

Bridging divides

civil society peacebuilding initiatives

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Independent civil society groups and social movements emerged in Armenia and Azerbaijan only in the last decade of Soviet rule. Following the Soviet collapse, democracy promotion became a central part of Western aid programmes as civil society development came to be seen as critical for democratization and a successful transition. These efforts led to the phenomenal growth in the number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Attempts by civil society actors to influence the Armenian-Azerbaijani peace process have thus been simultaneous to their emergence as a constituency for democratization across their respective societies. On a range of issues this has often pitted civil society against governments suspicious and unaccustomed to autonomous initiatives and wary of the foreign funding that supports these organizations. Nonetheless, since 1994 civil society initiatives, often working in very difficult conditions, have addressed various issues including the protection of human rights, the release of hostages and prisoners of war (POWs), the problems affecting refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), and the need to find a peaceful solution to the conflict.

Current circumstances, including the controversial renewal of the Aliyev regime in Azerbaijan, government-opposition confrontation in Armenia and the wave of 'revolutions' across the former Soviet Union, have worsened conditions for civil society while simultaneously creating new opportunities for it. While regimes are perhaps more reluctant than ever to loosen their monopoly on peacemaking, the need for movement in the peace process is creating openings for new forms of civic contact across the conflict divide.

Peacebuilding: possibilities and challenges

A number of factors have limited the effectiveness and impact of NGOs in Armenia and Azerbaijan: capacity, the political environment and the nature of the societies of which civil society itself forms part.



Increased poverty in these countries has meant that few organizations are membership based and supported, making NGOs dependent on foreign donors for the overwhelming majority of their funds. This allows politicians as well as journalists to question the motivations and aims of NGOs that work on peacebuilding and conflict resolution. At the same time international involvement specifically targeted at conflict resolution efforts has been less forthcoming than, for example, in neighbouring Georgia. This has been in part a question of access, as Baku and Stepanakert have not been able to agree on a common mandate arrangement allowing international NGOs to have a mutually approved presence in Nagorny Karabakh. The fact that most of the NGOs engaged in this work are also quite small, with a limited scope of operations, compounds these problems: NGOs reach a small segment of the population while the larger public remains unaware of their work and cynical towards the very notion of civil society. There is consequently a limited level of participation in the peace process and a very low sense of ownership of it.

Beyond issues of capacity, current political realities further circumscribe opportunities for NGO development. In 1999 President Heydar Aliyev announced that “for as long as we have not signed a peace agreement with Armenia there is no need for cooperation between our NGOs and Armenians. When Kocharian and I resolve the issue, it will inevitably involve compromises with which many will disagree. Then let NGOs reconcile the two peoples.” In other words, NGOs are assigned the role not of active players in the peace process but mitigators of public criticism directed at their leaders. Activists on both sides

engaged in meetings with representatives of the other side have faced reprisals, sometimes physical, on their return home, creating an intimidating atmosphere integral to governmental attempts to monopolize the negotiations process. These conditions often demand considerable personal courage on the part of civil society actors in the everyday conduct of their work, and combined with competition over funds, have put considerable strain on personal relationships within already small NGO communities. Especially (but not only) in Azerbaijan, personal conflicts and turf battles have divided civil society and debilitated its capacity to present a united front.

The politicization of NGOs in the context of government-opposition struggles is also significant. Particularly since the civil society-driven ‘Rose’ and ‘Orange’ revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, governments in Armenia and Azerbaijan have regarded their own civil societies with renewed suspicion as covert vehicles of opposition. A long-standing strategy favoured by governments in addressing this threat has been the proliferation of government-funded ‘front’ organizations (or GONGOs – government-organized NGOs). A recent term that has come to describe GONGOs in Armenian is *grbanayin* (‘pocket’) NGOs, a term used to describe NGOs seen as working for or ‘in the pocket’ of the authorities. In Azerbaijan government-controlled militant ‘quasi-NGOs’, such as the Karabakh Liberation Organization, pose as expressions of pluralism but serve as instruments of intimidation. There has been very little in the way of alliances between NGOs and political parties to promote civic peacebuilding initiatives, underlining the rift between ‘political society’ and civil society.

