Amalgamation, Promised Decentralisation, and the Politics of "Uniqueness": Local Narratives and Reform Legitimacy in Armenia

Gasparyan Arman
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Public Management Institute, Leuven, Belgium

Abstract: Debates about "democracy under pressure" often foreground national institutions, while the everyday, local bases of democratic resilience remain under-specified. This paper examines how citizens in Armenia describe their municipalities as "unique"—geographically, culturally, socio-economically, in service profiles, or via leadership reputation—and asks what these place-based narratives do for local democracy in the wake of amalgamation and promised decentralisation. Drawing on semi-structured interviews and focus groups across multiple municipalities conducted in 2023, we develop a typology of "uniqueness discourse" and trace how these claims legitimate or contest reform logics. We show that uniqueness narratives mediate three core democratic dynamics: (1) how satisfaction with concrete services (especially education and roads) translates into trust in local government; (2) which dimensions of autonomy (administrative, fiscal, political) communities view as essential to meaningful self-rule; and (3) how citizens interpret representation and accountability after consolidation when leaders become more distant. Rather than treat municipalities as interchangeable "units" for benchmarking alone, our findings reveal how local identity can buffer democratic strain—or, when ignored, erode perceived legitimacy even where efficiency improves. The paper contributes to scholarship on democratic resilience by specifying a place-sensitive mechanism—perceived uniqueness—through which reforms are accepted, resisted, or re-interpreted. Policy-wise, we argue that designing resilient reforms requires engaging not only with institutional capacities but also with the narratives that communities mobilise to authorise (or withhold) democratic consent.