THE IMPERATIVE TO SHIFT ARMENIA'S PERIPHERALITY: CONTRADICTIONS OF INSTITUTIONALISATION AND FUNCTIONING IN CONDITIONS OF DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION

VALENTINA GEVORGYAN[*] iD
Yerevan State University

Abstract

This article offers a discussion about the possibility for Armenia's democratisation, and shift of its peripherality. The intention is to develop a thinking around the opportunities towards creating an environment in which a democratic transformation may be possible. The article uses the centre-periphery model and a decentring research agenda to build on the argument and a possibility for the shift of Armenia's peripherality by means of its civil society. The article argues that if the former practices have failed the country today, it may be relevant to consider the shifting of former practices, which may as well result in shifting country's peripherality. In this context, the process of democratisation of modern Armenia, which is conditioned by a number of factors, presupposing, first of all, the active participation of its civil society, is analysed. This article concentrates on the analysis of one of the necessary conditions for democracy and democratic transition, namely country's local agency, the civil society. The article is prepared based on the premise that public policies shall follow opinion and expertise of country's local agency.

Introduction

The intention of this article is to evaluate a possibility of a country, burdened by Soviet and post-Soviet past, towards democratisation. The possibility towards democratisation

[*] **Valentina Gevorgyan** is a PhD in Political Science, Assistant Professor of the Chair of Political Science of the Faculty of International Relations at Yerevan State University. Email: valentina.gevorgyan@ysu.am. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5642-9672.

is defined or understood as a contribution to creating an environment, in which a democratic transformation may be possible. There is a vast scholarship showcasing institutional problems of countries, once members of the Soviet structure, having moved on to a 'post-Soviet' period, however failed the task of building democracy and accountable governance. The intention of this article is to develop a discussion about the possibility towards a shift of practice, based on the value and potential of local agency or civil society, to help shift country's peripherality. For this purpose, the article locates Armenia in the centre-periphery model in relation to its former centre Russia (Filippov, Hayoz and Herlth 2020). The hypothetical discussion here develops in the context of the need for former peripheries to shift their peripherality, if they seek to shift former practices.

The centre-periphery model remains a relevant approach for assessing the dynamics on the post-Soviet space, considering the dependency contexts and behavioural tendencies of former centre. The next important variable in this discussion, offered by this article, is the capacity or potential of the Armenian civil society. The conceptual intention here is to identify the opportunities for country's democratisation, by means (or with the support) of its civil society. Another research enquiry would be towards providing an understanding of how the Armenian civil society can support country's democratisation. This article draws on the examples of developed democracies and the wealth of literature evidencing the obvious direct contributions of civil society for democratisation (see, for example, Cohen and Arato 1994; Cohen and Rogers 1995; Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti 1994; Salamon, Sokolowski, and List 2003).

In particular, however, the intention here is, based on the case of Armenia, to provide an understanding of the possibility for country, by means of its civil society, to move towards democratisation, and therefore shift country's peripherality. For this purpose, the article uses theoretical contour and a decentring research agenda offered by Huber and Kamel (2016), to see whether the efforts of the local agency on the peripheries, can be determinant of shifts, such as a shift of peripherality. The internal developments and domestic processes of the peripheries are crucial in order to understand the main transformation and the opportunity structures opened by such processes. Authors suggest a decentring research agenda for the internal dynamics, actors, and strategies of countries on the peripheries (Huber and Kamel 2015, 2016). The contribution of this approach is that the variances in a political context of the peripheries provide diverse opportunity structures and can lead to diverse outcomes. The approach advocates that the peripheries can be the ones leading the political, social, and cultural transformation, considering the opportunity structures, among others, defined as civil society. A significant contribution of this framework is that the operationalisation of the opportunity structure is pursued from the viewpoint of peripheries, and that the strategies adopted by the actors in the peripheries can transform their very constitution as a periphery.

Huber and Kamel advocate that the tangible changes in the countries on the peripheries are possible by taking advantage of the opportunity structures emerged in the post-revolutionary environments.

According to authors, the opportunity structure is located at the meso-level, with civil society, political parties, trade unions, social movements and the media (Huber

and Kamel 2016). In applying this contour, the intention of this article is to put stress on the local agency: the Armenian civil society. Also, it is to understand how its potential can be useful in peripheral internal dynamics, and how it may contribute to a post-Soviet country's attempted democratic transformation process.

