

## PRIORITIES OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN ARMENIA'S INTERNAL POLITICS

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### **Abstract**

*Currently, the effective use of political communication to confront internal threats to national security is an important issue in the Republic of Armenia (RA). Among the internal threats, the author singled out the absence of a stable civil society, the non-establishment of the multi-party system, the neglect of the feedback mechanism in the state's political communication, etc. In particular, the following are the main reasons for the weakness of the multi-party system in RA:*

- weak connection with voters, being active only during election periods,*
- unclear ideological orientation,*
- personnel policy, the weak structure of internal democracy and autonomy.*
- not sufficient representation in all provinces*
- non-transparency of political and financial activities,*
- weak control over the activity of parties.*

**Keywords:** national security, political communication, multi-party system, active participation, personnel function.

### **Introduction**

Among the main principles that reveal the essence of democracy in modern political science literature are: “a) establishing the state on the principle of separation of powers, b) existence of the highest political legislative body elected by the people, c) apart from the legislative body, also the presence of other elective bodies of power and administration, even self-government, d) universal, equal, free suffrage, e) deciding the outcome of the discussion by the majority of votes when making decisions” (Zhiro, 2006, p. 24) and so on.

The Constitution of RA adopted in 1995 was amended twice, in 2005 and 2015. During the recent constitutional amendments, the establishment of a parliamentary government system was justified by greater opportunities to get closer to the standards of democratic government, to root the traditions of

parliamentarism, and to increase the independence of the judiciary. However, in reality, the logic of the constitutional reforms did not lead to the separation and counterbalancing of the branches of power. In their turn, civil sector organizations did not receive greater powers and influence on decision-making. Thus, under the pressure of society, in the Constitution of RA of 2005 a clause was included that allowed a citizen to apply to the Constitutional Court if he has exhausted all other means of judicial protection in the lower courts and disputes the constitutionality of the provision of the law applied to him (Constitution of RA, 2005, Article 101, Clause 6). However, with the amendments of 2015, that clause was reformulated, and the opportunity for a citizen to apply to the Constitutional Court became more difficult. Today, a citizen can appeal to the Constitutional Court if the application of this provision to him has led to the violation of his basic rights and freedoms stipulated in Chapter 2 of the Constitution, taking into account the interpretation given to the corresponding provision in legal practice (Constitution of RA, 2015, Article 169, Clause 8). The possibility of applying to the Constitutional Court from the public sector is not provided at all.\*

The forms and means of political communication can be effective both under presidential or semi-presidential and parliamentary administration if the goal is to build a democratic society. What is important is how far the principle of separation of powers, the mechanism of counterbalances and mutual restraints, and staying within the scope of delegated powers are used in the life of the state. The main actors of political communication are political parties of different orientations, politically active citizens and their associations (civil society), media structures, and, of course, the main actor remains the state with its multi-branch information structures.

### **Security Issues in the Internal Political Communication**

The role of the above players (actors) in the context of political communication is very important from the point of view of ensuring the internal security of the state.

In the first years of Armenia's independence, the bureaucratic system had just begun to form, so the state formalism was not universal and complete. Gradually, the themes of "solving the Karabakh issue" and "universal rapid reforms" began to dominate the political arena. As a result, the formation of civil society took place under the significant influence of the traditional bureaucratic structure of the state. It began to be presented as the basis of

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\* It should be noted that the process of constitutional reforms has been launched in RA, the Council of Constitutional Reforms has been established, which should develop the draft amendments to the RA Constitution (Decision of RA Prime Minister. N 111-A., 2022).

social activity, which allowed to block the striving for independence of civil society structures. Civil society in Armenia started to form in the context of war and socio-economic and political crises. This contributed to the formation of a bureaucratic state, which had a significant impact on the development vector of civil society. Civil society structures served exclusively the interests of the bureaucracy, including actively attracting foreign grants, a significant part of which contributed to the progressive enrichment of the bureaucratic apparatus.

