

The Transformation of the Public Sphere from Soviet to Post-Soviet Armenia

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Introduction

The public sphere is one of the important components of a democratic society, where members of it have an important role in managing the state and looking for ways to solve public problems. The bourgeois public sphere first appeared in the 18th century and aims to mediate between individuals' private concerns and demands, and the concerns of social and public life. Its purpose was to use the ongoing discussions among the public to influence the decisions of the government. The theory of the public sphere is presented in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) written by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas¹. Even though Habermas made observations about the transformation of the public sphere on the example of the bourgeois society, we can still localize Habermas' thoughts in the Armenian reality. In this case, first of all, it is necessary to take into account the systemic and traditional peculiarities of Armenian society. The problems faced by the Armenian people in recent years are quite numerous, from war to political problems, which also have an impact on the public sphere.

This thesis focuses on the main features and challenges of transformation of the public sphere from Soviet to post-Soviet Armenia. Firstly, it aims to show the main characteristics of the transformation process and examine how the Soviet Armenian transformation case deviates from Habermas' theory. Secondly, it discusses the characteristics of the post-Soviet Armenian public sphere with an emphasis on the role of digitalization. In this thesis, mostly analytical research has been done and it could be considered as an attempt to present and interpret the transformation process of the public sphere.

The process of transformation of the Armenian public sphere and the historical events connected with it is captivating in many senses: on the one hand, the study of the history and characteristics of the Soviet Armenian public sphere help to rediscover and reevaluate the role of the underground, secret organizations and *samizdats* (self-publishing press)² in the process of Armenian independence, on the other hand, this discussion helps to examine the post-Soviet Armenian public sphere with its characteristics. The work seems challenging because it is difficult

¹ Jürgen Habermas. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Oxford, England: Polity Press, 1992.

² *Samizdat* is a certain type of books, magazines, newspapers, leaflets, posters, and other similar literature, that regardless of the number and periodicity of publishing, has some circulation and is published independently of the state's control and ideology.

to bring Soviet ideology and the public sphere together. However, both in Armenia and in other Soviet states, public thought has found its unique forms of expression under secret conditions.

The work is divided into three parts, each of which engages with Habermas' theory: the *first chapter* is the theoretical part of my research, which is based on Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) work. The main aim of this chapter is to present the key details of the public sphere theory combining the critiques that Habermas' theory has generated.

The *second chapter* is dedicated to the main features that pushed the process of transformation of the public sphere from Soviet to post-Soviet Armenia. It introduces the nature of the Armenian secret political and ideological sphere during Soviet times and their influence in the transformation process. In light of these discussions, bringing Habermas' theory in the Soviet Armenian public sphere will allow elucidating my argument.

The *third chapter* lays out the key challenges that the post-Soviet Armenian public sphere meets after independence. This chapter deals with both traditional (the way that Habermas defines it) and digital public spheres in Armenia. This research could be useful for understanding how digital media shape the public sphere and public opinion in Armenia and how it could shape citizens' attitudes about political issues.

According to Habermas, the public sphere is made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state.³ Following this definition, my thesis statement is that in the Soviet Armenian case, the private people are the private organizations that tried to gather together. Here it is important to mention that we could not imagine any process of articulation the needs of the society with the state because there were no mechanisms, which could provide conditions for negotiating with the Soviet State. I argue that besides, Habermas separate only private and public spheres, in Soviet Armenian case, there were t private, non-State and State public spheres, so in the thesis discusses how this tripartite system fits with and challenges Habermas' theories.

³ *Ibid*, 176.

For the theoretical understanding of the public sphere mostly Habermas' books and articles are used.⁴ In addition to these primary sources, secondary sources are used for a better understanding of the critical observation of Habermas' theory,⁵ as in this discussion, Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato's analyses were helpful.⁶ The importance of underground organizations in Soviet Armenia is highlighted by Vardan Harutyunyan;⁷ his work presents the whole history of Armenian dissident thought starting from the 1960s. Information about Armenian dissident thought is also found in Russian sources.⁸ *Samizdats* were important tools for Armenian dissident thought, and many of them were used in this thesis, such as *Paros* (the first Armenian *samizdat*), *Erkunj*, *Ankakhutyun*, *Mashtots*, and others. For the theoretical understanding of the *samizdats* Ann Komaromi's⁹ and Myalo, L., S. Sokolov and V. Sverdlov's¹⁰ works were helpful. For analyzing Post Armenian public sphere Mark Grigoryan's¹¹ work was important, where he summarized the Armenian media history after Independence, as well as Armine Ishkhanian's book about civic society and its activity in Armenia.¹² The thesis ends with a Conclusion, which brings together the key findings and arguments of this research.

⁴ The Transformation of the Public Sphere (1962), Further Reflections on the Public Sphere (1993), Between Facts and Norms (1996).

⁵ *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, edited by Craig Calhoun, (Massachusetts: Fourth printing, 1996).

⁶ Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, (Cambridge: MIT press, 1992).

⁷ Vardan Harutyunyan, *Aylakhout'yuny Khorhrdayin Hayastanum*, trans. *Dissent in Soviet Armenia*, (Yerevan: Van Aryan, 2014).

⁸ See: Lyudmila Alekseeva, *Istoria Inokomislia V SSSR, Noveiishii Period*, trans. *History of Difference in the USSR, the Latest Period*, Moscow: Moscow Helsinki Group: 2012.

Sbornik Dokumentov Obshesvennoi Gruppy Sodeistviya vipolneniu Xelsinskii Soglashenii v SSSR, trans. Collection of documents of the Public Group for Assistance in the Implementation of the Helsinki Agreements in the USSR, New York: Khornika, 1978.

⁹ Ann Komaromi, "The Material Existence of Soviet Samizdat," in *Slavic Review*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (Autumn, 2004).

¹⁰ Myalo, L., S. Sokolov and V. Sverdlov's, *Po stranitsam samizdata*, trans. *Through the pages of samizdat*, (Moscow: Molodayagvardya, 1990).

¹¹ Mark Grigoryan, "Media and Democracy in Armenia", In *the Armenians Past and Present in the Making of National Identity*, edited by Edmund Herzig and Marina Kurkchian, (New York: Routledge. 2005),

¹² Armine Ishkhanian, *Civil Society, Development and Environmental Activism in Armenia*, (Yerevan: City Print house, 2013).

Chapter 1

Theoretical Approach to the Public Sphere: Jürgen Habermas' Public Sphere Theory

The first chapter of the present work is dedicated to the discussion of the theory of the public sphere presented by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1929-). In this chapter, we will discuss Habermas' works and how they have been criticized. This analysis will help to develop subsequent chapters a critical discussion of Soviet and post-Soviet Armenian public spheres. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1962)*¹³ by Jürgen Habermas is a massively influential book on a broad range of fields. This chapter is important for understanding key ideas about the theory of the public sphere, which we will use in a subsequent chapter for discussing specific aspects of the Soviet Armenian case. In addition to presenting important theoretical details, we find it important to discuss the critiques that Habermas' theory has generated. It has received extensive criticism and has sparked extremely fruitful debates about various issues concerning democracy. It is important to discuss the criticisms to better understand how we can implement Habermas' theory in the Armenian example.

Habermas is associated with the Frankfurt School of critical social theory, which emerged in the 1920s at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt. He is considered to be a member of the Frankfurt Institute's second generation, succeeding first-generation and founding intellectuals such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse. His works had a significant impact on numerous fields such as communication studies, cultural studies, political science and sociology.

Habermas refers to issues concerning the public sphere, democracy, public opinion and so on in his different works, such as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1962)*, *The Theory of Communicative Action (1987)* and *Between Facts and Norms (1996)*. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1962)* discusses the origin, elements, structure, transformation process of the public sphere. As mentioned above, this book also received criticisms, many of which Habermas responded to in his later works.

Although in his many articles Habermas addresses the issues concerning the public sphere, his complete ideas are summarized in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* book,

¹³ This book translated into English in 1989 by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence.

which was first published in German in 1962. It was met with both enthusiasm and criticism in Germany, and when it was translated into English in 1989, it sparked much more debate about Habermas and the public sphere. For us, this book is interesting to consider from both historical, political and philosophical contexts. On the one hand it gives historical preconditions and conditions for the development of a public sphere; on the other hand, it addresses important concepts for the political sciences such as civil society, political consciousness, public opinion and public debate. And of course, the book discusses philosophical issues with engaging thinkers such as Karl Marx, John Stuart Mill, Alexis de Tocqueville and others.¹⁴

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), Habermas gives a historical background to the bourgeois public sphere by emphasizing the structural changes concerning capitalism and economics. He presents how citizens deal with those changes by showing the social-structural transformation of the public sphere, the main changes in public functions, and the shifts in the concept of public opinion.

