

Civil Society and Confidence Building in Central Asia, the Caucasus and Eastern Europe: Best Practices and Outstanding Needs



**Conference proceedings
23-26 November 2020
DCAF Webinar**

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Event programme

MONDAY, 23 November 2020

13:20-15:00: SESSION 1 - CENTRAL ASIA

Moderated by Prof. Sergey MARKEDONOV, senior researcher, Euro-Atlantic Security Center, MGIMO Institute for International Studies, Moscow.

The objective of this session was to map the best practices and outstanding needs of civil society organizations in Central Asia active in the area of confidence building.

TUESDAY, 24 November 2020

09:00-11:00: SESSION 2 - THE CAUCASUS

Moderated by Dr. Grazvydas JASUTIS

The objective of this session is to map the best practices and outstanding needs of civil society organizations in the South Caucasus active in the area of confidence building.

WEDNESDAY, 25 November 2020

09:00-11:00: SESSION 3 - EASTERN EUROPE

Moderated by Dr. Grazvydas JASUTIS, Project Coordinator, Europe and Central Asia, DCAF.

The objective of this session is to map the best practices and outstanding needs of civil society organizations in Eastern Europe active in the area of confidence building.

THURSDAY, 26 November 2020

09:00-11:00: SESSION 4 - SHARING INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Moderated by Franziska KLOPFER, Head of Cyber Programme and Civil Society Programme, Europe and Central Asia Division, DCAF.

In this session, international experts have shared their experiences in confidence-building from different parts of the world, including Cambodia, Kosovo and African countries.

Keynote speech - Prof. Alexander Cooley

Introduction

Civil society in Central Asia confronts daunting challenges. The sector remains poorly funded, legally precarious, and is often the target of disinformation campaign by governments and their allies who seek to delegitimize its activities and role in governance. This is especially true of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and individuals who engage with security-related issues such as police accountability, human rights abuses, penal conditions and reform, and anti-corruption monitoring that are sensitive to national and local governments.

In general, the state of civil society organizations in Central Asia reflects a long-term regional decline in support for democratic norms, practices, and institutions. Since the early 2000s, this regional de-democratization has been driven by Central Asian leaders more effectively consolidating power, including their control over the security services, the squashing of political opposition, and their increasing control over the digital information space. Central Asia is certainly not unique in this regard, as authoritarian and anti-constitutional trends have characterized other parts of the world, including even some Western countries within the OSCE.

But we should also note a few possible exceptions: Uzbekistan, since the death of its former strongman Islam Karimov in 2016, has taken important steps under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev to support the role of an emerging civil society in all levels of public life, as well as invite prominent Western NGOs and media organizations that were evicted from the country in 2005 following Western criticism of the Uzbek government's crackdown on protestors in Andijon. Kyrgyzstan, as we saw in early October 2020, also continues to host a vibrant civil society sector even as the chaotic small country has experienced the collapse of yet another government as a result of election-related protests. And, as I will explain a bit later, although the COVID pandemic has generally strengthened the hand of autocratic governments in the region, it also has generated some genuine collaborations between security services and NGOs that have brought expertise in the area of public health, information campaigns and tracking the spread of COVID-19 across vulnerable communities.

Still, the trends over the last two decades clearly have been negative and it is worth considering precisely why — especially when members of the international community are refining their strategic thinking about how to positively support better governance and security sector reforms. The key point developed in this paper is that while the international community was mostly supportive of reform efforts and Central Asian NGOs in the 1990s and for much of the 2000s, external pressures and geopolitical shifts since have considerably eroded public support for civil society.

Here I wish to highlight the role of four important trends, all of which have accelerated over the last 15 years.

Color Revolutions and the Stigmatization of NGOs

First, NGOs across the region have been successfully branded and stigmatized by autocratic governments as agents of the West or ‘foreign-based’ organizations. A key inflection point was the wave of so-called “Color Revolutions” that swept out of power governments in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005) where

civil society groups played an important role in mobilizing protests following problematic national elections, as well as monitoring and documenting large-scale voter fraud and administrative manipulations. However, the dramatic outcomes of these protests — the removal of corrupt regimes — also sent shockwaves throughout the region. Governments in countries like Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan quickly took steps to avoid similar tactics by NGOs in their own elections, reframing the activities of civil society as potential threats to regime security and integrity.