Description of methods

This article uses data from methodology originally designed by author. It draws from data collected for the purpose of author's doctoral dissertation (book), titled *"Civil Society and Government Institutions in Armenia. Leaving Behind the 'post-Soviet' Title" (2023)*. The research applied a meso-level qualitative analysis design, based on the units of analysis representative of institutional relationship between civil society and government in Armenia. The innovative element of the methodology comprises the offer of the available institutional formats, which facilitate civil society's attendance to public policy in the country, including: (1) local and bilateral institutional platforms (involving CSOs and government institutions); (2) regional and international multilateral institutional platforms (involving civil society organisations (CSO), government institutions and third parties, such as international institutions, donors, other members of civil society); (3) international advocacy opportunities (facilitated by the United Nations, European Union, and other international structures and institution-led formats providing opportunities for civil society advocacy); (4) thematic and ad-hoc cases manifesting civil society advocacy function (inter-governmental commissions, working groups, etc.). The analysis has been reduced to observable units, to be able to study the past, and develop a discussion responding to the conceptual frames and research intention of this article.

Research techniques applied for the collection of data include, (a) desk research and secondary data analysis, using the available data on Armenia's social and political context, mainly reports by the community of local and international experts to understand country's political regime performance and civil society research; (b) analysis of legislative framework and policy developments in Armenia (including data triangulation through consultations with legal experts); (c) content analysis of documents, including national strategies and concepts, which are not legally binding, but demonstrate country's intention or commitment towards civil society and human rights policy development, human rights monitoring and advocacy reports produced by leading CSOs and experts in Armenia; (d) semi-structured and in-depth interviews with scholars, policy experts, human rights defenders, leaders and members of CSOs, international institutions and donors. Interview data applied thematic analysis of qualitative data (Gibson and Brown 2009).

Stages in the development of Armenian civil society

Throughout the history, the Armenian people have witnessed unprecedented cases of mass mobilisation and expression of public attitude, manifesting democratic ideals and

public will. Spanning from antiquity to present, Armenia is a state-survivor of the invasions, wars, treaties, and a rich cultural history of Armenian monarchies. Armenian people have also been scattered among the different empires, with a worldwide diaspora (Ter Minassian 1984). The Armenian history can be summarised as the one of struggle to liberate Armenian literature, language, the right to schooling and secular thinking. The quest for education, research and enlightenment is wrapped in the exploratory and explanatory enquiries of Armenian thinkers that the nation, luckily, had more than a few.

The First Armenian Republic was declared on May 28, 1918, to last until the Soviet arrival and the restructuring that ensued throughout the region. Next came Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic officially from 1920, to last until the departure of the Soviet structure, uphold by the national mobilisations of public confidence, new demands and beliefs. During the Soviet period (Solzhenitsyn 1974), the Armenian people had several unprecedented for the Soviet history manifestations of public activism. In 1965, around 100,000 people gathered at the Yerevan Opera Square to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Armenian Genocide. According to Karlsson (2007) the gathering evolved into a 24-hour rally, the first of such type and scale to occur in the Soviet Union. The first human rights organisation, the Helsinki monitoring group was found in Soviet Armenia in April 1977. The Armenian civic activism was the first to become a headline in the international press in February (1988), when more than a million people peacefully gathered in Yerevan in support of the constitutional demand of the cessation of the Supreme Soviet of the-then NKAO (region) in the SSR of Azerbaijan (Gevorgyan 2020, 126).

Additionally, as a response to a devastating earthquake in 1988 in Armenia, voluntary groups and organisations were formed to provide humanitarian assistance (Paturyan and Gevorgyan 2014a). By the end of 1980s, the Armenian, along with other Soviet societies would try to locate a new way forward. The period of late 1980s came to be known as the (re)birth of the Armenian civil society (Abrahamian 2001; Abrahamian and Shagoyan 2011a) stressing its mass rallies and street activism.

The events of 1989 gave the needed sparkle, energy and enthusiasm to the nationalities and their discontent within the Soviet borders, including the moods and organising of Armenians. Armenia's what later became known as the 'Karabakh Movement' was first and foremost a movement of democracy, democratic principles, ideals and human rights. The Armenian democratic and revolutionary movement in the Soviet Union started in 1987-88, as a direct and clear opposition in their ideology against the communist rule, adjoined by mass demonstrations in Yerevan in support of Artsakh or Nagorno Karabakh: a predominantly Armenian region, which became a subject of dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan when both gained independence from Russian Empire (1918). The Soviets, upon expanding into South Caucasus, gave the region the status of an autonomous oblast within Azerbaijan. Towards the years of Soviet dissolution, the overwhelmingly Armenian-populated region again became the subject of dispute, resulting in war (1991 [1988]-1994). Since then, almost the entire territory of NK and the territories surrounding it have been under the joint control of the Armenian and Artsakh Defence Forces. In September 2020, Azerbaijan's political-military leadership, backed by Turkey, launched aerial and missile attacks on the entire

line of contact with Artsakh, targeting also the peaceful settlements, including the capital of Stepanakert. The unprecedented aggression developed into a full and large-scale war.

