HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG
YEREVAN
South Caucasus Region

# FROM NATIONAL TO MULTI-PERSPECTIVE MEMORY: MEMORY POLITICS IN INDEPENDENT ARMENIA

## (KEY TRENDS IN RECENT HISTORY)

Lusine Kharatyan, Gayane Shagoyan

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Photo on the cover: Levon Abrahamyan

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Over the years, the ever-expanding studies of memory have repeatedly recorded how the remembering [Connerton, 1989; Assman 2006, Alexander, 2004, 2012; Eyerman 2004] and silencing/forgetting [Ankersmit 2003; Connerton 2009; Assman, 2019] policies have influenced the construction and transformation of national identities. These issues actualize – especially during periods of abrupt political upheaval and lead to processing the past. Thus, the collapse of the Soviet system left the newly independent republics to deal not only with the issue of constructing their futures but also with constructing their pasts.

Memory politics and the memory landscape in Armenia were largely based on the processes proceeding and leading up to Armenia's independence, as well as the political ideology and rhetoric of the consequent ruling parties, with their respective implications for identity construction and nation-building. While both bottom-up and top-down processes have fed the politics, this paper is structured mainly around top-down practices.

Generally, memory politics of the Republic of Armenia in 1991-2020 had the following features:

- They were largely shaped by nation-state building based on national discourses and narratives put forward during the Karabakh Movement, and evolved around a national narrative leaving little space for alternative memory.
- Genocide memory has generally prevailed over memory politics and memory landscape from monuments, memorials to education and beyond. Silenced in the early Soviet period, Genocide memory survived as a latent memory, and since 1965, has been transformed into Collective and even Cultural Trauma (Eyerman 2004, Alexsander 2004). After the USSR's collapse, it unfolded into the Master narrative (cf. Alexander 2004:12-15) and influenced other memorial practices. Today, it still is in the stage of routinizing/institutionalizing memory (Alexander 2012).
- Relevant legislation and policies, including an official Holiday Calendar, toponymy, monument and memorials, and education curriculum, have been effectively utilized to impose the official narrative.
- Despite all these, there were grassroots initiatives that had some success in opposing the official approach as well as creating alternative narratives.

Overall, minor and major shifts and changes in memory politics can be linked to the periods of Armenia's leaders Levon Ter-Petrosyan (1991-1998), Robert Kocharyan (1998-2008), Serzh Sargsyan (2008-2018), and Nikol Pashinyan (2018-present).1 Initially nourished from the bottom, rooted in public decent silenced during the Soviet era, Armenia's memory politics was then materialized in the relevant legislation and policies, and the resulting actions.

1 Ter-Petrosyan, Kocharyan and Sarkisyan were the presidents of Armenia, while Nikol Pashinyan is the Prime Minister, as after the recent constitutional reform Armenia became a Parliamentary republic with Prime Minister holding most executive power.

# DENUNCIATION OF THE SOVIET PAST AND LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR NATION-BUILDING (1992-1998)

Launched in 1988, during Gorbachov's Perestroika, the Karabakh Movement paved the road for Armenia's independence and basically laid the groundwork for the construction of the Armenian nation-state. Growing into a popular democratic undertaking, the Pan-Armenian National Movement (ANM) became a political party by winning the majority vote in the 1990 Parliamentary (The Supreme Council) Elections and declared Armenia's independence from the USSR on August 23, 1990. These events were followed by a referendum for independence on September 21, 1991, and the consequent election of its leader, Levon Ter-Petrosyan as the first president of Armenia. During the last years of USSR, the movement demanded the transfer from the Azerbaijani SSR to the Armenian SSR, the mostly Armenian-populated Nagorno-Karabakh oblast. The works analyzing the movement (Marutyan, 2009; Abrahamian, 2006) show how the events of the time (for example, Armenian pogroms in the city of Sumgait in Azerbaijan), awakened and brought into the play the memory of the Armenian Genocide. Marutyan argues that this memory helped people to get rid of paradigms of the Soviet present, abolish the bonds of Soviet propaganda and become the basis for revolutionary transformations leading to Armenia's independence.

