

Engaging Civil Society in the Nagorno Karabakh Conflict: What Role for the EU and its Neighbourhood Policy?

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Engaging Civil Society in the Nagorno Karabakh Conflict: What Role for the EU and its Neighbourhood Policy?¹

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Abstract: The conflict over Nagorno Karabakh, opposing Armenia and Azerbaijan, is the longest conflict in the OSCE area and a fundamental security threat to the South Caucasus and surrounding regions, preventing full and inclusive economic development and constraining regional relations. This chapter takes the ENP as a conflict transformation tool and looks at how the EU has used this initiative to reach civil society organisations (CSOs) and improve their performance as peace-builders in this protracted conflict. Building on the theoretical framework presented by Tocci (2008), the chapter assesses EU involvement in the civil society domain, mapping the types of organisations privileged by the EU and the potential impact of their activities on the conflict. It puts forward relevant arguments regarding the suitability of the EU's goals and instruments to the dynamics on the ground and concludes with a categorisation of the EU's approach according to three hypotheses: The Liberal Peace, the Leftist Critique and the Realist hypothesis. It argues that work with civil society is a crucial part of the EU's approach, despite the difficulties of making such engagement a central part of its peace-building and conflict transformation activities.

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Introduction

The conflict over Nagorno Karabakh, opposing Armenia and Azerbaijan, is the longest conflict in the OSCE area and a fundamental security threat to the South Caucasus and surrounding regions, preventing full and inclusive economic development and constraining regional relations. The benefits of independence from the Soviet Union have been thwarted by the war and, in the long-term, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno Karabakh have been unable to fully part-take in the global and regional processes of economic and political development. External powers acting in the region have managed the existing cease-fire, but have been unable to gather the necessary will and resources to bring about a sustainable and mutually acceptable peace agreement. The presence of the European Union (EU), through the Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) could represent an important incentive for peace.

This chapter takes the ENP as a conflict transformation tool and looks at how the EU has used this initiative to reach civil society organisations (CSOs) and improve their performance as peace-builders in this protracted conflict. Building on the theoretical framework presented by Tocci (2008), the chapter assesses EU involvement in the civil society domain, mapping the types of organisations privileged by the EU and the potential impact of their activities on the conflict. It puts forward relevant arguments regarding the suitability of the EU's goals and instruments to the dynamics on the ground and concludes with a categorisation of the EU's approach according to three hypotheses: the Liberal Peace, which contends that EU policies aim to increase the interconnectedness between government structures and mid and top level CSOs, on the one hand, and between these CSOs and grassroots, on the other (Tocci 2008, 27); the Leftist Critique assumes that EU actions have a detrimental impact on CSOs role in conflict transformation, since EU engagement fundamentally alters the nature of the CSOs, depoliticising or co-opting them (Tocci 2008, 28-30); and finally the Realist hypothesis, which sees conflict resolution as mainly a prerogative of state actors and top levels of society and therefore, advocates that in order for the EU to affect conflict dynamics it should focus on these actors (Tocci 2008, 31).

Although conflict resolution in Eurasia has gradually become a priority for the EU and its member states (Popescu 2007; Stewart 2008), the Nagorno Karabakh conflict rose to the top of the EU's agenda only after the war in South Ossetia, in 2008. Moreover, the gradual improvement of Armenian-Turkish relations has also opened a window of opportunity for

movement in the Nagorno Karabakh peace process, which the EU could support through confidence building measures (CBMs). Work with civil society is referred as a crucial part of the EU's approach, despite the difficulties of making such engagement a central part of its peace-building and conflict transformation activities.

1. Conflict Dynamics

The conflict over the Nagorno Karabakh territory, while sharing most of the characteristics of other protracted conflicts in Eurasia,³ displays and increased level of complexity. Being populated almost exclusively by Armenians, the Nagorno Karabakh enclave inside Azerbaijan has relied on military, political and financial assistance from the Armenian Republic, making it a part to the conflict. Although several United Nations (UN) resolutions recognise Karabakh as part of the Azerbaijani Republic,⁴ and no state (including Armenia) has recognised the Nagorno Karabakh Republic's (NKR) declaration of independence,⁵ the isolation of the separatist region and the international politics of non-recognition have left Karabakh highly dependent on Armenia and have severed all direct channels with Azerbaijan, over the last twenty years. Thus, the conflict over Nagorno Karabakh is best portrayed as an interstate conflict, with visible impact on the domestic constituencies of both Armenia and Azerbaijan, making any analysis of civil society engagement in conflict resolution highly incomplete if this interstate dimension is not reflected.

It can therefore be said that the dispute over Nagorno Karabakh is an ethno-territorial conflict of an interstate nature with elements of irredentism and separatism. This complex mix has made the task of finding mutually acceptable solutions to the conflict much harder. As Nadia Milanova (2008, 1) argues, "the effectiveness of ethnicity as a political instrument

³ The remaining 'protracted' conflicts in Eurasia include Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia and Transnistria in Moldova.

⁴ There have been four UN Security Council Resolutions concerning the situation in Nagorno Karabakh, namely UN Security Council Resolution 822, 30 April 1993; UN Security Council Resolution 853, 29 July 1993; UN Security Council Resolution 874, 14 October 1993; UN Security Council Resolution 884, 12 November 1993. Available at <http://www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/nagorny-karabakh/key-texts.php>. In 2008, the UN General Assembly approved a resolution reaffirming Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and demanding the withdrawal of Armenian forces from the territories surrounding Nagorno Karabakh. An attempt on March 14, 2008, to pass a UN Security Council Resolution in the same direction failed, nevertheless, with votes against by the three Minsk Group Co-Chairs and Armenia among others, in recognition that the OSCE remains the legitimate venue to deal with the peace process.

⁵ Declaration on State Independence of the Nagorno Karabakh Republic, January 6, 1992. Available at http://www.nkrusa.org/nk_conflict/declaration_independence.shtml#three. The designation Nagorno Karabakh Republic is used to refer to the self-designated authorities in the Nagorno Karabakh territory, and do not imply any sort of recognition of the region's claims to independence.

emanates from the emotional attachment of individuals to a group. This emotional attachment can also be projected through a sense of belonging to a territory, thus linking identity with territory”. As we will see below, the disputed conceptions of the historical presence of an ethnic group or the other in Karabakh lands remain at the heart of the conflict today. However, in order to account for the years of peaceful co-existence between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, it might be useful to retain a notion of ‘ethnicised conflict’ (Özkan 2008, 580), where the violent collapse of the structures of the Soviet Union and the consequent competition for power among elites led to an ethnic-based process of national consolidation.

The dynamics sustaining this protracted conflict, as opposed to the often conveyed notion of “frozen”, are complex and range from individual-based to social, regional and global dynamics and evolve perceptions and power balances. The following sections put forward detailed information on these dynamics, in order to recognise the need to address them in a comprehensive view of the conflict.

1.1. Addressing Mutual Perceptions

Historical accounts of the Armenian and Azerbaijani presence in Karabakh have been used to justify each side’s claim to the land (de Waal 2003, 145-158; ICG 2005, 3-6). From an early age, children are taught in school and by their families all the important dates in the development of their nation-states and the centrality of Karabakh on both accounts is a crucial factor (Vesely 2008). This shapes their ideas of the past and of the future in radically opposed and mutually excluding ways. Moreover, claims to the land have been advanced in historical terms more than political or economic (Milanova 2008, 4), leaving little room for innovative assessments of interests. The well established victor (Armenians) and victim (Azerbaijanis) identities have also made it harder to shift perceptions and establish points of departure for reconciliation.

The military outcome of the conflict has also embodied important meanings for the process of nation-building in the three territories. For Armenians, the military victory over Azerbaijan allowed a heroic reassessment of a national history filled with episodes of defeat, loss of territory and statehood, of a victim mentality that the genocide issue reinforced.⁶ It returned self-confidence and pride to Armenians all over the world and strengthened the

⁶ Armenians are engaged in an international campaign for the recognition of the mass killings by the Ottoman Turks, in 1915, as an act of genocide.

national movement to restore Armenian statehood, after independence.⁷ For the NKR, the military victory represented closure in a long history of autonomy, kept through several occupations, that is now very close to being consolidated.⁸ Finally for Azerbaijan, it remains an obstacle in the process of developing a nationhood that is fairly recent, while posing a serious threat to its territorial integrity (Priego Moreno 2005).

