

SCALING UP CIVIC PARTICIPATION AS A STABILITY FACTOR IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: OPPORTUNITIES IN AZERBAIJAN ALONGSIDE EXPERIENCE FROM GEORGIA

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Introduction

Following the events associated with the collapse of the so-called "socialist camp"¹ or "communist bloc", as it was named in Western political studies, the discourse on civil society has intensified. Velvet revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe resulted in a smooth transition of political power from the former authoritarian elite to the reformist forces, referred to as "democratic consolidation." Representatives of the political, economic, and cultural elite participated in this reform process. The term civil society has come to refer to all those forces that fought for the population's civil rights. This confrontation has been defined not just as a struggle for political power, but as a confrontation of two cultures. Two types of social behavior and morality were juxtaposed in this context; the declared morality and the ideas of socialism came into rigorous conflict with

the practice of economic and political life. This clash of political interests transformed into a cultural conflict between hypocrisy and moral conformism on the one hand and the culture of rule of law, open expression, and human dignity on the other.

The unification of protest forces in the former Soviet states was also based on a rejection of the past as a Soviet cultural and political commonality. It has also featured searches for new national identities. This is a distinctive feature compared to CEE countries, where the political transformation did not question European identity and reintegration. Nationalist sentiments presented an attractive haven for the split Soviet political elite, who could move into opposition regardless of past habits and principles of public administration.

The South Caucasian states are partners of the European Union within the

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European Neighborhood (ENP) and Eastern Partnership (EP) programs. Interaction with European institutions certainly offers these countries an alternative direction to explore and develop domestic and foreign policy priorities, given that Russia, especially after the war with Georgia in August 2008, has been increasingly showing the intention to restore its political influence in the region. EU steps to promote Eastern Partnership policy have been seen as an alternative to these objectives. However, those steps seem passive and ineffective, as they rely on the “magnetism” of the EU model, while Russia has been working to boost its own attractiveness in the neighborhood using all possible power and incentives.² The whole appeal of the European model is anchored in fundamental freedoms and civic participation, which are supposed to be effective stabilizing mechanisms in public policy. In contrast to this approach towards civil society institutions, the attitudes of the ruling political elite in the post-Soviet space

sometimes carry the hallmarks of former Soviet practice. An understanding of civil society’s standing and capacity for societal transformation in post-Soviet countries is critical to the promotion of a stable and friendly neighborhood for Europe and for the countries of the region.

Azerbaijani civil society can be especially significant to study since the Azerbaijani government is reckoned to have the most considerable financial and institutional resources in their interaction with citizens and their organizational structures. As the process of post-Soviet transitions is far from over, an understanding of the specifics of the Azerbaijani case can be helpful for predicting the general trends and attitudes of governments that grow financially strong while still bearing the hallmarks of the former culture of governance. The case of Azerbaijan can be studied both as an evaluation of previous civil society assessment efforts and as an insightful study for successful civil society activity.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

Background political context for NGOs

Civil society and civic participation in the Western meaning of the concept, as uncoerced citizen activity consolidated in networks and organizations, was almost unknown in the former Soviet Union. The post-Soviet civil society organizations were started in a legal and cultural space that was created to facilitate civic responses to government policy very much in line with the political culture of the authoritarian Soviet regime, i.e. the government was seeking and organizing civic support,

whereas citizens were actually limited to positive and supportive responses to government policy. Protest movements that emerged in the former Soviet political space and smashed the structures of Soviet administration have been conditionally defined as civic movements. From this socio-political milieu, new political parties and civil society organizations appeared. This seemed to present new capacity and a new role for civil society compared to the practices of advanced democracies, where the political process was organized mainly

through political parties and associated institutions. Not surprisingly, civil society concepts based on practices from advanced democracies did not provide the possibility for civil society organizations to replace any state agencies or private producers or to accept responsibility for political governance.³ Unlike the western model of civil society activism – as an element of stability and a platform for civil dialogue and the reconciliation of conflicting economic and political interests – the political agents, government, and opposition parties in the South Caucasus were all seeking civil society support in political contests.