The developments and transformations within Armenian society in result of the war, and the security, social and other dangers ensuing from it place Armenia under the burden and a necessity to rethink country's policies and practice, towards shifting its peripherality, which is the intention of this article, and to which the discussion will return.

The Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic was renamed the Republic of Armenia with the Armenian Declaration of Independence (1990)[1], forming the basis for the development of the Constitution and legislation of the republic. In the end of the twentieth century Armenia was a product of national resistance, collapse of a despotic domain, a war and an economic failure. The country located itself in transition, along with other newly independent states, with challenges to regional integration, full of continuous perceptions of insecurity and systemic problems shaping its political and economic changes (Gallina 2010; Stefes 2006). The parody of democratic reform went hand in hand with multiplicity of authoritarian components entrenched in government system. And importantly, a feature of the post-Soviet space – the informality (Giordano and Hayoz 2013; Hayoz 2015), arbitrary decision-making, centralised media control, monopolies, the lack of accountability, and most certainly, the lack of space and a meaningful role for civil society. Since early 1990s the development of civil society in Armenia has been somewhat questionable and democracy suffered (Dudwick 1995a; Dudwick 1995b; Dudwick 1997b; Stefes 2006; Cooley and Mitchell 2010).

In the early years of independence (during the period called 'post-Soviet'), the country experienced a new reality, full of challenges or large-scale problems. In that reality, however, there was no agenda of establishing an independent non-governmental sector. That reality was characterised with a devastating economic situation (as a consequence of the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, until ceasefire reached in 1994) and mismanagement in the way policies were to handle, mainly through informal and arbitrary decision-making, partisanship and corruption. Similar to other post-Soviet countries, the early years of independence witnessed an extensive reliance on informal networks and personal contacts. Human rights, participation and accountable governance, unfortunately, did not serve as the guiding principles for Armenia's political leadership of the consecutive regimes, which skilfully manipulated the reform process throughout years.

The development of the post-Soviet civil society in Armenia is of particular interest. The country has moved through several curious stages of societal development, from the Soviet to the so-called "NGO-ised" civil society, and to a new stage defined as civic activism (Paturyan and Gevorgyan 2016), where cooperation of formal and informal civil society actors has been most visible. The "NGO-isation" argument has been described by Ishkanian (2009) as the period of "mushrooming of NGOs" and a process of "genetically engineered civil society", or a "baby-boom" of NGOs, to borrow the term by (Chimiak 2006), thanks to the range of international donors rushing

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[1] Armenian Declaration of Independence. Adopted 23.08.1990. Accessed July 30, 2023. http://www.parliament.am/legislation.php?sel=show&ID=2602&lang=arm&enc=utf8.

to support the management of a new republic. The major philanthropist George Soros has served a great aid to Armenia, along with helping other countries of the post-Soviet region to revitalise former authoritarian practices of closed societies.

In 2000s, the country attempted to register a visibility on the international stage through memberships in international platforms, signing agreements and committing to a range of responsibilities in line with recognised standards of democratic governance. The domestic conditions, however, would largely remain as plaguing the economy and social life due to lack of meaningful collective decision-making constrained by centralised powers, the expressed lack of checks and balances, an arbitrary rule and selective justice. The first years of a new decade, and a new century involved the politicised judiciary system, education and other sectors, thus undermining capacity to institutional development.

Roughly since 2007, Armenia experienced gradually evolving mobilisations or issue-based activist campaigns, with citizens rejecting decision-making contradicting public good in different sectors. In the upcoming eight years, there have been up to around 50 civic initiatives, with many of those resolved in favour of the activists. An important introduction and a benefit of the so-called civic activist campaigns has been their contribution, defined as somewhat changing public attitudes towards the non-governmental sector as confined to solely formal representatives. Because of the changes in original policies and decisions, in result of civic activism, these initiatives elevated public trust towards the sector and the possibility of change, in general (Paturyan and Gevorgyan 2016). The data of a four-year study (2012-2016) analysing the formal and informal members of Armenian civil society, among others, their behaviour, public attitudes, and perceptions towards the third sector and its members, shows the attachment of people to the concept of unity. A unity, through which it is possible to register a change, conceptualised as political decision-making in favour of public good (Paturyan and Gevorgyan 2014a, 2016). The study of Armenian civil society conducted in the preceding years of the revolution (2018) displayed evidence on an overwhelming agreement among public that the only sphere capable to lead the development of the country in the right direction – has been the third sector or the civic sphere (Paturyan and Gevorgyan 2021).

