The Green Void: Post-Soviet Institutional Fragility and the Framing of Environmental Expertise in Armenia

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Abstract

This paper examines the controversy surrounding the Amulsar gold mine in Armenia to explore how environmental issues are framed in a context marked by institutional fragility and contested expertise. Using qualitative frame analysis of 94 media and civil society texts, as well as five semi-structured interviews, the study investigates how different actors - state officials, corporate representatives, activists, and civil society organisations (CSOs) - construct competing narratives around environmental risk, legitimacy, and development. The findings reveal that while government and corporate actors frame Amulsar as a symbol of national progress and economic necessity, activists highlight environmental harm, procedural injustice, and elite collusion. Both sides selectively invoke international expertise, exposing a broader "expertise void" in post-Soviet Armenia, where domestic epistemic authority is weak and foreign assessments are politicised. The study contributes to environmental governance and post-Soviet transition literature by demonstrating how knowledge itself becomes a strategic tool in democratic struggles over environmental legitimacy.

Keywords

Evnvironmental Governance, post-Soviet Transition, Contested Expertise, Expertise Void, Institutional Fragility

Introduction

After Vremya stopped broadcasting on Soviet Central Television, the baton for the truth was not passed but dropped to be fought over. More than three decades after the collapse of the USSR, the struggle to build credible institutions and restore public trust continues to shape the political landscapes of its former states. Particularly, the scramble to dominate discourse is visible within issues cutting across the politics of knowledge, legitimacy, and state authority. With environmental governance, questions of sustainability are deeply entangled within these dimensions, opening the ground to the contestation of the green agenda, its relevance and feasibility.

In particular, the question of environmental expertise becomes critical in contexts where scientific authority is weak, trust in institutions is low, and external actors play outsized roles in policymaking. In such settings, environmental governance becomes inseparable from the question of knowledge: who gets to define risks, whose expertise counts, and what political agendas does knowledge serves? While global environmental discourse increasingly revolves around issues of sustainability and green transitions, post-Soviet states, such as Armenia,

continue to grapple with the institutional, epistemic, and political legacies of a collapsed technocratic order (Hellman, 1998). Environmental expertise in such contexts is not simply lacking—it is fractured, contested, and often externally sourced. This structural condition, which this thesis terms an "expertise void," renders environmental discourse a battleground over development, legitimacy and authority.

Environment and sustainability have emerged as dominant topics in global political discourse, sparking immense academic interest in studying how environmental discourse is shaped in different contexts. For instance, climate change denial is a major topic in environmental discourse analysis, such as examining how government actors circumvent the issue or contest the scientific expertise surrounding it (Boecher et al., 2022). Social media has also been the subject of numerous studies, which have shown that environmental knowledge on specific issues is shaped through interactions among activists, think tanks, and NGOs on various environmental issues (Kim et al., 2024, 2024; Vu et al., 2021).

However, most studies on discourse analysis of environmental policy and movements primarily focus on countries with already developed institutional contexts for environmental policy (Leipold et al., 2019). Some analyses focus on countries with less developed environmental agendas, yet mostly among grassroots movements or the youth specifically (Tomohardjo et al., 2023). Alternatively, such studies focus on the coproduction of environmental knowledge between different stakeholders, which overlooks the inherently political aspect of environmental framing and the role of government coordination (Zarei et al., 2020). Thus, environmental knowledge production and discourse are still quite understudied in settings where domestic environmental institutions are underdeveloped or largely dominated by foreign organization's.

To do so, this paper suggests the case of Armenia and its post-Soviet institutional legacy. Relevant literature on environmental discourse will be presented, outlining the theoretical concepts applicable to the analysis of environmental expertise and environmental governance in post-Soviet institutional contexts. This theoretical background will be applied to the case of the Amulsar gold mine project in Armenia, as well as the discourse surrounding the environmental controversy related to it. The example of Armenia provides an additional variable of national security: a factor which, paired with the need for economic development, often overshadows environmental concerns, proving to be an interesting case for public policy and environmental studies (Barbieri & Aleksanyan, 2024).

The Amulsar gold mine project, located near the spa town of Jermuk in southern Armenia, has become one of the country's most prominent and continuous environmental controversies. The project is operated by Lydian Armenia, a subsidiary of the formerly UK-based Lydian International, which obtained a license to develop the site in the late 2000s (Lydian Armenia, n.d.). The mine was designed as a large-scale open-pit gold extraction operation utilizing cyanide heap leaching technology, with estimated reserves exceeding 2.5 million ounces of gold (ibid).

From the outset, the project raised concerns among environmentalists, local communities, and experts due to its proximity to Lake Sevan (Armenia's primary freshwater reserve), the Vorotan-Arpa water tunnel, and the Jermuk mineral springs, which are crucial to both the region's ecology and economy. Critics have also raised concerns over biodiversity loss, seismic risk, and the potential for cyanide contamination, particularly given Armenia's limited institutional capacity to monitor large-scale mining (COE, 2020).

By 2016, Lydian had begun construction, with backing from international institutions like the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the International Finance Corporation (IFC), both of which later distanced themselves from the project amid growing controversy (Bankwatch, 2019). Meanwhile, local resistance began to escalate. Protests emerged in nearby villages such as Gndevaz and Jermuk, where residents organized demonstrations and launched lawsuits against the environmental impact assessment (EIA), arguing that it failed to account for significant risks (CEE Bankwatch Network, 2017).

Despite the growing unrest, the Armenian government, under Republican Party leadership at the time, maintained its support for the project. Activists and critics claimed that high-level political ties shielded Lydian, and that regulatory bodies lacked the independence and expertise to evaluate the project's risks properly (OpenDemocracy, 2019). This environment of institutional distrust and opaque decision-making laid the groundwork for what many viewed as a symbol of elite-corporate collusion in post-Soviet Armenia.

Through mass protests, which started through social media campaigns, the 2018 Velvet Revolution brought the opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan to power (Witman et al., 2018). Since 2018, environmental movements have experienced a surge in Yerevan and rural parts of Armenia, driven by the promised reforms and democratization of the country, showcasing firsthand that popular movements can create change. The Amulsar gold mine project was controversial from its inception, as its land acquisition and approval were marred by numerous corruption scandals associated with the former government (Lesikhina, 2024). The anti-corruption campaign advocated by the new government sparked hope that the project would be halted.

Therefore, the case of Amulsar not only represents an avenue to explore environmental expertise in the context of institutional fragility but also how democratic discourse and aspirations shape the framing of the country's environmental agenda. This paper investigates the discursive and epistemic dimensions of this conflict. Specifically, it examines how different actors frame the environmental issues surrounding the Amulsar mine and how these framings reflect and reproduce the void of environmental expertise in Armenia. The objective of this research is to contribute to a deeper understanding of how environmental knowledge is politicized and legitimized in fragile post-Soviet contexts. This is particularly relevant in light of increasing global attention to green transitions, extractive industries, and the role of knowledge in democratic decision-making. Post-Soviet states are not exempt from global developments, and the obstacles to effective environmental governance in such contexts are also crucial to identify. These include epistemic obstacles, as the framings of environmental issues are central to public involvement and government action.

Hence, the central research question guiding this study is: *How do different actors surrounding the Amulsar mine controversy frame the environmental risks of the project, and how does this relate to the expertise void in post-Soviet Armenia?* Through a combination of frame analysis of newspaper and activist discourse, as well as qualitative interviews with key stakeholders, the research explores the landscape of environmental argumentation and epistemic authority in Armenia's most prominent environmental dispute to date. In doing so, it aims to contribute to academic debates on framing, environmental governance, and post-Soviet transitions while also offering insight into the political stakes of knowledge production in contested democratic settings.

This study advances Hajer's notion of the "institutional void" by introducing the concept of an "expertise void": a dual condition in which institutional fragility and epistemic dependency converge, rendering expertise both structurally absent and discursively contested. By theorizing expertise voids as both structural legacies of

post-Soviet collapse and discursive resources strategically mobilized by actors, the paper connects Armenia's case to broader debates on knowledge politics in transitional democracies and semi-peripheral states.