Thomas de Waal (2009) speaks of a “Karabakh trap” in which these deep settle identities become harder to renegotiate by the political leaders, since they become part of the societies’ self-image. Overcoming the zero-sum mentality, in which Armenian gains are Azerbaijani losses and vice-versa and focusing instead on long-term gains for all sides, including other regional actors that could act as peace-builders is crucial. CSOs working at the mid-level of society could have a real impact by promoting, supporting and diffusing examples of positive cooperation in economic, environmental and social areas. Moreover, linking CSOs dialogue and mediation activities to tangible peace-dividends is also a way to reinforce the impact of their actions (Mirimanova 2009, 25).

The role of the media is a fundamental aspect in the formation of local perceptions. In the post-cease fire period, the media in both countries normalised its activity. This meant that, in Armenia, interest in the conflict diminished, reflecting the generalised belief that the war was over, while in Azerbaijan war propaganda made its way into the mainstream (Griporyan and Rzayev 2005). Today, the scenario has changed, with the media increasingly under state control in both countries. In Azerbaijan, state propaganda has been regarded as a legitimate instrument in the war-effort and has trickled down to the society, at times adding elements of xenophobia to the militarist rhetoric. Armenians have been particularly concerned about anti-Armenian discourses, which they perceive as being sponsored at the highest level by Azerbaijani state authorities, including President Aliyev.⁹ This same feeling is expressed by Armenians in Karabakh, who regard the Azerbaijani militarist propaganda as very dangerous and unconstructive to the peace process.¹⁰ Azerbaijanis on the other hand underscore

⁷ In the words of Giorgi Derlugian (2003, 189) “For the Armenians, the question of Karabakh encapsulated all their historical sorrows and became the symbolic substitute for the much larger trauma of the 1915 genocide and the loss of historically Armenian lands that remained under Turkey’s control. Such a transposition seemed natural insofar as the Azeris shared with the Turks a closely related language and were Muslims ...”.

⁸ Interview with David Babayan, Head of Information department, NKR Presidential Office, Stepanakert, April 7, 2009.

⁹ Interviews with CSOs, Yerevan, April 2009.

¹⁰ Interviews with CSOs, Stepanakert/Khankendi, April 2009.

Armenia's unwillingness to deal with concrete concessions and their pre-established historical notions about the Karabakh territory as a fundamental obstacle to good relations.¹¹

1.2. Human Dynamics

Armenians and Azerbaijanis live in total isolation of each other. Except for sporadic meetings by a small elite in third countries, societies in Armenia, Nagorno Karabakh and Azerbaijan have no regular contacts (Broers 2006). During the conflict Armenians and Azerbaijanis returned to their nations, abandoning the multi-ethnic societies they had formed and today it is virtually impossible to travel to the other side. Inside Nagorno Karabakh there are no Azerbaijanis left, making it a mono-ethnic society. Civil society initiatives figure prominently among the most important activities aimed at maintaining dialogue and exchange between Armenians (both in the Republic of Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh) and Azerbaijanis. They range across several thematic areas, such as women's issues, youth meetings and media, but also track-two mediation, seminars, conferences, visits and fact-finding missions. Although their impact on the achievement of a final solution has been very reduced and limited by the secret and top-down nature of the peace process, these activities remain crucial and illustrate a possibility of normality in relations with the other side, which can set out an example to the wider societies.

Former combatants remain active players both at the political and civil society level, in Armenia, Karabakh and Azerbaijan. The most striking example is the current and former Armenian Presidents, who were both military leaders from Karabakh, actively engaged in the war with Azerbaijan. Similarly, in the Armenian society war veterans enjoy great respect and legitimacy and remain engaged in social activities, such as assistance to war victims and their families, or even educating young generations in military-patriotic tradition (Baghdasarian and Yunusov 2005). In Azerbaijan, due to the outcome of the war, veterans were regarded by the authorities with suspicion and their engagement in public activities has been limited.

Among the population and civil society those defending a military solution to the conflict vary. In Armenia, most people regard the conflict as settled and therefore military presence is necessary to defend what are called the "liberated territories". One of the most vocal organisations demanding a no-concession policy toward Azerbaijan is the Organisation

¹¹ Interview with Azerbaijani official, Brussels, May 2009.

in Defence of the Liberated Territories, whose leader Jarayir Sefilyan was also a commander for the special Shusha battalion (Abasov and Khachatrian 2006, 82).¹² A recently created movement, called Miatsum (unification), also with Sefilyan's participation, continues this line of action (Avetisian 2008). In Azerbaijan, according to a 2004 survey, although a large majority of people prefer a peaceful solution to the conflict, they do not exclude the use of military means (Yerevan and Baku Press Clubs 2004), partly resonating the official speech. President Aliyev has often stated that Azerbaijan will use its new found oil wealth to overcome Armenia militarily and restore territorial integrity, eventually by force.¹³ Radical groups inside Azerbaijan, such as the Karabakh Liberation Organisation, also remain active elements of the society with a significant destabilising power (Karpas 2005). Inside Karabakh, although recent years have restored some level of normalisation, with foreign investment, mainly from the Armenian Diaspora, and even economic growth, security and defence remain the main concerns of the population (Abasov and Khachatrian 2006, 84), making the military a central institution.

The large population movements that took place with the war led to the dissolution of the multi-ethnic societies in Armenia and Azerbaijan, to create instead a pure Armenian society (with very few minorities) and an Azerbaijani society without Armenians. Although refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are central to build sustainable peace, they have not been engaged in official negotiations. Azerbaijan has favoured a non-integration policy, keeping IDPs in provisory areas, and making no attempt to include them in the official mediation process, partly because the legitimacy of official representation of this vast group is disputed. Since 2006, the Azerbaijani government has initiated a program of resettlement of the IDPs in new housing facilities, built close to the front-line. In Armenia the number of refugees is smaller but still representing a social and economic risk.¹⁴

Most Armenian refugees leaving Azerbaijan before and during the war stayed in Karabakh or moved to the adjacent areas. Thus, it is inside Karabakh that the issue of the refugees and IDPs is harder, especially since there has been very little assistance to these

¹² See also "Armenian veterans concerned at arrests over TV chief's murder", *Armenia Daily Digest*, Yerevan, 7 January 2003. <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/armenia/hypermail/200301/0009.shtml> [02.11.2009].

¹³ "Azerbaijan may use force in Karabakh after Kosovo", *Reuters*, March 4, 2008 <http://www.reuters.com/article/latestCrisis/idUSL04930529> [02.11.2009].

¹⁴ According to Azerbaijani official numbers, in 2005 there were 686 586 IPs. Quoted in ICG (2007, 16). UNHCR numbers indicate around 260 000 refugees in Armenia. See UNHCR (2006).

populations. Unofficial numbers indicate 30 000 refugees coming to Karabakh from Sumgait and Baku, as early as 1988-9.¹⁵ In order to include them in the peace process and to address their needs, a needs-assessment should be conducted to identify who are the refugees and IDPs, what is their property and what happened to it.¹⁶

1.3. Political Dynamics

The current ‘no-war no-peace’ situation has been appropriated by local and external actors, looking to derive benefits from it. Instead of dealing with the situation, elites have avoided the issue of concessions and compromises to maximise their hold on power, while external actors have come to see the conflict as “frozen” and therefore representing minimal danger to their interests (Özkan 2008, 577). By portraying conflict dynamics and the incentive structure as “frozen”, all parts to the conflict and the international mediators have preserved the current *status quo* and have downplayed the fragility of the current cease-fire, as well as the dynamic nature of the conflict structure. At best, the only “frozen” aspect of this conflict is the peace process, and even that is radically changing. The brief war in South Ossetia, in August 2008, and the ongoing process of normalisation of relations between Turkey and Armenia have forced a reassessment of interests by external actors. President Aliyev has repeatedly underlined the link in the normalisation of relations between Turkey and Armenia and the Nagorno Karabakh peace process.¹⁷ By supporting more actively the Nagorno Karabakh peace process, Russia for instance reinforces its leadership in the region, namely by coming closer to Azerbaijan through energy deals, and establishing a more balanced position as regards the parts to the conflict (Giragosian 2009). The new Obama administration, on the other hand, is currently supporting a wider stabilisation process, where a peaceful solution to the Karabakh conflict is central.¹⁸ The EU, which has defined transportation, energy and stability as fundamental interests in the region, has looked at the Nagorno Karabakh conflict with a new sense of urgency. Although there has not been widespread military confrontation between the sides for fifteen years, this remains an active conflict, making it harder to establish optimal strategies, suited to the conflict cycle.

This situation has led to the discredit of the mediators and moderates inside conflict societies. Illustrating this, Azerbaijan occasionally seeks to move the peace process to other

¹⁵ Interview with Karabakhi refugee community leader, Shushi/ Shusha, April 7, 2009.

