

Civil Society in the Caucasus: Myth and Reality

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Abstract

Although touted as a victory of “civil society”, the success of the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003 was not so much the result of a successful mobilization from below, as the outcome of a split within the ruling political elite. This article seeks to debunk the myth that the so called “colored revolutions” in the former Soviet Union represented a renaissance of civil society. It begins by exploring what we mean by civil society, what civil does and what it is not, before going on to investigate whether the organizations and popular movements that were involved in mass demonstrations in the three South Caucasus republics (Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan) were in fact a part of civil society or whether they were instead something quite different. It concludes that neither the recent street demonstrations nor the emerging NGO sector in the Caucasus region can really be said to constitute civil society in the way that it is normally understood. Instead it proposes the nearest there is to civil society in the Caucasus can be found in the Georgian Orthodox Church. Despite its strongly illiberal agenda and often intolerant opinions, the views of the Church are far more representative of popular opinion than those of the narrow and elitist NGO sector.

What Civil Society is

For Philippe Schmitter civil society is

“[a] set or system of self-organized intermediary groups that: 1) are relatively independent of both public authorities and private units of production and reproduction ...; 2) are capable of deliberating about and taking collective actions in defense or promotion of their interests or passions; 3) do not seek to replace either state agents or private (re)producers or to accept responsibility for governing the polity as a whole; and 4) agree to act within pre-established rules of a ‘civil’ nature.” (Schmitter 1997: 240).

Similarly, John Keane defines civil society as

“a complex and dynamic ensemble of legally protected nongovernmental institutions that tend to be nonviolent, self-organizing, self-reflexive, and permanently in tension, both with each other and with the governmental institutions that ‘frame’, constrict and enable their activities” (Keane 2009).

Finally, Larry Diamond defines civil society as

“the realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, (largely) self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules” (Diamond, 1994: 5).

Overall these definitions underline four key attributes of civil society: independence from the state and private

capital, self-organization, deliberation and civility. To these four key attributes, I would propose a fifth: institutionalization. Civil society is an ensemble of organizations that is not dependent on the fate of any one organization and can instead be envisaged as a mesh of strongly institutionalized networks of communication that comprise the public sphere.

Given the principle of civility, civil society can be equated with social capital, defined by Putnam as “features of social organization, such as networks, norms and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam 1993).

This definition is rather similar to Schmitter’s definition of civil society, especially in terms of its requirement for organization, cooperation and civility. Moreover, the notion of “capital” suggests a kind of institutionalized “reserve” that cannot be squandered in the course of a year or two, but is instead gradually accumulated or used up over decades or even generations. By equating civil society with social capital, the development of civil society can be seen in terms of the gradual deepening and institutionalization of cross-cutting social networks and the establishment within these networks of norms of reciprocity or mutual trust.

What Civil Society Does

In general, civil society, by aggregating citizens’ demands, by communicating these demands to the state leadership and by mobilizing significant parts of the population if they are not met, enables citizens to exert influence over government in a way that would not be possible

if society were nothing more than “atomized individuals”. The various parts of civil society together therefore ensure the principle of vertical accountability, according to which the rulers are ultimately answerable to the ruled. Civil society is seen as an essential component of a democratic regime and is held to be particularly important in preventing democratic backsliding on the part of the incumbent regime during the consolidation of democracy.

Of interest here is not only the strength of civil society, but also its capacity to remain more or less autonomous from the various political factions that are vying for power. For Barry R. Weingast, restrictions on the capacity of incumbents to transgress democratic norms will “become self-enforcing when citizens hold [them] in high enough esteem that they are willing to defend them by withdrawing support from the sovereign when he attempts to violate [them]”. This implies not only an active civil society, capable of bringing its political leaders to account, but a civil society that is prepared to put aside group interests and punish all cases of subversion by the state even if the state’s actions may benefit certain powerful factions within civil society. Weingast argues that “[p]olicing the sovereign requires that citizens coordinate their reactions” and suggests that what is needed is the “construction of a consensus about limits on the state” amongst the broad mass of citizens (Weingast 1997: 251).