Yet the fact should not be underestimated that most civil society actors in Armenia and Azerbaijan, while sharing commitments to non-violence and democracy, adhere to incompatible visions for the future of Nagorny Karabakh. Civil societies, after all, form part of – and emerge from – wider societies; with those societies reproducing ever more antagonistic visions of the conflict and its future, it is unrealistic to expect that civil society actors should be close to one another in their thinking. On both sides civic actors may actively campaign for a non-violent and participatory peace process and to mitigate excesses of enemy stereotyping obtaining in official propaganda. However, this consensus on method cannot be taken to imply a convergence of their *political* goals in the resolution of the conflict. Assessments of civil society's mediatory potential must take this factor into consideration. Civic actors may have particular capacities to channel the concerns of their own societies to the leadership, and to open up difficult or taboo subjects. Yet bridging political divides between societies, and addressing the competing visions of justice underlying them, arguably presents a distinct set of challenges requiring the identification and development of additional mediatory capacities to dedicate to this task.

The projects and the organizations

Local NGOs in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nagorny Karabakh have organized and participated in dialogues between the parties involved in the conflict, they have worked for the release of POWs, organized youth camps, and led civic education and conflict resolution training programmes as well as skills training programmes for refugees and IDPs. The aim of these activities has been to keep the lines of communication open, to allow individuals from Armenia and Azerbaijan to meet, to combat processes of de-humanization and enemy stereotyping, and to foster social attitudes more receptive to reconciliation and dialogue. One of the first initiatives, the 1991 Peace Caravan, organized by the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly (HCA) chapters in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, provided the context for Armenian and Azeri civil society activists to meet on the Azerbaijani-Armenian border at Kazakh-Ijevan (referred to as the 'peace corridor') to discuss prospects for the resolution of the conflict and to issue a joint appeal for peace. The HCA chapters in the Caucasus, which are part of the larger HCA global network of organizations, also established 'The Transcaucasus Dialogue' in 1992 to coordinate and support the work of the individual HCA chapters in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Nagorny Karabakh as well as their regional cooperation. In 1992, Anahit Bayandour (Armenia) and Arzu Abdullayeva (Azerbaijan) were awarded the Olof Palme Memorial Fund Peace Prize and in 1998 Abdullayeva also received the 'European Union and US Government's Award for Democracy and Civil Society'.

Another successful initiative was a conference in 1995 held in Bonn, Germany, with the support of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. The conference resulted in a series of agreed confidence-building measures including the release of hostages and POWs, and mutual visits by civil society activists, journalists, and students. In the following years hundreds of hostages and POW exchanges took place as part of the agreed confidence-building measures, but as Mary Kaldor and Mient Jan Faber argue, due to political circumstances and a lack of momentum this process came to a standstill in the late 1990s. From the late 1990s there have been various regional meetings and initiatives. These include the 1998 Nalchik seminar, leading to the creation of the Caucasus Forum, one of the longest-lasting and most important forums for NGO cooperation, and the 2001 Tsakhkadzor conference, which created opportunities for civil society activists to discuss pathways to peace. These meetings were an example of local NGOs cooperating with international counterparts, being facilitated by International Alert. One can also note the founding in 2001 of the Caucasian Refugee and IDP NGO Network (CRINGO), established in order to assist the displaced population.

More recently the Consortium Initiative, implemented by a coalition of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) made up of Catholic Relief Services, Conciliation Resources, International Alert, and the London Information Network on Conflicts and State-building (LINKS), has sought to bring a more comprehensive approach. The Consortium Initiative represents a government-funded initiative (it is funded by the United Kingdom government) aimed at a more strategic approach of intersecting strands taking in political and civil society dialogue, conflict-sensitive development and public awareness of the conflict and peace process. It is also explicitly aimed at including all the constituencies in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Karabakh and among displaced communities with a stake in the resolution of the conflict.

Regional approaches have frequently been necessary given the constraints imposed by authorities on meetings with representatives of the other side in each other's countries. Although this has diluted the potential for direct Armenian-Azerbaijani dialogue by situating contacts within a regionalist agenda, it has at times been the only way to incorporate Karabakh Armenians due to Baku's reluctance hitherto to approve meetings between Azeris and Karabakh Armenians in particular. It has also been one of the few means of fostering a sense of pan-Caucasian commonality of interest in a region riven by conflict, blockades and front lines.

