

TOPIC: URBAN ACTIVISM, HUMAN RIGHTS, CULTURAL RIGHTS

Duration: 90 minutes

Materials:

Laptops, links to appropriate websites and sources, printed materials, visual aids (projector, screen), markers, sheets of paper

Age: up to 20.

Abstract/Information:

In this learning activity, students will gain a broader understanding of urban activism in Armenia through analyzing issues related to urban planning, cultural heritage, property rights, economic transition and civic activism/initiatives related to these processes. Students will discuss the transition to a market economy and some of the issues during that process, as well as activism, urban activism and cultural and environmental rights. They will evaluate what the adverse impacts of the neoliberal urban development/transition were in Armenia.

Key question:

Why is it important to have an active civic stance on matters related to our physical and natural environment?

Learning outcomes:

Students will be able to:

- Work with witness accounts and other primary sources.
- Use different types of sources to justify and present their opinions and positions regarding different issues.
- Discuss the fundamental values that make people active citizens.

ACTIVITIES

Step 1: Brainstorming (10 minutes)

The purpose of the activity is to stimulate an interest in the topic. The following question (slide 1, Appendix 1) appears on the screen and the teacher asks one of the students to write down the answers on a flipchart:

- What is urban activism?

After gathering as many answers as possible, the teacher shows some definitions of urban activism on the screen (slide 2, Appendix 1).

Step 2: Introducing the Witness (5 minutes)

The teacher introduces the witness based on information provided in the interview, as well as the text accompanying it. The teacher can also print Appendix 1 and give it to the students.

Step 3: Watching and discussing an excerpt (22:22–28:05) from the video
(10 minutes)

After watching the excerpt, the teacher stops the video and asks the following questions:

- What is urban activism according to Isabella?
- How is the organization of urban space connected to our life?

Step 4: Watching and discussing an excerpt (2:36–7:04) from the video
(10 minutes)

After watching the excerpt, the teacher stops the video and asks the following questions:

- According to Isabella, what were the main impacts of the transition on Yerevan's urban space and residents?
- What are the main issues identified by Isabella?

The teacher writes down answers on a flipchart.

Step 5: Watching and discussing an excerpt (8:34–13:34) from the video
(10 minutes)

After watching the excerpt, the teacher stops the video and discusses the following question:

- How did Isabella get involved in urban activism and why? What was the turning point for her?

Step 6: Watching and discussing an excerpt (15:53–18:03) from the video
(10 minutes)

After watching the excerpt, the teacher asks the following questions:

- What did Isabella and her friends succeed in?
- What did they not succeed in and why?

Step 7: Group work (20 minutes)

The purpose of the activity is to link the topic to our topical framework of the “3Ds”: democratization, decolonization and demographic change. Following the discussion of the excerpts, the teacher splits the students into 3 groups: democracy, demography and decolonization respectively. Each group receives a flipchart and a printed text on its respective topic (Appendix 2). The following questions/tasks are also given to the groups and they have to answer these within 12 minutes:

Group 1: After reading the text you have received, please let us know if there are processes/issues/challenges Isabella mentioned that are related to democracy.

Group 2: After reading the text you have received, please let us know if there are processes/issues/challenges Isabella mentioned that are related to decolonization.

Group 3: After reading the text you have received, please let us know if there are any processes/issues/challenges Isabella mentioned that are related to demography.

The groups are then invited to present their answers (8 minutes).

Step 8: Work with visual sources (5 minutes)

The teacher puts some photos (examples are provided in Appendix 3) on the table that illustrate different aspects of changes to Yerevan's urban space (the photos in the Appendix 3 are related to the "3D" project theme). The students are asked to choose the photos that represent/illustrate the themes of democracy, decolonization and demography and post them on the corresponding flipchart of the groups.

Step 9: Reflection (10 minutes)

At the end of the session, the teacher asks the students to reflect on the following:

- What have I learned?
- Why is it important to be active in the issues related to my place of residence?

WHAT IS URBAN ACTIVISM?