What Civil Society Is Not

Baohui Zhang distinguishes between well established societal organizations with the capacity for both representation and control (as observed in parts of Latin America and Southern Europe) with large social movements that lack these capacities (more prevalent in former totalitarian states). Social movements in Zhang’s sense of the word lack both a formal organizational structure and the capacity to deliberate; typically, they act spontaneously and are characterized by an outpouring of the population into the streets in response to a particular grievance. Often they are strongly dependent on their leaders, whose oratory most effectively expresses the grievance and thereby maintains the momentum of the protest. For Zhang, social movements in post-totalitarian settings do not necessarily promote democratization because they “lack internal control ... and are dependent on the movement for their power and influence” and as a result “employ increasingly demagogic political positions” rendering them incapable of implementing a negotiated settlement with the authoritarian regime (Zhang 1994: 134). The result of the “social movement” model of popular protest is often a “winner takes all” struggle

between the authoritarian elite and its opponents. By implication, social movements – while possibly critical during the transition phase – would lack the capacity to help forge the consensus that is necessary during the consolidation phase.

Given that our definition of civil society emphasizes self-organization, deliberation and civility, it would be stretching this definition to the breaking point if we were to equate the sort of spontaneous social movements identified in the above paragraph with civil society. Such movements are in many ways opposed to civil society as they are disorganized, spontaneous and – by their refusal to compromise – at times uncivil.

Another open question is whether or not donor-funded NGOs constitute civil society. Despite a tendency in recent literature to reflect a liberal consensus that NGOs are somehow good for democracy and good for development, NGOs can be uncivil, prioritize donor-funded service provision at the expense of political activities, and are not always representative of society (Mercer 2002). In many developing countries, including those of the former Soviet Union, they are dominated by urban, educated, middle class elites. Moreover, frequently the NGO sector is highly fragmented, consisting of a very large number of tiny organizations that are bitterly competing with one another for donor funding. As such, they fail to form an “ensemble” as Keane requires, and are not self-supporting (Diamond) as they remain dependent on donor-funding. Finally, they are often poorly institutionalized within the country and unsustainable without donor funding. This is not to say that a self-supporting, relatively united and well-institutionalized NGO sector is not possible; I merely mean to say that NGOs do not necessarily constitute civil society according to the definitions provided above.

Finally, in order to represent civil society, and still more to be effective in promoting the consolidation of democracy, societal organizations should not represent any one faction of the political elite. Groups that are dependent on political groups or parties that are vying for control of the state represent political society, not civil society.

Civil Society in the Caucasus

The first decade of the twenty-first century saw a series of popular protests that threatened to unseat from power the incumbent rulers in Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia. Listing these events chronologically, the first of these protests, which occurred on 16 October 2003, was directed against perceived electoral fraud in presidential elections that brought victory to the son of the long-

time leader of Azerbaijan, Heidar Aliiev. The rebellion was put down within hours by the Azeri security forces.

The second was the only successful protest, when large crowds in the centre of Tbilisi forced the resignation of long-time leader Eduard Shevardnadze after disputed parliamentary elections on 2 November 2003. The success of the so-called “Rose Revolution” in Georgia provided the impetus for protests in Armenia the following year; a campaign to remove President Robert Kocharian was launched in March–April 2004 on the grounds of suspected vote-rigging in elections the previous year. The protests were suppressed early in the morning of 13 April, when internal security forces used water cannons and batons to disperse demonstrators from the city centre and went on to raid the headquarters of three opposition parties.

The next set of demonstrations occurred once again in Georgia, when tens of thousands of people took to the streets calling for the resignation of President Mikheil Saakashvili in early November 2007, resulting in a police crackdown and a nine-day state of emergency. The Armenian presidential elections provided the backdrop for the next set of protests in February–March 2008, when demonstrators took to the streets in protest at the victory of Serzh Sarkisian, allegedly with the help of election fraud. Once again the police used force to put down the protests, resulting in the deaths of eight people. Finally, Tbilisi was again the scene of opposition protests from April to July 2009, which were aimed once more at forcing the resignation of Mikheil Saakashvili. This time the authorities used a softly-softly approach and waited for the protests to dwindle of their own accord.

