

The background of the cover is a photograph of a multi-story apartment building with many windows and balconies. A large red diagonal shape is overlaid on the bottom right corner. The text is arranged in white and red boxes.

**ZOIS**

Zentrum für Osteuropa-  
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# ZOIS REPORT

## THE CULTURE OF POLICING IN ARMENIA

Nadja Douglas

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## Executive summary

In April and May 2018, anti-government protests<sup>1</sup> mobilised thousands of people in the Armenian capital, Yerevan, and put law enforcement, the rule of law, and the overall political system in the country to the test. The most recent protest wave was directed against former president Serzh Sargsyan, who had tried to prolong his political career by moving from the post of president to that of prime minister. In line with Armenia’s transition from a presidential to a parliamentary system, he would have remained the central figure in Armenian politics. To the surprise of many, Sargsyan stepped down after eleven days of protests, having to admit that he had made a mistake.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Demonstrations began in April 2018, when it became obvious that the majoritarian Republican Party would nominate president Serzh Sargsyan for the prime minister’s post after he resigned on 9 April. According to a 2015 referendum on a constitutional reform, following the end of Sargsyan’s second and last term in office and the inauguration of Armenia’s new president Armen Sarkissian, the parliament had to elect a new prime minister. On 17 April, the day of the prime minister’s election, protesters tried to block entrances to the building of the National Assembly obstruct the voting. Protest rallies were led by opposition leader and MP Nikol Pashinyan (Civil Contract Party/Yelk Alliance), who called for a ‘velvet revolution’. He was appointed as prime minister by the Armenian parliament on 8 May.

2 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, ‘It’s Not You, It’s Me: Serzh Sarkisian’s Breakup Letter To Armenia, Annotated’, <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-annotating-longtime-leader-sarkisians-breakup-letter/29187836.html>.



He had underestimated the capacity of Armenian society to hold its political elites accountable, while trusting in the control exerted by state structures. How have state-society relations evolved over time to make these events possible and what role did state power structures play? Is there a chance for the new government led by Nikol Pashinyan to restore confidence in and reform the law enforcement sector?

These most recent protests were the latest in a long series of protest cycles in Armenia, including Electric Yerevan in 2015 and the Erebuni hostage crisis in 2016, which have demonstrated the mobilising potential of social grievances and discontent. Before the April 2018 protests, the Armenian authorities had repeatedly reacted by displaying a mixture of weakness and intransigence and by considerably strengthening the law enforcement sector.

Empirical research on the relationship between the police and protesters is rare, especially in the post-Soviet region. Due to the difficulty of accessing primary data from the Armenian police and other state authorities, this report draws mainly on qualitative interviews with local activists affected by police arbitrariness, and with observers and representatives of civic organisations, intergovernmental organisations, the media, the expert community, and lawyer associations that deal with police and law enforcement structures. The interview data was collected by the author in Yerevan in spring 2017 and is complemented by results from public opinion polls on trust and confidence in institutions, notably the law enforcement agencies, conducted by the Caucasus Barometer and the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor/Advanced Research Group.<sup>3</sup> The emphasis is on the question of how changes in the culture of policing, especially protest policing, have altered state-society relations prior to the peaceful transfer of power in the country.

The principal findings of the report are:

- The worsening socio-economic situation in Armenia represents the backdrop for the recent wave of social and political protests.
- Trust in executive and judicial structures in general continues to be low. The image of the police suffered most after the protests and riots following the disputed presidential election in March 2008.
- Comparing 2015 and 2016 poll results, the level of arbitrariness by the police as perceived by the population rose. Perceptions are partly influenced by respondents' residential origin, age, and socio-economic background.

<sup>3</sup> The Caucasus Barometer is an annual survey on socio-economic issues and political attitudes conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers, a network of research centres from Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. The sample size was 1,648 respondents. The most recent fieldwork was conducted between 13 and 27 October 2017. The Law Enforcement Arbitrariness Index is based on sociological surveys conducted by the Advanced Public Research Group at the request of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor in 2015 and 2016. Opinion polls were conducted in all the marzes (regions) of Armenia and in Yerevan. The methodology and survey tool to calculate the index were based on similar surveys conducted by the Russian-based Public Verdict foundation. The sample size was 1,200.

- Armenian authorities tend to react to civic initiatives and social protests with a mixture of suppression, repression, and concessions. There is a widespread sense of a disproportionate use of force. The number of unlawful arrests increased significantly in the course of social protests during 2015–2016. Impunity among police officers is considered a serious problem with the rule of law in Armenia: there have been hardly any indictments of law enforcement officials who have broken the law.
- The police budget has increased more than five times since 2007, and the number of police officers has risen considerably.
- The police, rather than the army, plays the role of a “national guard”.
- Public control of state power structures is not widespread in Armenia. Nevertheless, civic activists, for example police monitoring groups, make efforts to increase police accountability by monitoring and documenting malpractices.
- Civic activists familiar with the police reform programme judge international efforts and involvement in the Armenian reform process as largely inefficient. There is a risk that citizens’ trust not only in national but also in international institutions is further eroding.
- The lack of legitimacy of state power structures will most likely persist in the country for the time being, despite the recent political change induced by the 2018 ‘revolution’. The new government under Nikol Pashinyan faces the challenge to reform state power structures, a task that could become vital for the sustainability of the new regime.

## Introduction

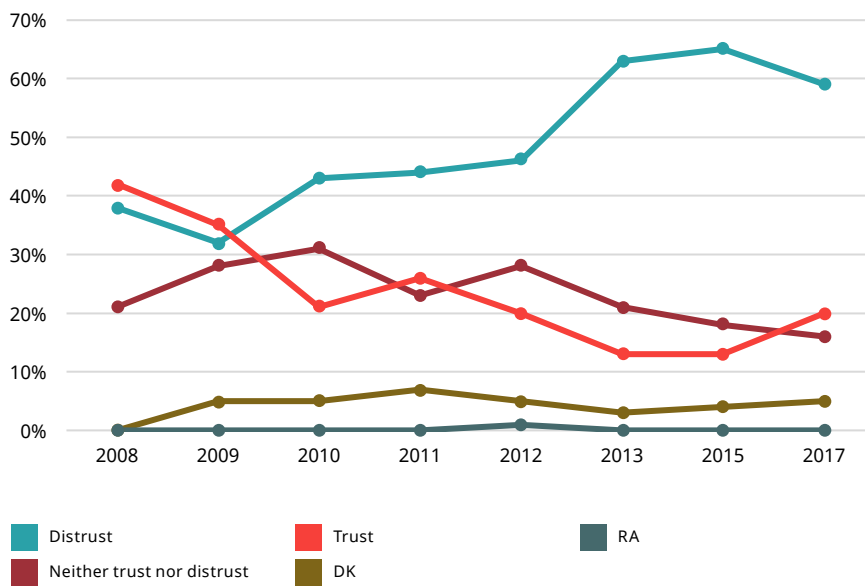
Two parallel trends can be observed in post-Soviet Armenia over the past decade. On the one hand, the socio-economic situation has clearly been worsening. According to official statistics, about 30 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line, while unofficial sources estimate that they amount to 40–50 per cent.<sup>4</sup> The middle class is underdeveloped and made up mainly of the urban population. A perception of rampant social injustice in the country is pronounced, with a rising number of social protests and especially young people driving a new form of civic activism that attempts to emancipate itself from a stagnating state run by ‘old elites’ and rigid power structures already prior to the events in spring 2018.

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<sup>4</sup> Arka news agency, ‘About 45 percent of Armenia’s population is poor’, [http://arka.am/en/news/society/about\\_45\\_percent\\_of\\_armenia\\_s\\_population\\_is\\_poor/](http://arka.am/en/news/society/about_45_percent_of_armenia_s_population_is_poor/).

On the other hand, the new government like the former Sargsyan regime, is faced not only with an unstable foreign policy situation (complicated relations with neighbouring Turkey and Azerbaijan, the latter reaching a low point with the four-day war over Nagorno-Karabakh in April 2016) but also with authorities accused of corruption and therefore struggling with widespread societal dissatisfaction. ► FIGURES 1+2 The previous government’s response to civic protests has resulted in a considerable strengthening of the Armenian national police and the use of repressive forms of public order management.