In addition to NGOs, there are some smaller grassroots organizations comprised of refugees, the mothers or wives of soldiers, and families of hostages or POWs.

These organizations often work with NGOs and there is an increasing tendency for these organizations to institutionalize over time and to register as NGOs themselves. Armenian diasporic communities, particularly those in the US, have lobbied for foreign aid and publicized the Armenian position. Although diasporic NGOs and individuals from the US, Europe, and the Middle East have contributed to humanitarian aid and development initiatives since independence, there has been little in the way of cooperation with and support for local NGOs involved in peacebuilding and conflict resolution initiatives in Armenia. On the contrary, some diasporic organizations, especially nationalist political parties, have taken more intransigent positions.

Women's NGOs and networks

A striking feature of NGOs in the former Soviet states is the considerable number of women involved. Women from Armenia and Azerbaijan have been working together through NGOs as well as transnational advocacy networks to promote peacebuilding and conflict resolution. An example of women's NGOs' collaborative efforts is the Transcaucasus Women's Dialogue, which was established in 1994 under the aegis of the National Peace Foundation in Washington, DC. From 1997-99, the Transcaucasus Women's Dialogue organized various projects involving the environment, democratic rights and education, including a three-year summer school at Tbilisi State University. Another women's regional initiative was the 'Working Together – Networking Women in the Caucasus' programme (1997 – 2002) sponsored by the Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe (IDEE) with funding from the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the US Department of State. 'Working Together' was a programme for women leaders in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia to promote greater cross-border networking. Through a range of training, civic education, NGO development and cross-border networking activities, the IDEE programmes attempted to enhance the leadership abilities and capacity of women leaders and their NGOs, and to advance women's participation in public life.

Mixed prospects

The capacity of civil society to impinge upon the Karabakh peace process has always been subject to cycles of opportunity and constraint imposed by internal political developments in Armenia and Azerbaijan. It may appear in the current period that civil society faces more constraints than opportunities, and in some senses prospects do not appear good. The conflict is no closer to resolution, momentum is difficult to maintain, militant rhetoric is on the increase, and there is a danger that individual activists and organizations will

become disillusioned by the lack of progress. Even where they enjoy access, civil society actors do not appear to be able to influence politicians. Furthermore, rising oil revenues and the successful opening of the BTC pipeline suggest greater, rather than less, autonomy for the Azerbaijani state from society.

Against this somewhat bleak picture, there is no doubt that since the ceasefire of 1994 NGOs have played a key role by maintaining dialogue, promoting a culture of peace and human rights, working toward the release of POWs, and facilitating the meeting of individuals from the parties to the conflict. Over the years NGOs have gained experience and developed new skills and capacities leading even the most conservative circles of government to recognize the potential of civil society. On 14 June 2005 a statement issued by the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs actively supported prior international calls for the establishment of direct contacts between the Karabakh Armenian and Karabakh Azeri communities. According to the statement, direct inter-communal dialogue and associated confidence-building measures will contribute to creating the prerequisite conditions for normalizing relations between Karabakh Armenians and returning Azeris. This represents an important opening for these two core constituencies to establish a dialogue for the first time since the war. Another trend is the growth of civil society in Karabakh itself, a nascent phenomenon tempering the influence of the military in Karabakh Armenian politics.

Looking to the future, the key priority for civil society is to act as a conduit for wider, more informed participation in the peace process. Broad-based public awareness of and participation in the peace process is essential for the region to develop democratically and a mutually acceptable, sustainable solution to the conflict to be found. This requires civil society to develop proposals on both substantive and procedural issues for consideration by the negotiating parties. It also demands outreach to marginalized communities and internal dialogue on painful, often taboo issues. The accession of both Armenia and Azerbaijan to the Council of Europe in June 2000, and their resulting obligation to resolve the Karabakh conflict by peaceful means, should serve to indicate to peacebuilders in the region that they can count on the support of European structures such as the Council of Europe and the European Union. This support will be crucial for civil societies; ultimately however, the challenge is to include disaffected populations in a meaningful dialogue on options for peace, and to thereby instil in them a sense of ownership over the resulting peace process.