

# Informality, Politics and Mutual Support in Armenian Flea Markets

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## Introduction

In economic anthropology, flea markets are considered as an informal sphere of economic activity and as places of informal exchange (Brown 2017; Brown and MacKie 2017).<sup>1</sup> This paper also tries to explore flea markets as spaces of informal trade and informal interaction in the case of Armenia. In my previous articles related to flea markets in Armenia and Georgia I look at them from within the discourse of tourism studies and how they became tourist attractions.<sup>2</sup> The questions I explore in this article relate to the social and cultural practices and so-called informal relationships in Barakholka flea markets and public spaces in an urban setting in post-Soviet Armenia. Broadly speaking, space and its commercialization is a frequently studied field in urban and economic anthropology (Lefebvre 2009; Prigge 2008). In this working paper, I (1) illustrate how flea markets, as commercialized public spaces, relate to political processes and the emergence of informal trading as a sign of collapsing governing political systems, and (2) how social, economic and cultural processes are reflected in flea-market activities.

Scholarship on informality and the informal economy in the post-Soviet Caucasus (and post-Soviet states in general) is extensive (Shanin 1999; Barsukova and Radaev 2012; Karrar 2013; Altman and Morrison 2015; Iskandaryan, Mikaelyan and Minasyan 2016; Polese and Rekhviashvili 2017). As noted, flea markets are also considered an informal sphere of economic activity (Brown 2017; Brown and MacKie 2017). Nevertheless, in Armenian, the terms “formal” and “informal” are not part of the everyday lexicon. Instead, a common phrase is “*levi yekamut*” – an informal income, circumventing legislative systems or social norms. *Levi* comes from the Russian word *levo* meaning ‘left’, suggesting that which is hidden, or informal). This term became popular in the 1990s. In fact, the period beginning in the 1990s has been a period of creating new vocabulary describing informal economic practices in daily life.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Flea markets have also been discussed in scholarship on the anthropology of poverty (Maisel 1974: 492; Browne 2011; Riveira 2013; Chivivi, Moyo and Mapuwei 2014: 22-28; Brown 2017). In anthropological theory, the items on sale are also approached from the vantage of public relationships; scholars who subscribe to this viewpoint consider the social and cultural origins of the items — who used them and how, as well as how they eventually arrived at the flea market — to be important (Kapytoff 1986; Appadurai 1986).

<sup>2</sup> Flea markets feature the sale (often resale) of personal effects and household items, metal or wooden tools, electronic items in a state of disrepair (mixers, lamps, telephones, electric saws, television parts, radios), clothes and so on (Melkumian 2010; Hovhannisyanyan 2012; cf. Pachenkov and Voronkova 2014).

<sup>3</sup> An example of how *levi* was used in the 1990s is *levi luy*s, that is, informally taken electricity or electric light. There was no electricity in the 1990s, except in some administrative buildings and for

Relegating flea markets to the informal sphere reproduces the viewpoint of state institutions. For example, from the point of view of state economic and political systems, activities are considered informal if they circumvent the existing legislative arrangements (Hardenberg and Fehlings 2016: 4, 6). In economics, a broad spectrum of definitions for formal and informal activities includes modes of production, business organization, and so on. However, one of the distinctions between formal and informal activities, for instance, applies to employees registered with state bodies (formal) and those who are self-employed (informal) (Buehn, Karmann and Schneider 2009: 702, 706; Bangasser 2000: iii). I conclude that flea markets have both formal and informal characteristics. Nevertheless, in other areas of anthropology an attempt has already been made to categorically classify some activities as informal and others as not.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, I also try to limit my use of “formal” and “informal.” My methods in this study are mapping, interviews, and oral histories. (The markets where I have conducted fieldwork are ideal sites for collecting oral histories because of their delimited environment for the oral histories and memories of vendors and customers; they are well suited for researchers using this method.)

### **The Barakholka Flea Market**

The flea markets in Yerevan, as usual, are located near the city center.<sup>5</sup> Currently one is located at the edge of the city center, adjacent to the Dinamo Stadium on Vardanants Street, and a very small one is in the city center, on the outskirts of the Vernissage souvenir market, along Vardanants and Khanjyan Streets, close to Republic Square (see Table 1 and Figure 1, points B and C). The flea market adjacent to Dinamo Stadium was gradually moved to its current location on the initiative of the Yerevan municipality between 2012 and 2015 (Table 1; Figure 1, points B and C). Between 1993 and 2012, it was the flea-market section of the Vernissage souvenir market, which is located in the pedestrian space enclosed by Buzand, Vardanants, Nalbandyan and Khanjyan Streets (table 1, picture 1). Urban folklore gave this flea market the name Barakholka—Russian for a place where Soviet items (picture 2) and old junk are sold.

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privileged persons who were provided electric light. In my childhood, local people used to steal electricity from the grid. However, they “hid” the *levi* light by darkening and blocking windows with dense fabric.

<sup>4</sup> Recently I received a reader’s report on a paper that discusses formal and informal aspects of religious practices among Yezidis in Armenia; in the report, the reviewer argued that dividing social practices into a formal-versus-informal binary means excluding a variety of cultural practices and alternative perceptions from the analysis.

<sup>5</sup> One other flea market, which is less known and operates spontaneously, is located next to the railway and metro station named after David of Sasun (an epic hero). This one is closer to the urban periphery.



