THE SOCIO-NORMATIVE CULTURE OF ARMENIA AND THE SYMBOLIC POWER
OF *TRUTH*

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Contents

Abstract

The Armenian socio-normative culture has experienced transformation after the independence in 1991. The Soviet social norms and the new establishing systems have created a situation in which the predominates the criminal-oligarchic normative culture.

This paper attempts to describe the main characteristics of the socio-normative culture in Armenia, and identify what influence the criminal-oligarchic elite of Armenia has on the socio-normative culture.

The paper is based on a qualitative research, focusing on the theories of Emile Durkheim, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and the study of Cristina Bicchieri. The discussion is divided into three dimensions. The social solidarity in Armenia is analyzed through the lens of the theory of Durkheim on *The Division of Labor in the Society*. The second section reviews the mechanisms through which the social norms are enforced in the Armenian society. The final concern of the paper is to understand what social groups possess the power to produce and dictate certain types of normative behavior.

Introduction

Prior to the parliamentary elections of the prime minister in Armenia, 2018, when the former president Serzh Sargsyan–with the support of the Republican party–was about to enter his third term of the rule, a massive wave of civil disobedience took over the country. The unfair opportunities, inequality, corruption and many other injustices have become the factors that took people to the streets. After two decades of dealing with the injustices orchestrated by the governing powers, the revolution became a moment of relief for people. The movement reached its goal– the resignation of Serzh Sargsyan– and continued the fight against the oligarchic regime of the Republican party.

However, the unjust culture injected into the society is not possible to eliminate as fast as the fall of the regime. The normative culture in which many generations have grown up has become the benchmark; minor corruption has become a part of problem-solving, and the ability to bypass the laws has become a praiseworthy trait.

These are examples of social norms– informal mechanisms that make the communication between people predictable and sustain the social solidarity in the society. Such social and cultural mechanisms mirror all aspects of life, but it also has the power to influence the pace and direction of development. Consequently, the cultural or socio-normative transition should also be considered when defining the desired direction of state development.

The failure of cultural transition is a problem that Armenia faced after independence. Ideally, the constitution and the legislation should be the sets of "norms" ensuring the predictable and secure coexistence of citizens within a society. However, the state bodies do not function effectively and their proposed normative frameworks are not in harmony with the existing cultural norms (Tadevosyan, 2012). So, when the law fails to be adequately enforced, the members of the society prefer to follow the existing norms or create new ones

in the process of interpersonal communication. It is important to point out that these norms stay informal and can contradict the formal legal norms. (Bicchieri, 2005)

Due to the historical developments in the region, Armenia was exposed to different cultures. The diverse cultural influences left their trace on the Armenian normative culture. A new wave of influence and normative transformations took over during the Soviet period. The Soviet social norms were national in a form but had Soviet content. (Tadevosyan, 2004) The person that was not a relative, friend or a supporter of the same values was not a foreigner but an enemy. So the ones deviating from the accepted norms were considered traitors of the country.

After independence Armenian society had the opportunity to liberate and redefine its culture and move towards democratization. The Armenian government has paid almost no attention to the cultural transition which is not a less important factor for determining the sustainable development of the state. (Tadevosyan, 2012)

Subsequently, in the discussion of the socio-normative situation of the society, it is impossible to neglect the political situation in the country. The shortest description of the political landscape of Armenia was given by the former ombudsman of Armenia Karen Andreasyan, in 2008, "As in other transitional countries an oligarchic regime is developed in Armenia, and controls to a large extent the press and the parties as well as the state institutions. […] The business elite has got a chance to have a decisive influence on the state politics, and most importantly, economic policy-making by imposing group interests to the state powers." (Sargsyan, 2014)

The current normative framework of Armenia gives birth to oligarchy and criminal which in their turn create unequal opportunities and oppressive environment for self-expression. (Tadevosyan, 2002) The main impediment for changes is the absence of political will. Moreover, the pseudo-criminal normative framework and the Soviet normative

remains, such as *blat*, become institutionalized and used by the political powers in the decision-making process and interpersonal relations.

Currently, Armenia is in a stage of drastic systematic changes. One of the main objectives of the Armenian Velvet Revolution was to take down the Republican party that has monopolized the political and economic spheres. In that process, it is critical to understand the effect the criminal-oligarchic regime has had on the culture and the mindset of the society, and to examine the ways it can be improved over time.

