

The Role of Civil Society in the Prevention of Armed Conflict South Caucasus Regional Action Agenda

Background

In early 1990s the South Caucasus states Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia gained their independence and sovereignty. Since then these states have chosen the path of democratic governance (adoption of Constitution, division of powers, etc.), civil society (development of the NGO sector and independent mass media) and liberal economy (free market). However, currently Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia are in an acute period of political, economic, social and cultural readjustment. There have been enormous qualitative and quantitative changes in society since early 90s due to several key factors, such as:

- Inevitable but still severe post-Soviet social-economic collapse related with wide-spread corruption;
- Armed conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno Karabakh, and in Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), which reached high-intensity stage and later grew into a protracted “frozen” stage;
- Humanitarian crisis characterized by the vast flow of refugees and IDPs in the aftermath of regional conflicts as well as the exodus of population (including intellectual capital) to abroad for better opportunities and life conditions;
- Process of democratization and institutional reforms of political, military, economic and social systems in compliance with international standards and their gradual integration into the international community;
- Development of various strategically important economic projects with vast international assistance and support. The projects based on the region’s key strategic location (Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia) and energy resources (oil/gas resources along with pipeline routes, such as BTC and SCP).

Among above-mentioned issues, the most arduous challenge appeared to be armed conflicts that took up enormous amount of national human and economic resources, on one hand, and aggravated number of socio-economic and political hardship, on the other. After the ceasefire agreements over the conflicts were reached (over Nagorno Karabakh in May 1994; over Abkhazia in July 1993 – yet broken in September 1993 and regained in April 1994, and over South Ossetia in June 1992), much effort has been spent by the international community towards the final resolution of the conflicts, which mainly faced the hard-edged and polarized approaches of the conflicting parties. Also, these conflicts have had their deep impact on the societies awaking latent negative feelings, strengthening existing negative stereotypes and nationalism in general.

As a result of Azerbaijani-Armenia conflict over Nagorno Karabakh, Georgian-Abkhazian, and Georgian-South-Ossetian conflicts the following issues have become key factors for the development of South Caucasus states:

- Unresolved conflicts still decisively influence the political life of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia and hamper the process of their further democratization; military structures have gained an influential role in Armenian society, pushing back other democratic institutions and negatively affecting the country’s democratization process in general;

- The regions uncontrolled by federal authorities have provided a solid ground for corruption, lack of transparency and isolation of civil control over the decision making process;
- The conflicts in Georgia have hardened the relations with Russian Federation. Unresolved conflict over Nagorno Karabakh breeds tensed relations between Armenia and Turkey, which altogether seriously slows down the process of integration in the region;
- Hundreds of thousands of refugees and IDPs flown from the conflict zones, and the issue of their resettlement are still a serious social problem.

Conflict Resolution Strategy

South Caucasus states currently strive towards the non-violent resolution of conflict by peaceful means, however, there is no complete confidence in the stability and irreversibility of the peace process. The society of “no war, no peace” completely differs from the society living in the state of war and the one living in the state of peace. First of all, the distinctions lie in the institutional structure of society: values, stereotypes, expectations, accepted models of behavior, perspectives for social and economic development and overall in the public opinion. The society of “no war, no peace” is itself a dynamic phenomenon, having its own development stages and having the potential for self-transformation, and an ability to transfer the complex perceptions of the regional societies towards events and processes related to the conflict potential.

Thus, the burden of conflict and other social problems causes changes in social attitudes and imperatives. The character and the vector of changes need to be identified. In the positive aspect, it must be directed to the idea of proving security and peaceful co-existence and co-development of different societies in the region.

It is worth to note that establishment of civil society institutions still remains one of the main factors in reaching long-lasting peace among communities in the conflicts over Nagorno Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The extent to which mistrust between peoples involved in ethno-political conflict is deeply rooted in history or is embedded in a culture is spontaneously reproduced among conflicts. Each conflict is unique with its own subjective characteristics that often have important behavioral consequences. Therefore, in deep-rooted ethnic disputes conflict management strategies are not adequate. One has to move towards conflict resolution and reconciliation processes where not only the underlying issues to the conflicts are resolved to everyone’s interests but also the antagonistic attitudes and relationships between the adversaries are transformed from negative to positive. Thus, one of the most important yet the least understood aspect of peace processes in the South Caucasus is the importance of conflict prevention initiatives usually outlined by international community and carried out by the civil society institutions – NGOs and mass media.