1.1 Literature Review: Framing Analysis and Environmental Governance

Framing analysis offers a means to comprehend how environmental issues are constructed and contested by various actors. Specifically, collective action frames consist of diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational components (Benford & Snow, 2000: 615). These elements help actors define problems, suggest solutions, and mobilize support. The government is positioned as a key actor in environmental governance, responsible for regulation, enforcement, and coordinating diverse stakeholders (Agrawal et al., 2022). In the context of environmental governance, framing plays a central role in shaping public perception and political discourse around environmental harm and sustainability (Feindt & Oels, 2005: 162–163).

To enhance the theoretical depth concerning social movements and interest groups, this analysis incorporates the social-psychological framework of the Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) theory of movement support (Stern et al., 1999: 81). VBN posits that public support for a social movement, a critical resource for overcoming powerful actors, flows from a conjunction of values, beliefs, and personal norms (idem: 83). Specifically, pro-movement actions are activated when individuals accept a movement's basic values (e.g., altruism), believe these valued objects are threatened (referred to as *Awareness of Consequences*, AC), and believe that action can alleviate the threat (*Ascription of Responsibility*, AR) (ibid). This process creates a personal norm for action that results in a predisposition to provide support. The type of support ultimately provided - whether it is low-commitment active citizenship actions (such as joining or funding groups**),** policy support/acceptance, or highly committed activism - depends on the individual's specific capabilities and constraints (ibid). This framework is highly congruent with social movement literature, as the VBN components parallel core framing tasks: diagnostic framing (defining the problem) aligns with the AC belief; prognostic framing (suggesting solutions) aligns with the AR belief; and motivational framing (impelling action) aligns with the resulting *Personal Norm*. Crucially, the opposition identified in the Amulsar case - Economic Necessity versus Environmental Risks - reflects a struggle between Self-Enhancement (egoistic) values and Self-Transcendent (altruistic) values, which VBN theory identifies as central drivers of environmental conflict

In the context of social movements and their adjacent actors, Hajer introduces the notion of "*discourse coalitions*"; groups of actors who share a particular set of storylines in the discourse (Hajer, 1997: 65). In environmental conflicts, such coalitions compete not only over policy, but also over meaning itself. Frame analysis has been applied to environmental disputes globally, such as mining resistance in Chile, environmental justice movements in South Africa, and resource struggles in Southeast Asia (Urkidi, 2010: 136; McDonald, 2003: 23; Forsyth, 2003: 89). These studies show that environmental conflicts are both material and discursive, involving struggles over how problems are defined and who is authorized to define them.

Thus, expertise is often mobilized strategically in such conflicts. Rather than resolving disagreement, it becomes a political resource. Boswell distinguishes between the instrumental use of expertise that genuinely informs policy and the symbolic use of expertise aimed at legitimizing decisions (Boswell, 2009). In the Amulsar case, Lydian Armenia appeals to international consultancy assessments to claim scientific legitimacy, while opponents challenge the neutrality of these experts, suggesting they are biased by financial or geopolitical interests.

The use of scientific legitimacy is vital for the Armenian case, as the general condition of Armenian politics since its independence has been one of lacking legitimacy and public trust (Giragosian, 2009). Legitimacy, in this case, is multidimensional, encompassing democratic legitimacy (the extent to which decisions are made through inclusive and participatory processes), legal legitimacy (compliance with rules and procedures), and sociological legitimacy (the degree to which institutions and decisions are perceived as appropriate, fair, and trustworthy by affected publics) (Bernstein, 2004). These dimensions are deeply interrelated: a process may be legally sound yet lack democratic participation or public trust, thereby undermining its broader legitimacy.

The lack of perceived legitimacy in Armenian politics can be attributed to several factors, one of which is the country's post-Soviet development. Rather than cultivating robust local expertise, states often rely on international consultants and Western science. This creates tensions around authenticity, autonomy, and trust. The absence of domestic epistemic institutions leads to what this thesis terms an "expertise void": not simply a lack of technical knowledge but the absence of credible institutions to adjudicate between competing truth claims. In Armenia, actors routinely invoke foreign expertise (e.g., ELARD) while simultaneously questioning its legitimacy. Similar dynamics are observed in Ukraine and Russia, where environmental governance is shaped by donor agendas and transnational NGO networks, often leading to fragmented and contested policymaking (Pavlenko & Kraemer, 2017, p. 201; Henry, 2010, p. 74).

Literature situates the Amulsar mine controversy at the intersection of framing, knowledge politics, and post-Soviet governance. It draws on a range of interdisciplinary literature to explore how environmental expertise is mobilised, challenged, and contested in fragile institutional contexts. By doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates about the role of knowledge in environmental governance and the challenges of building legitimacy in post-Soviet states.

1.2 Theoretical: Post-Soviet Armenia and Its "Expertise Void"

The context of this paper bases itself upon the post-Soviet reality of Armenia, its transition to a nation-state, and the fragile state of its institutions. There is a vast literature on such transitions, and the academic debate encompasses valuable concepts for further analysis of environmental expertise within the Armenian government.

During Glasnost, Armenia had one of the earliest environmental movements in the USSR, centred on the Nayiri chemical factory and the Metsamor nuclear plant (Ishkanian et al., 2013). These movements, however, were later overshadowed by the Karabakh movement, which sparked both events of Armenian independence and the war with Azerbaijan for the disputed region. Since then, environmental sustainability has not been a primary agenda item in Armenian politics. The period after independence resulted in the country following the unfortunate pattern of other post-Soviet states in developing fragile democracies (Hellman, 1998).

This pattern can be grasped by using Hellman's concept of a *partial reform syndrome*, which encapsulates Armenia's sociopolitical development in the 1990s. Partial reform syndrome refers to incomplete or uneven implementation of economic reforms leading to market distortions that generate concentrated gains for a narrow group of early winners or elites (Hellman, 1998: 204). As in the case of Armenia, Hellman argues that these elites consolidate their power by manipulating institutions, resisting transparency, and limiting institutional development (ibid). The post-Soviet legacy has also developed the dominance of informal institutions such as cliques and elite affiliations, while the external (primarily Western) influence on the post-Soviet countries has undoubtedly been

controversial domestically (Gel'man, 2003: 97). The legacies of central governance and rapid liberalisation have undermined the development of responsive and accountable institutions (ibid). This suggests that the development of these institutions simply did not have enough time and historical context to develop organically, instead being rushed after the fall of the USSR. In environmental governance, this results in vague or inconsistently enforced regulations, as well as low levels of public trust. All these factors suggest the fragility of the institutional landscape of the country as different institutions evolve at various speeds, creating an overall environment of instability and unpredictability (Hu et al., 2025: 2)

At the same time, Armenia's domestic institutions became increasingly reliant on external actors for their development and expertise. This reliance has sparked hostility towards some demographics and even opposition members in the country. For instance, the former chief of national security called the OpenDemocracy foundation a threat to the country, hinting that there are *"foreign-funded political organizations in Armenia*" which promote their own liberal values (Cricchio, 2019).

Tlostanova's concept of the *coloniality of knowledge*, which describes the delegitimization of post-Soviet social sciences by Western institutions, provides a valuable analytical tool for studying such dependency or hostility towards "*foreign*" knowledge (Tlostanova, 2015: 39–40). Not only did most of the country's experts leave the country after the collapse of the USSR, as the number of scientists in the country decreased five times to only 3000 during this period, but the remaining scientific community was left with a discredited Soviet education, most notably in the fields of politics and international relations (Gzoyan et al., 2023: 6–7).

Since then, Armenian society has been largely dependent on its scientific diaspora, which has also essentially meant using foreign expertise in its policymaking through bilateral scientific agreements with Western institutions (ibid). While reliance on diasporic scientific knowledge is a structural necessity, it can often clash with the hostility towards foreign expertise, creating situational trust in the diaspora as a source of scientific authority. Similarly, in its social policy, the Armenian government often uses European countries as examples to justify their implementation, as can be seen in the case of a failed ban on public smoking or the comparison of public littering policies of Armenia and Estonia by PM Pashinyan himself on his social media pages (Pashinyan, 2025).