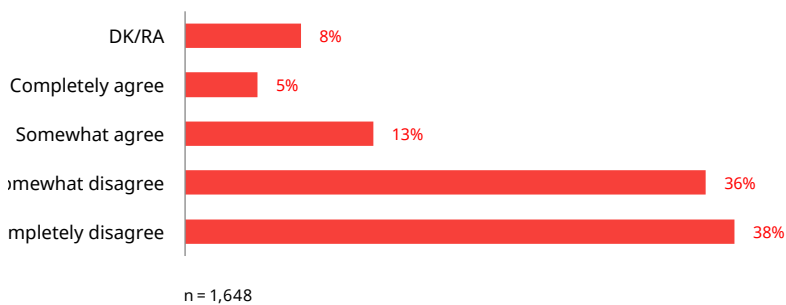
**FIGURE 1**  
**Trust in the executive government**



n = 1,648

Source: Caucasus Barometer 2017

**FIGURE 2**  
**Do you agree or disagree that people like you are treated fairly by the government?**



n = 1,648

Source: Caucasus Barometer 2017

### Protest policing in Armenia

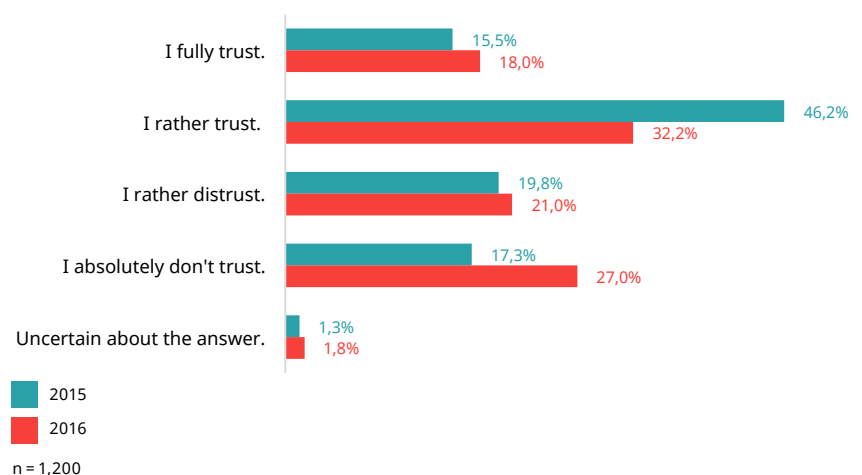
Protest policing refers to the ways in which the police handles protest events. While activists consider it a form of repression, state authorities usually see it as a means to guarantee law and order.<sup>5</sup> Empirical research on the relationship between the police and protesters is rare, especially for the post-Soviet region. Nevertheless, an analysis of protest policing is particularly pertinent for gaining a better understanding of the wider state-society relationship. The police is usually conceived as the most visible manifestation of government authority ('street-level bureaucrats'), and the police's performance usually influences perceptions of the state and government.<sup>6</sup>

► FIGURE 3

State reactions to civic initiatives and political or social dissent vary from country to country. The characteristics of protest policing, however, are often quite distinctive for a type of police culture that can be found in certain regions. This is particularly relevant when state power structures, such as the police, have a high degree of discretionary power.<sup>7</sup> Historical experiences with authoritarian regimes are also often decisive for the prevalent policing style.<sup>8</sup> Characteristic for post-Soviet countries and styles of policing is that traditionalists often have a greater say than reformers, who recognise the organisation of demonstration as a fundamental right in the context of riot policing.

The main emphasis of existing studies on institutional confrontation between society and authorities in Armenia, which emerged in the course of the protest cycle during the last decade, is on the social movement potential. Less attention has been paid to the types of responses by state power

FIGURE 3  
How much do you trust law enforcement agencies?



Source: Law enforcement arbitrariness index 2015 – 2016, Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor/Advanced Research Group

5 Della Porta and Reiter 1998, 1.  
 6 Hofstra 2012, 151.  
 7 Della Porta and Reiter 1998, 10.  
 8 Ibid., 3.

structures such as the police. This report will begin to fill this gap by delineating the most significant stages of Armenian police reform during the past decade and illustrate the distinctive features of police culture, especially with regard to the interaction with and reactions by civic activists and protesters.

## Stages of police reform in Armenia

The Armenian police continues to suffer from the legacies that plague most police structures in the former Soviet Union: a high degree of centralisation and hierarchy, deficient application of human rights standards, and a rigid educational structure that overemphasises legalism over practical knowledge and basic public-order management skills.<sup>9</sup>

One of the first reform efforts and principal changes occurred in 2002, when the Ministry of Interior was disbanded along with the Ministry of National Security. They were merged and reorganised into two non-ministerial institutions: the National Police of the Republic of Armenia and the National Security Service (NSS), which are now both directly accountable to the prime minister.

Trust in and the overall image of the police suffered considerably after the deadly riots in context of the prolonged protests following the disputed presidential election in March 2008.<sup>10</sup> International partners, donors, and the Armenian government saw the need to increase efforts to reform the police structure.

Accountability mechanisms have gained in relevance in recent years, especially in the course of Western-led reform processes. Questions that are relevant here are whether police representatives wear identification tags, whether they have to submit to monitoring and review processes, and whether citizens can file formal complaints.

As early as the end of the 1990s, the Open Society Foundations, sponsored by George Soros, launched comprehensive programmes in many former Soviet countries to strengthen the capacity of the police. Most of the programmes were assessed as by and large unsuccessful due to widespread corruption and a lack of willingness by the police authorities to engage. These are the reasons why – at least in Armenia – the foundation has stopped working directly with law enforcement agencies.<sup>11</sup>

9 Hofstra 2012, 151.

10 Mass protests were held in wake of the Armenian presidential election in March 2008. Supporters of the unsuccessful presidential candidate and first president of Armenia, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, protested against allegedly fraudulent election results. There was a mass mobilisation of thousands of demonstrators in Yerevan's Liberty Square, and on 1 March, after nine days of peaceful protests, national police, aided by the armed forces, dispersed the protesters and killed ten people. Today, the memory of 2008, when the army was called in to help quell the opposition protests, is still quite vivid among many civic activists. On 27 July 2018 former President Robert Kocharian was arrested on charges of 'overthrowing the constitutional order' during the post-2008 election events. Former Deputy Defense Minister Yuri Khachaturov was also charged but later released on bail. New Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, part of the Ter-Petrosian camp at the time, was imprisoned in 2009 on charges of instigating mass protests.

11 Interview with David Amiryanyan, Open Society Foundations Armenia, Yerevan, 11 April 2017.

The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and other international organisations, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the European Union (EU), started to invest in their own programmes to reform the Armenian police. However, this endeavour to change the mentality of an entire organisation, especially in the law enforcement field, proved more difficult than expected.<sup>12</sup> The Police Assistance Programme launched by the OSCE in 2008 consisted of activities in the field of community policing,<sup>13</sup> police education, renovation of police training facilities, and the establishment of an emergency call centre.

Moreover, several Armenian human rights NGOs received grants to hold lectures and conduct training courses at the police academy for members of the riot police on how to behave during mass protests. However, these were usually one-time measures and, despite positive responses from police officers involved, were not continued.