Picture 1: *Barakholka* Flea Market, Yerevan, 2010, photo by Hamlet Melkumyan

	Place	Opening year	Closing/Relocation date
1.	<b>Original Location:</b> Surrounding the open-air Vernissage market in M. Saryan Monument Park (See point A, Figure 1). Opera House district in the city center, near Sayat' Nova and Mesrop Mashtoc Avenues (See point B, Figure 1).	1989	1993
2.	<b>Moved to:</b> General Ave. boulevard, between Vardanants, Buzand, Hanraptyan and Nalbandyan Streets (See points C & D, Figure 1).	1993	2015
3.	<b>Moved to:</b> S. Vrats'yan Street, in front of the Dinamo Stadium administration building. (See points E & F, Figure 1).	2013-2015	—

Table 1: The Barakholka Flea Market: Timeline and Places of Relocation



Picture 2: Copy of R. Khachatryan's «Abu-Lala Maary (a portrait of L. Abrahamian), 1978. Barakholka Flea Market, Yerevan, 2010, photo by Levon Abrahamian

### **The Flea Market as a Form of Street Trade**

The current flea markets in Yerevan date to the twilight of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. The Barakholka flea market was first located, along with the open-air Vernissage market, at the statue of the famous Soviet painter Martiros Saryan in a small park next to the intersection of Mashtots and Sayat Nova Streets near the Opera House. The art market itself had begun as a spontaneous open-air exhibition and marketplace in the 1980s and has since become known as the Artistic Vernissage (Harutyunyan 2004).

Hence, flea-market exchanges were conducted in a public space and often with the patronage and support of state officials. For example, in the 1980s, First Secretary of the Communist Party Karen Demirchyan gave verbal permission for the outdoor sale of paintings. Those who worked in this marketplace in the 1990s recall support from a high-ranking police official who informally controlled the allocation of space and for whom payments were collected illegally (Melkumyan 2006-2008). The support of this official was an act of patronage, rather than a regulated procedure. This informal rent collection circumvents legal requirements and demonstrates self-organization (cf. Buehn, Karmann and Schneider 2009; Hardenberg and Fehlings 2016; Bangasser 2000). In the 1980s, the sale of art in the open-air Vernissage market was also unregulated, and hence informal, making it also a criminal offense according to Soviet law. On May 23, 1986, a new law was passed that aimed to strengthen control of these activities and ban personal profiteering through alternative economic activities

in the USSR (Decree of the Presidium of the USSR 1986; Medvedev 2010: 31, 56-75). Despite the fact that the Vernissage had all the characteristics of informal economic activity, the artists presented and positioned themselves as “creators of affordable fine art” rather than “painting sellers.” For example, one artist assessed the value of one of her paintings at US \$2000. On the one hand, nobody bought the painting.<sup>6</sup> But simultaneously, the painter had used public space to display her work and suggest that it was of great value (Melkumyan 2011: 25; Melkumyan 2011a). In this case, the artist considered sale to be secondary, while the priority was to display her art, which indeed quite clearly demonstrated marketing skill. According to a former Soviet official — in charge of investigating economic crimes — the Artistic Vernissage was not subject to punishment because the artists were displaying and selling their own paintings, not reselling someone else’s work. But he also acknowledged that at the time, someone trying to sell a potato he had grown himself could be arrested. “Only the state had the right to sell something and engage in commerce” was how he put it (Melkumyan 2016).

After 1989, the Artistic Vernissage underwent quick transformation into a flea market. Where the rows of artists ended, other vendors appeared, bringing tools, household appliances, kitchen utensils and machines to sell. This new part of the bazaar grew to predominate over the area where art was sold; one of my research participants, a woman, recalled how there were more household items than artworks for sale here in 1991-93. The paintings ended up at the center of the park, surrounded by a flea market. This was how post-Soviet flea markets began; the Vernissage souvenir market followed a similar pattern. In the early years, people were not reselling anything; they were selling personal belongings (Melkumyan 2010: 492-493; Melkumyan 2014: 13-18).

After 1992, Armenia found itself mired in an economic crisis resulting in widespread poverty. At that time, small retail areas, described as “tables” (Armenian: *seghanik*),<sup>7</sup> emerged across cities (Tadevosyan 2011: 89-91). Tables were placed on the street and in public spaces (Tadevosyan 2011: 90), displaying everyday household items, as well as food (Dudwick 2003: 124, 132; cf. Abrahamian 2006: 183; Tadevosyan 2007: 124). The street vendors were self-employed and did not pay taxes. It was not the state that regulated this trade, but either local thugs — the so-called armed “fedayis of asphalt”<sup>8</sup> — or the police who tried to illegally control public spaces (dictating who could trade, in which place) and extract rent (Melkumyan 2011: 33, 42; cf. Tadevosyan 2011: 90). There is even a social myth that street vending was a way to get rich in a time of economic crisis. The tabloid press has also reported that some oligarchs enjoying monopolies today began as street vendors. For example, the tabloid press has featured stories on how one of the oligarchs started his business selling bras on the streets in the 1990s,

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<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to anthropologist Levon Abrahamian, who shared this story with me.

<sup>7</sup> Scenes of items being sold on tables on the street are presented in various documentaries and television movies as a symbol of survival during that period of crisis (Hovhannisyan 2012).

<sup>8</sup> I was told that during the Karabakh War in the early 1990s, armed groups who introduced themselves as Karabakh War warriors appeared in the city, while people said they had never left the asphalt of Yerevan and were imposters.

which resulted in the nickname by which he is known to this day, Lfik (from the Russian *lif*, meaning “bra”) (Shabat.am 2015).

The Yerevan flea market developed at a time when street vending was beyond the control of the state and not taxed. This was not similar to underground commerce during Soviet times or to the speculative activities that occurred in the late Soviet period, because “speculators” (in Russian, *spekulanty*) were usually considered to be those people who sold items in “deficit” (i.e., in short supply) at higher prices, or who made a profit but did not pay taxes (Romanov and Suvarova 2003).

During the early years of the development of the flea market alongside the open-air exhibition and sale of artwork, the artists occupied the central space near the statue of Martiros Saryan, which was considered a prime location. The flea-market section was located along the periphery of the park, in the “non-prestigious” areas. However, the flea market spread quickly, soon surrounding the artists.