As a result, beginning in 2005, governments across Eurasia and Central Asia securitized the activities of NGOs and enacted several countermeasures designed to erode the influence of civil society. These included placing new barriers on the registration, operations and funding of NGOs and restricting the travel and networking activities of activities and NGO leaders. Some civil society groups were also stigmatized as “foreign agents,” beholden to the geopolitical agendas of Western powers such as the United States and NATO allies which retained a security presence in the region (including logistical bases and security cooperation) to support Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan (OEF). At the same time, governments stepped up their funding and support for state-sponsored youth organizations (similar to Nashi in Russia) as well as launched a number of GONGOs (governmental-sponsored non-governmental organizations) which were meant to give the appearance of a robust civil society sector, but remained uncritically loyal to the host government agenda. The advent of new tracking and surveillance technologies in the digital sphere also made it easier for security services to monitor the activities of NGOs.

Perceptions of Withdrawal of the West and the Rise of Russia and China

Second, around 2014, a highly visible shift in the external balance of power intensified Russian and Chinese engagement with Central Asia and signaled the diminished interest of the United States. During the Obama Administration’s second term, 2014 was identified as a key date in the drawdown of the US military presence in the region, and US authorities did, indeed, close the military transit facility at Manas airport in Kyrgyzstan. At the same time two other events highlighted Moscow and Beijing’s increasing prioritization of the region.

The first was the regional ripple effects from the Maidan revolution in Ukraine and subsequent conflict. In the West, the prevailing assumption at the time was that all of the post-Soviet states, fearful of possible Russian intervention, would back Ukrainian territorial claims and denounce Russia’s actions as a breach of international law and the post-Cold War European security architecture. However, in the UNGA vote in March 2014 that sought to affirm Ukrainian sovereignty over Crimea, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan abstained on the resolution, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan failed to vote at all. And although the Central Asian governments were alarmed — especially given that several of them host Russian troops and military installations — they were even more fearful of having to confront similar Maidan-type street protests. Throughout the Ukraine crisis and conflict, Central Asian public approval of Russia’s regional leadership remained very high, while Russian news and disinformation stoked concerns that the West, via its funding of NGOs and civil society activists, was determined to spark other revolutions across Eurasia, including Central Asia.

The second impactful development has been China's announcement of its landmark "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) — which took place in Kazakhstan at Nazarbayev University in September 2013) — under which Beijing has committed to investing close to a trillion dollars to upgrade infrastructure and enhance regional connections to China. Shortly after Xi's announcement, China upgraded relations with all the Central Asian states to "strategic partnerships." Looking at the current maps of the BRI, Central Asia lies in three of six major BRI transit corridor routes and is viewed by Beijing of special importance given its proximity to Xinjiang. Unlike public support for Russia, Central Asian publics are more skeptical and apprehensive about China's growing regional role. Although Central Asian elites rarely criticize China and publicly welcome the BRI, the public opinion remains skeptical whether this upgrades in regional roads, railways, digital infrastructures, and energy pipelines will actually spur economic development. Indeed, a number of China-related corruptions scandals — including the abandonment of construction of a light rail network in Nursultan or the breaking down of the Chinese-operated TBEA thermal power plant in Bishkek in the depths of winter — have been tied to corruption, embezzlement and poor oversight of these BRI-funded projects.

More broadly, China's security footprint is also intensifying in the region, further drawing the scrutiny of Central Asian media and civil society. For example, the revelations of China's network of re-education camps in Xinjiang was particularly alarming in Kazakhstan, where local NGOs revealed that up to 10,000 ethnic Kazakhs had passed through the camps, many of who were separated from their families in Central Asia. Moreover, several large regional infrastructure projects are now being secured by Chinese private security companies (PSCs), whose exact role and regulatory framework in Central Asia is still not well understood. There is also, since 2016, a confirmed presence of Chinese troops in Tajikistan patrolling swathes of the Tajik-Afghan border as well as heightened internal security cooperation with Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. As the Chinese security footprint grows throughout the region, it is unclear what rules and or mechanisms of accountability will govern its presence.

