Youth Participation in Decision-Making and Peacebuilding in Armenia

Report was produced by Peaceful Change initiative
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1. Executive Summary

This report synthesises findings and analysis of research into the participation of youth in decision making and peacebuilding in Armenia in the context of the political changes since April 2018. The research was conducted in the framework of the project "Progressing youth participation in Armenian on governance and peace", which is implemented by Peaceful Change initiative and Youth Cooperation Centre of Dilijan and is funded by the UK Government's Conflict, Stability and Security Fund. The study is comprised of desk research, as well as focus groups among young men and women (16-30 years of age) in Shirak, Syunik and Tavush marzes of Armenia and expert interviews with key informants on the subject of peacebuilding and youth policy.

Based on the results of the research several key findings can be outlined:

- Youth in Armenia engaged in various protest movements of a political and civic nature prior to the 2018 "Velvet Revolution". Political protest movements usually had a clear political agenda and were an outcome of post-election dissent. Whereas, civic movements tended to be apolitical, or at least, non-partisan. From the point of view of youth participation, there is a clear difference between the two, as the civic protests tended to be dominated by youth, both in terms of leadership and participation, while the political protests were usually led by "older generation" political leaders, and youth, with certain exceptions, tended to be only part of a broader line-up of participation in these movements.

- The protests of 2018, which led to the change of political elite, was carried out largely with the participation of youth, and it also brought an unprecedented number of young people into the executive and legislative branches of power. However, this influx of young people has not yet led to decisive developments in youth policy, as this field remains apparently low on the list of the priorities of the new government. Moreover, there are concerns that the optimization of the government, particularly the merging of the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs with other ministries can create obstacles undermining the elaboration of efficient youth policies.

- Armenia today has a largely youthful Government and Parliament. If we define youth as people up to 30 years, about 11.1% of the staff in the Government's structure can be categorized as such. As for employees in the 30-40 age range, who for the standards of politics and government can also be considered as representing youth, the figure is 33.3%.[1]

- In Parliament, there is an influx of young people. The current parliament is arguably the youngest National Assembly (NA) in Armenia's history. In the NA of the 7th convocation the average age of newly elected MPs is around 30.[2] It has to be considered that

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[1] Detailed information on Government representatives can be found here: https://www.gov.am/en/structure/
[2] Ampop Media. "Average age of candidates, self-withdrawal, national minorities and women". https://ampop.am/

according to Armenian legislation, the members of parliament cannot be younger than 25 years old, so some political activists under the age of 25, who played a part in the protests, were unable to put forward their candidacies.

- Young men and women in Armenia identified the following major challenges for their cohort:
    o Unemployment and the lack of economic opportunities,
    o Education and accessibility to professional opportunities which usually are irrelevant to labour market criteria,
    o Disproportionate development of infrastructure in urban and rural communities,
    o Indifference and lack of motivation,
    o Emigration,
    o Unresolved regional conflicts.

- After the "Velvet Revolution" young men and women expect more opportunities to voice their opinions and realise their potential. They are more informed and engaged in political developments. However, existing top-down and bottom-up mechanisms for youth participation are not efficient enough. New approaches have to be considered to engage youth more actively in decision-making processes on local and national levels.

- While political-level engagement is still dominated by men, women are coming increasingly to the fore on the issues of civic participation.

- Even though the 2018 movement took place with active participation of young people and brought an unprecedented number of young people into different branches of power, the new Government has been slow to react to the necessity of working out a new youth policy and strategy. In fact, a part of the government optimization program of the ruling political force included the merging of the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs, which had previously been responsible for working out youth policies, with the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Culture.

- Young men and women are mainly open to dialogue and communication with their counterparts in Azerbaijan and Turkey. However, they are not aware of UN Security Council Resolution 2250 calling for increased representation of youth in decision-making at all levels. Young people find that in a long run peace can be achieved through people-to-people communication and not nurturing aggression and enemy image in the minds of people.

2. Background

Today, the role of youth in the political life of their societies is growing, as new developments in the social, economic and technological spheres provide more opportunities for young people to engage in decision-making. At the same time, new challenges are emerging, to which youth is often more vulnerable than other layers of society. UN Security Council Resolution 2250 "Urging Member States to Increase Representation of Youth in Decision-Making at All Levels"[3] has brought more attention to the essential role young people should play on peace and security, showing how the marginalization of youth from matters of peace and security is an impediment to sustainable and inclusive peace.

Armenia today represents a vivid example both of new opportunities and challenges that the youth are facing today. On the one hand, recent years have brought a completely new level of engagement of youth in the political and societal processes in the country, culminating in the so called "Velvet Revolution", when peaceful protests with an extremely wide participation of youth led to the removal of an authoritarian regime, and brought to power a new political elite, in which young people are represented to an unusually high extent. This is partly evidenced by the fact that 88% of young men and women (18-29 years of age) view the 2018 change of government in Armenia positively.[4]

At the same time, issues including unemployment, poverty, housing as well as other challenges in the socio-economic sphere carry their own particular impacts on youth resulting in a large number of young people leaving the country, either for permanent emigration or seasonal guest worker jobs.

According to the 2011 Census, youth accounted for about 1/3 of Armenia's population – 26.6%.[5] The Concept of Youth Policy in Armenia,[6] designed in 1998, defines youth as people aged between 16 and 30 years. The majority age in Armenia is 18, the legal age for marriage is 18 for men and 17 for women. Voting age is 18. The minimum age for being elected as a member of parliament is 25. All Armenian men aged 18 have to serve in the military, the service lasts two years. Until recently, exception was made for young men doing graduate and post-graduate studies. However, this deferral was abolished in late 2017. In 2014, the new Concept of Youth Policy was adopted setting the priorities of youth policy for the following years.[7]

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[3] https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12149.doc.htm
[4] Public Opinion Survey: "Residents of Armenia", July 23–August 15, 2018, Center for Insights in Survey Research, A Project of the International Republican Institute, p. 5, https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2018.10.9_armenia_poll_presentation.pdf
[5] Population Census 2011, https://www.armstat.am/file/doc/99486128.pdf
[6] Conception of State Youth Policy, Adopted by the Government of Republic of Armenia, Yerevan, 1998, (translated from Armenian by NAYO and YES-Armenia Country Network), p.2 https://www.youthpolicy.org/national/Armenia_1998_Youth_Policy_Concept.pdf
[7] Government decree approving Youth State Policy Concept, 2014 http://www.msy.am/files/post/1426864819-hayecakarg.pdf

The [2018-22 Strategy for the State Youth Policy](#)[8] of the Republic of Armenia (2017), which is currently on hold, builds on the [2013-2017 Strategy for the State Youth Policy](#),[9] the Concepts of Youth Policy (1998, 2014) and other research studies, including one conducted by the Council of Europe on "[Youth Policy of Armenia](#)" (2009).[10]

Following the expiry of the 2013-2017 Strategy for the Youth State Policy of the Republic of Armenia, the 2018-22 Strategy has been postponed pending a review of the current needs and situation of young people. According to the [Council of Europe](#), "The Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs wished to see a stronger, citizen-centric and more inclusive Strategy… to see whether Armenia should have a **Law** on youth to meet the needs of young people, youth workers, and other relevant stakeholders… by studying international practice and synchronising with European youth policy standards by involving impartial, international and comparative expertise and assessment". [11]

However, the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs has now been merged with the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Culture turning into the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport. This was the result of the process of government optimization introduced by the government of Nikol Pashinyan in 2019. The word "Youth" has dropped from the name of the new Ministry and it is not clear yet how the youth policy will be developed in the future.

Youth in Armenia continues to be confronted by a range of pressing challenges which include various types of social issues. While the new government has not detailed its approach to youth policy, it has outlined policies that are relevant to youth. These particularly include the government's policy on "economic revolution", which is supposed to include a set of policies advancing the development of small and medium enterprises and educating the workforce. Development of the IT sector is another priority, where most of the workforce are young people. It also aims to reduce the discrepancies between the capital Yerevan and the regions, which would help to alleviate the problems of regional youth. The Government's plans also include measures aimed at making housing more affordable, from which mostly young people would benefit. All these measures are expected to stop and reverse the migration trends, preventing a brain-drain and loss of workforce, particularly among the youngest part of the population.