The absence of domestic epistemic institutions leads to what this thesis terms an "*expertise void*": not simply a lack of technical knowledge but the absence of credible institutions to adjudicate between competing truth claims. In Armenia, actors routinely invoke foreign expertise (e.g., ELARD) while simultaneously questioning its legitimacy. Similar dynamics are observed in Russia, where environmental governance is shaped by donor agendas and transnational NGO networks, often leading to fragmented and contested policymaking (Henry, 2010: 74).

Having discerned the institutional reality of Armenia as it emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union, this paper will examine environmental discourse in the country through the lens of post-Soviet developments and the domestic institutional void in ecological and sustainability expertise. Similar patterns are evident in other parts of the post-Soviet space. Studies of mining in Georgia and Russia highlight how weak institutions, low civic trust, and politicised science lead to unresolved environmental conflict and widespread public scepticism (Ivkovic, 2025; Newell & Henry, 2016).

Environmental expertise in this paper refers to the natural scientific aspects of environmental degradation and its impact, as well as the knowledge of social and economic factors that affect the environment and relevant

stakeholders (Sörlin, 2013: 14– 15). This conceptualisation of environmental expertise enables a broader examination of the case study, uncovering not only the framing of pure ecological threats associated with the project but also its social, economic, and political implications, which are pivotal in the Armenian landscape.

More specifically, in the Armenian context, the co-production of knowledge is marked by asymmetries of power and a lingering dependency on foreign expertise, which many actors either leverage or critique in their framings of the Amulsar conflict. Thus, investigating how actors frame the environmental risks, responsibilities, and stakes of the Amulsar mine also reveals deeper dynamics about how expertise is produced, contested, and legitimised in a state grappling with the legacies of Soviet technocracy and the uncertainties of democratic transition. This relational approach not only explains what is being framed but also why certain frames prevail or fail within Armenia's evolving environmental discourse.

Literature situates the Amulsar mine controversy at the intersection of framing, knowledge politics, and post-Soviet governance. It draws on a range of interdisciplinary literature to explore how environmental expertise is mobilised, challenged, and contested in fragile institutional contexts. By doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates about the role of knowledge in environmental governance and the challenges of building legitimacy in post-Soviet states.

1.3 The Case of Amulsar

By the time of the 2018 Velvet Revolution, which brought a wave of anti-corruption sentiment and democratic optimism to Armenia, the Amulsar mine had already become emblematic of wider public frustration with state-corporate power and environmental disregard. Following the revolution, resistance intensified: roads to the mine were blockaded by activists and residents, effectively halting operations and marking a turning point in both the conflict and the broader politics of environmental governance in Armenia.

Nevertheless, the new leadership turned out to be more populist than reformist. After initially promising that the project would only be approved if all environmental issues were resolved, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan approved the project in 2019 despite inconclusive assessments (Carvalho, 2017). Lydian Armenia, the company seeking the approval to exploit the mine, was repeatedly criticized for not conducting adequate environmental impact assessments (EIA) for the project: the residents of the nearby city Jermuk were not included as stakeholders in the company's report, despite activists' claimed links with the natural spring reservoir and cyanide leaching technology for mining proposed by the company (ibid).

The government approval faced immediate backlash from both protesters and civil society organizations, which were joined by international organizations advising against the project. The protesters, who have been blocking the mine's entry since 2018, received charges from Lydian Armenia, while many faced unjustified arrest, highlighting the government's resistance to support them (Aleksanyan, 2020). Despite the limited success of the protests and domestic pressure, such as the EBRD's decision to cut ties with the project after Lydian filed for bankruptcy, the company does not face serious legislative threats to its plans for the gold mine (Lesikhina, 2024). Moreover, with the recent agreement, 12.5 per cent of the Lydian shares were transferred to the Armenian government, effectively siding the administration with the company (Armenpress, 2024)

The discourse on Amulsar has also been curated by European and US institutions, which have pushed for their own interests. The internal EU report revealed that the UK and US have pressured the Armenian government in a

two-year standoff between protesters, an international mining company, and the authorities (Rowley, 2020). This cross-border character can be explained by Lydian Armenia being a branch of Lydian International, a UK-based mining corporation headquartered in the US and Canada.

Therefore, it is reasonable to suspect that domestic environmental organizations in Armenia are either not strong enough to exert pressure on the government or that civil society itself does not consider environmental issues as paramount due to higher priorities, such as economic development and national security.

2. Research Question and Methodology

This paper aims to answer the following question:

> *How do different actors surrounding the Amulsar mine controversy frame the environmental risks of the project, and how does this relate to the expertise void in post-Soviet Armenia?*

The two components of this research question are analytically intertwined: the way environmental risks are framed by different actors in the Amulsar mine controversy both reflect and reproduce the underlying expertise void in post-Soviet Armenia. Framing is not merely a representational practice; it is a strategic means through which actors compete to define environmental problems, assign responsibility, and assert legitimacy (Entman, 1993; Benford & Snow, 2000). In contexts where institutional trust is low and scientific authority is fragmented, as is the case in many post-Soviet states, such framing becomes particularly consequential (Henry, 2010). The absence of a widely trusted and independent epistemic infrastructure in Armenia creates a discursive space for multiple, often conflicting, claims to expertise, including those from government bodies, international consultants (e.g., ELARD), corporate actors such as Lydian, grassroots activists, and transnational organizations.

This study adopts a *typical* case selection strategy, focusing on the Amulsar mine controversy in Armenia as a representative instance of how environmental discourse and expertise are contested in post-Soviet contexts (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). A typical case is not chosen for its extremity, deviance, or theoretical leverage alone but rather because it reflects the broader structural and discursive patterns that define the phenomenon under investigation. In this case, the Amulsar controversy illustrates the characteristic tensions between domestic institutional weakness, public distrust in environmental governance, and conflicting claims to expertise that are prevalent across post-Soviet and post-colonial societies (Henry, 2010; Jasanoff, 2004; Forsyth, 2003).

Armenia, like many post-Soviet states, has inherited fragmented environmental institutions, an unstable science-policy interface, and a heavy reliance on foreign expertise to validate environmental decision-making. The Amulsar mine has been the subject of intense domestic resistance, international involvement, and governmental ambivalence, all of which reflect common dynamics in states where liberal democratic institutions are evolving but remain contested (Rowe, 2013; Turnhout et al., 2020).

The Amulsar case stands out as an information-rich and analytically accessible example of the very conditions under which expertise, legitimacy, and environmental risk are co-constructed in post-Soviet societies. Hence, the case is well-suited for qualitative, discourse-oriented research that aims to deepen our understanding of broader epistemic and political processes.

The research question and its double focus on problem framing and the role of knowledge production in post-Soviet settings introduce several other relevant subquestions that are addressed implicitly throughout the paper:

How do the framings of scientific versus social and economic expertise differ in the discourse?

How is the relevance of environmental knowledge in Armenia traced to its national security and development objectives?

What role does international expertise play in the framing of environmental issues in Armenia?

How do different actors perceive the expertise void in Armenia, and what are their proposed solutions?

These questions will be analyzed in light of Armenia's post-Soviet context, as described above, and additional qualitative methods will be employed to situate the analysis within this context.

2.1 Framing Analysis of Online Articles

The study will use two qualitative analysis methods to answer these complex questions. Given the focus on meaning-making, actor perceptions, and contested knowledge, a qualitative approach is well-suited for unpacking the complexities of environmental governance and expertise in transitional settings (Forsyth 2003).

To investigate the framing of environmental issues and the discursive politics of expertise, this study relies on a purposive sample of public texts produced by a range of key actors engaged in the Amulsar controversy. A total of 93 publicly available articles published between May 2018 and May 2025 were collected and coded from six sources, each selected for its representativeness of a specific stakeholder position. All articles deemed relevant to the Amulsar topic were selected, meaning that the quantity from each source varies based on the available material. The summary of the data can be seen in the table below:

Table 1

Sources, Actor Groups, and Number of Articles

Source	Actor / Group Represented	Number of Articles
Lydian Armenia	Mining Company / Corporate Actor	18
Azatutyun Radiokayan	Government / Official Statements	21
Civil Society Institute	CSO	3
ArmEcoFront	Environmental Activists	5
EcoLur	Environmental Activists / CSO	30
Hetq Investigative Journalists	Independent Media	13
Total	6	94

Note. CSO = civil society organization; ArmEcoFront = Armenian Environmental Front

Each source was selected to represent a distinct discursive position within the controversy. Following media and discourse analysis standards, sources were selected not for balance or volume alone but for their salience in framing the conflict and reflecting actor strategies (Wodak, 2015).

