

EDITORIAL
BY SIMON THORNTON,
PROJECT DIRECTOR OF YOUNG CITIZENS IN KASA

YOUNG CITIZENS

March 2013- n° 0

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Why read this Newsletter?

1. You're bored
2. It's only a few pages
3. You're curious about the Young Citizens Project

A SHORT STORY....

I first visited Armenia as a volunteer. I spent ten months working at KASA doing various different tasks, including running an English club. At that time, we would talk about anything we wanted; I would invent a topic, make a presentation and then ask questions. There was only three or four clubs in Yerevan at that time, and even fewer in Gyumri. I left Armenia and returned to study in the UK. But I did not lose contact with my colleagues in Armenia. Throughout the year, they kept contacting me asking for advice and information about civil society, politics and philosophy. It was only after several months of these sorts of cryptic E-mails that I knew they were planning something big.

Eventually, a project emerged which had as its aim the development of civic activism among young Armenians. As someone who is both deeply interested in political and social questions and a lover of Armenia, I immediately wanted to get involved.

AN INCREDIBLY AMBITIOUS AND MULTIFACETED PROJECT

The project that developed is called 'Young Citizens of Armenia'. It is an incredibly ambitious and multifaceted project. It is centred around thematic youth clubs in Yerevan and Gyumri, at the time of writing we have no less than 10 youth clubs spread across Yerevan and Gyumri. These clubs are facilitated by a group of enthusiastic volunteers we call 'animators'. The animators, with assistance from me and the project team, develop youth clubs which focus on vital social and political issues facing Armenia and the world.

But that is only the beginning, through our seminars and roundtables, we give people in Yerevan and Gyumri the chance to meet and speak to leading experts in fields relating to civil society, and through our action days and twinning activities we encourage our volunteers to get active, organizing events and actions in Yerevan and Gyumri and collaborating with other regions in Armenia.

A PROJECT LED BY DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES

Our project team is led by the principle that, because democracy means the rule of the many, the many must be involved in the decision making of a country. In most countries around the world this is not the case, and Armenia is no exception. Our project, therefore, aims to provide the tools, both intellectual and physical, for young Armenians to substantively contribute to the running of their own country, thus making it more democratic.

We are not, however, naïve. We know the magnitude of such a principle; a participative and well informed youth does not emerge overnight. Our task is more modest. We want to help a small group of young Armenians in Yerevan and Gyumri develop themselves; learning how to be leaders, learning more about the issues and problems vital to a democratic society and able to present this information to others in a clear and effective way. This small group of volunteers will become multipliers, causing a metastatic effect as they meet and discuss with other Armenians both within the clubs and without.

THE MONTHLY THEME: MEDIA
NEXT MONTH'S THEME: ETHICS

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NEWS



New Club in Gyumri

We are pleased to announce the inauguration of "Debate Club" in KASA Gyumri. The club focuses on developing analytic and critical skills and promoting free expression among young Gyumretsis (14-18 years).

10
participants
at the first
meeting



Int'l Womens Day in Yerevan

To celebrate International Women's Day, we premiered the film "By Choice or By Chance" with Women's Resource Centre and The Screenery.

Premiered in
20
countries



Avetik Ishkhanyan in Espaces

On the 16th of March, we invited Avetis Ishkhanyan head of the Yerevan Helsinki Committee, to give a talk about human rights in Armenia.

TUESDAY

English Club: 3pm-4.30pm, KASA Gumri
English Club: 6pm-7.30pm, KASA Espaces

WEDNESDAY

French Club: 6pm-7.30pm, KASA Espaces

THURSDAY

French Club: 2pm-3.30pm, KASA Gumri
Art Club: 6.30pm-8pm, KASA Espaces

FRIDAY

Cine Club: 3pm-4.30pm, KASA Gumri
Psy Club: 6pm-8pm, KASA Espaces

SATURDAY

English Club: 1pm-2.30pm, KASA Gumri
Debates Club: 3pm-5pm, KASA Gumri
Human Rights Club: 3pm-4.30pm, KASA Espaces
Cine Club: 5pm-7pm, KASA Espaces
Intercultural Club: 5.30pm-7pm, Kasa Espaces

MICHAL DURIS THE ANIMATOR OF THE MONTH

What club do you animate and how did you come to animate this particular club?

I animate the English club. Initially I was not supposed to animate just to occasionally help the other animators. I started to like it. And it has already been 1 year.

How has the young citizens project impacted you and your perception of civil society in Armenia?

Well, I just learned incredible amount of interesting information about Armenia and Armenians I wouldn't have found in any book. My perception has changed completely. It is easy to make quick judgements and present simple

solutions without enough knowledge. The current state of civil society in Armenia is much more difficult than I've ever imagined. But that's for a loong discussion.

If you could change one thing about Armenian society, what would it be?

The roads. No, just kidding :) Definitely the dependence of young people on their families. It is a lot about money, but taking more your own decisions doesn't cost you anything. Just a lot of courage. The results are worth that risk. Many young people would be happier, although at the expense of their traditional-thinking parents.



SAMVEL MARTIROSYAN TALKS ABOUT
THE MONTHLY THEME...



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Difficult Freedom: Elections, Media and Armenia

During the 2008 parliamentary elections in Armenia Samvel Martirosyan contributed to the operation of the Ilditord.org web platform for reporting electoral violations. When asked if the platform was used this year, and, if so, to what effect, he responded, firstly, by saying that during the 2008 elections the Ilditord platform was a big thing, and it was really active. They received about 1 100 reports and it was the only website that suffered a hack attack during the election day.

This year, however, they received about three times less reports, a figure which Samvel observes 'does not necessarily mean that the elections were better; maybe people were less active. Its hard to judge.' Indeed, its hard to judge, but the activist Lena Nazaryan did not find it hard to judge and blame the international observers for legitimating a "fraudulent" election. Was she right to do so? Samvel explains that 'My perception is that they prepared the reports three weeks before the elections – everything was clear before the elections. There was no competition.' He adds that "it is one thing to observe and it is another thing to interpret". All observations have to be interpreted in some way, and maybe

it is the case that international observers' interpretations were less vigorous than hoped for.'

Apart from the international observers interpretations of the elections, it is worth asking how the Armenian media interpreted the elections; was the coverage fair? Samvel argues that whilst in 2008 the coverage of election candidates was very unfair, this year it was better. Most candidates got some positive media coverage. He even maintains that sometimes the opposition candidates got more coverage than the incumbent president. Part of the reason for this, he argues, is a general improvement in the freedom of Armenian media. 'Five years ago', Samvel argues, 'the media was under total control, today it is still under control, but because the major media outlets need to compete with the internet, where all information is available, they have begun reporting in a better way.' The message is clear; for Samvel new media is acting as a force pushing older and more traditional media sources to improve their quality. Samvel is still far from saying Armenia media is free, but he is an optimist and sees a please trend in media freedom in Armenia.

Who is Samvel Martirosyan?

Samvel Martirosyan has been a recognised media activist, IT expert and social commentator for many years. He has been involved in many different activist and research based projects, including the foundation of the Ilditord.org platform for the last Armenian parliamentary election, a space which enabled Armenian citizens to report any voting irregularities. Furthermore, Samvel regularly gives interviews and lectures, discussing new innovations in the media world and their social significance. He visited Espaces Centre last year, and impressed our volunteers with his reasoned and balanced approach to his subject, so we invited him back again this year, and managed to interview him about the recent Armenian presidential elections, and his musings about media, education and the future of Armenia.

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