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The practice of political rights and patron–client relations: a case study of a party in Armenia

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates how patron–client relations impact the practice of citizens' political rights, including the rights of free and voluntary suffrage and party membership, in Armenia. It presents a case study of a pervasive clientelist network reaching from a powerful patron, the founder of a political party, to intermediaries in positions of authority, and large numbers of citizens. It illustrates how politicians use the informal power of directors/managers of private and state organizations and bureaucrats over citizens' social security in order to maintain power. Referring to the debate on coexistence or contradictions between political citizenship and clientelism, the article highlights the importance of clarifying if the notion of political citizenship is used in normative or in descriptive terms. It argues that in descriptive terms patron–client relations strongly impact the practice of citizens' political rights in Armenia. Furthermore, in normative terms, in this case study clientelist relations involved various illicit activities and violations of citizens' political rights.

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Introduction

It has been widely acknowledged that patron–client relations play an important role in the internal politics of the post-Soviet states (Stefes 2005; Vorozheikina 1994). With few exceptions, however, comprehensive ethnographic accounts of the workings of patronage/clientelism in these countries have been lacking (on Kyrgyzstan see Ismailbekova 2012, 2014). This article contributes to filling this gap by investigating how clientelism impacts citizens' political participation and the practice of political rights in Armenia. More specifically, it presents a case study of a pervasive clientelist network reaching from a powerful patron, the founder of an influential political party, to directors/managers of private and state organizations, state officials and other intermediaries, and large numbers of citizens. Furthermore, it also seeks to contribute to the theoretical debate on whether the notions of political citizenship and clientelism should be seen as contradictory or rather coexisting and mutually impacting one another.

In the article, I provide a detailed description of how patron–client relations influenced the practice of political rights of my field site's residents, including the practices of becoming

party members and voting in elections. Furthermore, I demonstrate how the informal patron–client relations penetrated state administration and organizations, which in turn functioned as some of the key intermediary links ensuring the large scale recruitment of citizens into the patron’s network. Thus, the article illustrates how politicians use the informal power of state officials and directors of organizations over citizens’ social security (e.g. security of jobs, education or welfare) in order to maintain political and economic power in Armenia. The ethnographic account thus supports the argument of Stefes (2006, 4), according to which in states with a centralized system of corruption, including Armenia, ‘formal authority provides access to informal sources of power, which in turn reinforce formal authority’.

Pervasive systemic corruption and patronage were characteristic of the entire Soviet Union, and post-Soviet states inherited this legacy; in many cases members of the former elites remained in powerful positions (Stefes 2006). In post-Soviet Armenia, pyramids of corruption ‘overlap with the formal state hierarchies’ and pervade ‘the entire bureaucracy’ (Stefes 2006, 100), branches of government are not independent from one another, and economic and political power are fused meaning that the loss of political power would imply vast economic losses to the elite (Payaslian 2011; Stefes 2006).¹ ‘Adhering to the democratic rules is therefore a risky option [for the elite – M.B.], whereas utilizing economic resources to secure electoral victories is a viable option’ (Stefes 2006, 129, 130).

As of May 2017, Freedom House official website classifies Armenia as a semi-consolidated authoritarian regime with a democracy score of 5.3 for 2016 on a scale from 1 (‘the highest level democratic progress’) to 7 (the lowest). Electoral process ranks even lower on the scale (predominantly 5.75 since 2007). Armenian constitution as amended in 2005 (Articles 28 and 30) and in 2015 (Article 46), and the RA Electoral Code adopted in 2016 (Article 4) secure the rights of citizens to vote and to join political parties based on principles of freedom and voluntariness, and in this article I also demonstrate how patron–client relations contribute to the curtailment of these political rights.

The article is based on a long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted primarily in an Armenian town I call Masiv and partly in nearby towns.² During the thirteen-month fieldwork and several visits over the following years I investigated post-Soviet citizenship practices in Armenia focusing on the case study of Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan (who had arrived to Armenia in 1988–1992). While the fieldwork initially focused on refugees, long term residence allowed for investigating wide-scale local processes which engaged refugees and local residents alike. I conducted participant observation and in-depth interviews on political participation with refugees (65.2% of whom had already been Armenian citizens), local residents, state officials, and representatives of various state/public, private, international and non-governmental organizations. Further methods of data collection included a quantitative survey with refugees³ and discourse analysis (e.g. of pre-election speeches). To protect the identity of my informants I do not disclose if the bulk of the presented data were collected prior to parliamentary elections in 2007 or 2012.

The patron–client network I discuss is one of the most visible ones in Armenia. Its prominent patron has often been cited in the media as one of the richest oligarchs in Armenia. Although N is a relatively young party, it gained significant success in the parliamentary elections held on 12 May 2007, becoming one of the most influential parties in the parliament. In early 2007, the head of a party’s election headquarters claimed that the party had allegedly nearly 370,000 members, an impressive number for a country with a population

of slightly more than 3 million people, including those of not-voting age ('NSS of the RA' 2008, 22). As for my own survey data, 38% of my respondents with Armenian citizenship were members of the N party, 9% were members of other parties, and 53% had not joined a party. The fact that 47% of my respondents with citizenship were members of political parties was unexpected at first, especially given that many of them commonly expressed doubts concerning citizens' ability to impact politics in Armenia.⁴ Nonetheless, many of Masiv's residents were actively engaged in politics, participated in elections and pre-election events. Thus, according to RA Central Electoral Commission's official website, during parliamentary elections in 2007 and 2012 voters' turnout was estimated at 59.4% and 62.3%, whereas in the region of the fieldwork it was higher than average (about 62% and 65% respectively). Hence, I also discuss why and how so many people joined and supported the N party, particularly in my field site.