Since the very beginning of independence, the 1915 Armenian Genocide became a core pillar of memory politics. The Declaration of Independence itself had a special provision, stating that "The Republic of Armenia stands in support of the task of achieving international recognition of the 1915 Genocide in Ottoman Turkey and Western Armenia", thus establishing the two most important pillars of the memory politics: Genocide and Western Armenia. In 1995, the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute was established. Consequently, the 1915 Genocide became a Master Narrative in Armenian history (Shagoyan, 2016).

Due to the nature of Armenia's independence movement, including the intended breakout from the Soviet Union and the growing escalation of the Karabakh conflict, the memory politics of the early 1990s was largely directed towards erasing the manifestations of the Soviet past, as well as the memory of the Azerbaijani presence in Armenia, including changing the toponymy, removing some monuments,[2] and creating non-inclusive narratives. At the same time, the new memory politics was restoring and memorializing the fragments of the Armenian history neglected and/or revised by the Soviets, thus establishing the cornerstones and shaping the ideological basis for the new

2 An early example of this is the removal of Azerbaijani Bolshevik Meshadi Azizbekov's monument (1932) from the Azizbekov square as early as 1988, then renaming the square after Andrei Sakhorov and erecting his monument on Azizbekov's place later (2001).

nation-building. As with many other post-Soviet nations, the Armenian historiography of the time was presenting a picture in which the development of the Armenian nation was interrupted by Sovietization, after which the Armenian nation deviated from the righteous path and endangered its national identity. As a result, the ancient period received public attention and was at the center of public discussions. In October 1991, the 1,500th anniversary of Movses Khorenatsi's[3] "History of Armenia" was celebrated at the state level. President Ter-Petrosyan made a speech on that occasion, in which he valued Khorenatsi's work from the perspective of the establishment of national historiography: "And it is not important to which noble family Khorenatsi attributes the mission to restore Armenia's independence. The important and main thing is that he does not imagine the existence of the Armenian people without the existence of a national state."[4]

The first landmark event held with the goal of abolishing the Soviet past was the dismantling of Lenin's monument in the main square of Yerevan in February 1991, followed by similar events held in other parts of Armenia. At the same time, the revision of toponymy was initiated. In Armenia, changing the place names, including the renaming of urban and rural settlements, as well as the names of streets and places within a settlement, started as early as 1990, and included not only the toponyms imposed by communist ideology, but also non-Armenian, and mostly Turkic-Azerbaijani place names (Kharatyan, 2008). A good illustration of this is the re-naming of Yerevan's city center, which shows both the erasure of the Communist past and the restoration of ancient history.[5] A special committee was established for this purpose, consisting of historians, ethnographers, linguists, and others. The concept suggested by the committee, and adopted by policy-makers, was based on the idea of re-constructing Armenia's Golden Age (5th Century)[6] in downtown Yerevan, thus symbolically re-establishing the connection with the most important and self-defining period of Armenian history – the creation of the Armenian alphabet and the following era of national revival, when many books were translated and written in Armenian. Based on the suggested approach, the major streets named after important Communist leaders were renamed after Mashtots (the inventor of the Armenian alphabet) and his students,[7] symbolically establishing the ideological basis for the newly independent republic.[8]

Analyzing the current names of administrative and other geographic units of Armenia, some researchers distinguish the following types of re-naming/naming practices: "reinstated," "re-vocalized," "calqued or translated," and "reconstructed" (Dabagyan, 2011). An example of a "reinstated" name is the case of second largest city of Arme-

3 Movses Khoernatsi is a 5th century Armenian historian credited for the earliest known historiographical work on the history of Armenia. He is widely perceived as the "father of Armenian history" (patmahayr).

4 Levon Ter-Petrosyan's speech at the official session dedicated to the 1500th Anniversory of Khorenatsi's "History of Armenia" in 1991. bit.ly/3C11uD9

5 The information was provided by one of the Committee members, ethnographer Zaven Kharatyan.

6 In 405 Mesrop Mashtots invented the Armenian alphabet. The alphabet became a powerful tool for preserving the Armenian identity, and its creation led to a new era in Armenian culture, science and literature. The following translations and independent literary heritage was so rich that the 5th century is considered the "Golden Age" in the history of Armenian culture.