During the late Soviet period and the initial years of Armenian independence (1991-93), when the outdoor exhibition and sale of paintings began transforming into a flea market, the municipality considered the flea market an inappropriate image for the cultural center of the city (Melkumyan 2011: 37; Melkumyan 2010; personal communication from V. Khachatryan, mayor from 1992 to 1996; Former mayors of Yerevan 2017). The surrounding areas of Freedom Square and the Opera House were planned as a cultural center because they contained key symbols of Armenian cultural heritage, including the Opera House as well as statues of famous architect A. Tamanyan, who planned the main layout of Yerevan, writers, composers, and painters (Abrahamian and Melkumyan 2012). In addition, Freedom Square was located across from the Opera House, the site where the Karabakh Movement and demonstrations for the independence of Armenia from the USSR began (Abrahamian 2006: 232-235, 237; Marutyan 2009: 1, 6, 61, 89; Derluguian 2004: 166-167). In 1993, the mayor and other officials were key players in the independence movement; the Opera House, Freedom Square, and Saryan Park were probably perceived as symbolic spaces (Abrahamian and Melkumyan 2012).

In 1993, the Yerevan municipality introduced regulation of “the organization of the exhibition and sale of artwork and fine-art creations in the space between Main Avenue, Republic Street and Khanjyan Street as well as the Saryan Monument Park.”<sup>9</sup> After this regulation, vendors selling secondhand goods were forcibly relocated to a boulevard lined with government buildings around Republic Square. This was actually the first organized flea market in post-Soviet Yerevan in the 1990s. It was joined with the Vernissage souvenir market and existed as part of the souvenir market.

However, what was originally a small bohemian market in the 1980s, the Artistic Vernissage in M. Saryan Monument Park, spontaneously transformed into a flea market in the

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<sup>9</sup> Decision of the Yerevan City Council dated 7 July on the “Organization of the Exhibition and Sale of Works of Applied Art and Fine Art in Saryan Memorial Park and the Space between Main Avenue, Republic and Khanjyan Streets,” Yerevan City Archive, fonds 1, list 15, document 386, N 17/26.

1990s. So the carpet sellers who sold their wares along the edge of the Artistic Vernissage at M. Saryan Monument Park (facing the Opera) were moved before the others and relocated to a market in the district of Bangladesh, a city suburb.<sup>10</sup>

### **Flea Market Spaces: Center-Suburb Contrast**

In this section I discuss the location of the Barakholka within the larger urban landscape, in particular, by asking why informal commerce usually takes shape in the city center and is then pushed to a suburban area. At the same time, I will show how the forced movement of flea markets reflects the perceptions of the city administration as well as the public.

As mentioned earlier, in the post-Soviet period, the first semi-formalized flea market was the section that was moved in 1993 from the Artistic Vernissage at M. Saryan Monument Park to Main Avenue (Picture 3).



Picture 3: Main Ave. – Boulevard, 2012, photo by Hamlet Melkumyan

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<sup>10</sup> The name of this district dates to the 1970s, when it was constructed. It was named in solidarity with the Republic of Bangladesh, which declared independence in that period (Mirzoyan 2006: 89). Urban folklore suggests that the district's name was a reflection of its distant location from the city center. This is of interest to us because it also is a clear demonstration of how the flea market was removed from the city center and moved to one of the most distant parts of the city.

The vendors who traded there called the commercial space the secondhand-goods market, but the public now recalls that place with the name Barakholka. Interestingly, the people who called it Barakholka had been brought up and educated in Soviet times, so they gave the market a name in Russian, probably reflecting their cultural background, because in Soviet everyday practice, these kinds of markets were associated with Russian Barakholkas (for example, St. Petersburg's Udelnyi market is also known as the Barakholka; Pachenkov and Voronkova 2014: 137).

The stretch of Main Avenue to which the flea market was relocated in 1993 was known during Soviet times as a modern entertainment boulevard. Documentary and commercial movies were shot there (Bumerang 1984: 09:32-09:42). For the most part, Soviet visual material depicted the boulevard as an elite space, where high-ranking officials and intelligentsia lived. For that reason, the buildings were considered prestigious. One of my acquaintances, for example, who lived there, rejected the urging of his relatives to sell his apartment and use the money to buy several places in Yerevan's other districts. From the windows of the buildings along the boulevard, the vista opens onto Republic Square and its singing fountains, reinforcing ideas of elitism.

In the 1990s, after independence, the boulevard deteriorated despite the fact that several government ministries were located nearby. The abandoning of the district was a consequence of the Soviet collapse and the change in the Soviet political and ideological value system, as a result of which the space lost its previous significance as an entertainment area. Even the names of these places were changed, thus stressing the loss of the spaces' previous contexts and functions. For example, in the 1990s the public space adjacent to Main Avenue was renamed Republic Square from the previous Lenin Square (Republic Square 2017), and the names of adjacent streets were changed as well. Thus, the section of the boulevard that was adjacent to Lenin Square also lost the public function of a leisure space that it had during Soviet times. Between 1990 and 2000, the abandoned boulevard often featured graffiti by representatives of various youth cultures, also seen in other abandoned or marginalized sections of Yerevan that had a limited flow of people or were isolated from the center.<sup>11</sup> I have already mentioned that following a 1993 municipality resolution, a souvenir market began operating here, joined spontaneously by the Barakholka flea market. From a broader perspective, the Barakholka could be considered a division of a larger market space that started at Republic Square and continued along Vardanants Street to the Dinamo Stadium (around 1.2 km away). The market on Vardanants Street sold hardware and construction items, tools and household goods. What is interesting is that in the area of abandoned and half-ruined buildings at the end of Vardanants Street, yet another flea market was operating (picture 4), known as the K' rji bazaar (Khamoyan,

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<sup>11</sup> One well-known example in Yerevan is the tunnel leading to the Children's Railway Station leisure park, which was named the "The Lifeless Tunnel in Yerevan" in a report by the Russian online channel TV Rain (Elovskii 2011). The section between the Zoravar Andranik and David of Sasun metro stations is also abandoned and in ruins, and another flea market operates in that space as well (Melkumyan 2006-2008; 2016).

