



ARMENIAN EXPERIENCE OF ADVOCACY SURVEY RESULTS



POLITICAL DIALOGUE

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SURVEY RESULTS

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ABOUT THE STUDY

The present study aims to identify the attitude of Armenian civil society organizations towards their advocacy work and some general advocacy issues. Based on several in-depth interviews that were carried out with various representatives of leading civil society organisations, their attitude towards the study subject was discovered and summarized according to the following issues: attitude of the previous and present authorities towards the advocacy, advocacy success and failure stories and their reasons, obstacles to the advocacy, main tools for advocacy. The study was undertaken by “Political Dialogue” organization with the financial support of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Edgar Vardanyan
Political scientist, researcher

Edgar Vardanyan completed his postgraduate studies at Saint Petersburg State University, receiving a qualification of researcher-lecturer. He received his Master’s degree in Political Science from NAS RA International Scientific Educational Center. His scientific interests include theory of democracy, democratic processes, civic resistance, Armenia’s domestic politics, political ideologies. He is an author of various researches on the abovementioned topics. As an independent political analyst, Edgar Vardanyan has collaborated with several leading local and international civil society organizations and foundations.

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ARMENIAN EXPERIENCE OF ADVOCACY SURVEY RESULTS

The survey *aimed* to identify the advocacy experience of civil society organizations in Armenia.

In the frameworks of the present survey the experience of Armenian civil society organizations (hereinafter referred to as CSOs) in carrying out advocacy was reviewed in two stages: one including the period leading up to the Velvet Revolution in 2018 and the time period coming after that. These two periods differ with the type of political systems that have existed, and our hypothesis was initially that this circumstance may have greatly impacted the nature and outcomes of advocacy implemented during these two periods.

The research has utilized the *method* of in-depth interviews that were carried out with a series of representatives of leading civil society organizations who are generally experienced in activism, human rights protection, election monitoring, protection of women's rights, protection of freedom of speech and conscience, supporting civil society and other areas.

ATTITUDE OF THE AUTHORITIES TOWARDS ADVOCACY PRIOR TO THE REVOLUTION

The answers of our interviewees depicted below show that the political regime that existed before the revolution had a formalistic approach towards the idea of cooperation with the civil society and did not display enough political will to review, acknowledge and accept recommendations made by CSOs. Despite the fact that CSOs were often invited to various consultations and roundtable meetings, recommendations made by CSOs were almost entirely neglected and not included in policy papers and documents developed by former authorities.

“There used to be a belief that the authorities were not ready for real cooperation and real change.”

“The authorities mostly tended to write off CSOs.”

“We sent out a lot of inquiries before and never received any answers.”

“Previously a dialogue was either impossible or was just a formality.”

“We did not exclude cooperation with the state before but the state itself was not willing to cooperate.”

“In the end we were facing political obstacles that had to do with the nature of the previous regime.”

“The authorities did listen to us but never had the will to solve the issues.”

Most of our respondents claimed that for the previous authorities it was important to create the myth that they were closely cooperating with CSOs. The authorities, for instance, while adopting certain laws, would often announce that the draft legal acts were the result of joint work with CSOs, which, according to the same CSOs was mostly not true.

“Only 20-30% of our recommendations were included in the Law on Television and Radio, after which the authorities announced that it was the result of our joint effort. We said that no, it was not and that there was no actual successful joint work.”

ADVOCACY SUCCESS STORIES OF CSOS PRIOR TO THE REVOLUTION, THEIR CAUSES

Our respondents noted that in the rare cases when CSOs were successful in reaching their objectives through advocacy while working with the authorities, this mainly happened during the times when the regime was inclined towards making certain compromises due to pressure from the international community, European institutions or simply because they couldn't resist the international pressure any longer.

“They [the authorities] wanted to show the outside world that they respected democratic processes simply only because they had expectations of financial support from them.”

“It was just a policy of cozening the West.”