The Rise of Illiberal Conflict Resolution Norms and Ideas

Third, and relatedly, just as the geopolitical balance of power has tilted towards Russia and China in the region, so too have more illiberal ideas about security reform, conflict management and post-conflict reconstruction. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, we tended to regard police and security service reform as extending liberal ideas and values, originating, and practiced in the West, into these post-Communist governments and security institutions. Embodied in the work of organizations like the OSCE, the promotion of liberal principles were key components of security reform projects, while foreign groups that partnered with local civil society in post-conflict settings such as Tajikistan or southern Kyrgyzstan pushed outcomes such as including minority groups in local governance structures, ensuring social protections such as access to education and language rights, opening information and media to a variety of perspectives, and ensuring a general level of civic tolerance and inclusion in governing processes.

Yet, what we now see in these same spaces by local and national governments is the application of illiberal principles and practices that run counter to these ideals. In this new form of "illiberal peace-building" local minorities — even substantial ones like the Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan — are being systematically excluded from governance, their cultural institutions are being closed or defunded, dominant narratives

that emphasize exclusive titular country nationalism dominate state media and social media, and the defense of minority rights is stigmatized as anti-patriotic. Such illiberal principles are also supported in the regional security frameworks promoted by China and Russia, most notably the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) whose stated mission is to combat the “three evils” of terrorism, separatism and extremism and whose members maintain a regional backlist of thousands individuals and about fifty illegal organizations with no clear criteria as why they were listed or procedures for potential delisting or appeals. And unlike the OSCE, groups like the SCO have no mechanisms for the input or inclusion of civil society representatives in decisions or declarations.

Autocracy Goes Global: The Extra-Territorial Dimensions of Central Asian Securitization

A fourth notable development has been the extra-territorialization of authoritarian tactics and security service activities by the Central Asian regimes outside of the region. The rise of transnational repression is especially notable in the case Central Asia. Having effectively stifled most forms of domestic dissent and driven political opponents overseas, Central Asian governments have become adept at using online technologies and surveillance tools to monitor and intimidate political openness and groups in exile. At the extreme, we have witnessed several assassinations of Central Asian opposition figures, even in third countries once thought to be safe havens like Turkey. The government of Tajikistan has been especially aggressive in this area as it has abused the Interpol red notice system to list thousands of political opponents as suspected terrorists and extremists, while also pressuring OSCE member countries, like Poland, to arraign and extradite opposition members and civil society leaders who have criticized or opposed the Rahmon regime in international fora like the OSCE’s Human Dimension meeting. While in the 1990s we talked about NGOs as “activists beyond border,” thirty years later we now see the power of “autocrats beyond borders.”

COVID-19 and a New Wave of Instability

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 has both magnified these challenges but created some unexpected opportunities for the region’s NGO sector. On the one hand, according to the watchdog FreedomHouse, we have seen a global weakening of democracy during the pandemic with the justification that governments are seeking to safeguard public health. These trends have included restricting media reporting and coverage of government actions, banning, or curtailing public protests and demonstrations, and an increase in police violence and detentions, especially against marginalized and vulnerable communities. In Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, initial denials about the extent of the spread of COVID-19, and implications for public health, were maintained for months. In Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, countries that took more timely steps to combat the epidemic, some foundations that support civil society have reported that grantees during the crisis deepened their informal cooperation with the security services in order to manage healthcare protocols and public information campaigns about preventative measures. Whether this tacit alliance convinces governments and security services to ease pressure on civil society groups remains in doubt.