In this situation when in Armenia the state constantly keeps the society distanced from the Nagorno Karabakh issue, showing an apparent reluctance to initiate discussions with civil society entities, Armenian NGO’s have had a very little room to influence the decision making processes. However, Armenian NGO sector has paid an attention to the issues related to conflict and further prevention of its escalation.

In Georgia civil society efforts in post conflict reconciliation have been substantial and, at some stages, even successful. Activity by NGO sector in Georgia for confidence building measures between Georgian and Abkhaz, Georgian and South Ossetian communities had an influence on the communication and cooperation between the sides within the framework of internationally supported initiatives. Georgian governmental structures support civil society initiatives on this issue; broad consultations with NGOs working on conflict prevention issues are envisaged from state authorities responsible for conflict resolution issues.

In Azerbaijan, NGO sector is the least supported from the state, highly attached to the government and under its strong control. However, some NGOs and public activists could manage to contribute positively to the peaceful process.

During the last decade Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan have mostly fulfilled the formal prerequisites for democracy with regards to civil society. Some necessary institutions and laws for the establishment of democratic social institutions were launched. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that the efforts spent by the state could hardly be assessed as satisfactory. Judging from the general situation in the region, the steps implemented by the governments were rather formal than substantial, which in its turn led to the following negative consequences:

- misinterpretation in the society concerning the real essence of democratic values;
- insufficient participation of civil society in decision making process and limitation of its ability in shaping public opinion and committing public monitoring;
- existence of legal (through law) obstacles to free flow of information and promotion of pluralist social culture;
- a lack of dynamics of a participatory society;
- a necessity for active participation of civil society in all spheres;
- it is worth to mention that the new leadership of Georgia that came to power after the popular supported “Rose revolution” in November 2003 has recently put forward a constructive approach to resolution of the Georgian-Ossetian dispute and stresses its commitment to a peaceful way of conflict resolution.

Mostly the reforms that South Caucasus states undertook in the field of democratic institution building could not create a sound basis for conflict management or conflict prevention, and civic participation related to conflict prevention may effectively improve the situation only when entities of civil society actively undertake their part of responsibility, giving a strong impetus to the above-mentioned processes. In the case of the state’s incapacity and non-readiness for improvement in some key areas directly related to conflict prevention (human rights, freedom of speech, free mass media), it is civil society that should play a crucial role both in promotion and dissemination of the basic democratic values. Misunderstanding in the society regarding the essence of fundamental democratic values and principles, lack of transparency between state and society, and limitations for free flow of information are the main obstacles for democratization affecting peaceful conflict resolution process. Development of civil society in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia is undoubtedly connected with democratic reforms, which must be carried out in all spheres. It will give impetus to civic entities to be involved in governance and be able to promote new ideas, thus restraining the rise of antagonism and stereotype-based ideologies. The just political solution of conflicts should be preceded by active movements of societies. Active support and special attention to the issues of the confidence-building between the parties to conflict, transformation of the image of enemy and the idea of peaceful co-existence of conflict –stricken communities should become of top priority in the South Caucasus states’ civil society agenda.

Regarding the above-mentioned factors, it is indispensable to analyze the role of South Caucasus NGO sector in the following aspects: a) the mission and potential of civil society in the democratic transition; and b) the role of civil society in conflict prevention: confidence building measures, issues related to arms control and others.

Civil Society in Conflict Prevention Area

Several social-psychological factors of conflict potential exist between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, Georgians and Abkhazians and South Ossetians: *image of the enemy, negative stereotypes and mutual distrust*. The post-Soviet development and to a greater extent conflicts in Nagorno Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia strengthened the role of ethnic element in a number of social characteristics of Georgian, Armenian and Azerbaijani societies.