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[8] Strategy for the State Youth Policy, 2018-2022, (in Armenian) https://www.e-draft.am/en/projects/482
[9] Strategy for the State Youth State Policy, 2013-2017, (in Armenian) http://ystudies.am/
[10] Youth Policy in Armenia, Council of Europe publishing, 2009
[11] National Youth Policies, Council of Europe, [https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/national-youth-policies#{%2239921579%22:[0]}](https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/national-youth-policies#{%2239921579%22:[0]})

3. Methodology

The main Research Question was whether political changes in Armenia created new opportunities for young people to participate in decision-making and peacebuilding. The sub-questions included studying the following aspects:
- current approaches with regard to youth policy in Armenia,
- existing entry points for youth participation in decision-making and peacebuilding
- opportunities for young people in the new environment to take part in decision-making as well as contribute to the transformation of the country
- the impact of unresolved regional conflicts over Nagorny Karabakh and Armenia-Turkey on the future of youth.

Research was conducted on the basis of 3 methods:

a) Desk Review on youth participation in Armenia on decision-making and peacebuilding;
b) Focus Groups (FG) with young people in 3 marzes of Armenia: Tavush, Syunik and Shirak;
c) Key-informant Expert Interviews (EI) with stakeholders in youth policy and youth participation matters in Armenia.

The **Desk Review** explored the extent to which young men and women played a role in the events of 2018, the "Velvet Revolution", and identify the impact young people can have in decision-making and peacebuilding in the current setting of political developments in Armenia. This work covered analysis of youth demographics and youth engagement in public life, and outlined the current state of affairs regarding youth policy and youth strategy in Armenia after the structural changes of the Government and Ministries. It also summarised involvement of youth during the "Velvet Revolution" based on available materials on the internet and other publications, as well as provided an overview of youth initiatives in peacebuilding activities focusing on regional conflicts

Focus Groups aimed at studying perceptions of young men and women (aged 18-30) on youth participation in decision-making and peacebuilding in Armenia. FGs were conducted in three marzes: Shirak, Syunik and Tavush. All three marzes border Azerbaijan and Turkey. Young people in these marzes are the ones who live in an environment where human security is under major threat. Also, closed borders with the neighbors creates fewer opportunities for economic livelihood for young people.

Three FGs were conducted in each marz. One group in each marz comprised exclusively **women,** including students and early career professionals (in total three groups). The gender perspective was one of the aspects of youth participation assessment within the research. The second group was mixed gender, including young men and women already engaged in different fields of civil society **peacebuilding** initiatives (in total three groups). The third category were young men and women living in rural **communities bordering** closely with Azerbaijan and Turkey (in total three groups).

Overall, 77 young men and women participated in FGs: 27 from Shirak, 27 from Tavush and 23 from Syunik. Respondents came to represent 23 different settlements. Overall, 45 out of 77 represented urban settlement type, and 32 represented rural areas. Gender distribution

of FGs was 75% female and 25% male respondents. The average age of respondents was 23. 56% of respondents had Bachelor's and/or Master's degrees, while 27% were involved in undergraduate and/or postgraduate studies at the time of the FGs. Four respondents had technical/vocational training and five respondents had high-school education.[12]

Expert Interviews aimed at studying opinions of young professional NGO leaders and decision-makers on youth policy, youth reform in Armenia, as well as young peacebuilders. 10 interviews were conducted overall: 5 interviews with experts representing National Assembly (Standing Committees on Science, Education, Culture, Diaspora, Sport and Youth Affairs; on Foreign Relations; and on Human Rights) and Government (ex-Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs). Another 5 interviews represented civil society organizations specialized in youth work and youth policy. 4 out of 10 respondents were male, and 6 were female. Two of them had PhD degrees, and the rest had Masters degrees.

Focus group and expert interview guides were developed by PCi and YCCD.[13]

The research used the MAXQDA 18.02 software package to carry out the qualitative data analysis.

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[12] See the details in Annex 1
[13] See the Guides under Annexes 2 and 3

4. Main challenges faced by young men and women in Armenia

4.1 Unemployment and lack of economic opportunities

The majority of FG respondents referred to unemployment as the most pressing issue among youth. This leads to issues such as emigration, financial instability and lack of autonomy. At the same time, a lack of economic opportunities creates obstacles for personal development by effecting motivation, self-esteem and self-realization:

> *"Lack of employment is not only not having a paid job, it is also not having an opportunity to work with a group of people with different mentality, background and viewpoints" (male, 26, rural, Shirak).*

Unemployment is perceived as the number one issue that Armenia's population is facing, according to different studies conducted by various organisations. In the quantitative study[14] conducted in 2012 by the then Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs (MSY) and UNDP Armenia, the primary problems that youth have been facing are "unemployment" - 81.5%, "low salary" - 47.4% and "problems with housing" - 35.8%. "Unresolved conflicts with neighbor countries" make up only 1.4%, whereas other problems include "accessibility and quality of education", "lack of state support to youth", "health issues" and "drug abuse".

Caucasus Barometer's recent data[15] (2017) confirms the issues facing Armenia among young people (18-35 years of age): "unemployment", "poverty" and "corruption" feature among top-three concerns, whereas 44% of young men between 18-35 years of age and 68% of same age young women confirmed they "never had a job".[16] In a recent study conducted by International Republican Institute in 2018, unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh issue is mentioned in top 3 problems faced by 23% of Armenians.[17]

4.2 Lack of quality education opportunities

The next major challenge raised by FG participants was the lack of quality education opportunities. Most of the respondents expressed general dissatisfaction with the quality of education in the higher education institutions. Another issue raised by the FG participants was the gap between the formal education students obtain and the existing job opportunities in the labour market.

Lack of education is also evident from the perspective of employers:

> *"We have been unable to fill the position of lawyer at our organization for quite some time now. Even though the local university has a Faculty of Law and there are many-*

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[14] National Youth Aspirations Research Report, MSY and UNDP Armenia, 2012, p. 76

[15] Caucasus Barometer 2017, Armenia. https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2017am/IMPISS1-by-AGEGROUP-withoutdkra/

[16] Ibid: https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2017am/HAVEJOB-by-RESPSEX-withoutdkra/

[17] Public Opinion Survey: "Residents of Armenia", July 23–August 15, 2018, Center for Insights in Survey Research, A Project of the International Republican Institute, p. 30
https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2018.10.9_armenia_poll_presentation.pdf

many graduates, we cannot fill the position because of the lack of professional capacity" (female, 29, urban, Syunik).

"Youth does not know what will be needed in 10 years and, therefore, they do not know how to choose a specialization. In general, in Armenia, we have problem of poor planning and short-term vision. I believe even our authorities do not know what kind of Armenia we want to see in 10 years" (expert on youth work, Gyumri).

Among many flaws in the educational system, young people emphasized the poor level of teaching languages, especially in rural areas. Lack of knowledge of the English language, specifically, deprives many youngsters from participation in various non-formal educational activities. Travelling to neighbouring, mostly urban, community for classes requires financial assistance, as well as regular transportation service, which in case of many rural areas is not available.

4.3 Disproportionate territorial development

Another challenge affecting youth and its potential for development is the lack of balance in territorial development. When comparing urban environments to rural communities or the capital city to provincial cities, the underdevelopment of infrastructure is quite evident. Overall, the lack of services available in rural communities is a challenge for rural youth. In borderline communities of Tavush and Shirak, youth has emphasized the lack of concern by central authorities towards those areas and little investments in those communities:

"Youth living in marzes, especially rural youth, has limited access to quality education, participation in different projects/events/trainings, leisure activities, sport activities, organizing holidays, etc." (expert on youth work, female, Yerevan).

4.4 Lack of opportunities for social integration

Lack or absence of physical spaces for leisure activities is another challenge. Most of the time universities become the main (if not the only) hub for young people to come together. A participant of the FGs from the borderline community in Tavush underlined the necessity of Youth Centers in rural areas.

"Such centers can serve not only as a platforms for mobilizing youth, but also as a way to come together to discuss community issues and make their voices and opinions heard about the concerning issues" (female, 25, rural, Tavush).