7 Lenin Avenue, which was the central/main avenue of Yerevan, was renamed to Mashtots, and all the other vertical streets with Communist names, were renamed after his students, including Kirov to Koryun, Marx to Khorenatsi, Sverdlov to Buzand, Ter-Gabrielyan to Koghbatsi, etc. Interestingly, Lenin avenues in many Armenian cities followed the example of Yerevan and were renamed to Mashtots.

8 Full list of renamed streets of Yerevan is available under the following link: https://www.yerevan.am/uploads/media/default/0001/29/8d73ca144990a63c4cda3afa2b2fe9740d6bf84a.pdf

nia, Leninakan. It was renamed Kumayri between 1990-1992, and then to Gyumri on March 13, 1992. Both Kumayri and Gyumri were old historical names linked to that settlement, restored after independence. Most Armenian names were preserved, and so were the names of the settlements and streets that were associated with the Communists of Armenian origin, such as Stepanavan, named after the Communist leader of 26 Baku Commissars, Stepan Shahumyan.[9] Additionally, some names of former Azerbaijani settlements were simply translated into Armenian, while the others were just created anew. However, in most cases the bottom line was the *Armenization* of the names, thus altering the memory landscape for the construction of the Armenian nation-state. In sum, most Soviet monuments, as well as Soviet and generally non-Armenian names, were eliminated during this period.

This was also the period when almost all Soviet holidays and memorial days were demolished, and a new calendar was adopted. Interestingly, the liberation of Shushi in 1992, a major event in the Karabakh War, coincided with May 9, which was traditionally celebrated as Soviet Victory Day over Nazi Germany. So, while the date was kept on the calendar, it received a new meaning and has since been celebrated as Victory and Peace Day.[10] This was the only Soviet holiday included on the new calendar. There were only eight official non-working holidays/memorial days of which three were related to independence, including May 28, (First Republic Day in memory of the First Armenian Republic announced on May 28, 1918); Constitution Day (celebrated on July 5, the date when Armenia's new constitution was adopted); and Independence Day on September 21, (the date of the 1991 referendum of independence). Two were remembrance days – April 24 (in memory of the 1915 Genocide victims) and December 7 (in memory of the 1988 Earthquake victims). Because March 8 was a very popular holiday in the Soviet Union and generally celebrated as Women's Day, the new Armenian government adopted a new holiday called "Motherhood and Beauty" for women, celebrated on April 7. As Alleida Assmann shows in her work, forgetting is an integral part of memory politics (Assman 2019), and the establishment of such holidays similar to Soviet holidays performs the function of palimpsest, when in order to erase the old text, a new one is superimposed on effaced earlier writing. In the case of holidays, a new holiday is created to perform the functions of the old one.

However, while the Soviet legacy was being deliberately erased from the public space, the entire history and historiography was mostly based on the Soviet school of historiography. Moreover, as Zolyan and Zakaryan correctly noted, "the national history narratives that became dominant in the post-Soviet states did not emerge "out of nowhere." In many cases, including Armenia, important features of national history narratives had already been formed in the pre-Soviet period. These narratives, or at least their separate elements, existed and were developing in the Soviet period as well, despite the fact that they had to "survive" under the conditions in which the official Soviet historical narrative was dominant (Zolyan & Zakaryan, 2008). Under the USSR, the historical narratives of Soviet Republics were largely based on Stalin's Nationalities Policy, where each of the 15 Soviet Republics had the opportunity to develop its "national

9 The names of prominent Communists of Armenian origin were mostly preserved, which is another indication of nationalistic nature of re-naming.