According to Habermas' interpretation, the bourgeois public sphere first appeared in the 18th century and aims to mediate between individuals' private concerns and demands, and the concerns of social and public life. The first shift took place in England, France, the United States, and Germany some 150 years ago, beginning in the late seventeenth century. Habermas attempts to explain the rise of the public sphere by linking political, social, cultural, and philosophical events in a multidisciplinary manner. Initially, monarchical and feudal civilizations existed that drew no boundary between state and society, or between public and private, and that had organized themselves politically around symbolic representation and position. The political task of the bourgeois public sphere was the regulation of civil society.¹⁵ The major element of this public sphere was its independence from the power of both the church and the government as a result of its access to economic and social resources.

According to Habermas, the "town" was the life center of civil society not only economically; in cultural-political contrast to the court, it designated especially an early public sphere in the world of letters whose institutions were the coffee houses, the salons, and the

¹⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *the Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, (Cambridge: MIT press, 1991), 102-129.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 52.

Tischgesellschaften (table societies).¹⁶ These institutions constituted the public sphere of a rational-critical debate in the world of letters, in which the subjective experience arising in the interiority of the conjugal family gained clarification about itself by communicating with itself. For Habermas, salons, coffee houses and table societies pushed society into the public sphere. To this he also added that the periodical press (the handwritten correspondence at first, then the printed weekly or monthly) became the publicist instrument of criticism.¹⁷ At first, they were platforms for art and cultural criticism, then they became an important element for public criticism about various issues starting from art to political questions.

According to Habermas, the separation of public and private spheres implied that the competition between private interests was in principle left to the market as a regulating force and was kept outside the conflict of opinions¹⁸. The public sphere, as part of the private realm, was constituted by private individuals opposed to public officials and was founded upon the capacity of the civil society of private individuals to organize itself independent of any imperative from the state.¹⁹ This is crucial for our second chapter, where we will discuss the public-private relationship in the case of Soviet Armenian society, where the public and private were blurred.

The fully developed bourgeois public sphere is based on the fictitious identity of the two roles assumed by the privatized individuals who came together to form a public: the role of property owners and the role of human beings pure and simple.²⁰ Habermas continues this conversation by emphasizing that the public's identification of "property owners" with that of "common human beings" was made all the easier because the social status of the bourgeois private persons in any case usually combines the distinguishing characteristics of ownership and education. Besides, later in order to better understand political issues related to political elections and the public sphere, it became important to have political consciousness. A political consciousness developed in the public sphere of civil society, in opposition to absolute

¹⁶ Habermas, *the Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 30.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 41.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 189.

¹⁹ Agnes S. Ku, "Revisiting the Notion of "Public" in Habermas's Theory-Toward a Theory of Politics of Public Credibility", in *Sociological Theory*, Jul., 2000, Vol. 18, No. 2, 218.

²⁰ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 56.

sovereignty, articulates the concept of and demand for general and abstract laws, which ultimately comes to assert itself as the only legitimate source of this law.²¹

The success of the public sphere, according to Habermas, is based on rational-critical discourse, in which everyone is an equal participant and the highest communication ability is the power of argument. A set of basic rights concerned the sphere of the public engaged in rational-critical debate (freedom of opinion and speech, freedom of press, freedom of assembly and association, etc.) and the political function of private people in this public sphere (right of petition, equality of vote, etc.).²² In the "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere" (1993) article,²³ Habermas claims that there are opinion-forming associations that have a political impact via the public media because they either participate directly in public communications or, as in the case of projects advocating alternatives to conventional wisdom, the programmatic character of their activities sets examples through which they implicitly contribute to public discussion.²⁴ Here, it is interesting to engage in this conversation the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, who saw civil society as the public sphere where trade unions and political parties gained concessions from the bourgeois state, and the sphere in which ideas and beliefs were shaped, where bourgeois 'hegemony' was reproduced in cultural life through the media, universities and religious institutions to 'manufacture consent' and legitimacy.²⁵

From this point of view, Habermas also emphasized some negative aspects of the publicity, one of them being manipulation, which is a relevant theme nowadays. According to Habermas, manipulative publicity aimed at rendering the broad population (and especially the sector of it that is most indifferent as regards products) infectiously ready for acclamation.²⁶ Habermas argued that these manipulative actions mostly carried out political parties and organizations. This is also crucial for us, because when considering the digital public sphere in the third chapter, we will see that manipulation is one of the biggest issues in the formation of the digital public sphere in the 21st century. Examples of the manipulation could be fake news, which manipulates people and

²¹ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 54.

²² *Ibid*, 83.

²³ This article was published in 1993 in the *Habermas and the Public Sphere* volume, edited by Craig Calhoun.

²⁴ Jürgen Habermas, "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere", in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, edited by Craig Calhoun, (Massachusetts: Fourth printing, 1996), 454.

²⁵ Andrew Heywood, *Political Ideas and Concepts: An Introduction*, (London: Macmillan, 1994), 101.

²⁶ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 211.

guides them in making choices, thereby influencing the public sphere and opinion. One such case is the 2016 US election campaign, during which a large amount of fake news began to circulate on the Internet, which influenced people's political choices. Fake news can also cause panic, especially in war situations.

As some commentators on Habermas have noted the rise of the large corporation, the problematization of consumption, the development of the social-welfare state and mass democracy all altered both the conditions that framed the view of classical Marxism and the conditions of bourgeois society itself.²⁷ From this point of view, in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* Marx was presented as one of the greatest thinkers over the time and Habermas mostly discusses Marxian ideas concerning public opinion, civic society and activity. Both Marxist and liberal utopias had an influence on Habermas' theory of the liberal public sphere. We can see the Marxian influence on the theory, because the entire discussion concerning the economy and class were central during the transformation process. According to Habermas, class interest is the basis of public opinion.²⁸ Habermas uses the role of the bourgeois society mostly in the Marxist sense; according to Habermas bourgeois society refers to the private. As a result, Habermas differentiates two important roles for the public sphere. Accordingly, Habermas argues that as a privatized individual, the bourgeois was two things in one: owner of goods and one human being among others, that is the bourgeois and *l'homme*. This distinction comes from Marx. It was also discussed by Hegel, who differentiates not only between the *l'homme* and the bourgeois but also separates the role of the citizen. Cohen and Arato argue that Habermas does not consistently adopt this second, more Hegelian, usage, because he seems to be sensitive to a fictional identification between *l'homme* and the bourgeois criticized by the young Marx.²⁹

While attempting to extend processes of public criticism and supervision to the economic sphere, Habermas mostly uses Marx. Cohen and Arato argue that while doing this Habermas would have considered irrelevant the combination of Marxian critique and democratic liberal norms, but Habermas believes that neither the Marxian nor the liberal utopias are adequate guides for

²⁷Craig Calhoun, "Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, edited by Craig Calhoun (Massachusetts: Fourth printing, 1996), 6.

²⁸ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 89.

²⁹ Jean L. Cohen & Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, (Cambridge: MIT press, 1992), 220.

exploring what has occurred in the liberal public sphere. In Habermas' analysis, none of these options—Marxian, liberal, or even their combination—have been actualized.³⁰

In this discussion about the connection between Marx and Habermas, it is interesting to take into account some critical observations about Habermas' theory. One such observation is possible alternative public spheres apart from that of the bourgeois. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge in their *Public Sphere and Experience Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (1993) criticize Habermas for not reflecting much more on the proletarian public spheres. This is important for our project, because Soviet societies were proletarian societies with Marxist ideology. In contrast to Habermas, Negt and Kluge insist on the need to understand postliberal, post literary public formations in terms other than those of disintegration and decline. Moreover, they assert that it is impossible to define or describe a public sphere in the singular, as if it has a homogeneous substance.³¹ It can only be understood as an accumulation of phenomena with very different features and roots. Craig Calhoun also argues that the lack of attention to the plebeian public sphere is also part of a failure to adequately describe the full field of force impinging on the bourgeois public sphere.³² Later in his article "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere" (1993), Habermas emphasizes that the modern public sphere comprises several arenas in which, through printed materials dealing with matters of culture, information, and entertainment, a conflict of opinions is fought out more or less discursively. This conflict does not merely involve a competition among various parties of loosely associated private people; from the beginning a dominant bourgeois public collides with a plebeian one.³³ This discussion continues by engaging more and more types of public spheres. Some scholars such as Nancy Fraser, Geoff Eley, and Mary Ryan argue that Habermas excludes from consideration some formations of publicity and to then focus especially on gender and racial problems.