"I'd like to get to know all types of people and the more I know those who had little opportunities to travel, the more I realise that they have so many incredible ideas that they didn't have a space [chance] to voice and realise, they are simply not heard. We need platforms to bring together young people of different backgrounds and make them talk and discover each other" (male, 23, rural, Shirak).

4.5 Indifference and lack of motivation

Indifference is also a problem. This issue is closely related to the educational problem discussed above.

"…there are few who want to do things and those few become very busy. It seems like there is a little segment in youth that did everything possible to be educated and skilled. They are active, people know them, but the rest is very inert" (female, 27, Tavush, urban).

A representative of the former Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs considered the first challenge of youth the *"apathy toward taking initiative, self-development, self-education"*. Reasons for lack of motivation identified by FG participants in all three marzes, were connected to low self-esteem, lack of faith in change, disappointments and disbelief that their voice can be heard.

"Low self-esteem is a reason for low motivation. If they [meaning young people] are not being personally invited [to an event or training], they think it is not for them, therefore they are not being bothered to fill an application" (female, 29, Syunik, urban).

According to some participants of FGs and several experts, the reasons of passiveness might be rooted in the culture, translated by their parents who were born and raised in the Soviet Union when civic activism was virtually non-existent. On the other hand, young people in all FGs agreed that "a revolution took place in the country but not in the minds of people".

"I believe everything is down to an individual, but at the same time an individual needs favourable conditions and at this point, universities do not come to help" (male, 24, Shirak, urban).

This also serves to support the statement made by an Expert MP (female):

"We consider that the reform of an individual is the basis of the reform of a society, which is a very important impulse to make people thinking about changes, even if he/she is the first person thinking about it".

4.6 Emigration
Young people leaving the country temporarily or permanently is another issue raised by youth. According to Caucasus Barometer data (2017) young people interested in permanent emigration was 46%;[18] and young people (18-35) interested in temporary emigration was 72%. [19]

"Youth, especially in small communities, don't see their future in the communities they were born. Because they don't see the possibility to realize their full potential, (expert on youth work, male, Gyumri)".

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[18] https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2017am/EMIGRAT-by-AGEGROUP-withoutdkra/
[19] https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2017am/MIGSHRT-by-AGEGROUP-withoutdkra/

Emigration is particularly typical to young men who choose to leave the country (primarily to Russia) to find better jobs (though mainly as workforce) rather than search for opportunities for professional development and better chances to find a job. Also, young men, especially in rural communities, tend to migrate after spending two years in the compulsory military service, which usually disrupts their undergraduate education.

4.7 Unresolved conflicts with neighbouring countries

Unresolved conflicts concern only 1.4% of young people in the MSY study. However, it remains probably the most serious challenge for Armenia as a whole, and youth in particular. Thus, in the largest escalation since the 1994 ceasefire, the so called "4-day war" in April 2016, Armenian official sources [20] confirmed 64 combatant fatalities, 15 volunteers and 4 Armenian civilians among the casualties. Since 2016, and especially after the 2018 events, there has been a pattern of relative calm on the border with Azerbaijan, which reduced the number of incidents and casualties. However, the threat of both sporadic incidents and large-scale incidents remains real. Results of FGs and EIs confirm the perception of young people (aged 18-30) regarding the top-priority issues.

5. Political and civic activism among Armenian youth prior to the "Velvet Revolution"

5.1 Youth career paths

Before the political transition of 2018, there were two paths for youth participation in the social and political life of the country. One was what could be called "the official" path, that is through official channels, such as the youth wings of the political parties, more specifically the ruling Republican Party. The other path can be described as "the activist" or "the protest" path. "The official path" included mostly two channels of advancement of young people to the top of the political ladder, through youth wings of political parties, and through so-called "student councils", student self-government bodies, which in most post-Soviet countries tend to be under the influence of the university management and incumbent government. The second path to political socialization went through participation in social and political protests, which promised little in terms of career advancement, but helped to influence the political debates agenda and create moral support for activists.

Since the mid-1990s, the "official" path seemed the most effective in terms of young people's prospects of advancing through the career path. Some members of the ruling Republican Party started their careers as youth activists, within the youth wing of the party. However, this career path also proved to be quite slow, as some representatives of the youth wing, often remained in the position of "youth wing" even when their age no longer strictly qualified them as a youth representative or for the particular position in the organisation they were holding. [21]

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[20] Reference (report) about the losses between April 2-5 – RA Ministry of Defense, https://razminfo.wordpress.com/2016/04/14/reference-report-about-the-losses-between-april-2-5-ra-ministry-of-defense/

[21] E.g. Republican MP Karen Avagyan, born in 1974, who had been the president of the student council of Yerevan's Medical University in 2003-2005, was dealing with the youth wing of the RPA for years, and became the coordinator of the board of the Youth Foundation of Armenia in 2010, and had remained in this position up

By contrast, "the activist" path presented few opportunities in terms of acquiring a position in the government system. It presented opportunities, instead, to voice certain issues and demands that dominated the youth agenda, and as such to influence the public debates and government policies. And, ironically, as a result of the 2018 events, "the activist" path also proved more efficient in terms of getting jobs in government, as numerous youth activists received positions in the executive and legislative structures after the "Velvet Revolution".

5.2 Youth participation in protest movements

For many in Armenia the active participation of Armenian youth in the political processes in the spring of 2018 which came to be known as "the Velvet Revolution" came as something of a surprise. Thus, before the events of 2018 there was a research project conducted on the Armenian youth, entitled the "Independence Generation" 2016, which found that Armenian youth was characterized by a high degree of uncertainty about their behaviour in public life. According to this study, a certain state of "autonomy" was characteristic for young people, who isolated themselves from the political processes.[22] In other words, young people's behavior was determined by traditions, social psychology, social ties, and personal perceptions of the future rather than attachments to political institutional mechanisms.

Even though this research reflected the perception that for most of the Armenian youth socially and politically passive behaviour was characteristic, however, prior to the political transition there had been cases of political and social protests or movements with high level of youth participation. Among these were such "civic initiatives", as "Sksela" (It has begun) youth initiative, "Occupy Mashtots Park", "100 dram movement" which protested against the rise in the public transport costs in Yerevan, the "Dem.am" movement against the pension reform, "the Electric Yerevan" movement that protested against electricity prices hike, and so on. Also, youth was widely represented among the political protests, such as the post-election protests in 2008 and 2013, or the protests related to the "Sasna Tsrer incident" in 2016.

There was also significant participation of youth in political protests, i.e. protests with specifically political demands, either supporting certain opposition politicians and/or challenging the government. Thus, during the post-election protests of February-March 2008, there were a lot of young people among the opposition supporters, who even formed a youth organisation "Hima" ("Now" in Armenian). "Hima", which numbered several dozen activists and became the youth wing of what the protesters called "the popular movement". These protests began in the wake of the presidential elections of 19 February 2008. Most protests took place in the capital city Yerevan and were organized by supporters of the unsuccessful presidential candidate and first President of Armenia, Levon Ter-Petrosyan. One of the most ardent supporters of this movement was the future leader of the "Velvet Revolution", Nikol Pashinyan, who at the time was 33 years old.

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until the events of 2018. After the events of 2018, the activities of the Youth Foundation of Armenia came under a criminal investigation, facing charges of embezzlement..
[22] Independence Generation, Youth Study 2016 Armenia, http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/georgien/13149.pdf

The political protests, with a wide participation of youth, did not cease in the aftermath of 2008. Thus, a wave of protests by supporters of Ter-Petrosyan took place in spring 2011, which were arguably influenced by the Arab Spring. However, these protests did not succeed in unseating the incumbent government of Serzh Sargsyan.

Another wave of protests took place in 2013, following the contested presidential election in which opposition leader, former Raffi Hovhannisian lost to Serzh Sargsyan, according to the official results, which were heavily contested by protesters. The movement came to be known as "Barevolution", a word made from the addition of *barev* ("hello") and *revolution*, referring to Raffi Hovannisian's habit of walking up to people and greeting them during the election campaign. While Hovannisian and thousands of people gathered in the streets of Yerevan to protest it, clashing with police forces. After that the movement faded out. "Barevolution" movement was followed by other political protests, which were less wide, but also included large numbers of youth.

