



The power of communication in advancing one's own agenda

Analysis of the results of the network meeting

Yerevan
2020

Introduction

On September 8, 2020, the 2nd network meeting of the DATA project was held to discuss with the participants how Armenian CSOs use the means of communication and data language to advance their own agenda, and what needs to be strengthened to make the process more effective. The discussion was attended by 25 representatives of research organizations, think tanks, mass media, local NGOs and government agencies.

This synopsis summarizes the main results of the analysis of the ideas and opinions voiced by the participants during the discussion; in particular: 1) the means by Armenian CSOs to impose their own agenda on the authorities, 2) the factors influencing the process, 3) the challenges in the field of communication; 4) the steps to be taken by CSOs to promote the effectiveness of communication in imposing their own agenda on the authorities.

Measures for CSOs to impose their own agenda on the authorities

The tools chosen by Armenian CSOs to advance their own agenda can be divided into two main groups, each of which is applicable to two different strategies: 1) direct dialogue with the authorities and 2) mediated dialogue/communication with the authorities (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Measures by Armenian CSOs to impose their own agenda on the authorities

1. Direct dialogue with the authorities

- Public policy research and presentation of policy reform proposals
- Involvement in working groups, committees, forums and other public platforms attached to the Government, the National Assembly and other state bodies
- Response to drafts submitted by government agencies
- Negotiations with decision makers and their team representatives

2. Mediated dialogue/communication with the authorities

- Demonstration, public protest, disobedience
- Publicizing one's own agenda, raising public awareness of the issue (including working closely with the media)
- Cooperation with international organizations around one's own agenda and application of international mechanisms of influence
- Creating a discursive field conducive to one's own agenda

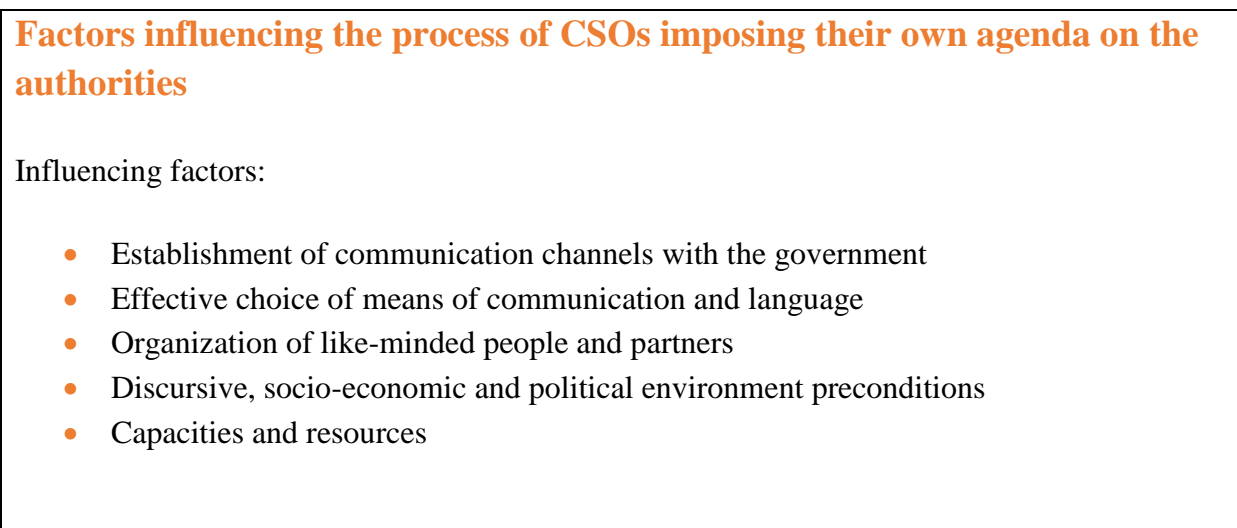
In the case of direct dialogue with the authorities, CSOs, as a way of advancing their agenda, submit proposals to the authorities for policy reforms based on public policy research addressing their concerns. Some CSOs participating in the discussion cited their involvement in working groups, committees, forums, and other public platforms attached to the government, the National Assembly, and other government agencies as a means. Despite some criticism of these platforms, CSOs believe that they allow them to reach out directly to government officials. Another way to advance your own agenda is to actively respond to draft policies published by government agencies (for example, on the e-draft platform). CSOs are ambiguous about their other means: negotiating with decision-makers and their team members. Due to the factor of a single person, this can lead to a rapid and positive result on the one hand, and, on the other hand, as a consequence of the lack of institutional communication and decision-making procedures, can reduce the consistency of the work and the sustainability of results.