Over roughly the same period as the pandemic, the Eurasian region has experienced yet another wave of major interstate conflict instability, and protest. At the time of this writing, the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh between Azerbaijan and Armenia appears to have been resolved at a new equilibrium, with Azerbaijan retaking militarily, with assistance of Turkey, adjacent territory to disputed Nagorno-Karabakh, while agreeing to a major role for Russian peacekeepers. Protests continue to erupt in Belarus against President Lukashenko over the disputed results of his August 9 Presidential election victory, while in Kyrgyzstan the national government collapsed yet again following the contested results of the October 5, 2020 parliamentary elections. Unlike previous waves of instability — especially those of the mid-2000s and the fallout of the Ukraine crisis in 2014 — what distinguishes this year's events across the post-Soviet space are their local and regional nuances and the lack of an overarching narrative that they are part of a broader Russian-Western geopolitical confrontation in the Eurasian region. This may permit, going forward, a limited role for NGOs and civil society, though the external conditions for conducting advocacy and promoting government accountability continue to be extremely challenging.

Session 1 – Central Asia

Context

Central Asia is a diverse area, home of a vast number of ethnic groups, languages, and religions. However, the Osh conflicts in Kyrgyzstan, unsettled border disputes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, consequences of the Tajik Civil War, regional water and energy quarrels, and extremism continue to challenge security and safety. Relations between Uzbek and Kyrgyz communities in Southern Kyrgyzstan remain tense, with significant ethnic violence witnessed in 1990 and 2010 in the areas of Osh, Jalal-Abad and Batken. Tajikistan suffered a devastating civil war from 1992 until 1997. The General Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and National Accord in Tajikistan was signed on 27 June 1997, however some issues remain unresolved, while the long and porous land border with Afghanistan poses additional security challenges. Karakalpakstan — an autonomous republic within Uzbekistan — is the scene of an ongoing ecological disaster with the continuing desiccation of the Aral Sea. Deserts now cover 13.67 million hectares of Karakalpakstan, which makes up more than 80% of the territory. Nationalists have sought to mobilize public support for an independent Karakalpakstan by focusing on the economic insecurity caused by the Aral Sea disaster.

Fergana Valley — an intermountain depression shared by Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan — has experienced social, economic, and political turmoil, and faces significant security challenges including ethnic violence, terrorism, and social unrest. The conflict between the Uzbek community and Meskhetian Turks 1989 demonstrates the region's vulnerability to inter-ethnic conflict. The spread of Salafism and subsequent creation of the Islamic Uzbek Movement in Fergana Valley adds another layer of complexity. Lastly, the notorious events in Andijan in 2005, to which IMU was allegedly connected, resulted in widespread civilian casualties and reflected the region's growing fragility. Tensions surrounding enclaves — territories surrounded by the territory of another state — also persist in Fergana, with approximately 30 such enclaves in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Discussion

Work to build trust and improve relations between ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan was carried out by civil society from the onset of the conflict in Osh. Benefiting from direct contacts with local communities, civil society was able to consolidate resources, attract humanitarian and international assistance grants, and mobilize the local population.

Participants mentioned that the main approach taken by civil society was to build trust at the grassroots level through the involvement of local leaders — the so-called aksakals (elders) — and women and youth who had received training on conflict management and resolution. This was exemplified by the work of the Foundation for Tolerance International (FTI), a non-governmental organization dedicated to conflict prevention and peacebuilding. The work of the organization was carried out in 3 key areas:

- Monitoring and analysis of the situation, assessment of threats and risks;
- Work to restore trust at the grassroots level;
- Promotion of institutional approaches to peacebuilding at the national level.

With the support of the United Nations Development Program, FTI held consultations on the conditions and possibilities for creating local peace mechanisms, while the experiences of successful peacebuilding and infrastructure projects in Ghana and Kenya were studied, and their applicability to the Osh conflict examined. Important achievements in Osh included the creation of a state agency for local self-government and interethnic relations, which drew its authority from various national strategies aiming to improve interethnic relations. A monitoring center was also established under the agency, responsible for monitoring developments on the ground.

Participants also discussed the situation in Uzbekistan, stressing that in general, Uzbekistan has become open to cooperation and compromise, and to resolve existing security problems. In the view of the participants, officials have become more attentive to citizens' appeals, the activities of media, and to the resolution of conflicts between the population and representatives of the authorities, with several political and "economic" prisoners released from prisons in recent years. Despite this, the Uzbek elite remains unwillingly to engage in broad-scale reforms, with the political situation remaining complex and challenging. Against this backdrop, the role of the international community remains in flux. In recent years, particularly since 2014 and the withdrawal of NATO combat troops from Afghanistan, the attention of international donors has moved elsewhere. This has been compounded by the complicated bureaucratic procedures necessary for supporting civil society in Uzbekistan.