Although social solidarity and social norms are concepts that are continually redefined, the current normative state in Armenia is not well studied yet. So, this paper attempts to portray the overall socio-normative image of Armenia. The political sphere is inseparable; moreover, it is an exemplification of the socio-normative issues in Armenia, so the descriptive material is intertwined with the examples from the social and political lives of Armenia.

Literature Review

After independence Armenia started to transform its political and economic structures.The transition from communism to capitalism had its ups and downs. In the complex process of state building, however, the Armenian government paid almost no attention to the cultural transition which is not a less important factor that determines the sustainable development of the state (Tadevosyan, 2011). According to Armenian scholars, that is the reason why along with the design of the Constitution and establishment of legislative bodies a particular set of norms has evolved.

Such unwritten rules exist in all societies and make the interaction between people acceptable and predictable. In the sociological literature, the concept of social solidarity emerged in the 19th century. The phenomenon of group solidarity was recognized before the term solidarity emerged. (Stjerno, 2004, p. 25) Earlier, it was defined by the term *fraternity* (as in brotherhood), which has a religious meaning. During the time, the term lost its religious connotation and used to describe the relations between merchants. The concept has been reformulated along with the changes and transformation happening in the societies.

After the Enlightenment, the main actors responsible for the solidarity have become the people. During that time, Thomas Hobbes and other philosophers proposed the concept of social contract. According to the theory, people have an intrinsic desire for security and order, so they are ready to give up some facets of their freedom to feel secure and live in a harmony with others.

During the period of blossoming capitalism, urbanization and rapid technological advancements the social order also experienced changes. The modern understanding of social solidarity was developed by Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx and other scholars of the same academic discipline. Durkheim's theory on social solidarity identifies two types of social solidarities - mechanical and organic. Mechanical societies are usually small societies

where the labor division is done equally; everyone is involved in more or less the same type of job, has the same lifestyle, the same values and beliefs. While in the organic societies people are diverse; they have different professional and social roles, thus different functions. Consequently, they are interrelated and respect each other's differences. Durkheim believed that mutual interests unite people for short periods of time, whereas the existence of mutual values ensures the continuity of the peaceful coexistence. (Horne, 2001, p. 12) He refutes the fact that the mutual interests or the state regulations can create long-term social solidarity. According to Durkheim "if the mutual interest draws men closer, it is never more than for a few minutes." (Durkheim, 1984, p.152) While members of the mechanical societies are not tolerant towards deviations from the accepted norms.

The fact that there cannot be universal norms satisfying the interests of all seems evident. However, in that case, what obliges people to follow them? The paper of Christine Horne (2001) *Sociological Perspectives on the Emergence of Social Norms* gives an overview of the way social norms function and what is the motivation of people to follow them. According to the paper people decide to confront or go against the social norms based on their self-interest, public opinion and altruism. (Horne, 2001) Horne also discusses the stages of how the norms are challenged and replaced by other norms. If the person finds the norm wrong for herself, but is not yet ready to break it, she is highly inclined to support people that find the courage to break the "rules". This means, that there should be pioneers that prefer their desires over the common norms.

Before discussing the socio-normative frameworks, it is essential to establish the definition of the term. The work of Cristina Bicchieri (2005) *The Grammar of Society* addresses sufficiently enough aspects of the concept. The book incorporates all aspects of social norms, so it is one of the main cornerstones of this paper.

Social norms are the unwritten rules that make the relations among people comprehensible and predictable. It is important to differentiate social norms from conventions, as conventions are descriptive norms, such as fashion, traffic, etiquette, while social norms act in cases of tension or conflict. (Bicchieri, 2005, p. 3) According to Bicchieri (2005), two type of norms exist, that are *prescriptive* and *proscriptive* norms. The prescriptive norms are the sets of norms describing the regular and ordinary behavior of people; these are all the fashions and fads as well as regular habits. Because of some practices prescriptive norms can turn into conventions which include informal but working sanctions imposed on people that does not behave in accordance with the norms. The motivations to follow the norms, according to Bicchieri (2005), are:

1. the contingency, which is the case when the person applies the rules,

2. the conditional preference - the person conforms to the rule in case of certain conditions,

3. empirical expectation - the person conforms to the rule because a sufficiently large number of the population accepts the rule,