The one successful case of regime change through popular protests – the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia – led some observers to highlight the role of civil society in bringing authoritarian or semi-authoritarian leaders to book (Demes and Forbrig 2007). This idea that civil society in the former Soviet Union was a driving force for political change was reinforced by the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in November–December 2004 and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in March 2005.

However, if we look further at the six sets of protests in the Caucasus region identified above, we see that the Rose Revolution was successful not only because of the strength of the protests, but because of the internal divisions within the Shevardnadze administration. By 2003 Shevardnadze was relying on an ever more narrow circle of family friends and former communist apparatchiks and no longer had a winning coalition amongst those with coercive power (Wheatley 2005: 175–196). Those opposing him, including the man who would replace

him, Mikheil Saakashvili, were former Shevardnadze associates who had held top posts in the parliament and in government. Shevardnadze had even lost control of the poorly-paid and notoriously corrupt police force, and senior officers began progressively to desert him. Although the size of the demonstrations was just as large in Armenia in 2004 and in Georgia again in 2007 and 2009, the regimes were far more coherent and united and were able to resist the protests and remain in power.

Moreover, if we look more closely at the protest movements in the Caucasus, we see that the assumption that civil society played the key role in the protests – at least if we stick to the definitions of civil society provided above – is questionable. Indeed it is even open to question whether either the demonstrators that took to the streets or the NGO leaders that helped to co-ordinate them belonged to civil society at all. The mass of demonstrators resembled far more a social movement in Zhang’s sense of the word – spontaneous, disorganized and uncompromising – than civil society. Most of the protesters belonged to no organization, were driven onward by the fiery rhetoric of their leaders and would accept nothing less than the complete capitulation of their opponents. Their struggle with the authorities was a zero-sum game in which one would emerge victor and the other vanquished. Negotiation, deliberation and compromise were an anathema to such movements. Moreover, the networks that were used to mobilize them were short-lived and ephemeral and disintegrated after the success or failure of the protests. Once again they fail to satisfy the condition that civil society must be, in one way or another, institutionalized.

The NGO Movement

The role of NGOs in the so-called “colored revolutions” is also cited by some commentators as evidence of the revival of civil society in the post-Soviet space. On the face of it, this appears to be a quite plausible explanation. By 2002 there were estimated to be around 5,000 NGOs in Georgia and NGO leaders took part in coordinating the protests and mobilizing protesters during the Rose Revolution. However, if we look beneath the surface we see that Georgian civil society was not what it seemed. Of the 5,000 or so NGOs, only 600–800 had carried out at least one project and most of these were small and highly dependent on outside donor funding. Only around 200 were considered to be relatively stable and just 20 to 30 had permanent staff and boards (Nations in Transit 2004). Those actively involved in organizing the Rose Revolution probably numbered little more than a dozen and the number of individuals coordinating the

protests therefore represented a tiny segment of society. In fact, at the national level, the most prominent organizers were Giga Bokeria, Giorgi Targamadze and Levan Ramishvili, the leaders of an NGO called the Liberty Institute. However, by 2003 the Liberty Institute and a handful of other politically active NGOs were co-operating closely with Mikheil Saakashvili's National Movement and it is therefore hard to distinguish their leaders from opposition party activists.

Since the Rose Revolution, many of the most prominent NGO activists in Georgia (including Bokeria and Targamadze) have entered active politics with the (now ruling) United National Movement. As a result a number of commentators have lamented the depletion of the NGO sector and its reduced influence on the body politic (Nations in Transit 2009). However, it would be a mistake to interpret the loss of a few individuals from the NGO sector as a weakening of civil society because if "civil society" can be undermined by the absence of a small number of key people, it is not civil society as we understand it. The year-on-year vicissitudes in the capacity of the NGO sector in Georgia and its Caucasian neighbors provides further evidence that the NGO movement does not constitute civil society as it does not represent an ensemble of relatively well-institutionalized societal networks that aggregate and articulate the interests of citizens. The problem with the NGO sector in Georgia – as well as in Armenia and Azerbaijan – is that it represents no more than a narrow stratum of political activists that belong more to political society than to civil society or, alternatively, providers of (mainly foreign-funded) humanitarian support.