Data has also portrayed the informal civil society members (so-called civic activists) as the ones providing for the formal actors (CSOs or legal entities) the link to the public (Gevorgyan 2017). Research stressed the inevitability for formal and informal members coming together and recognising each other's legitimacy if the society is to progress to the next level. Such a uniting formula for both actors within the civil society domain, envisioned as the next step of societal development proved true manifesting in Armenia's 'Velvet' (2018). A revolution, or otherwise a multiplicity of elements in a big puzzle joining forces with the leading role of youth characterised by spontaneity of action and increased participation.

In 2015, the Armenian authorities initiated constitutional changes, to shift the semi-presidential form of governance to parliamentary. The framing used to justify constitutional initiative was about the necessity for a new quality of governance, required to solve a range of social and economic problems. The argument was weak, did not work, considering the low and regressing public trust towards political

institutions and the obvious intention of the regime to remain in power[2]. The intention and reasons towards a simple change of form, instead of norms and practice, have been obvious for the expert community, but also public. This intention and its moving-forward through possible and necessary means, including the role of the CoE Venice Commission, accumulated in civic rejection, a protest campaign against constitutional changes. Notwithstanding public resistance, the referendum was held (by many accounts and expert assessments forced and falsified) and changes adopted. Armenia became a parliamentary republic[3].

Since its independence (1991), Armenia had a semi-presidential system of government; after the forced constitutional changes in 2015, the country adopted a parliamentary system. The false promise of this shift, let alone the intention of the third president to cling to power (by using constitutional change to serve the purpose), brought people to the streets. It also generated harsh criticism in Armenian political discourse, along with the public demand contributing to the eventual loss of trust towards political institutions[4]. April's parliamentary elections (2017) sparked a new wave of demand and increased protests echoing the events of the 1980s.

The advantage of civil society's functions

Among the methodological intentions of this article has been to focus on the implementation of Armenian civil society's advocacy function, to provide an understanding of the role, values and possible impacts of the local agency towards supporting country's shift of peripherality (Huber and Kamel 2016). The advocacy choice is central to relations between civil society and government institutions. In Armenia, in the light of continual flaws in governmental strategies towards civil society and the implementation of human rights policy in the country, over the years civil society, and not the government, has prioritised the human rights agenda. Despite the environment of continual crises, along with the third sector's internal problems, CSOs have managed to maintain public interest-oriented, human rights issue-specific and social-group targeted strategies. Despite the governmental strategy towards civil society and human rights policy, cooperation with government for the sake of the public has been on the actual civil society's radar since the early 2000s, throughout three consecutive administrations.

Service provision as Armenian civil society's power-function in the 1990s came to shift towards attendance to public policymaking, roughly from the early 2000s, demanded by political changes in the country. Civil society's advocacy choice was

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[2] Such has been possible through a changed constitution as the former one disallowed presidential serving for more than two terms. Becoming a prime minister with a new constitution has been the intention, and a replication of a largely practiced experience in former states of the Soviet Union.

[3] See, for example, report by US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor 2017, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Armenia. Accessed July 30, 2023. https://www.state.gov/reports/2017-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/armenia/.

[4] Which has been continuously low, Caucasus Barometer data (Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2010, 2011, 2015).

conditioned by the inevitable strategy shift towards upholding government accountability and human rights standards. Although with some instances of bilateral success, for example CSOs monitoring of closed institutions, overall, the failed governance practice seemed to deepen, triggering a new stage of development in the relational dynamics between the two entities. The recurring cycle of crises led to a period of informal civil society and collective action in the decade 2007–16, shifting the understanding of the third sector as synonymous with CSOs. The period of small and big issue-based civic campaigns, merging their strategies with civil society institutional actors, creating a larger ecosystem of Armenian civil society (Paturyan and Gevorgyan 2021), eventually resulted in the uprising of 2018. This necessitated a reconsideration of the civil society advocacy function. Prior to the revolution, CSO-government platforms have been ineffective and CSO-parliament dialogue almost non-existent. Although there were policy provisions available to strengthen civil society's presence in local institutional structures, Armenia's government failed in its initiative-taking strategy, while CSOs rendered a proactive advocacy approach.

After 2018, the implementation of reforms became the defining variable for civil society's advocacy choice, and the strengthening of that choice became an imperative. The different members of the new political leadership seemed to attach themselves to different qualities, to fear different things. Such a behavioural tendency has led to strategic chaos, preventing clear-cut ends and means towards civil society and human rights policy in the country. Such confusion, combined with inaction on the part of the government, has generated aggressive or more demanding civil society strategies for reform. The revolution has produced somewhat paradoxical conditions for the implementation of civil society's advocacy function. Although the seemingly new post-2018 political and social circumstances promised a friendly environment (where the CSO advocacy function could manifest), the developments targeting civil society have delayed that promise. The qualitative data shows that the period after the revolution in Armenia led to the development of new factors, or variables, for understanding civil society's advocacy function.