4. normative expectation - the person conforms to the rule as she believes that a sufficiently large number of people expect her to follow the rule,

5. normative expectations with sanctions - the person follows the rule as he believes that sufficiently large number of people prefer everyone to conform and will sanction otherwise. (Bicchieri, 2005)

The analysis of social norms gain significance especially when its ability to dictate and act as a tool for power exercise is taken into account. What is power, and, more importantly, how it works? These are questions to which modern philosopher Michel Foucault (1976) has an answer. He argues that the one that defines others owns the overall power. The theory of power/knowledge is specifically addressed in the book *Discipline and*

Punishment. Although the concept is elaborated in the context of prisons, the proposed formula is universal and can be applied to any other aspect of life. According to Foucault, the various powers existing in the society continuously interact with each other. These power-relations "permeate, characterize and constitute the social body, and this relation of power cannot be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation, and functioning of a discourse." (Foucault, 1976, p. 93) The power can be exercised only in case of possession of the truth, and vice versa. In other words, the ones possessing power has a privilege to define others. Foucault also points out that power is not something accumulated in the hands of one class or one person; "...power is exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power." (Foucault, 1976, p. 96) So, each has some power and is subjected to some power.

Another important aspect is to specify what kind of power we have in mind. The answer to this question is found in the theory of Pierre Bourdieu, who, to some extent, continued the discussion of Foucault.

Bourdieu proposes a concept of symbolic power. He explains it as an "invisible power which can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they themselves exercise it." (Bourdieu, 1994, 164) So, the exercise of symbolic violence is the ability of a certain class to dictate and define others, when members of the society do not recognize that imperceptible violence towards them.

From the perspective of the symbolic power theory, the pseudo-criminal norms have become massively spread in the society after independence because a certain group seized the power to define the rest. Bourdieu explains that different classes are always in a struggle for symbolic power, as all of them have interests in spreading their values among the people.

Church, political parties, minority groups or academia; any of these and other groups can possess the symbolic power. The ones possessing more power has more chances to impose their group values on masses, thus make their dominance legitimate. (Bourdieu, 1994, 167)

Not being challenged by other classes, the culture imposed by the dominant becomes a norm in which new generations born, live, and consider that norms as a normal course of life. Bourdieu defines "recognition" of certain social norms as "the set of fundamental, pre-reflexive assumptions" that people comply with once they accept the world for granted.

Although every class possesses some power, one is always predominant, and prioritizes its discourse. The dominant discourse is otherwise called an ideology. Ideologies, according to Bourdieu, tend to give a misperception that its definitions are natural and are the ultimate truth. (Bourdieu 1994; 169) The recognition can be distracted in case of consciousness of its arbitrary nature, thus the destruction of the belief that they are innate and truthful (Bourdieu 1994; 170).

The tool of exercising power, according to Foucault, is knowledge which helps to create truths. This is an important concept, especially in the context of the following discussion, as the norms in Armenian society are known as common truths. "There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations," writes Foucault. (Foucault 1979; 27). Possession of knowledge is a power of defining others, which was brought up by Bourdeau.

The exercise of power through defining others is the process of producing reality, in which people live and do not question the origins of the truths they accept. In Armenian context, the political, economic as well as the cultural power is possessed by the criminal-oligarchic elite, which was quickly formed as a consequence of an unsuccessful transition from socialism to capitalism. (Tadevosyan, 2012)

Aghasi Tadevosyan, a researcher of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, has published several articles about the socio-normative mechanisms of Armenia. Specifically, two articles: *The problems in Transition: Peculiarities of the Post-Soviet Culture and the Prospects of Modernization* (Անցումային հիմնախնդիրներ. հետխորհրդային առօրեականության առանձնահատկությունները եւ արդիականացման հեռանկարը) and *The Influence of Value Setting in the Process of the Public Capital Formation in Armenia* (Հայաստանում արժեքային կողմնորոշումների ազդեցությունը հանրային կապիտալի ձևավորման գործընթացին). These two articles explore the socio-normative problems which the Armenian society faces. In the first article, Tadevosyan discusses the consequences of the failed transition from socialism to capitalism. The post-soviet socio-normative remains have become the cause of the current socio-normative issues existing in Armenia. The main issue identified is the intensive inflow of criminal norms into the national value system. For example, if doing the promised favor was a virtue, now, the ability to diverge and fool the other is a praiseworthy trait. (Tadevosyan, 2004)

The criminalization of the socio-normative culture is a consequence of the political situation in Armenia. The political power has become accumulated in hands of the oligarchic elite that lives by criminal rules. Political scientist Manvel Sargsyan coined the term criminal-oligarchy to describe the Armenian political system.This is a system in which the political power is seized by the economic powers. Thus, all political, social, cultural levers are in the hands of a small group of people. This results in the current critical socio-normative situation in Armenia.

