

Reversal of Democratic Backsliding in Armenia: Looking for Partners¹

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Abstract

While upholding the rule of law and transparency were among the main priorities in Armenia after the peaceful overturn of power in 2018, known as the “Velvet Revolution”, the threat of democratic backsliding in the country has become an increasingly pertinent topic in political and civic circles recently. The lack of momentum in judicial reforms, lack of processes to establish transitional justice mechanisms to deal with the usurpation of power by previous ruling powers have presented themselves as pressing issues for the current political leadership. This, coupled with restrictions of freedom of movement, assembly and speech during the Coronavirus lockdown in Armenia, restrictions of the freedom of speech during martial law in September-November of 2020, and the extreme polarization of the political scene in the post-war phase are argued to be evidence of the shrinking civic space in the country.

This paper argues that in the post-war transitional phase, the mobilization of local civil society organizations is crucial for the maintenance of democratization processes. At the same time, trust towards international partners and platforms needs to be re-established following the disillusionment of the Armenian civic scene towards them. The paper attempts to give a snapshot of shrinking civic space perceptions and indications in Armenia, while exploring whether the civil society pursues to reinvigorate ties with regional partners. Stronger ties with regional partners, including in the immediate neighborhood can serve to support mutual democratic diffusion, however, challenges persist in the resilience of civic space under the pressure consolidated authoritarian regimes.

Keywords: Armenia, democratic backsliding, democracy, civil society, European Union

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Introduction

Democratic backsliding has been a common experience among the post-communist countries that emerged from the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Eastern Europe. Democratic backsliding is defined as the “*deterioration of qualities associated with democratic governance*”⁴ featuring elements such as leadership vacuums, resistance to reform, populist demagoguery, and changes in the international arena⁵. At different times, these elements have existed within Armenian politics, converging into a current risk for democratization processes.

The precedents of stalled reform and unmet promises following the colored revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine as well as the experience of conservative backlash in states such as Romania and Bulgaria upon ascension to the European Union pose concerns for the success of the democratic transition in Armenia. Additionally, being surrounded by authoritarian Turkey and Azerbaijan, and becoming a subject of geopolitical shifts in the South Caucasus of 2020-2021, Armenia is facing a serious threat of spillover of authoritarianism across borders.

In this context, this article looks at the phenomenon of democratic backsliding as manifested in the shrinking of civic space. This paper explores the current challenges of civil society organizations in Armenia and the possibility of democratic support from partners in the region, due to familiarity with the common political scene. Taking into consideration the internal democratic issues in Armenia and neighboring countries, this paper argues for stronger cross-border cooperation on regionally pertinent issues and empowerment of grassroots local participation for a sustainable civic space.

Armenia: Civil Society and Its Challenges

The mass protests against social injustices in 2018 in Armenia resulted in the peaceful overturn of power, now known as the “Velvet Revolution”. This event was the cornerstone of democratization of Armenia, promising major reforms in the judicial system, in education, and the establishment of transitional justice mechanisms to investigate crimes of state capture by previous regimes. The new ruling party “My Step Alliance” won elections by a landslide (over 70% of votes⁶) and has enjoyed the most public trust since independence⁷. However, the developments in the previous two years have led to conditions where the civic space of Armenia has shrunk⁸ and is facing further challenges.

Among the most significant events that have led to public disappointment towards the government have been the botched investigations into the wrongdoings of previous regimes, particularly, the appropriation and abuse of state resources by appointed officials and financial elites, and the use of violence against protesters following the 2008 presidential elections, which

⁴Waldner D., Lust E. Unwelcome change: Coming to terms with democratic backsliding //Annual Review of Political Science. – 2018. – T. 21. – p. 93-113.

⁵Gati C. Backsliding in central and eastern Europe //Connections. – 2007. – T. 6. – №. 3. – C. 107-120.

⁶ Snap Parliamentary Elections in Armenia, December 9, 2018. OSCE Final Report: Armenia, Early Parliamentary Elections. <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/armenia/413555>

⁷ According to Caucasus Barometer 2019 survey data, 71% of respondents expressed trust towards the Executive Government, while in 2017 it was 20%, in 2013 and 2015 - 13%. (see: <https://www.caucasusbarometer.org/en/cbam/TRUEXEC/>).

