



GMF Black Sea Trust Advisory Board Meeting
Yerevan, Armenia
18-21 November 2024

Summary

As an independent think tank in Armenia, and as a past GMF Black Sea Trust (BST) grant recipient, the Regional Studies Center (RSC) was invited to participate in the BST Advisory Board meeting in Yerevan. Convened from 18-21 November 2024, this meeting focused on the regional consequences of conflicts in the Black Sea region and assessed key challenges for civic actors in the countries of the wider region. The Advisory Board provides the Trust with recommendations on how to develop a more integrated and long-term approach to its grantmaking, as well as helping build its strategic vision.

As an element of our participation, RSC Director Richard Giragosian spoke at a session entitled “Civil Society in Times of Crises” that examined how civil society in the countries of the Black Sea region is reacting to or coping with the many challenges their societies face, with additional assessments of the need for sustainability and measures for civil society to build a working relationship with state authorities without changing their fundamental nature of keeping governments accountable and transparent.

The timing of this meeting was especially significant given the ongoing ramifications from Russia’s failed invasion of Ukraine, concern over the Georgian government’s retreat from its traditional European trajectory, and the difficult and daunting diplomatic negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Moreover, beyond those broader challenges, there are three specific trends defining Armenia today. First, Armenia’s strategic imperative is to reassert independence and bolster sovereignty while overcoming years of dangerous over-dependence on Russia. A second trend centers on Armenia’s “pivot to the West,” which is notably bolstered by a combination of a rare commodity of legitimacy and demonstrable democratic credentials.

But it is the third trend that presents even more daunting challenges for Armenia. This trend stems from a need to overcome the dangerous precedents from the war of 2020, which was largely an Azerbaijani victory of authoritarian power over democracy and a validation of the use of force by Azerbaijan over diplomacy. These dangerous precedents not only threaten to undermine European values, but also weaken faith and confidence in democracy within Armenian society. And a related risk lies with the temptation for the Armenian government to lessen its commitment to democratic reform within this post-war context of insecurity.



“Civil Society in Times of Crises: The Case of Armenia”

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Recommendations for Post-War Armenia

For Armenia, the country continues to struggle to sustain momentum in reform and democratization in a difficult new post-war reality. Faced with the lingering weakness and vulnerability of democratic institutions, Armenian civil society should now deepen its engagement in the public policy process while adopting a more constructively critical posture seeking to forge greater government accountability and to anchor the continuation of the country’s reform program. More specifically for Armenian civil society, there are three core areas of recommendations: educating the citizenry utilizing new strategies; elevating the discourse using new tools; and empowering new faces to broaden the base of civil society.

- I. **Educating the Citizenry.** Seeking to deepen democracy in Armenia, there is a need to both invest in an informed citizenry and empower elected officials. It is important to note, however, that the goal of educating and empowering Armenian citizens is a core component of the democratic process and, therefore, does not seek to predetermine any outcome or opinion. For this objective, there are three tools or tactics:
 - **Scenario-planning exercises** for the staff of Armenian state ministries and bodies to better assess vulnerabilities and craft effective responses to threats that may weaken democracy. This is most needed in the related areas of information security and media literacy, where the use/misuse of disinformation, “fake news” and potentially damaging artificial intelligence (AI) programs could target democratic reforms in Armenia;
 - **Rapid response capabilities** and innovative measures to counter such threats, with examples including policies to aid the Russian citizens who fled Russia, address the needs of Armenians from Nagorno Karabakh who sought refuge in Armenia, and assist and defend civil society organizations and activists in neighboring Georgia to circumvent the new Russia-inspired “foreign financing” legislation adopted by the Georgian government;
 - **Broaden the constituency** for democracy. To preempt complacency and prevent any loss of trust in democratic ideals, there is a need to broaden support and deepen engagement of Armenians in the democratic process and to promote responsibility and accountability in good governance.

- II. **Elevating the Discourse.** For Armenian civil society organizations, lingering political polarization requires new tools capable of elevating the political discourse. This further necessitates challenging all political parties and figures, government and opposition alike, to demand greater accountability and to defend dialogue and debate based on policy choices, rather than different personalities. To attain this objective, there are three recommended techniques:
- ***Engagement in the public policy process.*** To offer a constructive challenge to government officials and opposition parties, the monitoring and evaluation of public policy increases accountability. Yet this also entails greater responsibility for civil society groups to actively engage in the formulation of public policy in Armenia;
 - ***Financial security and innovation.*** Given the financial weakness and donor-dependence of many civil society organizations, new tools for greater financial security are needed. Beyond the clear limitations from an over-reliance on project-driven and donor-dependent work, civils society organizations should seek a wider diversity of donors, including from the Armenian diaspora, and should also adopt measures of financial innovation, such as fundraising, membership dues, volunteer programs, and core funding solicitations;
 - ***Pursue public-private partnerships.*** As part of a more strategic and sustained effort of modernization and professional development, Armenian civil society groups should also secure partnerships with the business and academic sectors, leveraging the synergy from the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and precedent of vibrant activism in Armenia.
- III. **Empowering New Faces.** The longer-term sustainability of civil society efforts and their project achievements is an often-overlooked area. But to ensure more lasting change and greater efficacy, there are two important tools:
- ***Civil society networking.*** Reflecting the collective power and resiliency of civil society organizations, efforts at networking and working as consortium partners are critical to face shared threats and forge greater unity from pursuing the same goals. Networking also provides an opportunity for collective advocacy and an avenue for sharing “lessons learned” and expertise that only helps to strengthen institutional capacity and bolster project implementation;
 - ***Mentoring and professional development.*** To better address the need to institutionalize democracy and attain greater resiliency against regress or retreat from hard-fought democratic gains, new programs of mentoring and professional development are crucial for Armenian civil society groups. Such mentoring offers a chance for growth and development that may include embedding younger, less experienced civil society individuals and civic activists within civil society organizations, and more specialized training programs targeting CSO staff.