

Social Capital in Georgia

By Leslie Hough, Tbilisi, Georgia

Abstract

Georgia has been characterized as a country with high “bonding” social capital, but low “bridging” social capital. This pattern of in-group solidarity and out-group mistrust is thought to contribute to the lack of civic engagement in Georgia as evidenced by extremely low rates of group membership and participation in public meetings. However, results from a new survey on social capital and civic engagement show that despite the Georgian public’s low levels of formal participation in the civil society sector, widespread norms of openness and altruism underlie vibrant forms of bridging social capital that already exist in Georgia. These findings suggest that the key challenge to increasing civic engagement among Georgian citizens is the institutionalization of currently informal forms of social capital and the alignment of the civil society sector with the population’s existing priorities and habits.

The Challenge of Formalizing the Informal

Like many of the successor states of the Soviet Union, Georgia has been characterized as a country with high “bonding” social capital, but low “bridging” social capital. That is, while bonds are thick and cooperation is high within the boundaries of small tightly-knit family and friend groups, levels of trust and collaboration across these groups among members of the broader society are low. This pattern of in-group solidarity and out-group mistrust is thought to contribute to the lack of civic engagement in Georgia as evidenced by extremely low rates of group membership and participation in public meetings. The comprehensive Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) 2011 Social Capital Report (<http://www.crrc.ge/research/projects/?id=2>) identifies the four key obstacles to increasing bridging social capital in Georgia as 1) apathy toward collaboration, 2) distrust of social entrepreneurs, 3) a challenging socio-economic environment, and 4) reluctance to institutionalize cooperative efforts.

However, results from a follow-up survey on social capital and civic engagement, carried out by the CRRC in cooperation with the Policy, Advocacy and Civil Society Development Project in Georgia (G-PAC), call the first two of these obstacles into question, while shedding further light on the problems posed by the latter two. For one, the new survey data show that despite the Georgian public’s low levels of formal participation in the civil society sector, widespread norms of openness and altruism indicate the existence of active, albeit informal, bridging social capital and civic engagement in Georgia. Secondly, the survey finds a high level of respect for social entrepreneurs, openness to building new relationships and willingness to participate in civil society campaigns. All of this suggests that Georgia’s low levels of civic engagement are not in fact caused by a deficit of social capital.

Instead, in concert with the findings of the CRRC social capital research, the chief obstacles to formal civic

engagement in Georgia seem to be twofold. For one, during challenging economic times over-reliance on the family as a form of informal insurance is a strategy that substitutes for engagement with NGOs. Secondly, and most crucially, a lack of institutionalization of informal engagement means that pro-social behaviors are often one-off rather than regular events. These new findings suggest that rather than attributing the problem of low civic engagement to a deficit of bridging social capital in Georgia, scholars and practitioners alike would be better served trying to understand how informal forms of bridging social capital that already exist in Georgian society can be formalized to create enduring institutions.

The Contradiction: Formal versus Informal Measures of Social Capital

Across multiple survey instruments from the CRRC’s Caucasus Barometer to the World Values Survey, the Georgian population scores low among even its post-communist peers for rates of formal civic engagement. According to the 2007 Caucasus Barometer survey, only 0.7% of Georgians had attended a meeting of any sort of club or civic organization in the six months prior to the survey compared to 1.7% of Azerbaijanis and 2.4% of Armenians. Meanwhile, data from the World Values Survey in 2008 reveal that rates of membership in charitable organizations, while lower in post-communist than Western countries, are exceptionally low in Georgia. While 20.9% of people in the UK and 15.2% in the US consider themselves active members of a charitable organization, and a lower 2.5% of people in Moldova, 1.9% in Ukraine and 1.1% in the Russian Federation say the same, only 0.1% of Georgians report active membership in such organizations.

The civic engagement survey results corroborate these low levels of civic engagement among the Georgian population. The data show that less than 5% of the Georgian population have attended a meeting organized

by an NGO, participated in an NGO training, or visited the office of an NGO over the last two years. Moreover, while a surprisingly low 1.7% of the population report that they belong to a political party, an even smaller 1.0% of the population, report membership in an officially recognized NGO or professional union, and only 0.77% say that they belong to a cultural or sports union.

However, despite these low levels of formal civic engagement, informal helping behaviors across groups, which are an alternative if not more direct indicator of active bridging social capital in the society, are surprisingly widespread. The survey data show that in the last six months, 65% of the population gave money to a beggar, 61% helped a friend or neighbor with household chores, 50% helped a stranger on the side of a road, 28% made a contribution to charity, 26% helped clean a public space, 25% know someone who gave blood and 20% helped someone resolve a dispute. Moreover, positive attitudes toward altruism and feelings of being reliable and reciprocally able to rely upon others outside of the immediate family are also common. Far more Georgians (40%) do not share the cynical *quid pro quo* view of altruism than those (22%) who do believe that people only help others because they expect a favor in return. A majority (55%) of the population report that they feel helpful to many people outside of their family. Reciprocally, most people (46%) feel that generally, they have plenty of people to rely on when they have problems compared with few (13%) who do not. More specifically, the vast majority of respondents (69%) claim that if they were ill, there are people outside of their immediate household who would look after them without expecting any compensation. These findings of informal altruism across society call into question the conclusion that Georgia suffers from low levels of bridging social capital.