Armenia's 'Velvet' offered a somewhat counterintuitive dynamic for civil society. The period that followed witnessed a fresh outbreak of anti-civil society campaigns, purposely targeting third sector actors, and in particular, their advocacy function. The forces, having lost their influence and power as a result of the nationwide uprising, invested harshly into discrediting active civic domain. Civic actors have been framed to blame for changes in a post-Soviet country mired in partisanship, the decisions deepening the country's dependence on the former centre. The revolution has placed Armenian civil society into an unprecedented twofold situation: on the one hand, space for them seemed to emerge, in terms of new participatory opportunities; at the same time, the real or critical civil society members have become the main target of disinformation. Before the revolution, there were few tangible spaces for engagement. Since 2018, such spaces have seemed to emerge. But along with these, the burden of manipulation has similarly surfaced. Whether aggressive or confrontational, cooperative or contained, civil society's advocacy function has manifested in being prepared to counter a wide range of information manipulations and physical attacks.

After 2018, among the pioneer civil society concerns has been the rejection of a dangerous route towards dissociating from reforms and commitments promised by April's uprising. 'A revolution gone wrong' remains a primary concern for the critical civil society. For the implementation of civil society's advocacy function, not the attacks, but rather society's lack of or faulty understanding of concepts that are core and vital for democracy is a challenge. These concepts include the relations among and responsibilities of different actors in public life, the relevance of human rights standards for reform, and the actual role of non-governmental actors in supporting such. For many years, a short-term vision in governance has damaged the country's institutional progress and the rule of law. The events of 2018 displayed a public quest for a new period, with the main highlight being that a change of political leadership is practicable and real. However, during the past two and a half years, 'to make the revolution go wrong' became an openly established purpose of the forces that lost their power, and have positioned themselves in the civic domain. Therefore, Armenia finds itself in an interesting interplay. On the one hand, upholding the promise of the nationwide mobilisation has become a challenging task for the revolutionary leadership. On the other hand, damaging the promise of the revolution has become the target of the group that lost their power. This is where civil society actors try to locate their performance and remain effective, in an environment of crossroads *'full of thorns'*, not to speak of the internal and foreign security and social challenges, post-war.

But then, can the Armenian civil society support country's democratic transformation? The main intention here is an attempt towards providing an understanding on the possibilities for the country's democratic transformation, identified within the domain of relations between civil society and government institutions. For a long time now, the literature on post-communist civil societies has explained the 'weakness' of societies based on low membership in voluntary organisations, low levels of public trust towards the voluntary sector and low levels of volunteering (Howard 2003). The data generated in result of research, presented in this article, offers a new definition viewing a 'weak' civil society from the perspective of the lack of public policy expertise and access to influence. In Armenia, with numerous challenges and growing concerns, still, there seems to be a new understanding in the public policy community that a 'weak' civil society means one lacking expertise. This finding seems to suggest an understanding that a strong and a professionalised model of CSO activity is one that concentrates on public policy. Understanding the civil society advantage here may be helpful.

During the round of crises in Armenia, CSOs did not abandon their public-oriented strategies; in fact, they offered continual monitoring and advocacy, even during times when the government was not very cooperative. The civil society advantage is understood through considering the different but recurring behavioural practices from the discussion of institutional platforms in this research. These include civil society's engagement in a number of local and international institutional platforms, working groups, councils and committees; research and monitoring activities; efforts to understand the steps that government designs and implements to support human rights; the support provided to government institutions in the development of national

strategies; qualitative assessment of reforms as opposed to solely output-based assessment; contributions in terms of conceptualisations of reforms and government actions; contributions in terms of providing an understanding of area-based crises and developing responses to them, as well as regularly presenting evidence and so on. Over the years, it has been civil society, and not any other actor, that has pointed out that there is more to upholding human rights in the country than the training of public officials or creating more e-governance mechanisms. Civil society's potential and initiative-taking qualities have supported the implementation of reforms, including in the areas of the judiciary, anti-corruption and the upholding of a number of human rights, without which it might not be possible to shift country's peripherality. Armenia's governance needs to take advantage of the local agency and listen to the available expertise. The country needs to establish relations between government institutions and civil society actors based on public policy and regulation, not traditions, informality or stereotypes. The political and social assessment of past policies and practices may develop into civil society and government institutions' strategic objectives (Najam 2000). The findings suggest that the country should distance itself from former failed practices through a better alignment of institutional goals and strategies between civil society and government agencies. The alignment of goals and strategies to achieve them might produce an experience that is different from earlier.