Finally, another case of political protest in the period before the 2018 events, which also managed to gain a certain level of support among youth was related to the incident of July 2016, when a militant group, calling itself "Sasna Tsrer" ("The Daredevils from [the region of] Sasoon") captured a police station in an armed attack, killing two policemen and taking some policemen hostages. The Sasna Tsrer violent action was followed by a series of non-violent protests, in which large numbers of youth took part.

Thus, when looking at the pre-political transition cases of protest one can distinguish between political movements, which had a clear political agenda, and civic movements, which tended to present themselves as apolitical, or at least, non-partisan. From the point of view of youth participation, there is a clear difference between the two, as the civic protests tended to be dominated by youth, both in terms of leadership and participation, while the political protests were usually led by figures representing older political establishment. The civic protests were largely youth-based, but they also tended to be smaller in scale than the political ones. In terms of success, one could claim that the civic protests were more successful, in contrast to political protests, which mostly failed. However, this can be explained by the fact that the "civic" protests usually had more limited goals, and were not seen as a major threat by the authorities. Finally, in terms of political socialization of youth, both "civic" and "political" protests were instrumental in attracting young people into the political sphere and young people to enter the public realm as political and/or civic leaders.

6. Youth Participation during the "Velvet Revolution"

6.1 Formal and non-formal groups of youth

Organised civil society groups and activist initiatives like "My Step", "Reject Serzh" and "Restart" were the core of the protest movement. These were the groups that were most active in the beginning of the protests, at the time when few expected significant results from the protests. These groups, were in a certain way similar to the protest initiatives of the previous period, as they represented mostly middle-class urban youth, as was the case with the previous protests. However, as the movement was becoming wider, more and more social groups were becoming included into it, and new youth groups also joined the movement.

An important component of youth participation in the 2018 movement was the participation of university students. Particularly apparent here was the level of student participation and activity in the form of demonstrations and strikes, in which the role of the "Restart" initiative was significant. The "Restart" initiative remained active also after the successful outcome of the protests. Members of the initiative were actively involved in the post-2018 protests, when interest groups and public debates were set up. Some groups preferred the street struggle as a means to voice their demands, and the students returned to the "classroom" struggle, by discussing their concerns and introducing them into the political agenda.

The importance of young people in the Pashinyan team was especially relevant in terms of the mapping of "revolutionary" actions and the implementation of non-standard measures, as political analysts have said. The movement employed tactics, which included mobile demonstrations and marches that did not allow direct police actions against the crowd, since the protesters often dispersed and gathered in another place to avoid police violence. They also used the tactic of using a road closure, when protesters and cars blocked certain streets, or, sometimes, pedestrians would simply cross the streets extremely slowly, causing a traffic jam, yet formally not breaking any rules. These tactics allowed to avoid a confrontational approach, and allowed to involve larger numbers of young people than would have been the case if the protests had been violent.

6.2 Youth in the Focus Groups

According to most of the FG participants, not all social groups amongst Armenian youth have been equally active in recent years. However, the political transition of 2018 proved those observations wrong, as youth belonging to various social strata took active participation in the events of peaceful protests, as well as in subsequent political processes.

Most of the FG participants participated in the protests of April 2018. Interestingly, participants also admitted that during the first days of the protests most of them were mainly observing the developments in Yerevan via livestream internet platforms. Only after some time did they join the protests either in their own communities or by moving to Yerevan.

With regard to the incentives to take part in demonstrations participants outlined factors related to **socio-economic** conditions as well as **moral-psychological** factors. Protests seemed to be the only means to express distrust and dissatisfaction against the regime. Almost every participant described the events of April 2018 as an outbreak, "eruption of emotions after decades of injustice and poverty":

> *"We had an image of our parents' generation before our eyes, they lived decades with hope and probably got used to the situation, and would not believe that revolution would actually take place; young people believed that they could do it", (female, 21, urban, Shirak).*

Participants in all marzes mentioned that demonstrations increased hope for changes in their lives. The bigger and more united demonstrations became, the stronger the hope for change and expectations for the new beginning. Key motive for change was "getting rid of the corrupt rich rulers and feeling of safe space in the social environment". One of the experts from the

Parliament suggested that the main incentive in the minds of people was *"the lack of social mobility, and hardship of climbing those stairs led many to leave the country".*

In small communities, where **everyone knows each other**, participation in the protests was rather difficult. Many young people, for instance, decided to move to Yerevan for safer participation in protests in 2018. It was especially difficult for those who were employed in the public sphere because of the fear they could be identified and fired from their jobs. Those who joined the protest movement in its early days were the ones who had nothing to lose. One of the FG participants in Gyumri, an 18-year-old high school student narrated how they were trying to convince their teachers to take part in protests:

> *"if you are afraid of losing your job and don't take part in demonstrations, we will grow up having no fear of losing jobs, because simply we will not have any".*

According to young people of Shirak, the older generation was hesitant and fearful, but when it became clear that there is no way back, they were trying to participate through youngsters, they would support, they would try to have mediated participation.

Along with the burst of euphoria, people developed a hope that after the revolution employment opportunities will be created. Socio-economic motives of the participation were more articulated in Shirak than in other two marzes:

> *"Gyumri has always been the "revolutionary" city in Armenia. Previous Government always had very little support here and electoral fraud was relatively low. Reasons for that are numerous socio-economic problems of Gyumri. Therefore, people felt that [with these demonstrations] they got the closest finally to remove this government. Serzh Sargsyan visited here [Gyumri] only a couple of times, because there was little he could talk to people here. High activism was a result of grievance cumulated throughout years" (female, 23, urban, Shirak).*

Those few discussants of FGs who did not participate or were passive in demonstrations were discouraged by "crowd/mob participation" and not because they did not aspire to the same changes in society as demonstrators did:

> *"Anytime I would see a group of middle school students marching, I would think that this revolution will take us nowhere, because people doing it do not understand what they are doing or that they are doing it just for fun and just skipping their* classes*"* (male, 18, urban, Syunik).

Other saw their participation prevented by the limits enforced by their parents or other relatives. Some would travel to Yerevan and participate in protests there because of pressure by police. In Tavush, young people mentioned that in street protests police would "harass" the parents of youngsters, especially women, asking: *"Do you know what your daughter/son is doing?".* Several young women from Tavush said that participation in protests was challenged by their families by telling them *"it is impolite"* to take part in demonstrations. According to one of the experts in the field of civil society "politics is considered to be a 'dirty' space, which is more suitable for men".

To summarize, there is no clear information about the number of young people taking part during the first days of the civil disobedience campaign of the protests, or there is no clear information, but most media outlets say that the number of protesters in the centre of Yerevan rose as high as 40,000 during the first six days. Most of these people were young people. In the days at the peak of the protests, such as 22 April, 25 April, 1 and 2 May, the numbers of protesters probably rose to 150 to 250 000 in Yerevan alone. These protests also included large numbers of youth, though other age groups were also widely represented. Also, large rallies took place in Gyumri and Vanadzor, regional centres of northern Armenia, and smaller rallies and protest actions in other parts of the country. Overall, young people were key to the success of the "Velvet Revolution". One can conclude that youth has been the most active participating force in the protests, and a measure of its success was to a large extent the active involvement of Armenian youth.

7. Youth participation in the Government and Parliament in "post-revolutionary" Armenia

7.1 Political participation

The presence of young politicians in the Government and the Parliament became a subject of wide public debate. In particular, the media covered the public's concern over the perceived lack of experienced politicians within the ranks of the new ruling party. The Government was accused for "not being serious enough", playing on the idea that the members of the government are too young and therefore not competent to lead the country. [23] At the same time, the new government members often claim that being young is their advantage. Thus, the Ministry of Diaspora website took special pride in the fact that the Minister, who was appointed in May 2018, was at the moment the youngest cabinet member in Europe. [24]

Politics has become an important part of people's everyday life after April 2018. Young people follow the news and discuss political events on a regular basis.

> "In our community everyone started to watch weekly governmental sessions and parliamentary hearings" (female, 20, rural, Shirak).