Tsaturyan and Sargsyan 2013: 72) (*K'urj* is Armenian for all kinds of junk; Acharean 1926: 596, *k'urj* [քուրջ]).



Picture 4: *K'rji bazaar*, S. Vratsyan backstreet, 2017, photo by Hamlet Melkumyan

Thus, two flea markets emerged at the beginning and the end of the commercial area between Republic Square and the Dinamo Stadium and completed the commercial area. They were similar to each other in a semiotic sense, marking out the abandoned places of the city and appearing as boundaries of the poverty and social marginalization in society. For this reason, I do not consider it to be a coincidence that after 2012, when the municipality shut down the Barakholka flea market on Main Avenue, the vendors working there were given the option of relocating to the space next to the Dinamo Stadium, on S. Vratsian street. I have already mentioned that a typical flea market was already operating in this space. Thus, two informal flea markets began to simultaneously operate on the same territory, but they did not merge. This was because the Barakholka had already begun to take on the structure of a formal market, while a flea-market culture still prevailed in the section that had existed adjacent to the Dinamo Stadium earlier. Many of the poorer vendors even lived there. The former Barakholka relocated there too, as an extension of the construction and hardware tool market of the Gnuni bazaar (with

wealthier vendors and bigger shops). It is located between the Gnuni bazaar and the old flea market at the stadium (an environment of poverty).

One of the research participants with whom I spoke recalled how, before the formation of a flea market, the space next to the Dinamo Stadium hosted one of the city's large gold markets. Thus, it was no coincidence that there was already a flea market there before the Barakholka was relocated, and on the same principle, this was how the Barakholka ended up next to the souvenir market, which was also an active commercial zone, especially for tourists. Thus, flea markets in Yerevan tended to emerge adjacent to commercial zones (bazaars and markets). Furthermore, the traders in bazaars and markets would speak about the actors in the flea market, ironically calling them "trash sellers," while positioning themselves as more legitimate and prestigious traders because they have more income and deal with "clean" stuff (Melkumyan 2006-2008).

Thus, the relocation of the Barakholka was a sign that part of Vardanants Street was already changing its public and urban role as well as its semiotic significance. However, an interesting case here is how flea markets, or informal street trading, emerge adjacent to markets. The main spatial characteristics of a flea market are that it should have an active flow of people and that the space must have lost its previous cultural significance. Mapping the formation and relocation of the Barakholka makes it obvious that the center-suburb spatial scheme occurs in all flea-market locations in the city. These markets are satellites of active commercial or public spaces.

### **Time, Space and Commercialization in the Flea Market**

We have already seen how conflict periodically arose between flea markets and political organizations, the main reason being the takeover of public spaces. It was in 1993 that the Yerevan municipality first forcibly moved and relocated vendors selling secondhand goods around the Saryan monument to the boulevard lined with government buildings around Republic Square (see Table 1, as well as points A and C in Figure 1). By 1993, only painters were allowed to stay in the park where M. Saryan's monument was located.