Conflicting civil society concepts

Critical and active civil society groups, and their relationship with external funding sources and partners, were perceived as a direct threat to the sustainability of the regime. The effect of decreasing tolerance for critical voices has become evident in government attitudes towards independent civil society organizations. In Azerbaijan, the national government had actually driven the political parties out of the active political scene and managed to control almost the entire spectrum of media by 2010. Only the structures of civil society preserved some potential for resistance to authoritarian trends in society and the state, and thus they became the target of sensitive attitudes and restrictive treatment by the national government.⁴ Simultaneously, political parties in the country considered the external political developments to be manifestations of a general regional trend and consequently expected that civil society institutions should perform as allies of the opposition. Many civil society organizations were trapped in this political contestation,

acting along a separating frontline. International NGOs became radical critics of government policy, thus increasing the government's suspicions about their interests in political instability. Such perceptions of civil society have caused a few damaging effects on civic participation in the country:

- The government has taken steps to curtail the legal space for civic participation while adopting a politically selective approach in dealing with the NGO sector.

- External donors have faced legal difficulties in providing financial support to Azerbaijani civil society, leaving space for government funding.

- Potential civil society activists that were keeping a distance from serving any political interest have also started facing institutional and legal difficulties and have actually been discouraged from civic activism.

Consequently, the public opinion survey conducted for the ISSICEU project in Azerbaijan and the other two South Caucasian states in 2015 demonstrated increasing mistrust in intra-societal relationships in general, with NGOs in particular scoring the lowest rate of trust.

Civil society and religious communities

Perceptions of NGOs and the civil society situation overall in Georgia and Azerbaijan are generally very similar, with two major distinctions:

- Legal space for foreign donors and access to foreign funding is much more favorable for the promotion of civil society in Georgia than in Azerbaijan

- The visibility and significance of religious communities in terms of society and policy is different in Georgia and Azerbaijan.

It is worth considering these two major distinctive characteristics of the civil society situation in Georgia and Azerbaijan in the context of the searches for new identity and national state building processes in the region. The post-Soviet transformations in the South Caucasus have been occurring alongside a general trend of growing religious sentiments. However, the credibility of religious organizations and the religiosity of the population are significantly higher in Georgia and Armenia than in Azerbaijan. This is indicated by the results of the Caucasus Barometer, a multiyear sociological survey whose latest reports were released in 2013.⁵ A different sociological survey indicated that religious institutions had a more or less stable but relatively higher reputation in Azerbaijan in 2006-2010.⁶ The recent downgrade of trust in religious institutions in the overwhelmingly Islamic population of Azerbaijan reveals the apparent discrepancy between national identity arguments and trends in the Muslim world. Islam does not recognize national boundaries; the Islamic identity even opposes the national identification of Muslim peoples. Besides, the national identity in Azerbaijan does not align with the predominant religious group. Most Azerbaijanis are Shiite Muslims, while the construction of the nation state and the rise of national consciousness has taken place with close political and cultural ties to the ethnically close Sunnites in Turkey. In keeping with this trend, the sociological survey conducted within the framework of the ISSICEU project in Azerbaijan in 2015 showed an even sharper fall of trust in religious organizations – down to 12.4%. Undoubtedly, this is largely the outcome of the last two years of global policy and developments in

the country. Global terrorism under the banner of Islam, religious radicalism, and especially the revelation of some (albeit very minor) groups in Azerbaijan with ties to radical Islamic organizations have had an unavoidable effect on public opinion. In Georgia and Armenia, the links between religious and national identities are different. Their borders are virtually identical. Throughout history, each country's national church worked to preserve the national self-consciousness of its people. The churches in both countries today promote the complete equation of national and religious borders for Georgians and Armenians.