Methodology and Research Questions

The methodology of this paper is comprised qualitative descriptive methods. The data collection was done through an overview of the historical records, archival videotapes, and observations of ongoing events. Comparative analysis methods are also used in the work. The theoretical framework of the paper is created through the synthesis of the existing theories. Three types of theories are used in this paper. The first group of theories explain the emergence and functioning of social solidarity. The main theoretical framework for this section is provided by theory *Division of Labour in the Society* by Emile Durkheim. The emergence of social norms and incentives of following them are studied with the use of the *Grammar of Society* by the philosopher, sociologist Cristina Bicchieri (2005). The third group of theories helps to understand who and how defines and executes the social norms. The theories of Bourdieu on Symbolic Power and Foucault's concept of power/knowledge are used to understand that aspect of the theme.

Examples from different time periods are used to support the arguments about the socio-normative cultural problems of the Armenian society.

The work on this paper coincided with the Velvet Revolution in Armenia, 2018. During that period actual observations of the exercise of power dynamics by the criminal-oligarchic political elite were done. Many examples of socio-normative changes, as well as reestablishment of existing values were observed.

The paper is a descriptive study of the existing social norms that reflect the criminal-oligarchic system in Armenia. So, the central research questions are: Can a certain group impose social norms? Who are the main actors possessing the power to influence the socio-normative culture in Armenia? What influence does the criminal-oligarchic political elite have on the socio-normative culture of Armenia? What role does the concept of *truth* have on the socio-normative culture of Armenia?

Social Solidarity: How do social norms emerge?

To understand the problems created by certain social norms it is important to study how these norms emerge, and what role do they play in the society. For that, the discussion must be started from the concept of social solidarity. The identification of the type of the social solidarity gives a hint about the normative culture of that certain society. Before discussing the social solidarity in Armenia, there are several ideas from the Durkheim's theory that are important to add.

First, for Durkheim individualism is not a threat to social solidarity. Durkheim believed that development should have a spontaneous nature. Thus each should have an opportunity to reveal and express her talents. (Durkheim 1984, Stjerno, 2004)

Second, solidarity based on shared norms results in a conventional morality enforced by strong sanctions. The new, organic forms of association produce mechanisms of self-regulation requiring no external sanctions. "Morality is the source of solidarity, and morality is 'everything that forces man to take account of other people, to regulate his action by something other than the prompting of his egoism." (Durkheim 1984, Stjerno, 2004, p. 34).

The Armenian society mostly resembles the mechanical type of society. Morality is not left to the individual but is dictated by the society. So, many people regardless of their desires restrain themselves from some actions, realizing the harshness of the external sanctions (Durkheim, 1893). Examples of social persecution of people with different views or choices are abundant in Armenia. The criticism becomes especially aggressive when a family-related norms are violated.

In 2017, a photo of a family of Armenian woman and an Afro-American man with their child was posted in social networks. The photo of the happy family wearing Armenian garments has become a topic of discussions and provoked aggressive hate speech. Some people spread accusations addressed to the woman. People wrote that by marrying a

foreigner, the woman betrayed her Armenianness or as was stated betrayed "her Armenian genes". Others were writing racist comments addressed to the Afro-American man. Because of the aggression towards the family, the photo was removed (Barseghyan, 2017). Such aggressive response to the mixed marriages incited by the strong desire to preserve the so called "pure Armenian genes" is a trait of a mechanical society.

A more recent example is the story of Asya Khachatryan, a young girl with blue hair. With a desire to explore Nagorno-Karabakh she moved there to work as a bartender. According to her words, she was harassed and bullied by the police because of being outside at late night and having unordinary appearance (Epress, 2018). The mechanical nature of the Armenian society also explains the discrimination towards women and aggression towards LGBT community or representatives of any minor subculture.