“We chose a moment where our interests and those of the government and the international community coincided.”

“I am not aware of such cases where the CSOs were able to reach tangible results through lobbying without the help of western institutions.”

“Before the revolution effective lobbying could take place only when the authorities themselves were looking for a suitable partner in order to show the West that the outcome was the result of joint work.”

Respondents also mentioned that prior to the revolution it was sometimes possible to have partial success thanks to some progressive state officials who were ready to cooperate.

“It was possible to work with some state agencies, for instance, with deputy ministers who had progressive thinking i.e. in the ministry of justice.”

“There used to be small feedback from the ministry of defense and the ministry of justice.”

Prior to the revolution some CSOs were successful in carrying out advocacy in relation to a limited number of issues.

“Organizations dealing with violence against women were able to carry out public awareness campaigns, find partner NGOs in the provinces, work with beneficiary groups, find multiplying people and as a result increase the number of reports on violence, which could be regarded as an effective indicator of advocacy.”

“With respect to gender-based abortions, CSOs were able to raise the issue within society.”

During the interviews, there was also the opinion that the mere fact of continuous monitoring, for instance, in the area of human rights was already a testament to the fact that there were successful advocacy practices in Armenia.

With regard to working with state institutions, our respondents have noted the following as partially successful examples of advocacy:

- ❖ Reforms in the health sector:

“i.e. in the field of palliative care,”

- ❖ Preventing the adoption of a regressive law in the field of freedom of conscience:
-

“They wanted to adopt a law on religious organizations. We sent in complaints to international organizations asking them to voice their positions. They too were against and we were able to halt the adoption of the law using the feedback from international institutions.”

- ❖ The adoption of recommendations by the government in the area of fighting sexual abuse:
-

“The recommendations made in the research on issues related to sexual abuse of children were adopted by the government.”

- ❖ Legislative amendments in the area of freedom of speech:
-

“80% of the Law on Mass Media Outlets was what we had wanted.”

- ❖ Partial legislative amendments with regard to the reform of law-enforcement agencies:
-

“Our organization also contributed to the changes in the law in relation to what was allowed to be filmed by police officers and what not.”

Many of the interviewees from CSOs noted that prior to the revolution mainly due to the unavailability of conventional ways, the only form of advocacy were often street movements and non-conventional political participation, which sometimes helped to achieve solutions for certain issues. Some successful or half successful such examples are the movement for the protection of the Trchkan Waterfall, the movement for the preservation of the Mashtots Park, the 100 Dram Movement, etc.

CONDITIONS CONDUCIVE TO ADVOCACY FOLLOWING THE REVOLUTION

Many of our interviewees have highlighted that there are now favorable conditions for advocacy in the sense that many state institutions and representatives of the ruling party are open and willing to cooperate and sympathize with CSOs with respect to many issues.

“After the revolution the government cooperates a lot more. There is a clear will for cooperation.”

“Current authorities themselves initiate various platforms for cooperation and have been very active in that.”

“There is a lot more dialogue now, officials fear public opinion because they were elected by the people and they realize that they have to be accountable.”

“Lobbying is much easier now. For instance, it is much easier to work in the social sector now because high-ranking officials of the ministry are progressives and people willing to cooperate.”

“There are huge changes now. Authorities communicate with us.”

“We are now heard. Authorities themselves expected active participation of CSOs.”

OBSTACLES TO ADVOCACY AFTER THE REVOLUTION

Out interviewees, who are active representatives of civil society, usually mention that even though now there are more favorable conditions for advocacy, however, there are also some obstacles of both objective and subjective nature.

For instance, it was often noted that the authorities more often cooperate with representatives of CSOs that they used to be partners or friends with before they went into government, and this creates an unequal playing field.

“We are, however, in a better position not in institutional terms but because we can have success due to our personal connections. Those who do not know anyone may be left out of the game. We do not yet know if this openness is towards everyone or just the chosen ones.”