The performance of institutional platforms and initiatives in Armenia prior to the revolution manifested a tendency towards a weakening reform agenda, which lowered public trust in government institutions and their credibility. The government's superficial strategies or tactics regarding reform were a determinant factor that led to the national uprising of 2018. Sadly, half a decade into revolution, not much has actually changed, except the leadership. It has been the local agency and the civil society forces, not government institutions, that pushed for reforms, the implementation of which post-war seems now doubly challenging. Similar to the historical practices (Kale 2004), the critical part of the Armenian civil society has sought for mechanisms prioritising an enlightened public opinion, and engagement in collective reflection on common good and constitutional order.

Rejecting the adjustment of Armenia's future to its past

We may as well reframe Armenia's 2018 *"Re-volu-tion"* to a *"Re-value-tion"*, considering the nationwide public quest and a demand of changing the established practices absorbed in *post-Soviet* values, free from human rights standards and guarantees. Human rights and justice have been the main quest of the 1989 revolutions, which facilitated the departure of the Soviet Union. In April 2018, Armenia witnessed an unprecedented mobilisation, a nation-wide uprising, known as *the Velvet Revolution*, sparking an immediate interest of local and international scholarship and journalism (to name a few, for example, Abrahamian and Shagoyan 2018; Baev 2018; Cooper 2018; De Waal 2018; Niculescu 2019; Riegg 2018; Way 2018). The Armenian citizens woke up against the lack of justice and transparent governance uphold

continuously by the previous consecutive regimes. Armenia's 'Velvet' was also a quest to the elevation of human rights, social justice and a calling for reforms (Abrahamian and Shagoyan 2018; Lanskoy and Suthers 2019; Markarov 2018; Markarov and Davtyan 2018). A study shows that thirty years into 1989 revolutions, the countries of the Eastern and Central Europe are still fearful of the future of democracy and their freedoms[5]. It is the same concern that the small states with a legacy of almost a century under a totalitarian regime are still fighting to regain, while the local agencies help governments in doing so. A long period of informal and arbitrary practices in Armenia transformed into a quest to establish a rule of law and respect for human rights. The events were sustained by a continued and increasing public discontent over the levels of poverty and corruption, and the decay of democratic institutions during the years of former regimes' uncontested rule.

Revolutions are events, not processes (Chartier 1991), and massive mobilisations do not emerge from a vacuum. In Armenia's case, issue-centred civic advocacy has prepared the terrain for the revolution. In May 2018, the Armenian citizens welcomed new Prime Minister Pashinyan, and new government appointees. In December 2018, Armenia voted in the first parliamentary elections of the so-called *"new Armenia",* where Pashinyan's alliance gained the majority of seats in the parliament. The parliamentary elections institutionalised the demands of the revolution, with citizens voting for a new era of political governance, and, hopefully, a new mission for civil society. After 2018 the country faced a number of challenges in a seemingly new political and social context. Armenia found itself at an interplay of exciting, but also risky for democracy challenges. A relevant question for Armenia's post-revolutionary period has been whether the new leadership is able to develop functional tendencies rejecting former practices. The question remained whether the new leaders are able to convey a certainty to the future by the improved practice of relations between government institutions and civil society, notwithstanding the security shocks and egregious challenges imposed on the country from the outside.

In September 2020, the neighbouring Azerbaijan waged a large-scale war against Armenians and Artsakh (Nagorno Karabakh (NK)). In a period when the entire world was fighting a common enemy, the Covid-19 pandemic, Azerbaijan initiated a war, what proved to be a cumulative of discontinued aggression, war crimes, mass human rights violations and grave breaches of international humanitarian law[6]. Beyond doubt,

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[5] See, Lan (Bui-Wrzosińska 2019) "States of Change: Attitudes in Central and Eastern Europe 30 Years after the Fall of the Berlin Wall", Open Society Foundations, November 2019. Accessed July 30, 2023. https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/states-of-change-attitudes-in-central-and-eastern-europe-30-years-after-the-fall-of-the-berlin-wall (Research administered in seven countries: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Hun¬gary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia); a similar concern also argued by Timothy Garton (Ash 2019) "Democracy is under attack in post-Wall Europe, but the spirit of 1989 is fighting back", October 2019. Accessed July 30, 2023. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/oct/30/democracy-europe-1989-berlin-wall-velvet-revolutions-populists.