The situation is changing slowly. According to the sociological studies, if a certain norm is not acceptable for the majority but is desirable for a certain individual, then that individual will most probably approve that action when it is undertaken by others. Surely, when the norm becomes approved by many it becomes a part of the socio-normative culture. (Horne, 2001, p. 9)

Although no sociological study can show the dynamics, still the positive changes towards less aggression are noticed. The topics about women's rights and other groups are not taboos anymore. Following the prognosis of Horne (2001), after some (undefined) time many, currently unacceptable, actions will become norms.

To function consistently, the norms should be internalized by the individuals. "Individual apply sanctions to their behaviour and respond to these by internally generated rewards and punishments." (Horne, 2001)

Social Norms: The Micro Level of Solidarity

The norms emerge naturally and describe the behavior of people in the society or a smaller community. The emergence of social norms is a cultural phenomenon that is conditioned by the value system, conventions and traditions existing in the particular society (Jackson, pp. 301-309). Norms exist as long as people believe in their truthfulness and efficiency. The conformity with the social norms is conditional. However, social norms can become a part of the value system of the society. In that cases the obligation to obey the norms intensifies (Bicchieri, p. 2). The ones not following the accepted behavior are condemned to be perceived abnormal.

A question arises– if norms are not always relevant and can be destructive, then what forces people to follow them? Cristina Bicchieri (2005) points out three reasons why people follow social norms: the fear, benevolence, and the desire to fulfill others' legitimate expectations. (Bicchieri, p. 42)

Since social norms do not have any legal power, there is no formal punishment for not following them. Still, many societies have informal ways of punishing the disobedient ones. For example in many societies exist the tradition of blood revenge. In some Muslim societies women are exposed to strict sexual mores. In both cases the community norms are oppressive and irrelevant for the modern world, but still not many take the risk to disobey (Bicchieri, 2005, p. 5).

In other societies, not typical behavior might cost heavy criticism, exile from the community, exclusion from the family, misfortunes in the professional life. For example, homosexual son or a daughter can be rejected by the family in Armenia.

Interesting cases in Armenia are the norms of male communities. In the Armenian male dominant communities the liar is considered to be a spoiled person. Lying is presumably punished in the society in the most harsh way.

The Velvet Revolution movement against the former president Serzh Sargsyan was mostly based on the lie of the former president; during the shift from the presidential to the parliamentary system, Sargsyan officially promised not to run for the prime minister, however he did. During the decade of rule, Sargsyan was criticized many times injustices ; the lie has become the biggest "crime" he committed.

During the discussion about moving from the presidential to the parliamentary form of government in 2014 Sargsyan said, "I, Serj Sargsyan, officially announce, that I will not run for the position of a the president […] If the form of the parliamentary system will be chosen, then I will not run for the position of the prime-minister either," (Armlur, 2018). On April 11, The Republican Party officially proposed the candidacy of Sargsyan for the position of the prime-minister. (Azatutyun, 2018) Three days later, the people were protesting on France Square and shouting "Serzh, lier."

The Armenian Owners of the *Truth*

If norms work unobstructedly and have a specific logic behind them, then the normative culture can be called a system which carries a certain power in the society. The power of influencing the socio-normative culture of the society is one of the examples of the exercise of symbolic violence proposed by Bourdieu. That is the "invisible power which can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they themselves exercise it." (Bourdieu, 1994, 164)

The functions of social norms in Armenian society are not studied much. There are only several anthropological observations and short scholarly articles, which help to initiate a further discussion of the topic.

A starting point of research for many scholars is the Soviet period. At that period the social value system of the member countries experienced drastic mutations. Under the

communist ideology, the public interest became replaced by a group (mostly a political party) interests. Although the conceptual change was small, still, it has had a significant influence on the overall social behavior. "The communist dogmatic uniformity and absolute intolerance towards the diversity mutated the pivotal elements of the Armenian socio-normative culture." (Tadevosyan, 2004, p. 35) The most harmful consequence of such mutation is the current inability to create new norms based on the existing traditions. (Tadevosyan, 2004) The anthropological field work done in 1999-2003, showed that such normative stagnation is one of the reasons (along with the economic difficulties) for youth emigration; the authoritative nature of the current socio-normative culture limits the creative and free environment which the younger generations seek. (Tadevosyan, 2004, p. 36)

After independence, Armenian statehood building agenda failed to pay attention to the cultural transformation of the state. (Tadevosyan, 2012) Although all Soviet heritage has become offcast, the system of social norms keeps functioning until now. The ones that question and attempt to reevaluate the efficiency of existing conventions and norms are threatened to be deprived of their reputation as patriots and Armenians. (Voskanyan, 2012) The norms, which mostly relate to the private spheres of life, work even if they pass the legally defined boundaries.