Mary Ryan sees Habermas's model as masculinist and West-centric. Particularly, the concept of the public sphere is seen as systematically marginalizing the viewpoints of women and non-Western people. Ryan argued that women were patently excluded from the bourgeois public

³⁰ Cohen & Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, 231.

³¹Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, (London: University of Minnesota Press Minneapolis), xxix.

³² Craig Calhoun, "Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere", 39.

³³ Jürgen Habermas, "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere", 430.

sphere, that ideal historical type that Habermas traced to the eighteenth century, and were even read out of the fiction of the public by virtue of their ideological consignment to a separate realm called the private.³⁴ Although women were not treated equally in the public sphere the actions they did take should be viewed as modes of expression and interaction. However, Habermas's model cannot include them, since they certainly do not conform to the qualifications of rational-critical discourse.³⁵ According to Eyla Rabinovitch, Habermas' conception is assimilationist and normalizing because the only way for marginalized groups to gain legitimate entry to the public sphere is by adopting the privileged mode of communication.³⁶

Although Habermas received a lot of criticism against his theory of the public sphere, his work contains influential and valuable ideas concerning the various concepts of today's democratic institutions. As we have already mentioned above, in the second chapter we will discuss how Habermas' theory could work on Soviet societies, especially in Soviet Armenia.

³⁴ Mary P. Ryan, "Gender and Public Access: Women's Politics in Nineteenth-Century America", in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, edited by Craig Calhoun, (Massachusetts: Fourth printing, 1996), 260.

³⁵Eyla Rabinovitch, "Gender and the Public Sphere: Alternative Forms of Integration in Nineteenth-Century America," in *Sociological Theory*, Nov., 2001, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Nov., 2001), 348.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Chapter 2

Brief History of the Emergence of Public Sphere in the Soviet Armenia

The post-Stalin, post-mobilization modernizing phase established the solid framework for Soviet opposition. Self-consciousness increased; specialization of interests developed; and the fragmentation of the mobilized society began. Secretary Nikita Khrushchev's policy of de-Stalinization raised expectations of systemic change in some parts of the population, and the seeds of dissent took root in the late 1950's and early 1960's.³⁷ Dissent bloomed in the Soviet Union, becoming a tenacious perennial in the 1970s, owing largely to the fact that the deStalinization program was never finished and the hopes of reform were mostly disappointed.

The history of dissent in Soviet Armenia had deep roots and it constantly led to arrests and exiles of many people. After the death of Stalin (1953), during five years (1953-1958), more than 50 people were sentenced in Armenia for political reasons. In 1962-63, *the Youth Union of Armenia* started its activities. This organization did not have a clearly developed program and charter, various attempts were made to develop them at different stages and they were never finalized, but for four years, it operated under the most difficult conditions. The active organizers and participants of that union were the "Seven Patriots" arrested in 1963 (this is what the public called them after their arrest). With their arrest, the period of classical dissent begins in Armenia.³⁸ This was more of a national-patriotic organization, which members setting goals such as commemorating Genocide Day (April 24), erecting a monument to the victims of the Genocide, reclaiming Armenia's lost territories (particularly Artsakh and the return of Nakhichevan), and preserving the purity and preservation of the Armenian language. In 1965 the powerful demonstration can also be considered one of the successes recorded by this organization.

The first major outbreak of dissident nationalism within Soviet Armenia occurred on April 24, 1965, when thousands of Armenians in Yerevan demonstrated on the fiftieth anniversary of the 1915 deportations and massacres.³⁹ Most of the participants were young people. On this day, students, having gathered in the institutes in the morning, did not start their studies, but took to the

³⁷ Robert Sharlet, "Dissent and Repression in the Soviet Union", in *Current History*, Vol. 73, No. 430, 1977, 113.

³⁸ Vardan Harutyunyan, *Aylakhout'yuny Khorhrdayin Hayastanum*, trans. *Dissent in Soviet Armenia*, (Yerevan: Van Aryan, 2014), 10.

³⁹ Ronald Grigor Suny, "Soviet Armenia", in *the Armenian People from Ancient to Modern times*, Vol. II, ed. by Richard Hovhannisyan, (Los Angeles: Macmillan, 1997), 376.

streets. They rushed to the center of Yerevan, to Lenin Square, entering institutions, libraries, etc. on the way. and calling upon the people there to join them.⁴⁰ Protesters demanded that the Turks return the Armenian lands to Armenia. After that demonstration, the public, especially the people involved in the political dissident struggle, started to realize that they could oppose the existing rules and that thousands of people were ready to go out on the streets and force the authorities to retreat. Here it is significant to highlight that Armenian dissidents started to think that the Soviet Union was guilty for the territorial losses of the Armenian people.⁴¹ This is important, because before that there was a popular opinion, according to which Russia was the only ally for Armenia throughout history. This demonstration broke many taboos.

In summary, the whole 1960s movement carries the mark of the Armenian people's sufferings at the turn of the twentieth century, the lost homeland, and the unfulfilled promises associated with the USSR's prospective resolution of the Armenian crisis at the conclusion of the Second World War. These unfulfilled hopes, the Genocide, the loss of historical territories, the possibility of resolving the issues of Karabakh and Nakhichevan within the USSR had a constant impact on the Armenian dissident mind, both in the 70s and 80s, but in the 60s were completely imbued with these ideas. This is the basis on which the Armenian dissident thought arose and developed, and with its development reached the need to fight for independence and against the communist dictatorship.

Since 1966, Armenia was the only country in the USSR to have an organized opposition party with an official publication that stated its ideological war against the present system and disseminated leaflets. It was the *United National Party* (UNP). UNP members were continuously arrested and sentenced to long-term imprisonment, but the party continued to function. And it worked until 1988, when there was no need for an underground struggle. The UNP was a party fighting for the creation of an independent Armenia. It follows from the UNP program that this structure imagines itself not only as a classical party, but also as a unit acting on behalf of the Armenian people, as a party to interstate and international contacts.⁴²

⁴⁰ Lyudmila Alekseeva, *Istoria Inokomislia V SSSR, Noveiishii Period*, trans. *History of Difference in the USSR, the Latest Period*, (Moscow: Moscow Helsinki Group: 2012), 79.

⁴¹ Harutyunyan, *Aylakhout'yuny Khorhrdayin Hayastanum*, trans. *Dissent in Soviet Armenia*, 10.

⁴² *Ibid*, 78.

April 1, 1977 An open human rights association was announced — the Armenian Helsinki Group. The Armenian Helsinki group made several reports about violations of civil and human rights in the territory of the Armenian SSR. The message addressed to the Belgrade Conference is a summary, in which the facts of suppression of the national Armenian culture are noted; discrimination of the Armenian language; the names of people who lost their jobs due to ideological motives are given; the violation of human rights of politically imprisoned Armenians is indicated; persons who have been denied the right to emigrate are listed; the books taken out of libraries and destroyed only because their authors emigrated from the USSR are listed.⁴³

Above mentioned underground organizations were vivid examples of Armenian dissident thought, so it is clear that these organizations prepared a solid ground for creating a public sphere in Soviet Armenia. While speaking about the premises of formation of the public sphere in Soviet Armenia, it is important to understand how the private, secret, underground organizations turned into public. Therefore, the relationship between public and private spheres is crucial here. According to Habermas, the public sphere is made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state.⁴⁴ With following to this definition, we can assume that in the Soviet Armenian case the private people are the private organizations which tried to gather together but here it is important to mention that we could not imagine any process of articulation the needs of the society with the state, because there were no mechanisms, which could provide conditions for negotiating with the Soviet State. Whilst its border with the private realm was relatively blurry, the private-public sphere was strongly divided from the official-public realm-state. Therefore, there was a clear distinction between the private sphere, non-state public sphere and the state.