¹⁶ Interview with Azerbaijani journalist, Baku, March 24, 2009.

¹⁷ “Azerbaijan Seeks To Thwart Turkish-Armenian Rapprochement”, *RFE/RL Caucasus Report*, 6 April, 2009.

¹⁸ “Turkey-Armenia peace focus of Barack Obama”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 9 April, 2009.

forums, where it feels it could have a better chance to review the current situation.¹⁹ Armenia has so far been happy with the current negotiations, to the extent that the outcome of the war has not been revised and no unfavourable solution has been imposed on Armenians. However, inside Nagorno Karabakh people are very sceptical of the legitimacy of the OSCE Minsk Group and other external actors, such as the EU, to support a peaceful change to the current *status quo*, especially since Karabakhis have not been included in the peace process. Similarly, for many civil society actors and opposition parties advocating a peaceful settlement and the necessity of concessions on both sides, engaged in track-two mediation, dialogue and co-operation across the front-line and within their societies, the time is also of frustration and discredit in the eyes of their communities. The lack of results and the highly controversial nature of their activities, often regarded as “unpatriotic”, have pushed them to marginal positions, without support from their own constituencies or external actors.

The continuation of the conflict has hampered the democratic processes in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno Karabakh. During the first years of independence from the Soviet Union, nationalistic mobilisations were associated with the war effort, taking time and energy away from the democratic process. This included unconditional and uncritical support for leaders, the channelling of national resources to the war effort and the privileging of military interests in external relations, ahead of political, social and economic issues. Today Armenia remains hostage to the economic blockades imposed by Azerbaijan and Turkey, making economic development hard and highly dependent on external assistance, namely from Russia and the Armenian Diaspora. Such economic dependence has also carried a political price, to the extent that policy-making in Armenia has often been influenced by external interests, including from Karabakh, something that has worked as an obstacle to domestic pluralism. Both the opposition and the government have used the Nagorno Karabakh conflict for domestic political purposes more than they have attempted to reach a solution and in all, the presence of the conflict is usually presented as the main obstacle to democracy (International Crisis Group 2007, 15).

In Azerbaijan, the tendency to consolidate authoritarian power in the hands of the President and the surrounding elites has been driven both by the conflict and the oil revenues (Vorrath, *et al* 2007, Guliyev 2009). This combination can potentially become explosive as

¹⁹ Azerbaijan tried to move the peace process to the United Nations, in 2008, a move that was denounced by the OSCE Minsk group Co-chairs. See Alisayidov (2008).

political elites make use of war rhetoric for political purposes, in a context of increasing military spending (Freizer 2008) and diminishing civic liberties. This state of affairs creates an autistic society, merged in apathy and uncommitted to peace or democracy, lenient on state opinions and decisions and deprived of the means to develop a critical assessment of its leaders' performance.

A similar narrative can be made in NKR, despite attempts by local political and civil society leaders to portray the regime as more democratic than in Azerbaijan or even in Armenia. The limitations of non-recognition bear on the pluralism of ideas in these non-recognised entities (Lynch 2004, 42-54). Although the submission envisioned by Azerbaijan has not worked to its advantage, it has had a visible impact in today's Karabakhi society. The lack of communication and the curtailing of all forms of co-operation with Azerbaijan have pushed Karabakh even further towards Armenian control and dependence. It is not only in its regional relations that non-recognition has an impact. Naturally, development opportunities are fewer under these conditions, while reconstruction of the devastated areas has been slow. Today Nagorno Karabakh has managed to develop some level of normality, including regular elections, assistance to the most vulnerable populations and increased control of the criminality. This could either support the peace process, developing democratic features and an open society, or could in fact remove the incentives for compromise. So far the opposition of Azerbaijan to include NKR in the official negotiations has prevented the Karabakhi society from having an official voice in settling their future, making any peace deal very fragile.

2. EU engagement with civil society in conflict resolution

EU involvement in the civil society domain in Armenia and Azerbaijan has been very limited. Until the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was in place, the European Commission focused on the promotion of legislative reforms, strengthening the rule of law and democratic institutions in the framework of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA) and TACIS programme (EU-Armenia PCA 1999; EU-Azerbaijan PCA 1999). Overall, EU cooperation with these countries supported wide political reforms that would improve the context for civil society organisations and private entrepreneurs to take action. Nevertheless, within TACIS only a small percentage of total assistance was directed at civil society support, through the LIEN programme (Link Inter European NGOs), the Institution Building

Partnership and the European Instrument on Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) (Raik 2006, 17).

A second stage of EU cooperation with Armenia and Azerbaijan was inaugurated with the European Neighbourhood Policy, increasing the potential for cooperation with CSOs in political and security issues, such as conflict resolution. The European Commission recognised the importance of strengthening the role of civil society in the ENP, through three major steps: strengthening dialogue between the EU and civil society; reinforcing community support to the civil society dimension; and improving public knowledge of the ENP and exchange of information (European Commission 2006). Individual ENP Action Plans also established goals dealing with conflict-resolution referring a “shared responsibility in conflict prevention and conflict resolution”. EU-Armenia and EU-Azerbaijan ENP Action Plans state the EU’s “strong commitment to support the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. [...]. The EU is ready to consider ways to strengthen further its engagement in conflict resolution and post conflict rehabilitation”. The proposals include support to the OSCE Minsk Group conflict settlement efforts; the possibility to provide EU support for humanitarian and de-mining initiatives; measures to assist refugees and IDPs; active involvement of civil society; and co-operation in support of conflict resolution with the EU Special Representative (EUSR) for the Southern Caucasus (EU-Armenia ENP Action Plan 2006, EU-Azerbaijan ENP Action Plan 2006).

Civil society engagement with the EU in the framework of the ENP has mainly been conceived as a way of democratising and making governments more accountable. The process of negotiation of the Action Plans was seen as an opportunity for governments to consult with civil society actors, empowering them, while the monitoring of implementation of the Action Plans should further reinforce this process. However, the outcomes in Armenia and Azerbaijan were below the expectations, with CSOs marginalised by government officials, something the EU did not manage to prevent (Alieva 2006, 10-11). The EU did set up a feedback mechanism for CSOs from the partner countries to contribute to the annual ENP Action Plan implementation report, and further engagement will be sought during the negotiation of Association Agreements under the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative (see further details below).

2.1. Financial Instruments

Although the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) makes clear reference to CSOs, not only as potential beneficiaries of EU funding, but also as partners in strategic planning and programming of EU external assistance, clear mechanisms and concrete measures on how to implement this participation are still missing (Ljubljana Declaration 2008). Funding under the ENPI is divided between National and Regional Programmes, managed by the European Commission delegations on the ground and EuporeAid, in Brussels, respectively. The delegations manage smaller projects, namely the calls for the EIDHR and other financial instruments dealing with civil society (see below for more details).

Since the ENP is in place, the EU has made more vocal statements on the importance of including civil society in the process of democracy building in Armenia and Azerbaijan, and has increased the lines of financing available for cooperation with civil society actors. Through the ENPI and the reformed EIDHR, the EU has increased direct financial assistance to the development of CSO capacity,²⁰ though there is no explicit mentioning in the Action Plans of an increased role for civil society in conflict resolution. By 2008, the European Commission put out the first call for projects to be financed under EIDHR and Non-State Actors and Local Authorities Development (NSALA) programme, in Azerbaijan. This was the first time the EU created the possibility to directly finance CSOs in Azerbaijan. Both programmes are under DG RELEX responsibility and are managed by EuropeAid. They include geographical coverage and thematic programmes such as NSALA, which is replacing since 2007, the NGO co-funding and Decentralised Co-operation programmes.

The main goal of these budget lines is to build capacity among civil society in development contexts. The projects being financed in Azerbaijan under these two instruments deal mostly with capacity-building for local actors, awareness-raising and coordination and communication (NSALA), as well as human rights protection and electoral monitoring (EIDHR) (EuropeAid 2009). In a broad sense these activities aim at improving the capacities of CSOs and to improve the general context for action in domestic environments. However, they do not address issues of conflict resolution or conflict transformation.²¹ Moreover, while the NSALA 2008 Action Programme indicates that the priority should be for small-scale initiatives originating from CSOs in the EU and partner countries, with budgets around 50 000

²⁰ Under EIDHR, the heading transnational and regional activities include civil society in democracy and human rights promotion, conflict mediation and political participation. See EIDHR calls for proposals at ec.europa.eu/europeaid/where/worldwide/EIDHR

²¹ Interview with EU officials at EuropeAid Co-operation office, May 3rd, 2009, Brussels.