Although many of my informants did not believe in the effectiveness of electoral voting in Armenia and assumed that elections could easily be faked, the gathered data indicate that many used their political rights instrumentally, thus attributing a certain value to them. After gaining more tangible political rights since independence in 1991, my informants experienced how various politicians tried to obtain their votes by offering gifts, money, or visible community support in return, particularly during pre-election campaigns. As an informant jokingly said, 'I wish elections took place every month in Armenia', implying that politicians tended to serve people better in pre-election periods. I argue that many of my informants used their political rights of suffrage and party membership not or not only to support parties they favoured (e.g. according to the leader's charisma or political programme), but also or, perhaps more importantly, to engage in patron–client relations. No doubt, many citizens were compelled to enter such relations for fear of losing their jobs, state/private welfare or valuable informal ties with people of influence. In spite of this, many poor citizens engaged in clientelist relations eagerly, hoping to gain benefits and social security while lacking its provision by the state. While numerous informants exchanged their political rights for community benefits and personal gains, at the same time many also believed that the party leader would indeed serve people well and supported his party sincerely. Thus I argue that the practice of political rights in Armenia is strongly impacted by patron–client relations.

Below I first outline the conceptual debate on patron–client relations and political citizenship. In the following sections I depict the patron's charity; the election campaign and resource distribution in the pre-election period; the process of mass recruitment for the party and reasons for joining and supporting it. Finally, after discussing a comparative case of recruitment in another party, I sum up my conclusions.

The debate on political citizenship and patron–client relations

In his seminal essay on 'Citizenship and Social Class' T. H. Marshall ([1951] 1977) defines the political element of citizenship as 'the right to participate in the exercise of political power, as a member of a body invested with political authority or as an elector of the members of such a body' (78). In turn, 'the patron-client relationship', according to Scott (1972, 92),

may be defined as a special case of dyadic (two-person) ties involving a largely instrumental friendship in which an individual of higher economic status (patron) uses his own influence and resources to provide protection or benefits, or both, for a person of lower status (client)

who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal services, to the patron.

According to Scott (93, 94), patron–client relations are characterized by several features including inequality, reciprocity, ‘face-to-face character’ and ‘diffuse flexibility’; these may also be characterized by trust, affection and a sense of obligation that develop over time. The patron may benefit much more from the relationship than the clients, yet the fact that he needs clients and reciprocates with them distinguishes patron–client ties from the relationship of ‘pure coercion or formal authority’ (93). As Scott (95) notes, usually a patron only has few clients that he can have a direct interpersonal tie with, while the majority of his followers are connected to him through intermediaries or brokers.

It is not uncommon for scholars to oppose political citizenship and clientelism or ‘client-ship’ (Taylor 2004). Thus, according to Taylor (2004) citizenship is characterized by autonomous political agency, rights, and equality between the politician and the voter; it is based on the recognition that citizens are the ‘ultimate keepers of sovereignty’ (214). Like citizenship, client-ship is also not devoid of agency, and it also grants people an identity of ‘a political being’ (214, 215). Furthermore, according to Taylor (215), both citizens and clients are able to grant or withhold legitimacy. However, in contrast to citizenship, client-ship is characterized by inequality, exchange of ‘support in return for material benefit’, favours rather than rights, contingent provisions rather than laws, customs rather than procedures, and personal ties rather than formal relationships (214). Furthermore, Taylor contends that clients’ loyalty and their desire to vote are based on the charisma of the leader and recognition of one’s unequal position rather than on ideological motives. Client-ship is

not about democracy but about negotiated authoritarianism; that is, the power relationships between the parties are acknowledged – and even accepted – as being inherently and steeply unequal but each needs the other in order to further their cause, and as such even the subaltern dealer can wield a little power. (214)

Thus, participation and agency are false measures of citizenship, since ‘participation under conditions of client-ship is as meaningful as that under citizenship’ (215). One may derive that even the sincerity of the vote cannot be a measure of citizenship, since it may also pertain to client-ship. Ultimately, then, according to Taylor (215, 216), it is the inequality between voters and leaders that distinguishes client-ship from citizenship. For others, these are also distinguished by principles of particularism vs. universalism (Schneider and Zúniga-Hamlin 2005).

Fox (1994) makes a similar distinction between citizenship and clientelism in an article tellingly entitled ‘The Difficult Transition from Clientelism to Citizenship: Lessons from Mexico’. According to him, an indicator of such a transition is ‘the process by which poor people gain access to whatever material resources the state has to offer without having to forfeit their right to articulate their intentions autonomously’, i.e. without being coerced to enter patron–client relationships (153). Thus, in his view, subordination in exchange for welfare distinguishes clientelism from citizenship. In order to explain varying degrees of coercion, Fox proposes to view authoritarian clientelism and citizenship as poles of a continuum, using the term ‘semiclientelism’ for ‘the multiplicity of political relationships in between’ these poles (157). For him, authoritarian clientelism is characterized by the ability of political elites to enforce compliance through the threat of coercion (e.g. in cases of authoritarian or military regimes or vote buying by political machines), while ‘semiclientelist political relations induce compliance more by the threat of the withdrawal of

carrots than by the use of sticks' (153, 157). Ballot secrecy could assist in the transition to semiclientelism or citizenship; still, when entire communities are expected to support a certain power, individual ballots' secrecy is hardly helpful (157, 158).