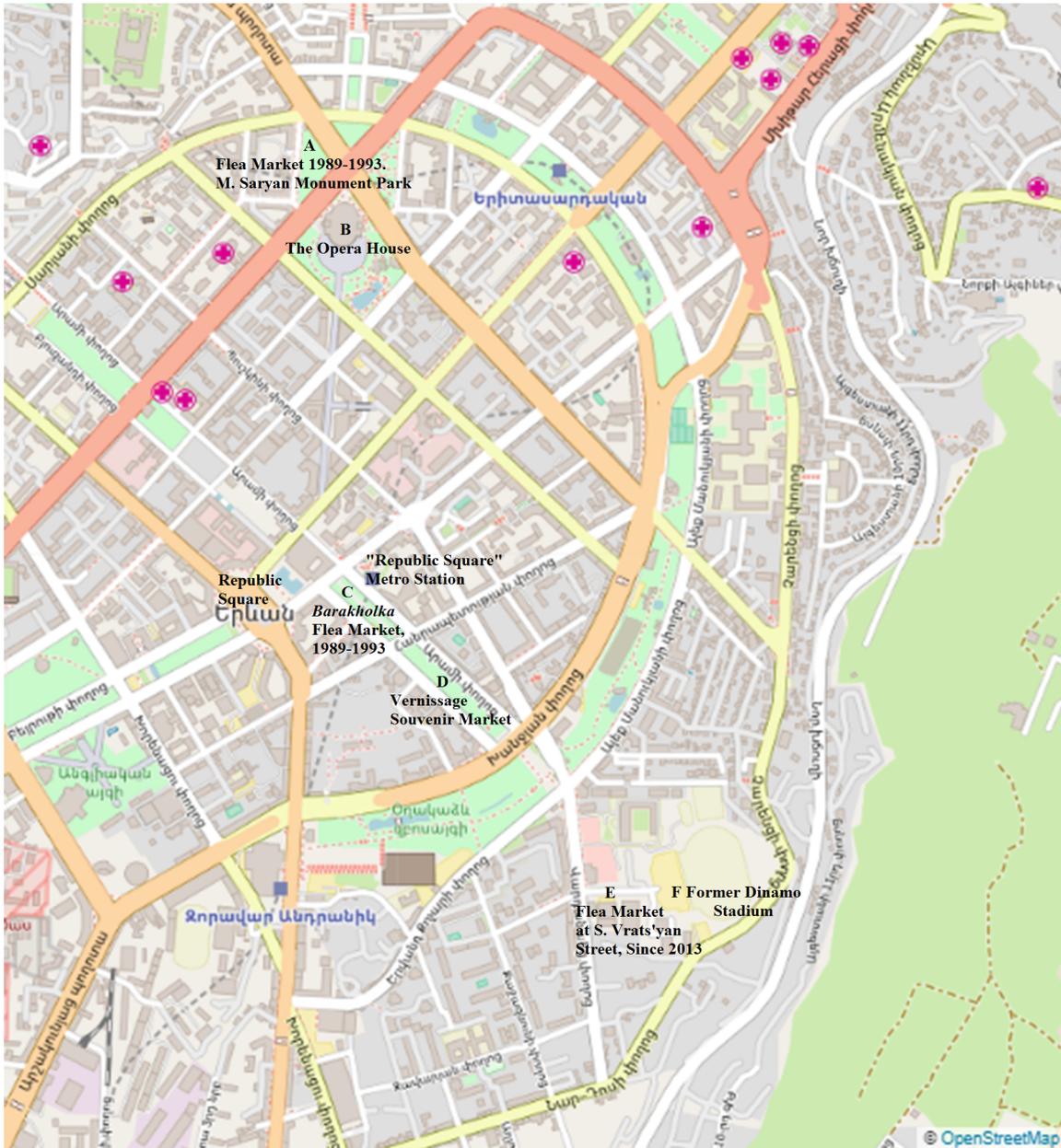


Figure 1: Map of the Flea Markets in Yerevan (OpenStreetMap 2017)

The process of relocating flea markets since 1993 can be considered in the context not only of the aesthetic perception of the city, but also of attempts by the authorities to redefine and control public space. This is especially true given that the pattern of banning flea markets or moving them out of the city center continues to this day (Table 1). For example, some of the politicians (for instance, a former city mayor) who initiated the dismantling of the Vernissage open-air art market and its flea-market component in 1993 were actively involved in the political campaign of ex-president Levon Ter-Petrosyan in 2008. This time they were posing as the opposition party, holding demonstrations in Freedom Square. In 2009, the police brutally moved demonstrators from the square and banned their activities in this space (Smbatyan 2009). Later, demonstrators started to gather in the Martiros Saryan park, where the open-air

Vernissage art market was operating at the same time. Conflict simmered between the artists and the organizers of these political events. The artists argued that this was their space and the politicians were obstructing their business. But the demonstrators argued that they had the right to public space to discuss events in Armenia (Melkumyan 2009). Finally, the political discussions started to be held in the evening, at 6 pm, at the time when the artists usually were packing up their paintings. This process is an example of how political actors and traders were in conflict about the occupation of a public space.

This process reflects the conflict that exists between political and economic actors in public spaces, where both try to bring public space into their sphere of influence (Brown and MacKie 2017; Rekhviashvili 2015; Polse and Rekhviashvili 2017).

One such case study is presented in this section; it began in 2011 on Main Avenue next to Republic Square and lasted for five years.

Abandoned urban public spaces have the potential to be reused, and in order to understand possible developments, anthropologists and urbanists consider it necessary to study the relationship of those spaces to past and present political trends. Public spaces also have political significance — “Space is political” (Brenner & Edlen 2009: 33; Low & Smith 2006) — at the same time that, as discussed in H. Lefebvre’s works, they are marginalized or abandoned following changes in political systems (we can recall that this was the case with Main Avenue in Yerevan). In Henri Lefebvre’s book *State, Space and World* (2009), he proposed seeing the role of public spaces in the context of political influences — right, left, or neoliberal — and their critiques. In particular, he focused on how urban public space is perceived in the context of politics and capital, as well as formal and informal relations. He considered the leftist approach to rethinking public spaces to have the most potential. The leftist approach would define these spaces as environments of equality, social justice and creativity. For this reason, Lefebvre believed that space and the formation of public space in a political environment would be the resource in greatest demand in the future (Lefebvre 2009: 172-174). Lefebvre criticized the liberal and neoliberal political approaches to using public spaces, which for the moment remain more relevant today. However, these approaches have not yet become set in stone in political agendas and development trends, and we observe the same issues in the case of post-socialist Yerevan.<sup>12</sup> In one of his articles, W. Prigge starts with a quotation about the relationship between Pierre Bourdieu’s space and symbolic capital, after which he further develops the idea that capitalist, liberal and neoliberal systems treat public spaces as environments that can accumulate symbolic and economic capital (Prigge 2008: 41). For this reason, the state and large corporations occupy public spaces (Kimmelman 2012: xiii-xvii; Shiffman et al. 2012). However, if the political systems that dominate public spaces collapse, then these areas lose their political and symbolic capital and start to become commercialized (Prigge 2008; Elden

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<sup>12</sup> A. Voulvouli (2017) discusses recent manifestations of these trends using the case of Gezi Park in Istanbul in 2013 as an example, in the context of the fact that the issue in the Gezi Park movement was not just environmental in nature, but socio-political.

2008: 87). The emergence of informal trading centers is a sign of weakening or collapsing governing political systems. Most often, as in the case of the Yerevan flea markets, these spaces are transformed into informal marketplaces. The creation of souvenir and flea markets next to Republic Square, for example, was a result of the process of the commercialization of spaces abandoned by the political and governing structures of newly independent Armenia (cf. Prigge 2008; Elden 2008). The physical space was first turned into a commodity, which is why the vendors at the Vernissage had to pay for the space (500-1000 AMD<sup>13</sup>), and the area of the Vernissage was leased out by the municipality (Melkumyan 2011a; Melkumyan 2016). However, the vendors at the flea market did not usually pay a location fee, which once again suggests that that market had not been planned for that area and functioned mainly spontaneously and in a self-organized manner.

During fieldwork, I was surprised at how the Barakholka operated in the yard and immediate vicinity of Government Building No. 3. The flea market and state organizations shared the same public space. If we subscribe to the approach that flea markets are considered to be “political performances” (Maisel 1974; Pachenkov and Voronkova 2014), then the Barakholka’s operations could be considered a spontaneously organized “performance” in front of the government, demonstrating the difficult social conditions in which one part of society lives. The government did not want to notice those performances, because they were also serving a socio-economic purpose. In fact, they also operated on a different timetable. The Barakholka functioned on Saturdays and Sundays, while the government worked from Monday to Friday, which is why these two environments did not encounter each other for a full twenty years.