[6] Azerbaijan's non-stop aggression, even in result of three declarations for humanitarian ceasefire negotiated by the three members of the OSCE Minsk Group countries, led to violations of numerous human rights of the citizens of Artsakh, including the right to life, the right to education, the right to health, the right to property and many others. Arrogance, propaganda, deception and terror became defining characteristics of this dirty war, where civilians and the vital for human life infrastructure and cultural

the lack of experience of Armenia's new leadership, country's three decade-governance style and failed negotiations on NK, and Armenia's militarily and otherwise overwhelming dependence on Russia – offer main variables to understand the reasons for war's outcomes benefiting all direct and indirect parties involved – but Armenians. The war brought Armenia and the Armenians around the world on the brink of disappointment and anger, anxiety and pain. In fact, the war has been forced on a small and a landlocked country with intentions to democratic transition. The war took the lives of thousands on both sides proved a blatant power-seeking function of regional authoritarians.

In the centre-periphery context involving Russia, as an actor, the war has manifested also the former centre's intention to target a periphery for civilian, military and economic destruction and, therefore, more influence. The war manifested an intentional targeting (or a silent agreement to target) a legitimate government of a smaller country – a former periphery with hopes for its reorienting of local agenda and external dependence. As the history teaches, the post-Soviet countries pay high price for their intentions to detachment from the centre, independent decision-making and importantly, a legitimate governance. Along with Georgia, Armenia is the only country with an actual democratic potential in its immediate neighbourhood. Armenia's recent history is a showcase of security and other shocks, employed by a former centre on a periphery, which has taken a chance to shift its peripherality; which has showcased an intent towards a legitimate government and decisions, commensurate with the title of an 'independent' republic.

After revolution, the lack of the assessment of former practices and the lack of capacity to analyse the reasons for governance failures based on multivariate analyses, remains problematic. The legacy of the dysfunctional governance mechanisms and the enduring practices of informality (Giordano and Hayoz 2013; Hayoz 2015; Klíma 2019), institutional gaps, partisanship and corruption (Stefes 2006; Falkenhain 2020), and the lack of tangible reforms – either before or after revolution, along with government's lack of competence – have led to the tragic losses in war. Over the course of three years 2018-2020, Armenia witnessed three major shocks: a revolution, a pandemic and a large-scale war. The three processes have generated new challenges, and became critical junctures, influencing harshly the developments today.

The developments suggest that the centre and periphery model for countries on the post-Soviet space may remain relevant for future research and policy. This war, its consequences and effects on the regional dynamics must remain a subject of multidisciplinary research, to provide an understanding of, among others, the challenges imposed by regional autocrats on members of the EU's Eastern Partnership countries, with potential and collective demonstrated will for democratic transformation.

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objects were bombed, including general healthcare facilities and maternity hospitals, schools, theatres, churches, fauna and the natural habitat. Regarding specific human rights violations, see, "Human Rights Violations During the 44-Day War in Artsakh", Fact-finding Report produced by (Open Society Foundations-Armenia et al. 2022) in cooperation with civil society partner institutions (2022). Accessed July 30, 2023. https://www.osf.am/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Fact-Finding-Report_FINAL_web.pdf.

The years after Armenia's independence (1991) reflected a continuity of the Soviet practices relevant to the curtailed and intentionally disabled civil society function. More than two decades of independence did not manage to be successful, in terms of breaking cultural and behavioural ties with the ones of its former centre, Russia. The concepts, framing, ideologies and beliefs in present-day Russia, resonate with the Soviet-era governance and thinking. Selected examples of fake patriotism trampling on any possibility of human rights being a priority confirm this[7]. Also, to remind that, the post-Soviet world was built on the ideology advocating, *"...if we remember the suffering of millions of people, it will distort the historical perspective. If we seek the essence of our temper, it will overshadow material progress."* (Solzhenitsyn 1992) [1973], 91).

Opportunities for domestic reforms helped the collapse of the Soviet Union (Bunce 1999). The assessment of former practice may be the reforms. However, the failure of countries to revise their own history after declaring independence from the Soviet Union emerged in the replication of authoritarian practice. Previous enquiries searched for stabilising factors in hybrid regimes (Levitsky and Way 2010; Robertson 2010), which may, as well be reframed as a search for factors that will help to divert from the former centre-periphery model towards democratic transformation, and therefore a change of peripherality. In that process, the assessment of what worked and failed to work in the past becomes necessary. The contributions that civil society is able to provide may become the stabilising factor in Armenia's transition to democracy, where public and civil society exercise channels to influence institutional decision-making, through institutional engagement on different levels.