However, numerous authors have criticized the opposition between citizenship and clientelism by pointing out that in practice they coexist; some argue that the practices of clientelism/patronage should not necessarily be viewed negatively and may assist the process of democratization, advancing the practice of citizens' social rights or political participation (Gay 1998; Schneider and Zúniga-Hamlin 2005). Thus, Gay (1998) criticizes approaches stressing only the negative effects of clientelism, e.g. preventing the organization and protest of the marginalized masses, making them dependent on patron's good will, being provided only with insignificant rewards. He maintains that these arguments are not necessarily false, yet in certain conditions clientelism may play a positive role in democratic consolidation (7, 12). He notes that often clients pursue collective goals, with entire regions making deals with politicians; thus 'clientelism might be embraced as a popular political strategy' (14). This may happen if citizenship and universalism 'take on very different meanings' in reality; if people get disillusioned with elections and corrupt politicians, preferring to rely on clientelist relations which may prove more beneficial (16). Furthermore, politicians' favours may be perceived as rights by the population and politicians failing to provide may lose support. Finally, he maintains that clientelist practices are 'not necessarily devoid of ideological content' and that 'there is no necessary contradiction between rewarding patronage at the ballot box and "voting one's conscience"' (15).

Similarly, Schneider and Zúniga-Hamlin (2005) argue that the rights of marginalized citizens can be advanced by clientelist practices. They bring examples of clientelist leaders who advanced citizen rights by encouraging marginalized groups' participation in local decision-making processes or by directing state resources and jobs to needy and underrepresented citizens, but by this also built clientelist support. In turn, in her study on Bolivia Lazar (2004, 228) argues that 'clientelism is a part of citizenship practice'. She acknowledges that in her field site clients were in a subordinate position, yet views political agency rather than equality as the 'crucial aspect of citizenship' (230). She argues that her informants, fearing 'unrepresentative' politics, valued politicians' personalities more than political programmes, supporting those they deemed approachable, sincere and generous (240). By trying to build personal relations with such politicians, they attempted to 'substantiate citizenship' (240), 'assert a greater representativity of politics', and gain individual and communal advantages. She acknowledges though, that such a strategy was hardly to be relied upon after elections.

In a similar vein, in her study on Kyrgyzstan Ismailbekova (2012, 2014) argues that patronage should not be seen as incompatible with democracy. In this case, extended kinship relations are used to justify patron-client ties, thus rendering them less hierarchical and infused with trust and reciprocity. Based on the assumption of common kinship, people believe to have some power over the patron, who is expected to conform to kinship norms and honour the decisions of the community's elders (2012, 325, 326). Given that Kyrgyz society is dominated by kinship and regional affiliations, in Ismailbekova's case study people genuinely supported their 'native son', an oppositional candidate. Assuming that he would represent their interests and expecting protection and particularistic benefits in return, they actively participated in the elections, voted sincerely, and at the same time reinforced patron-client ties.

In my view, both of the outlined approaches provide valuable insights and do not have to be seen as contradictory: while the scholars opposing citizenship and clientelism rely on the normative concept of liberal democratic citizenship, their opponents use the concept predominantly in a descriptive sense. To avoid confusion, hence, it is important to clarify how the concept of citizenship is used. Such a distinction is implicit in Marshall's essay as he differentiates between ideals and practices of citizenship rights. The normative dimension may thus refer to ideals of what citizenship, including its legal attributes and practices, should imply. However, if the concept of citizenship is disentangled from its normative connotations (e.g. of free political participation, civil engagement or equality) and is used to denote merely a status of nation-state membership implying citizen rights and duties, it may be used for studying citizenship struggles or actual practices of rights which may deviate from its emic or etic ideals. In descriptive terms, the concept may also be applied in various contexts, including authoritarian or totalitarian ones. In fact, various authors demonstrate that citizenship has been used as a method of sanctions by states (e.g. Alexopoulos 2006) or may reinforce social inequalities through unequal attribution of rights in legislation and practice (Holston 2008).

In this study I analyse how citizens actually practised their political rights of suffrage and party membership. However, normative approach is important here too, since liberal democratic ideals are reflected in the Armenian legislation and shared by numerous citizens.⁵ Hence, I discuss how the described clientelist practices contributed to the curtailment of citizens' political rights in the normative sense.

The patron and his charity

Ashot Aramian, who owns a network of various high-scale enterprises, is reportedly one of the wealthiest oligarchs in Armenia. His native region, of which Masiv is part, is considered to be the centre of his economic and political power. During elections his party was particularly successful in this region, and patron–client ties were crucial for this success.

In the field Aramian's name was often pronounced together with the word 'benefactor' [A: *bareerar*]. This was the case in favourable media reports, particularly on TV channels under his influence, in the words of many residents and state officials. Media often represented him as being a sponsor of sports and culture, having strong family values; at times he was compared to Armenian entrepreneurs and benefactors of the pre-Soviet period. Critical publications on Aramian accusing him of tax evasion or paying low taxes due to laws that privilege oligarchs, redistributing only a small amount of 'unpaid taxes' to people and buying citizens' votes were also abundant.

While many across the republic learnt about Aramian's charity only before the 2007 elections, in Masiv he had been known to the population for many years before. According to the head of a campaign headquarter, Aramian's charitable activities started in the region in the late 1990s, and later extended across the republic. Most informants were well aware of the charity, not only because it was covered in detail by an affiliated TV station, but because many had benefited from such provisions. When asked, people of different ages or occupations listed various types of support [A: *ognutyun*] made on Aramian's behalf.⁶ Such provisions included presents or money distributed to individuals, support provided or hospitality offered (A: *pativ tal* – literally 'honour paid') to vulnerable or distinguished groups of population (e.g. pensioners, veterans, children of war martyrs, teachers, pupils,

students), and actions benefitting the town's community, organizations, public spaces and infrastructure (e.g. hospitals, schools, transportation stops, gas infrastructure). Thus, according to a housewife,

He does a lot for the town and the population. Once every 2–3 months he appears live on TV, and people address him ... with their problems. For example, they appealed to him saying there was no minibus going to the [X] district and he organized it. (...) Those students who study well and cannot pay for the study, he pays for them. My children's school will soon have gas supply with our joint efforts, (...) many other schools [too]. He always organizes the 'last bell' [school graduation party] in the city, there is always firework. (...) [On TV] he always says: 'no problem', and we see that he does what he promised, things get done.