One of the assumptions is that the normative predominance over the legal system is a consequence of centuries of a "foreign rule and foreign subjugation." (Kopalyan, 2018) Not having own public sphere Armenian society had to put stress on the preservation of the private one, i.e. the family, brotherhood and other types of private communities. "Contextually, whether it was the legal realm of the Ottoman Empire or the legal realm of Soviet Communism, Armenians have always maintained a subconscious distrust of the public sphere: simply put, our culture has embedded in our political culture an anti-systemic distrust of the public sphere." (Kopalyan, 2018)

Because of the constant imposition of different cultures by different powers, the socio-normative culture of the Armenian society has become a mixture of different cultures.

The places to observe the norms in action are the private spheres like the family or the yard. The family as a private space is one of the most important institutes. It has such critical importance, that bribery and fraud are justified if they are done for the sake of sustaining the family. It is rare to witness a person to put the public interests over the private ones. A space in between the private and the public is filled by the small criminal-oligarchic group interests, which has problematic traits. The yard is the most proper space to observe how do social norms function.

The model of the normative framework of Armenia is the criminal-oligarchic system that evolved in Armenia since 1990s. For a long time the constitution has been used not for but against the public. The small economic elite has come to power in Armenia. By having the political lever, it has started to dictate its agenda in the internal policy-making. (Sargsyan, 2011)

The oligarchic principles has started to determine the reality in Armenia. A small group has divided the spheres among themselves, thus possesses all possible kinds of powers in their hands, by monopolizing politics, economics and the social life. This is an example of possession of power both in Foucault's and Bourdieu's terms. The oligarchic elite has got the privilege to define the social life, and exercise the symbolic violence on the masses. So the criminal-oligarchic normative framework works not just among that small group but is also spread among the wider public. (Sargsyan, 2014)

The Yard and the *Truth*

The most suitable place to examine the possibly widest spectrum of social norms in action is the yard. The yard is an important component of the social division of the society. It is the second important social structure after the family. (Tadevosyan, 2004) Tadevosyan explains it as the expression of the public, that comes from the national social value system of Armenia. The yard is a pseudo-criminalized social organism, the main actors of which are young men.

The yard, regardless of its physical structure, plays a role of a commune where everyone unavoidably knows each other and has unwritten but particular roles and responsibilities. Women are mostly responsible for communication of information among the neighbors, while men are involved in conflict resolution and the regulation of internal and external affairs of the yard.

The Armenian term for yard is *qucha*. The difference of *qucha* from the yard is that it also embraces the affairs happening in the yard, mostly between men. So the conflicts, the clashes and other type of interpersonal relations are a part of *qucha*.

The leaders of the districts have a title of *qucha nayogh* (literal translation: watcher of the yard). Such authorized men regulate the affairs in their yards or the neighborhoods. Such authorities are respected and feared by others. It is considered that the leader of the yard possesses all answers to all moral questions. Interestingly, such ultimate answers are known as truths. In the scenarios when someone does something against the accepted norms or something that is considered morally incorrect, the action is labeled as *chisht chi* [not right]. However, in Armenian the phrase has two connotations; *chisht* not only means right but also means true. That is why in many cases, the word is also used in its second meaning. *Chshter*, the plural of the word is used as an accumulation of all right/true ways of behavior.

In other words, the content of *chshter* is similar to the one of social norms. The *qucha nayogh* is the person possessing the truths of life, with the meaning given by Foucault.

The abundance of streetcorner life is not a trait inherent solely to Armenian society. The trend of pseudo-criminalization is inherent to many post-soviet communities. The similar social order also shares neighbouring Georgia. Moreover, the origins of the word *qucha* are Georgian. In the Georgian context, the word has the same strong connection with the socialization of men.