The situation began to change only after the relative stabilization of the situation in the region and the growth of information and communication capabilities. Non-governmental organizations began to be actively created in all areas, as a result of which the hierarchical structure began to crack. Horizontal networks were formed, actions aimed at leveling bureaucratic tendencies were taken. In the years preceding the Velvet Revolution, the civil society in Armenia definitely revised its positions and approaches. In a number of cases, disagreements with the bureaucratic apparatus grew into constructive forms of civil actions and gave certain results (struggle against the increase in transport fares, revolt against reforms related to the retirement age, the “Electric Yerevan” movement, etc.). For example, in July 2013, Yerevan Municipality’s decision to raise city transport fares by 50 percent sparked a public outcry. Media expert S. Martirosyan mentioned the role of communication technologies, when these protest actions took place without being organized by a single center, just with network relations (AMI “Novosti-Armenia”, 2013). After the seven-day actions, Yerevan Mayor T. Margaryan canceled the decision. Different forms of political communication began to be used in public speech, thanks to which civil activists assumed a certain leadership, opening a new page in the aspirations of Armenian civil society for independence.

Civil initiatives in Armenia differ from NGOs in the following features: lack of hierarchy, spontaneous organization, and lack of financial dependence on foreign and domestic donors. Civic initiatives are characterized by independence and a networked structure of activity. “The most important indicator of active citizenship, proactive behavior and practical civic participation is the individual’s civic culture, in the unity of its two components: civic consciousness (knowledge) and participation in public affairs” (Domanov, 2010, p. 25). Civic activists began to embody the changes in public consciousness in Armenia.

The effectiveness of political communication is largely determined by the existence and development of civil society. In general, the existence of civil society is the end result of a democratic society. One of the most important conditions of democracy is the active participation of citizens in the

governance of the state and their involvement in political decision-making processes, and this is possible only in the presence of civil society. “The normative-value base of the civil society is the autonomy of the citizen and human rights” (Dash, 2001, p. 245). The indicator participation is the most important institution for the realization of individual rights and fulfillment of duties of the effectiveness of civil society activity is the high level of participation in the process of making and implementing public decisions. “Participation is the most important institution for the realization of individual rights and fulfillment of duties” (Margaryan, 2006, p. 351).

On the other hand, the participation of civil society institutions in public administration should not be limited to the activities of the election period.

In the modern world, civil society is a variety of relationships between free and equal individuals, not mediated by the state.

In authoritarian countries, there is a strict hierarchy at all levels of government institutions. In the ranks of the bureaucratic apparatus, personal devotion to top management prevails. Unconditional hierarchy and absolute predominance of vertical connections lead to an artificial narrowing of the number of decision-makers (Khaitun, 2012, p. 88). Every change of the first persons in any structure leads to uncertainty in official activities as well as uncertainty in terms of the interpretation of laws. In such conditions, civil society institutions are deprived of the opportunity to carry out their function of transferring information to the regulatory and control structures through communication channels. The state network structure of the distribution of rights and powers does not work. Although by law some of the administrative decisions must be made at lower levels, most of the officials in that position do not take responsibility, they wait for instructions from the top.

The lack of networking opportunities with state bodies has a negative impact on the process of civil society formation. In the conditions of developed information and communication technologies, it is the network that determines the efficiency of the non-governmental sector, not the hierarchy. Every network that is formed by individuals aims to serve to strengthen their own security and satisfy their interests. In addition, networks can have their nodes or centers, which occupy a relatively primary place in the internal structure of the network.\*

If a limited number of people, mostly representatives of the bureaucracy, are involved in the decision-making process, then the outcome of those decisions reflects their understanding and interests. Accordingly, the laws and other regulatory norms adopted by them imply the safest possible forms of relations for them. Due to this, the bureaucracy is further strengthened, as a

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\*See more in detail in Castells, M. (2000).

result of which the independence of the activities of public organizations is further affected. In an authoritarian system, civil actions that can question the activities and decisions of government institutions or the operation of the law are perceived as a direct threat to the system.