‘I remember very well that in 2009, when I was invited to talk to officers of the internal troops of the police, we reflected about the relationship with citizens. There were more than forty officers... I can still divide them in three groups. One group understood the topic extremely well and knew what it was about... The [second] group knew absolutely nothing about anything and only had in mind that they had to submit to orders and the third group was somewhere in between. After many hours, a part of the second group began to understand that situations can be different from what they believe... Only a small part remained like they were, like mortars [knocks on wood]. They all came up to me during the smoking break and started telling me that there would be a need for more frequent encounters of this sort... However, after this one there were no more such seminars.’<sup>14</sup>

In April 2010, the official Police Reform Programme was launched and adopted by the government, under the guidance of the National Security Council. Salaries were significantly lifted (on average they now amount to 225,000 Armenian dram, or €373 per month), police buildings and facilities were renovated, and the working conditions for police officers were improved. However, observers and members of Armenian civil society criticised the fact that no efforts were made to affect behavioural changes in interactions with the public to lower the high barrier that still exists between the police and society. Many of the changes introduced were perceived as cosmetic. Some interviewees even called the reforms ‘fake’, considering them a performance for attracting funds from foreign donors.<sup>15</sup>

An important factor in the way the police behaves is its organisational structure. In Armenia, a functional division exists between uniformed police on the streets, investigators, juvenile inspectors working with minors, patrol auxiliary police, and traffic police. There are still a large number

12 Hofstra 2012, 151.

13 Community-based policing is characteristic of OSCE police assistance programmes and implies a policing philosophy that advocates close working relations and physical proximity between the police and the public, including small local police outreach stations to foster cooperation, mutual respect, and trust between the police and the population. See Hofstra 2012, 153.

14 Interview with Avetik Iskhanyan, Helsinki Committee Armenia, Yerevan, 6 April 2017.

15 Interview with Armen Grigoryan, political analyst and civic activist, Yerevan, 11 April 2017.



of well-armed interior troops, who are run similarly to standard military units. The so-called ‘red berets’, or Special Interior Forces, have taken on a role comparable with special forces like OMON from Soviet times. They are responsible for crowd control and act as riot police during mass protests. They also follow a different chain of command, being directly accountable to the chief of police. As part of the reform process, another unit, colloquially called the ‘Angel Force’, which also includes female police officers, was introduced to deal with mass protests before they escalate. Nevertheless, the general image of the police in society is still more of a controlling force than of a service to the population.

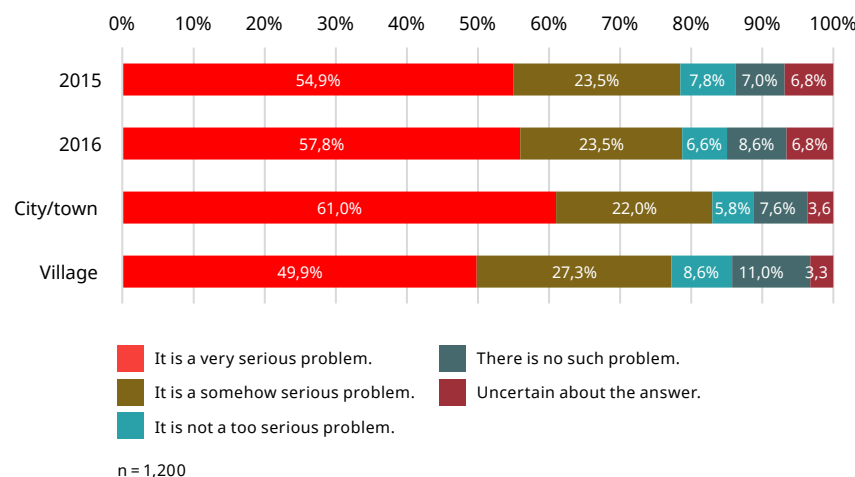
## Perceptions of the law enforcement sector in Armenia

Since Soviet times, the Armenian population’s perceptions of and attitudes towards the police have not been characterised by trust. In fact, the police profession has a negative image and reputation:

‘Policemen are not respected by the public and smaller communities. So usually guys who have some opportunity to get a profession wouldn’t prefer to go there... We came to the conclusion that policemen are those who usually have been oppressed, maybe in their childhood... and then couldn’t find themselves in public life.’<sup>16</sup>

Comparing opinion poll results from 2015 and 2016, there was a rise in the level of arbitrariness by the police as perceived by both urban and rural communities – but mostly urban. ► **FIGURE 4** One explanation for this could

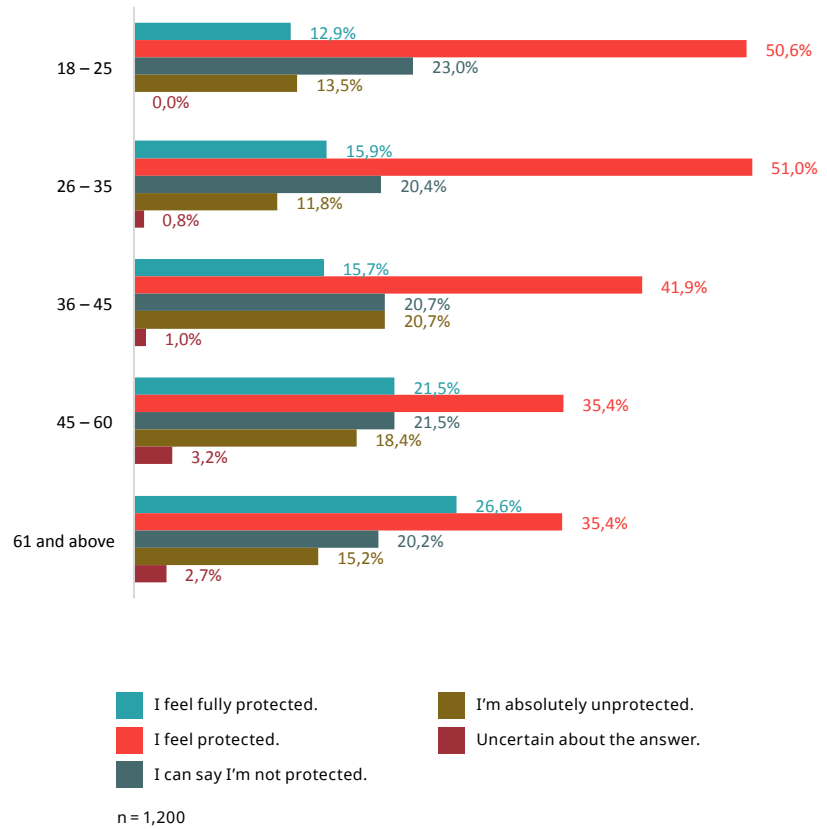
**FIGURE 4**  
In your opinion, how serious is the issue of unlawful and arbitrary actions by law enforcement agencies for Armenia?



Source: Law enforcement arbitrariness index 2015 – 2016, Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly Vanadzor/Advanced Research Group

16 Interview with Arman Gharibyan, Human Rights Power, Yerevan, 12 April 2017.

**FIGURE 5**  
**How protected do you feel personally against arbitrary actions by law enforcement agencies?**



Source: Law enforcement arbitrariness index 2016, Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor/Advanced Research Group

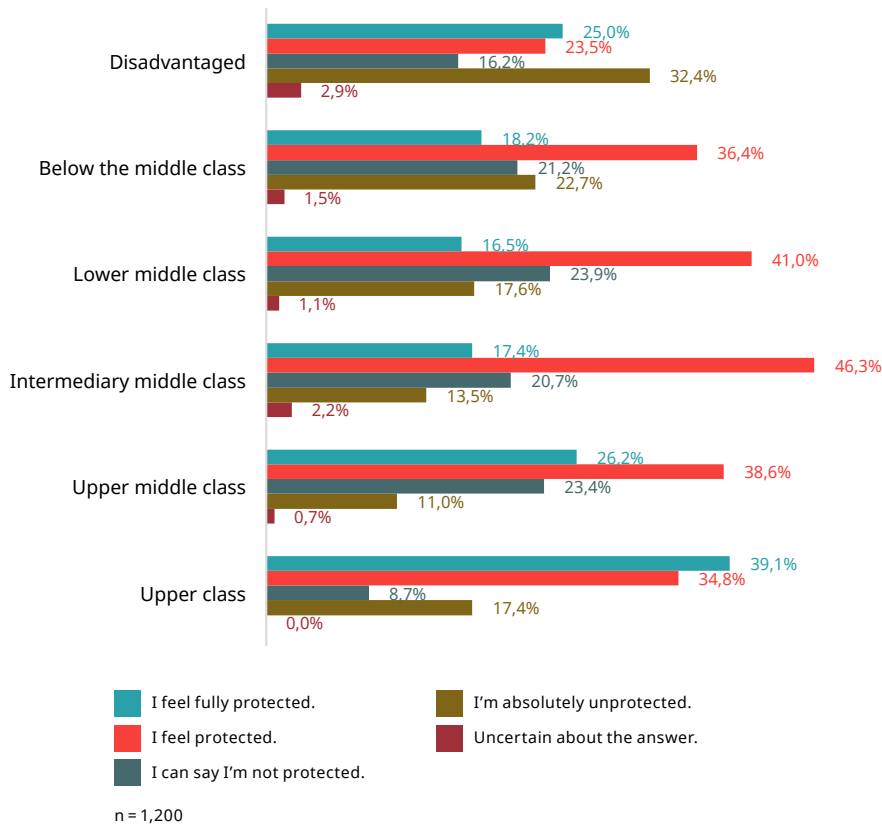
be that people in urban areas, especially Yerevan, more often face law enforcement agencies and are more actively involved in socio-economic and political processes than people in rural areas.<sup>17</sup>