Euros (Annual Action Programme for Non-State Actors and Local Authorities in Development 2008), of the three projects approved in Azerbaijan, two are run by foreign organisations and the budgets are of more than 400 000 and 250 000 Euros each (EuropeAid 2009). The choice to finance such large-sized projects reflects the criteria used by the European Commission, privileging well written projects and reliable partners.²² These are still major difficulties for local CSOs. However, the EU should be aware of the difficulties by local CSOs to match the EU's standards and aim at capacity-building.

Under DG RELEX, the Instrument for Stability (IfS) is another possibility for EU support to civil society in conflict resolution processes. The IfS includes a Crisis Response Component aimed at short-term action on conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Under this initiative the EU established the Peace-building Partnership (PbP), with a global scope (no specific geographic focus) and aiming to mobilize and consolidate civilian expertise on peacebuilding issues, by working with selected partner groups.²³ Most of the CSOs engaged in this initiative, however come from the EU and display large capacity, making it harder for local CSOs to compete under this initiative.²⁴ Under this component there has been a call for the organisation of roundtables, which could be used by local CSOs working on the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, but this seems to be more of token gesture than an important element in engaging the EU in conflict resolution. Under the long-term component, one of the priorities is to enhance pre- and post-crisis preparedness, including investing in implementation partners such as international, regional and sub-regional organisations, state and non-state actors. This could be put into action once an agreement has been reached.

There are also procedural issues currently obstructing a more streamline used of the IfS assistance, which runs through calls for projects. This means that the European Commission does not control the themes or quality of projects being proposed and depends on the organisations applying for funding to put forward conflict-related themes. Overall, EU action on the Nagorno Karabakh conflict has remained very dependent on the stimuli emerging from the ground, and although IfS does not require the formal agreement of states to be implemented, the EU seeks agreement before deploying these measures.²⁵

²² Interview with EU officials at EuropeAid Co-operation office, May 3rd, 2009, Brussels.

²³ Information available at http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/how/finance/ifs_en.htm

²⁴ Email exchange with EC official, DG Relex, 30 September 2008.

²⁵ Interview with EC officials, DG Relex, May 7, 2009, Brussels.

A large part of the European presence in both Armenia and Azerbaijan still relies on the member states' national development agencies. This hampers coherence. However, since 2008, and responding to both countries' wish to have relations with the EU upgraded, the European Commission opened two full-fledged delegations in Yerevan and Baku. This move also made it easier for the EU to identify local partners within civil society, making the EU more aware of the circumstances in which CSOs operate, their limitations and their efforts to become active players in conflict prevention and conflict resolution. European Commission delegations are central instruments in the design and implementation of EU assistance and in its diplomatic efforts to sustain assistance with political will. They would be privileged interlocutors in the implementation of any CBMs that might be approved. Because both delegations are rather young and understaffed and their representatives are still in the process of gaining access to and the trust of domestic interlocutors, they have still to gain full operational capacity.

2.2. Regional initiatives

In its communication of 2007 intitled "Black Sea Synergy" (European Commission 2007), the European Commission supported the development of networks of NGOs dealing with conflict issues around the Black Sea. Aiming to enhance the role of the ENP on conflict resolution, the Black Sea Peace Building Network was established, bringing together the Crisis Management Initiative and local NGOs. Funding for this imitative has come from EU member states such as the United Kingdom, through DFID, or the German International Foundations (Crisis Management Initiative 2007). Along with the ENPI, instruments such as the Cross Border Cooperation programme for the Black Sea basin (CBC-BS), which is directed at improving economic and social development in the region, with a focus on local actors and the Black Sea Forum (BSF) or the Community of Democratic Choice (CDC), all have important civil society dimensions. There is a certain reluctance to engage in discussions of regional policies for supporting civil society in conflict resolution, as these formats are seen as having limited impact in solving the conflicts and civil society, though important, is too small to have a lasting influence (Crisis Management Initiative 2007). Moreover, there is a gap between the EU's long-term approach of democracy building and the short-term, reactive attitude of the ENP partners.

Under the recently created Eastern Partnership (EaP) the EU has the potential to engage further with civil society. The EaP envisions a closer cooperation at the bilateral level between the EU and partners countries, providing the possibility of further reforms. According to EU

officials, the EaP seeks to provide a new impetus to multilateral initiatives, which the EU hopes can contribute to regional cooperation and confidence-building in its Eastern neighbourhood. Azerbaijan has refrained from participation in most of the regional initiatives involving Armenia; however, there are signs that the Azerbaijani leadership might also be concerned with its international image as a blocking force and could be more willing to engage. Should the EU move forward with the implementation of CBMs in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, civil society organisations could act under this multilateral initiative, under regional priority number 1, democracy promotion and stability.²⁶

As far as the Civil Society Forum is concerned, it is being thought of as a “flexible and open network of EU and Eastern Partnership civil society, meeting once a year and operating via working groups and teams which would address specific topics and issue proposals for programmes and projects to secure the partnership's objectives” (European Economic and Social Committee 2009a). The European Economic and Social Committee has specifically called for greater civil society engagement in conflict resolution with EU support (European Economic and Social Committee 2009b). To kick-start the Civil Society Forum, the European Commission issued an “Invitation to contribute to an opinion on the Eastern Partnership Forum” (European Commission 2009) for CSOs in the EaP and EU countries. An EaP Civil Society Forum is scheduled for Brussels on 16-17 November 2009.

2.3. Conflict prevention and crisis management

The EU has also focused increasingly on conflict prevention, following the Gotenburg report (European Council 2001). The programme envisioned an integrated approach to conflict prevention, working both on the structural causes of violence, including through the strengthening of democracy and human rights situations world-wide, using the EIDHR and the ENP Action Plans (Council of the European Union 2006) and operational prevention, through the development of the EU civilian crisis management, ESDP missions, and cooperation with international partners such as the UN, the OSCE and other regional intergovernmental bodies. Civil society engagement was underscored as an important contribution to conflict prevention, especially in early warning, although co-operation throughout all the conflict phases was deemed crucial. However, work is needed to mainstream conflict prevention and increase dialogue promotion between governments and their societies, as part of the EU's governance

²⁶ Interview with EU officials at EuropeAid Co-operation office, May 3, 2009, Brussels.

approaches to conflict (EPLO 2006, 38). Moreover, EU instruments for crisis management and early warning can also be deployed as support tools for the ongoing mediation process, in that they can improve the EU's contribution to making international guarantees to the conflict parties more credible (Herrberg et al 2009, 18). This is particularly relevant as the peace process around Nagorno Karabakh has reached a critical stage, where international mediation must push through concrete commitments by the conflict parties (Sarkisyan 2009).

The EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus is perhaps the most visible EU initiative as regards conflict transformation. The high profile post was created in 2003 and is held, since 2006, by the Swedish Ambassador Peter Semenby. The mandate of the EUSR provides for functions of support to peace efforts, including through the implementation of reforms envisioned in the ENP. The EUSR has maintained close contacts with CSOs in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno Karabakh, although he has failed to visit Nagorno Karabakh personally, having instead sent his Political Advisors, who visited the region for the first time in June 2007.²⁷ This has been interpreted in Karabakh as a double standard of the EU, which has been fully engaged in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and as a proof of the pressure exercised by Azerbaijani officials on the EU's approach to conflict resolution in Karabakh.

2.4. Overview

EU engagement in the Nagorno Karabakh peace process has increased over the last years, mainly through the institutionalisation of an informal mediation role, partly derived from France's presence in the official mediation process, acting as a Co-Chair of the OSCE Minsk Group, but also from other EU member states' participation in the group's enlarged format.²⁸ Today, the EUSR for the South Caucasus is a central actor in the region, closely working with the Minsk Group Co-Chairs and the European Commission delegations in Baku and Yerevan to monitor developments on the ground and providing crucial updated information to the EU, as well as establishing important links to local actors. It is therefore crucial that an increased EU presence in the mediation process does not overburden it or eventually increases lack of coordination (Svensson 2009, 11). Moreover, the EU's financial instruments can provide crucial support to long-term changes in conflict societies, contributing to transformative, long-term mediation (Herrberg et al. 2009, 13), which could work as a complement to the current

²⁷ Interview with EU Council Secretariat official and EUSR Political Advisor, Brussels, May 2009

²⁸ Interview with EC officials from DG RELEX, Instrument for Stability, Brussels, May 2009.

power-based mediation, and favour the development of a wider reconciliation process among and within societies (Gahramanova 2007, 46).