Thus, if we consider that a flea market is a kind of informal commerce, then that means that the formal (in this case, state institutions) and the informal were located in the same space (for example, on the steps of the government building), but I believe in different temporal dimensions, sometimes in parallel to each other.

During the early period of the formation of the Vernissage souvenir market space, the presence of such a market was understandable and logical. However, after 2002, the souvenir section of the market was subjected to changes by the municipality, becoming a regulated market. For example, new stands were installed, the old fountains were removed, and a vinyl roof was installed. But the Barakholka section remained in its previous state, with items for sale lying on the ground, no tables, and no roof to protect it from rain or snow. For this reason, the Barakholka differed from the Vernissage souvenir market. And this further emphasized the estrangement between the two sections, although from a structural point of view, these two markets were inseparable. The Barakholka was already an independent market, and it began to encroach on the territory of the Vernissage souvenir market. It was thus predictable that this commercial section would eventually be relocated elsewhere as a bazaar.

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<sup>13</sup> Equivalent to one to two US dollars.

This contradiction grew more obvious in 2008. On the initiative of the government, certain Mondays in the year were declared non-working days in 2008 because they followed the five principal feasts of the Church, and those days were replaced by the Saturdays that followed them, which became working days (Grigoryan 2008; Resolution of the Government 2008: 639-N). This also allowed the flea market and the state and political systems to come face to face in the same spatial and temporal dimensions. During this period, I observed several times how the staff of various ministries would step outside the building during their break and would end up in the flea market, beginning on the steps of the government building. I would notice their surprise and often their discontent, because the flea market vendors would “occupy” the parking spaces meant for the ministry staff members’ cars. Two different social and cultural realities were clashing with each other. My observations allowed me to presume that the relocation of the flea market from spaces adjacent to the government would be accelerated, especially given that many government officials had political capital that could be used to intervene in the decisions related to organizing that space. When I was completing one stage of my study, I learned that the municipality was planning (in April 2011) to move the Barakholka to another part of the city (Melkumyan 2011: 13-14). In 2012-14, a large part of the bazaar was moved to the space next to the Dinamo Stadium, as already mentioned, on the periphery facing the center.

### **The Flea Market and Politics**

It is worth recapping that when political systems collapse, urban public spaces created by them are occupied by new actors (Lefebvre 2009; Low 1996: 861-879). The Barakholka flea market functioned for twenty years at the center of the post-Soviet political and economic system of Armenia. However, when the political system started to stabilize, it tried to relocate the informal markets to suburbs — in 2011, there was a discussion about moving them to the space adjacent to the Charbakh metro station or to the Hrazdan market — as was done in 1993 and again in 2012-14 by the various mayors of Yerevan. There was a tendency by the political and administrative elite to attempt to retake public space. The struggle for space eventually transformed into protest. From 2011 to 2015, the flea-market vendors tried on several occasions to keep the flea market through protests (2011),<sup>14</sup> but they did not achieve success. This also suggests that when the political and state systems gain a certain amount of power, then they become intolerant of self-organizing groups in their environment, groups which in this case consisted of the vendors selling secondhand goods.

The state policy of occupying public spaces was usually defined and presented as a necessity for cultural and aesthetic improvement, and this improvement would usually be characterized as a demand by the public. For example, the website of the Yerevan municipality received an online suggestion relating to the aesthetic reorganization of space, “It’s an ugly view from one part of Nalbandyan Street, and it is just near Republic Square. Destroying all the

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<sup>14</sup> Epress.am and Tert.am ran detailed stories on this issue; see “Street Vendors protest nearby Yerevan ‘Vernisage’ market” 2011, “Street vendors protest outside Yerevan Municipality” 2011.

concrete fountains and instead of them increasing the green areas,” implying that ugliness was not supposed to exist in the city center. The municipality’s response was “We would like to inform you that within the scope of the park improvement program of Yerevan provided for 2014, the park near the Main Avenue Vernissage is included” (Mkrtchyan 2013). This reinforced the prevalent perception that the Barakholka was incompatible with the urban landscape, and the only reason why its relocation from the center had been delayed was that the Yerevan municipality did not wish to rush ahead with the construction program.

Following the announcement in 2014 of the cleanup of the flea-market territory, construction work began, and the whole territory was demolished. Thus, all traces of the former Barakholka were wiped away. Because the Barakholka flea market vendors had left their phone numbers in graffiti on the ground tiles, when these were extracted and destroyed, all visual memories of the Barakholka were wiped away.

The deconstruction of the Barakholka space began in 2015, when the Yerevan municipality initiated the “Cultural Genocide: Symbolized by *Khachk’ars*” permanent exhibition as part of the hundredth-anniversary commemoration of the Armenian Genocide, and the space was given the name *Khachk’ar* Park (An open-air exhibition 2015).

These were copies of already famous medieval *khachk’ars* (memorial stones), and their purpose was not to fulfill a function as *khachk’ars* to create a sacred landscape, but to serve as decorations. This can also be seen from their layout. Traditionally, *khachk’ars* were placed on an east-west axis (Petrosyan 2015: 6-7, 10-11; Petrosyan 2001: 60-68), while here their positions are random. Thus, the deconstruction of the Barakholka space was implemented in the context of something that was kitschy and souvenir-like, in which the *khachk’ars* that were set up are a manifestation of that perception of “Armenian exoticness.”<sup>15</sup> I would interpret the construction of a *Khachk’ar* Park in the former location of the secondhand-goods market as a way to occupy public space.

Modification and occupation of space continued in 2016. The governing Republican Party and the municipality erected a monument to a well-known Armenian political, military and ultranationalist actor, the early-twentieth-century Nzhdeh, in the place where the flea market used to exist. On the one hand, the erection of Nzhdeh's monument is not surprising, because his image is widely venerated among nationalists.<sup>16</sup> Its current placement symbiotically links this location to the neighboring square, where a statue of the fourth-century national and religious hero Vardan Mamikonyan is located (erected in 1970). These two monuments, which face each other, constitute a deliberately constructed landscape of heroes.