Overcoming negative stereotypes at the social level is possible under the conditions of positive communications between the parties to the conflict, regional cooperation both on state and social levels. State policies supposed to neutralize negative stereotypes (particularly among young people) could play a very significant role. Overcoming negative stereotypes and the image of enemy with the means of wider social cooperation is an important aspect of conflict prevention. The image of the whole South Caucasus region as a permanent conflict zone proves that it is necessary to work on the decrease of the enemy image and negative psychological elements.

NGOs focused on conflict management may enhance conflict prevention tools between the conflicting parties. These organizations aim at assisting conflict resolution by surpassing the logic of the power politics and encouraging communication, understanding and collaboration between antagonistic communities. Public diplomacy makes possible the involvement of civil society in conflict resolution activities, along with the efforts made by national governments. That is one of the most influential mechanisms that needs to be strengthened and actively applied to peace processes in all South Caucasus states. Integration of NGOs within regional networks serves as an important link and exchange in the South Caucasus. NGO regional networks oriented on conflict prevention and peacebuilding activities refer to the problem of refugees/IDPs, social security and human rights issues etc Women's NGOs and network play a significant role not only in achieving gender equity, but in peace studies and conflict prevention.

Mass media is another instrument in conflict prevention. It can play both positive and negative role in the process. The negative aspect implies stream of information aggravating hatred and hostilities between parties, while positive aspect brings tolerance and understanding.

The other key issue is the development and introduction of similar educational technologies aimed at strengthening cooperation of scientific-educational centers as strong actors of conflict prevention in the region. This role becomes more important under the conditions of inefficient activity of formal international structures and peacemaking agencies. Establishment of mechanisms for preparing specialists in conflict and peace issues may contribute to conflict prevention processes and peacebuilding. Education and training programs in schools based on delivering skills for promoting tolerance and non-violence means of resolution need serious encouragement and support. Publishing is another strong mechanism: it could also help balance the negative impact of mass media covering the disputed issues.

Civil societies of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia perceive their current state of relations in the region as an opportunity to achieve and strengthen long term peace since the transformation of "no war no peace" situation into a "positive peace" becomes the most important condition for conflict prevention.

NGOs and civil society groups in the unrecognized entities/conflict zones can play an important role in decreasing the enemy image in their communities and promoting public diplomacy efforts.

Private and economic sector is an important part of conflict prevention and the peacebuilding process. The development of economic co-operation and integration can stipulate positive economic changes in each country, providing people with new opportunities. At present the entrepreneurs have the greatest interest in realization of economic interests and creating new markets instead of wide-spread smuggling.

Civil society could also play a crucial role in terms of ensuring *regional security*. This problem is also linked to the miniaturization of the region. People in the South Caucasus are still

highly concerned about the miniaturization due to the elusive peace and the frozen conflicts. People certainly dream of peace though yet do not feel they can quit their arms.

Civil society can play an enormous role in conflict prevention/resolution process as its potential in the South Caucasus is high and needs further development. Effective interaction/cooperation between civil society, governmental agencies and international organizations will firmly contribute to the peace, stability and security of the whole region.

Recommendations:

To Civil Society

- Strengthen civil society's capacity to carry out activities in conflict prevention:
 - a. To conduct research and facilitate debate on conflict prevention and culture of peace issues. Develop independent research and facilitate debate between international, national and non-governmental actors on conflict prevention issues;
 - b. To increase collaboration at the region/international level of NGOs with relevant experience on peace-building/conflict prevention;
 - c. To work together with grassroots organizations supporting and participating in the community-based conflict prevention activities in the South Caucasus states.
 - d. To support initiatives which increase capacity of civil society to advocate and monitor the protection and promotion of human rights and democracy in the region, especially in conflict zones;
 - e. To establish special centers or community unions/organizations in bordering conflict areas with the aim of fostering ties between communities (including economic ties) and to promote negotiation processes both at the official and unofficial levels;
 - f. To build capacity to support/implement educational programs for youth on peace-building, conflict prevention and resolution;
 - g. To strengthen the linkages between theoretical experts and practitioners in the area of conflict prevention and peace-building;
 - h. To support contacts between civil society and media to ensure regular and informed coverage of issues and the work of civil society in the context of national reconstruction and rehabilitation