Perceptions of law enforcement arbitrariness are also influenced by age. ► **FIGURE 5** Based on the results of the 2016 survey, people most vulnerable to arbitrary actions by law enforcement agencies are aged between thirty-six and sixty, and people who feel most secure are aged between twenty-six and thirty-five, which is also the average age of protesters in Yerevan.

When asked about trust, young people also trust the police more – and see it as less arbitrary – than older generations do. This seems to be related to whether respondents were primarily asked to judge the law enforcement structure as a system or the police as a local entity, which is generally more trusted. A higher degree of trust among young people, who feel less intimidated and believe in their rights as citizens, seems to correlate with a greater willingness of young people to join protests.

<sup>17</sup> Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor, 'Report on Indices characterizing actions of law enforcement agencies in the Republic of Armenia 2016' (2017), 17.

**FIGURE 6**  
**How protected do you feel personally against arbitrary actions by law enforcement agencies?**



Source: Law enforcement arbitrariness index 2016, Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor/Advanced Research Group

The social situation of respondents also impacts their perception of the law enforcement sector. ► **FIGURE 6** The 2016 survey shows that the actions of law enforcement agencies are considered most arbitrary by socially disadvantaged groups – that is, the lower the social status of the respondents, the higher the likelihood that they may suffer from arbitrary and illegal actions by law enforcement agencies. In contrast, respondents who affiliate themselves with the upper-middle and upper classes feel less concerned by police arbitrariness. Students and the upper-middle class (educated urban populations) have also been the most active during protests in Yerevan, also in April/May 2018.

In sum, the arbitrariness of law enforcement agencies has become an issue of serious concern for the Armenian population at the latest since 2015. The degree of negative public perception of the actions of law enforcement agencies has increased in particular as a result of the negative publicity the police received following the 2015–2016 protest wave. People in Armenia still perceive the police as a military structure comprising an intricate and opaque system, rather than a service provider acting in a transparent and accountable manner.<sup>18</sup>

18 OSCE and National Center for Legal Researches, 'Police-Media Relations in the Republic of Armenia', 2010 report, <https://www.osce.org/yerevan/68200?download=true>.

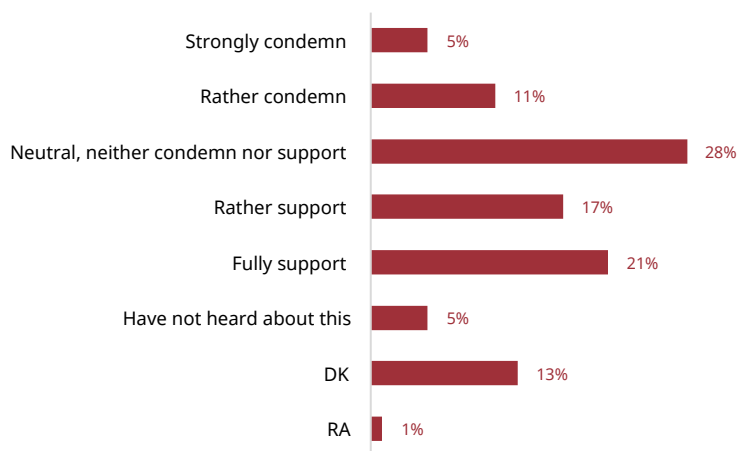
## State reactions to protests

Armenian authorities tend to react to civic initiatives and social protests with a mixture of suppression, repression, and concession. Repression of protesters, for instance during the Electric Yerevan protests,<sup>19</sup> led to a further escalation of contention between protesters and the police. Suppression before and during the protests included attempts by state authorities to impede any kind of media transmission about the event. During the Erebuni hostage crisis,<sup>20</sup> there were attempts to suppress the protests by discrediting the hostage takers, the **Sasna Tsrer**,<sup>21</sup> and labelling them ‘terrorists’. Concessions by the state authorities eventually led to an end to the contentious interaction, in both 2015 and 2016. Nevertheless, there was a wave of sympathy across Armenian society with the frustration, rage, and humiliation of the hostage taker. ► **FIGURE 7**

Unlike during previous mass protests, in April/May 2018 Armenian law enforcement and security agencies displayed considerable restraint. In the beginning of the protests the police habitually blocked the streets near the parliament and the prime minister’s residence with barriers and barbed

**FIGURE 7**

**Do you condemn or support Sasna Tsrer’s actions?**



n = 1,648

Source: Caucasus Barometer 2017

19 The social protest wave that started in the mid-2000s cumulated in June – July 2015 in the Electric Yerevan protests, with tens of thousands of people in the streets demonstrating against a 17 per cent hike in the electricity rate.

20 A group of gunmen called Sasna Tsrer carried out an armed attack on a patrol-guard police station in the Erebuni district of Yerevan on 17 July 2016. The most violent clashes between police and protesters occurred on 20 and 29 July. During the unfolding events, three people were killed.

21 The group **Sasna Tsrer** ('Daredevils of Sassoun') was constituted by former Karabakh fighters who were close to the Founding Parliament Movement led by Zhirair Sefilian. Their principal demand was the release of political prisoners (among them Sefilian) and the resignation of the president of Armenia. Their demands were largely shared by the people, who were upset with widespread corruption, social injustice, poverty, and the low prospects of democratically instigated regime change.

wire, and used tear gas. Hundreds of protesters, including members of parliament, were detained until April 23 (the day Sargsyan stepped down). However, the authorities never gave an order to launch a massive crackdown of the protests, possibly because it may have caused a split within the police forces.<sup>22</sup> The Armenian military also refrained from involvement in the protests, except for a few dozen soldiers from a peacekeeping brigade stationed in Yerevan who joined the demonstration hours before Sargsyan's resignation.<sup>23</sup>

### Disproportionate use of force

In previous years, for instance in response to the Erebuni hostage crisis, the Armenian police used disproportionate force to deter civic activities.

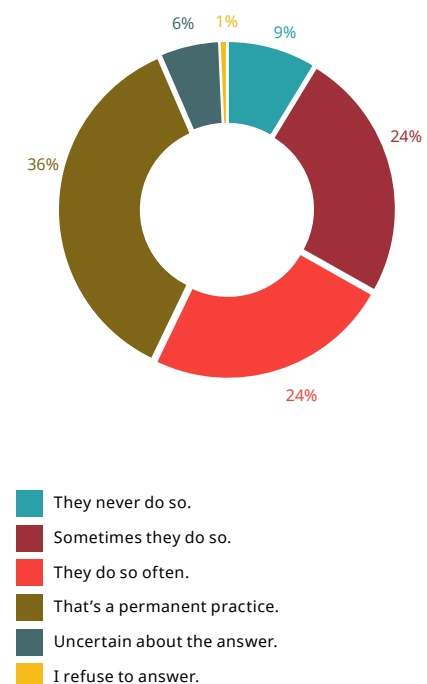
► **FIGURE 8** According to observers who drew on their own testimonies, eyewitnesses, and live broadcasts of the events, riot police was generally equipped with shields, truncheons, and guns, and additionally used stones, tear gas, and stun grenades against unarmed citizens.<sup>24</sup> Particularly problematic was the prohibited use of stun grenades, which was also reported from protests in Gyumri in 2015.<sup>25</sup>

Human rights defenders in particular reject the use of force and oppose it even more vehemently when it comes from the state:

‘If the unlawful use of force occurs from the side of the state it is particularly despicable. A citizen can be mistaken [when using violent means] and can therefore be prosecuted, but if the crime is committed by the state it is unbearable.’<sup>26</sup>

The Armenian police law of 2001 specifies the conditions for deploying non-lethal weapons. It clearly stipulates that before using force, police officers should warn protesters. However, adequate warning was not given on either 20 or 29 July 2016.<sup>27</sup> In other words, the police did not use other means of crowd control before resorting to stun grenades.