10 May 9 is currently perceived and called "triple holiday," celebrating the Soviet Victory in WW II, liberation of Shushi and the establishment of Artsakh (Karabakh) Army.

history." The narratives resembled one another discursively: they would start with the ethno-genesis of the nation, followed by the development of national consciousness and national liberation struggle, leading to the development of a class consciousness that directed them toward communism as the better form of social organization (Bilmez et al, 2017). Basically, national history narratives developed under the Soviets that were complemented with other national narratives silenced at the time, became the basis for national awakening and also directed much of the public discourse in late 1980s-early 1990s. They also became the basis for the formation of "nation-centered" history in textbooks, within the general context of the nationalization of history in academia and in other spheres of public discourse in post-Soviet Armenia (Matosyan, 2013). While the first post-Soviet Armenian government tried to remove communist ideology from history teaching, the production of history textbooks and their contents had been authorized by the government, and the new ideological criteria defining the content of textbooks fit into the general trend of "de-ideologization" and "re-ideologization" (or "nationalization") observed across the entire post-Soviet space (Matosyan, 2013). This resulted in the most important sites of memory being rooted in national single-narrative history discourse, and nationalism gradually becoming the main pillar of memory politics already in the early stages of Armenia's independence.

# FOCUSING ON THE KARABAKH WAR, A GREATER CHURCH PRESENCE IN MEMORY LANDSCAPE, AND THE SHAPING OF NATIONAL HISTORY EDUCATION (1998-2008)

By the end of ANM rule, most Soviet names and monuments had already disappeared from the public space. However, while the changes in toponymy had been taking place since the very first days of independence, the RA Law on Geographical Names was not adopted until 1999. The law stated that the names of geographical objects can be changed in the following cases:

a. When restoring the historical names of individual objects

b. When removing foreign, unpleasant and repetitive names

c. When regulating geographical names

The first two cases obviously continue the *Armenization* policy, as in their majority the restored names are presumably the old Armenian names, while "foreign" and "unpleasant" names are also mostly exchanged for Armenian ones.

In 2001, the 1996 Law on Holidays and Memorial Days was abolished and a new law was adopted. The new law had more of a military and church presence, and also some reincarnation of Soviet holidays. This could be partially explained by the background of Armenia's new leadership: Kocharyan and some of his team members came from Nagorno-Karabakh and were directly responsible for it during the war. In contrast to the ANM leadership and many members of the Karabakh movement, who were Soviet dissidents, they were also Communist Party leaders during Soviet times. Thus, the new calendar had March 8 back as Women's Day, but the newly created April 7 was also kept on the calendar.[11] The May 1 Workers' Day was also returned to the calendar as a non-working holiday. Yet, more important is the fact that these two Soviet holidays were firmly entrenched in people's calendars. The exchange of gifts on March 8 created a sense of responsibility for the exchanging parties, while May 1 was so absorbed during the Soviet period, that in some regions its celebration was followed by a traditional visit to cemeteries.[12] Therefore, these two holidays, even when left off the official calendar, continued being celebrated, and thus the amendments brought the law in line with existing practice.

11 Now March 8 was not a working day, while April 7 was a working day.

12 In the Armenian tradition, big Church holidays were usually followed by visits to cemeteries on the next day, to remember the dead family members. As Church holidays were banned during the Soviets, this custom was now transferred and linked to May 1.

February 8 and May 8 were also added to the calendar, the former being Army Day and marked as a non-working holiday, and the latter as the Day of Yerkrapah (volunteers who fought in the Karabakh War) and was marked as a working day.

Various monuments and memorials commemorating fighters of the Karabakh War were erected in Armenia from the very first days of the war. This included both grass-root and state initiatives. Yerablur national Pantheon-Memorial site for the fighters of Karabakh war was established as early as 1992. Yet, in general the presence of Karabakh war fighters, as well as the memorialization of Karabakh war and Armenian national armed fight, became more visible in the public space from early 2000s, as days were added to the calendar with special events/commemorations associated with the memorial sites.

Over time, Yerablur became the main cemetery/memorial site – not only for the soldiers fighting in the Karabakh War, but also for all major persons and events of the Armenian freedom fight of the 20th century. In 2000, a memorial dedicated to the members of the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA)[13] was opened in Yerablur. In the late 1990s, Armenia initiated the repatriation of the remains of prominent members of the 20th century Armenian liberation movement who were buried abroad. First, in 1998, the body of Sose Mayrik[14] was brought to Armenia and buried in Yerablur. In 1999-2000, a state commission was set up to organize the transfer of Andranik Ozanyan, a key military figure of the Armenian National Liberation Movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the commander of the first Armenian Volunteer Battalion within the Russian Army during World War I. Headed by the defense minister, the committee negotiated the transfer of Andranik's remains from France with the French authorities, and eventually the remains arrived in Yerevan and were buried in Yerablur in 2000.