⁸Ayvazyan, Karen. *Civil Society and Democratisation in the Eastern Partnership Countries: A Shrinking Space Index*. The Maecenata Institut für Philanthropie und Zivil gesellschaft. Berlin. May 2020. <https://bit.ly/2LivKSN>.

left 10 people dead⁹. These processes remain unfinished, causing public frustration with the current powers¹⁰. At the same time, reforms have not been achieved in the sphere of education and justice, which were key demands by many groups in 2018, especially the youth and civil society circles.

As the Coronavirus appeared in the global arena and resulted in restrictions on freedoms of movements and assembly, such limitations also appeared in Armenia. When a State of Emergency was declared in March 2020, according to its decree, mass media outlets were required to disseminate COVID-related information only released by official government sources¹¹. Later the decision was amended, allowing sharing from foreign official sources as well, but the Armenian civil society called the emergency provisions regulating the activities of the media “*inefficient and disproportionate*”¹². The State of Emergency also prohibited (289-N, Appendix, Article 16) organizing and participating in public gatherings and strikes, and some members of the political opposition blamed the ruling party for intentionally extending these restrictions to prevent anti-government rallies. In the same month, the National Assembly made amendments to the country’s Law on Electronic Communication, allowing the government to access data from people’s mobile phones to stem the spread of the virus. The initiative was strongly objected by the opposition and CSOs amidst fears that citizens’ privacy might be infringed¹³.

At the same time, the Coronavirus pandemic posed another significant issue for the CSO sector, as many NGOs began focusing their efforts on delivering emergency aid to risk groups, shifting away from their watchdog activities to social services¹⁴. This diverged the work of the civil society away from democracy support, which is an urgent impediment to democratization and civic life in a crisis state¹⁵. Donor funding was also redirected to emergency response, leaving civic space neglected.

In addition to these circumstances, the second Karabakh war that broke out at the end of September 2020 also distinctively impacted the political and civic scene. Not only did it add to

⁹Democracy on Rocky Ground. Armenia’s Disputed 2008 Presidential Election, Post-Election Violence, and the One-Sided Pursuit of Accountability, Human Rights Watch, 2009.

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/02/25/democracy-rocky-ground/armenias-disputed-2008-presidential-election-post-election>.

¹⁰ Piotr A. Świtalski. “The Armenian Revolution: An Unfinished Cable”. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland and The Polish Institute of International Affairs, 2020, p.106.

¹¹Harutyun Tzatriyan, “The work of media and restrictions on media work during the state of emergency”, Public Journalism Club, 2020, p. 4. (In Armenian) https://covid.pjc.am/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/arm_Research_Media_Freedom_During_COVID19.pdf

¹²“Statement of the journalistic organizations regarding the regulations on the dissemination of information during the state of emergency”, Hetq, March 20, 2020. <https://hetq.am/hy/article/114785>.

¹³Ani Mejlumyan, “Armenia seeks to stem coronavirus spread by tracking phones”, Eurasianet, March 31, 2020. <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-seeks-to-stem-coronavirus-spread-by-tracking-phones>.

“What was the Commandant’s Office busy with for the past half a year?” Talk show “Radioluri Hyurasrahum,” 11 September 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/armradio.am/videos/617689312218712>.

COVID-19 Portal. Government of Armenia <https://covid19.gov.am/hy>.

¹⁴ Caucasus Research Resource Center-Armenia Foundation. “Armenia: Case study on Effectiveness in COVID-19 Response.” November 16, 2020.

¹⁵Kennedy R. Fading Colours? A Synthetic Comparative Case Study of the Impact of “Colour Revolutions” Comparative Politics. – 2014. – T. 46. – №. 3. – C. 273-292.

the strain that was put on the civil society, pulling the sector further into humanitarian aid and crisis management, the war also had a major impact on the polarization of Armenian politics¹⁶.