**FIGURE 8**  
In your opinion, how often do the Armenian authorities use law enforcement agencies to suppress the opposition?



n = 1,200

Source: Law enforcement arbitrariness index 2016, Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor/Advanced Research Group

22 The Jamestown Foundation / Eurasia Daily Monitor, 'Armenian Revolution Aided by Restraint of Military, Security Services' <https://jamestown.org/program/armenian-revolution-aided-by-military-security-services-restraint/>.

23 Ibid.

24 Transparency International Anticorruption Center, 'Statement on the effectiveness of the international assistance in police sector reforms', <https://transparency.am/en/news/view/1550>; Human Rights Watch 'Armenia: Excessive Police Force at Protest', <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/08/01/armenia-excessive-police-force-protest>.

25 Clashes with the police occurred in early 2015 in Gyumri as a result of the killing of an Armenian family by a Russian soldier who had deserted the Russian 102nd Military Base stationed in Gyumri. The wave of civic activism then adopted a more negative tone and divided along geopolitical lines. Supporters of a pro-European and a pro-Russian course however already became manifest around 2013, when the Armenian government decided to reject an Association Agreement with the European Union and instead join the Eurasian Economic Union.

26 Interview with Artur Sakunts, Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor, Yerevan, 7 and 12 April 2017.

27 Preliminary findings of the fact-finding mission of the Civic Solidarity Platform to Yerevan, Armenia, 28 July - 1 August 2016, 'What happened in Armenia: the CSP reports', <https://www.civicsolidarity.org/article/1155/what-happened-armenia-csp-reports>.



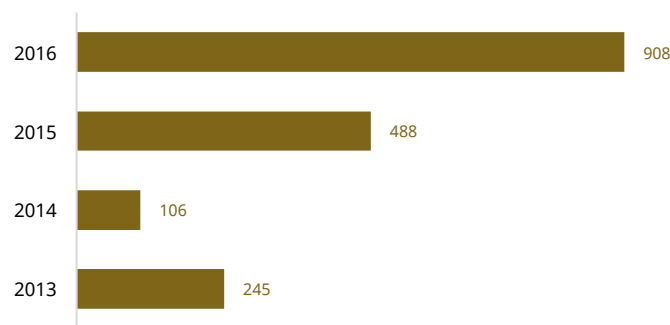
Although the Armenian ombudsman is viewed mostly critically by local civil society organisations, its apparatus nevertheless reliably documented reports of violence against protesters, journalists, and detainees during the July 2016 events. There are separate chapters in the ombudsman’s ‘Ad hoc Public Report on July 2016 Events’ related to freedom of expression and association, with detailed description of cases of violations.<sup>28</sup>

### Illegal detention

The number of unlawful arrests, according to human rights defenders from the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly Vanadzor, has increased disproportionately to the increase in the number of demonstrations since 2013. ► **FIGURE 9** While a 25–30 per cent rise in protest activities was reported in 2016, the number of arrests increased by approximately 400 per cent. On average, protesters spent nine hours in detention, which violates the legal three-hour limit.<sup>29</sup>

During the Erebuni events in 2016, several hundred protesters were detained without due justification and jailed for hours without food or medical aid.<sup>30</sup> According to official police reports, the total number of detainees amounted to 365, but Armenian human rights lawyers stated that the number of those detained was between 500 and 800. An indicator for the higher figures was the fact that many protesters were taken to police stations and military bases of the police troops in neighbouring towns around Yerevan,

**FIGURE 9**  
**Number of apprehended activists and protesters, 2013 – 2016**



Source: Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly Vanadzor and Partnership for Open Society Initiative, ‘Deterioration of Freedom of Assembly in Armenia’ (2017)

28 Human Rights Defender of the Republic of Armenia, ‘Ad hoc Public Report on July 2016 events’, <http://www.ombuds.am/resources/ombudsman/uploads/files/publications/9a7f8980c87f5f297c7502590c4a1667.pdf>.

29 Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly Vanadzor and Partnership for Open Society Initiative 2017.

30 Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty Armenia, ‘Politsiya: Byli podvergnuty privodu 136 grazhdan’, <https://rus.azatutyun.am/a/27871719.html>.

implying that detention centres in the capital were at full capacity.<sup>31</sup> According to statements by victims, procedural rights were rarely respected during detentions and arrests, and many remained in custody for longer than three hours (sometimes up to thirty-two hours).<sup>32</sup>

Armenia's Special Investigation Service (SIS) opened investigations into police actions during the events on Yerevan's central Baghramyan Avenue on 23 June 2015 and the night of 29 July 2016. Police also announced an internal investigation,<sup>33</sup> but activists and observers criticised the length of the investigation and the lack of results.<sup>34</sup>

### Increasing police strength

As in other post-Soviet countries, the attention dedicated to police strength is disproportionate in the eyes of activists, given the size and normally peaceful nature of the protests. Numerous interlocutors mentioned that during most mass protests in recent years, the police forces often outnumbered the protesters.<sup>35</sup> The budget of the police has increased more than five times since 2007, and the number of police officers has risen considerably.<sup>36</sup> There are no official numbers (the number of police officers is regarded as a state secret, as are many budget lines), but NGOs like Transparency International and the Union of Informed Citizens have tried to calculate the police strength on the basis of the salaries in the budget and other factors.<sup>37</sup> Human rights defenders largely agree that the size of Armenia's police force is not suited to the overall size of the population.<sup>38</sup>

You see there is an increase in police but at the same time an increase in the number of crimes. This is very ironic.<sup>39</sup>

Several interviewees reported that police equipment had improved considerably and that riot police in recent years had become increasingly heavily armed, including with the help of international material support.

31 Preliminary findings of the fact-finding mission of the Civic Solidarity Platform to Yerevan, Armenia, 28 July – 1 August 2016, 'What happened in Armenia: the CSP reports', <https://www.civicsolidarity.org/article/1155/what-happened-armenia-csp-reports>.

32 Ibid.

33 Human Rights Watch, 'Armenia: Excessive Police Force at Protest', <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/08/01/armenia-excessive-police-force-protest>.

34 Interview with David Amiryan, Open Society Foundations Armenia, Yerevan, 11 April 2017.

35 Interview with human rights lawyer, Protection of Rights without Borders, Yerevan, 13 April 2017.

36 Transparency International Anticorruption Center, 'Statement on the Mass Violation of Human Rights in the Republic of Armenia', <https://transparency.am/en/news/view/1565>.

37 A1 Plus, 'The number of RA police officers and vehicles', <http://en.a1plus.am/1268572.html>.

38 The numbers are not publicly available. In 2013, Kutnjak Ivkovich / Khechumyan estimate between 5,000 and 7,000 sworn officers with a population of 3 million. In 2017, a report by the "Union of Informed Citizens" estimates that there could be up to 13,500 officers (including those paid from the extrabudgetary police fund (A1 Plus, 'The number of RA police officers and vehicles', <http://en.a1plus.am/1268572.html>). This would be equivalent to 450 police officers per 100,000 of the population, which would subsume Armenia under the more heavily policed countries in the world, according to a 2013 Bloomberg ranking (<https://www.statista.com/chart/2987/the-most-heavily-policed-countries-in-the-world/>).