Failed Explanations for Low Social Capital

One of the often cited reasons for low levels of social capital and civic engagement in Georgia and other post-Soviet countries is the enduring political culture of apathy, mistrust, pessimism and cynicism toward political participation and civic activism bred by the Soviet system. Building on the work of Marc Howard, a scholar of post-communist civil society, the CRRC Social Capital Report highlights apathy and mistrust as two of the key reasons for Georgia's lack of social capital. However, after tailoring the 2011 civic engagement survey to pick up on particularly Georgian iterations of this post-communist political culture, an onslaught of apathy, cynicism and suspicion did not appear in the data.

For one, the results of the civic engagement survey show that despite their Soviet legacy, Georgians have

a great deal of respect for, and little suspicion of, social entrepreneurs who organize for the benefit of the community. The questionnaire tested the Georgian public's attitude toward three different examples of social entrepreneurs and in all cases responses to those people was far more positive than negative. When asked about neighbors who serve as social entrepreneurs by solving local problems, 81% of Georgians responded that they view such neighbors positively, 17% neutrally and only 1% negatively. Meanwhile, 77% agreed that they respect social entrepreneurs who collect money to fix neighborhood problems while only 3% stated that they are suspicious of them. Moreover, despite the low level of trust for NGOs as institutions, when asked what type of person is most likely to be active in NGOs, far more people viewed these activists as someone "who is trying to improve the situation in the country" (17%) and "who wants to help people like me" (12%) than as embodiments of negative stereotypes such "grant-eaters" (6.3%), "busybodies" (2%), "modern day Komsomol members" (0.8%) or "troublemakers" (0.6%). Again, this very convincingly defeats the notion that Georgians have negative attitudes toward social entrepreneurs. In fact, they very much respect them.

Secondly, the survey results showed that high levels of bonding social capital among close-knit family and friend groups do not come at the expense of bridging social capital across groups. The high level of trust and altruistic behavior within bonded friend groups should logically lead to a very high barrier to entry and make social groups static and fixed rather than changing membership fluidly. People in these friend groups, who have already earned the trust of the other members and have taken on the high level obligations and received the benefits of these close friendships, should show low levels of openness to meeting new people or making new friends. Since in the West meeting new people and making new friends often motivates participation in civil society organizations, a lack of desire to make new friends in a place with high bonding social capital could depress participation in NGOs. However, the civic engagement survey found the opposite to be the case in Georgia.

When asked if they have close friends an overwhelming 92% of respondents said yes as predicted. Yet, despite expectations that Georgians would not want to acquire additional friends, a very surprising 63% of the survey respondents stated that they were open to making new friends, 53% of them completely so, while only 17% said that they are not interested in making new friends, only 10% of them completely so. Moreover, 66% of the respondents stated that they enjoy meeting new people, 45% of them agreeing completely, while only 9% did

not enjoy meeting new people. Thus, even though bonds are high among close friend groups, these groups are not necessarily sealed off or static in a way that would limit bridging social capital.

Finally, and most directly, the civic engagement survey tested the self-reported willingness of respondents to participate in NGO campaigns that addressed issues of unemployment, healthcare, social aid and rising food prices. A series of four questions each presented an NGO taking up one of these salient issues and then asked respondents if they would participate in the following activities organized by the NGO: 1) signing a petition, 2) attending a rally, 3) going door-to-door informing neighbors about this issue, 4) donating money to help resolve this issue, and 5) discussing this campaign with family and friends. Given the context of low levels of engagement with the formal NGO sector, the responses were surprisingly high. Across the four questions, 60–66% of the respondents said that they would sign a petition, 52–57% would discuss the campaign with family and friends, 18–20% would attend a rally, 12–14% would go door-to-door informing neighbors about this issue and 16–21% would donate money to the campaign. This high level of willingness to participate in NGO campaigns contradicts the idea that apathy hinders civic participation.

While skeptics might argue that self-reports of behavior on surveys are not credible measures of what actions people would actually take in the real world, these numbers gain credibility in a comparative context. The fact that low-cost actions such as signing a petition and discussing the campaign with friends and family have such higher response rates than higher-cost actions such as donating money or going door-to-door indicates that respondents were incorporating real world factors like effort, time and money into their responses. Moreover, the characteristics of the people responding positively to the different options also correspond well with reality. In all four cases, men were more likely than women to say that they would attend a rally and younger people were more likely to say that they would go door-to-door.

One possible reason for the contrast between currently low levels of participation and significantly higher levels of willingness to participate, as suggested by the survey data, is a mismatch between the issues that the Georgian NGOs choose to address and the issues that are currently most important to the Georgian citizens. Respondents to the civic engagement survey stated that economic issues such as poverty, unemployment and social assistance, like the ones used in the survey questions, are the most important problems facing Georgia and issues that they think NGOs should address more.