EU official priorities towards the conflict are clear: first, prevent armed conflict; second, stop the war rhetoric; and third provide all necessary support to keep the negotiations active.²⁹ EU official policy underlines that the Minsk Group is the main format for negotiations and the EUSR's mandate is to support official mediation efforts, not replace them.³⁰ The EU is considering the development of CBMs which would focus on media and youth, inside Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as on the development of people-to-people contacts between the two sides.³¹ Civil society actors stand as privileged partners in these plans. However, real progress in the peace talks is a pre-condition for further engagement with civil society on conflict-related issues including the CBMs. As one European Commission official has put it "without advances in track-one mediation, there can be no track-two or track-three successful engagement. Civil society alone will not solve the conflict".³² Furthermore, the European Commission is also concerned about how more engagement with civil society would be perceived by both governments. As one European Commission official in the region put it: "The EU is not in the process of funding revolutions!"³³ This perception reflects the growing efforts of the EU in developing independent and respected delegations in Azerbaijan and Armenia, and illustrates how far political leaders are willing to use the conflict for domestic political purposes, making discussions on this issue a highly politicised matter.

Any EU policy towards the Nagorno Karabakh conflict has also to overcome internal divisions inside the EU, in terms of interests and priorities. From the interviews with EU officials it was clear that the European Commission has been pushing for a greater role of the EU in the peace process, which could include a EU presence in the Minsk Group or the establishment of formal channels of communication with the Minsk Group Co-chairs, since consultation is made in an *ad hoc* fashion. However, in the Council this perception is more cautious. Although most member states feel there is a new momentum and more urgency in addressing the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, any changes to the Minsk Group are not welcomed,

²⁹ Interview with Member State representative at COEST, Brussels, May 2009.

³⁰ Interviews with European Commission and Council officials as well as Member States representatives confirm this interpretation.

³¹ Interview with EC official, DG RELEX, Desk Officer, Brussels, May 2009.

³² Interview with EC official, DG RELEX, Desk Officer, Brussels, May 2009.

³³ Interview with EC official in the South Caucasus, March 2009.

and thus the EU would keep a back seat. Another such example is the difficult co-ordination of EU and member states interests in the Caspian region, namely in dealing with Azerbaijan. Energy security is a central priority for both the Commission and the member states, limiting their options of engagement and making political stability a central concern for investors. Member states also have their own interests, policies and programmes in Azerbaijan and often they leave EU policies for second plan.

3. Civil society working on conflict resolution in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno Karabakh

Below there is a list of CSOs interviewed, from mid and grassroots level in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno Karabakh.

Armenia	Azerbaijan	Nagorno Karabakh
1 Think Tank	1 Research Centre	1 Think Tank
1 Business Association	1 Self-help Initiative	1 Business Association
1 Training CSO	1 individual citizen	1 Training CSO
1 individual citizen	1 Students' Group	1 Women's Group
1 Media CSO	1 Religious Organisation	1 Religious Organisation
	2 Funding Organisations	1 Media Organisation
	2 Media Organisations	1 Activist

3.1. Types of Activities

During the 1990s, following the cease-fire, local CSOs in Armenia and Azerbaijan got engaged in activities related to conflict resolution, often with support from international donors. An explicit feature of these activities was to cultivate dialogue between the parties to the conflict, including inside Nagorno Karabakh. This facilitated the development of CSOs across the region, with prominent examples such as the Yerevan, Baku and Stepanakert Press Clubs, the first independent media groups to emerge after the collapse of the USSR. Another well-known organisation present in the region is the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly (HCA) with branches in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Karabakh. Both the Press Clubs and the HCA work as umbrella organisations, providing support for grassroots organisations, looking to strengthen independent voices in the region and to contribute to the pacification and free development of regional societies, including though contributions to conflict resolution. They were engaged in

peace caravans, journalists' meetings, surveys and track-two mediation efforts, among other activities (Hasanov and Ishkanian 2005).

However, the lack of results at the political level deteriorated the context in which CSOs could contribute to conflict transformation and conflict resolution. The consolidation of the *status quo* has led, in Armenia, to a tendency to regard the conflict over Karabakh as *de facto* settled. The Armenian government policy regarding civil society engagement in conflict resolution has shifted from a strictly elite-dominated process, to regard civil society engagement as useful, at best, and harmless, at worst. This could lead most CSOs to divert their priorities to development-based activities. However, this trend is counterbalanced by the fact that it is easier for CSOs to work on conflict resolution issues in Armenia. In Azerbaijan, often one organisation will combine activities on democracy promotion and human rights education with peaceful conflict transformation, reflecting an adaptation to the increasingly dangerous situation for peace activists, and for those CSOs dealing with highly politicised issues (Human Rights Center of Azerbaijan and Azerbaijan National Committee of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights 2004). This included running the risk of being physically endangered or subverting the role of civil society exclusively for conflict resolution purposes, when there was mounting evidence that both sides (Armenia and Azerbaijan) were using civil society in their nationalist propaganda. One way to circumvent this situation has been to resort to human rights reports as vehicles to expose violent conflict-related action and to advocate non-violence (Weiss and Nazarenko 1997, 8).

Conflict-related activities, such as inter-communal dialogue, peace education and track-two mediation efforts are still common in the region. The Yerevan Press Club (YPC) has conducted a series of research projects, conferences and surveys dealing with public perceptions of the Karabakh conflict, in collaboration with the Press Clubs in Baku and Stepanakert.³⁴ In Azerbaijan, similar projects have been carried by the International Centre for Social Research (ICSR), including surveys on public opinion regarding the peace process and media monitoring.³⁵ One of the most widely known television programmes, both in Armenia and Azerbaijan, is the TV Bridge programme, managed by Internews Azerbaijan, which brings

³⁴ Two important projects include "Karabakh Conflict in the Mirror of Media and Public Opinion in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Mountainous Karabakh", in cooperation with the Baku and Stepanakert Press Clubs, conducted in 2001 and in 2003-04 a second bilateral project named "Possible Resolutions to the Karabakh Conflict: Expert Evaluations and Media Coverage", was carried in cooperation with the Baku Press Club, which resulted in a publication gathering experts from the two countries (Aliev, et al. 2006)

³⁵ Interview CSO, Baku, March 2009

together Armenian and Azerbaijani politicians, diplomats, members of political parties, cultural figures and specialists exchanging views on both countries' relations. Further activities include second-track mediation and confidence-building initiatives, such as those linked to the Dortmund Conference (Gahramanova 2006, 182; Poghosyan 2009, 19) and the Consortium Initiative.³⁶ Working with partners in the region to contribute to positive conflict transformation and conflict resolution, the Consortium initiative was set up in 2003, bringing together International Alert, Conciliation resources and LINKS. Conciliation Resources has also been engaged in the project *Dialogue through Film*, bringing together Azerbaijanis and Armenian Karabakhis, in collaboration with Internews Armenia, Internews Azerbaijan and the Stepanakert Press Club. However, the extent to which such initiatives comprise a sustainable effort of civil society towards peace can be questioned, as elements of local CSOs participating in such initiatives seem to sustain hard-line positions (International Crisis Group 2009, 11).

Inside Nagorno Karabakh conflict resolution remains a priority. This is natural for a society aiming to live a fully recognised existence and to overcome the limitations of the current context, which makes them highly dependent on external funding and on foreign donors' priorities. CSOs also display a tendency to be less specialised in their activities, frequently dealing with human rights and democracy promotion as part of their conflict transformation approach, as well as a tendency to address both the causes and the symptoms of the conflict (promoting dialogue, forums, meetings and supporting families and prisoners of war, for instance). Because Nagorno Karabakh is a small society, CSOs are closer to the grassroots and it is easier to reach the average citizen in their initiatives. In contrast, CSOs have more difficulties in reaching the international community and to make their concerns, needs and suggestions heard. There are, nevertheless, examples of how the presence of international donors has created space for civil society to participate in official mediation processes, including the promotion of Karabakh CSOs meetings with the co-chairs of the Minsk Group,³⁷ or the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus' advisors.

Choosing to address either the symptoms or the causes of the conflict depends mostly on the context for action. While in the 1990s, addressing the symptoms of war was an emergency, leading to the prevalence of activities regarding refugees³⁸, prisoners of war³⁹ and

³⁶ Interview CSO, Baku, March 2009

³⁷ Interview CSO, Stepanakert/Khankendi, April 2009.