Furthermore, Aramian organized celebrations of holidays and rituals that had been traditional since the Soviet period, for instance for female teachers on the 8th of March (International Women's Day), or for WWII veterans on the 9th of May. Lacking acknowledgement and social security in present-day Armenia and nostalgic about the Soviet past, representatives of these groups valued such events which made them feel appreciated, acknowledged their contributions to the society, created a festive atmosphere and a feeling of continuity with the socialist past.

Thanks to the charity, the oligarch was very popular among the population in Masiv. Some men saw him as a role model. According to an interlocutor, Aramian had fulfilled every man's dream by creating wealth, providing first and foremost for his family and kin, and also for the native region and the country. Many believed that Aramian was generous and would not refuse to support anyone if asked for. People told tales about him giving money to the poor or to the workers of his enterprises when he met them.

Many also believed that he genuinely cared about people and supported them not only for gaining their votes, as he had launched his charity long before creating his party. Thus, a 72 year-old pensioner, a party activist herself in the Soviet period, hung Aramian's poster at the entrance to her house. 'I really like this boy', she told me with a smile. She knew about his charity and her children won prizes during the pre-election lottery (described below). 'He didn't help me in particular', she said, 'but I have heard a lot. He distributes in general to people, not only for elections, he always helps'. When asked why he ran for elections then, she replied that he rightfully did so to preserve his wealth. She, as many others, appreciated the long-term feature of his provisions.

Only several of my respondents were openly critical. Thus, an informant, citing Karl Marx, said that 'the initial capital is stolen' by 'those who now have millions', and believed oligarchs and people working closely for them to be bandits. 'Let's say this [person] has money and he is investing 100 million to get the place [in the parliament]', he continued, 'he does so to earn 200 million let's say, and he knows that he will make this sum. Politics is all about business, and everyone knows this'. Another informant shared the viewpoints expressed in critical media; she believed that Aramian evaded taxes, redistributed only a small amount of the wealth that actually belonged to the people, and exploited the workers of his enterprises by not registering many as employees and paying them a small salary for long hours of work.

Let me now turn to the party's campaign and resource distributions which significantly increased just before elections.

The party's campaign and pre-election resource distribution

According to critical media, the Armenian president and the oligarch allegedly created the party as a strategy to direct votes away from the opposition; the oligarch's reputation as a benefactor was to be used to attract those poor and unsatisfied with the current political rule to the newly created party.

Several months before the elections numerous campaign headquarters were established across the country. These were among the most visible and numerous headquarters in the region and in the capital, situated in buildings along the main roads and carrying massive posters of the party. In Masiv too, many posters were put up on buildings or in shops and organizations, representing Aramian himself or carrying party slogans. This was quite an effective message in itself demonstrating the enormous economic power of Aramian and the vast number of his allies.

The oligarch's meetings with residents of various localities were covered in detail by television channels under his influence. The party's campaign focused on resource distributions and on Aramian's character, charisma, power and promises. The meetings often involved him giving presents to communities, e.g. an ambulance car for a local hospital. While a popular belief in Armenia holds that politicians strive to power for appropriating resources ('eating' in colloquial language), in his public speeches Aramian often stressed that he already had everything he wished for and was running for elections to help improve people's lives and build a flourishing country. He stressed that he always fulfilled his promises, turned words into actions, was strict with people working for him, and promised to dismiss anyone who would abuse the state office and 'neglect the territory' [A: *taratsqe antesi*].

As for the party and its programme, the oligarch usually touched upon them briefly and vaguely, claiming that he had gathered people fit to work in every area. N is a centre-right party advocating economic liberalism, yet during the speeches, the party's head did not scrutinize the details of intended economic policies, but put accent on supporting social welfare instead. On the whole, his speeches promised to build a successful economy, resolve pressing pragmatic problems faced by communities, support vulnerable groups and fulfil people's hopes. Unlike the case study of Ismailbekova (2012, 2014), kinship rhetoric did not play an important role in the party's propaganda, and even if regional affiliation was often stressed, it was not made central as the party aimed to reach out to the entire republic.

The oligarch's power and superior position were strongly pronounced in the campaign. For instance, one of the posters of his party read 'The powerful – fair, the weak – protected'. This slogan explicitly depicted the population as composed of those weak vs. powerful, instead of representing all citizens as equal subjects of political agency. According to Taylor (2004), inequality inherent in patron–client relations is typically justified based on frameworks of naturalism or liberalism/historicism. While liberalism explains inequalities in terms of merit, naturalism is based on a shared assumption that inequalities in power and wealth are 'natural', and though the weak are subordinated, those powerful are responsible for their security (216). Referring to charismatic patrons, Taylor (215) writes:

as mere people-in-the-plaza, we get caught in their sway and are glad to give them our devotion, relieved that the king has come to save us, comforted that we are able, at last, to surrender our troubles to a higher being.

Similarly, Aramian took upon himself the responsibility to provide for those 'weak' while his clients in Masiv expected security from him. Even symbols of royalty were not absent

from their interactions. For instance, a TV report showed how a community presented a throne to the oligarch; people loudly applauded as he gladly and briefly sat in it, got up and thanked everyone.