Conservative Civil Society and the Church

Probably the only well-institutionalized civil society actors in the region are the established churches of Armenia and Georgia. Of these, it is questionable whether the Armenian Apostolic Church can be said to constitute a civil society because of its close co-operation with the authorities. In recent elections the Armenian clergy were reported to have actively supported President Serzh Sarkisian and the ruling Republican Party.¹ In Georgia, the Orthodox Church is more independent and has exerted strong leverage on both Eduard Shevardnadze's government and subsequently Mikheil Saakashvili's administration. During the Shevardnadze period

it was pressure from the Orthodox Church that led, in March 2001, to a decision by Parliament to amend the Constitution in order to grant the Orthodox church and its clergy a privileged position in Georgian society. Despite the widely suspected hostility of some members of the United National Movement towards the Georgian patriarchy, the new government has not reversed the 2001 Concordat and the Church remains the most trusted institution in Georgia according to virtually all national opinion surveys.

In October 2009 after a video posted on YouTube mocking the Georgian Patriarch had appeared on the Facebook page of Tea Tutberidze, one of the leaders of the pro-government Liberty Institute, the Church accused a number of pro-government media channels of attacking the Church as the video sparked protests from both the Church itself and from the opposition. As a result, President Saakashvili's office was forced to step in with a statement condemning any attacks on the Church, claiming that they "wittingly or unwittingly" served the purpose of splitting society. While it is possible that some individuals close to the authorities are frustrated with the Patriarch's role in society, the authorities remain loathe to attack the Church, given the latter's strong institutional backing within both state and society.

However, the Georgian Orthodox Church seeks to propagate a vision of Georgia that is strongly opposed to that of many of the liberal-minded and western-funded NGOs. Deeply conservative and vehemently opposed both to non-Orthodox religions and to alternative lifestyles, it is believed that the Georgian Orthodox Church left the World Council of Churches in 1997 because of the endorsement by some churches of women priests, the revision of Christian views on homosexuality, as well as use of inclusive language for the Bible.² Amid rumors that a gay rally was to be held in Tbilisi in July 2007, resistance by the Church ensured that no such rally would take place and the Georgian patriarch, Ilya II, publicly opposed such a rally. A Church-sponsored organization called the Orthodox Parents Union regularly campaigns against the Vatican and in May 2009 disrupted a meeting held by the German-based Heinrich-Boell Foundation to commemorate the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia.³ While the views of such

1 Manvel Sargsyan, "The problems of Constitutional state building and Armenian Apostolic church", Religions in Armenia, <http://www.religions.am/eng/index.php/home/79-the-problems-of-constitutional-state-building-and-armenian-apostolic-church.html>, 8 January 2010.

2 Orthodox Christian Information Centre, "Georgian Orthodox Church to leave WCC and CEC", originally posted by Ecumenical News International, ENI News Service (26 May 1997) at http://www.orthodoxinfo.com/ecumenism/georgia_wcc.aspx, 8 January 2010.

3 "IDAHO in Tbilisi: Orthodox group disrupts homophobia related discussion insulting participants" (2 June 2009) at <http://idahomophobia.org/wp/?p=1382&lang=en>, 8 January 2010.

organizations are shared by a large majority of the Georgian population they do not reflect the liberal western conception of civil society.

Conclusion

Despite appearances to the contrary, civil society in the Caucasus region remains weak and fragmented. While it is true that mass protests directed against the incumbent authorities have been observed on a number of occasions, demonstrations that are not supported by well-organized and institutionalized civil society networks and organizations are ephemeral phenomena that cannot be sustained in the long term. They represent spontaneous and dis-

organized social movements, led by more or less charismatic leaders, rather than civil society as understood in terms of social capital. Moreover, they will only succeed when the incumbent regime is fatally divided. The NGO sector too has proven to be an ephemeral phenomenon; while a multitude of NGOs exist, few are active beyond the provision of basic goods and services. The few that are active are recruited from a narrow stratum of the urban intelligentsia and can be readily incorporated within the political elite. NGOs may have the capacity to recruit new political leaders but they do not, at present, form the basis for civil society.

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