During this period, the Armenian Apostolic Church generally became more visible in the memory landscape. While the previous law mentioned that some traditional church holidays and commemoration days could be celebrated in the Republic of Armenia, the new law explicitly listed some of those. Interestingly, Vardanants Day, dedicated to the memory of the victims of the Battle of Avarayr in the 5th century[15] was among those added to the list, thus uniting the military and church in one holiday. In 1999, Vardanants Chapel was opened in Yerablur. Moreover, the date of the establishment of Yerablur is May 26, 1992, the date of the Battle of Avarayr, thus implying that the narrative of Vardanats was actually introduced as early as 1992.

In 2001, Armenia celebrated the 1,700th anniversary of adopting Christianity as a state religion. This was the major commemorative event of this period. For this anni-

13 ASALA was an Armenian militant organization that operated from 1975 to 1990. Its stated goal was "to compel the Turkish Government to publicly acknowledge its responsibility for the Armenian Genocide of 1915." To reach this goal, the organization carried out attacks and assassinations of Turkish diplomats in different countries of the world.

14 Sose Mayrik or Mayrig (1868 – 1953) was an Armenian fedayee (freedom fighter), the wife of famous fedayee leader Aghbyur Serob. She has participated in many armed operations on the territory of Western Armenia (Turkey). From 1920 lived in Istanbul, then Alexandria, Egypt where she died and was buried in 1953.

15 Generally perceived as the major battle to defend Christian Faith in Armenia, the Battle of Avarayr is believed to take place on May 26, 451 between Christian Armenian Army and Sassanid Persia. It is seen as one of the most impoartant/defining events of the Armenian history. The participants of the battle were called Vartanank after the leader of the Armenian Army, Vardan Mamikonyan, while the struggle itself is known as "Vardanants War."

versary, the new Church of Grigor Lusavorich (Gregory the Illuminator), eventually the largest dominating Yerevan's cityscape, was built in Yerevan.[16] Finally, in 2001, during the 1,700th anniversary, a large cross was erected in Yerevan's central square on the same pedestal where Lenin's statue previously stood before it was demolished (Abrahamian 2003, 2012).[17]

Many new churches were built or initiated throughout Armenia during this period. Among them, noteworthy is the case of Saint Anna Church and the patriarchal residence of the Armenian Catholicos in Yerevan. In 2002, the government handed over the former building of Hrachya Acharyan Language Institute (built in 1938 in the place of St Astvatsatsin Basilica demolished by the Soviets) to the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin for building Saint Anna. The demolition of the building began in 2007, and in 2015, St. Anna church was opened. Thus, while the Soviets had demolished churches and constructed buildings of science, education and culture in their place, in this case we observe the return of the church through demolishing Soviet heritage.

At the same time, starting in 2002, the "History of the Armenian Church" subject was introduced in public schools in Armenia in cooperation with the church. While the collapse of the Soviet Union and Armenian independence certainly brought important changes to the history education in the country, reforms in the education system have largely been driven through World Bank loan projects (Bilmez et al, 2017), which mostly coincided with the period under discussion. Through the first project – the "Education Financing and Management Reform Project" in 1998-2002 – it was envisaged that textbooks would be based on the existing curriculum, with the exception of removing Soviet ideological biases and reflecting Armenian culture – an interim curriculum that would allow time for policies on curriculum and methodology to be developed. According to Bilmez et al, as the priority of those years was textbook production and supply, curriculum design was left without methodological improvement and the only condition was the removal of Soviet ideology. From this perspective, the drift towards a nationalistic ideology was not exposed or hampered, since it allowed for the much-desired departure from the Soviet past. Stripped of communist internationalism and saturated with nationalism, the historical narrative still strikingly resembled its Soviet predecessor starting with ethnogenesis, followed by the struggle for national liberation and culminating, this time, in independent nationhood (Bilmez et al, 2017).