As a result, the development of civil society in Uzbekistan is conditioned on the following:

- The availability of and ability to access foreign grants for the development of civil society institutions (NGOs, mass media, etc.);
- The level of foreign support for organizing and conducting research on key development issues in Uzbekistan and the wider region, and the ability to communicate the results of such research to society, state authorities and other Central Asian Republics.

Participants raised the important role of media in confidence-building processes in Tajikistan. The importance of “positive journalism” was highlighted. The work of the National Association of Independent Media in Tajikistan was given, which published numerous stories on friendship and neighborly relations between Kyrgyz and Tajiks. It was noted that journalists re-focused their efforts to promoting confidence-building, and to addressing conflict stimulating factors.

The project “Consolidation of journalists on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border” highlighted the need to improve the general quality of journalism by ensuring that it complies with quality standards for the preparation and dissemination of information, including accuracy, neutrality and conflict-sensitivity; as well as the verification of facts and sources. The participants suggested that the level of public confidence in social media remains low and that in general the public, particularly in the border regions between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, prefers to consume news from traditional media outlets. Another achievement of the “Consolidation of Journalists on the Kyrgyz-Tajik Border” project was the adoption of the Declaration on Quality Standards, signed by journalists and editors of the “Mediamost” network (Kyrgyz-Tajik Media Network).

The following points were suggested as ways to improve and promote “positive journalism”, and thus to support confidence-building:

- Maintain balance: maintain a balance of opinions when covering issues related to borderlands and bilateral relations.
- Verify facts: do not base new stories on rumors, but only on verified facts.
- Strict neutrality: maintain neutrality and objectivity when reporting.

Session 2 - The Caucasus

Context

The Caucasus region is another dynamic and diverse region, with a history of conflicts, ethnic tensions, territorial disputes, religious clashes, and socio-political differences. The Caucasus lacks a regional identity – with a host of historic grievances, it is hardly possible to speak of a region independent of the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia), much less one that incorporates the Russian North Caucasus which include Adygea, North Ossetia-Alania, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Ingushetia, Chechnya and Dagestan. The Caucasus also hosts three de-facto states, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorno Karabakh, the statuses of which still remain unresolved.

The Georgian (GEO) and South Ossetian (SO) conflict was often mercurial in 1991-2008, which resulted in significant territorial changes and dire humanitarian consequences across the region. The conflict reached critical peaks in 1991-1992, and 2004 and demonstrated to the international community the fragile and vibrant situation in South Caucasus. Georgia was engaged in the Abkhaz conflict between 1992-2008. Georgian armed forces and volunteers fought to suppress the Abkhazia (ABK) successionist movement, which sought independence from Georgia along Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, resulting in an Agreement on a Ceasefire and Separation of Forces signed in Moscow on 14 May 1994. The Moscow-brokered ceasefire agreement did not prevent further bloodshed, and the conflict again peaked in 1998 and 2001, further straining GEO-AKB relations and complicating the

process of reconciliation. In August 2008, forces of the Russian Federation fighting alongside ABK security actors became embroiled in another conflict with Georgia. The so-called ‘five days war’ was ended with the European Union sponsored Six Point cease-fire agreement followed by an immediate deployment of the European Union Monitoring Mission across the country. The 2008 Six Points agreement has proved a reliable tool for maintaining stability in the region, although its ability to facilitate reconciliation processes between opposing communities and contribute to broader conflict resolution remains limited. Turning to Armenia and Azerbaijani, the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War ended with the signing of a cease-fire agreement on 9 November 2020 by Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev. Under this agreement, Armenian and Azerbaijani forces were to ‘stop at their positions’ and Armenia to cede control of all of the territories outside of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast still under their control, except for a 5-kilometre wide corridor through Lachin to connect the territory with Armenia. Russian peacekeepers were deployed to oversee the agreement.

