribution to the field of post-Soviet and social movement studies. It will, no doubt, serve as a strong basis for further research. The empirics and theoretical considerations outlined in it will contribute to a refinement of current approaches, in particular those that account for structure as well as culture. In particular, it will surely become the catalyst for future studies that will bring in a more systematic theory-oriented analysis. It is also a call for more insight into the role of social media in contention in Armenia.

#### *About the Reviewer*

Karena Avedissian is currently a Fellow at the University of Southern California’s Institute of Armenian Studies. She is a political scientist focusing on issues of democracy, civil society, media, and human rights in the former Soviet Union. She has published in the *Caucasus Survey* and regularly writes for outlets such as *Open Democracy*.

## CHRONICLE

## 8 December 2016 – 6 February 2017

8 December 2016	A court in Azerbaijan sentences opposition activist Bayram Mammadov to ten years in prison on drug trafficking charges
9 December 2016	Georgian Parliamentary Speaker Irakli Kobakhidze announces that the Parliament plans to set up a state commission to develop a package of constitutional amendments
12 December 2016	The European Union extends the mandate of the monitoring mission in Georgia (EUMM) for two more years that has been deployed following the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia
13 December 2016	Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu meets with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev during a visit to Baku to discuss bilateral ties, and meets with leaders of Azerbaijan's Jewish community
15 December 2016	The Azerbaijani state oil company says that one person is dead and nine are missing after part of an off-shore platform fell into the sea due to heavy winds
15 December 2016	The Georgian Parliament approves a new state constitutional commission, chaired by Parliamentary Speaker Irakli Kobakhidze, with the task to develop constitutional amendments before 1 April 2017
16 December 2016	Georgian Defense Minister Levan Izoria meets with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev during a visit to Baku and emphasizes the importance of having Azerbaijan as a "reliable neighbor" as well as the strategic partnership between the two countries
20 December 2016	The Council of the European Union confirms the agreement with the European Parliament on visa liberalization for Georgia
21 December 2016	Iranian President Hassan Rohani meets with Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian during a visit to Yerevan to discuss bilateral ties and attend an Armenian–Iranian business forum
21 December 2016	Armenian Defense Minister Vigen Sargsyan visits Georgia and meets with his Georgian counterpart, Levan Izoria, to discuss defense cooperation and sign an agreement on bilateral military cooperation for 2017
26 December 2016	Three more parliamentary factions are established within the Georgian Dream—Democratic Georgia (GDDG) majority in the Georgian Parliament
27 December 2016	The Special Representative of Georgian Prime Minister for relations with Russia, Zurab Abashidze, declares that Georgia is ready to help Russia in the search for victims of a military plane crash on 25 December near the coast of Sochi and the breakaway region of Abkhazia
29 December 2016	Officials say that four soldiers were killed and further soldiers wounded in an armed clash at the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan
30 December 2016	During a telephone conversation, Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko agree to intensify the political dialogue between the two countries and deepen bilateral cooperation
1 January 2017	US Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John McCain and two further US Senators visit Georgia to hold talks with Georgian leaders and opposition representatives
5 January 2017	United World Wrestling imposes a four-year ban on athletes from Iran and Azerbaijan after athletes from the two countries were tested positive for doping during world competitions
6 January 2017	Former mayor of Tbilisi and a leader of the Georgian opposition party United National Movement, Gigi Ugulava, is released from prison after his sentence is reduced by three years and three months
6 January 2017	The Trump Organization, Donald Trump's property development company, and Silk Road Group (SRG) announce in a joint statement that they are formally ending the development of Trump Tower Batumi in the Georgian Black Sea coast town
9 January 2017	Israeli President Reuven Rivlin visits Georgia and meets with Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili and Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili to discuss economic cooperation between the two countries
9 January 2017	De facto Abkhaz Foreign Minister Daur Kove attends the presidential inauguration of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua
10 January 2017	Georgian Foreign Minister Mikheil Janelidze meets with his Turkish counterpart, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan during a visit to Istanbul to discuss transport and energy cooperation, and expresses his condolences following recent terrorist attacks in Turkey

10 January 2017	Georgian Energy Minister Kakha Kaladze meets with Director General of Gazprom Export LLC Elena Burmistrova in Minsk to discuss Russian gas transit to Armenia via Georgia and renew a gas transit agreement
11 January 2017	Georgian Foreign Minister Mikheil Janelidze meets with his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif in Teheran and discusses bilateral relations in trade, tourism, economy and culture
13 January 2017	The deputies of the United National Movement opposition party rename their parliamentary faction to “European Georgia” following a split in the party
16 January 2017	Georgian Economy Minister Giorgi Gakharia and China Energy Company Limited CEO Zhang Yuzhuo sign a memorandum of understanding on strengthening new Silk Road projects
17 January 2017	The former Georgian Parliamentary Speaker and former leader of the Republican Party, Davit Usupashvili, announces a new political party and says that “he and his teammates” will achieve “serious success” in the 2020 parliamentary elections
21 January 2017	Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili sends a congratulatory message to the new US President Donald Trump and invites him to visit Georgia, while noting the historical friendship between the two countries
23 January 2017	Georgian Defense Minister Levan Izoria visits Finland before flying to Sweden and Estonia to discuss defense cooperation and explore the countries’ experience on “total defense” and conscription
25 January 2017	A court in Baku sentences Azerbaijani members of the opposition Movement for Muslim Unity and Popular Front Party to prison terms for publicly inciting ethnic, religious and social hatred
27 January 2017	Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili pardons five former Ministry of Defense officials convicted in 2014 for exceeding official powers
31 January 2017	A Georgian platoon leaves for the Central African Republic to join the EU-led military training mission (EUTM RCA) for six months
2 February 2017	The European Parliament adopts a proposal on visa liberalization for Georgia that allows biometric passport holders to enter the Schengen area for 90 days for holiday or business purposes, but not work purposes
2 February 2017	A court in Armenia finds three men guilty of inciting mass disorder in connection with the seizure of a police station in the capital Yerevan in 2016
3 February 2017	An agency in the Georgian Ministry of Education decides to close down the Batumi Refaiddin Şahin Friendship School, a Gülen affiliated School in the Georgian Black Sea coast town
6 February 2017	Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev cancels a meeting with the European Parliament in Brussels, which hosted an event on human rights violation in Azerbaijan, after discussing a new partnership agreement between Azerbaijan and the European Union with EU officials
6 February 2017	South Ossetian leader Leonid Tibilov signs a decree to hold a referendum in April 2017 on renaming the breakaway region to “the Republic of South Ossetia—the State of Alania”

*Compiled by Lili Di Puppo*

*For the full chronicle since 2009 see <[www.laender-analysen.de/cad](http://www.laender-analysen.de/cad)>*

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Founded in 1982, the Research Centre for East European Studies (Forschungsstelle Osteuropa) at the University of Bremen is dedicated to the interdisciplinary analysis of socialist and post-socialist developments in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The major focus is on the role of dissent, opposition and civil society in their historic, political, sociological and cultural dimensions. With a unique archive on dissident culture under socialism and with an extensive collection of publications on Central and Eastern Europe, the Research Centre regularly hosts visiting scholars from all over the world. One of the core missions of the institute is the dissemination of academic knowledge to the interested public. This includes regular e-mail newsletters covering current developments in Central and Eastern Europe.

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