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<sup>15</sup> The *khachk’ars* adjacent to the souvenir market are now being promoted as tourist art (Melkumyan 2011: 117-118).

<sup>16</sup> However, in recent years there has been a tendency among both academics and leftists to look critically at Nzhdeh’s controversial role and image in Armenian history.

On the other hand, the governing Republican Party (RPA), which promotes Njdeh's ideology, symbolically occupied the space of the flea market. Besides this, the RPA<sup>17</sup> had declared itself a follower of Njdeh's ideology<sup>18</sup> and erected the statue of its ideological leader in a space physically close to it, in the environment of the government buildings, with the RPA headquarters in a neighboring street. Through this example, we see that political organizations and bureaucratic systems can use public space to place monuments that legitimize their political power.

Thus, the formerly commercialized area of Main Avenue became a space for the construction of nationalism. On the one hand, the souvenir market and *khachk'ar* park create and reproduce "exotic Armenianness" (Melkumyan 2011), and on the other hand, radical nationalism is centered around the symbolic statue of Njdeh. The creation of a landscape of ethnic and national symbols was politically motivated, while the souvenir market was publicly motivated. In both cases, the transformation of identities and their symbols into everyday things is similar to banal nationalism (Billig 1995; Billig 2009), when identity becomes an everyday decorative detail or commodity (like at the Vernissage).

However, one of the important characteristics of a flea market is that it arises close to public places. If we follow the changes in the flea market and how traders negotiate with the state, we observe that when bureaucratic state systems experience economic crises, alternative informal commercial spaces — such as flea markets — appear. While flea markets initially appeared in the city center close to government offices, as soon as the state started acquiring economic and political stability, the flea markets were relocated from central public spaces to the urban outskirts.

### **Informal Practices, Trust and Mutual Help in the Flea Market**

In the previous paragraphs I have elaborated on the interrelations of public spaces in post-Soviet Yerevan and the informal and political practices that sprouted within them. Accordingly, informal environments emerge in busy urban spaces, and during economic crises they also appear in major city centers.

However, as the state and city administration systems grow stronger, they work to drive the informal economic environment out of central public spaces, considering it unfitting in the urban environment, antisocial and against the norms of urban planning (a municipality official explained in an interview that the area was being cleared of drunks). The media carried stories about "cleansing the space," implying that the area was unclean (Melkumyan 2016; Khudoyan 2016).

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<sup>17</sup> Republican Party of Armenia (RPA).

<sup>18</sup> The RPA program notes that the party follows Njdeh's ideology of *Tseghakron* (religion of the nation); in brief, Njdeh developed the nationalistic idea of creating an ethnically homogeneous state (RPA 2017 Program).

The prevailing perspective among scholars is that apart from providing people with basic economic resources, informal bazaars also set up milieus of public mutual help. In an article on informal social relations in English marketplaces, “The Magic of the Marketplace: Sociality in a Neglected Public Space” (2008), Sophie Wilson argues that street markets are crucial for their potential to create systems of informal help and communication. The spaces of informal trading become non-institutionalized and secure spaces for vendors, while the bureaucratic, capitalistic or neoliberal state targets these marketplaces as informal and their vendors as illegal actors. According to Watson, preservation of informal market spaces in modern hypermarketing cities is paramount, since these are free public spaces that do not turn into places of aggressive marketing, such as malls or superstores (Watson 2009: 1577, 1589-1590).

The model of informal interactions and mutual help described by Watson bears a resemblance to practices in the Barakholka in Yerevan, as well as in the Vernissage souvenir market. One practice of social mutual help emerged in 1993, when Armenia was at war, with an ensuing economic crisis, high unemployment rates, and growing poverty, especially in urban areas (Kharatyan 12-14, 24, 32-33). I asked some of my research participants who have regularly visited the Barakholka since its beginnings to name some goods they have purchased since 1993. They found it difficult to remember particular items and gave generalized answers, such as tools or hardware. In fact, they rarely bought anything or did not purchase anything at all. As one of them put it, “I was only interested in walking around... I scarcely bought anything from that part — the poorest part.” Surprisingly, the same people did recall the vendors, even their names and biographical details. The reason is that they used to go to the Barakholka mainly to chat and pass the time. An elderly man recounted that he would go to the flea market each week. He described it as a place where it was possible to bypass and forget about everyday hardships — shortages of bread, electricity, running water, money, and clothes:

People were low on money, unemployed [in the 1990s]. One would go crazy staying at home the whole time, so you go [to the flea market, to the Vernissage], get warm at least, talk to people, breathe in some hope, some positive energy. The transport did not function, people had to walk all the way to... [the central district]. Even in winter, on foot... Well, the metro always worked<sup>19</sup> ... I used to go [to the Vernissage and the Barakholka] ... the

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<sup>19</sup> It is noteworthy that in the context of visiting the Barakholka, the question of transport is brought up repeatedly. For example, one person told me: “The transport did not function, people used to go on foot in winter... Well, the metro always worked...” From his point of view, the market and mobility are interlinked, which supports the hypothesis that flea markets typically emerge next to active streams of people, sustained in this case by the metro. That is why visitors to the Barakholka mention the entrance to the flea market from the direction of the Republic Square metro station. When I asked about the market, they would ask me to specify whether I meant the “metro part” or would start with “I used to get out of the metro, and someone was selling mixer parts.”

One of the research participants I talked to also resided in the vicinity of the Barekamutyun metro station. His easy access to the metro was one of the reasons for his weekend visits to the souvenir market and the Barakholka, which were set up next to the Republic Square metro station (it is noteworthy that another flea market functions close to the central railway station) (Melkumyan 2016: fieldwork notes). In their research about St. Petersburg’s Udelnaya flea market, O. Pachenkov and L.

book section, the handiwork, the dogs were among my primary interests. The other part, the area facing the street [Hanrapetutyán] was all a Barakholka. The name Vernissage stuck to the place...