Young people became more active in voicing the problems. However, grassroots participation in finding solutions to issues is on much more modest level. Rather, the most popular way of raising issues of different scale are made on online platforms, mainly on Facebook.

FG participants in all marzes, but especially in Syunik and Shirak marzes, highlighted the "complaining and criticizing" culture among many in Armenian society, including youth. Facebook and other means of modern communication are the main platforms where people share their concerns and issues. However, little effort is put in going beyond social media platforms and demand changes from relevant actors on the level of policy-makers.

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[23] https://www.azatutyun.am/a/29959682.html
[24] http://hayernaysor.am/en/archives/290666

"There is no real activism, people [also referring to young people] just like to criticize and it became more obvious after the revolution" (male 24, rural, Shirak).

Several other participants believe that politicization of the society is too high, *"…the more people get interested in politics the more there is polarization and aggression in the society, and none of that can be healthy for a developing society".* One of the experts also supported the idea that the more politically engaged people get, the more polarized the society becomes.

According to the results of FGs and EIs, the issue of youth participation in decision-making has two aspects to it: top-down engagement and bottom-up participation. The **bottom-up** participation is hardly effective in communities governed by people from older political establishment with patriarchal mentality whose attitude towards youth is barely tolerable. In communities where young, active and supportive leaders govern, youth engagement initiatives are more encouraged and promoted. The less strict the subordination between local authorities and residents, the higher the level of cooperation is developed. FG participants from 4 different communities in Tavush shared success stories of youth engagement in local civic life, as well as participation in organizing cross-border programs with Georgia and acknowledged the crucial role of the head of the community, especially in rural communities. In communities where support from local authorities is low, youth gets quickly disenchanted and bottom-up participation is curtailed.

"..our new government should always be reminded that each disappointment gives a right to a youngster to leave community/country", (expert in the field of civil society, female, Gyumri).

In rather large communities, where CSOs are involved, youth have better opportunities for community-level participation. For example, in Gyumri the [UPSHIFT-Armenia Adolescents Development and Empowerment programme](https://yic.am/en/upshift-armenia/) (although aimed at 12-18 years old participants) had an impact for adolescents in Armenia to be more proactive in practicing civic engagement.[25] Another barrier to efficient bottom-up participation is a lack of initiative and motivation among youth itself.

The **top-down** participation platforms are not well institutionalized. On paper, there are Youth Councils attached to governments at the marz level, however currently only a few are active. The activity of the council depends on the secretary of the council and regional governor. With the change/replacement of one of those people, the council's activity is fluctuating. Inaction of Strategy on State Youth Policy, as well as lack of mechanisms provided by the government to institutionalize top-down participation is a big challenge to youth participation in decision-making.

Although in the course of the past year people became increasingly more interested in political processes, at the same time, according to FG participants, the level of **political awareness** increased only slightly.

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[25] Upshift Armenia: https://yic.am/en/upshift-armenia/

"People don't really understand or are not really aware of the functions of different elective positions, such as Local Governor, Members of Community Council, Members of Parliament. They view officials as "problem solvers" and therefore elect those who would care enough to solve their problems, if needed. Many people, including youth, tend to vote for a friend, neighbour, etc. rather someone who offers real change" (male, 20, rural, Shirak).

7.2 Expectations from the new Government and the input by youth in the future

Young men and women interviewed during FGs highlighted the need for profound **educational reform** with introduction of an institution of professional orientation at schools. According to one FG male participant from Shirak:

"Education should be the priority of the new Government. If we get a better education, we will have a fantastic country, and everyone would be rich", *(male, 23, urban, Shirak).*

Having **better employment opportunities** is another expectation mentioned in all FGs. Many participants referred to opening of new jobs, particularly in the regions, rather than concentrating everything in Yerevan. Interestingly, youngsters recalled the opening of big industrial factories and production (back in Soviet times) as a solution to solve employment issues and to develop the economy. In Tavush, young people underlined the importance of **investments in borderline communities** and the development of agriculture. In Shirak, people expect the new government **to create institutions responsible for developing youth policies,** e.g. creation of "Committee on Youth affairs" was suggested. Others expect **to see functioning state structures,** professional and capable decision-makers accountable for reforms. Last, but not least, ensuring **application of law** equally to all, is the expectation increased significantly after the "Velvet Revolution".

7.3 Mentality and gender aspects of youth participation

In general, people in Armenia have little trust towards young people in decision-making positions. The large portion of criticism towards the executive and legislative branches of power is connected with the presence of young "inexperienced" politicians. This attitude is expressed not only towards national political actors but also local community grassroots activists who are "blamed" for being "young and inexperienced". According to one of the young female MPs:

"Young people have fewer opportunities to engage in politics. There is always a question *"Are these kiddos supposed to decide how we live?".*

Other experts underlined that women are more "accepted" in civic activism, rather than political activism. This is especially true in marzes, where conservative values and patriarchal system is widely acknowledged. This usually has negative effects on the mindset of women lacking confidence in their ability to even take up a new job. One of the youth work expert mentioned that:

> "Women have lower self-esteem compared with men, who usually have unjustified strong confidence. For example, we announce a position with eight eligibility criteria. Boys, who met only two think they can apply and moreover they have high chances to get it. Girls, on the other hand, who met seven out of eight criteria, decide not to apply because they think they are not good enough. The idea that you are not good enough is there from the day of birth, because if you were good enough you would be born as a boy".

Women engagement in politics, nevertheless, has improved by promoting gender quotas. Young women, in particular, are more active today than middle aged women. Interestingly, female experts mention that despite the gender quota, there is little space for women in politics:

> "Ambitions of women have never been supported in the society and it requires much more effort from women than from men to have a career as a political decision-maker", even after the "Velvet Revolution".

7.4 Youth Policy

Based on the Youth State Concepts for 2013-2017 and 2018-2022 short-term youth state policy strategies have been developed in Armenia. However, the current strategy is on hold. Even though the 2018 movement took place with the active participation of young people and brought an unprecedented number of young people into the government, the new government initiated optimization program including the merging of the Ministry of Sport and Youth, which had previously been responsible for working out youth policies, with the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Culture. The aim behind the merging of the Ministries was to improve the management of state agencies, and put an end to the situation when different government agencies were working in the same area, often leading to a lack of coordination and contradicting policies. However, at the current stage, it has not yet been determined which are the priorities of the new government structure, when it comes to youth policy in particular.

As a result, a new Ministry has been created: the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport, which some experts have already named a "super-ministry". Critics of the government claim that the "super-ministry" will not be able to perform its function of effectively managing all these diverse fields. While these claims may be politically motivated, some experts are worried that the issues of youth policy will be "lost" among the various challenges that the new ministry will have to grapple with.

Various youth non-governmental organisations (such as "Armenian Progressive Youth" NGO (APY) and "We" Youth NGO) have expressed their concern over this situation and that the youth policy is not clarified. Thus, there is a danger that youth policy will be missing from key policy frameworks.

Even though most of the experts do not see this merger as a vital issue some of them mentioned that it is essential to have an institution, which will manage/coordinate youth policy development and youth programs:

"What is important right now is implementation of democratic reforms in Armenia. There is no need for centripetal intuitions, which have a potential to reproduce old, dominant models [of behavior of youth]. We do not need a dictating Government, but rather facilitating one" (MP, female).

It is more important to have a team, which will facilitate development or possible revisions of youth strategy, tools and methodology of implementing youth policy. One of the main functions of the institutions should be constantly sending impulses to motivate young people to take initiative.

Many mentioned that the Ministry of Youth and Sport was rather concentrated on Sport affairs. What was disappointing for youth organisations today is the lack of transparency in the process of structural changes as well as a lack of communication on developments:

"This whole year we have been in an informational vacuum, with no awareness of developments" (civil society expert, male).

While discussing Youth Policy in Armenia, some experts underlined the importance of not simply having a Youth State Policy Concept and Strategy, but plan for localization of policies in different communities, as well as creating co-management platforms to engage youth with local governance.

8. Youth participation in Peacebuilding

8.1 General trends and analysis of the current situation
The conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh has been ongoing for more than thirty years. There were some peacebuilding initiatives that took place in the first stages of the conflict, but most civic peacebuilding initiatives have started after the end of the active phase of conflict with the ceasefire of 1994.