Taking into consideration the pressure that the political life of Armenia is experiencing, there is a large gap in the support of democracy and civic oversight of state accountability. Therefore, there is a serious concern that the effects of the Armenian Velvet Revolution have only brought a cyclical rather than transformational change, where government turnover will hardly lead to regime transition with sustainable outcomes of democratization.

Trends in the Eastern European Region and Armenia

Looking at the broader neighborhood of Armenia, illiberal, nationalist and far-right elements and actors still exist in the region, hindering the work of the civil society. While traditional spheres of work, such as upholding human rights and rule of law continue to be central components of civic life in the European Neighborhood Policy/Eastern Partnership region, new areas of activism have emerged, including environmental and social justice issues, domestic violence, disability issues, etc. These indicate the dynamic development of the space that the civil society occupies in the Eastern European and South Caucasus regions¹⁷.

As mentioned above, challenges to consolidating cooperation around democratization and stability come from a number of persistent factors such as geopolitical competition by Russia and Turkey in the region, reignition of conflicts and militarization over the previous years (Georgia, Ukraine, Armenia), and as a result stalled democratization or backsliding to authoritarianism. External events surrounding Armenia have been a factor leading to the shrinking of civic space, diminishing the effectiveness of advocacy¹⁸.

The scarcity of cooperation across borders, despite the similarity of issues does not allow for a spillover effect to take place in civil society. This is also important, considering that all countries in the Eastern Partnership region have insufficiently consolidated democratic institutions and there are more opportunities for civic repression. In light of Armenian civil society's disillusionment with European actors promoting civic and human-centric values, space has opened for a united front within the region against common challenges across borders, such as those pertaining to the de-politicization of human rights and depolarization of political life riddled with right-wing populism.

What is notable is that these countries are familiar with the context of our region, and can give Armenia significant guidance in maneuvering through legacies of the past and in the current international space. Using their membership in international organizations, bilateral relations with strong democracies, and the local civic sector, the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe present themselves as potentially key players in the struggle for democratic change.

¹⁶Delcour, Laure. "The Future of Democracy and State Building in Post conflict Armenia" January 19, 2021. Carnegie Europe. <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/01/19/future-of-democracy-and-state-building-in-postconflict-armenia-pub-83650>

¹⁷Balfour, Rosa, et al. The Changing Landscape of Civil Society in the Eastern Partnership. German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/resrep27656. Accessed 3 Feb. 2021.

¹⁸ The Black Sea NGO Forum. 2017. The Black Sea NGO Forum A Decade On. Evaluation, Impact and Perspectives. <http://www.blackseango.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/The-Black-Sea-NGO-Forum-a-decade-on-Evaluation-Impact-and-Perspectives-2017.pdf>

States to the east of the consolidated democracies in Europe have the unique opportunity to strengthen their democratic basis by engaging in advocacy for common values beyond borders, particularly in Eastern Partnership neighbor countries.

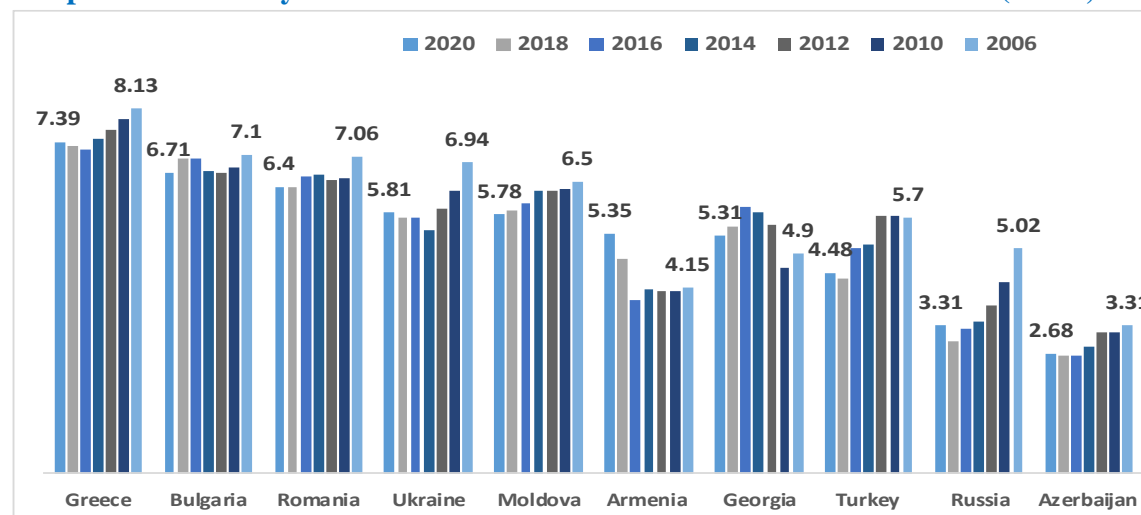
Below, we look at trends in transparency, corruption perceptions, democracy indices and other indicators from the region in an attempt to understand prospects of cooperation among Black Sea (BS) states and respective civil societies.