39 Interview with Armen Grigoryan, political analyst and civic activist, Yerevan, 11 April 2017.

## Interaction between protesters and police

For protesters, the behaviour of the police is often unpredictable and arbitrary. One day demonstrators are allowed to protest on one street; another day access to the same street is banned for protests by one group but possible for another group.<sup>40</sup> Yet, there is a general awareness that certain symbolic locations are usually banned, such as the area around the presidential building, the office of the Republican Party, and the Embassy of the Russian Federation.<sup>41</sup>

During the 2018 protests, demonstrators and the police opted for similar tactics as in 2015. Demonstrators conducted actions of civil disobedience, peaceful sit-ins and blocked several streets and squares in central Yerevan. In turn, police forces were forced once again into delicate situations, having to decide whether to apply force or not. Initially, they reverted to routine strategies, i.e. clearing streets by detaining protesters and blocking places in order to prevent large gatherings of people. On 22 April up to 280 people were arrested.<sup>42</sup> These reactions by the police led again to the unintended consequence that even more people joined the protests. However, fewer journalists were detained compared to previous years and in the end, both the activists and the state avoided an escalation.

During the Electric Yerevan protests, Vladimir Gasparyan, the chief of the Armenian police, tried to enter into dialogue with the protesters to appeal to their sense of patriotism. One activist reported that he asked the crowd to abandon Baghramyan Avenue, arguing that as a small country, Armenia could not afford this kind of upheaval. Although many people decided to obey and leave the street, hundreds remained seated.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, during the April 2018 protests, the deputy chief of the police of Yerevan, Valery Osi-pyan, came to the demonstration site to negotiate with the opposition and rally leader Nikol Pashinyan.<sup>44</sup>

Law enforcement agents, especially riot police, have not developed as predicted and intended by international donors that have been financing Armenia's security-sector reforms for many years. The police has learned its lessons in the interplay with protesters, but this has made it even more unpredictable:

‘The police became smarter. They know when and what should be done to, let's say, have the result they want but to avoid calls on police being tough. I wouldn't say that this is a positive change, obviously.’<sup>45</sup>

At the same time, the police is reportedly more and more intimidated by the bold behaviour of protesters. According to some activists, police officers embarrassed themselves in an open display of weakness. In particular rank-and-file police became very reluctant to follow orders to use force.

40 Interview with Artak Kirakosyan, Civil Society Institute, Yerevan, 10 April 2017.

41 Ditorid Observer 2017, 10.

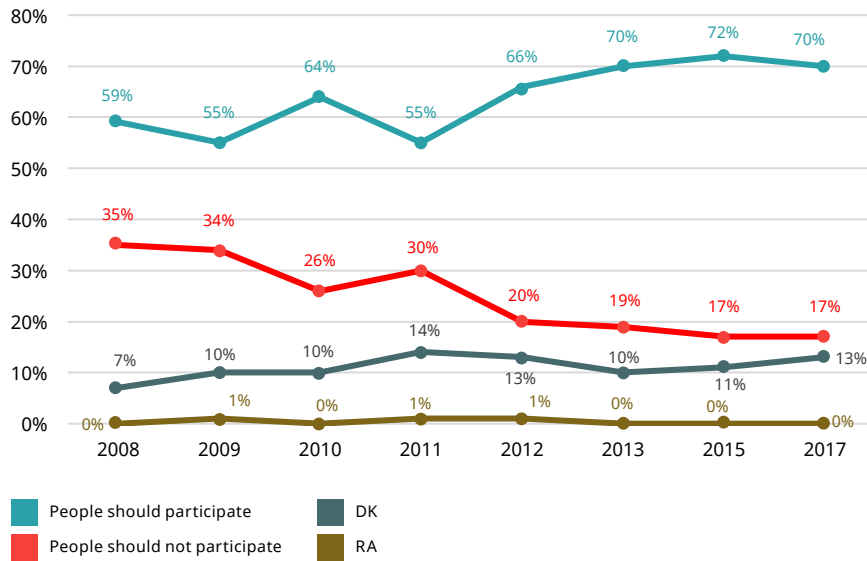
42 Vesti.ru, '280 protivnikov Sargsyana zaderzhany v Erevane' [280 opponents of Sarsyan detained in Yerevan], <https://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=3009980>.

43 Interview with Vahram Soghomonyan, activist/political scientist, Yerevan, 11 April 2017.

44 Armenpress, 'Protesters once again take to streets in Yerevan as demonstrations enter 2nd week', <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/930681.html>.

45 Interview with Mikayel Hovhannisyan, activist, Yerevan, 12 April 2017.

**FIGURE 10**  
Should people participate in protest actions?



n = 1,648

Source: Caucasus Barometer 2017 and respective readiness in society to participate in protest actions

According to experts and observers of the events, this was because the protests were ‘humanised’ by the organisers. The population also displayed a greater willingness to express their dissatisfaction by means of open street protest. ► **FIGURE 10**

Some activists reported that they ‘saw fear in the eyes of the chief of the police [who was present during Electric Yerevan] ... whereas for the last twenty years he was able to do whatever he wanted to’,<sup>46</sup> The fear spread to the government, especially during the 2016 Erebuni events, as one activist recalled:

‘During that time, authorities were trying to act very smoothly in order not to make people angry ... So that’s quite interesting ... people were forcing the police not to do anything ... Maybe that’s why Freedom House thinks that civil society in Armenia is powerful.’<sup>47</sup>

46 Interview with Valentina Gevorgyan, research associate, American University of Armenia, Yerevan, 7 April 2017.

47 Interview with Daniel Ioannisyants, Union of Informed Citizens, Yerevan, 10 April 2017.

## Interaction between journalists and police<sup>48</sup>

The events of March 2008 and later protests have contributed to a divide and mistrust between the media, especially critical media, and the police.<sup>49</sup> The police is often convinced that the media deliberately misinterpret information to cast a bad light on it, whereas the media complain about a lack of transparency and communication by police structures.<sup>50</sup> Both the media and the police play very specific roles in Armenian societal life. In Armenia, state agencies often seek to trespass the boundaries of public oversight, while the media try to narrow those boundaries as far as their scope allows.<sup>51</sup>

In the past, Armenian journalists were able to report more or less unimpeded on civic activities and protests. In recent years, since live broadcasts have become more common, the presence of journalists and camera people during protests has become more dangerous. During Electric Yerevan, on 23 June 2015, media representatives were required to gather in one place, where they were attacked by the police. When they showed resistance, they were beaten with truncheons and most of their equipment was confiscated. Many journalists were injured and/or arrested on this day.<sup>52</sup>

As early as 2009, the OSCE started to work intensively with both the police and the media, organising various workshops and a series of ‘Improvement of Police-Media Relations Roundtables’, resulting in a guidebook for police officers to help them cooperate with representatives of the mass media. In addition, the Council of Europe supported seminars in 2008 and 2009 held by the Helsinki Committee Armenia on cooperation between the police and the mass media. Although the exchange of information between the police and the media was improved, the problem is still not adequately solved, according to most interlocutors. The Armenian NGO Committee to Protect the Freedom of Expression published numerous statements expressing outrage about the inadequate use of force against journalists. The group complained in particular about the lack of accountability:

‘So there were twenty-two journalists and cameramen [during Electric Yerevan] recognised as aggrieved parties, but so far only four policemen have been held accountable for these incidents... which already happened almost two years ago.’<sup>53</sup>

During the Erebuni events, journalists testified that before 29 July 2015, police officers did not generally interfere in their work. However, on that date, several journalists were brutally beaten by both representatives of the police and unidentified officials in plain clothes acting in coordination with the police.<sup>54</sup>

48 The media landscape in Armenia is characterised by a relatively free Internet, but traditional media (print and television) are considered unfree and divided into various political and economic camps and interests (see Freedom House report, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2017/armenia>). Most journalists therefore feel more committed to their media entrepreneur than to public interest and informational value.

49 Hofstra 2012, 161.

50 Ibid., 161.

51 OSCE and National Center for Legal Researches, ‘Police-Media Relations in the Republic of Armenia’, 2010 report, <https://www.osce.org/yerevan/68200?download=true>, p. 6.

