



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

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Title of Research Proposal: Information and Communication Technologies and Political Development: Toward a Theory of Cosmetic Democracy in the Former Soviet bloc. Case Study: Armenia

Topic of Research

What is the impact of information and communications technologies (ICTs) and networks on the political development of post-communist countries in the Caucasus? This research focuses on assessing and understanding the ICT capacity of over 20 institutions across the executive, legislative and judicial branches of the government of Armenia, and determining the nature of the relationship between technological and institutional transformations.

Relevance and Contribution to Field

This research is designed to question and supplement existing literature, countering writings that see Western 'techno-globalism' as an inevitable and unassailable force and technology as its great 'liberalizing' driver. Those who are proponents of such views tend also to view the free market as a positive and objective transformer, and the information society and e-business scales as useful measures that act in the interest of developing economies. Development is thus seen as a generic destination rather than what Babb calls a "holistic journey that is, ultimately, an expression of people's unique

national vision”¹. The idea that ICTs are positively transforming relationships between rulers and their citizens, and between rulers and people themselves, is said to be upheld by “utopian techno-revolutionaries”.² To an extent, in contrast, this work is intended to supplement literature that has been developed around the competing concept of ‘techno-nationalism’, the view that technology is something to be harnessed for the purpose of acquiring power. More specifically, this work is an inductive, theory-building analysis that attempts to define the specific conditions under which ICTs are able – or not – to bring about more transparent institutions in government. This is underpinned by a corresponding assumption that transparency comes with a willful devolution of power from the executive, upheld by leadership commitment to promoting democratic participation and infrastructure modernization.

Approach and research methodology; list of research sites

This project is comprised of both qualitative and quantitative analysis. The bulk of the qualitative analysis used for the theory-building exercise comes from more than 70 interviews in 20 institutions of the Armenian government, albeit with heavy emphasis on the executive branch. These institutions include a full range of government ministries, as well as Parliament, the Constitutional Court, the Central Bank, and 2 Commissions. Over a six month period spent in the heart of Yerevan, Armenia, information was gathered in a series of field notes, and what began as a series of informal discussions was merged into a more formal template for analyzing the ICT capacity of institutions. This template has now been merged into an “ICT Assessment” tool, which facilitates some level of comparative analysis of the capacities of various ministries and organizations. Each institution was explored individually, prior to the generalization of patterns across cases. The structure of the research framework which informs the template for data gathering, distinguishes between four types of institutional capacity: financial, human, organizational, and technological.

The process of gathering qualitative information through interviewing can only be effectively leveraged if there is a strict framework of categories and definitions in which to organize it. Very often, interviewing and/or surveying are the only means of gathering information of this kind – as there is frequently a dearth of updated documentation in developing country governmental structures plagued by insufficient resources. Few governmental organizations in Armenia without explicit previous experience in ICT development appear to have strategic plans outlining their institutional objectives, particularly as they relate to improving the levels of transparency. The complex interplay of the components of institutional ICT capacity requires that conclusions be drawn - often about the same issue - through a number of different questions and analytical perspectives.

The quantitative aspect of this project is based on a dataset compiled over the last year. This dataset is comprised of a large range of indicators that speak either to ICT penetration (i.e., figures from the International Telecommunication Union, the World Bank, etc.), or to transparent governance in more than 180 countries. The objective of this analysis is to determine whether significant relationships exist between ICT presence and transparency/good governance, and whether such causality can be

¹ {{53 Babb, Annalee C. 2003; }}

² {{177 Allison, Juliann Emmons 2002 /s35; }}

inferred. While of course the challenge of isolating independently causal variables remains, this analysis will attempt to control for factors such as population and GDP, when accounting for broad outcome variables like ‘rule of law’, ‘good governance’, or ‘transparency’.