Lydian Armenia was selected to represent the corporate framing of environmental risks, economic benefits, and scientific legitimacy. As the mine's developer, Lydian's statements, press releases, and technical justifications provide insight into the ways corporate actors deploy environmental expertise and frame opposition as irrational or uninformed.

Azatutyun (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty) serves as a proxy for government communication. While nominally independent, Azatutyun is widely used to report official government statements and policy updates and often publishes statements from ministries, prime ministers, or affiliated officials. It allows access to the government's public framing without requiring access to internal records.

EcoLur and Armenian Environmental Front (ArmEcoFront) were chosen for their longstanding and consistent opposition to the Amulsar project, representing grassroots and environmentalist perspectives. These actors are not only critical of corporate and governmental practices but also mobilize counter-expertise and transnational environmental discourses. Even though Ecolur is a more established CSO with proximity to protesters, ArmEcofront represents a more grassroots perspective on the issue.

Hetq, Armenia's premier investigative journalism outlet, was selected for its role as an intermediary. It represents a more independent, investigative discourse, often uncovering contradictions, financial links, or institutional weaknesses. Hetq bridges civil society and public accountability journalism.

The Civil Society Institute was recognized as a professionalized civil society actor, known for its legal and policy-oriented contributions to public discourse, particularly in areas such as human rights, environmental rights, and stakeholder participation. Though fewer in number, their articles offer high informational value on institutional reform and civic engagement.

Together, these sources enable a sturdy triangulation between corporate, state, civil society, activist, and journalistic framings, providing a multifaceted perspective on the controversy. This diversity also helps uncover how different types of legitimacy - legal, democratic, and sociological - are invoked or contested in the framing of environmental risk.

The coding process consisted of inductive coding and comprised a total of three rounds. The data set is available in the appendix along with the codebook, helping with the replicability of the study.

2.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Secondly, to enrich the analysis, the study employs six qualitative, semi-structured interviews with actors representing Amulsar protesters, the government, civil society, and Lydian Armenia. Beyond complementing the framing analysis with direct insights from those actors, the interviews enable the exploration of post-Soviet institutional fragility and reliance on external actors in Armenian environmental discourse. The interview guide can be found in the appendix.

Additionally, qualitative interviews allow for further clarification of the frames used by each actor. For instance, codes such as *international organizations are useless* were uncovered through the interview process,

whereas this sentiment was only briefly mentioned in officially published data. Similarly, the activist and CSO articles often mentioned phrases such as *Exploitation of Armenia* or *Armenia as a Pollution Haven;* however, the justification and framing of these aspects as important to the debate were possible to expand upon in a direct dialogue with the protesters. The nature of qualitative interviews allows for the exploration of more personal perspectives and opinions from the subject directly - a subjectivity that secondary sources do not possess. When dealing with an issue which is crucially social and affects people from the bottom up, having direct insights from active stakeholders is significant for the credibility of the findings.

The study conducted five hour-long interviews: one interview with an activist who is part of various environmental CSOs in Armenia (Interview 1), a grassroots student activist against the Amulsar projects (Interview 2), an independent geologist/mining expert (Interview 3), a representative of Lydian Armenia working in the sustainability department (Interview 4), and a former public servant in the ministry of the environment who currently works at the World Bank (Interview 5).

The participants underwent an informed consent procedure, being informed about the aim of the study. The interviews did not involve notable ethical concerns, such as distress. Given the possible exposure of the participants, such as their societal position, affiliations, and employment, the interviews were anonymized. Only information relevant to the study about the participants is described above. The data collected from the interviews was transcribed either manually or using software, in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Additionally, all data, including interview transcripts, were stored in compliance with regulations and deleted upon completion of the study.

2.3 Limitations and Quality Assessment

This study was designed to meet the qualitative standards of credibility, transferability, transparency, dependability, and reflexivity. Notwithstanding, it acknowledges the inherent constraints of time, data availability, and researcher bias.

Credibility was supported through the triangulation of sources, including actor-aligned media (Lydian, EcoLur, Azatutyun, etc.), interviews with relevant stakeholders, and the coding of discursive content across a diverse dataset. The use of framing analysis allowed for the identification of patterned meaning-making strategies across cases. However, it should be noted that the study was conducted across the span of two months. A prolonged engagement would have allowed for deeper triangulation. Furthermore, the number of interviews was fewer than hoped at the outset of the study. This was in significant part due to the difficulty in contacting relevant actors and issues of access. Particularly, government officials and Lydian representatives were difficult to reach within the slim time frame, resulting in only one representative from each side being interviewed and thus diluting the empirical basis for certain conclusions.

Additionally, using a proxy source for government representation was chosen due to the time constraints of the study. This, however, might introduce some bias and incomplete representation of the government's perspective, as opposed to analyzing full government speeches and announcements on the topic.

Transferability was strengthened by situating the Amulsar case within a broader theoretical framework of post-Soviet institutional fragility, epistemic politics, and environmental governance. Nonetheless, because the research focuses on a single case study, the findings are contextually grounded and not generalizable in a statistical

sense. Their relevance lies instead in their conceptual and theoretical resonance with similar governance contexts marked by weak institutions and contested expertise, namely, other post-Soviet contexts in the South Caucasus, such as Georgia and Azerbaijan.

Dependability was addressed through careful documentation of the analytical process, including a codebook, coding tree, and thematic synthesis. The use of ATLAS.ti ensured a structured approach to data management. Still, due to time constraints, inter-coder reliability testing was not conducted, and coding decisions, while reasoned, may reflect the partiality of the researcher's perspective. This issue can be amplified by the positionality of the main researcher, who comes from Armenia. This also concerns the interviews, as they both helped in recruiting participants and meant bigger bias in interpreting the results.

This leads to potential flaws in the confirmability of the findings, which were tried to be accounted for through reflexivity and transparency. The use of memos and peer review of the findings tried to compensate for the potential bias. The interview plan and questions were also designed according to qualitative research standards and peer reviewed to avoid researcher bias. Nevertheless, more systematic reflection on positionality and potential researcher bias could have strengthened the robustness of the findings.

Overall, while the study does not claim exhaustive empirical coverage, it offers a meaningful and analytically grounded contribution to the literature on environmental governance, expertise, and discourse in transitional contexts. It should be read as a theoretically informed exploration of framing dynamics rather than a definitive or comprehensive account of the Amulsar conflict.

3. Result: Framing of Amulsar

A total of 509 quotations were identified, and 65 different codes, leading to the identification of four core themes. These themes are systematically organised here based on the three central framing tasks identified in the literature: diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational.

Diagnostic Framing (Defining the Problem): This is addressed in Section 3.1: Economic Necessity and Environmental Risks, where discourse coalitions present competing definitions of the crisis. Lydian and the government frame the problem as Economic Necessity, appealing to materialist values. Activists frame the problem as Environmental Risks and corruption, appealing to altruistic values.