Resource distribution also significantly increased in the period of the pre-election campaign. Thus, according to numerous informants in Masiv, money (equivalent to approximately 10 EUR) was distributed to families in need. This information was spread through informal connections; often neighbours and relatives passed the news. To receive the amount, people had to write letters with their name, address and a sentence on being in need and asking for support. These letters were handed to persons in charge, and in a few days applicants could receive the amount. Informants also mentioned distributions of food products (e.g. sacks of potatoes) in rural areas.

It should be stressed that distribution or promise of assets, privileges or services in exchange for votes or under the pretext of charity in the period of pre-election campaign are prohibited by the Armenian legislation and imply criminal or administrative responsibility. As pointed out by lawyer Heriknaz Tigranyan (personal communication, 17 May 2017), the illicit distribution of mass pre-election charity puts constraints on the voters' decisions as they feel a moral obligation to vote for the candidate from whom they received material assets; thus the citizen's 'vote is in essence being bought'. Let me depict further some pre-election provisions.

Case 1: ritual celebration and support for a distinguished and vulnerable group

On 9 May victories in WWII and in the town of Shushi during the war in Nagorno-Karabakh are celebrated in Armenia. The tradition of state celebrations on this date stems from the Soviet period. In Masiv authorities have traditionally been organizing a procession from the city hall to the monument for war martyrs. On that day around 11 am people gathered at the city hall, including municipality chiefs, kindergarten workers, teachers, veterans, dressed in worn-out clothes and wearing medals, and schoolchildren carrying flowers. Two flower wreaths, from the municipality and Ashot Aramian, stood in front of the city hall. A veteran I spoke to complained about the lack of state care. When the mayor arrived, people walked to the monument. After the commemoration ceremony, the veterans went to a reception in a restaurant. I asked an elderly woman if the dinner was organized by the municipality. 'No, it's Ashot [Aramian]', she replied, 'every year he invites us to a restaurant'. I walked with the veterans and was astounded by the exquisite luxury I saw through the open entrance door. The ritzy restaurant, decorated with drapes, flowers and candles, contrasted strongly with the impoverished town spaces. Apparently, the invitees included not only the veterans but also officials, supporters and intermediaries of the patron. As I was told later, each veteran also received 100 USD as a present.

Case 2: provision of infrastructure for a community

This case involved the construction of gas infrastructure for a town district. The initiative belonged to the residents, or rather to a recruiter from the district. According to informants, a collective letter was written and handed to Aramian. The problem was treated as 'no problem', and the construction works started and went on quite effectively until the day of elections in May. According to an informant, though, only part of the construction

was financed by Aramian, while the gas supplying company financed the rest. As an act of reciprocity, a significant number of the district's residents joined the N party and voted for it. After the elections, however, the works halted. In September that year, there was still no gas in the district. People were disappointed, realizing that the prompt work was done to raise their enthusiasm before the elections. Nevertheless, some pipes were already in place; this gave them hope that soon gas would be available.

Case 3: culmination: a concert and a lottery for an entire town

The meeting of Aramian with Masiv's population was organized as a concert and a lottery on the last day of the campaign. The entire population of Masiv was invited to a free concert in the town's stadium. Each household had been allocated a free lottery ticket to be played after the concert. Thus, many residents had an additional reason to attend it. Lottery tickets were distributed by communal administrators, who received them from the municipality. Apparently, many officials at the municipality, including the mayor, were part of Aramian's clientelist network. The stadium, which belonged to and was renovated by Aramian, was decorated for the event with flags, balloons, posters. The concert started with the speech of Masiv's mayor, who introduced Aramian, praising his generosity and saying that it was not necessary to remind them of all his charity for the town. The mayor also reminded the audience of the 'affection connecting Aramian with this locality' and said that he could not have come to Masiv without a present: an ambulance car for the hospital. He pointed to the corner of the stadium, where people could see the car. Then Aramian spoke very briefly, reiterating the main points of his other public speeches. The concert with pop-stars lasted for about one and a half hours after which the lottery began. Children were invited to take out lottery tickets; the door of an underground warehouse was opened and piles of prizes were being taken out continuously. The lottery lasted much longer than the concert itself, with a few winning numbers read out every minute. The process appeared endless: the distribution of the cheapest prizes (music record players) alone lasted for more than two hours. Then prizes got more expensive. The stadium was filled with poor people hoping to get a bit of the wealth, holding their lottery tickets – some with their eyes closed, others cynical, but still not leaving. There were people including refugees who did not have a television set or a refrigerator, and they came hoping to win what they wished for. For instance, an informant living in extreme poverty said he came hoping to win a television set, but that even if he did not win it, he would receive one from the party since his entire family joined and would vote for the party.

Besides verbal messages, the forms the distributions took also conveyed certain messages. These were not devoid of ideological content, but were primarily associated with the patron's personality. I argue that by providing for publically recognized vulnerable or distinguished groups (e.g. veterans, pensioners), supporting public organizations, repairing infrastructure and town's spaces and organizing public holiday celebrations, the oligarch emulated state social policies and welfare, which many impoverished residents of Masiv were expecting and lacking. By this, he conveyed the message that he would be a good leader, advocating and providing social welfare.