³⁸ Interview CSOs, Baku, March 2009, Yerevan and Stepanakert/Khankendi, April 2009.

families of the victims of war;⁴⁰ with time CSOs have started to address the causes, mainly through dialogue, debate, policy research and exchange within and across societies. There are also situations, inside Karabakh, where CSOs will focus on development activities, departing from the view point that the war has been solved for fifteen years and now it is time to provide opportunities for economic development.⁴¹ Like in Karabakh, in Azerbaijan, there is a balance in activities dealing with the causes (training, capacity-building and education aimed at re-articulating stereotypes and perceptions of the other) and the symptoms of the conflict (focus on economic assistance to the refugee communities, through self-help initiatives, mediation among the communities and support capacity-building among refugees). These activities have been regarded as positive developments by the authorities and therefore have not been considered as threatening the position of the regime in the negotiation process.

Pursuing conflict transformation through adversarial activities has become a risky business in the Caucasus. Due to the relatively more plural public space in Armenia, CSOs have raised public awareness at grassroots level, elites and media through surveys, discussion clubs, and publications, raising the costs of the *status quo*, exposing vested interests in the current state of affairs. The International Centre for Human Development (ICHD), one of the most well known Armenian think tanks, has complemented its traditionally elite-oriented activities with work at the grass-roots level, aimed at mainstreaming “invisible” opinions in the Armenian society and at providing information on the peace process to the wider population.⁴² This represents an important change on how civil society seeks to better integrate different perceptions on the conflict and facilitate intra-social dialogue. Most of the activities conducted by the organisations interviewed in Azerbaijan, on the other hand, are non-adversarial, aiming to promote change in society. The few potentially adversarial activities include the raise of public awareness of conflict issues in the media⁴³ and international advocacy,⁴⁴ although threats and violent action against journalists and activists in Azerbaijan has developed some level of self-censorship and a climate of intimidation and fear. There were cases where CSOs had to abandon more vocal activities of an adversarial nature, including raising awareness on the conflict and denouncing, to favour non-adversarial activities, focusing on policy research

³⁹ Interview CSOs, Baku, March 2009, Yerevan and Stepanakert/Khankendi, April 2009.

⁴⁰ Interview CSOs, Baku, March 2009, Yerevan and Stepanakert/Khankendi, April 2009.

⁴¹ Interview CSO, Stepanakert/Khankendi, April 2009.

⁴² Interview, Yerevan, April 2009.

⁴³ Interview CSO, Baku, March 2009

⁴⁴ Interview CSO, Baku, March 2009

with a regional focus. This illustrates the difficulties inherent to the limited democracy enjoyed inside in the region, including in Nagorno Karabakh.⁴⁵

3.2. CSO Impact

The impact of local CSOs activities can be thought of in three main ways: peace-building, holding the status quo, and fuelling the conflict (Tocci 2008). To the extent that CSOs still conduct conflict-related activities, most will portray them as aiming at peace-building, including activities dealing with discursive transformation of identities, roles and perceptions and dialogue across the frontline. Such activities have been favoured by international donors working in the region, since the cease-fire, although the lack of tangible results in conflict resolution has led to some discredit of this approach, especially in Azerbaijan, where the outcome of the conflict is unfavourable. Armenian organisations, on the other hand, find it easier than their Azerbaijani counterparts to engage in conflict-related activities with bilateral character. Most CSOs interviewed inside Karabakh present a more conciliatory approach, working both inside the Karabakhi society to change perceptions, addressing radical views and working as well across societies, with Azerbaijani counterparts. However, this is possible because CSOs in Karabakh depart from the position of victors of the conflict and do not open the possibility of revising the outcomes of the war. Instead they propose activities that could facilitate peace under the existing *status quo*, which can have, at best, a holding effect on the conflict dynamics and at worst fuel conflict by removing any serious possibility of a mutually acceptable peace.

Holding activities “affect the material and psychological symptoms of conflict rather than its underlying causes” (Tocci 2008, 18), affecting long-term conflict dynamics. Such activities include those looking to address the symptoms of economic isolation of Armenia, which Azerbaijan perceives as a central strategy in the conflict. Much like in Nagorno Karabakh, the argument should be made that this strategy of isolation has been ineffective in pushing Armenia to concede its position and has strengthened radical groups in the country, as previously discussed. Such groups although promoting the *status quo* might end up fuelling the conflict as impatience with and discredit of peace-building activities increases. Assistance to refugee and IDP communities can potentially have one of two effects. On the one hand, by providing palliative assistance one can reduce the incentive for an active engagement by these

⁴⁵ Interview CSO, Stepanakert/Khankendi, April 2009.

communities in having their rights acknowledged. The right of the Azerbaijani Karabakhi community to an active voice in the peace process has been questioned, although the Azerbaijani government has promoted the formation of a coherent Azerbaijani refugee/IDP community from Karabakh, which could counterbalance the pressure made by Armenian Karabakhis in the peace process (Abbasov 2009). Thus, activities aimed at assisting refugee communities to integrate in the society and to develop social skills, instead of consolidating the *status quo*, can contribute to significant changes in the social fabric and empower the voices of those most directly affected by the conflict, eventually contributing to change. Similarly, organisations dedicated to development activities, including at the level of grassroots,⁴⁶ business communities⁴⁷, as well as assistance and economic opportunities (especially with Azerbaijan), could play a crucial role inside Nagorno Karabakh society in removing a sense of isolation and make them more open to cooperation as well.

Such examples are particularly important since the credibility of the security guarantees offered by the international community to Nagorno Karabakh have been questioned, in the face of Azerbaijan's increasing militarist rhetoric. The government, in Baku, seems to have filled a fuelling function in society, legitimising a wide-spread support for more radical positions. The radicalisation of Azerbaijani official positions has limited civil society's space to portray peaceful conflict resolution as a priority. Several problems were identified by civil society actors limiting the impact of their activities in conflict resolution. Situations of politicisation of research activities and confidence-building measures raising issues of trust and acceptable language;⁴⁸ lack of public acknowledgement of the achievements of civil society initiatives, including by public officials;⁴⁹ lack of sustainability of the processes being developed; and the existing restrictions on media freedom were all indicated as major obstacles in the process of overcoming stereotypes and develop knowledge of the other side, beyond official rhetoric.

In spite of the relatively free environment inside Nagorno Karabakh for CSOs to operate and influence government decisions, their capability to impact the conflict dynamics is limited by the fact that the NKR authorities are not officially part to the peace negotiations. The need to build trust, common knowledge and develop the opportunities for increased positive contact between the Azerbaijani and Karabakhi societies is widely recognised as a

⁴⁶ Interview CSO, Stepanakert/Khankendi, April 2009.

⁴⁷ Interview CSO, Stepanakert/Khankendi, April 2009.

⁴⁸ Interview CSO, Baku, March 2009

⁴⁹ Interview CSOs, Baku, March 2009.

fundamental premise for any peace agreement to be regarded as legitimate and to be accepted by the population. This is particularly important to assure that the return of refugees can be made in a context of stability, where the main sources of tension and grievances have been addressed. In this context, CSOs from Nagorno Karabakh have voiced their critics to the approach of the Minsk Group and its attempt to impose the Madrid principles on Nagorno Karabakh without taking their views into consideration. Recognising these obstacles the Minsk Group has widened its activities to include people from NKR, both from civil society and the administration.⁵⁰

3.3. CSO Effectiveness

Traditionally, CSOs actions have greater visibility and impact in the domestic context if there is support from the government structures. This can include the participation of officials in CSOs activities, the non-obstruction of their work or even financial and logistic support. However, in the context of the Karabakh conflict, CSOs face a delicate balancing act, between accepting/needing state support to improve their credibility and the dangers of co-option. Illustrations of this dilemma, in Armenia, include state officials attempt to control CSOs' activities, as well as lack of understanding as to how civil society can assist the government in the peace process, and inversely how the state can assist civil society.⁵¹ As a consequence, CSOs who are protective of their independence often lose the support of state officials, making their activities less visible internationally and less legitimate domestically. In Azerbaijan, many organisations recognised that personal connections to state officials facilitated their work and increased their ability to achieve good results, namely by removing suspicion. The Azerbaijani government has also become an important civil society financer, through the state Fund to Support NGOs, established in 2008, with a budget of 1.5 million AZN (Azerbaijani Manats) to fund NGO activities (USAID 2008, 57). Nevertheless, the risk of co-option and self-censorship exists, considering the official speech from the Azerbaijani authorities aimed at maintaining the conflict resolution process at the high political level.

The authorities in NKR regard civil society development with interest, considering their goals of developing a pluralist society,⁵² in line with the official policy of portraying NKR as a democratic “country”.⁵³ There are no major interferences in the registration processes of

⁵⁰ As an example of the inclusion of civil society in the Minsk Group process, the co-chairs have participated in several initiatives led by International Alert, aimed at providing track-two initiatives.