In Georgia the streetcorner culture is a transitional platform for teenagers to the criminal world. (Zakharova, 2010, p. 182) As discussed above, the norms in the Armenian yards, also echo with the criminal underworld. In Georgia, the classification of men is distinct, and is very similar to the Armenian division; there are *kai bichi*, meaning good guys, cool guys, *patiosani bichi* -- decent, good-mannered guys, and *dedikos bichi*, which are the sissy boys. (Zakharova, 2010, p. 189) Such classification reminds of the criminal division of prisoners into thieves, machos, and wilted/collapsed men. (Yefimova 2004, Zakharova 2010, p. 190) The differentiation can be applied to Armenian yard communities too.

Many social norms coming out of the yards have criminal colorings. One of the criminal characteristics of *qucha* is the geographic divisions based on the power relation among people and mostly male. *Quchas* have a specific group of people handling or representing them; sometimes they are named after the leader of the yard or the district. This is not a phenomenon. The unwritten geographic division of spheres of influence is common in the criminal world; the thiefs in law also have their territories and do not invade into each other's territories in terms of the impact.

The exemplification of the geographical division of *quchas* is the well-known division of Yerevan. Officially, Yerevan is divided into 12 districts. Unofficially, each district is known after a certain person, which owns the power of decision-making in that

district. For example, the district of Malatia is "overlooked" by a businessman, MP Samvel Aleksanyan, the Arabkir district is associated with the name of another businessman Artak Sargsyan, Qanaqer-Zeytun - with a businessman Mihran Poghosyan and the rest of the districts are also affiliated with some businessmen and politicians. These conditionally called leaders of *quchas*, informal leaders of the formally divided districts, have their people under their patronage.

These people have their influence on each district and do not interfere with each other's business. Moreover, they are partners and sometimes have close personal ties. Such precise division of areas of power and partnership among each other comes in especially handy during the elections. During the parliamentary elections of 2017, the candidates with highest results in each district were mostly famous businessmen, that influenced that district, regardless of the proposals and their level of participation in the political field (which usually is very low).

Following the logic of the criminal division, the political criminal authority becomes the head of the country, i.e. the president or, with the new parliamentary system, the prime minister. The Vice President of the National Assembly and the Spokesperson of the Republican Party of Armenia, Eduard Sharmazanov once called the president Serzh Sargsyan their father. Speaking about the results of the Parliamentary elections he said: "We are a one family, we are a united amicable family, that has one father, Serj Sargsyan." (Azatutyun.am, 2017) By so Sharmazanov presents all members of the party as friends and sons obedient to the leader, while the party system implies figures equal to each other, that choose the party leader, based on his/her merits. On one hand, this is truthfully an Armenian family model, where patriarchy rules, on the other this is also a model of criminal relations, where the criminal leader is not chosen and cannot be taken down.

Another example of the criminal conduct of affairs in the state level, was the tension between Serzh Sargsyan and Gagik Tsarukyan in 2015, when Sargsyan publicly offended Tsarukyan, calling him by his nickname, and added that he was the one not letting the others to call Tsarukyan that way. This was a showcase of power by Serzh Sargsyan, as a response to certain political moves of Gagik Tsarukyan.

Referring back to Bourdieu, a question arises, whether the norms of *qucha* has become so popular that they have reached the levels of institutionalization or is it a part of the symbolic violence exercised by the governing class, thus infused into society through the state propaganda.

Blat. The Norm of Loyalty over Professionalism

The possession of social capital is a key to sustaining a position in the society. The social capital is important for the *qucha* "leaders", as well as the ones seeking patronage. The *blat*, a practice inherited from the Soviet Union, has become one of the components of the social solidarity in the society, and made loyalty a more important value, than the professional merits. This is an example of informal relations being more important than the formal procedures. (Aliyev, 2013)

Such relations include several groups of people. The person able to do favors can do it for the family, extended relatives, for friends, and for the ethnic or regionally affiliated people.

The emergence of *blat* is dated to the Soviet Union. The absence of equal opportunities for self-realization, and more importantly, the inability to purchase certain items people found other paths for reaching their goals. Interestingly, *blat* originated in the criminal world and became a part of the everyday life in 1930s. These were the times when the Soviet economy restricted circulation of many goods. However, people always seek

better quality life. So, the connections helped to get hard-to-find goods and services, luxury items imported from abroad. (Ledeneva, 2001, p. 7) So, *blat* is the informal mechanism of sustaining the private interests in conditions of state distribution system limitations. (Gharagulyan, 2011, p.17)

Such exchange of favors is not common only in the Soviet space. "The growth of bureaucracy, economic shortages, authoritarian state systems and other political, economic or social factors induce the emergence of reciprocal informal networks distributing commodities and services in different corners of the world." (Aliyev, 2013, p. 92)

The phenomenon of *blat* stayed in the post-Soviet space even after the collapse of the Union and the spread of capitalism. This is a common type of interpersonal relations in the South Caucasus. The word, however, has changed its meanings, and implies any favors, from luxurious services until high-rank positions.