At the same time, his charity also contrasted with state provisions in certain ways. Thus, given the drastic decrease of state welfare in the post-Soviet period (Babajanian 2008a), citizens widely associated state support with lack of resources, narrow eligibility criteria,

exclusion of the needy, corruption and bureaucratic hassle, even if state provisions were some poor families' main source of income and in rare cases were quite substantial (Baghdasaryan 2014, 2011).⁷ In contrast to this, as the above cases illustrate, Aramian's provisions had the appearance of abundance, lavishness or even luxury, of which people could sometimes partake. In spite of some encounters with rude intermediaries, many informants associated these provisions with ease and good organization, inclusive, and also vague and particularistic eligibility criteria (giving preference to oligarch's compatriots), informality, and strong control of intermediaries who distributed resources without withholding them.

As the following section demonstrates, however, such provisions called for reciprocal political support.

Supporting the party, recruitment and the role of intermediaries

As pointed out by Roniger (1994, 4), in clientelist relations 'asymmetrical power and/or inequality is combined with solidarity, and potential and/or actual coercion coexists with an ideological emphasis on the voluntary nature of the attachment'. Let me now turn to the coercive side of patron–client relations in this case. Although most informants described their joining the party as voluntary, the fact that people massively joined and supported it during elections was the result of a successful recruitment campaign by Aramian's intermediaries. The success of the recruitment was based not only on clientelist exchange, illicit pre-election provisions, promises of better future and the oligarch's popularity, but also on the power of intermediaries.

The network of Aramian's intermediaries and clients was pervasive in the town, including the mayor himself. Some residents believed Aramian's power to be so great that the mayor or other high-ranking officials held their positions only with Aramian's consent. People believed Aramian to be the main power-holder in the region, and hence businessmen and state officials widely chose to be his supporters. Many citizens also became his supporters in order to be connected with him and his intermediaries through multifaceted reciprocal ties. According to my interlocutors, brokers were promised rewards for their support.

Aramian's intermediaries were primarily those holding managerial positions or positions of bureaucratic authority, e.g. those who had a significant amount of control over citizens' employment, education, state welfare benefits or other social security resources. They included heads/managers of state and private organizations, state/municipal officials and communal administrators. Such intermediaries organized pervasive recruitment and propaganda in residential buildings and organizations in Masiv. They were dependent on Aramian's power, and at the same time due to their own position were able to exercise power locally over large numbers of people.⁸ I interviewed several intermediaries in my field sites who took up large-scale propaganda, recruitment and monitoring of voters' actions on the voting day.

Having been asked or requested to join and vote for the party, people did so with varying degrees of willingness. Most informants joined it eagerly, assuming that this was in their own interests. For others, it did not make a difference whether to join or vote for the party or not, and being compelled to do so they decided not to risk spoiling their good relations with intermediaries or facing other negative consequences and agreed. Finally, a minority of my informants admitted that they were unwilling but were compelled to join the party

for social security reasons, e.g. in order not to risk losing their jobs. I assume that some informants may have chosen not to talk about this openly.

For instance, Greta, a pensioner, responded eagerly to the recruitment campaign; although she understood that intermediaries' involvement was not unproblematic in terms of the law, she justified it as she and her neighbours joined the party willingly.

- (Greta) They came and said in the building: who will you vote for? I said – Aramian, and signed up for the party too (...).
- (M.B.) Who came?
- (Greta): [An official] came and told our communal administrator. And s/he told us. (...) It's not good that you are writing this, is it? Well, there isn't anything bad in this, they didn't force us; we went and voted for him according to our own will.

Those who joined the party eagerly mentioned different reasons for that, including clientelist exchange and reciprocity (i.e. having benefited or expecting personal or communal benefits in the future, e.g. a television set or gas infrastructure), appreciating the charity, supporting their 'regional deputy' and wanting to cooperate with intermediaries.

Still, clientelist exchange was not the only reason for such support. Some also sincerely believed he would be a good leader, caring for people's welfare especially in his native region. '[I support] this man as a good working man; [because] he does a lot for the people, I want to be in his party', a female pensioner in her 60s told me. According to another male pensioner, Aramian could contribute to improving Armenian economy as 'he has that [entrepreneurial] gift'. Their appreciation and trust, however, were almost entirely based on assumptions concerning the oligarch's personal characteristics rather than on understanding the party's programme and intended policies. Even if they signed up as party members, most of my informants never read the party's programme or received party membership cards; few were requested to and participated in party meetings. Their perceptions of the party were rather based on talks with intermediaries, media coverage and Aramian's speeches. Hence, vertical democratic accountability, with citizens being aware of the intended policies and able to hold politicians responsible, was questionable in this case. As long as the oligarch distributed resources, the details of the political programme were hardly scrutinized by most of my informants and seem to have been reserved for those in charge.

Although many assumed that patron–client relations had practical advantages and advanced their welfare, these relations also encouraged people to approve of illicit practices, e.g. distribution of bribes or pre-election charity and tax evasion. Thus, many supporters of the party were not only aware of allegations concerning Aramian's tax evasion, but in fact approved of it given their distrust of state authorities. Also, while patron–client relations may have provided benefits to the oligarch's compatriots, they did not encourage ideals of universalism and the rule of law associated with democracy and citizenship.

For instance, Naira, a housewife who had children and whose husband was unemployed due to a disability, avidly supported Aramian's party. She held that Aramian did well if he evaded taxes and redistributed money to the needy directly. If he paid much tax instead of distributing charity, she contended, the money would have been appropriated by corrupt state officials and would not reach citizens in need. In response to my argument that tax-financed social policies (e.g. in healthcare and education) were universal, Naira passionately argued that Aramian provided for public schools, hospitals and infrastructure. Although the main stable source of this family's income was state poverty allowance, Aramian's charity

provided them with additional benefits, and Naira, like many other impoverished citizens, was pragmatic in her defence of particularistic charity. Thus, people relied on patron–client relations as they lacked trust in state authorities and in the actual practice of social and political rights.