For a democratic transformation of a country, it may require a development from perspective of institutionalising the available public policy expertise. More than a decade ago, Schmitter, reflecting on the lessons learned from democratic transitions put forward fifteen findings (2010). Among those is one about the democratisation process requiring professional politicians, not amateur citizens (Schmitter 2010). Considering that Armenia's revolutionary government may lack required expertise in a number of areas, it may also mean that taking advantage of the available expertise that civil society actors provide may become inevitable. In Armenia, the need for policy expertise remained constant. The Armenian civil society's professionalised capacities may positively influence the process of institutionalising expertise. Institutionalising expertise means developing a process not dependent on persons or groups in the government, but the system. Institutional participation will also contribute to the increased political trust, which has been declining in Armenia during the former administrations, as there is a positive correlation between political trust and institutionalised participation (Hooghe and Marien 2013).

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[7] Some examples of fake patriotism overruling human rights include Russia's political leadership's dominant narratives about the 20th century and Stalin's victory of the WWI, justifying the egregious number of deaths (both soldiers, but also civilians, in result of his years of terror); and the spread of the modern truth in Russia, separating the realities, best explained in essay (see, "The roots of Russia's Atomised Mourning" by Kiril Kobrin 2016, Open Democracy, November 2016. Accessed July 30, 2023. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/roots-of-russia-s-atomised-mourning/.

Decades ago, Migdal argued that weak states produce strong societies, and the choice of methods in this process is governed by resources, ideas and organisational means (Migdal 1988). Such resources and organisational means were also referred to as opportunity structures (Tarrow 2011). In Ukraine, for example, same opportunity structures were opened for reforms in the immediate aftermath of the revolution. However, the reforms did not have time to develop into democratic, due to Russia's war in Ukraine. The post-Soviet countries seem to share the same behavioural traits by former centre Russia, meddling into the sovereign decision-making and public will over the choice of countries' peripherality and progress.

Conclusion and discussion

The hypothetical frame for the discussion in this article revolved around the assumption that if former practices and country's established peripherality and an overwhelming dependence on its former centre Russia – did not succeed (moreover, have brought about new challenges) it may be relevant to consider the shifting of former practices, which may as well result in shifting country's peripherality. The theoretical approach applied for this discussion, also advocates that the peripheries can be the ones leading the political, social, and cultural transformation, considering the opportunities, among those defined as civil society (Huber and Kamel 2016).

Research on local civil society has demonstrated shifts and development dynamics within the larger eco-system of Armenian civil society (Gevorgyan 2017; Paturyan and Gevorgyan 2018; Paturyan and Gevorgyan 2021). Also, and in particular, that during the years preceding 2018, there has been an agreement among public that the only sphere capable to lead the development of the country in the right direction is the third sector or civil society (Paturyan and Gevorgyan 2021), which has proved true manifesting Armenia's 'Velvet'. Following the changes in the country, the implementation of reforms became the defining variable for the critical civil society's advocacy choice. Data also demonstrates public shifting understanding of the actual roles and contributions of local agency, offering a new definition of a 'weak' civil society from the perspective of the lack of public policy expertise and access to influence. Armenian government's former and superficial strategies or tactics regarding actual reform implementation were a determinant factor that led to the national uprising. Policies of Armenia's former administrations (by default resulting in more dependency on Russia) have led to the revolution.

Beyond doubt, the post-2018, and especially post-war (2020) circumstance have generated multiple and new challenges for a young, and still a post-Soviet Armenia. At the same time, and notwithstanding, the country resides among the very few representatives in the region (along with Georgia), with potential and collective will to democratisation and accountable governance. Surrounded by immediate and regional neighbours, consolidated authoritarian regimes, Armenia strives to sustain the opportunity for creating an environment, in which a democratic transformation may be possible. For a democratic transformation of a country, it may require a development from the perspective of institutionalising the available public policy expertise.

Otherwise, an alignment of government's goals and strategies with those of professionalised civil society actors, with years of reform implementation and human rights monitoring experience, to help produce a country practice different from earlier ones.

Understanding the trajectories of change and developments in post-social movement environments remain a necessity, especially on the post-Soviet space. Russia's war in Ukraine may be one obvious and relevant case in point. With today's Russia promoting power, violence and isolation, openly rejecting modernity and progress (Etkind 2023; Galeotti 2022), and with interest in occupation of neighbours, Armenia is bound to revisit its peripherality. In that process, reference to local agency may be crucial. The analysis suggests, that distancing from former, failed and post-Soviet practices may be possible in result of taking advantage of civil society's functions and expertise. Changing the meaning of the peripheries may mean a change in methods of handling things that were practised before. Updating local institutional platforms involving civil society, and importantly, taking advantage of the expertise it has to offer is one way to do this; shifting the former faulty experience, by also shifting country's peripherality. With multiplicity of new, security, social and political challenges, it seems an imperative for Armenia to reject country's future adjusting to its past, to establish new practices at home, and to shift its peripherality.

Supplementary material

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Conflict of interests
The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical standards
The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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