The gap between secular civil society groups and religious communities and organizations is observed elsewhere in the societies of the South Caucasus. The special significance of this issue for Georgia is that the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) enjoyed broad public support and used this support to build a relationship with the Georgian government as an independent and self-organized part of the population.⁷ The search for a future model for Georgian society is characterized as a conflict between "religious nationalism and secular nationalism, taking the roots in the Georgian Enlightenment movement of XIX century."⁸ The coexistence of two competing blocks of values in Georgian civil society reiterates the idea that a conflict of cultures is associated with the transformation of post-socialist societies. It further suggests that the cultural consolidation in the struggle against the legacy of totalitarianism in the countries of the former USSR is connected with the search for a new national identity. Strong civil society structures, not unlike the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC), may not necessarily be pro-Western and

democratic in their ideology and values.⁹

Conclusion: civil society and challenges to stability

State building and governance reforms in Azerbaijan are directly affecting the nature of interactions between the government and its citizens. This type of intra-societal relationship is the arena of clashing cultural patterns. The accumulation of economic and political weight in the government leads to the idea that a strong government is an effective but controlling and suppressive system of institutions. Curtailing legal space for civil society activism and civic participation is indicative of the national government's political vision for civil society. The impact of this factor on other economic and societal spheres is evident.

■ Tough legal requirements for external donor support, limited access to external funding by non-governmental organizations, and obstacles to the implementation of NGO projects and initiatives are impeding the participation of both the donor community and national civil society actors in further initiatives as well as in the promotion of civil society activism.

■ The aftereffects of this civil society situation on the societal level, such as the diminishing number of civil society actors and projects and the increasing imbalance between the rural and capital population, conceal the potential for social grievances and tension. The relocation of critical oversight and human rights activities from inside the country to overseas and the lack of domestic civic dialogue and advocacy mechanisms are a twofold threat to social consent and stability:

■ One effect is that resources of critical review are tending to flow out of the country

and concentrate on international advocacy rather than having a direct impact on domestic policy.

■ The second effect is that internal critical voices and constructive civil society actors are being stranded and isolated.

■ Both cases entail the fragmentation of society and the alienation of societal groups and their interests towards each other, which would make collective stability and security mechanisms less effective.

■ The core reasons and interests behind the manifested restrictive policy towards civil society could be defined simply as a dominant incentive of regime sustainability and reproduction.

■ However, a less antagonistic diagnosis of the existing policy approach towards civil society is the lack of insight into the concept of civil society and its significance as a stabilizing factor.

■ The outstanding issue in the civil society sector is religious organizations and believers' communities. Their attitudes towards European values and partnership with the EU clash with the aspirations and priorities of conventional civil society institutions. This challenge highlights the issue of cultural environment and values as a critical dimension of civil society.

The Azerbaijani case is a manifestation of a common trend concerning government attitudes towards civil society in the region. Increasing threats to stability and security generated by some non-governmental actors (certain radical religious or extremist organizations, for example) may work as justification to limit civil society activism elsewhere. However, the national governments underestimate the backlash effect, which jeopardizes a generation of intra-societal security and stability mechanisms.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Support open discourse on civil society concepts.

It is evident that perceptions of civil society and the significance of NGOs to the national reformation and societal transformation processes in the South Caucasus are sometimes conflicting and wrong. These conflicting views on civil society are perhaps the result of antagonism from political and economic interests. However, they could also result from the lack of open and participatory public discourse, both generally and specifically, on the visibility and functions of civil society in the transitional societies of the South Caucasian states.

Policy recommendations stemming from the findings of our research are based on the assumption that political procedures and political struggle are the driving principles for major actors developing a vision for civil society in the countries of the region. However, a narrative defining civil society as a stabilizing factor that acts transparently, independently, and effectively in favorable legal conditions is needed. Such discourse on civil society concepts, along with a national dialogue about the values and functions of civil society, is crucial for harmonizing political and societal interests. The findings of this research have uncovered various concepts rooted in different societal experiences that would make suitable discussion points for the eventual discourse.

Topics for civil society discourse.

The following concrete thematic priorities could lead to a convergence of conflicting civil society perceptions, influence public opinion, and encourage and promote civic participation:

- Balance of transparency and independence in civil society institutions
- Priorities of urgent civil society engagement in public policy
- Civil society and the process of electoral democracy: what is expected and what contravenes the specifics of civil society's role
- Civil society and peace building
- Individual citizens' mobility between civil society, government, and political party memberships
- Civil society and religious communities: shared concerns and perception of the boundaries of activity
- Government accountability: role of civil society as an important element in a system of checks and balances
- Civil society and anti-corruption programs in the government.