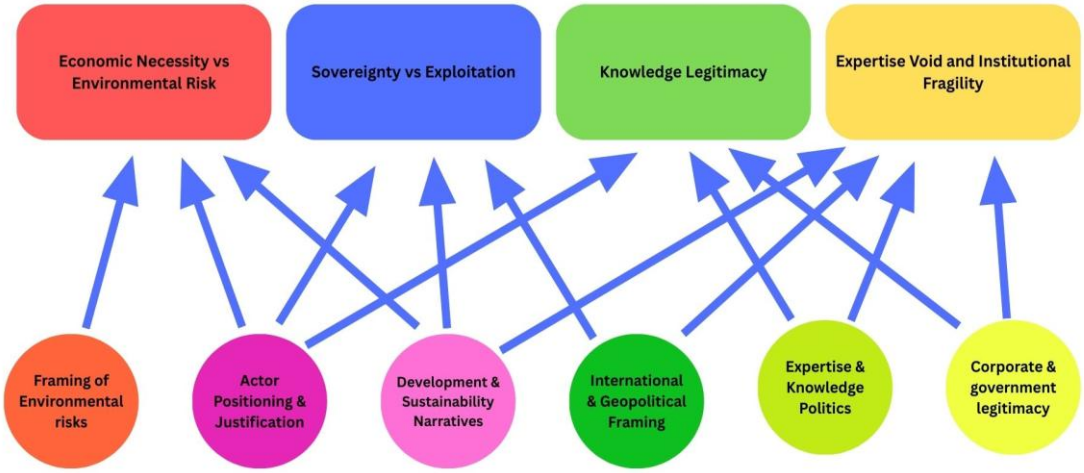
Prognostic Framing (Suggesting Solutions/Actions): This is explored in Section 3.2: Sovereignty and Extraction and further detailed in Section 3.4: Expertise Void and Institutional Fragility. Prognostic frames focus on the required actions, such as seeking legal protection from threats to future investment or advocating for government action to stop the project.

Motivational Framing (Call to Action/Justification): This is woven throughout the themes, particularly in Section 3.4, where opposing frames justify specific actions. For example, by framing resistance as democratic versus framing the blockade as illegal and potentially politically motivated.

A total of six code groups emerged through the inductive coding process of both the archival material and the interviews: *Framing of Environmental and Social Risk, Actor Positioning and Justification, Expertise and Knowledge Politics, Corporate and Government Legitimacy/Illegitimacy, International and Geopolitical Framings,* and *Development and Sustainability Narratives*. These code groups further lead to the observation of four core themes summarized below.

Figure 1

The Transformation of Code Groups into Themes



The core finding of this analysis rests on clarifying the dual function of the 'expertise void' in the Amulsar dispute: a distinction necessary for moving beyond mere description. The expertise void is fundamentally a structural factor - the condition of institutional fragility in post-Soviet Armenia, characterised by the absence of credible domestic epistemic institutions and low public trust. This structural factor dictates that environmental knowledge, rather than being a neutral input, becomes a strategic tool in democratic struggles over legitimacy. Thus, the actual mobilisation of expertise (e.g., citing ELARD or international certification) functions as a rhetorical frame used by all actors to assert epistemic legitimacy. This analytical separation ensures the void is understood both as the underlying systemic issue and the strategic resource that actors exploit, reinforcing the finding that the struggle is over 'who gets to say what is true?'.

3.1 Economic Necessity and Environmental Risks: Framing Armenia's Political Agenda

The first theme identified in the coding process is intuitive. Each actor analyzed tried to present the issue by either repeatedly highlighting the environmental and social risks associated with the project or, conversely, downplaying them and focusing on the benefits of the mine. This theme emerged through two opposing diagnostic frames of the project, between the government and Lydian, on the one hand, and the CSOs and activists, on the

other, essentially forming two opposing discourse coalitions. The *Economic Necessity and Environmental Risks* theme highlights the use of opposing aspects of the project, which the actors in the discourse attempt to emphasize. This theme serves as an example of competing diagnostic and prognostic frames, with environmental harm versus economic necessity as competing definitions of the situation.

The most heavily used code group was the one related to the *framing of environmental and social risks*, as well as the *actor positioning and justification*. The Armenian government most often cited the economic benefits of the mine to portray the project in a positive light while also stating that the environmental concerns raised by activists and civil society organizations (CSOs) were exaggerated. These codes were identified 16 and 12 times, respectively. For instance, statements such as "*Predicting boosts to economic growth*" or "*this is a project, which will create a thousand jobs*" are both examples made by Nikol Pashinyan in his speeches in Jermuk, highlighting the heavy reliance on economic arguments when framing the project's risks as minimal (Azatutyun 17).

Similarly, Lydian's publications and public statements heavily emphasized the creation of jobs, economic growth, and the tax revenues associated with their project, which constituted their most frequently used argument for the mine (12). This frame used by both the government and the private company is not unique to Armenia or this case. Focusing on the economic downsides or benefits of environmental policy is a crucial framing device that can either discourage or promote it among the public (Bertolotti & Catellani, 2021). The mining industry itself uses economic frames when facing grassroots environmental activists, as was seen in the cases of India and the Philippines (Borde & Rasch, 2018). Hence, the use of economic frames when diagnosing the issue is not a new concept and is thus expected in the analysis.

This frame appeals directly to materialist values centred on economic well-being and personal and national security. Given Armenia's post-Soviet context, which prioritises economic growth and stability over environmental concerns, these materialist values hold high salience. Consequently, these economic arguments were treated as 'fairly apparent' and did not necessitate heavy mobilisation of complex scientific or international expertise. The diagnostic frame here is evidently accepted by many stakeholders, allowing corporate actors to focus on financial justifications rather than contested technical evidence.

On the other hand, both grassroots activists and civil society organizations (CSOs) focus on the environmental risks associated with the project. The most frequently cited argument against the mine is the risk of water contamination, which was mentioned 19 times. Risks of biodiversity loss, radiation risks, public health, and the social risks of community displacement, as well as those faced by Jermuk resort workers, were frequently highlighted by these actors. What is interesting is that, in official publications, the argument that the project's environmental risks are unmanageable or unavoidable was only used twice, both instances being made by the Civil Society Institute. In contrast, both the government and Lydian argued that the environmental risks of water contamination, radiation, and biodiversity loss were heavily exaggerated, citing this point 11 and 5 times, respectively.

The environmental risks frame, employed by activists and CSOs, required the heavy mobilisation of expertise (such as citing risks of water contamination, biodiversity loss, and public health threats). This is because environmental protection often appeals to altruistic values, which, while crucial, may be perceived as a lower priority when compared to economic or national security concerns in the current Armenian context. Furthermore, the central diagnostic belief in this frame is technically ambiguous (e.g., whether contamination risks are

unavoidable). In the absence of credible domestic epistemic institutions (the 'expertise void'), both sides required international expertise to validate their specific beliefs about these complex technical risks, thereby asserting epistemic legitimacy.

The independent expert interviewed for this research mentioned this as one of the key shortcomings of the whole discourse. As they phrased it:

"The mining industry a priori does harm to the environment. The activists should decide whether they are opposed to the mine wholly, which is a valid case to be made. But they choose to focus on specific technical aspects of the project, which can be simply disproven, even by me" (Interview 3).

Therefore, the activists and CSOs did not actively argue in their publications that their environmental concerns are insolvable, allowing the government and Lydian to frame the issue in a manner that suggests the risks of the project are already addressed and not significant.

By downplaying environmental concerns, the economic aspects of the Amulsar project gained a more significant role in the discussion. This gave Lydian and its supporters from the government an upper hand in framing the issue as primarily economic. Activists acknowledged the economic arguments for the mine to a certain extent. CSOs, such as EcoLur, addressed the economic aspect of Amulsar eight times, refuting the fiscal argument by highlighting the risks to the Jermouk tourism sector in case the mine operates, the costs of adequately containing the water contamination risks, and the financial burden on the government after the damage to the environment is done. This is also a common strategy, as activists acknowledge the short-term economic benefits of polluting industries but highlight the long-term environmental damage that will be a financial burden not only on the affected communities but also on the government. The case of Philippine-Palawan grassroots eco-activists also highlighted the prevalence of the "*eco-tourism argument*" in countering the economic frames used by mining companies (idem: 200-205).

The economic argument based on the tourism sector also appeared in the interview with the former government official and public servant at the Ministry of Environment. They mentioned that this would be the first mine in the region of Vayots Dzor, posing a significant threat to the community's tourism and resort-based economy (Interview 5). However, the activists and CSOs engaged far less with the main diagnostic frame used by the government and Lydian (economic benefits) compared to the latter two, which dismissed the environmental concerns raised by the project's opponents.