We can deduce that for visitors and customers the Barakholka indirectly presented a space for support. In another instance, the same person recollected that the free concerts organized by conductor Loris Tjeknavorian in the concert hall were another means of salvation from solitude. “The conductor found some funding, the hall was heated. We would go sit there both to warm up and to enjoy the music.” It must have been a unique opportunity for socializing for those who could not afford to attend the rare functioning places of entertainment. Another research participant said, “The concerts were indeed a salvation in the 1990s; we were students back then and sometimes when we skipped classes, there was nowhere to go. It was not as if we had money, nor there were any cafes for that matter, so we went to the Opera House. It was warm, the atmosphere was new, and we took the opportunity to listen to the music” (Melkumyan 2016). Therefore, as aptly put by the research participant, attending a concert was not people’s primary aim. In their references both to the flea market and to the concerts people used almost identical formulations: warm up, talk, listen, enjoy the comfortable atmosphere, remember better days. Consider the following statement: “I used to see a lot of acquaintances there [in the concert hall] who would come.... We lived in a terrible reality where a man, a person with a title of professor, was able to take a shower only once a month, and even that by means of melting the snow.”

The Barakholka, as well as the concert hall, appears to have been a milieu for shaping and restoring informal, close-knit relations, that is, a place to seek safety and psychological support in a public space. According to researchers (Hiebert, Rath and Vertovec 2015: 10), such behavior comes about in situations where public and state institutions are caught in a vacuum and profound crisis. Seeking safety and psychological support apparently was the case in the aftermath of Armenia’s independence.

There are also cases of mutual support and trust among the vendors and visitors (customers). Research participants recollect buying some items from the flea market to give some help to the vendor, who looked very thin because of illness.

Besides the stories of vendor-visitor mutual support, there are well-developed systems of mutual support and trust among vendors. The most obvious practice is that vendors are asked (with a connotation of demanding) to keep an eye on other vendors’ business and personal items while the owner takes a break. In general, the practice of mutual trust and support is typical among the actors in any informal trade. The most recent case was in the Vernissage market (where the Barakholka was previously located) in 2016. One of the Vernissage artisans, Arthur,

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Voronkova mention that it is located next to the Udelnaya metro station, but they do not focus on the fact that flea markets tend to be located near lively public spaces (Pachenkov and Voronkova 2014: 136).

now known as “the bread-bringer,”<sup>20</sup> was arrested. He was considered a prisoner of conscience<sup>21</sup> in most public narratives and by lawyers. At the Vernissage, a fundraiser was organized by vendors who worked together with him. They had been working together in this informal market for more than twenty years and recalled that Arthur regularly gave free lessons in physics and mathematics to their children to pass exams at school or university.

This case illustrates the multi-level character of the informal mutual support and trust among actors engaged in the informal economy. The practice of mutual support among informal market vendors is strong.

In such environments, as my research participants recalled, people overcome hopelessness more easily, because they are aware that they are all in the same situation. From this perspective, the atmosphere in the Barakholka can be regarded as bringing about practices of social, moral mutual help, entirely based on informal linkages.

As we see, the background of the Yerevan case is different. The emergence of informal social relations and communication in the Yerevan Barakholka is premised on not only cultural, but also economic and political reasons. Although the state system sees the vendors as anti-social and violating urban development norms, informal trade, for instance in the flea market of worn-out goods or Barakholka, proved to be a place where the alternative, informal functions of certain mutual-help schemes were in operation during the economic crisis of the 1990s.

## **Conclusion**

The formation of flea markets in different post-Soviet countries has economic and socio-cultural commonalities, the main reasons for which are the collapse of the Soviet Union and the economic, cultural and political crisis that followed. The flea markets of post-Soviet Yerevan also followed this trend. The flea markets of Yerevan were part of the informal economy. The flea markets of Yerevan usually functioned in the city’s central parks or in locations adjacent to its main squares, where there are public transport hubs (metro, intercity bus stations) or active economic areas (gold, souvenir, food markets).

The collapse of the USSR also had an impact on the formation of the urban landscape, as a result of which several public spaces were abandoned. In 1991, the abandoned public spaces began to be commercialized, and later state and political systems also interfered in this process. In the post-independence period, in conditions of economic crisis, informal commercial practices in particular grew in vitality in the new political atmosphere, and they sometimes continued the traditions of Soviet underground economic activity.

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<sup>20</sup> In 2016, a group with radical political views seized the police station in Yerevan and soon was blockaded in the station by armed police. They had difficulty obtaining food. Arthur broke through the police blockade in his car, brought in food for the rioters, and was given the name “bread-bringer.”

<sup>21</sup> He died in 2017, during a long-term hunger strike against state injustice toward him.

In post-Soviet Armenia, flea markets were directly related to the political situation. The weaker the political system and the deeper the economic crisis, the closer the flea markets were to the sections of the city that were considered central, the main squares and other public spaces. For this reason, as in the case of the secondhand-goods market in Yerevan, the Barakholka, a conflict over the occupation of those public spaces arose between that environment of informal commerce and existing administrative and political structures. Political organizations and city administrators seemed to perceive the liberation of public spaces as a battle against informal commerce and for the organization of legal and urban spaces. For this reason, they found it necessary to ban informal markets or relocate and hide them. However, because the expansion of flea markets in post-Soviet Yerevan was caused by the existence of an economic crisis, their artificial suppression resulted only in their temporary concealment away from public spaces (cf. Pachenkov and Voronkova 2014). Besides economic reasons, the vitality of the markets also had cultural and social reasons, because in a state of crisis, those markets became informal and alternative environments that were a leisure zone for people and demonstrated practices of mutual support.

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