Among the means used in mediated dialogue/communication with the authorities, CSOs singled out the organization of demonstrations, public protests and acts of disobedience. In the case of this group of methods, although both the calls and the raised agendas are addressed to the authorities, they are often not, by nature, a direct dialogue. One of the ways to advance the agenda through mediated communication is to publicize one's own agenda, raise public awareness of the issue and increase sympathy (including by working with the media), as well as to cooperate with international organizations on one's own agenda and implement international mechanisms of influence. From the point of view of long-term strategy, the following means was also mentioned: the creation of a discursive field conducive to one's own agenda – the establishment and dissemination of desirable scenarios and ideas.

Factors influencing the process of CSOs imposing their own agenda on the authorities

There are a number of factors that influence the process of CSOs imposing their own agenda on the authorities (see Figure 2).

Figure 2.



As Figure 2 shows, among the factors influencing the process of imposing their own agenda on the authorities, the CSOs in the discussion valued the effective choice of means of communication and language. When talking about your own agenda, it is important to choose the language and means of communication. Depending on the target audience and the strategy of the agenda, the language of facts (public policy summaries, synopsis of research and analysis, etc.),

one can choose as the language of communication: visual language, the language of emotions, or the language of the ultimatums, etc. CSOs were quite cautious and critical of social networks (particularly Facebook), which these days often act as a means of communication, imposing their own rules and language on the game. CSOs point out that the current high intensity of communication through social networks is the result of imperfect institutional mechanisms and, while it has positive aspects, poses significant challenges. In particular, communication with government representatives through social networks on the one hand reduces the distance between decision-makers and beneficiaries', increasing the possibility of beneficiaries being heard, and on the other hand limits the possibility of constructive dialogue and effective work.

As factors influencing the process of imposing their own agenda on the authorities, CSOs also stressed the effectiveness of communication channels with the authorities and the existence of two-way communication (from decision-maker to the public, from the public to the decision-maker). Effective bilateral communication also implies the possibility of dialogue and cooperation, not simply agreeing or disagreeing to a proposed draft – something that is a common practice today in communicating with the authorities, the CSOs say.

In order to impose its own agenda on the authorities, the following is also important: CSOs' capacity and resources to develop effective strategies for advancing the agenda, effective means and language skills; a wide network of like-minded partners and the organization of that network; as well as preconditions for discursive, socio-economic and political environments (in particular the pandemic, state of war, state of emergency or martial law, restrictions arising therefrom and widespread discourses, etc.)

Challenges for CSOs in the field of communication

CSOs note that they often face a number of communication challenges when pushing their own agenda: in particular manipulations of public speech, institutional gaps in communication with government agencies, distinct features of communication on social networks (particularly Facebook), distinct features of the media environment and agendas, lack of CSO capacity and resources (see Figure 3).

Figure 3.

Challenges in the field of communication

- Manipulations of public speech
- Institutional gaps in communication with state agencies
- Distinct features of communication on social networks (especially Facebook)
- Distinct features of media environment and agendas
- CSOs' capacities and resources

Especially in the so-called post-truth period of the 21st century, on the one hand the importance of argumentation of speech is stressed, on the other hand other verbal manipulations and speculations hinder research-based and fact-based thought. In particular, it is quite difficult to overcome through fact-finding the manipulation of emotions, and this poses a serious ethical dilemma for CSOs. In Armenia, this is compounded by the provocation by some media outlets of

a negative and destructive public reaction, anti-democratic and nationalist propaganda, which is freely carried out in the media sector due to lack of accountability for professional and ethical honesty, among other reasons.

Other influential challenges for effective communication of CSOs in Armenia in advancing their own agenda are the gaps in effective communication mechanisms within and between government agencies, between government agencies and the public, and even within individual CSOs, as well as the lack of CSO capacity and lack of resources.

Steps for CSOs to communicate effectively in imposing their own agenda on authorities

The CSOs participating in the discussion believe that some steps are needed to achieve greater results in imposing their own agenda on the authorities. Among the necessary steps in the field of communication, they singled out the work aimed at the institutional development of government-public communication channels, legal and institutional reforms in the field of communication (development of procedures, strengthening supervision over ethical issues, responsibility regarding public speech, a law on hate speech, etc.) work to increase the importance of data-based policies, reform of the general discourse field (overcoming anti-Western, anti-democratic, anti-gender, conservative, conspiratorial and other destructive ideas), as well as the development of CSOs' communication skills and resources (see Fig. 4).

Figure 4.

Steps for CSOs to communicate effectively in imposing their own agenda on the authorities

- Development of CSOs' communication skills and resources
- Reform of the field of discourse
- Institutional development of government-public communication channels
- Increasing the importance of data-based policies
- Legal and institutional reforms in the field of communication

In conclusion, the CSOs participating in the 2nd Network Meeting of the DATA project were willing not only to share their views and experience regarding the raised issues, but also to join efforts to address the challenges raised.