Even in interviews with environmental activists and protest organizers, the economic arguments for the mine were addressed only once, focusing again on Jermuk's healthcare resort workers and the decline in tourism. In contrast, during the interview with the Lydian Armenia representative, the economic argument was again presented and elaborated upon through phrases such as "*the mine opponents want Armenia to stagnate*," framing the issue as a matter of the country's economic development or stagnation.

The independent investigative magazine Hetq reflected these disparities in diagnostic and prognostic frames, presenting the activists' claims on biodiversity loss, water contamination, and social risks in higher numbers but mentioning economic arguments against the project only twice. Even though siding more with the activists, Hetq still reflected the major counter-frame of Lydian and the government, arguing that these ecological concerns were exaggerated.

This bipolar framing of the goals and obstacles for Armenia's development reflects not only the country's current prioritisation of economic growth but can also be traced back to the Soviet devaluation of environmental concerns. Despite being critical of the Soviet ecological legacy, security specialists in Armenia do not perceive environmental threats as major security threats, considering the frozen discussion about the Metsamor Nuclear plant built during the USSR, just 37 km away from Yerevan, in the middle of a seismic zone (Hopmann et al., 1997: 30). Hence, we can observe that 33 years after USSR, environmental issues made little progress in competing with the economic agenda for a spotlight in Armenian politics.

3.2 Sovereignty vs Extraction: Geopolitical Frames of Knowledge and Control

An inseparable aspect of the environmental agenda in Armenia is the question of national security and the country's position in geopolitical developments. Therefore, it was expected to see the actors in the discourse frame the Amulsar project as one of significance for the country's security and sovereignty.

Lydian and the Armenian government mentioned the threat to national security, namely the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh with neighbouring Azerbaijan, 8 times throughout their publications and speeches about Amulsar. Additionally, the codes of national security threats and economic arguments for the project were fully co-occurring in all eight quotations analyzed.

This illustrates how the company and the government amplify the frame of economic development to the extent that it impacts national security and sovereignty. Because Armenia cannot financially "*afford*" another war, as Lydian's director phrased it in one of the publications, the government and civil society should prioritize the Amulsar mine for the sake of Armenia, he claimed (Lydian 7). Pashinyan shared similar concerns by stating that the protesters' blockade of the mine would have "*severe consequences for Armenia's economy and even national security*" (Azatutyun 16). Pashinyan has used a similar fear-mongering approach in his re-election campaigns.

It is, therefore, unsurprising that Lydian can frame the blockade and resistance to the project as an international conspiracy. This was elaborated in the interviews with the Lydians' representative, who suggested, despite being critical of conspiracy theories, that they do not rule out countries like Azerbaijan playing a role in the protests, which aimed to stagnate and ruin Armenia's reputation among foreign investors (Interview 4). The independent mining experts interviewed also shared similar suspicions, stating that the entire impasse on the project did not benefit the country's interests.

This explains another common code observed in Lydians' and the government's papers, which showed great concern for threats to future investments in the country if the project fails and investors lose their money. This was not only used as an argument by Lydian but also constituted a significant fear factor for the government, as Pashinyan claimed that halting the project could turn the country into a "*black hole on the world's economic map*" (Azatutyun 15).

This connects directly to the country's post-Soviet reality, which often necessitates the country reiterating its independence. The fear of domination after its seperation from the USSR meant that economic stability and sovereignty were usually at risk, especially after ethnic antagonisms with neighbours became more apparent (Hopmann et al., 1997: 23). This political insecurity is visible also in the government rhetoric after the war, with Pashinyan repeatedly emphasizing that "*Armenia needs an internationally recognised state through a new constitution to affirm Armenia's sovereignty*" as part of a "*Real Armenia' ideology*" (Barseghyan, 2025).

Therefore, both the government and Lydian framed the project's success as crucial for the country's sovereignty and safety against neighbouring threats. This also achieved the aim of portraying the opponents of the mine as either intentionally undermining Armenia's national interests or simply seeking to hinder Armenia's development. The latter was especially the case when Lydian referred to the members of the diaspora who spoke against the mine and supported activists as those who want Armenia to turn into a "*third-world country*" or those who see Armenia as simply a "*summerhouse*" with pretty nature (Interview 4).

From the activists' and CSOs' perspective, the geopolitical framing of Amulsar was not so much about economic development as it was about economic exploitation. The ArmEcoFront publications repeatedly hint at the global financial pressure on Armenia, which undermines its sovereignty. Motivational frames, such as "*not letting international banks trample the interests of the Armenian people*," imply an unequal geopolitical position between Armenia and Western financial interests (ArmEcoFront 1). This frame was expressed more clearly in the interviews, adding sentiments that *Armenia is seen as a pollution haven* because "*the government does not have the guts to regulate them*" or that the only difference between Amulsar and resource exploitation by Western companies in Africa is that Lydian is doing a "*subtler*" job in Armenia (Interview 1).

Additionally, activists portray the sovereignty of Armenia as being undermined by citing reports of foreign governments, such as the UK and the US, allegedly exerting pressure on Armenia to approve the project. This, along with repeated claims of "*corporate greed*" during the interviews, shows that the frame employed by the opponents of the mine is one of economic exploitation of Armenia, whose interests contradict those of the project.

The investigative Hetq reflected these activists' concerns that Armenia would become a pollution haven in its publications while briefly mentioning the geopolitical aspects of the project only once. This suggests that, despite both sides hinting at external powers influencing the course of the discussion, much of it remains unspoken in official settings and is elaborated upon more during interviews.

In the context of the conflict with Azerbaijan, activists and CSOs addressed concerns about national security only once, stating that the proximity of the mine to the border necessitates even greater scrutiny by the government. This argument was somewhat vague, and even during the interviews, the activists did not link the project to border security as closely as the government and Lydian, often mentioning that the conflict meant environmental and sustainability concerns were frequently overshadowed in Armenian politics. One of the activists went as far as to say that personally, they thought of the Amulsar issue much less after the 2020 war and, to a certain extent, understand the public negligence towards environmental concerns in Armenia right now.

"I have to admit when the war broke out, I forgot about Amulsar. I am not saying every member of our organisation did, but I personally could only think about our brothers on the frontline and the possibility of this happening again in the near future (Interview 1)

This sentiment further highlights the environmental agenda being at the margins of Armenian politics, as such issues become secondary in the face of immediate threats to one's security. A fact that both Lydian and the government exploit in their framing of the Amulsar project.

3.3 Actor Positioning Through Knowledge Legitimacy

In the case of the economic frame, expertise was not heavily employed, as the arguments for job creation and tax revenue were fairly apparent and were not significantly contested by activists and CSOs. Similarly, statements about international conspiracies or the global exploitation of peripheral countries by richer ones tend to reside more on kitchen counters than at the forefront of Armenian environmental discourse. However, where the topic concerned something more publicly contestable, such as environmental impact, all the stakeholders engaged in more nuanced frames by utilizing different sources of expertise.

Right away, we can see a clear link with the research question concerning the expertise void in Armenia, as all stakeholders actively used references to international expertise (71) in their prognostic and diagnostic frames, something this paper particularly focuses on. In comparison, reference to local expertise was observed in less than half the number of quotations (24). The visual summary of these findings is illustrated in Figure 5 below.

Figure 2

Reference to International Expertise and Reference to Local Expertise



The use of international expertise was mainly seen as a strategy for each actor to legitimize their claims on the environmental impact of the project. Lydian, in their publications, referred to international experts approving their project and procedures 12 times. The company conveyed sentiments that the EIA being processed by the government had already been approved by "*more authoritative Western organizations*" such as Wardell Armstrong (Azatutyun 13). An interesting connection is also made between Lydian's own research and international expertise, thus linking corporate knowledge with international standards to legitimize it. The co-occurrence of both codes in their publications was four times, while the company's positionality, operating through international standards, effectively reaffirms the linked instrumental and symbolic use of expertise.