Link civil society discourse to civil society education.

Civil society education is missing in formal and informal education efforts in Azerbaijan. It would be worthwhile to transform the thinking on civil society and promote its value through educational resources. In terms of informal education, one suggestion would be a civil society school that could organize and maintain certified courses on civil society topics, including lectures by external visiting experts. As to formal education, a civil society course could be established and incorporated in some university master's programs at law schools and within social work, public administration, international relations, or any other relevant humanities programs.

Promote and facilitate implementation mechanisms that would diminish the restrictive effect of the latest legislative amendments.

In order to diminish the effect of already existing impediments in legislation, our recommendation is to promote a dialogue on civil society which would mitigate the effects of restrictive legislation on civil society activism and suggest practicable implementation mechanisms.

Along with improvements to practicable mechanisms, the idea of civic oversight over their implementation could be promoted to ease the interaction between civil society groups and the respective government bodies.

EU structures and the EU delegation can serve as a relevant actor by using convening power, assisting with external expertise, and providing opportunities for learning best practices from external experiences.

Strengthen capacity and expertise in the civil society sector.

The recent crackdown in the civil society sector has caused a drastic reduction of civic activism. Many NGOs have lost their ties with their foreign counterparts. Lack of capacity to conduct research and advocacy work has caused experts and experienced human resources personnel to leave formerly active NGOs. The prospect of civil society dialogue and cooperation with other societal actors imminently requires that expertise and skills be revived and further enhanced in active NGO structures, especially in the legal field, in economic analysis, and in public services such as education, health and other civic rights. Revenue and public expenditures expertise, negotiation skills, and public

speaking are also especially important.

External donors: funding for civil society.

Since a drastic decrease of external funding has been steadily taking place in Azerbaijan, the focus of foreign funding has shifted away from Azerbaijani NGOs. External civil society funding organizations are being asked to explore the possibility of redirecting funds for civil society support towards the regional NGO sector, in Azerbaijan in particular. International NGOs are asked to promote South Caucasus engagement as a priority for their research and advocacy plans and activities.

Turn other societal actors towards the NGO sector.

Adjacent societal sectors inside Azerbaijan should also evolve for a better civil society environment.

■ In order to combat and diminish the negative impact of the NGO monopoly, the diversification of civil society services needs to be included in the government's anti-corruption programs.

■ Country legislation should be reviewed to encourage domestic investments in the civil society sector. Tax policy can be adjusted for that purpose, and other advantages for business and individual funding might be established.

■ Addressing the challenges of the rural population through civil society support activities can be a helpful approach to mitigating imbalances between the capital city and the regions, though this should still be associated with support to decentralizing reforms in the government.

The expected effect.

The support for discourse, publications, dissemination of information, and educational activity should result in a converging effect on conflicting ideas of civil society in Azerbaijan. Increasing investments in civil society should result in the activation of civil society institutions, the enhancement of their expert capacities, and their increased visibility and significance in public policy and societal reformation.

Consistent EU engagement with the South Caucasus.

A strong and influential civil society is supposed to be part of the EU's strategic and policy priorities in the South Caucasus, and in Azerbaijan in particular. It is evident that Georgia is the most dedicated and formally committed to developing a European partnership among the three South Caucasian countries. Economically

and politically, Azerbaijan is also significantly advanced in the implementation of strategic partnerships with the EU. However, even in Georgia there are growing alternative aspirations. This is largely due to the low engagement and poor representation of the EU in efforts at conflict transformation and peaceful resolution for territorial conflicts in the South Caucasus. The EU can use its conflict resolution experience in a more representative way, to promote the perception of a European partnership as a healing opportunity for conflict resolution based on international law and practices. Civil society support programs, combined with a visible upgrade of EU engagement in the settlement of pressing territorial conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, can have a positive effect on perceptions of the EU and foster the strategic priorities of EU policy in the South Caucasus.

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Endnotes

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