“Many representatives from the authorities communicate with people they used to work with when they too were members of the civil society...such NGOs could ask not to be treated differently just because they used to know each other because perhaps other NGOs had better suggestions...but they don’t do that. Instead they use their chances...and the government has to establish such a mechanism, which would create equal conditions for lobbying.”

Our respondents have also mentioned about other obstacles in relation to advocacy, such as:

“In many cases there are no instruments, through which it would be possible to propose reform packages. Today there are no issues with being heard but there are bureaucratic hurdles. Also, officials are not sure they can push the proposal through. There is a lack of professionalism.”

“There are also state agencies that do not respond in any way. We do not know why this is so. Perhaps they don’t have enough time or experience or anything else. We need more time to understand the real causes.”

“There are no NGO-authorities cooperation mechanisms. Everything is done based on good will.”

“Civil society does not have a political partner now either. There is no debate, no experts, no international support.”

“CSOs often do not have the necessary resources and the time in order to respond to all offers of cooperation.”

“We must find solutions together through a brainstorming. The government should not just present a ready-made document and only collect feedback on it.”

“However, the quality and language of criticism by CSOs is not good. They continue to treat the government the way they used to treat the former regime. This kind of spooks officials and affects the quality of advocacy negatively.”

“Before there was a problem with breaking down. Now the target is not clear. It is not clear who is responsible for what.”

“One cannot say that all issues find their solutions today and that the government is always inclusive. In some areas the situation has

even got worse i.e. getting information based on surveys. As for construction projects, public participation does not exist like before. Many officials look down on citizens. There is no common approach based on values within the state system. Everything is spontaneous. The situation is very different from one state agency to another and many things are unpredictable for us.”

“Now we should be more proactive in setting the agenda. Civil society organizations often do not succeed in doing this because there are many issues we have to address.”

“It’s good that the new authorities are very sensitive towards public opinion but they are almost entirely indifferent towards the opinion of the international community and this might weaken the efficiency of advocacy.”

“In some way it was very difficult to lobby these days because due to the high popular support of the government very few people support activities that contain criticism towards the government.”

“Current authorities are in some cases way too self-confident. They often tout that they have received a mandate of trust from the people and they’re going to do what they think is right. Such a position makes it very difficult to carry out advocacy based on approaches that do not align with their viewpoint.”

“Although in some areas the authorities listen to us very carefully, in the end we find out that they already have a decision and are not keen on changing it. In these situations, we do not know how to change their approaches and how to carry out effective advocacy.”

It is also interesting that the high popular rating of the prime minister was mentioned as an obstacle, which means that the high level of legitimacy of the authorities is not yet a guarantee for effective cooperation between CSOs and the government.

SUCCESSFUL EXAMPLES OF ADVOCACY AFTER THE REVOLUTION

Our interviewees have noted that it is too early to speak about how effective advocacy of CSO's has been after the revolution since not a lot of time has passed following the establishment of new public and political rules. However, there are already some successful examples of advocacy in different areas.

“For instance, there is some procedure on mental health care that was uploaded onto edraft.am. We made some recommendations on it that were all accepted.”

“We have been able to convince the minister of education that rural schools should not be closed down.”

“We made some recommendations with regard to direct democracy; we organized a seminar with the participation of an MP and in the end the corresponding draft law ended up containing our recommendations.”

“The concept paper on political parties already includes our recommendations which were considered acceptable by consensus.”

“Our recommendations in relation to the media sector and elections have already be included within the CEPA roadmap.”

MAIN TOOLS FOR ADVOCACY FOR CSOS

Our interviewees have noted that in the frameworks of advocacy CSOs have mainly applied the following tools:

- ❖ Awareness raising campaigns through handing out flyers, development and presentation of visual materials, seminars and other means.

- ❖ Messages and proposals addressed to specific state officials through both electronic formats and in hardcopies.
- ❖ Organization of face-to-face meetings with certain officials.
- ❖ Organization of public events with the participation of mass media outlets and officials from corresponding sectors.
- ❖ Use of conventional and non-conventional methods, including marches, demonstrations, hunger strikes, school strikes, blocking roads, etc.