52 Interview with Arman Gharibyan, Human Rights Power, Yerevan, 12 April 2017.

53 Interview with Ashot Melikyan, Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression, Yerevan, 13 April 2017.



## Impunity

Impunity among public officials, especially police officers, is considered by many interviewees a grave problem of the rule-of-law system in Armenia. If among the rank and file of the police somebody is held accountable, this usually concerns police officers of the lowest rank. Although ill treatment and torture in police custody or pre-trial detention have not been completely eradicated in Armenia, due to the practice of covering up crime, there have rarely been any indictments of state or law enforcement officials who have broken the law, a situation that is criticised by human rights activists:

‘The problem is that in cases when we discover – by ‘we’ I mean civil society or lawyers – evidence of torture we don’t see proper investigation... We don’t even have a single case of proper investigation on torture by police... The quantity is less now, because the police needs foreign or Western grants like from the OSCE, from the US Embassy, from the European Union.’<sup>55</sup>

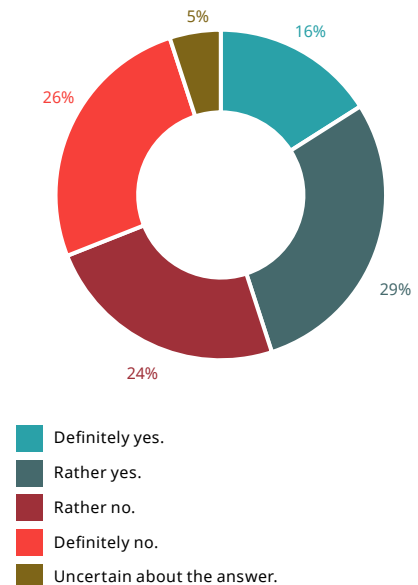
If cases are investigated at all, they usually do not result in convictions, because often they are suspended by the Special Investigative Service (SIS). Problematic is also that the investigator’s facilities are not transparent or open to public control. Civic activists are particularly concerned that investigations related to the killing of ten people during the events on 1 March 2008 are still held in secret and have been unjustifiably delayed. They fear that the same could happen with investigations into Electric Yerevan and the Erebuni hostage crisis. This is also reflected in the trust in other institutions to legally restore breaches of law and violations by police officers. ▶

FIGURES 11 + 12

In fact, since the protests in 2015 and 2016, despite repeated demands by civil society and international organisations,<sup>56</sup> the state has not published any account of police actions. Moreover, those responsible for violations of the laws on the freedom of assembly and expression have not yet been brought to justice. Those policemen who were indicted following the Erebuni events had to pay fines of around €500–600, but were allowed to remain in their positions.<sup>57</sup>

A consequence that nevertheless followed the Erebuni hostage crisis was the dismissal of the chief of the Yerevan police, Ashot Karapetyan.<sup>58</sup> Following the May 2018 events and the new government leader Nikol Pashinyan has appointed a new SIS head and launched an anti-corruption campaign against former elites. The anti-corruption drive has led to criminal charges or investigations into figures in Sarkisian’s formerly ruling Republican

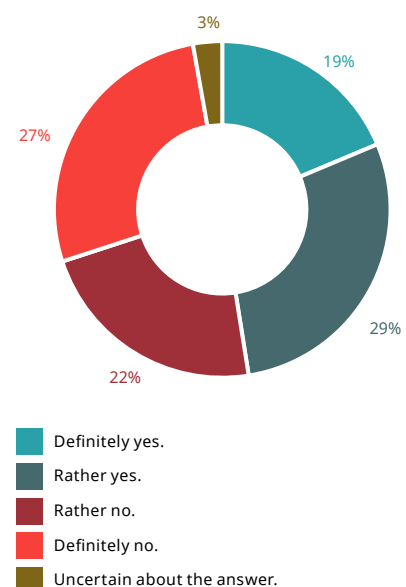
FIGURE 11  
If you ever suffer any arbitrary action by the police, do you think other law enforcement agencies will protect you?



n = 1,200

Source: Law enforcement arbitrariness index 2016, Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor/Advanced Research Group

FIGURE 12  
Do you think the rights violated by the police can be legally restored in Armenia?



n = 1,200

Source: Law enforcement arbitrariness index 2016, Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor/Advanced Research Group

54 Preliminary findings of the fact-finding mission of the Civic Solidarity Platform to Yerevan, Armenia, 28 July – 1 August 2016, ‘What happened in Armenia: the CSP reports’, <https://www.civicsolidarity.org/article/1155/what-happened-armenia-csp-reports>.

55 Interview with Daniel Ioannisyán, Union of Informed Citizens, Yerevan, 10 April 2017.

56 Report of the Monitoring Mission on the civil society, media and human rights situation in Armenia in relation to the events of 17 – 31 July 2016 by the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, September 2016, [http://eap-csf.eu/wp-content/uploads/Report\\_AM\\_Mission\\_final.pdf](http://eap-csf.eu/wp-content/uploads/Report_AM_Mission_final.pdf).

57 Interview with human rights lawyer, Protection of Rights without Borders, Yerevan, 13 April 2017.

58 Human Rights Watch, ‘Armenia Sacks Yerevan Police Chief’, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/08/09/armenia-sacks-yerevan-police-chief>.

party, including ex-army generals, customs officers and several other senior officials (see fn. 10 for charges against former President Robert Kocharian).<sup>59</sup>

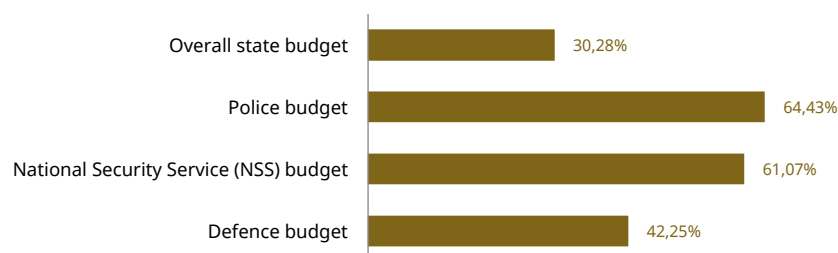
## ‘Serving the state, not the people’

There is a widespread belief in Armenia that the police is used for political purposes. Some also speak of a ‘politicisation of the police’.<sup>60</sup> This is widely acknowledged by civil society representatives, who at least until recently saw in the police a ‘servant’ of the former regime :

‘If an extreme situation for different political reasons emerges, all police actions become politically motivated. By and large, the law enforcement structures, notably the police, do not serve the law but the regime. They are de facto part of the regime. They understand that these protests can have an influence... they can disrupt the regime. For the most part, the entire regime counts on this force.’<sup>61</sup>

The former leader of the Armenian parliamentary opposition and new Armenian prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan, who led the 2018 protests, called on the police not to protect Sargsyan any longer ‘because they are not Serzh Sarkisian’s police, but the police of the Republic of Armenia and its people’.<sup>62</sup> Some interviewees went so far as to say that the state has been captured by the police in Armenia. This stands in contrast to other (semi-)authoritarian states, where the armed forces usually play the role of national guard. In Armenia, civil-military relations are of lesser relevance, because the police, not the army, have come to be the instrument of coercion and pressure.<sup>63</sup> Both structures face significant challenges due to restricted state resources. ► FIGURE 13

FIGURE 13  
Growth in the budgets of the police, National Security Service, and defence ministry of Armenia, 2011 – 2016



Source: Compilation by Journalists' Asparez Club: In: Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor and Partnership for Open Society Initiative, 'Deterioration of Freedom of Assembly in Armenia' (2017)

59 Deutsche Welle, 'Ex-Armenian President Robert Kocharian arrested', <https://www.dw.com/en/ex-armenian-president-robert-kocharian-arrested/a-44860220>.

60 Interview with Armen Grigoryan, political analyst and civic activist, Yerevan, 11 April 2017.

61 Interview with Ashot Melikyan, Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression, Yerevan, 13 April 2017.

62 Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, 'More Arrests In Yerevan As Armenian Opposition Protests Resume', <https://www.rferl.org/a/more-arrests-in-yerevan-as-armenian-opposition-protests-resume-/29180654.html>.