Let me now turn to less voluntary cases of recruitment. The following quote illustrates an informant's and his father's recruitment who were pressured to support the party, but were also eager to do so:

First of all I work at his [Aramian's] factory – *whether you want it or not – it's necessary to join [the party], otherwise they will dismiss one.* From the ... [certain state] department they called my father and said that he has to join the party. Well, he has to choose a party in the end! And he joined. He [Aramian] gives support to my father ... and papa was willing to. What's the difference if there is a membership ticket or not! Let Aramian be glad!

Thus, in the case above, all employees of a factory were requested to join and vote for the party under the threat of dismissal. Another informant, a middle-aged mother working in a state educational institution, joined and voted for the party against her will, but according to her words, she was not 'forced to' or openly threatened. Rather, she was 'asked' by her director and chose not to refuse him, fearing that she might otherwise spoil her good relations with him and lose her job. Otherwise, she would have preferred to join another party, the one her husband joined, as certain benefits were promised to them through another clientelist network.

- (Rita, also referring to relatives living in villages) Many people joined [the party] according to the will of their directors or village mayors. This was not according to their own desire.
- (M.B.) Does this oppose your political views?
- (Rita) Yes it does. (...) Did they go to [N party] for a bag of potatoes? (...) No, mostly for the superiors: 'You should go [join] otherwise I will deprive you of land! (...) I was not forced, I just respect him [the director] very much, we are close, he suggested and I did not refuse, otherwise he would start looking badly at me. I have my job, for me that's the most important, I don't want to lose it. (...) One hundred people must necessarily go to the demonstration – there is a number requested. [Our director also requests] to go to the party meetings. They [people] do it being afraid for their job, for their study. That's the fear for tomorrow's day, that you don't lose your job.

In addition to using the power of his position and insistently asking all his subordinates to join and vote for the party, thus questioning them for loyalty, the head of this organization, as other brokers, tried to convince the employees by stressing the good deeds of the oligarch and the importance of supporting him. While many agreed, others felt the need to conform to the heavy propaganda at least superficially. Another informant, who joined the party against her will, compared the atmosphere at her workplace with the Soviet past, when one could not openly challenge the dominant ideology. She tried voicing her criticism, but was reproached by a party activist for not appreciating Aramian's contributions.

In spite of this, thanks to the rhetoric accompanying recruitment, some people felt as if joining the party was not only their choice, but also a privilege. Thus, a student mentioned that she was asked to join the party as she studied well and Aramian wished talented people to be members of his party; a teacher said she was asked as a member of intelligentsia; a cleaner was proud that she was included despite her low-status job.

The above quotations demonstrate that many felt dependent upon the informal side of relations with their employers or bureaucrats, relations through which such important resources as jobs or state welfare were acquired or maintained. In the context of post-Soviet Armenia, jobs are of crucial importance for a family's social security; they are often acquired through informal connections or bribes, and are not only a source of income, but also of further connections, privileges, and the ability to participate in the exchange of favours (on *blat* see Ledeneva 1998). Even if many informants described the situation as being 'asked' rather than openly threatened, to secure their work positions and good relations with directors, many employees consented and were willing to join and vote for the party. In the case of state/municipal officials, many informants believed that they could hinder or help people access state support and therefore found it important to preserve good relations and cooperate with them.

When I asked my informant Rita if she could nonetheless vote for the party she preferred, she replied that she would not risk doing so: rumours circulated that party activists 'had their ways of checking' how people voted, for instance through the use of mirrors. Several other informants also expressed similar concerns. My observations on the day of elections showed that these fears were not unsubstantiated and that some brokers had further tasks. At the polling station where I conducted observations, an intermediary was present and monitored if people who were expected to vote actually came and voted. Ballot secrecy was also questionable since there were no isolated cabins at this station. Instead, facing a wall in the main room there stood rostrum-like constructions with narrow wooden bars on the sides barely covering the writing surface. Therefore, if someone stood behind the voter, one could see how one voted, or at least notice if the voter marked the top or the bottom of the ballot. Many people were in the room, and were in a position to make such observations.

Nevertheless, Aramian's intermediaries in Masiv were not omnipresent and were not able to control everything. The power was rather restricted to those who associated their welfare with intermediaries. Residents who did not depend on intermediaries or work in organizations affiliated with the oligarch were not necessarily included in this process. Some supported oppositional parties or were critical and chose not to join even if asked by an intermediary. Still, N party gained the largest number of votes in this region.

To contextualize my findings on clientelism in Armenia I also talked to neighbourhood residents and several employees of organizations in two other cities prior to two parliamentary elections. Several residents of a neighbourhood said that they voted against their conscience in exchange for charity and rewards. Other respondents, employees of organizations, were requested to vote for and in some cases to join the X party that their directors were clients of. Overall, they hesitated to discuss the details of their recruitment. However, some reiterated the arguments they were told in support of this party at work or during rallies. Hence, in this case too, propaganda was used to convince them to support the party.

For instance, employees of one organization were asked to vote in exchange for rewards and were otherwise threatened with dismissal. According to an employee of another organization, some time ahead of elections all employees were told to submit documents, since their entire organization would be joining and supporting a party. He commented that the employees were not even asked if they wished to, and were being *forced* to join the party, but immediately added that 'everyone wants to, everyone agreed'. When I asked if otherwise one would be fired, my informant replied: 'I don't know, it's impossible not to join'. He was also requested to attend a political rally under the threat of dismissal, and received a check-up

phone call with instructions on how to vote. He too feared that party activists could check how individuals voted. Thus, in this case too, hardly anyone chose to refuse their bosses. I should add that although this informant was compelled to join and vote for the party, he also viewed it favourably, was convinced by intermediaries' arguments and felt proud to be part of his organization. Thus, other parties in Armenia have also been relying on clientelist relations to secure success.