The security situation in the North Caucasus also remains fragile. Two Chechen wars, territorial disputes between Chechnya and Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia, the Prigorodny conflict and the emergence of terrorism marks the region as one of the most volatile on earth.

Discussion

Participants discussed the level of freedom enjoyed by NGOs working in Armenia, in general concluding that it was sufficient. Despite this, societal narratives, as well as those from representatives of NGOs, are often extremely adversarial. As a result, the ability of CSOs to play a constructive role in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has remained limited.

In 2011, Azerbaijan joined the international initiative of public administration “Open Government”, which brought together government leaders and civil society in order to promote accountable, responsive, and inclusive governance. In 2016, Azerbaijan established a Government-Civil Society Dialogue Platform to promote “Open Government”. The activities of the Platform are centered around facilitating cooperation between the government, parliament, and civil society in order to monitor the implementation of the Open Government initiative.

In relation to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the conference participants emphasized the importance of open dialogue. They stated that dialogue with all sides to the conflict is required, and that narratives and perceptions regarding the conflict need to be challenged. Civil society was argued to be able to facilitate such a process by initiating dialogue between civil society in Armenia and in Azerbaijan.

In 2016, Armenia-Azerbaijan Civil Peace Platform was established at the initiative of the citizens of Armenia and Azerbaijan, who wanted to contribute to the peaceful settlement of the conflict. The Platform aimed at ensuring an early and just peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Participants argued that the key lesson from this initiative was the need for additional international support, in particular from the OSCE Minsk Group.

International Eurasia Press Fund organized the Journalists Exchange program, implemented in direction cooperation with OSCE MG representatives and with the participation of Armenians and Azerbaijanis. During the visit, Azerbaijani journalists visited

Armenia, as well as the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan, including Shusha. Armenians also visited Baku and Ganja, where they met with their Azerbaijani counterparts, representatives of NGOs, academics, as well as with the Azerbaijani community of the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan.

Participants concluded that civil society can facilitate trust and dialogue between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Joint economic, agricultural, and social projects, demining, as well as initiatives on ecological and cultural restoration and sustainable development of the region, with active engagement of NGOs, may be a route to fostering such trust and dialogue, in particular religious tolerance.

Participants also addressed confidence-building processes in Georgia. They recalled that after the collapse of the Soviet Union and declaration of independence, Georgia faced numerous challenges: political and social unrest and violent conflict, including in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian relations remain complicated.

The Institute for the Study of Nationalism and Conflicts (ISNC), a Georgian CSO, has worked to resolve the legacies of the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian through three strategies:

- Reconnecting professionals: the ISNC has implemented dozens of projects aiming to connect professionals in different fields (cultural heritage, environment, education, human rights, etc.)
- Working with mid-level professionals: the INSC focuses much of its efforts on this target group, as they have a potential to advance to decision-making positions
- Youth: the organization actively works with younger generations who do not have the experience of coexistence in a common territory. As such, awareness raising and providing information about conflicts and the peace process is crucial to build a critical mass in the younger generation who have a strong understanding and vision on conflict resolution.

At the state level, the main actor responsible for conflict resolution is the State Ministry of Reconciliation and Civic Equality. Peacebuilding efforts in Georgia have also benefited from -and in large part been driven by international support. While the peace process was thus mainly managed by international actors, local CSOs have also initiated several confidence-building activities. These CSOs bring with them the benefits of understanding the local context, and have been able to leverage personal contacts to facilitate the engagement of Abkhazians and South Ossetians in the peace-process.

Participants stated that confidence-building activities have never been part of one, common plan or vision. At the same time, internal communication and mutual understanding within and between political elites and society are urgently required as political polarization, public manipulation and lack of internal coordination on the design of peace processes remain as major reproducers of protracted conflicts in Georgia. Potential measures to increase the efficiency of confidence-building initiatives include: Defining a shared vision and strategy, leveraging the potential of local peacebuilders, enhancing political dialogue, facilitating engagement, supporting grassroots initiatives, and strengthening sectoral cooperation.