Throughout the two and a half decades after the ceasefire of 1994, there has been a range of various "Track 2" initiatives aimed at conflict resolution and/or conflict transformation. The term "Track 2" usually refers to initiatives performed by civil society actors, in contrast to "Track 1", i.e. negotiations on the level of government officials. In some cases, "Track 1.5" dialogue also takes places, which means contacts involving both representatives of civil society and those from government circles, acting not in their official capacity, as well as, possibly, former officials.

Typical cases of Track 2 initiatives include:

1. Projects that seek to bring civil society together, creating a dialogue between NGOs representing various sides of the conflict;
2. Projects that deal with media, promoting reporting that is based on values of peace;
3. Parallel projects in the two societies, which are aimed at transformation of attitudes within the societies;

4. Regional projects, which bring the participants from the conflicting countries into larger regional frameworks, with participation of peace-building activists from other conflict zones as well.

One may note that in most cases it was arguably the Azerbaijani government's attitude toward peacebuilding projects that created obstacles for peacebuilding efforts. This does not mean that Armenian government's attitude has always been positive toward such initiatives. However, in overall terms, the Armenian government had been relatively tolerant of such initiatives, though it viewed them with suspicion. Negative attitudes toward peacebuilding were often expressed in Armenia by various pro-government activist groups and pro-government media, which accused participants of peace-building initiatives of "selling out" to Azerbaijan. In some cases, there were violent incidents, as was the case with the attempt to hold a Festival of Azerbaijani Films in Armenia in 2012, which became a pretext for fierce attacks on some of the NGOs involved in peacebuilding.

The main players in the field can be divided into two groups: international actors and local actors. In turn, the internationals can be divided into donors, who fund certain activities, and international NGOs that perform these. The local actors are mostly NGOs that operate in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh, who receive funding from the international donors or participate in common projects with international NGOs.

It is also important to note that many of these donors and organisations have also been active in Armenia-Turkey dialogue projects, which had been especially active at the time of the so-called Armenia-Turkey "football diplomacy", in the years following 2008, when it seemed that an Armenian-Turkish relations were in a phase of thaw.

8.2 Psychological impact

The situation on the NK Line of Contact is the most pressing issue for the FG participants. It has turned into an everyday routine for many to monitor the news with a hope that no major incidents have been recorded on the Line of Contact. Emotional burden caused by ceasefire violations with fatal outcome have become an inseparable part of their lives. There is general sense of security due to strong trust towards the Army.[26] However, since many families have young male relatives serving in the Army (near the Line of Contact), the conflict penetrates into their families and circles of friends because of concrete risks of the possible loss of someone close to you. A 23 year-old male participant of FG from Syunik described this condition as *"internal paranoia"* limiting personal freedom of a citizen. Those living in the communities directly affected by conflict underlined the influence of NK conflict on the development of a person when "people become more alert, anxious with little capability to make long-term plans".

In the borderline communities of Tavush marz, the feeling of "being used for the sake of political manipulation purposes" was mentioned. Residents of Tavush live close enough to the Line of Contact to hear shootings, shelling and other types of ceasefire violations. In the

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[26] About 80% of young people aged 18-35 trust the Army:
https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2017am/TRUARMY-by-AGEGROUP-withoutdkra/

course of the past years, residents have now learnt how to differentiate armaments simply by its sound.

With regard to the relations with Turkey, the situation is significantly different, though psychological trauma is still a core part of identity for all Armenians. Even though relations with Turkey on the level of people-to-people contacts is improving, the closed border and absence of diplomatic relations deepen mistrust towards Turkey. Relations with Turkey are described as "so close but so remote", especially for rural communities in Shirak marz, who have to travel to Georgia to enter Turkey, despite sharing a border.

8.3 Economic impact

Negative economic consequences of conflict and closed borders are obvious for almost all FG participants. In their communities they hardly expect any investment. Moreover, in Tavush marz, people do not use vast territories of arable land because of the security situation: shootings from the other side are regular, especially during the time of agricultural work. Among other issues related to economic hardship, participants highlight huge military expenses in the national budget which prevents development of other public sectors.

> *"If the conflict were resolved we wouldn't have this big military budget and it could have been used to make people's lives a little happier, with investments in other spheres" (male, 26, Shirak, urban).*

Among other consequences of economic issues caused by conflicts, participants mentioned emigration from borderline rural communities to urban areas in Armenia and also outside the country.

8.4 Critical thinking

Young participants of the FGs expressed eagerness to openly talk about the topics of conflict transformation and peacebuilding with the other side. Everyone expressed hope for peace and stability. However, most of them do not imagine how they could participate in supporting peacebuilding initiatives to transform relations between hostile neighbours. This is especially true in the case of the NK conflict. Moreover, the majority felt insecure to talk openly about their vision of conflict resolution publicly. There is a general belief that the resolution of NK issue does not imply direct participation of ordinary people in the negotiation process. The crucial role of external impulses, such as changes in regional configuration, shifts in geopolitical interests of greater powers have been overly discussed. Additionally, one of the experts in the field of civil society highlighted that after the 4-day April war in 2016, the conflict with Azerbaijan became more personal for the younger generation, as they lost someone of their age or someone they even knew, and this is a psychological trauma for someone to engage in peacebuilding activities.

FG participant from Tavush (male, 27) says:

> *"Youth is not engaged in conflict resolution platforms because they are not available for us, but I think that youth is generally peace-oriented. Youth simply does not have enough leverage. There are two ways to solve this conflict: waging another war or signing a peace agreement. By being more prone to peace youth can prevent the war,*

but when Pashinyan and Aliyev are negotiating, youth hardly can intervene in that process".

According to the majority of experts around NK conflict resolution, the peace process is neither inclusive nor transparent. However, after the "Velvet Revolution" transparency and inclusivity of the process have increased.

"For a long time there was an inherent mechanism that we [mostly referring to Soviet past or the previous Government] will think instead of you, you don't have to do it yourself" (male, 27, urban, Tavush).

This mindset is still deep among many and despite the positive outcome of the "Velvet Revolution", this mentality continues to dominate self-awareness of youth. One of the expert MP's mentioned:

"A big shift has taken place or is taking place [in Armenia], we can say it is announced that conflicts cannot be solved in a top-down approach. Until now we had an impression that we have answers to certain questions and we all know how we want to solve these problems. However, for sustainable resolution there is a need for reconciliation. If we want long term-peace in our region, we need to feel safe in the long run."

Another expert in the field of civil society says:

"I work with young women from NK, they want to meet Azerbaijanis and talk. I discovered that during such meetings healing is taking place because since childhood you hear a lot about the war and human losses, you grow up with the fear of war, cumulating emotions and traumas that you need to talk about".

Experts see potential in youth in terms of creating "a peace culture" in society. However, according to the expert community, misinterpretation of peace and peacebuilding serves as a barrier to youth participation. For decades, there was a discourse of considering peace and peacebuilding as equal to weakness and "giving up". According to the expert from Parliament "the only widely accepted formulations involving the term "peace" imply a certain level of assertiveness: for example, "to impose peace", "if you want peace, prepare for war", etc." This, in turn, brings men to exclusively engage in peace talks because they are an integral part of a "strong" society. As a result, women are excluded.

Although young people experienced difficulties in picturing themselves in conflict resolution processes, the majority believed that the situation will get more peaceful through people-to-people dialogue and resisting aggression and hate speech. Communication is underlined as a key element to peace. Young woman from the borderline community of Tavush mentioned that direct communication with Azerbaijani people is important, as:

"We do not know what they really think, media depicts only what their authorities think".

This idea was supported in the group, and it was also highlighted in other FGs. Notably, while the vast majority of FG participants expressed interest in meeting and exchanging ideas with youth from neighboring states, those who already did participate in such meetings expressed only positive remarks.

According to an expert from the field of peacebuilding:

> *"Youth by its nature is against the borders and limitations. Imagine you are a young person living a in a [borderline] Bayandur village [in Shirak], every morning you listen Muslim call for prayer from other side of the border, wouldn't you want to see what is going on there?"*

Interviewed experts confirm that young people can have major input in nurturing peace culture and building peace through direct dialogue. Young people should have an opportunity to meet the youth from other side of the border. Experts, previously or currently engaged in peacebuilding platforms, emphasized that the most efficient programs are those aimed at engaging young people in joint initiatives, cultural and artistic programs and in general, projects that intend to create people-to-people contact.