The surveys of 2010-2017 by the Caucasus Barometer show that, in Armenia, people identify the possession of connections as the most important factor for getting a job. (CRRC) This shows that the career advancement in Armenia is associated not with the hard-work or the level of education, but with the obtained social capital. *Blat* is at its strongest in the level of kinship. After the family, the other groups where blat works are friends and people acquaintances with regional or ethnic affiliation. (Aliyev, 2013, p. 93)

This soviet sediment still actively functions in Armenia. "Blat may be defined as a system of reciprocal relationships involving goods and favors that, in contrast to patronage relations, entail equals and are nonhierarchical. As the participants perceive these relationships, their basis was friendship, even if money sometimes changed hands." (Aliyev, 2013, p. 92)

Appointing to a certain position their relatives and friends the patrons, as a matter of fact, expect loyalty from the person. (Aliyev, 2013, p. 94)

This Soviet tradition of using personal connections for professional favors at first was attempted to be kept in secret. However currently, the politicians speak about such favors openly and justify them by the assumed talents and merits all their relatives have. (Factor.am, 2018) Blat functions in many levels: the highest is presidential. Former president Serzh Sargsyan appointed many of his relatives on high-rank positions. His son-in-law, Mikayel Minasyan, was appointed as his senior assistant during 2007-2008. Later, he worked in other different positions, and currently is the ambassador of Armenia in Vatican. On top of all, he is a media magnate in Armenia. Mikayel Minasyan has ensured the censorship in many TV and online media outlets and was responsible for the positive image of his close relative. (Factor.am, 2018) Many other politicians such as former prime minister Karen Karapetyan, Chief of Police Vladimir Gasparyan, the President of the Constitutional Court Gagik Harutyunyan have appointed their relatives to high-rank positions. Many other political figures become relatives due to the marriages of their children. As a result, the abundance of kinship connections between politicians and major business people blocks any possibility for formal decision-making aimed at development of the country. In the pseudo-criminal hierarchy described previously, blat has a role of a glue that ensures the loyalty to each other.

During the peaceful disobedience acts in Armenia after the prime minister election in April, 2018, the district "leaders" had a goal of preventing the protests in their districts. Samvel Aleksanyan and his crew have beaten up protesters in Malatia-Sebastia district. An internal messaging of Taron Margaryan, the Mayor of Yerevan, who is known to rule over the Avan district, were preparing to shout offensive words against the protesters. Also, the crew of Margaryan, all members of which are public workers, attacked the protesters in their district. In that specific case, Margaryan appointed to different positions criminal gang

members, which by any means ensure the desired outcomes during the elections, and can use any methods to stop the disobedience against their "father".

The criminal-oligarchic group overtook not only the political but also the judiciary systems of Armenia. That is the reason why the general public does not feel safe to go against the imposed norms even when they are illegal.

Conclusion and Prospects for Future Research

The Armenian Velvet Revolution resulted in election of the people's candidate as the prime minister. During the disobedience actions, people from different subcultures were witnessed to act hand in hand. Many normative changes happened during the revolution. Surely, the process of socio-normative changes is already in process, but it will need some time to be fully reestablished.

The political levers are passed to a non criminalized, professional political elite. This gives a prospects for quick cultural recovery from the post-soviet socio-normative blockade.

The most important factor in the "fight" against the criminal component of the socio-normative culture is the political discourse and the political will to do so. For successful and fast elimination of the criminal from the society it is important to involve cultural workers, anthropologists and sociologists to study the problem.

The rapid changes happening in Armenia give space for new and more elaborate studies of the transformation of the socio-normative culture in Armenia. The behavior and the inevitable transformation of the main carriers of the pseudo-criminal culture is another question for study.

The questions posed in this paper have a potential for more research and elaboration, however with the current developments in Armenia new questions for enquiry arise, not only for the cultural and anthropological studies, but also for the political and economic ones.

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