63 Interview with Richard Giragosian, Regional Studies Centre, Yerevan, 6 April 2017.

## Public control

Armenian civic activists engage in increasing police accountability by monitoring and documenting malpractices during protests. They take photos and send them to the police, asking for the names of the perpetrators. They criticise the police's missing identification tags, which are mandatory under the 2001 law on the police. Yet, police authorities usually refuse to provide civic activists with the names of the policemen involved in managing public order. Several activists and NGOs applied to the courts to reveal the names of policemen who had acted unlawfully on the streets, but rarely succeeded.

Often, especially since 2013, it is the other way around, and protesters are taken to court charged with an administrative offence – criticising or offending the police and its reputation – whenever a person has not complied with the legal order of a police officer. The sentence usually amounts to fines of 50,000–150,000 drams (about €80–250). According to human rights lawyers, this practice contradicts the Armenian constitution.<sup>64</sup>

The Group of Public Observers, a civil-society monitoring group, operates in police detention centres and prisons under the supervision of the Ministry of Justice. In the context of its mandate, the group focuses on the National Preventive Mechanism on the prevention of torture.<sup>65</sup> It is the only group of civic representatives, except for the ombudsman, allowed to access police detention centres to monitor the human rights situation in closed facilities. Torture in pre-trial detention places used to preoccupy foreign donors supporting the monitoring groups. Several interviewees confirmed that now, psychological degrading treatment is applied more often than physical violence. Several activists have expressed doubts about the effectiveness of the police monitoring groups, since often they are not permitted to enter facilities.

## Evaluation of international involvement

Apart from the OSCE office, various European embassies as well as the United States (through USAID) and the EU have funded projects aimed at the transformation and modernisation of the Armenian police. The first phase was characterised and dominated by material support and confidence building between international partners and the Armenian police leadership. The OSCE managed to install a system of community policing. Until the closure of its Yerevan office in August 2017, the OSCE conducted workshops with representatives of the central and regional police as well as police detention centres. Carel Hofstra, a former representative of the OSCE Office in Yerevan, described the results of the OSCE project as rather disappointing:

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Genya Petrosyan, Europe in Law Association, Yerevan, 13 April 2017.

<sup>65</sup> National Preventive Mechanisms are the national implementation mechanisms of the preventive system established by the Optional Protocol to the United Nations Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (OPCAT, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/OPCAT/Pages/OPCATIndex.aspx>). They are mandated to conduct regular visits to all types of facilities where persons are deprived of liberty.

‘The project would train tens of dozens of people, sometimes for several days at a time. They would sit through the training sessions, agree with the trainers and the philosophy, and sometimes participate actively and offer practical experiences and/or solutions. Then they would thank the trainers and the OSCE, fill in positive evaluation forms, and return to their daily lives, leaving the project team guessing as to the impact of their work.’<sup>66</sup>

Others harshly criticised the OSCE projects:

‘And the developments which we had after that in Yerevan, social movements and social protests, and the reaction of the police to these protesters showed that... this 2 million project of the OSCE was a waste of money and time.’<sup>67</sup>

Some of the interviewees were of the opinion that the reform programmes had an opposite, unintended effect, as one human rights lawyer described:

‘You can see that the work that was done, the money spent, and everything did not serve the idea to have democratic policing. But rather, we built a really strong police force with capacities to make them able to suspend everything that is happening in the country.’<sup>68</sup>

Generally, all sides put less emphasis on soft skills and accountability procedures as well as ethical guidelines, which with hindsight would have been critical for the reform process. Also, the lack of modules regarding the improvement of public order management techniques during the various police assistance programmes was a serious omission by the international actors involved. One observer noted that some of the riot police training tactics had a contrary effect:

‘It did not teach them responsibility of restraint. It instead gave them the techniques Western-style on how better to disperse or assault a crowd. Sadly. We saw this also in previous attempts.’<sup>69</sup>

Several studies confirmed that international assistance for the development of Armenia’s police-sector reform has largely failed.<sup>70</sup> The sobering but necessary insight is that international assistance to reform state power structures in post-Soviet (semi-)authoritarian states should be reconsidered. Conducting and supporting largely ineffective or even counterproductive reforms leads to a further decrease of citizens’ trust not only in national but also in international institutions.

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66 Hofstra 2012, 155.

67 Interview with David Amiryán, Open Society Foundations Armenia, Yerevan, 11 April 2017.

68 Interview with human rights lawyer, Protection of Rights without Borders, Yerevan, 13 April 2017.

69 Interview with Richard Giragosian, Regional Studies Centre, Yerevan, 6 April 2017.

70 Transparency International Anticorruption Center, ‘Statement on the effectiveness of the international assistance in police sector reforms’, <https://transparency.am/en/statements/view/233>.

## Conclusion: Implications for state-society relations

The recent protest cycle, public opinion polls, and statements from civic activists demonstrate that law enforcement structures are still not trusted – or trusted even less today – by the Armenian population. This is emblematic for missing trust in state institutions generally. This widespread lack of trust ultimately culminated in the collapse of the ruling regime and the demise of Serzh Sargsyan himself. Large groups in Armenian society are no longer afraid of the police, of being arrested, or of being taken into pre-trial detention. Due to an ongoing emancipation process (which can be attributed to various factors, including better connections on social media, support from the Armenian diaspora, and frustration due to the feeling of having nothing to lose), young people especially feel less vulnerable to police arbitrariness today and therefore more willing to engage in social protest to express widespread societal dissatisfaction.

A closer analysis of the evolution of the culture of policing in Armenia has demonstrated that some attempts to adapt the Armenian police to international security-sector standards have been undertaken. Yet, it is more adequate to speak of ‘transformation’ than of ‘reform’, because most state power structures, especially law enforcement agencies, have been rather averse to reform. This is despite huge efforts by international actors trying to support the reform process. These efforts are mostly assessed as futile or even counterproductive by Armenian civic society.

Deep barriers continue to exist between society and the police in Armenia. This is indicative of the lack of legitimacy of state power structures in the country. It remains to be seen whether the new government under Nikol Pashinyan will manage to break down these structures. There are certainly more efforts needed than to showcase the jailing of past leaders. This difficult task could be vital for the sustainability of political change induced by the 2018 ‘revolution’.

In fact, important changes were already under way before the toppling of the old regime in May 2018. This was reflected, on the one hand, in more confrontational interactions between state and citizenry, and, on the other hand, in the increasing heterogeneity of both entities. Since about 2013, Armenian society has become more diverse in terms of societal cleavages that run along geopolitical, socio-economic, and centre-vs-periphery lines. These cleavages also resonate, as shown above, in diverging perceptions of the police. The Armenian national police, according to numerous interview accounts, is not a monolithic bloc. There are traditionalists as well as reformers among high-ranking officials, and more open-minded and more submissive officers among the rank and file. Overall, however, the traditionalist and submissive elements still prevail.

Given the nature of the security sector in Armenia, with its pronounced culture of secrecy, the degree of public control of state power structures is still very rudimentary. What is needed are more reliable methods of monitoring the law enforcement sector, at least until a change in thinking about the role and purpose of the police has trickled down into the core of Armenia’s state power authorities.



The various protest waves in Armenia have shaped state-society relations through both the evolving culture of policing and the changing attitudes of societal groups. The increasing divergence in norms has made both state power structures and societal groups scrutinise the legitimacy of their respective actions and paved the way for the eruption of the underlying tensions. The patterns identified in this report are an important element in the causal chain that led to the unfolding of the recent protest wave and Serzh Sargsyan's resignation, and they will continue to shape state-society relations under the new political regime.

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### Author

Nadja Douglas

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### Address

**Centre for East European and International Studies  
(ZOiS) gGmbH**  
Mohrenstraße 60  
10117 Berlin  
[info@zois-berlin.de](mailto:info@zois-berlin.de)  
[www.zois-berlin.de](http://www.zois-berlin.de)

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