In Search of Partners

As stated above, the Caucasus region has faced numerous challenges over the past year that have significantly impacted democratic transparency and civic communication. Between the coronavirus pandemic and regional conflicts, transparency within government and civil society has notably regressed. To see the trends in the region and other BS countries from the CSO enabling environment point of view we did look at a few globally accepted rankings, such as Democracy Index provided by The Economist Intelligence Unit, Corruption Perception Index provided by the Transparency International and Freedom Index provided by the Nations in Transit.

Democracy Index (DI): the two graphs below show that almost all the countries in the BS region experienced a reduction in the democracy index, especially during the recent years. It also diverged from country to country: while the European countries (Greece, Bulgaria and Romania) currently are Flawed democracies (DI=6-8), the most of neighborhood countries (Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Georgia) and Turkey have Hybrid regimes (DI=4-6), and Azerbaijan and Russia are Authoritarian countries.

Graph 1. Democracy Index in Black Sea Countries: trends in 2006-2020 (Score, out of 10)



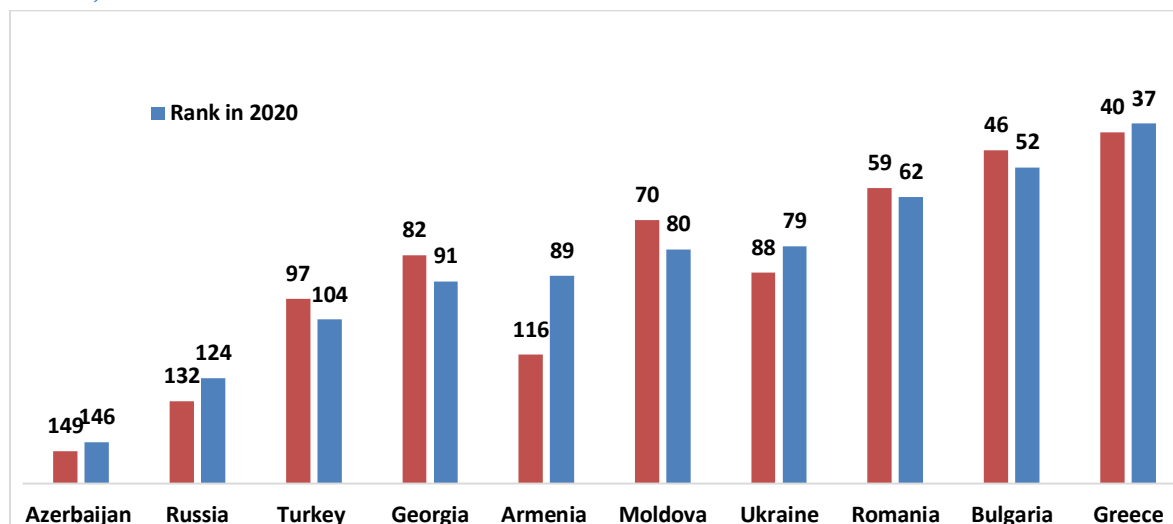
Sources: Data from the [Democracy Index 2020: In sickness and in health? & Democracy Index 2015: Democracy in an age of anxiety](#), Reports by The Economist Intelligence Unit.

The trend of democracy index was positive only for Armenia and Georgia: for Armenia it went up to 5.35¹⁹ in 2020 compared to 4.15 in 2006; for Georgia it was 5.31 and 4.9, respectively.