In this context, in the previous decades, civil society structures in Armenia had no real levers of influence in the information-decision-implementation cycle due to the strict hierarchical structure of managerial relationships in all spheres. The bureaucracy controlled both the decision-making process and much of the country's media.

According to the data of the RA Ministry of Justice, as of July 1, 2018, 3954 NGOs, 1060 foundations, 188 associations of legal entities (non-commercial), 645 trade unions and 49 religious organizations were registered in the Republic of Armenia.\* In 2023, 6469 NGOs, 1696 foundations, 225 associations of legal entities (non-commercial), 695 trade unions, and 62 religious organizations were already registered (“Electronic Register”, 2023).

These data prove that the weight (influence) of civil society in Armenia is increasing. However, one should not ignore the fact that many NGOs are created in Armenia in order to receive grants, to be financed, or to participate in the distribution of other material goods. Such organizations do not have socially based activity missions. These NGOs do not seek to influence the decision-making process, but only act according to the situation, with the principle of obtaining greater benefits. Essentially, these operate along the lines of commercial organizations. Naturally, such NGOs cannot play any serious role in the strengthening and development of civil society.

A large number of NGOs are active in the areas of human rights protection, anti-corruption, social, educational, cultural, environmental, democratic institutions, information, control of decisions of state bodies, and many other areas. Although the 2016 law granted non-governmental organizations the ability to self-finance, in practice, the mechanisms for conducting business activities are almost nonexistent.

The establishment of civil society is also very important from the point of view of ensuring the national security of our country because one of the important preconditions for the effectiveness of state administration is the increase of the role of civil society in the process of preparation and control of decisions. From this point of view, the political society in a sense also assumes the functions of the opposition, transmitting information about the urgent problems of the citizens through its channels to the relevant bodies.

However, there are also risks in this field. Society has an ambiguous attitude towards Armenian NGOs. A small number of them were financed by

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\*See more in detail in “Electronic Register”. Government of the Republic of Armenia.

state grants for years (for example, “Baze”, “Armenian Youth Foundation”, etc.), so the popular opinion was that they serve the authorities, not the public.

The government also tried to contribute to the distribution of financial flows from abroad, naturally pursuing its own interests. The establishment of pocket NGOs by the state and the ruling elite aimed to ensure the participation of civil society organizations in political life in order to serve their interests. The first and foremost of these interests is to create a system for ensuring one’s own security. Also important are the use of NGOs in the decision-making and implementation processes, the dissemination of one’s point of view, and the collection of the main trends of public dissatisfaction in order to prevent unwanted manifestations.

On the other hand, many non-governmental organizations, and human rights defenders, which are not related to the state power, which are financed by the EU, the UN, various countries, international organizations, and associations, do not enjoy trust among the public. Moreover, there is a perception that they are carrying out anti-Armenian activities.

In our country, the role of the state in the implementation and development of forms of political communication is much more noticeable. The point is that in the conditions of not yet fully established and functioning social-communication and democratic institutions and the multi-party political system, it is easier to manipulate the mass consciousness and make security issues a pretext for fulfilling one’s own goals. From this point of view, the still weak development of political parties is a favorable circumstance. This is evidenced by the fact that the party that does not enter the parliament loses the levers of influence until the next elections. All mobilization potential is related to individuals, and party work is reduced to zero. Even in the parliamentary elections of December 9, 2018, the convincing victory of the “My Step” bloc, with 70 percent of votes, was achieved not due to the institutional establishment of the “Civil Contract” party, but to the personal qualities of its leader. The same can be said about the ruling party’s victory in the extraordinary parliamentary elections of June 20, 2021. Moreover, the pattern is repeated in the case of the main wings of the opposition. Former presidents Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan were the leaders of the blocs that passed the parliament, while other forces, whose leaders were little known to the public, gathered a small percentage of votes.