In contrast, references to local expertise occurred only thrice, twice of which aimed to ridicule the activists' empirical claims about biodiversity loss resulting from mine construction. In general, remarks on activists' and CSOs' lack of knowledge and "*naiveté"* were a common strategy for Lydian, identified in 10 quotations. These were also made more explicit in interviews with Lydian Armenia's representative, which implicitly differentiated between the good type of experts (mostly foreign) and the "*tree-huggers*" (naïve environmentalists) (Interview 4). Paired with this attack on the knowledge behind environmental movements, questioning the intentions of the activists was also observed in both interviews and published articles of Lydian, suggesting that the activists were either paid off by rival mining companies or manipulated into action.

The government statements, although less direct, relied on external expertise to justify their approval of the mine (seven times) while not mentioning local expertise a single time. Pashinyan himself ridiculed some activist claims about water and radiation pollution from the mine (Azatutyun 14). Considering the established government position that environmental concerns are exaggerated, the epistemic framing lies in creating an image of activists and concerned local experts as either possessing inferior expertise or being led by malintent. The same theory about activists being paid off was observed in four different quotations from government speeches and announcements.

Interestingly, CSOs and eco-activists utilized international expertise in a similar strategic manner to Lydian, thereby increasing the perceived sociological and democratic legitimacy of their concerns. Together, they referred to international expertise a total of 36 times in this manner. They would include claims of support from international environmental scientists, citing international standards or conventions that support their cause. This demonstrates a significantly greater reliance on international expertise by the mine's opponents, who were also more inclined to cite local experts (16 times) who shared their concerns.

All these references were mainly used to argue that the EIA conducted by Lydian was inadequate (26), therefore constructing an attack on corporate expertise. A similar strategy of delegitimizing Lydian was employed by activists and CSOs, who stated that Lydian made misleading claims about the project, as well as placed a heavy emphasis on the use of corporate force for physical and other forms of suppression of protesters (12). The activists further attacked corporate expertise by claiming that the international experts Lydian cites for their EIA were already contractually bound to the company or that independent experts would arrive at the mining site in the corporation's vehicles.

The peculiarity of these findings is that both opposing groups employed similar epistemic strategies in their prognostic and diagnostic frames, yet completely disregarded similar claims that contradicted their aims. For instance, Lydian heavily relied on international expertise when justifying its operations; however, it also heavily criticized ELARD's third-party audit by discrediting its knowledge of the mining industry and disregarding its conclusions, as observed in the interviews. This attack was particularly interesting given that ELARD did have experience in mining. The protesters used the same argument against Lydian four times, again stating that the company has no experience in mining, as Amulsar is its first-ever project.

During the interviews, the activists also revealed that they mostly viewed the role of international organizations in sharing their expertise as futile for the Amulsar movement. This further reinforces the idea that references to such expertise served symbolic aims, as activists recognized the greater importance of local expertise in such regional projects.

A crucial analytical task is determining why some frames mobilize expertise heavily while others do not. The analysis reveals a strategic disparity in the deployment of epistemic resources: expertise is **not heavily employed** in the **Economic Necessity** frame (Section 3.1). This occurs because economic arguments focused on job creation and tax revenue appeal directly to fundamental, high-priority materialist values (i.e., economic well-being and security) prominent in the post-Soviet context, making these claims seem 'fairly apparent' and thus requiring less epistemic validation. Conversely, the Environmental Risks frame necessitates heavy reliance on expertise. This reliance stems from two VBN-related needs: (1) environmental protection appeals to potentially lower-priority altruistic values; and (2) the core belief underpinning this frame (Awareness of Consequences, AC) is technically contested (e.g., whether contamination risks are exaggerated or unavoidable). In the context of the Armenian 'expertise void,' international authority is therefore strategically mobilised by both sides to validate contested technical beliefs, determining whose 'truth matters' in the policy system.

3.4 Expertise Void and Institutional Fragility: Government, Institutions and Crisis of Knowledge

To fully address the second part of the research question, the perceptions and actions of actors regarding environmental expertise in Armenia should be examined.

Unsurprisingly, given the heavily criticized state of Armenian politics, the government's actions (or, in most cases, inaction) were heavily criticized by both Lydian and the opponents of the mine.

The first apparent diagnostic frame employed by the activists concerned government corruption playing a role in the approval of the mine, primarily but not only referring to pre-2018 administrations. This frame was observed 15 times throughout the activists' and CSOs' publications. The sentiment that Armenian politics has been corrupt since its independence is used by the opponents of the mine to discredit the mining permits granted to Lydian, suggesting that the decisions made by previous governments cannot serve as a basis for discussion. Facts regarding the lack of stakeholder engagement, such as the absence of public hearings for Jermuk residents to participate in decision-making when approving the mine, are highlighted in the articles, underscoring the intentional procedural flaws in the project's initial stages.

Activists and CSOs also argued for more concrete cases of corruption. The head of the investigating committee for Amulsar, Yuriy Ivanyan, who was appointed shortly after the 2018 revolution, is reportedly linked in publications to the former Minister of Environment, who signed the documents for the EIA of Lydian. During the interviews, the activists also discussed how each minister of the environment had a side business, which often had financial interests in mining (Interview 1). Additionally, the activists mentioned that mining permits were being handed out as "*favours*"; thus, the approval of the initial EIA is "*comical proof*" of the mine's safety (ibid).

The apparent frame identified from these sentiments was the association between the new government members dealing with the issue and the previous corrupt regime. Thus, the code was also used in the context of the government siding with Lydian and concealing important information in their assessments, thereby aiding their previously mentioned arguments regarding Lydian's use of misleading expertise. For instance, one of the activists, Anna Shahnazaryan, stated that some government officials sided with Lydian (a direct endorsement observed six times in all the data) to provide Pashinyan with inaccurate information about the issue.

It can be noted that the opponents of the mine take advantage of two interdependent frames in this context: the approval of the mine is a result of corrupt governance, and Amulsar is a test for the new government to show

that these times are in the past. The most used prognostic frame observed in activists' and CSOs' publications was the *call for government action* (8) to intervene and stop the project. This was also paired with the initial *optimism expressed by activists in 2018* (4), as stated in publications and acknowledged by activists during the interviews.

This logically led to another frame employed by the opponents of the mine, which portrayed the *Resistance to the Project as Democratic.* This frame was used by activists and CSOs 22 times, making it one of the most significant diagnostic frames in the data. Therefore, Amulsar is seen by the opponents of the mine not merely about correct expertise but " *a good test to show that democracy is still lacking in Armenia*" as "*a big portion of the people didn't want the mining project, and the government just didn't care about that whatsoever*" (Interview 2). Therefore, if the resistance to the project is the democratic will of the people, a call for government action is a sound strategy. Surprisingly, compared to other grassroots environmental movements, the publications and interviews call for people's mobilization only once and refrain from this motivational frame, which is central for movements like Extinction Rebellion (Ermakova, 2020: 72).

In comparison, Lydian had similar hopes for change after May 2018, as expressed during the interviews, that the previous corrupt regime also created obstacles by demanding a share of the mine's profits (Interviews 3 and 4). However, instead of focusing on democratic ideals, Lydian took a more critical approach, calling for the government to ensure their enterprise's legal protection. This was shown by the frequent co-occurrence of the *illegal blockade* code with criticisms of the government. The most common approach was to appeal to the legal aspects of the case, given the previous approvals that the activists had criticized. Hence, Lydian hinted at potential legal threats to the Armenian government. As the company's executive director, Hayk Aloyan put it: "*If we see that the matter is not solved through dialogue, we could appeal to other bodies and try to have our rights restored*" (Azatutyun 20). Thus, Lydian's framing of the issue in this context often referred to the legal legitimacy of the government.

The government publications showed awareness of these threats by using them to justify their inaction to the protesters. The former government official recalls "*letters of blackmail*" to the government, threatening to pursue international arbitration for the blockade (Interview 5). However, it is interesting to note that by the time the conflict with the protesters began, Lydian was still registered in an offshore UK territory, shortly after which it changed its registration to onshore UK, US, and Canada (ArmEcoFront, 2016). As offshore registered entities acquire jurisdiction for arbitration, the post-factum registration could constitute an abusive process and not be taken by the court. It is not clear if the government was aware of this, but it highlights the primary purpose of the threats as framing devices.