In addition to interviewing IT employees and government workers on the inside of government bodies, it became apparent that a view from the ‘outside’ would be a good way of examining whether and how much the government and bureaucracy has ‘developed’ – and how transparent it is to its primary constituents. Thus, if indeed ICTs do not lead to a manifestation of liberal democratic value systems as reflected in government institutions, then the collective capacity of those institutions is perhaps best assessed by those they are meant to serve: the citizens. A survey instrument was designed to gauge the perceptions of the citizenry in Armenia, and was deployed with the help of the Armenian Sociological Association in Yerevan. The questions were presented to representatives of four hundred households in three different cities: Yerevan (the capital), Kapan (in the South), and Gyumri (towards the north).

Institutions studied included:

- A. Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- B. Ministry of Healthcare
- C. Ministry of Education and Science
- D. Ministry of Environmental Protection
- E. Ministry of Energy
- F. Ministry of Agriculture
- G. Ministry of Culture and Youth Affairs
- H. Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs
- I. Ministry of Transport and Communication
- J. Ministry of Urban Development
- K. Ministry of Trade and Economic Development
- L. Ministry of Finance and Economy
- M. Ministry of Justice
- N. Ministry for Regional Administration and Infrastructure Coordination
- O. Securities Commission
- P. State Commission on the Protection of Economic Competition Commission
- Q. The Constitutional Court of the Republic of Armenia
- R. Central Bank of Republic of Armenia
- S. The National Assembly of Armenia / Parliament
- T. Government/The Prime Minister’s Office

Research findings and preliminary conclusions

Given the amount of money and number of ICT-related projects that are underway thanks to donors working in the region (i.e., World Bank, UNDP, USAID, TACIS, CIDA, SDC, etc.), there does not seem to be much evidence in favor of the absorptive capacity of the government institutions surveyed in this assessment. After determining through quantitative analysis (using transcendental logarithmic regression) that linear, deterministic conceptions of ICTs with political development consistently overestimate the degree to which ICT causally impacts various proxies for political development (i.e., such as government effectiveness, transparency, civil liberties and political rights, etc.

etc.), this research proposes an alternative and more nuanced approach to the study of technology impact.

Preliminary conclusions support the finding that Armenia – like many of its post-communist counterparts – is emerging as a ‘cosmetic democracy’. For the purposes of this dissertation, a ‘cosmetic democracy’ is defined as a state in which the trappings of modern institutional transformation are intact (due mainly to the work of donor organizations), but in which the overarching political culture results in a lack of commitment to transparency and service delivery. These ‘trappings’ referred to above are actually exacerbated by the presence of new technologies, which gives them the appearance of capacity that they do not possess. Across the range of institutions studied, a general dearth of capacity was discernible, more so in the areas of human and organizational – than in financial and technical.

Future research agendas

Future research includes the exploration of the various types of government-to-constituent (G2C) relationships that are essentially the litmus test for the extent to which ICTs are successfully ‘modernizing’ the states. Ideally, it would be useful to attempt to replicate this analysis in neighboring post-communist states – and also most particularly in the case of Estonia – which is touted by many as the poster-child for successful ICT implementation over the course of the last five years.

Policy recommendations

The main policy recommendation at this point rests on the idea that the coordination of donors working in the Armenian development scene is critical to avoid some of the replication of effort and fragmentation of market that is currently visible. Some will say that this is nothing new, and has already been attempted by several organizations; however it has been underway without apparent success, and efforts should be made to strategically reconfigure this process.

It has not, also, been approached from a sustainability angle. The main success stories in this realm within the Armenian government are hinged upon the existence of innovators - or ‘champions’ – that have risen through the ranks but have been able to maintain some level of entrepreneurial spirit. There is no infrastructural capacity (or financial management of any kind) that can support these individuals, who are operating largely on shoe-string budgets. In the long run, this work to the severe detriment of the government, because the disparity between the capacity of institutions – and particularly between the financially-oriented economic/trade ministries & central bank and those ministries tasked with social welfare (including education, health, culture, environment) is growing. The greater the inconsistency that prevails between the communication capacity of these institutions, the more incoherent the public diplomacy between the will be, and the wider the experiential gap between that which the outside world sees, and what the average Armenian citizen lives.