During the interviews many people mentioned that CSOs usually did not have an advocacy strategy and mostly acted chaotically and based on the specific situation.

It was acknowledged that there was a need for learning skills of organizing effective advocacy and acting in coordinated coalitions. It was noted that for carrying out efficient advocacy being proactive was very important along with having own written proposals, which would be based on professional analyses and assessments.

“Evidence-based studies used to be lacking, although that progress was being made slowly in that direction.”

Our interviewees also mentioned that advocacy should be based on local peculiarities and take into account local issues rather than automatically applying the international experience.

They also spoke of the need for CSOs to revise their methodology for advocacy.

“Old, extreme tools are outdated and illegitimate today. Also, many people do not use it because there are people like them in the government. However, there are issues that do not find solutions and

it is hard to comprehend what needs to be done in general for those problems to be solved.”

“We need time to get used to the new situation and come up with a new language for advocacy. As long as there is the danger of indirectly helping the previous regime, civil society, in many ways, is an ally of the current government, which does not make it possible to express strong criticism.

MAIN CONCLUSIONS

Summing up the survey results we see that the advocacy carried out by CSOs targeting the government prior to the revolution can for the most part be considered ineffective. The main reason for this was the lack of the political will of the former regime to serve the public interest. Of course, it's not like CSOs used their full potential and always acted in an efficient way, however, there were many issues and sectors that were closed off for the public and most likely the CSOs would have been unsuccessful in these areas no matter how hard they tried to push for changes.

The limited successes that were recorded prior to the revolution were mostly due to international pressure in specific cases. This was when the proposals of CSOs were sometimes partially accepted. Some success was also possible due to the fact that certain CSOs were able to find some professional state officials with whom they shared common ideals and values, which made it possible to have effective cooperation.

Nevertheless, prior to the revolution many CSOs were successful in working with the public concerning certain issues and organize influential awareness campaigns. We can say that in the noted period CSOs basically had much better advocacy carried out with respect to working with the public.

Not enough time has passed to give complete assessments regarding the advocacy experience of CSOs following the revolution. However, it should be noted that for most of the CSO's now there are favorable

conditions for implementing advocacy in the sense that many people in the government now and those in CSOs are like-minded people. Many of our interviewees said that they believed the authorities had the political will to serve the public interest and implement democratic reforms.

For post-revolutionary advocacy using personal connections is very common, due to which many CSOs can cooperate with government representatives effectively. However, not everyone mentions this as a positive thing since it can lead to unequal conditions in the area of advocacy. There is an opinion that the authorities should create a level playing field for carrying out advocacy.

There is also the opinion that CSOs do not have the relevant tools, through which it would be possible to convey their proposals. It was often noted that now everything is based on the good will of the authorities and that there are no institutional grounds for cooperation. At the same time, it was highlighted that CSOs needed to be proactive and present quality proposals, which was not always ensured before.

According to representatives of CSOs, despite the conducive situation in terms of cooperation with the authorities in the post-revolution period, one cannot say, however, that all sectors and all officials are open for cooperation. It was also interesting to learn that the high legitimacy of the ruling party in some ways can negatively impact the efficiency of advocacy carried out by CSOs. It was mentioned that any activity containing criticism towards the government is never popular and it is very difficult to mobilize people around it. In some cases, according to some of our interviewees, overconfidence of certain state officials was a negative influence on advocacy. These officials would often refer to the fact that they received a strong mandate from the people to govern and would refuse to accept any positive and fundamental proposals.

Many of our interviewees also highlighted the fact that just like before the revolution, now too many of the CSOs carry out unorganized and situational advocacy and have no related strategies. It was also noted that CSOs should not mechanically apply the experience of other countries but rather adopt a professional approach and find the right means of communication with state bodies.



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