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), Habermas argued that the formation of the public sphere in Western countries was largely connected with the discussions that started in salons, cafes, and later the pamphlets and feuilletons that were already published had a great influence on the formation of the public sphere, state-civil society. Post-Stalin studies

⁴³ *Sbornik Dokumentov Obshesvennoi Gruppy Sodeistviya vipolneniu Xelsinskii Soglashenii v SSSR*, trans. Collection of documents of the Public Group for Assistance in the Implementation of the Helsinki Agreements in the USSR, New York: Khornika, 1978, 69-77.

⁴⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 176.

showed changes in the Soviet public sphere. In particular during the Khrushchev rule (1953-1964), communication in the kitchens and cafes of private apartments became new places of socialization, where people discussed various issues, from literature to politics.⁴⁵ From this point of view, the above-mentioned underground organizations and the discussions in the private places, could be considered as important conditions for the public sphere. Moreover, many of these organizations have printed leaflets, magazines, and newspapers which according to Habermas' theory had a crucial role in shaping the public sphere.

Most of the above-mentioned printed papers are known with the name "self-published" or "samizdat" because they were published independently of the state. Anna Akhmatova described the era as "pre-Gutenberg" because of the limited technical possibilities for producing and distributing uncensored written material. Strictly controlled access to copy machines made privately owned typewriters the most practical means for publication, and typescripts became the characteristic samizdat form.⁴⁶

Samizdat is a certain type of books, magazines, newspapers, leaflets, posters, and other similar literature, that regardless of the number and periodicity of publishing, has some circulation and is published independently of the state's control and ideology.⁴⁷ *Samizdat* can be conditionally divided into two types: anti-state ideology literature (leaflets, newspapers, magazines, books, etc.) and personal household literature (letters, handwritten notebooks, questionnaires, etc.)⁴⁸ Previous international audiences most often thought of samizdat in terms of political opposition and heroic dissidence: *samizdat* was a free channel for communicating the truth that would bring down the Soviet empire.⁴⁹ According to this idealistic "heroic" discourse, the goal of *samizdat* was to transmit the "truth" suppressed in the official world of state censored publications.⁵⁰ *Samizdat* provided a channel for freely transmitting content.

⁴⁵Larissa Zakharova, "Soviet Public Spheres", see: <https://www.politika.io/en/notice/soviet-public-spheres> (Retrieved 24.06.2022).

⁴⁶ Ann Komaromi, "The Material Existence of Soviet Samizdat," in *Slavic Review*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (Autumn, 2004), 599.

⁴⁷ Myalo, L., S. Sokolov and V. Sverdlov, *Po stranitsam samizdata* (Through the pages of samizdat), (Moscow: Molodayagvardya, 1990), 4.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Komaromi, "The Material Existence of Soviet Samizdat," 597.

⁵⁰ Komaromi, "The Material Existence of Soviet Samizdat," 600.

The first publication of the self-published press in Armenia is considered to be the *Paros* (meaning lighthouse in Armenian) newspaper published by the United National Party. In 1967 April, on the occasion of the Genocide Day, the United National Party distributed its first leaflet entitled *Paros*, and on October 19-20 of the same year, it also distributed the four-page *Paros* newspaper with the following eight articles: "The new ones are coming out", "The Armenian people", "Armenia under the yoke", "The Armenian question", "The international situation today", "The facts are ruthless", "What is the language of the nation", "Two words".⁵¹

The articles published in the very first issue of *Paros* had already pointed out that this newspaper was not like previously speeded leaflets. It contained a very important message which was the independence of Armenia, the establishment of the people's will:

Today it is the sacred duty of all of us to liberate the Armenian people from the yoke of Russia. There are many international opportunities, especially for advanced nations. That is why we will not face any difficulties. Only united determination will make the Armenian people fulfill their longing and, in the future, will put an end to the difficult problem of the Armenians, from which Russia feeds and digests itself with the peculiar wolf's mouth. Let's get rid of the materialistic, vile faith of a stranger among the people, through which they put a chain in the hands and mind of the Armenian nation. Let us act boldly and confidently.⁵²

Thus, for the first time in the Armenian self-published press, topics were being discussed that were previously forbidden to even be raised. It is interesting to note the fact that the newspaper was published underground, secretly, for a private circle of people, but spreading from hand to hand, it gave the opportunity to spread the main message of *Paros*, which would be the basis for new self-determination, uniting people around one idea of independence. In this sense, the private, secret sphere was gradually beginning to become public. Fifty thousand copies are not a huge number, but if we factor in hand-to-hand and word-of-mouth distribution of it, we can see some expansion of audience boundaries. *Paros* stood out for its pronounced anti-Soviet orientation, intolerance towards the Soviet authorities.

⁵¹ Harutyunyan, *Aylakhoutyuny Khorhrdyan Hayastanum*, trans. *Dissent in Soviet Armenia*, 10.

⁵² *Paros samizdat*, Yerevan, 1967, №1, 2. Here is the original Armenian: «Այսօր մեր բոլորիս սրբազան պարտքն է ազատագրել Հայ ժողովրդին Ռուսաստանի լծից, որի համար ներկայումս ստեղծված են միջազգային լայն հնարավորություններ, հատկապես առաջադեմ ազգերի համար: Դրա համար ոչ մի դժվարությունների առաջ չենք կանգնի: Միայն միասնական վճռականությունն իրականություն կդարձնի Հայ ժողովրդի դարավոր իղձը և հետագայում վերջ կդնի Հայկական դժվարամարս հարցին, որից Ռուսաստանը սնվում է մարսում է իրեն յուրահատուկ գայլի ախորժակով: Դուրս վանենք ժողովրդի միջից օտարի նյութապաշտական, ստոր հավատը, որի միջոցով շղթա են դրել Հայ ազգի ձեռքին ու մտքին: Գործենք համարձակ ու վստահորեն:»

The authors of *Paros* greatly emphasized the separation and independence of Armenia from the USSR: "It is the sacred duty of the Armenian intelligentsia together with the people to resolve the Armenian issue in a new and correct way in a short time, to make the wishes of the Armenian people a reality, that is, to liberate Armenia from the Russian yoke, to leave the so-called "Soviet structure" and to declare Armenia an independent, neutral state."⁵³

Here it is worth mentioning that the authors of the samizdat emphasized that the problems should be solved with the active participation of the people, here we see the need of the public for organizing the process of independence of Armenia. Important to see the date of this press, it is going back to 1960s when no one could imagine that after approximately 30 years Armenian Independence would be declared.

The second issue of *Paros*, in the form of a one-page typewritten leaflet, was published in 1971, and in 1973 "Paros-2 (supplementary)" autograph was published, which was the basic repetition of the previous one. The third issue of *Paros* was again published in the form of a leaflet in 1974, and in 1981, the fourth, last issue of the self-published *Paros* was published in Yerevan.

About a year and a half after the publication of the first issue of *Paros*, in January 1969, the secretly operating National United Party published the self-published magazine *Yerkunk* (meaning labor as in childbirth in Armenian) with the slogan "Death or Free Armenia." It spread to Yerevan, Gyumri and Vanadzor. Paruyr Hayrikyan is an Armenian politician, a prominent dissident of Soviet Armenia, who has been a member of the secretly operating National United Party since 1967. Hayrikyan's article "Independence as a vital requirement" was published on the first page of the newspaper, where the author highlighted the importance of the declaration of Armenia's independence. Hayrikyan states in the article that "even the great singer of the revolution, Yeghishe Charents, in the last years of his life, recognized the entire essence and despotic principles of the concept of "dictatorship of the proletariat".⁵⁴ This group distributing the autocratic periodical was exposed. There is evidence that, in addition to "*Paros*", Paruyr Hayrikyan published another self-published newspaper called *Tsasum* (meaning indignation or outburst in

⁵³ Paros samizdat, Yerevan, 1967, №1.

⁵⁴ Erkunq samizdat, Yerevan, 1969, №1.

Armenian) in those years. After this, nearly 17 years there were no published *samizdats* in Armenia.

The *samizdat* press in Armenia has been regularly published since 1987. Nerses Hayrapetyan calls 1987-1989 a *samizdat* press period.⁵⁵ The rise of the *samizdat* press was conditioned, first and foremost, by *glasnost* (openness) law which, to some extent, gave freedom not only to the official mass media (hereafter media) of the country, but also to all the organizations and individuals who tried to impart alternative and pluralistic information in different ways.⁵⁶ The topic of self-published press in this time was wide, but the events in Artsakh remain in the center of attention.