Urban Activism (Google search)

— Urban activism refers to efforts by individuals or groups to bring about social, political, or environmental change within urban environments. This movement often addresses issues like housing, transportation, public space, and environmental justice, focusing on empowering local communities to advocate for their rights and needs. Urban activists work to challenge systemic inequalities and promote sustainable urban development, making cities more livable and equitable.

<https://library.fiveable.me/key-terms/africa-since-1800/urban-activism>

— Urban activism is lifting citizens' voices in planning for the built environment. Urban or civic activism implies that citizens show interest and initiative in what is being done (or not done) in their built environment and how it is governed.

<https://www.girugten.nl/change-through-urban-activism-2/>

DEMOCRACY / DECOLONIZATION / DEMOGRAPHY

GROUP 1 — Democracy

The establishment of **democracy** in Armenia was a complex process, with a mix of political instability, power struggles and a weak institutional foundation. The transition was characterized by the formation of a democratic framework and institutions, increased citizen participation in public and political life and the emergence of a multi-party system, free press and civil society organizations. Nevertheless, Armenia's political landscape eventually became dominated by rigged elections, oligarchs and political elites, which resulted in a system often criticized for corruption and authoritarian tendencies. There has been civic unrest and protest after every major election since 1996, culminating in 2008 when the government used force against protesters at mass rallies that erupted after the presidential elections. This resulted in the death of at least 10 people. In the 2020s, however, Armenia witnessed a significant shift after the Velvet Revolution of 2018, which was a direct response to frustrations with the entrenched elite and a perceived failure of the political system to address citizens' needs.

GROUP 2 — Decolonization

Decolonization in Armenia's context is more nuanced than the typical understanding of breaking free from colonial powers. After centuries of foreign domination – whether Ottoman, Persian, or Russian – Armenia's independence in 1991 was the result of a long struggle for national sovereignty and political agency, as well as for liberation from internal and external foreign domination. However, while Armenia was among the first post-Soviet countries to initiate a de-Sovietization process, the early 1990s also saw it becoming heavily dependent on Russia for military and economic support, especially due to regional instability and the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This dynamic shaped the country's foreign policy choices, especially in relation to its disputes with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, and in securing economic aid and military support from Russia. During this period, Armenia was often seen as politically bound to Russia, limiting its ability to diversify its international relations. The 2020s, however, have seen increasing calls for greater autonomy in domestic and foreign policy. The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War further exposed the limits of Russian support. The aftermath of the war, along with shifting regional dynamics, has prompted the country to reconsider its strategic alliances. Armenia's calls for a stronger European orientation has been indicative of its evolving stance toward decolonization and a desire for a more autonomous identity on the international stage.

GROUP 3 — Demography

Demographically, Armenia's population has seen significant shifts over the last 30 years. First, at the beginning of the Karabakh conflict, there was an influx of over 360,000 ethnic Armenians from Azerbaijan to Armenia, and an outflow of over 160,000 ethnic Azerbaijanis from Armenia to Azerbaijan. At the same time, there was a significant population decline, mostly due to emigration and decreasing birth rates. The immediate post-Soviet era in

DEMOCRACY / DECOLONIZATION / DEMOGRAPHY

the 1990s was marked by substantial emigration, driven by economic hardship, political instability and the consequences of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. A large portion of the Armenian population, particularly the younger generation, sought better prospects in Russia, Europe and the United States. According to census data, Armenia's population declined from about 3.5 million in the early 1990s to 3 million by the early 2000s. According to UNFPA data, Armenia has a total fertility rate below replacement level at around 1.6. In the 2000s there were new immigration waves to Armenia. First, Iraqi and then Syrian Armenians moved to Armenia to escape the war and violence in those respective countries. Then, after the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Armenia had an influx of Russians and Ukrainians. Finally, in the aftermath of the 2020 Karabakh war, over 100,000 Armenians were forced to leave their homeland in Nagorno Karabakh and move to Armenia. This followed a blockade imposed by Azerbaijan from December 2022 until September 2023. The refugees had to flee an attack from the Azerbaijani army, fearing ethnic cleansing and genocide.