Finally, the participants discussed the North-East Caucasus area, which includes Chechnya, Dagestan, and Ingushetia). In comparison with the North-West Caucasus, this area is distinguished by less confidence building process. This in part relates to overlapping and sometimes opposing legislation and value systems: this includes the Russian tradition of secularism, Islamic jurisprudence (Sharia), and customary (traditional) mountain law - referred to as adat. Russian legislation is the only that is officially recognized. The only period in which the above-mentioned legal frameworks and value systems co-existed was during the short existence of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. Nevertheless, this was a transitional period, and the varying legal systems often did not work in harmony.

Session 3 - Eastern Europe

Context

There are several contemporary conflicts in Eastern Europe, including the annexation of Crimea, the on-going war in the Eastern Ukraine and civil unrest in Belarus. The conflict between separatists in Transnistria and Moldovan authorities erupted in 1991-1992. Chisinau and Tiraspol signed a ceasefire agreement on the 21 July 1992 in Moscow, which established a trilateral peacekeeping mission, the Joint Control Commission, composed of Russian, Moldovan and Transnistrian forces. In June 2018, and upon the proposal of Moldova, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted a text urging the withdrawal of Russian troops from the territory of Moldova. The case of Crimea has been highly detrimental to bilateral relations the Russian Federation and Ukraine, re-surfacing again after the political crisis and social unrest in Ukraine in 2013-2014. The annexation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol was completed in less than a month — from 20 February to 18 March 2014 — and was followed by the onset of conflict in Eastern Ukraine. In April 2014, the Ukrainian government launched the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) to restore territorial integrity and ensure law and order in the areas of Donetsk and Luhansk severely affected by the conflict. Despite this, the conflict remains ongoing.

In the Republic of Belarus, presidential elections were held on 9 August 2020. Immediately after the results were announced, citizens took to the streets to protest with what they viewed as an unfair and “rigged” election. As protests grew in intensity and numbers, the government responded with the use of force. Opposition leader Tikhanovskaya fled to Lithuania and established the Coordination Council in Minsk to coordinate the work of the opposition. Dialogue between the opposition and Lukashenko remains limited, and their standpoints are not reconciliatory.

Discussion

Participants began by addressing the ongoing unrest in Belarus. Participants agreed that the Belarusian political system has undermined efforts to facilitate dialogue between oppositional political movements and the government. As a result, Belarusian civil society lacks experience and competencies in designing and implementing such work. In addition, without a culture of political consensus and dialogue, Belarusian society in general also lacks experience and understanding of this area. Despite, according to participants, in 2014-2020, several thematic dialogue platforms were established. They were launched and managed by civil society actors. Two noticeable examples include, although they pertain exclusively to economic issues:

- Business forums organised by business unions
- Kastrychnitski Economic Forum (KEF) co-organised by several economic think tanks

An example of a confidence-building process driven by a non-state actor is the work of the Minsk Dialogue Track-2 Initiative, which in 2019 became the Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations. The most remarkable example of its activity was the annual Minsk Dialogue Forum on regional security; in October 2019 it gathered more than 700 participants from 62 countries.

Participants then moved to discuss the situation in Moldova. There, confidence-building measures are intended to contribute to the facilitation of the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict by increasing confidence between Chisinau and Tiraspol and the population from the both banks of the Dniester River. These measures are implemented in partnership and collaboration with various state and non-state actors. To this end, CSOs from both sides of the Dniester River play an important role in promoting CBMs at the grassroot level, by designing and implementing small-scale projects based on the identified needs of both communities. An example of such a CSO is 'Eco-TIRAS' International Association of the Dniester River Keepers. This CSO provides a platform the inclusion of multiple stakeholders in confidence building activities, including universities in Chisinau and Tiraspol which jointly participate in Dniester River basin conferences periodically organized by Eco-TIRAS. Eleven such conferences, with over 100 participants, have been organized. Each year Eco-TIRAS organizes kayak expeditions, in which scientists, NGOs, students and journalists from Moldova, including Transnistria, and Ukraine participate. Such events aim to strengthen inter-sector and transboundary cooperation on issues related to the conservation of Dniester River. In addition, Eco-TIRAS promotes the special Dniester River legal framework of bilateral cooperation between Moldova and Ukraine.