Some methods of propaganda and recruitment used by the N and the X parties violated the law and various citizen rights. Thus, the Electoral Codes of the RA adopted in 1999 (Articles 18 and 22) and more recently in 2011 (Articles 18 and 21) forbid the workers of state and local self-government bodies to engage in propaganda while performing their duties, and to use their authority to influence the citizens' free will or to create unequal conditions between candidates. Forbidden propaganda also violates the rights of other candidates to equal basis of campaign. Furthermore, by requesting citizens to join and/or vote for parties under the threat of dismissal or other negative consequences, people in positions of authority (e.g. directors of certain organizations) violated citizens' rights to freely and voluntarily vote or join political parties; to this one may also add violations of their constitutional rights to work and social security.

Conclusion

I have argued that patron–client relations strongly impact the practice of citizens' political rights in Armenia. To conclude, I would like to reflect on the relationship between clientelism and political citizenship in normative terms. Indeed, thanks to patron–client relations many of my informants felt somewhat more empowered and endowed with political agency, since their votes had value for the party and could be exchanged for communal or individual benefits. They actively participated in elections and pre-election events, could ask for rewards and bestow legitimacy on the patron based on appreciation of his charity. Many considered that Aramian's charity contributed to their welfare, thus compensating for lacking state support. Many voted sincerely, even if by this they also reciprocated for clientelist benefits.

However, I argue that in normative terms, clientelist relations in this case (and in the comparative case too) had a negative impact on the practice of citizens' rights to free and voluntary party membership and suffrage; they involved wide-scale violations of these and other rights and of the law. As I demonstrated, voters' relations with the party leader were sharply unequal. Even among those who joined the party eagerly, most were in a subordinate and dependent position, hardly having other choices than supporting this party. Lacking other sources of welfare, those living in poverty appreciated the available charity. The reception of forbidden charity during the campaign compromised the formation of their political will. Many were coerced to join or vote for the party by their bosses or other power-holders; they tolerated such treatment due to insecurity, lack of rights' protection, fear for future days, in order not to lose jobs, private or state welfare, or good relations with intermediaries. Furthermore, many engaged in informal reciprocal relations with the patron and intermediaries assuming that these could be more efficient in improving their lives than universal state policies designed and implemented by anonymous or corrupt state authorities. Therefore, they engaged in clientelist relations because they lacked trust in the functioning of citizenship rights and in the rule of law. Finally, although ideological

reasons for joining the party were not entirely absent (i.e. many informants hoped that the party's leader would support the poor and advance Armenian economy), clientelist participation did not encourage my informants to understand the party's programme and hence discouraged vertical democratic accountability. Based on the presumed corruption of state authorities, it rather encouraged them to approve of tax-evasion and particularistic provisions rather than strive to such ideals of democratic citizenship as universalism and the rule of law.

The results of this study may prove relevant for other post-Soviet states given that many of them share much in common, including the Soviet legacy of systemic corruption, overlap between economic and political power and economic insecurity of large segments of population.

Notes

1. For general accounts of corruption and clientelist power-structures within state bureaucracies and between state authorities and businessmen in Armenia, Georgia, Russia and Ukraine see e.g. Stefes (2006), Darden (2008), Ledeneva (2013).
2. For anonymity reasons I use pseudonyms throughout the article. The patron is referred to as Ashot Aramian and the party is entitled the N party. I do not reveal the names of my field sites, and do not specify which observations were conducted in which field site; all events are presented as having taken place in 'Masiv'. My informants' names, occupations or official positions are also disguised. I did not witness any crimes; this account cannot be verified or used for accusations.
3. For the survey I chose a random sample of 120 names from the population of about 700 refugees in Masiv. From the sample, 78 informants participated in the survey. Among them, 65.2% were Armenian citizens and 28.4% had refugee IDs, very few had retained invalidated Soviet passports. The questionnaire included 52 questions, with 12 questions on political participation, inducing on party membership, interest in and awareness of politics, voting behaviour, and so forth.
4. Lack of trust in fairness of elections in Armenia is indicated by various studies: thus, as pointed out by Payaslian (2011, 148 cited Radio Free Europe),

according to a study conducted in 2007, more than two-thirds of those surveyed considered the parliamentary elections held in May 2007 to be neither free nor fair, and 60% believed that the presidential elections in February 2008 would be equally undemocratic.
5. On recent grassroots civic initiatives and changing notions of citizenship in Armenia see e.g. Ishkanian (2015) and Paturyan and Gevorgyan (2016).
6. According to my interlocutors, support was provided personally by Aramian, while according to some media reports it was provided by his charity foundation.
7. Compared to strong social citizenship rights in the Soviet period, state welfare provisions in post-Soviet Armenia have diminished significantly and are aimed at the needy; due to economic crisis and the advice of international financial institutions state policy has been putting accent on minimal intervention and citizens' self-reliance (Babajanian 2008a). Family poverty benefit is currently the main welfare programme, and people's access to it 'is restricted by widespread administrative corruption' (Babajanian 2008a, 389). The programme only reaches a part of poor families: thus, according to the official webpage of the National Statistical Service of RA, poverty levels were estimated at 25.1% in 2007 and at 32.4% in 2012. However, in 2007 only 16.2% of households received the benefits while in 2012 they reached only 11.9% of the population (Minasyan 2012).

8. Referring to local (rural) mayors in Armenia, Babajanian (2008b) also argues that they strongly depended on informal ties and patron–client relations in order to fulfil their duties successfully.

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