¹⁹Among the elements of democracy index for Armenia in 2020 the lowest was scored political culture (3.13) ironically in parallel with the highest scored electoral processes and pluralism (7.5).

All in all, among 167 countries Armenia was ranked 89th compared to 116th in 2015, i.e. improved essentially - by 27 steps (see the Graph below). The lowest rank among the Black Sea countries recorded Azerbaijan and Russia.

Graph 2. Democracy Index: Ranking of Black Sea countries (2015 & 2020; among 167 countries)



Corruption matters: [The Corruption Perception Index \(CPI\) 2020 report](#) clearly states that “While most countries have made little to no progress in tackling corruption in nearly a decade, more than two-thirds of countries score below 50.” This regards the most of the Black Sea region (see the table below). An exception is Georgia that is stuck during the recent year. Again, just in a year - from 2019 to 2020 Armenia recorded the most remarkable changes in both the CPI score (49 in 2020 vs. 42 in 2019) and the CPI rank (60 in 2020 vs. 77 in 2019). The table also shows clear correlation between corruption and democracy: the authoritarian regimes have much lower CPI scores and much higher CPI ranks.

Table 1. Corruption Perceptions Index 2020: Score and rank changes 2019-2020

Country*	Region	CPI Scores (out of 100)			CPI rank (out of 180)			Standard error	
		2020	2019	Change 2019-2020	2020	2019	Change 2019-2020	2020	2019
Georgia	ECA	56	56	→ 0	45	44	↓ 1	3.15	3.84
Greece	WE/EU	50	48	↑ 2	59	60	↑ -1	1.81	2.57
Armenia	ECA	49	42	↑ 7	60	77	↑ -17	3.50	4.31
Romania	WE/EU	44	44	→ 0	69	70	↑ -1	0.89	2.76
Bulgaria	WE/EU	44	43	↑ 1	69	74	↑ -5	1.29	2.77
Turkey	ECA	40	39	↑ 1	86	91	↑ -5	2.06	3.34
Moldova	ECA	34	32	↑ 2	115	120	↑ -5	1.24	2.40
Ukraine	ECA	33	30	↑ 3	117	126	↑ -9	1.31	2.38
Russia	ECA	30	28	↑ 2	129	137	↑ -8	1.33	2.48
Azerbaijan	ECA	30	30	→ 0	129	126	↓ 3	5.00	7.16

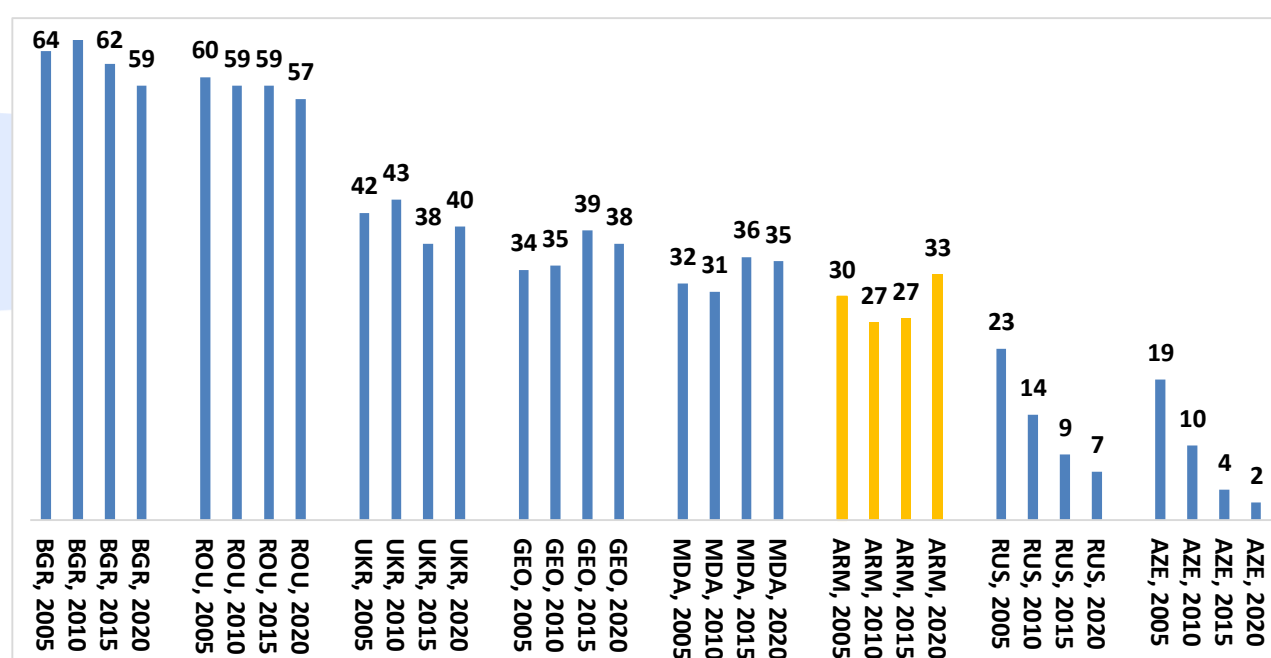
*Colour Scheme: Green marked are Flawed democracies, blue marked-Hybrid regimes and grey marked-Authoritarian regimes.