In contrast, they perceive NGOs as most often addressing the issue of elections. Data from the Association of Young Economists of Georgia's NGO Advocacy Capacity Report (<http://www.ewmi-gpac.org/en/news/1-news/157-advocacy-capacity-assessment-of-georgian-ngos>) confirm the mismatch between the issues that the majority of citizens want NGOs to address and the issues that they are currently addressing. This may indicate that citizens would be much more likely to engage with the civil society sector if NGOs addressed issues more immediately salient to their concerns.

Explanations that Endure

The CRRC Social Capital report posits that another obstacle to civic engagement is the challenging economic environment. The follow-up civic engagement survey data both corroborates this and helps explain the link between hard economic times and over-dependence on family that may crowd out civic engagement. Among the nationally representative survey population, household incomes skew very low with 61% of the households collectively earning less than 400 Georgian Lari (around \$240 USD) per month. Personal income is significantly lower with 33% of respondents reporting no personal income and an additional 43% earning under 250 GEL (about 150 USD) in the past month. The significantly higher levels of household than personal income suggest that individuals are pooling resources with family members even just to scrape by. Arguably, people need to prioritize their own economic survival and that of their extended family before they can start devoting time, energy and money to the public good.

Under these difficult economic conditions, the close-knit family relationships, observed as bonding social capital, serve as a form of informal insurance. The civic engagement survey finds that while individuals are not devoting large amounts of time to their families, most Georgians hold a strong belief that family comes first and rely heavily on other family members to support them in times of trouble. Across three questions testing who Georgians turn to in times of difficulty, the top answer was always family. Very few of those who reported owning formal insurance stated that they would use it in an emergency. Contrasting the vast majority who would turn to their family in a time of crisis (93%) with the small minority who would consider employing the aid of an NGO on their behalf (11%), an argument can be made that family bonds hinder engagement with the formal NGO sector. Respondents who stated that they would not be interested in joining a civil society organization were also asked the reason why they would not join. The largest proportion of respondents (37%) said that they did not participate in civil society organiza-

tions because they preferred to take care of their own family's affairs.

The second and more readily addressable obstacle to increasing civic engagement in Georgia is the lack of institutionalization of the informal bonding social capital that already exists in the society. While groups of Georgian neighbors and acquaintances may come together to solve a collective problem or initiate a pick-up football game, they do not often institutionalize these groups so that they may continue to operate after the immediate problem is resolved or the game has ended. This lack of institutionalization is at the heart of the divide between the formal civil society sector and the informal bridging social capital seen in the survey data. The informal civic engagement of problem-solving neighbors or sports-playing friends remains a spontaneous, one-off occurrence rather than an institution that creates a formal repetition of those practices.

This disconnect between formal and informal civic engagement has a direct parallel with informal religiosity and formal engagement with the Georgian Orthodox Church. Measuring both religious attitudes and practices, the survey results show most Georgians embracing the informal side of religion without feeling the need to engage formally with the church. 82% of Georgians say that religion is important to their daily life, 74% pray regularly at home, 53% of Georgians pray regularly in a church and 30% even claim to regularly donate money to a church. However, when asked how often they attend formal religious services 57% go only on special holidays, less often than that or never attend formal services at all. Thus, we see a pattern in which altruistic and religious sentiment both run high in Georgian society, Georgians value these sentiments and often act on them spontaneously. However, these spontaneous behaviors are seldom carried out through the formal institutions of the NGO sector or the Orthodox Church.

One positive recent development toward institutionalizing altruism in Georgia is the development of the

charity SMS donation scheme through which mobile phone users are able to SMS contributions to charities through their mobile phones. The 2008 World Values Survey recorded 6.7% of Georgians having made a contribution to charity. Unfortunately, no data on charitable contributions is available in the years following. However, the survey data gathered after the introduction of the charity SMS scheme shows a huge increase to 28% of Georgians reporting that they contributed to charity over the last six months. While, the survey did not disaggregate between SMS and other types of donations to charity, it is believed that the technology has become very popular and likely facilitated many of the current contributions. While the charity SMS technology does not help organize Georgians into formal groups, it does help pool collective resources for formal groups and illustrates one creative way that current practices of social capital can be formalized to facilitate increased civic engagement.

In sum, while the surface level statistics on formal civic engagement in Georgia paint a gloomy picture of bridging social capital among the Georgian population, those that take a deeper look into the context of Georgian society provide reasons for optimism about the cross-cutting links and widespread altruism that represent an alternative measure of social capital. Moreover, high levels of respect for social entrepreneurs, openness to new people and willingness to participate in NGO campaigns that address salient issues further support the raw materials for a flourishing civil society in Georgia. While the challenge of family interdependence in the currently difficult economic environment may take time for the society to work out on its own, there is room for creativity and innovation in addressing the other key challenge of institutionalizing existing informal practices of civic engagement.

About the Author

Leslie Hough is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Political Science at Yale University. She worked with CRRC and G-PAC to design the 2011 civic engagement survey and wrote the G-PAC Civic Engagement Report (<http://www.ewmi-gpac.org/en/news/1-news/183-2011-12-05-08-20-05>) while on an IREX US Embassy Policy Specialist Fellowship in Georgia in May–June 2011.