It also leads to nullification of other functions of the party as one of the civil society structures. In other words, the party must either accept the terms of the game proposed by the bureaucracy and try to enter the parliament, or risk being excluded from the public arena for five years. Even the parliamentary parties, which are part of the legislative power and are involved in the process of running the country, do not have the opportunity to block the

initiatives of the bureaucracy, because the latter always has an absolute majority of seats, guaranteed by the Constitution. Thus, Article 89, Clause 3 of the Constitution stipulates the obligation to form a stable parliamentary majority. Meanwhile, this situation contains threats, because “the still insufficient level of establishment of political parties poses a threat to national security. Intra-party democratization is important as a key precondition for strengthening democracy in the country” (National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia, 2020).

In our opinion, the legislative base for establishing a multi-party system in RA is quite sufficient.

More than seven dozen parties are officially registered in Armenia, but barely one-seventh of them carry out party-political activities both in terms of fulfilling the above-mentioned functions, legal-legislative, and classical-institutional. The rest are the so-called individual parties, in which the main actor is the founder of the party, and the voters do not recognize almost anyone from that political unit apart from him. These have traditionally sought to provide service to larger powers or influential individuals instead of operating independently. In other words, founding a party was initially determined by narrow selfish goals and not by the drive to assume a political role in the system of the state and become a participant in political communication.

The main functions of political parties can be grouped into three parts: “1) struggle for power – in this process, the party activates and involves social groups, contributes to the political socialization of citizens, spreads political ideas, 2) personnel function – recruitment of new party members, involvement of supporters and activists, election of leaders and nomination to leadership positions, 3) communicative function – this is a means of establishing contact between the civil society and the state, representing the political will of the former”.\*

1. Parties are mostly narrow elite groups or special “electoral machines”. They operate in periods of mass politics, so they are mainly alienated from the Armenian society. Parties primarily reflect the political institutionalization of competing groups of the ruling elite. Most of the parties in Armenia have not become a real political force in Armenian society, they do not have a clear ideology, or developed programs, in fact they are engaged in simulating political activities, in the depths of which clan, group interests, or personal ambitions are hidden.

The most organized political forces in the struggle for power have also, unfortunately, almost always been guided by the logic of narrow party

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\*See more in detail in Demchenko, S. (2016).

interests, which did not give an opportunity to fully represent the moods and demands of different layers of society. As a result of this, an unequal competitive field was formed for the parties, because the government parties always had more access to state, administrative, and informational resources, and therefore had a greater opportunity to influence the formation of public opinion. Nevertheless, it cannot be said that the activities of the opposition parties were solely in the interest of the society and were aimed at the solution of purely institutional nationwide problems. We witnessed all that during almost all national elections.

2. Although attempts were made to enlarge the parties to refine, consolidate, and make the political field more effective, this process did not yield the desired results. Intra-party democracy is completely absent. Rank-and-file members of political parties are not allowed to participate in decision-making, as decisions are almost always made alone by a leader or a group of leaders with the tacit consent of others. Party members turn into party functionaries who do what they are told to do, not what follows from their ideological beliefs and ideas.

Political parties are generally weakly involved in the formation of the personnel reserve, that is, the training and support of young and promising personnel. They can organize courses, seminars and other educational activities for their members to develop their professional and leadership skills.

Political parties also ignore quota policies to allocate certain seats in the party's governing bodies to representatives of certain groups or regions (for example, women or minorities) with a view to future representation in state bodies. Such policies can promote diversity and inclusion in HR policies.\*

3. Political parties have not yet established themselves as universal “social mediators” between the state and society (Harutyunyan, 2014, p. 539). In this sense, the attitude of the Armenian population towards the parties is a manifestation of mutual alienation of the Armenian society and the regime.

In a democratic state, government is carried out by the people or their legally elected representatives. Decisions are made taking into account the opinion of the public and interested individuals or groups. The branches of government are separated from each other; they control and balance each other. Human rights and fundamental freedoms are respected. In this case, the parties have an important role.