⁵¹ Interview with CSO, Yerevan, April 2009.

⁵² Interview with Karlen Avetisyan, Permanent Representative of NKR in Armenia, Yerevan, April 1st, 2009.

⁵³ Interview CSO, Stepanakert/Khankendi, April 2009.

CSOs⁵⁴ and usually support from external donors is a good way to safeguard CSOs from local interference. Moreover, government officials often participate in CSOs activities, displaying their support.⁵⁵ However, the government also wants to avoid strong CSOs from developing, so as not to jeopardise their power positions. Close contacts with government authorities thus remain crucial to enhance CSOs effectiveness, since there are few resources available outside the spectrum of the government.

Relations with the local communities can also enhance or limit the effectiveness of CSOs actions. Generally there is a tendency by local communities in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Karabakh to regard contacts with the other side with suspicion, reflecting the manipulation of the conflict in domestic politics. However, whenever activities are openly promoted and engagement with other CSOs is sought, it becomes easier to harness support for these activities,⁵⁶ as well as whenever personal capacity inside the organisation was high.⁵⁷ Due to their size, most CSOs in Nagorno Karabakh work closely to the grassroots, increasing their rootedness and legitimacy, although the lack of financial resources is forcing CSOs to resort to voluntary work, limiting the quality of their activities.⁵⁸ Therefore, the professionalization of CSOs or the work with experts and professionals improves the ability of CSOs to impact the conflict, as does the development of networks at the national, regional and international level. This works as a way to overcome limitations of resources, enhancing effectiveness and impact and providing greater visibility and coherence to public actions. It improves interconnectedness (the horizontal level) as well as visibility (at the vertical level) of CSOs work. In Azerbaijan, examples provided in the interviews show that competition among CSOs remains a problem to their effectiveness. CSOs compete for funding, ideas and access to information, creating poor communication, overlapping and limited synergies.

Financial and political support by external actors is crucial for civil society to stay engaged in conflict-related issues, since it enhances the visibility of the organisations. Currently, there are difficulties to gather funding at a time when most donors are re-evaluating their financial priorities. The diminution of grant sizes has left mid-level Armenian organisations with relatively big dimension in the position of competing with external

⁵⁴ Interview CSO, Stepanakert/Khankendi, April 2009.

⁵⁵ Interview CSOs, Stepanakert/Khankendi, April 2009.

⁵⁶ Interview CSOs, Baku, March 2009, Yerevan and Stepanakert/Khankendi, April 2009.

⁵⁷ Interview CSOs, Baku, March 2009, Yerevan and Stepanakert/Khankendi, April 2009.

⁵⁸ Interview CSO, Stepanakert/Khankendi, April 2009.

organisations for grants from foreign governments. Their local partners also suffer due to the lack the resources to keep supporting smaller grassroots organisations.⁵⁹ There is also an added difficulty in getting donors engaged in the promotion of long-term projects aimed at conflict transformation, as opposed to conflict resolution, since results are not immediate. Moreover, the priority of international donors, including the EU, seems to have shifted towards democracy and human rights, and away from conflict-related activities. CSOs in Nagorno Karabakh are highly dependent on international actors to provide in-put to the peace process. The need to build trust, common knowledge and develop the opportunities for increased positive contact between the Azerbaijani and Karabakhi societies is particularly important to assure that the return of refugees can be made in a context of stability, where the main sources of tension and grievances have been addressed.

However, dependence of external funding can also marginalise CSOs and portray them as co-opted and, in extreme cases, as traitors, especially when the society is polarised. Impositions in terms of agenda by foreign donors, pushing for reconciliation and dialogue has left local CSOs in fragile security conditions and has alienated them from the wider public. In other cases, the lack of funds has limited the scope of action undertaken by local CSOs.⁶⁰ One central issue mentioned in the interviews was donors' priorities for regional formats (including Georgia or Turkey) as opposed to bilateral (Armenian-Azerbaijani) ones.⁶¹ Although this has allowed for more projects to be developed, as they usually are not opposed by any of the parts and participants feel more comfortable in these diluted formats, bilateral meetings have the potential to be more intensive and deal with hard issues in more depth, potentially reaching more sustainable and visible results in conflict-related issues. Similarly, Diaspora funding also brings a nationalistic agenda close to governmental priorities.⁶² Diversification of sources would facilitate the development of CSOs working on conflict-related activities, but also human rights and democratisation, or addressing specific problems such as refugee issues.

Specific contextual factors can also enhance or curtail the efficiency of CSOs action in conflict resolution. In Azerbaijan, the official policy limits civil society engagement in conflict resolution or conflict transformation. Moreover, indirect impact on the conflict has also been limited by the deteriorating environment on civic liberties, in the period leading to the

⁵⁹ Interview CSO, Yerevan, April 2009.

⁶⁰ Interview CSOs, Stepanakert/Khankendi, April 2009.

⁶¹ Interview CSO, Stepanakert/Khankendi, April 2009.

⁶² Interview CSO, Stepanakert/Khankendi, April 2009.

presidential elections, in 2008. The media has been particularly targeted, several newspapers were closed and journalists have been harassed, while police investigations have delivered little progress (United States Department of State 2009). CSOs in Armenia considered that it became easier to deal with conflict-related issues following the war in South Ossetia, in 2008. The war changed not only the way international actors regarded the status of the conflicts in the South Caucasus, but also the way local actors perceived their military options. This meant that the importance of engaging societies along with the elites in finding sustainable solutions to the conflict became more pronounced. This much was also recognised by the Minsk Group co-chairs, since they also reinforced their attention to civil society actions (Khachatrian 2009). The recent Turkish-Armenian process of normalising relations also raised high expectations among Armenian civil society that the Azerbaijani authorities would soften their position and would embrace wider formats for dialogue, namely the ENP and the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform.⁶³ Finally, since the elections of February 2008 in Armenia and the violent repression of protesters, both the opposition and the government have used the conflict for domestic political purposes making it harder to distinguish between a serious effort at peace and political manipulation.

4. EU impact

The EU has financed NGOs in Armenia since 2004, though none of the projects is directly aimed at peace-building.⁶⁴ The EIDHR has also been available to Armenian CSOs since 2004, and there have been at least two important projects with potential impact on conflict dynamics. One was managed by the Association of Investigating Journalists, with the name “Armenia & Azerbaijan on the Crossroads of neither peace no war” and the other was managed by the International Centre for Human Development, with the name “Towards new leadership: Measures facilitating the peaceful conciliation of groups’ interests”. Further projects under EIDHR have focused on improvement of media standards (one of the most notorious initiative is the Cross Caucasus Journalism Network, implemented by Institute for War and Peace Reporting, which includes journalists from Nagorno Karabakh), human rights protection, local government and elections, which can at best have an indirect impact in the conflict dynamics. EU engagement with civil society in Azerbaijan is very recent. The first grants for CSOs were attributed in late 2008 and are now being implemented. In the framework of the ENP, the ENPI and the EIDHR have become available to support civil society

⁶³ Interview CSO, Yerevan, April 2009.

⁶⁴ Information available at the European Commission delegation in Yerevan website <http://www.delarm.ec.europa.eu/en/programmesactions/listprojects.htm>.

development, while the establishment of concrete priorities for Azerbaijan in the ENP Action Plan, including conflict resolution, democracy promotion and human rights, created the possibility to push for reforms that can improve the general context within which CSOs operate.

Inside NKR, there are no projects run by local civil society organisations currently being funded or supported in any way by the EU. Even as the EU considers CBMs for the Karabakh conflict it aims mainly to engage Armenian and Azerbaijani societies, while having no plans to engage with the authorities in Karabakh. The current staff in the European Commission delegations in Yerevan and Baku has never visited the region, and although the EIDHR, the NSALA and the IfS all allow EU support to countries and regions without local government consent (in the Karabakh case this would mean Azerbaijani permission), the EU has refrained from embarking on activities that could harm the current negotiations or could provoke harsh reaction by local governments. There have been, however, two visits, one by an European Commission delegation in Armenia with the first EUSR to the South Caucasus, Ambassador Talvite (International Crisis Group 2006, 21), in 2004, and another one by the EUSR Political Advisors, in June 2007, which Ambassador Semneby did not accompany.⁶⁵ The EUSR met at the time with NKR representatives in Armenia, while his Political Advisors travelled to Stepanakert/ Khankendi and met both with the political leadership and civil society. Although there has been no continuation of these contacts with civil society and the visit of the EUSR has not taken place yet, it was an important step to balance the EU's conflict resolution policies in the region, too centred on Georgia.