> *"Artist should meet an artist, builder should meet a builder, translator should meet a translator. Communication prepares people for peace".*

FG participant (female) from Tavush says:

> *"I believe we can culturally overcome our conflicts, but politically it is not yet possible. When political problems have not been overcome, it turns into societal crisis. We keep talking about how different we are, but let's discuss our similarities".*

Ensuring the status quo and preventing the conflict to become violent is the main expectation from the current government for most of the FG participants. This is possible only if balance of power is secured between the conflicting sides. Otherwise, escalation of violence is almost unavoidable. According to one of the FG participants in Shirak (male, 26):

> "in order to keep the balance each side has to take one step at a time. One of those steps already has been taken by Armenia: the revolution. Therefore, young people expect revolution/transition of power also in Azerbaijan, to be able to move forward in the NK conflict resolution process".

Any sustainable improvement in Armenia-Turkey relations is also linked to power transition in Turkey. The majority of experts support the idea that power transition in neighboring countries might bring change in regional conflicts resolution and peacebuilding prospects. However, experts consider it impossible to predict the development of events regarding Armenia-Azerbaijan and Armenia-Turkey relations and no major shift is believed will happen in the upcoming 5-10 years.

With this regard, even the UN Secretary-General emphasized the role of youth in Armenia. Shortly after the peaceful transition of power in 2018, Secretary-General Guterres called it a

"fantastic example" of peaceful transition. "Armenia's young people were at the heart of that country's peaceful political transition earlier this year – showing the potential of youth to use their voice to advance democracy". [27]

8.5 The youth dimension of peacebuilding

Involvement of young people in peacebuilding processes takes place in the form of activities initiated by Armenian and foreign (mainly European) youth NGOs, peacebuilding schools, summer schools, conferences, youth forums and other events. Eurasia Partnership Foundation has been one of the organisations whose peacebuilding work has a specific focus on the youth dimension. One of the directions of EPF's work was organizing "YouthBanks", youth centers in the regions, through which young people had an opportunity to engage in social entrepreneurship and civic activities, including peacebuilding. [28] The technology itself has actually been first introduced in Northern Ireland, where it helped peacebuilding. EPF's "YouthBanks" were particularly active in the Armenia-Turkey dialogue. Currently, EPF's Conflict Transformation Schools annual program is well-known in the area, in which young learners are trained in critical thinking, debate skills, the idea of democratic peace, and other skills and knowledge.

A major factor in the peacebuilding in general, and youth-oriented activities in particular is the EU funded EPNK, the European Partnership for the Peaceful Settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict (EPNK), under which several programs are being implemented involving youth. [29] The EPNK consortium unites several peacebuilding NGOs from Europe which are working with their partners from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh. There are two organisations within EPNK focusing on youth-oriented programs:

- The organization Crisis Management Initiative (CMI) aims to make a critical analysis of the deadlock situation in the peace process in the exceptional and multi-level dialogue involving the most vulnerable group of young people. The organisation's initiatives include:

  - providing opportunities for young leaders from all sides of the conflict to meet and understand better the needs of each other and their communities
  - assisting young people in the development and implementation of local confidence-building initiatives. This project is targeted especially for new generations that have no own experience of pre-war co-existence of the parties
  - meeting young people and local and international officials to inform about the official peace process and feed them with new ideas. Such initiatives are aimed at ensuring comprehensive public support for the peaceful settlement of the conflict.

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[27] Secretary-General's Address to the General Assembly, 25 September 2018
https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2018-09-25/secretary-generals-address-general-assembly-delivered-trilingual
[28] https://epfarmenia.am/project/youthbank
[29] http://www.epnk.org/

- Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, which carries out support for young women of the conflict sides and their rights. The Foundation is collaborating with local women's organisations and individual women's rights activists and supporting women mentors that work to engage and strengthen Armenian and Azerbaijani young women affected by conflict, so that they can play a more active part in peacebuilding efforts and influence decisions that affect their lives.

Currently, EPF implements a grant-making project within EPNK, aimed at supporting grassroots initiatives on peacebuilding and conflict transformation.[30] Several grants were given out to different actors in Armenia and Azerbaijan focusing on memory, alternative history, identity and conflict. Among these grants there have been several grants focusing on youth, such as "Armenian Progressive Youth" NGO's project on "Relationship Psychology and Tolerance". Another project "Alter-notion" focused on young bloggers and journalists from Armenia and Azerbaijan working together and developing materials on past memories and shared culture between Armenians and Azerbaijanis.

Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation has a special place, when it comes to the youth dimension, as it is itself a result of an initiative of youth from the region.[31] The Imagine Center's dialogue methodology was born out of the analysis of the collaboration between Turkish and Armenian students and young professionals studying together in the US who came together on a weekly basis in 2005 and 2006 to discuss sensitive issues concerning Turkish-Armenian relationships in the past, present, and future. The Imagine Center's methodology combines analytic problem-solving with narrative mediation and reflective practice. It relies on direct dialogue confronting the past, the present, and the future of the conflict in a belief that the solution to the present and future problems can be found in critically approaching the past.

The case of "Imagine" is also interesting in the way that it represents a direct case of influence of the civil society peacebuilding efforts on the political realm, as a result of the protests in Armenia. One of its founders, Maria Karapetyan, also became one of the active participants of the 2018 protests, and in the December 2018 election was elected a member of parliament and member of the Directorate of the Civic Contract party. Other participant of Imagine programs and contributor to its publications, Mikayel Zolyan also became a member of parliament, serving on the Committee of International Affairs of the National Assembly.

FG participants from Shirak were mainly interested to talk about Armenia-Turkey relations for obvious reasons. Whereas, participants from Tavush and Syunik discussed predominantly Armenia-Azerbaijan relations and conflict over Nagorny Karabakh. Conflicts have an impact on different aspects of life on the people living in the bordering regions.

8.6 Peacebuilding and youth today: new opportunities?

The events of 2018 in Armenia appear to present an opportunity for re-starting the peacebuilding process. The position of Armenia's new government as expressed by

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[30] https://epfarmenia.am/project/peace
[31] http://imaginedialogue.com/

prime minister Pashinyan is that any solution is acceptable, which is acceptable for the peoples of Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan. This formula, as well as other statements by Pashinyan and other members of his team, are meant to signify the willingness of Armenia's new leadership to have a dialogue across societies. While at the same time, Pashinyan has also been extremely cautious towards the talk of concessions, stating that there can be no one-sided concessions, he has called upon Armenians and Azerbaijanis to engage in a constructive dialogue. At the same time, he and some members of his team, particularly the Defense Minister have also made some quite harsh statements as well. It remains to be seen what is the reaction of Azerbaijan to this new line of Armenian leadership. There are signs that today Azerbaijani leadership is less hostile to peacebuilding initiatives, but it does wish to maintain such initiatives under its control.

Based on this trend, one may conclude that the conditions for Track 2 initiatives are improving. The Armenian side, with its emphasis on the dialogue between the societies, as well as on the democratic values in general, should be willing to encourage civil dialogue. The Azerbaijani side, while it remains more suspicious of Track 2 initiatives, is at the current stage probably also more receptive to such initiatives, provided that they do not cross certain red lines and their outcomes are predictable for the Azerbaijani side. The sides have proclaimed their readiness to engage in preparing the populations for peace, and though each side has its own interpretation of this term, neither side can completely ignore the necessity of working with the societies in order to prepare them for a peaceful solution. In addition, Minsk Group co-chairs, as well as the EU, have expressed their optimism in terms of a possible progress on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, so they can be expected to contribute to Track 2 efforts.

Assessing the results of the peacebuilding initiatives of the last years is not an easy task. On the one hand, one could point to a lack of specific concrete results, as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict does not seem to be getting closer to the resolution. On the other hand, the fact that the ceasefire, with certain notable exceptions like the "4-day war" has been held for over a quarter of a century without any peacekeeping operations, can be seen as a relative success, and one could argue that the existence of numerous peacebuilding initiatives has been one of the factors that contributed to this success.