It can be observed that both Lydian and its opponents share grievances against the government. The code *government inaction* occurred eight times in Lydian's publications and five times in activists' and CSOs' publications, showing that the general perception is that the administration is not fulfilling its duties, whether legal or democratic. When asked about the role of the government, the former official responded with:

> *"My biggest grievance with my superiors was not making a decision. Playing the populist card. The government's and politicians' main mandate is to make decisions. Informed decisions, as hard as they can be. And the government just dragged on and kicked the can for way too long. It was either pissing off a major investor and undermining the investment climate or pissing off*

all of the environmental actors. A decision should have been made as soon as we had ELARD's conclusion." (Interview 5).

The sentiment of disappointment is especially apparent after the promised judicial reforms in 2018 and Pashinyan's proclamations of Armenia as a "*bastion of democracy*", as one activist recalled (Interview 2). The growing pessimism about the government also translated into harsher evaluations during the interviews. Lydian representatives, activists, independent experts, and a former government official collectively referred to the government as incompetent a total of six times. Activists justified this claim by referencing its failures in environmental governance, with Lydian's representative suggesting that the government's "*inexperience and inability to understand the impacts of their decisions*" were to blame. At the same time, the independent mining expert went as far as to say that all the appointed ministers since 2018 are "*simply terrible experts in their given field if they even are experts*" (Interview 1, 2, 3, 4).

Especially the last sentiment expresses general frustration that, even after the revolution, Armenia seems to be lacking the expertise it needs to base its governance. The attacks by Lydian on domestic experts used by activists illustrate the superficial distrust of local knowledge. However, it goes much deeper than simply criticizing individual experts.

It has already been illustrated that all actors relied on international expertise to justify their positions, but it remains unclear how they motivated this decision. The code 'Armenia *Lacks Environmental Expertise'* was observed in the data 15 times, adding nuance to the understanding of the reasoning behind the dependency on international environmental expertise. In this regard, the interviews provided more insight than the primary data, as some actors elaborated on the issue of domestic knowledge production. Lydian representatives mentioned on several occasions that Armenia simply lacks "*serious large environmental audit companies inside the country*", also stating that since the Soviet Union, Armenia has never really developed any domestic research institutions (Interview 4).

Activists shared the perspective that Armenia's environmental expertise is underdeveloped. They mentioned that Amulsar is direct evidence of the incapacity of domestic expertise to produce a comprehensive overview of the project while also highlighting other environmental malpractices by the government, including deforestation and construction pollution in urban areas (Interview 2). The independent expert interview for this research even said that the government's preference for ELARD over local experts effectively "*dishonored local expertise*", mainly because no new data was provided for the audit and "*the same conclusions could be reached by the average Armenian expert, and not for a 1000 dollars per hour*" (Interview 3). They even stated that international expertise providers "*sell their authority first, rather than guarantee good conclusions*" (ibid). The coloniality of knowledge is evident here through the government's assumption that international expertise provides more credibility, as explicitly stated by Pashinyan (Azatutyun 13).

Even if grassroots movements and experts themselves can appreciate local expertise, its development in the country is routinely questioned. In the interviews, the activists expressed either general frustration about the future or glimpses of hope for the next generation. However, this hope is mostly based on optimism rather than concrete developments in the country. Environmental expertise would require a new generation of experts to emerge in Armenia, something which was obstructed by the shaky post-Soviet legacy of the country.

As the former government official stated in the interview:

> *"Technical expertise has been in a void in Armenia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Our economic structure underwent a complete transformation, with all factories closing down and national production coming to a halt. And education in science wasn't necessary anymore because the demand for jobs wasn't there, and because we were turning into a market economy where the highest demand was doing a major in business or economics." (Interview 5)*

Lydian's director also stated that many professions which require environmental expertise are simply lacking popularity among university students, who often seek education in finance or marketing to work at transnational corporations stationed in Armenia (Lydian 4). This point was reiterated by the former government official, who mentioned that they know "*maybe four competent biodiversity experts who have working English proficiency*" and that it is a "*very narrow pool of experts to operate with*" when justifying the government's choice of ELARD's audit (interview 5).

Lydian's comment suggests a form of brain drain within the country, where young professionals seek jobs not in domestic organizations or firms but in foreign ones. But then, what prognostic frames does the company use for the abovementioned issue?

Amidst the described crisis of knowledge in Armenia, Lydian places heavy emphasis on its role in contributing to the solution of this issue. The code *Lydian Promotes Environmental Expertise* appears 15 times in the data, serving as a recurring argument for the social approval of the mine. The company lists the "*homegrown*" experts in the field that it has produced for the country and industry. The Lydian representative in the interview also stated that the company plays a crucial role in environmental expertise, as most of the experts working in the field are employed by the mining industry (Interview 4). The discussion went even further, as they expressed a sentiment quite common in the framing of political issues in Armenia.

> *Environmental science only develops when it's funded and supported by the business and when it's needed by the business. It's a science, and any science should be funded by the economy anywhere in the world. I've seen no scientific breakthroughs anywhere in the world that have been funded by the government. That's how it works unless we're in the Soviet Union. (Interview 4)*

This belief in private sector expertise can be explained from two perspectives. One is the apparent preference of a company representative to cite the benefits of corporate knowledge production. However, this also illustrates another aspect of distrust in the Armenian government, as it is expressed to be mostly incompetent, highlighting the shaky shift into the market economy after the collapse of the USSR. Armenia's lingering partial reform syndrome and the inaction of the democratic government enable Lydian to frame the development of environmental expertise as inherently market-based, despite numerous scientific breakthroughs worldwide that are funded by the public sector.

In contrast, the former government official suggested - similarly to the activists - that this expertise void needs time to heal, focusing on the development of educational institutions and civil society.

> *I hope that in the next 10 years, as a result of the Sustainability and Environment course that we started at the American University of Armenia, we will have more and more talent emerging. Doing their master's somewhere abroad, but coming back and serving their country because we are definitely in a dire, dire need for this. (Interview 5)*

Conclusion

When a gold mine project near a spa town becomes the site of international lobbying, mass protests, and epistemic collapse, it is clear that more is at stake than environmental risk alone.

This paper explored how different actors - government, corporations, activists, and civil society - frame the environmental issues surrounding the mine and how these framings reflect an underlying expertise void.

The study found that actors mobilize environmental risk narratives strategically. Government and corporate stakeholders often framed Amulsar as a development opportunity supported by international expertise, while activists emphasized ecological harm, democratic exclusion, and the manipulation of knowledge. Despite their opposing views, both sides relied heavily on foreign assessments, revealing a shared dependence on external expertise in the absence of trusted domestic institutions. Perhaps when institutional voids cannot be managed internally, one can only fill them in with CEMEX cement.

This shared reliance underscores a broader theoretical insight: in contexts of institutional fragility, environmental knowledge becomes a site of political struggle rather than neutral arbitration. The *expertise void* described here reflects not just the absence of scientific authority, but a deeper crisis of epistemic legitimacy rooted in Armenia's post-Soviet transition.

The concept of an expertise void introduced here helps illuminate this gap, not as a simple lack of technical knowledge but as a structural condition in which legitimacy, institutional trust, and epistemic authority are weak or contested. This void is not neutral; it becomes a battleground where actors compete for narrative dominance and political leverage. As Bernstein (2004) and Boswell (2009) suggest, legitimacy and expertise are always relational, dependent on audience perceptions and political context. In Armenia, this relationship is shaped by the legacy of Soviet technocracy, partial reform, and contested sovereignty.

Future research could benefit from comparative case studies across other South Caucasus or Eastern European states to assess whether similar dynamics emerge under different conditions. It could also expand on the role of digital platforms and diaspora actors in shaping environmental discourse, particularly given Armenia's transnational political landscape. Finally, more sustained engagement with local scientific communities and primary data could deepen our understanding of how expertise is cultivated or suppressed.

Ultimately, this paper suggests that in contexts like Armenia, the politics of environmental governance cannot be separated from the crisis of institutional legitimacy, national security, and the geopolitics of knowledge. The fate of Amulsar is not just about one mine but about who gets to speak for the environment - and whose truth matters.

Conflict of Interests

There is no conflict of interest.

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