Finally, the participants discussed the potential for confidence building in Ukraine. An example of CBMs implemented by CSOs in Ukraine includes activities funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), including the UCBI (Ukraine Confidence Building Initiative), which ran from 2014 to March 2019. Similar work is also carried out with support of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in Ukraine. UNDP supports projects which aim to strengthen public safety and social cohesion, support economic recovery in conflict-affected communities, and implement reforms to decentralize power and healthcare in the Ukrainian-controlled territories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The activities of the CSO "The League Officers" are also aimed at strengthening public trust between civil society and the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and include:

- Retraining and employment of retired servicemen: The practical work of The League Officers" began with the creation of its own training base. The League Officers maintains active ties with enterprises and employment centers in Ukraine. Today, more than 200 enterprises use the services of the League Officers', which has assisted in the employment of more than 2,500 dismissed military personnel and their families.
- Psychological rehabilitation of combatants under the programme "Way Home from Battle". The programme consists of a set of activities aimed at preparing ex-servicemen - who participated in hostilities - for civilian life. The servicemen master the techniques of self-regulation and recovery, learn to communicate effectively with others and constructively resolve conflicts. In 2019, 42 such work-

shops were held with 1,680 former military personnel. Since the project begun, 241 seminars have been for 9'646 ex-servicemen.

- Mine action training for children in the operational / environmental protection zone. With the support of the Democracy Assistance Foundation of the US Embassy in Ukraine, representatives of The League Officers conducted a series of mine safety classes with students from secondary schools in the Stanichno-Luhansk district of the Luhansk region.

Outstanding needs

The participants also identified the outstanding needs of their organizations. Despite their different contexts, CSOs working on confidence building in Central Asia, the Caucasus and Eastern Europe share similar needs. These include: the need for the development of common plan or vision on confidence-building; the reinforcement of political dialogue and sectoral engagement; the provision of formal and informal peace education to support effective confidence-building; the expansion of grass-root initiatives; the establishment of regional and neutral platforms that could facilitate exchanges of information, confidence building, and act as a mechanism through which feedback to donors can be provided.

Recommendations

Participants agreed that security sector subject-matter experts working in mediation, confidence building and the monitoring of security sector reforms should be better engaged, and context-specific approaches to good security sector governance followed. It was agreed that initiatives to foster confidence building within and across states, facilitated by a neutral and impartial interlocutor, could make a significant contribution in this regard. The development of communication mechanisms and the strengthening of networks between non-state actors supportive of or active in the area of confidence building in conflict-affected areas, should be supported. The following areas could serve as starting point for the engagement of such CSOs in confidence building processes:

1. Ability to access information: the ability of civil society to access reliable information on the security needs of local populations, as well as to obtain timely information on security developments, remains critical to their efforts in supporting confidence building processes.
2. Support to state-driven initiatives: The participation of civil society in state-driven responses to crisis management and confidence building - through elaboration of national and regional initiatives - should be supported.
3. Participation in ongoing mediation processes: The strengthening of the participation of ethnic minorities in confidence building processes, whose opinions and security needs are often neglected, should be supported by CSOs working in confidence building.
4. Re-animation of cross-boundary confidence building initiatives: CSOs should engage local communities and relevant security actors in cross-boundary confidence building initiatives.

5. Provision of communication channels: CSOs should support the provision of communication channels so that the security needs and concerns of conflict affected populations and security actors can be heard.
6. Building resilience of vulnerable and conflict-affected populations: CSOs should target vulnerable and conflict-affected populations through tailored capacity building programs and informal peace education.
7. Joint research: Joint research on past and current security challenges, which engage experts from conflict affected areas, should be undertaken.
8. Strengthening of access to and the engagement of youth: in line with United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 - which emphasizes the importance of youth as agents of change in the maintenance and promotion of peace and security - CSOs should support the inclusion of youth from conflict-affected areas in confidence building processes.
9. Enhanced sectorial cooperation: CSOs should focus on sectoral cooperation in order to strengthen confidence building processes.



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