There are various obstacles in the way of successful peacebuilding activities in the region. These include the interests of the leadership to maintain aggressive rhetoric as a way of distracting attention from its own governance failings – a strategy used extensively by authoritarian regimes. While Armenia's new government has so far abstained from such a strategy, it is still reluctant to challenge the militant attitudes in society, as such attempts could be used by political opponents. There is a general lack of civil society inclusion in working out government policies, and obviously conflict resolution is one of the most rigid fields, where governments are unwilling to share the burden of responsibility with civil society. While this may have changed in Armenia, the exclusion of civil society still remains the norm on the other side of the conflict. In general, while the change of government in Armenia in 2018 has opened new opportunities for peacebuilding, these opportunities will remain limited as long as they are not met with a similar attitude from Azerbaijan. Besides, there may be significant differences between the way peacebuilding efforts are seen from Yerevan, and the way they are perceived in Nagorno-Karabakh, where

the society is more deeply scarred by war and siege mentality, and therefore more closed and suspicious toward any peacebuilding initiatives originating from outside.

Overall, the peacebuilding initiatives can be seen as successful to the extent that they have helped to keep communication between the societies, preserving channels of communication that otherwise would not have existed. Also, they have helped to preserve dissenting voices in both societies that have questioned the dominant militant narratives, and even though these voices have steadily remained in the minority, the attempts to silence them have never completely succeeded.

Finally, peacebuilding initiatives have been successful in a sense that they have created resources for the future, which can become useful when the political outlook changes and the governments of the countries are more cooperative and prospects for conflict resolution emerged. This factor specifically refers to the youth dimension of the peacebuilding projects, as it builds resources for the future. This is especially important in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, because unlike representatives of older generations who have lived through the Soviet period, Armenian and Azerbaijani youth have had very little experience of communication and have been growing in conditions of ongoing conflict. Therefore, youth are particularly vulnerable to propaganda that promotes dehumanisation and negative stereotypes, hence it is especially important for peacebuilding activities to target the youth.

9. Conclusions

- Youth participation in protest movements prior to the "Velvet Revolution" encouraged many to take on the streets and participate actively in protest movement in 2018.

- The authoritarian style of government, corruption, inequality and lack of opportunities, which were major issues for Armenian youth for years, have now significantly reduced after the events of April-May 2018. Now there are new opportunities for the country, as a whole, and for Armenia's youth specifically, as many young people are becoming more active politically and receiving a place in the executive and legislative branches of power.

- There are still many issues that the authorities have yet to address to alleviate issues young men and women still experience in everyday life. This is particularly true for the young people living in rural areas bordering with Azerbaijan and Turkey. Additional challenges that they face increases apathy and desire to emigrate.

- In the long term, the democratic changes in Armenia, brought about with the instrumental participation of young people, have an immense potential for positive developments in the field of youth policy. However, currently there is no clear understanding how the government wants to amend youth policy to address some of the issues young people still face.

- Peacebuilding initiatives directed at establishing trust between the conflicting sides and looking for mutual understanding is an important aspect of youth engagement in peacebuilding. Dialogue with peers from across the conflict divide is another element of potential peacebuilding initiatives.

- Despite the fact that young people have very little knowledge of international frameworks on youth and peacebuilding, they are interested in initiating dialogue and participating in activities aimed at peaceful conflict transformation.

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ANNEX 1. Focus group participants profile

Table 1: Distribution of FG participants by marzes

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Shirak	27	35.1	35.1
	Syunik	23	29.9	29.9
	Tavush	27	35.1	35.1
	Total	77	100.0	100.0

Table 2: Settlements included in FGs

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid		2	2.6	2.6
	Aghin	1	1.3	1.3
	Akhuryan	1	1.3	1.3
	Akner	2	2.6	2.6
	Amasia	2	2.6	2.6
	Ani	1	1.3	1.3
	Arapi	2	2.6	2.6
	Aregnadem	1	1.3	1.3
	Bavra	1	1.3	1.3
	Berdavan	2	2.6	2.6
	Dilijan	10	13.0	13.0
	Goris	13	16.9	16.9
	Gyumri	12	15.6	15.6
	Ijevan	9	11.7	11.7
	Jrapi	1	1.3	1.3
	Karashen	3	3.9	3.9
	Koghb	2	2.6	2.6
	Koti	2	2.6	2.6
	Maralik	1	1.3	1.3
	Noyemberyan	1	1.3	1.3
	Shirakavan	1	1.3	1.3
	Tegh	5	6.5	6.5
	Voskevan	1	1.3	1.3
	Yerazgavors	1	1.3	1.3
	Total	77	100.0	100.0

Table 3: Settlement type of FG participants

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Rural	32	41.6	41.6
	Urban	45	58.4	58.4
	Total	77	100.0	100.0

Table 4: Gender of FG participants

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	female	58	75.3	75.3
	male	19	24.7	24.7
	Total	77	100.0	100.0

Note: three FG were exclusively female

Table 5: Educational level of FG participants

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid		1	1.3	1.3
	High school	3	3.9	3.9
	Higher (completed)	43	55.8	55.8
	Higher (still studying)	21	27.3	27.3
	Secondary	5	6.5	6.5
	Vocational	4	5.2	5.2
	Total	77	100.0	100.0

ANNEX 2. Focus Group Interview Guide

<u>Governance</u>
1. What are the main challenges for you (the youth) in your local communities today?
    - *What is the economic situation and employment opportunities in your local communities?*
    - *What is the social and cultural life like in your communities?*
2. What is the political participation of young people on local and national levels?
    - *What impact do youth have on community development decisions on local level?*
    - *What role youth in your community have during National elections, Local elections, Local political and civil society actions, referenda, etc.*
3. How active did you (and others in the community) engage in political protests in 2018? What do you think, what was the major role and incentive for the youth groups to mobilize and contribute to the Revolution?
4. What are the expectations from the current Government in Armenia with regard to democratic reform? What kind of activities should you/youth engage in the current stage of reform in Armenia? In which areas of policy-making should youth have more impact?
5. Do you feel in your everyday life (interactions) things have changed in Armenia after the Revolution?
6. What are your expectations from the current Government with regard to the NK conflict and Armenia-Turkey normalization? What engagement would you expect from youth in these processes?

<u>Peacebuilding</u>
7. How does the situation around unresolved NK conflict and Armenia-Turkey relations affect you/your community?
8. What is the security situation in your community?
9. How do you envisage the future with neighbours in 5- and 10-years' time-frame?

Questions (additional) for the "peacebuilders"
10. How important is civil society peacebuilding initiatives on the peace process?
11. How well represented are youth in peacebuilding? Are there any barriers in engaging in dialogue and peacebuilding with the "other side"? If so, what kind of?
12. Have you heard of UNSCR 2250? If yes, what do you know?

ANNEX 3. Key informant Expert Interview Guide

<u>Governance</u>
1. What is your approach to the dissolution of the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs? Who is now responsible for Youth Policy (if there is one)?
2. What is the current stance on the Concept on Youth State Policy and Youth Strategy?
3. What is your assessment on reform on youth policy in general?
4. What role youth play in the government? How well represented are the youth in the Government and Parliament?

5. Is the voice of youth heard by the policy-makers?
6. What is the role of youth in peacebuilding? Are there any projects NGOs undertake currently or in the past?
7. Is there a gender component to youth inclusion-related issues?
8. How can Armenia empower youth within UNSCR 2250 to have a positive impact on NK peace process and Armenia-Turkey relations?

Peacebuilding
9. What are the challenges around NK conflict and Armenia-Turkey normalization process?
10. How inclusive is the peace process over NK and Armenia-Turkey?
11. How youth can impact peace processes around these conflicts?
12. How important is civil society peacebuilding initiatives on the peace process?
13. How well represented are youth in peacebuilding? Are there any barriers in engaging in dialogue and peacebuilding with the "other side"? If so, what kind of?
14. Have you heard of UNSCR 2250? If yes, what do you know?
15. How do you envisage the future with neighbors in 5- and 10-years' time-frame?