Source: From [The Corruption Perception Index 2020 report](#), Transparency International.

The recommendations that the CPI 2020 report provides - strengthen oversight institutions, ensure open and transparent contracting; defend democracy and promote civic space, publish and guarantee access to relevant data - are quite relevant and worth following.

The other source worth looking at is [Nations in Transit 2020](#) report by the Freedom house, which is openly entitled “Dropping the democratic facade”. The report evaluates the state of democracy in the region stretching from Central Europe to Central Asia. We did select the 8 countries (out of 29) that also comprise the Black Sea region to see the recorded trends using a five year interval starting from 2005. As the graph below shows, the least democratic countries are Azerbaijan and Russia, which are categorized as Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes. Armenia, Bulgaria and Romania are in the category of Semi consolidated Authoritarian Regimes, while Moldova Georgia and Ukraine are having Transitional/Hybrid Regime.

Graph 3. Democracy Percentage for Eight Black Sea countries (2005-2020, out of 100)



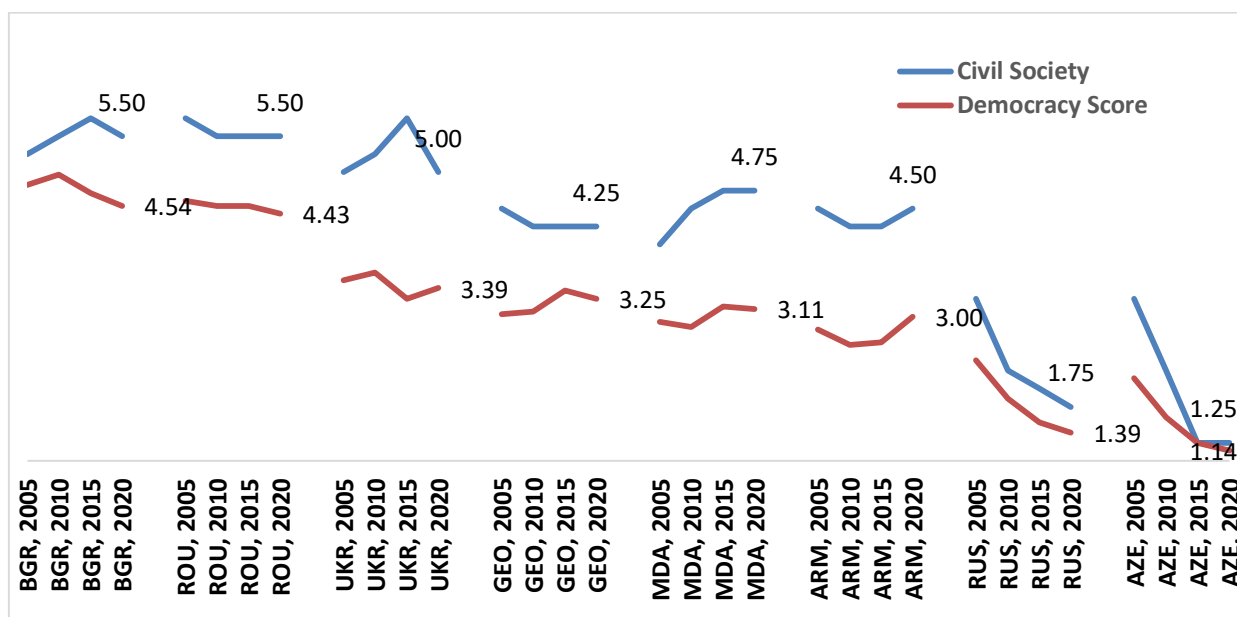
Source: Selected data from the Nations in Transit Database.