Whereas in an authoritarian or semi-authoritarian systems, power is concentrated in the hands of a ruling group or dictator; here the parties are subjected to constant pressures, they are unable to protect their interests and

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\* See more in detail in Keryan, G. (1996, 2006).



realize their goals in the electoral processes. All privileges are mainly enjoyed by the ruling party.

The lack of feedback from the parties, ignoring the signals and messages from the people lead to citizens' disappointment not only with the parties, but also with the state authorities, which are dominated by the representatives of the ruling political force/forces. This is the reason why, from time to time, moods of authoritarian rule, a "strong hand" need to arise in the society, justifying the ineffectiveness of democratic rule.

Meanwhile, "the existing multi-party system is one of the main characteristics of a democratic state".\*

In the post-election periods, traditionally, the activity of parliamentary parties can be seen in the arena. The rest are mostly in a state of political calm. Meanwhile, the political experience of developed countries shows that these forces should actively engage in party building, enter into communication with their electorate, receive a certain political advance for the upcoming elections, etc. In contrast, the ruling party or alliance of parties uses vertical forms of communication to influence the mass consciousness to convince them that their policies are in the public interest.

Thus, currently, the main reasons for the weakness of the multi-party system in RA are:

- weak connection with voters, only being active during election periods,
- unclear ideological orientation (liberal, conservative, left-wing, etc.), personnel policy, the weak structure of internal democracy and autonomy.
- not in all provinces and not sufficiently represented,
- non-transparency of political and financial activities,
- weak control over the activities of parties.

Political communication is not a one-way flow of information through the "state government-society" channel. As in the case of parties and the state, political communication performs its functions thanks to the feedback mechanism. If feedback is ignored or not important during political communication, the state loses the ability to objectively assess reality, relying only on its channels and information-communication means. As a result, it becomes difficult to make political decisions and evaluate their effectiveness, predict their positive or negative reaction from society, etc. Meanwhile, the future success in facing various threats depends on the flexibility and speed of the government to touch the mood of the public and win its sympathy. Until the 2018 parliamentary elections, there has almost always been a crisis of confidence in Armenia.

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\*See more in detail in Demchenko, S. (2016).

Therefore, the state in all spheres of its operation should keep in mind that political communication ensures the legitimacy and efficiency of the government's operation, including when solving security-related problems. Accordingly, political communication with its feedback function is both a factor in the stability and organization of the political system and a factor in ensuring its security. Media structures are a direct tool of political communication for civil society.

If thanks to the widespread print media in the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century, society became an indirect participant in political processes, and later with the introduction of radio and television, it got a greater opportunity to express its position on the unfolding political events, then the situation changed dramatically with the emergence of the Internet. A networked society was created in which each member has relatively equal opportunities to create and consume information.

In the modern world, the elements of the information society formed due to the introduction of information technologies play a major role in the organization of political communication: social and information websites, and blogs, which together with other means of mass media (television, print media, and radio) form the current media domain.

In the past, one or other political and economic groups kept under their control the traditional means of mass media (television, radio, and print media).

Thanks to this, they were able to control public opinion and influence the consciousness and worldview of the broad sections of society. The Internet has made it possible to largely get rid of that control. The variety and unlimited sources of information allowed the public to get acquainted with new views, approaches, and interpretations of the same phenomenon or event. Nevertheless, as some analysts note, "in this case, the governing frameworks have found some ways to maintain information networks in the controllable field (controlled chaos) due to the mastery of the technological opportunities provided by various fake users ("fakers"), information websites, and even social websites" (Bard & Zodkervist, 2005, pp. 175-177). The new technologies of the information or network society provide an unlimited opportunity to disseminate reliable information both in a non-disruptive manner and by falsifying it at one's discretion. Therefore, the political forces, especially the ruling powers, cannot but follow the technological possibilities arising from the spirit of the new times in politics. As the famous French sociologist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century P. Bourdieu stated, "Politics is a field of competitive struggle for power, in which the ignorant fight for the right to speak or act on behalf of some group or public" (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 205).