One of the important *samizdats* in this period was *Ankakhutyun* (meaning independence in Armenian). The first issue of *Ankakhutyun samizdat* was published on October 24, 1987. Firstly, it was edited by Paruyr Hayrikyan. The first article of the issue is "We and our struggle" by Paruyr Hayrikyan. Here Hayrikyan, raised an important issue concerning no the national awakening and independence:

'The nation itself is the director of its destiny and every intervention is illegal and anti-human if the majority of the nation does not express its favor through a popular poll, a referendum. We believe that it is this idea that is capable of uniting the nation regardless of the political and religious views, moral principles and party affiliation of its representatives.'

⁵⁷

Here it is interesting to emphasize two important ideas. First, it is the idea of referendum, which means that already there was a common opinion that the issues concerning the country should be solved by the active participation of the people. Second, it is the idea of political and religious diversity among people. This is important, because for nearly 70 years people in Armenia lived under totalitarian regime and atheistic atmosphere.

⁵⁵ Nerses Hayrapetyan, *Hayastanum zhamanakakic mamuli zardacman mi qani hartser (1988-1998 tt.) trans. Some issues of modern press development in Armenia (1988-1998)* (Yerevan: Development of democracy in Armenia. Collection of seminar materials 1999), 28.

⁵⁶ Evia Hovhannisyan, *Construction of a New Discourse on Russia in the Scope of the Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict in the Samizdat of 1989*, (Tbilisi: Heinrich Boell Stiftung Tbilisi Office, 2019.), 5.

⁵⁷ *Ankakhutyun samizdat*, Yerevan, 1987 October 24, №1, 3-4. Here is the original Armenian: Ազգն ինքն է իր ճակատագրի տնօրենը և ամեն մի միջամտություն ապօրինի է ու հակամարդկային, եթե դրա օգտին չի արտահայտվում ազգի մեծամասնությունը համաժողովրդական հարցման՝ ռեֆերենդումի միջոցով: Մենք գտնում ենք, որ այս գաղափարն է, որ ընդունակ է միավորել ազգն անկախ նրա ներկայացուցիչների քաղաքական և կրոնական, բարոյական սկզբունքներից և կուսակցական պատկանելիությունից:

Another interesting example of *samizdat* press was *Mashtots (named after the 4th century Armenian monk who is credited with the creation of the Armenian alphabet)* published by the Goyapaykar [Life Struggle] Youth Union, there were articles about Armenian-Russian relations, events in Artsakh etc. This *samizdat* mostly concentrated on language issues and for the publishers one of the biggest problems was the preservation of mother language-Armenian. It addressed all the issues that were troubling the people who were not involved in the dissident struggle, in other words it raised issues that were important for society (for example, in the protests of the population of Abovyan against the biochemical plant).⁵⁸ With this we can notice that they started to realize the role of the press as a tool for the general public.

It was under such conditions that the *samizdat* implemented the agenda of creating and transforming the public sphere. At the same time, one of the most important functions was carried out by the *samizdat*. It was to draw the public's attention to the former national problem such as awakening of the idea of the nation-homeland. The *samizdat* literature is full of slogans, images, and biographies of its heroes. One ARF figure from the first half of the century, Garegin Nzhdeh, was particularly revered and written about.⁵⁹ By 1988, Armenians had a clearly articulated and strong sense of national identity. Interesting to note, that sometimes the first pages of *samizdat* contains texts from Armenian writers or political leaders, who previously had nationalistic ideas. In the *Inknoroshum (meaning self-determination in Armenian)*, we can find the poem *Erdum* (meaning oath in Armenian) by the 19th century romantic nationalist Armenian writer Rapayel Patkanyan, in the other cases we can see the poems by Yegishé Charents, who was one of the many victims of the Soviet regime. Besides this, there were several historical articles published in *samizdats*, which could be tools for national awakening (like in the 19th century, when nations started to recognize themselves through printing their history); strong historical characters and their thoughts could be good examples of the politics of history. The publishers could use the history and historical characters for the political actions.

Habermas emphasizes the role of the public sector as a way for civil society to express its interests; in addition, according to him press, the publication of political essays plays a significant role in transforming the public sector. In *samizdat Inknoroshum (Self-determination)* one can even

⁵⁸ Mashtots *samizdat*, Yerevan, July 1989, 14.

⁵⁹ Harutyunyan, *Aylakhoutyuny Khorhrdyan Hayastanum*, trans. *Dissent in Soviet Armenia*, 245.

meet calls to international organizations, which speak about the need to establish a connection between Armenia and the international community. Thus, according to the article published in *Inknoroshum*:

On September 28, 1988, in the 24-year-old Congresses of more than 500,000, the Armenian people voted in favor of the following statements of the National Self-Determination Union. "The people of Armenia are appealing to the European Parliament and the United Nations to hold a referendum under their auspices and under their direct control to remove Armenia from Artsakh from the USSR, which is the only guarantee of saving the nation from massacres."⁶⁰

Thus, first of all, we see that the decision was approved through a civic gathering, the number of participants was about 500.000 which makes it clear that the citizens came out to protest against the issues that concern them, and this is one of the most important ways of exposing the public sector. The public expresses its opinion. And it is interesting to consider the idea of democracy here, that is, decisions were made through the will of popular assemblies, the direct participation of the people.

In this situation it becomes clear that the society at that time already started turning towards expressing collective criticism against the regime. And when individuals realized that they could be part of the big public and create a common atmosphere with other people, they started the process of understanding the importance of the public sphere. It is from this point of view that the role of the media was central. In this context, it should be noted that the "samizdat" press had a serious impact on the political struggle. *Samizdat* contributed to the promotion of the activities of the political opposition, the spread of its ideas in the society. It was not only a means of information, but also a means of shaping public opinion. Thus, "Samizdat" newspapers and leaflets became a serious tool of political struggle. The dissident media became a platform for discussions and a workplace where a new national identity was built. It also played an important role in the struggle for independence and the establishment of the Armenian Pan-National Movement, ensuring the entire network culture of the anti-Soviet movement.⁶¹ " In this context, the "samizdat" newspapers and leaflets also had a psychological effect, essentially breaking the atmosphere of

⁶⁰ *Inknoroshum samizdat*, Yerevan, 1988, December 1 Issue, p. 15. Here is the original Armenian: «1988 թվականի սեպտեմբերի 23-ին և 25-ին ավելի քան 500,000 անոց հանրաժողովներում հայ ժողովուրդը իր քվեն տվեց ի օգուտ Ազգային Ինքնորոշում միավորման հետևյալ հայտարարություններին: Հայաստանի ժողովուրդը դիմում է Եվրոխտիրդարանին ու Միավորված Ազգերի Կազմակերպությանը՝ նրանց հովանավորությամբ ու անմիջական վերահսկողությամբ անցկացնելու հանրաքվե՝ Հայաստանը Արցախի հետ, ԽՍՀՄ կազմից դուրս բերելու համար, որը հայ ազգը կոտորածներից և ստույգ ոչնչացումից փրկելու միակ երաշխիքն է:»

⁶¹ Hovhannisyan, Construction of a New Discourse, 17.

fear.⁶² *Samizdats* became a solid platform for expressing and creating an Armenian pan-national movement.

When talking about independent periodicals, it should be kept in mind that these were published not by professional journalists, but by politicians fighting for independence, some of whom did not even receive the necessary training.⁶³ Therefore, it is understandable that the articles found here were from the genre of public speaking and were more reminiscent of political speeches, the purpose of which was to carry out propaganda against the Soviet authorities, Soviet order and for the self-determination, independence and democratization of Armenia.

So, *samizdats* were political tools, which turned public issues from private groups into public ones, then more serious issues, up to independence-the formation of democratic bodies, which are important components of the public sphere, as citizens begin to think about the country's fate through dialogue. The dialogue with the Soviet authorities first turned into demonstrations and protests, and then the war as a rigid form of dialogue.

⁶² Arman Galoyan, *Hay Samizdat Mamuli dery Hayastani ankakhatsman gortsyntatsum*, trans. *The Role of Armenian Samizdat press in Armenia's Independence* (Yerevan: Noravank, 2012), 5.

⁶³ Arman Galoyan, *Inknahraty Hayastanum*, trans. *Self-Published press in Armenia*, (Yerevan: Haghinakayin hratarakhutyun, 2013), 55.