Note: The Democracy Percentage is a translation of the Democracy Score (from 1 to 7) to the 0-100 scale, with 0 representing the lowest and 100 the highest level of democracy.

As the focus of our interest is Civil Society, it is worth noting that in all the countries the Civil society scores²⁰ are higher than the average Democracy scores. This should be saved, indeed.

²⁰ The Civil Society score assesses the organizational capacity and financial sustainability of the civic sector; the legal and political environment in which it operates; the functioning of trade unions; interest group participation in the policy process; and the threat posed by antidemocratic extremist groups.

Graph 4. Civil Society and Democracy Scores in 2005-2020



Source: Constructed based on selected data from the Nations in Transit Database.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the changed geopolitical environment challenged not just our everyday lives, but how NGOs work with partners - local, regional and international. The past events tested cross-border cooperation and showed that the responses to complex and unprecedented challenges should be collective and in a more flexible way. CSOs have their say in the local and global developments and need much more consolidation and tighter partnerships. This requires complex long-term commitment and multi-country, multi-layer dialogues. Thus, NGOs should get more actively engaged with already established programs, including [CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness](#) (CPDE), [Black Sea NGO Forum](#), Civil Society Policy Forums (CSPF) hosted by the World Bank and IMF within their [Spring](#) and Annual Meetings, but also with new initiatives, such as [Civil 20](#) which provides a platform of CSOs from all over the world to bring forth the political dialogue with the G20.

The CSOs need to depart beyond the simplistic understanding of realities and take courage to look at problems that are collective and failures are systematic. This, perhaps will increase societal trust towards NGOs²¹ and bring further benefits to many.

Conclusions and Recommendations

CSOs need to identify the gaps they face in coping with the new ways of working and address those. Actively search for ways to fill the skills or knowledge gaps.

²¹ The data from the Caucasus Barometer Survey shows that only 25% of respondents in Armenia and Georgia fully and/or rather trust NGOs (see: <https://www.caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2019/TRUNGOS/>).

Donors need to be aware of the fact that not all CSOs are capable of finding their way in the funding landscape now that face to face contact is absent. In this case, there is a need for both CSOs and for donors to find each other.

Donors should continue working with established CSOs in Armenia, to aid them in working with human rights, transparency and anti-corruption, upholding of rule of law, etc. especially in conditions of extreme political polarization in the country and gaps in aid due to the recent conflict.

While institutionalized CSOs need continuous support to prevent democratic backsliding in a state of crisis, grassroots action and new civic initiatives to support citizen empowerment and civic participation also require strong support to ensure a safe environment for their work.

Besides Track 2 diplomacy, partners in regional networks should apply more pressure on home states to uphold collective values of human rights, rule of law and transparency, demanding a stronger stance from representing states and regional structures on enabling space for civil society.

More action-oriented networking opportunities are necessary for bilateral or multilateral cooperation among civil society actors in specific directions. Traditional political issues relating to human rights and democracy need continued reinvigorated advocacy and promotion, while supporting not institutionalized grassroots activism is also essential for a sustainable and resilient civic ecosystem.

Opportunity needs to be seized to boost civic education and civic empowerment, as these are important investments for political participation in the deteriorating region. Citizen empowerment will create an additional pillar supporting the work of civil society actors in the long term.

New geopolitical developments should be viewed as an opportunity for cross-border outreach and cross-border advocacy, as issues have become even more common among the Black Sea and Eastern Partnership region.