Kocharyan's years are also associated with the destruction of Yerevan's cultural heritage for the purposes of new, business-oriented development. This caused public discontent and protest, eventually leading to the formation of active self-organized civic initiatives/groups aware and concerned with cultural heritage and memory. The efforts of these groups bore fruit only in later years.

16 While the actual construction took place in 1996-2001, the decision about the 1700th anniversary, as well as the construction of the mentioned church, was made by the Church leadership back in 1989-1990.

17 While Lenin's statue was dismantled in 1991, the pedestal remained until 2006.

# STRENGTHENING NATIONAL MEMORY CONSTRUCTION AND A GREATER FOCUS ON GENOCIDE MEMORIALIZATION (2008-2018)

The Republican Party of Armenia (RPA) was the main ruling party of the period. While it already dominated the parliament and the government during the previous 10 years, President Kocharyan did not belong to the party itself. From 2008 onward, however, Armenia essentially became a one-party state. The platform of the RPA was clearly nationalistic and previous national tendencies became even more dominant during this period.

Overall, the politics of this period, as well as the policies and actions deriving from it, continued in the directions laid out during Kocharyan's years, with greater church-state cooperation, as well as a strengthened legal-regulatory basis for the further advancement of national single-narrative memory construction. Thus, following the adoption of the Law on Public Education (2009), the state standards/outcomes of public education had been defined for all subject areas, including history. Introduced in 2009, the Subject Standards for history (still in force) mostly focus on the same nationalist concepts and identity-construction (Kharatyan and Toqmajyan 2018).

Developed based on these standards, the narrative of the textbooks both in text and images (especially maps) depicts a self-image of Armenia and Armenians as unique, always homogenous, and proud of their ancient heritage (Bilmaz et al.). Throughout the textbooks, either the text or the images accompanying the texts portrayed spaces that are called "Armenia" without an explanation of what the category of the word "Armenia" is – conflating its geographic, ethnic, and political meanings. These spaces or images may not be within the national boundaries of today or of the time but are referred to as "Armenian" (Bilmaz et al.). Such approaches facilitate an essentialist construction of memory that tracks back to millennia "Armenians" and "Armenia."

Interestingly, during the same period, church construction initiatives in the city center made the preservation of Soviet heritage an issue of public importance. As mentioned above, Kocharyan's urban development policies have resulted in the major destruction of Yerevan's cultural heritage, which in turn gave birth to several civic initiatives aimed at the protection of the heritage. In 2010, the government decided to take out the Summer Hall of Cinema Moscow from the list of monuments protected by the state and allow the construction of churches in its place. As in the case of the Acharyan Language Institute, Cinema Moscow was built on the place of Saint Poghos-Petros Church in 1935-36. The summer hall was added in the 1960s. So, when the public learned about the decision to demolish the summer hall and build a church similar to Poghos-Petros in its place, a group of young architects and active citizens concerned about Yerevan's heri-

tage, self-organized, and initiated various protests while petitioning to suspend the decision. In a short time, the initiative and its petition drew over 24,000 supporters and eventually succeeded in saving the summer hall. This is an interesting case, as on the one hand it heralded the first protest against the religionization of public space and the imposition of religious identity, and on the other hand, the protection of Soviet modernist heritage. The revaluation of Soviet architecture became the main counterbalance. At the same time, this was a defining event for voicing the issue of "sites of memory" in urban space, as well as the formation of a new urban identity with a sensitive attitude towards the city. This new identity eventually started to work not only towards preventing the destruction of old buildings, but also towards the erection of new monuments to such "heroes" whose heroism was doubted by the public, i.e. there was no public consensus on that. One such example was the case of the construction of Anastas Mikoyan's monument initiated by his heirs (Shagoyan 2014). Not only was that attempt prevented, but the more complex issues of Soviet history, to which Mikoyan was involved, became the subject of heated public debate and criticism.