Chapter 3

Components of the Public Sphere in Post-Soviet Armenia

The theoretical assertions pertaining to Habermas' work and the characteristics of the Soviet Armenian public sphere examined in the first and second chapters of this work give grounds to discuss the public sphere and its features in post-Soviet Armenia. The declaration of independence made it possible for the development of the public sphere and the formation of civil society in Armenia. After the collapse of the USSR, many non-governmental, civil society organizations formed in Armenia. The 1990s were transformational, because people rejected the chains of Soviet ideology, the media worked without any restrictions and patriotic and nationalistic feelings, connected to the victory of Nagorno Karabakh (Artsakh) war, were significant. After the independence of Armenia in 1991, the country had four ruling administrations with their respective leaders being Levon Ter-Petrosian, Robert Kocharian, Serzh Sargsian and Nikol Pashinian. In this chapter, we will describe the main features of the public sphere during each administration, with an emphasis on the key events concerning civil society. This chapter will also address issues concerning the role of the digital public sphere in Armenia. It is important to look at the digital public sphere, because in the 21st century everything, including the public sphere has become digital, making it crucial to examine the characteristics, key elements and relevance of the digital public sphere.

3.1 Civil society in Post-Soviet Armenia

While discussing the public sphere in Armenia, it is worth-mentioning that it is inextricably connected with the idea of civil society. The concept of the public sphere, it has been argued, is the normative core of the idea of civil society and the heart of any conception of democracy.⁶⁴ The early modern concept of civil society was revived first and foremost in the struggles of the democratic oppositions in Eastern Europe against authoritarian socialist party-states.⁶⁵ Habermas has argued that the core of civil society comprises a “network of associations that institutionalizes problem-solving discourses on questions of general interest inside the framework of organized public spheres.”⁶⁶ He has further contended that more or less emerging from the private sphere,

⁶⁴ Ted Fleming, “Habermas on Civil Society, Lifeworld and System: Unearthing the Social in Transformation Theory”, in *Teachers College Record*, January 2020, 3.

⁶⁵ Cohen & Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, 15.

⁶⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, (Cambridge: MIT press, 1996), 367.

this general public is made of citizens who seek acceptable interpretations for their social interests and experiences and who want to have an influence on institutionalized opinion- and will-formation.⁶⁷ We can assume that the formation of the civic society in Armenia is conditioned with the new legislative opportunities, establishment of the international organizations in Armenia and also with the new connections with the Armenian diaspora. Civil society so constituted is considered to be capable of acquiring influence over the political system through the articulation of interests that are "aggregated" by political parties and legislatures and brought to bear on political decision making, itself understood along the lines of the elite model of democracy.⁶⁸

In the 1990s the core of Armenian civil society consisted of non-governmental organizations. The formation of NGOs in the Republic of Armenia was largely dependent on the devastating earthquake of 1988 and the tragic events in Baku and Sumgait, which were immediately responded to by the international community.⁶⁹ During this period, international NGOs began to work in Armenia and started serving as models. In parallel, local NGOs were also formed, which were financed mainly from the Armenian diaspora and the United Nations. We can assume that the Armenian diaspora also played a huge role in the process of forming civic society organizations, because in the Western countries the representatives of the Armenian diaspora were already familiar with such organizations. Nowadays, according to the Ministry of Justice of Armenia, 5,982 non-governmental organizations and 1,581 foundations are registered in Armenia as of September 2022.⁷⁰ Besides NGO's, there are also civic society organizations, which in Armenia have focused on various concerns over the years, mostly on issues such as raising public awareness on human rights, democracy and disinformation. However, these organizations are not fully accepted by society. According to the Caucasus Barometer survey conducted in 2019 by the Caucasus Research Resource Center, 26% of the public fully trusts CSOs (civil society

⁶⁷ Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 367.

⁶⁸ Cohen & Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, 18.

⁶⁹ Anahit Mkrtchyan, "Arevmtyan modeli errori sektori harmarman gorcyntacnery hetxorhrdayin hasarakutyunnerum" *trans.* Adaptation Processes of the Third Sector of the Western Model in Post-Soviet Societies), In *21rd dar*, No. 3 (55), 2014, 8.

⁷⁰ Report by the Agency of the State Register of Legal Entities of the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Armenia, Ministry of Justice, Yerevan, 2022, p. 1. Available here: https://www.moj.am/storage/files/legal_acts/legal_acts_6539979232921_stat2022-9_1_.pdf (Retrieved from 13.12.2022)

organizations), while 33% neither trust nor distrust, and the percentage of those who prefer or fully distrust CSOs is 25%.⁷¹

According to Habermas, civil society is made up of more or less spontaneously emergent associations, organizations, and movements that show how societal problems are reflected in private life spheres, as well as how such reflections are transmitted to the public sphere in enlarged form.⁷² Civil society in Armenia is not only notable for implementing projects with funding from various sources, but also for participating in acts of peaceful civil and political disobedience. According to Habermas, civil disobedience contains an underlying call to link organized political will formation with the communicative processes of the public sphere. Civic initiatives in Armenia now have years of experience of using (whether successfully or with failures) the aforementioned principles of volunteerism, decentralization, non-violent, concerted effort and so forth.⁷³ Once again according to Habermas, actors who support the public sphere are distinguished by the dual orientation of their political engagement: with their programs, they directly influence the political system, but at the same time they are also reflexively concerned with revitalizing and enlarging civil society and the public sphere as well as with confirming their own identities and capacities to act.⁷⁴ Here, we should separate types of civil disobedience among Armenians. Firstly, we will address initiatives which were carried out by political parties and had political reasons; secondly, we will focus on civil initiatives which had social, economic and environmental reasons.

The political system, which must remain sensitive to the influence of public opinion, is intertwined with the public sphere and civil society through the activity of political parties and general elections; this intermeshing is guaranteed by the right of parties to "collaborate" in the political will-formation of the people, as well as by the citizens' active and passive voting rights and other participatory rights.⁷⁵ There are a lot of post-election demonstrations in independent Armenia history, such as in 1996, 2003, 2008, 2013, 2021. When in 1991 Levon Ter-Petrosian,

⁷¹Caucasus Barometer time-series dataset Armenia, Trust towards NGOs (%), see: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cbam/TRUNGOS/> (Retrieved from 11.11.2022)

⁷² Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 367.

⁷³ Zhanna Andreasyan, Armine Ishkanian, Arpy Manusyan et al, *From Shrinking Space to Post-Revolutionary Space: Reimagining the Role and Relations of Civil Society in Armenia*, (Yerevan: Socioscope, 2018), 28.

⁷⁴Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 370.

⁷⁵ Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 368.

Chairman of the Supreme Council and leader of the Pan-Armenian National Movement⁷⁶, was elected the first President of the Republic of Armenia by more than 80%. Paruyr Hayrikian, the leader of the National Self-Determination Union, who took second place and received 7% of the votes, organized the March of Black Flags. Among these post-election demonstrations, the most popular was the 2008 demonstrations in Armenia as a result of which, 10 people died, including two policemen. Demonstrations against the political regime continued in Armenia throughout the years and still are relevant in Armenia. The pick of demonstrations against the government was in 2018 “Velvet Revolution,” after which the whole government changed in Armenia. However, the leader (Nikol Pashinyan), assuming the role of the liberator and the returner of the “stolen” of the former, directed the rejected and atomized mass of citizens against other classes of the society, mostly contributing to the deepening of dividing lines in the society.⁷⁷ The anti-government demonstrations again became relevant in Armenia after the 44-day war in Nagorno Karabakh (Artsakh), when people started to demand the resignation of the current administration.

The wave of civic activism in Armenia has been referred to as a new “awakening” (*zartonk*) which began in 2008 and greatly expanded in 2011 and which continues today. It is characterized by the emergence and growth of grassroots movements locally known as “civic initiatives.”⁷⁸ Civic initiatives are grassroots, volunteer based, non-partisan groups usually consisting of between twenty to a couple hundred (in rare instances) individuals, who come together to collectively raise awareness of and to address a particular issue. The vast majority of civic initiatives are either based in Yerevan or include the active participation of Yerevan-based activists.⁷⁹ The first serious demonstrations, with which civilians achieved success, were the protests in Mashtots Park. When Yerevan Municipality decided that there should be private kiosks in Mashtots Park, a group of environmentalists and citizens rose up to fight against that decision. As a result, the municipality had to take into consideration the citizens' protests and dismantle the kiosks. In 2013, protests were

⁷⁶ The Pan-Armenian National Movement (*Hayots Hamazgayin Sharzhum* in Armenian) was founded in August 1988 to coordinate the Karabakh movement. The first head was Vazgen Manukian, then after his resignation it was headed by Levon Ter-Petrosian.