To UN and other international organizations:

- a. To ensure active collaboration among UN agencies at the national and regional level in developing/ implementing peace-building/conflict prevention programs;
- b. To develop programs that target the most vulnerable social groups impacted by the conflict, ensuring that issues of gender are integrated;
- c. To monitor and control the fulfillment of UN resolutions and other decisions adopted;
- d. To raise efficiency and responsibility of the UN peacekeepers in conflict zones;
- e. To involve the representatives of civil society, particularly experts and representatives of independent research centers, into the process of elaboration of recommendations on conflict settlement and peace-building;
- f. To create UN Center for Peace journalism in the region;
- g. to support the activities of NGO networks within early warning/early response strategy;
- h. To increase female involvement in conflict prevention, management and resolution.

- i. To promote women's initiatives for confidence building between the parties in conflict
- j. To introduce the principles of gender balance into the personnel policies of UN and the diplomatic corps in compliance with provisions of *CEDAW* (article 8), the *Beijing Platform for Action* and *UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security*. In this regards, specifically to increase the number of female special representatives and envoys of the UN Secretary General tasked with facilitating prevention and resolution to armed conflicts.

To Governmental agencies:

1. To facilitate the authorities’ awareness on the issues pertaining to conflict prevention/resolution, through:
 - i. Facilitating the more active involvement of NGO at the local and national level into peace building process via both Track One and Track Two diplomacy;
 - ii. Actively involving women who have been impacted by conflict, including refugees and IDPs, into the conflict prevention and peace building processes;
 - iii. Facilitating the active involvement of youth into peace building process through a “culture of peace and tolerance” and human rights education, ensuring the inclusion of a gender perspective.
2. To establish mechanisms and capacities at the government level which monitor and support implementation of UN SC Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security.
3. To increase female involvement in conflict prevention, management and resolution.
4. To promote women's initiatives for confidence building between the parties in conflict
5. To allocate government funds for development of local organizations involved in conflict prevention and peace-building activities.

Action Plan

	Narrative Summary	Measurable Indicators	Means of Verification	Important Assumptions
Goal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Developed regional platform on effective action in conflict prevention and peacebuilding at the regional level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Making peacebuilding higher on the political agenda at the national (regional) level and receive more resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Number of documents adopted ▪ Joint actions undertaken ▪ Joint declarations and projects elaborated and implemented 	
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ NGOs capacity/networks in the field of conflict prevention is developed and strengthened ▪ The role of CS and NGOs in the prevention of 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Active and effective engagement of NGOs ▪ Activated public diplomacy process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Less cases of aggression / violence, ▪ Number of conflict management / peacebuilding training delivered 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Political will and social readiness

	Narrative Summary	Measurable Indicators	Means of Verification	Important Assumptions
	<p>armed conflict in the region is explored</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Developed and improved interaction between CS the UN and governments in achieving more integrated and coherent approach in the field of conflict prevention ▪ Implementation of the Caucasus Regional Agenda 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Qualitative and quantitative data on public diplomacy process 	
Outputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Successful networking, ▪ Case studies and recommendations prepared ▪ Involvement of NGOs through their contribution ▪ Awareness raised with a large public about the importance of peacebuilding and what civil society can contribute 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provision with information, effective and regular feedback ▪ Peace oriented approach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Frequency of on (off) line communication ▪ Number of case studies, lessons learned and best practices brochures issued and disseminated ▪ Sociological research data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Motivated actors ▪ Transparency/openness
Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Regional meetings, workshops and seminars ▪ Publication of materials ▪ Field missions and other initiatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Active participation in the meetings, workshops and seminars, effective exchange of information ▪ Information and lobby campaign 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Frequency of meetings, workshops, seminars ▪ Number of participants, ▪ Number of materials circulated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ No drop outs, ▪ Effective timing and planning, ▪ Constituency <p>Precondition:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Caucasus Regional Process implemented (2002-2005) ▪ International Conference at the UN Headquarters in July 2005