There has been another project financed under the ENPI regional projects, run by two experts promoting meetings between representatives from the two countries and from NKR. The project run as a track-two diplomacy initiative with three stages: in the first stage, experts from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Nagorno Karabakh and Turkey met, in four seminars, to discuss consequences of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict; in the second stage a bilateral meeting (the first in ten years) between officials from the Republic of Azerbaijan and of the NKR, followed by debriefings in Yerevan, Stepanakert/ Khankendi and Baku was envisioned. This initiative was closely monitored and sponsored by DG Relex and the EUSR for the South Caucasus, and

⁶⁵ The EUSR had reached an agreement with the Azerbaijani Foreign Minister to visit NKR after the meeting of the Armenian and Azerbaijani Presidents, in St. Petersburg. However, in a last minute *volte face*, the Azerbaijani Ambassador in Brussels communicated that the visit was not the best option taking into consideration the lack of progress in the St. Petersburg summit. Interview Council Officials, Brussels, May 2009.

focused on CBMs, abstaining from discussing substantive matters under the OSCE Minsk Group. The third stage aimed at facilitating trilateral meetings between Armenia, Azerbaijan and NKR authorities, in Georgia, but major problems prevented the completion of the contract.

In Armenia, the main obstacle to any visible impact of EU actions in the conflict is what many civil society actors call an “imitation of democracy”, making structural approaches highly ineffective. On the other hand, under the ENPI, the EU has also been displaying a careful selection of projects and priorities, avoiding the financing of openly critic CSOs or those working on issues that are poorly perceived by the government. This has reduced the spectrum of CSOs to those “hunting” for funds, those CSOs closely linked to the government, and advocacy CSOs. One area where Armenian CSOs are hopeful of EU support is in cross-border regional cooperation, border management and energy cooperation projects, which Armenia sees as confidence-building measures (much as the EU), but which Azerbaijan has refused to participate in. EU’s work with Azerbaijani CSOs in conflict resolution needs to become more visible, balancing its government-centred approach by supporting and improving CSOs capacity. This should include not only democracy and human rights CSOs, but also more political and activist ones (which the EU has refused to assist), since they are under great pressure, weakened by official policies and lack of funding.

The EU should also make civil society an active stakeholder in setting the EU’s priorities for Azerbaijan, better framing financing to the situation on the ground and consequently empowering CSOs. The general impression is that over the last years, which roughly match the entrance of Azerbaijan to the Council of Europe and in the ENP initiative, conditions for civil society to develop and become a legitimate and empowered social agent have decreased. So we can say that although the EU has an indirect approach to conflict resolution, through a broad human rights approach, it is operating in fast deteriorating environment. Moreover, EU activities in Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus region lack an articulation towards the goal of peace. Among the Karabakhi CSOs EU engagement is mostly welcomed and expectations are high regarding the scope of activities where the EU could get involved (civil society development, mediation, training, financial assistance for democracy and human rights projects and assistance to the refugee community). There are, however, some reservations, also expressed by the NKR representative in Yerevan, regarding EU engagement

in conflict resolution.⁶⁶ Considering the recognition of Kosovo by most EU member states, and EU engagement in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Union is now perceived in Karabakh as applying double standards and thus it will be necessary to develop trust between people in Nagorno Karabakh and the EU before more high profile issues could be approached.⁶⁷

The possibility of more EU engagement in conflict resolution, namely in changing the structural conditions around the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, has been facilitated by some level of depoliticisation of the context, making the EU more suitable to promote a less geopolitical approach. Most interviewees consider that civil society can only be effective in conflict transformation if there are concrete steps towards a political agreement at the top level. In that sense the EU is well positioned to put pressure on the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan and to increase contacts between the two sides, developing eventually an international confidence-building programme, where trust can be restored and the international community can also improve its stance as security providers once a peace agreement is reached.

5. Explaining EU activities in the civil society domain

The EU has focused on mid- and top-level CSOs, mainly aiming to develop interlocutors on the ground for its governance policies. In the framework of the ENP, the EU has attempted to raise the status of civil society as an agent in public life, mainly by promoting forms of dialogue between CSOs and government officials. The EU has supported feedback mechanisms for governmental policies to be analysed by civil society and seeks to make civil society an integral part of its monitoring mechanisms, particularly in the context of the EaP initiative. This would fit well into the Liberal Pace Paradigm hypothesis, proposed in the conceptual paper (Tocci 2008), since the EU has focused on reinforcing the linkages between government structures and mid-level CSOs with access to EU funds and with the dimension and skills to assess public policies and present them to the society at large as well as the international community. The EU has also financed workshops, debates and training, granting mid-level CSOs the opportunity to reach to the grassroots. The EU has also provided other donors with a commonly accepted framework (the ENP Action Plans) which serves as a reference point in their interaction with civil society and governments, reinforcing this liberal perspective.

⁶⁶ Interview with Karlen Avetisyan, Permanent Representative of NKR in Armenia, Yerevan, April 1, 2009.

⁶⁷ Interview with Civil Society leaders, Nagorno Karabakh.

Although this approach is favoured by the EU, there are several problems with its implementation. First, EU focus on developing civil society capacity has delivered only a hand-full of organisations with the capacity to manage Commission grants and develop long-term projects, usually privileged by the EU. Both the EIDHR and the NSALA Programmes present shortcomings in terms of their reach to local CSOs, while the capacity of European Commission delegations on the ground to manage such programmes is still being fully developed. This leads to a concentration of resources and knowledge in few organisations that prevents an equal development across civil society. Second, in Azerbaijan and Nagorno Karabakh, the EU is either a new comer or an absent player, limiting the scope of its impact both at the governmental and civil society level. As far as conflict resolution is concerned, the EU has been unable and unwilling to take a more pro-active stance and its engagement has been conditional on several factors, including the priority awarded to the Minsk Group mediation efforts, which are not questioned by any of the sides. The EU also prioritised Georgia in its conflict resolution and conflict transformation efforts in the South Caucasus, leaving civil society actors, which are dealing with the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, in a marginal position. By not instigating the development of conflict-related projects by civil society, the EU has helped to maintain the *status quo* around the NK conflict, privileging stability. The context has now changed drastically, providing the opportunity for EU engagement, namely with and through civil society.

To a certain extent, then, EU engagement in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict fits the realist critique, which places state actors at the heart of conflict resolution. EU focus on the governmental level, first and foremost, has reinforced the government in Azerbaijan, legitimising it through engagement, while avoiding major contacts with CSOs engaged in denouncing and watch-dog activities. In Armenia, EU presence and co-operation with government has been perceived by civil society actors as a good way to put pressure on the government and has opened the political space for dialogue on conflict. Naturally this has been facilitated by Armenia's position on the conflict and by some level of openness of the Armenian regime that is not visible in Azerbaijan. In Nagorno Karabakh the EUSR has led EU contacts and has dealt both with civil society and political representatives, though sporadically. We can therefore conclude that the EU does prioritise contacts with state actors and does recognise their importance in solving the conflict, although the official approach reserves an important role for civil society, which the lack of resources and the delicate political and social context of the region have prevented from fully developing. EU impact on civil society has

mainly been built through the ENP, including through processes of accountability, increased support and opportunity to develop skills and ideas. So far this approach is missing a direct link to conflict resolution.

There is also the potential for EU actions to develop into the framework envisioned by the leftist critique hypothesis. This perspective sees EU engagement as detrimental to conflict resolution by either leading to the mushrooming of more de-politicised technical CSOs or by over politicising and co-opting CSOs working around the conflict. As we have seen, as far as the EU has managed to have an impact on civil society in Armenia and Azerbaijan, it has privileged less political ones, particularly in Azerbaijan. In Nagorno Karabakh the EU has not deployed the means to have any visible result. The legitimacy of the mid and top-level CSOs with which the EU is working in the framework of the ENP has been maintained, as most of the CSOs in this study remain closely linked to their communities, despite the controversy of supporting contact across the frontline. EU support for civil society development through training, network development and governmental support, has maintained a good level of interconnectedness throughout the society, as envisioned by the Liberal paradigm hypothesis. However, the EU has to compete with other donors (including the Azerbaijani state and the Armenian Diaspora) for an impact on civil society and conflict resolution, since it remains a relatively complex and new donor in the region. Moreover, inside Nagorno Karabakh the EU is completely absent, and there is a long road ahead before it is regarded as a trust-worthy partner by local CSOs.

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