⁷⁷ Ashot Voskanyan, “The Structural Change of the Public as an Armenian Event”, in *EVN Report*, 2022 November. Available: https://evnreport.com/arm/arts-culture-arm/habermas-translation-book-review-ashot-voskanyan/?fbclid=IwAR1kzB_qn3okQhGLWn93dxD_wSqvRmnlvLxpiXqkamD0FW7zq-e0LUtdZA4 (Retrieved from 07.12.2022)

⁷⁸ Armine Ishkhanian, *Civil Society, Development and Environmental Activism in Armenia*, (Yerevan: City Print house, 2013), 23.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

held in the city of Yerevan, mainly at the initiative of young activists, against the decision of the Yerevan Municipality, according to which the fares of shuttle taxis should be increased by 50%. As a result of the protests, mayor Taron Margaryan suspended the decision on the fare increase. In this series, we can also talk about the protests against the increase in electricity tariffs in Yerevan, which became known as #ElectricYerevan. The demonstration was mainly organized by young people who demanded from RA President Serzh Sargsyan to cancel the June 17, 2015 decision regarding the increase in electricity prices in RA territory. However, this time the government did not make concessions, instead choosing to disperse the demonstration.

These acts of nonviolent, symbolic violations of laws are meant as expressions of protest against binding decisions that, their legality notwithstanding, the actors consider illegitimate in the light of valid constitutional principles. Acts of civil disobedience are directed simultaneously to two addressees. Here we use Habermas' view to analyze the Armenian case. On the one hand, they appeal to officeholders and parliamentary representatives to reopen formally concluded political deliberations so that their decisions may possibly be revised in view of the continuing public criticism.⁸⁰ Such initiatives show that citizens want to become active participants of the decisions that the government made. From the point of view of collaboration between Government and citizens, it is important to mention the institute of Public Council in Armenia which was founded in 2008. This council is an apolitical, deliberative body formed by the President of Armenia; it aims to develop a democratic, to form a dialogue and reliable partnership relations between state authorities and citizens, society and government.

3.2 The Role of the Media in the Armenian Public Sphere

Media has played a crucial role in the transformation of Armenia's public sphere. Habermas sees the media as a tool for forming public opinion in society. Besides this, the media is an important platform for political communication, which is a necessary component of the political process in all democratic models. Throughout the years the forms of media have changed, starting from the family letters, including handwritten newspapers, pamphlets to today's blogs and websites. Habermas has argued that freedom of the press, radio, and television, as well as the right to engage in these areas, safeguards the media infrastructure of public communication;

⁸⁰Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 383.

such liberties are thereby supposed to preserve an openness for competing opinions and a representative diversity of voices.⁸¹ As information and communication technologies become more common, they obtain significant social and political implementation and influence. Information not only circulates, but also forms public opinion, influences people's behavior, decisions, worldview, preferences, promotes public communication and becomes an important factor affecting socialization. Social and protest movements have actually pursued out and employed new information and communication technologies to help them express their concerns.

As we discussed in the second chapter of the thesis, during the Soviet period the only way of expressing attitudes separate from the communist party presses and TV channels, was through *samizdats*. After independence, Armenia's media landscape grew and many *samizdats* became free newspapers. Overall, the period from 1990 to 1992 can be regarded as Armenian journalism's 'Golden Age' in terms of freedom of expression and the scale of the popular demand for the product.⁸² In the early 1990s and 2000s in Armenia the means of popular communication were the traditional media, including press, TV and radio. In the 1990s the number of periodicals in Armenia amounted to over 500. The first non-governmental TV stations started broadcasting in the 1980s. During the early 1990s, as Armenians faced regular electricity outages. Since Armenia has no natural gas and oil reserves, it has been quite dependent on Azerbaijan for natural gas and oil imports since Soviet times. Due to the Karabakh (Artsakh) war, Azerbaijan imposed a forced blockade on Armenia, as a result of which the Azerbaijan-Armenia gas pipeline was closed. TV stations would broadcast while the electricity was working. Moreover, television at that time was not viewed as a business opportunity; rather it was a social utility.⁸³ During electricity outages, only a few of the wealthier newspapers were able to stay in print throughout the years of crisis. The leading example was *Yerkir* (Homeland), the official publication of the political party *Dashnaktsutiun* or the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), which was able to rely on its own electricity generators supplied by wealthy patrons who could also arrange printing facilities on a private basis.⁸⁴ People were deprived of their most recognizable and cheaper sources of

⁸¹Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 368.

⁸² Mark Grigoryan, "Media and Democracy in Armenia", In *the Armenians Past and Present in the Making of National Identity*, edited by Edmund Herzig and Marina Kurkchian, (New York: Routledge, 2005), 184.

⁸³Katy Pearce, *Armenian Media Landscape*, Yerevan, 2011, 15. Available here: <https://mediainitiatives.am/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Armenian-Media-Landscape-in-English.pdf>, (Retrieved from 10.11.2022)

⁸⁴ Grigoryan, "Media and Democracy in Armenia", 189.

information broadcast from television and radio due to energy crises and power outages in residential areas. As a result, newspapers had become the primary source of news.

However, during the 1990s newspapers and TV channels were mostly concentrated in the hands of the politicians, which did not allow citizens to get objective information. This is reflecting both the initial development stage of Armenian media and the current situation. Every media, press, radio and television outlet were founded and is sponsored by a particular political force.⁸⁵ Such media openly and actively represents and encourages the interests of the individual, party, group, or institution who own the specific platform. *Hayq*, the Armenian National Movement's newspaper, was the first independent newspaper to be registered under the law. Of course, it was a pro-government newspaper and mostly sided with information provided by the government.⁸⁶ There are also other pro-governmental, official platforms, active to this day. The first one is the newspaper *Republic of Armenia*. It is founded in 1990 for promoting official information. In reality this new official press worked mostly as part of the president's party⁸⁷ propaganda machine, and the editorial content was put together under strict censorship.⁸⁸ Another pro-government media platform is *Armenian Public TV*. This TV organization is the only TV in Armenia which is financed by the taxes of Armenian citizens; however, it has mostly provided information that is agreeable for the government. Moreover, there were even cases in Armenian media history, when the TV stations closed for being in opposition to the governing administration. It was in the spring of 2002⁸⁹ that two TV stations, *AI+* and *Noyan Tapan*, were denied frequency licenses despite being the most famous broadcasters. The only plausible explanation of such a decision was that both stations were known to be openly critical of the president.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 185.

⁸⁶ During this time, the president of Armenia was Levon Ter-Petrosian.

⁸⁷ At first, political leader was Levon Ter-Petrosian, then Robert Kocharian.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 189.

⁸⁹ During this time, the president of Armenia was Robert Kocharian.

⁹⁰ Grigoryan, "Media and Democracy in Armenia", 193.

3.3 Digitalization and Armenia: Digital Public Sphere in Armenia

The situation described above has changed when social media and digital platforms became more popular. Digital media and it became not only a way of communication, but also a place where people started to express their attitudes and thoughts. We can assume that today all of us are media persons who transmit and get information from social networks. So, the social sites became a unique place for people to gather and have discussions. These spaces serve as an alternative to traditional ones, are more open for participation, allowing citizens to “cooperate and express their opinions, and serve as watchdogs over society on a peer-production model.”⁹¹ In this case, we can assume that gradually the public has started to form a sphere, where they express their opinions, but not in a material place. Digital public sphere means the publishing of information, critical publicity, and critical public debate mediated by digital information and communication technologies.⁹² We can assume that in this case it has become easier to engage more and more people in this digital public sphere. For example, the Armenian diaspora in this case could participate in public discussions in Armenia in an easy and effective way. Digitalization leads to the growth of inequalities and imbalances in the level of attention and influence in the public sphere; the opinions of popular bloggers can be considerably more significant for public opinion than the opinions of many ordinary users.⁹³ Opinion-makers shape the digital society's attitudes towards different issues.