In recent years, as a result of the development of the Internet, social networks have become one of the forms of development and consolidation of civil society in Armenia, where issues with public resonance are circulated. “The increasing attraction of social networks for civil initiatives of various scales indicates the formation of a certain culture (for example, posting open letters to government officials)” (Beglaryan, 2013, p. 129). “Facebook” social network is an important driving force of civil activism in Armenia. The latter is currently the most applicable domain in Armenia in terms of organizing political communication, where the number of users is close to 1.5 million (“Sputnik Armenia”, 2018). It proved its viability during the 2018 Velvet Revolution, which occurred in April - May of that year.

Due to the control and guidance of the previous authorities, the management system, the media and the elections, even in the presence of a more or less viable civil society, the Armenian society seems to have become alienated from political events, overwhelmed by apathy (Harutyunyan, 2014, p. 551). The sentiments of political alienation spread not only to the executive, legislative, and judicial authorities, but also to parties, and non-governmental organizations. The mentality that nothing depends on the voice and opinion of the people, the elections are predetermined, and any change initiated from below cannot be implemented in the conditions of widespread political and economic corruption, patronage, and monopolies in the country. In order to keep society under subordination and control, the former ruling elite had alienated it from political processes, creating security guarantees for itself. In such a situation, the government that adopted a semi-authoritarian way of working had itself stagnated and adapted to the order of manageable democracy that it had defined itself. The continuous emigration, the imperfect political system, the directed judicial system, the extreme polarization of society, etc., had already become the most serious threats to national security. In classical terms, all the prerequisites for a social explosion were created in the country. All this led to the unfolding of the Velvet Revolution, based on the experience of self-organization of the political opposition and civil society and non-standard working methods (Harutyunyan, 2014, p. 203). Moreover, the horizontal social support of information transmission and the culture of not responding to violence with violence made it possible to avoid provocations that would legitimize the use of force. With this step, the pressure of international opinion on the authorities was already ensured, so that violence would not be used against the peaceful demonstrators. If previously the gatherings took place mainly in one place (Freedom Square, Matenadaran, etc.), now a decentralized participation format was proposed. Thanks to network communication and information sharing, streets were quickly closed in different parts of different settlements. Through comments and likes on

social networks, information was constantly disseminated, public opinion exerted constant pressure on the central government, and so on. The features of civil activism and actions can be summarized in the following points:

1. The supremacy of peaceful disobedience to counter violence.
2. High level of self-organization.
3. Chain development of self-catalyzed aggregation.
4. Network-horizontal transfer of information.
5. Formation and operation of diverse centers in the logic of network operations.

### **Conclusion**

This research showcases that the use of media technologies currently become more and more expanded and has wider impact on Armenia's social and political processes which is relevantly also considered by the Armenian government.

It is a fact that the liberal-democratic model of the communication system is characterized by the development of social communication institutions, which provides a greater opportunity to involve the public in the implementation of effective political communication.

Despite the established principles of sovereignty, democracy, and a social market economy in Armenia, the liberal-democratic communicative model has not yet been fully realized in our Republic. This gap suggests ongoing challenges in fostering a truly participatory political environment.

Before the Velvet Revolution, the role of the state in introducing and developing forms of political communication was paramount. Currently, in the conditions of rapid development of social networks, thanks to the development of network technologies in the field of political communication, wider segments of society participate in communication processes, from individuals, and small groups to organizations and parties.

Thus, we can conclude that the model of the state with a democratic, social, legal, free, competitive market economy and parliamentary governance is consistent with the liberal-democratic model of the communication system. In order to develop and finally approve it, the Republic of Armenia still has a lot to do in both the legal-legislative and practical-applied dimensions.

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