Yet, the most important event of this phase was the organization of 100th Anniversary of the Armenian Genocide in 2015. With the motto of "Remember and Demand," and the symbol of the forget-me-not flower, the main message of which was "Remember," as explained in the official statement of the State Committee on the 100th Anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, the entire commemoration was structured around remembrance. During that year, the streets, roads and building throughout Armenia were flooded with posters and placards calling for remembrance. From government officials to schoolteachers, people wore forget-me-not badges and pins. At the same time, the communities throughout the country that previously did not have a monument and/or memorial dedicated to the genocide erected one. Groups of school children starting from the second year of primary school appeared at the Memorial Tsisternakaberd to pay tribute to the victims of the Genocide weeks before the commemoration day of April 24. School iconography included new items – posters, installations and interior decorations were created each day to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide with the inclusion of the official forget-me-not flower and the slogan: "I remember and I demand" (Mkrtchyan, 2015). Schoolchildren were tasked with painting and/or making paper forget-me-not flowers, which were then taken to Tsitsernakaberd.

# A SHIFT TO A MULTI-PERSPECTIVE MEMORY CONSTRUCTION AND THE FIRST STEPS TOWARDS A MORE OPEN AND INCLUSIVE MEMORY POLITICS (2018-PRESENT)

The Velvet Revolution of 2018 brought some changes to the memory politics. While it is too early to understand where it will eventually lead, it is already possible to make some observations. First, to commemorate the revolution and the success of civil struggle, a new holiday was added to the official calendar, "The Day of the Citizen of the Republic of Armenia." Then, there is a tendency to move the celebration of major holidays from the center, i.e. Yerevan or Yerevan's central square, to communities and other centers, thus decentralizing the celebration and providing an opportunity for different groups to create new "sites of memory." Finally, it was decided to erect a monument for the victims of the 2008 March 1 events.[18] These initiatives are markers of a cautious shift from the national identity to civic identity. At the same time, the education standards and curriculum were being revised and according to the reform agenda, the History of the Armenian Church would not be taught as a separate subject anymore. Finally, there are ongoing debates around the draft History standards, where traditional historians blame the reformers for the de-nationalization of history.

Interestingly, the new government's policy towards cultural heritage has not changed much. It continues business-driven city development planned by the old one, and active civic groups are now protecting buildings and the vernacular districts of Yerevan from destruction.[19] A new civic initiative, the Committee for the Protection of Yerevan's Heritage,[20] came into play at the end of 2019. The initiative is concerned with issues pertaining to urban development and Yerevan's heritage. A similar group, a sister-initiative – the Committee for the Protection of Gyumri's Heritage – was formed in 2020 in Gyumri.[21]

18 A series of mass protests against electoral fraud were held in Armenia after presidential elections of February 19, 2008. The protests started on February 20 and lasted for 10 days. Those were mainly organized on Yerevan's Freedom square and involved tens of thousands people during the day and hundreds camping out at nights. After nine days of peaceful protests at the Freedom Square, the national police and military forces tried to forcefully disperse the protesters on March 1. This caused mass anger and thousands gathered in the morning of March 1. Police and Army units were brought against protestors. Ten people were killed during skirmishes between police and crowd, and President Kocharyan declared a 20-day state of emergency. This was followed by mass arrests and purges of prominent members of the opposition, as well as a de facto ban on any further anti-government protests

19 The most recent example is the case of Firdus district in the heart of the city, two minutes walk from the Republic square.

20 https://www.facebook.com/OtherYerevan

21 bit.ly/3GloaRa

There is an evolving memory discourse mostly involving people concerned with cultural heritage and memory loss due to its destruction. Some of these groups started organizing memory walks in Yerevan and other cities. The routes of these walks also include Soviet heritage, particularly modernist architecture, thus revaluating the country's Soviet past. These grassroots initiatives signal the growing debate around identity and urban space.

# CONCLUSION

To conclude, we would like to note that from 1991-2020, the overall memory politics of the Republic of Armenia have been largely constructed around nation-state building and have evolved around a grand national narrative, leaving little space for alternative discourse. For the purposes of nation-building, both remembering and forgetting policies and practices have been utilized through changing the official holiday calendar, memory landscape and education curriculum. Genocide memory has been the Master narrative that has influenced most other memorial practices. However, some grassroots initiatives and civil society projects aimed at creating alternative narratives and influencing official policy have emerged since 2008, resulting in the creation of spaces for critical discourse over memory and memory politics.

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