The media, especially social networks, also have a great influence in organizing civil initiatives and even revolutions. The introduction and spread of social media, including Facebook and YouTube, as well as the greater availability and affordability of broadband technology which allows for uploading videos and live streaming, has allowed civic activists to organize and mobilize much more effectively and rapidly.⁹⁴ For example, the "Arab Spring", which reached similar proportions with the support of Facebook itself, remains in history as the "social media revolution."

⁹¹ Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 177.

⁹² Christian Fuchs, “The Digital Commons and the Digital Public Sphere: How to Advance Digital Democracy Today,” in *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 16(1), 13.

⁹³ Terje Rasmussen, *The Internet Soapbox: Perspectives on a Changing Public Sphere*, (Oslo: Universitets forlaget, 2016), 7.

⁹⁴ Armine Ishkhanian, *Civil Society, Development and Environmental Activism in Armenia*, 23.

Information technology can be seen as both a cause and effect for protests in the Middle East and North Africa. As a cause, protests in Tunisia started, in part, to show dissatisfaction with the government limiting access to YouTube and other Internet sources.⁹⁵ In Armenia, too, these digital platforms helped succeed the Velvet Revolution in 2018. It should be noted that the course of the Velvet Revolution and the entire post-revolutionary period were marked by an unprecedented increase in the number of users on social websites and the active involvement of the mass media. Pashinian used the media from the first day of his initiative. Mostly he concentrated on live streaming to show his march from the city of Gyumri. During the days of the revolution, the social platform, in particular Facebook, became a complex toolkit that brought together users (especially young people); it was a platform for heated discussions and virtual confrontations. Before the revolution, the number of Facebook users in Armenia was 1 million 100 thousand; at the end of the revolution, it was already 1 million 200 thousand.⁹⁶ According to the data of November 2022, 67.8% of the entire population of Armenia used Facebook;⁹⁷ whereas in 2018, only 42.8% of the population was using it.⁹⁸ Even after the revolution, Facebook live streaming became a tool for the government for communicating with the public. In this case we see how Facebook became a platform for public communication with the state.

Social sites can be used both by authorities and citizens. For example, people in the digital public sphere can reorient themselves from passive readers and listeners to potential speakers and participants in a conversation.”⁹⁹ In non-democratic countries information and communication technologies studies have been basically grouped around three main topics 1) the role of the new ICT in organizing opposition protests 2) the use of the Internet and social media by authoritarian authorities for control over their countries and 3) attempts of authoritarian regimes to influence the politics in others countries.¹⁰⁰ Authorities could use the media for diverting public attention from

⁹⁵ Mark I. Wilson and Kenneth E. Corey, “The Role of ICT in Arab Spring Movements,” in *Terrains du numérique: études de cas*, 26-3/4, 2012. Available here: <https://journals.openedition.org/netcom/1064> (Retrieved from 08.11.2022)

⁹⁶ Samvel Martirosyan, “The Revolution of Live Broadcasts. How the Information Field Was Transformed” In Globus analytical journal, № 4, 2018, available here: http://www.noravank.am/arm/articles/detail.php?ELEMENT_ID=17416:

⁹⁷ <https://napoleoncat.com/stats/facebook-users-in-armenia/2022/11/> (Retrieved from 11.11.2022).

⁹⁸ <https://napoleoncat.com/stats/facebook-users-in-armenia/2018/09/> (Retrieved from 11.11.2022).

⁹⁹ Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 213.

¹⁰⁰ Alexey Salikov, “The Digital Transformation of the Public Sphere, Its Features in the Context of Various Political Regimes, and Its Possible Influence on Political Processes,” in *Russian Sociological Review*, Vol. 18. № 4, 2019, 156.

important issues or to manipulate public opinion. An example of this could be the use of social sites by the Armenian government in the Karabakh 44-day war. During the war, the spokesperson of the Ministry of Defense Shushan Stepanyan, Artsrun Hovhannisyan, and the website of the Ministry of Defense published information several times every day. But soon after the war there were doubts around a number of facts that were published, including the denial of the surrender of the Hadrut city in Karabakh, the missile attack by the Armenian side on the Ganja airport in Azerbaijan and other information that did not correspond or partially did not correspond to reality. All this led to the fact that after the war official information began to be distrusted in Armenia. In addition, if in the past the government used social networks more to communicate with the public, after the war they rarely went live streaming or answered public questions online. Both before the war, during the war and after the war, websites and Facebook pages spreading disinformation continue to operate in Armenia. In this sense, it becomes difficult to manage information and the only way to fight against fake news is to be media literate. Media literacy is generally defined as the ability to access the media, to understand and to critically evaluate different aspects of the media and media contents and to create communications in a variety of contexts.¹⁰¹

There are also independent media outlets, which have become platforms for people to get analytical information and knowledge about various issues. An example of this is *Boon TV*, led by Gemafin Gasparian. It is interesting to take into account the example of this platform because as Gasparian mentioned during our interview, the aim of this platform is to present rational critical debate in science and art to the Armenian public. In Habermas' sense, this rational critical debate pushes society to form a better public sphere. Besides, *Boon* promotes the contribution of a formation of a society that uses the products of science and art. They make known the people involved in science and art and with this they model public rational debate with educated persons.

¹⁰¹A *European Approach to Media Literacy in The Digital Environment*, Brussels: Commission of the European Community, 2007, 3.

Conclusion

The transformation process of the public sphere in Armenia has many components which emerge in Soviet Armenia and then are transformed into Post-Soviet Armenia. Underground, secret organizations' importance in forming a public sphere has been crucial. They spread the idea of independence and brought forward a new sense of nationalism. During the transformation process these private, secret, underground organizations turned into public. Therefore, the relationship between public and private spheres became crucial for the discussion of the Armenian public sphere. There was a clear distinction between the private public and the state. If Jurgen Habermas' theory separates only the private and public sphere, in the Soviet Armenian case we find three spheres, which are the private sphere (family), the non-state public sphere (underground organizations), and the state public sphere. The research of these underground organizations and Soviet Union policy has revealed that in the Soviet Armenian case, the private organizations tried to gather together but there was no process of articulation of the needs of the society with the state, because there were no mechanisms, which could provide conditions for negotiating with the Soviet State. The 1990s were transformative years for the Armenian public sphere, because people rejected Soviet ideology, the media operated freely, and patriotic and nationalistic feelings were strong following the victory in the first Nagorno Karabakh (Artsakh) war (1991-1994).

Since for the transformation process of the public sphere Habermas paid crucial attention to the media, we also took into consideration the role of the media in the Armenian case. First, we discussed the *samizdat*, then TV and digital media. *Samizdat* is a type of book, magazine, newspaper, leaflet, poster, and other similar literature that published independently of the state's control and ideology. The analyses of these presses shows that Soviet Armenia *samizdats* were not only a means of information but also a means of shaping public opinion. Thus, *samizdat* newspapers and leaflets become a serious tool of political struggle. Later, after independence, the media become an increasingly effective tool for forming public opinion. It is used both by authorities and citizens. All forms of media face the digitalization process nowadays. In this case, the digital public sphere starts to emerge, where people start to discuss various issues on digital platforms. Opinion-makers shape the digital society's attitudes toward different issues. In the digital public sphere, it has become easier to engage more and more people. Along with the digitization process, it becomes almost impossible to control people's behavior on social networks;

this is why fake information becomes uncontrollable. The research on the Armenian media during the 44-day war in Artsakh and after allows us to assume that with the digitalization process, it is becoming more and more important to be media literate because the digital sphere is full of manipulation.

Another important component of the public sphere in Armenia is civil society. The declaration of independence made it possible for the development of the public sphere and the formation of civil society in Armenia. Civil society in Armenia is notable for both implementing projects with funding from various sources and participating in acts of peaceful civil and political disobedience, through which the public expresses their rejective attitude to government decisions. All of the historical events and public sphere components presented in the thesis were discussed in the context of Habermas' theory. Of course, we could not fully adapt Habermas' theory in Armenia, but many theoretical and genealogical arguments helped us understand the key components of the transformation process of the public sphere. Habermas' theory could also gain from applying to the Armenian case, as it could consider the possible characteristics of public sphere in states with totalitarian regime (Soviet Armenian case) and also could include new elements for pushing public sphere, such as Diaspora. We cannot say that the public sphere is fully established in Armenia, but we can note that since independence, there have been significant changes in the civil society and the media field, which help the public sphere to become stronger.

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