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# The Caucasus Conflicts: Frozen and Shelved?

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# Bridging Gaps in Civilian Peacebuilding in the Nagorny Karabakh Context

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## Introduction

When it comes to analysis of the Nagorny Karabakh (NK) conflict and related peace efforts, experts and analysts run the risk of repeating themselves. Karabakh watchers, experts and policy makers alike have recycled the same insights and conflict settlement approaches over the past 20 years with limited impact. Any attempt to analyse the intricacies of the NK conflict is unlikely to generate new insights or identify new channels for effective engagement. Almost every analysis of the conflict leads practitioners and analysts of the region to the conclusion that this is a protracted conflict largely due to geopolitical interests of mediating powers and lack of will of the conflicting parties. 20 years into official negotiations, the conflict is still classified as frozen and unresolved. Despite the efforts of the international mediators, there is very little change in the geopolitical realities and the parties' motivation to allow for any change in the current status quo. On the contrary, in the aftermath of the Ukraine conflict, the geopolitical game is back in town, hindering any political settlement of the conflict any time soon.

Calling the NK conflict a frozen one, however, is a fallacy. Judging from the increasingly frequent ceasefire violations and intense escalations along the Line of Contact (LoC) and the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, the conflict is far from being frozen – it is simmering to a rather alarming degree[2]. If anything, it is the official Track 1 negotiation process that is protracted and frozen.

To avoid yet another geopolitical analysis of the NK conflict and the Track 1 official peace process, the following article looks instead at the challenges of the Track 2 peacebuilding initiatives[3]. In a context of a protracted peace process, what is the use and the impact of Track 2 initiatives if they have no tangible influence on the official peace process and remain detached from it? A more specific dilemma then is how much sense does it make to advocate for the inclusion of the civil society into the official peace process given the protracted nature of the official negotiation process, the geopolitical restrictions and the conflict parties' unwillingness to change the status quo.

After a brief backgrounder on the NK conflict, the article will look at the nature and challenges of the Track 2 peacebuilding initiatives in the NK context. The author argues that even in the face of a protracted peace process and despite the weaknesses of the peacebuilding initiatives, it is still important to promote civilian peacebuilding initiatives, under certain conditions: they should be inclusive in a meaningful and not in a normative way; all conflict parties should be, to the degree possible, equally present and equally active in all or most of the initiatives; and most importantly, these initiatives should be designed according to the needs and demands of the current conflict phase to be able to achieve maximum possible effectiveness and impact[4].

## Conflict History

The conflict over NK dates back to 1988 when the predominantly Armenian population of then Autonomous Republic of Nagorny Karabakh with-

1 Anna Hess has been working on conflict settlement and inclusivity issues in peace processes with a regional focus on South Caucasus and the wider OSCE area. Through applied research and trainings, Anna Hess has been focusing her activities on Track 1.5 dialogue processes related to the Nagorny Karabakh conflict settlement, on women`s involvement in negotiations and multitrack peace mediation in South Asia, and Track Two academic initiatives in North Korea, among others.

2 Agayev, Zulfugar. "Azerbaijan Says It's Prepared to Take Back Karabakh by Force." Bloomberg Business. August 5, 2015. http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-08-06/azerbaijan-vows-to-take-back-karabakh-from-armenia-by-force.

3 To avoid terminological confusion, "civil society peacebuilding" and "Track 2 initiatives" are used interchangeably, while by "mediation" we mean official Track 1 negotiations.

4 According to findings of the comparative study of the CCDP on Civil Society and Peacebuilding by Thania Paffenholz, civilian peacebuilding initiatives are most effective if they are chosen according to the demands and the needs of the particular conflict phase, based on the so-called functional approach.

in Soviet Azerbaijan launched its independence movement and demanded unification with Soviet Armenia. Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost policies allowed for more freedom for national aspirations to gain momentum and shape a nationwide independence movement in Armenia and Karabakh as well as all over the Soviet Union[5].

What started as a peaceful political upheaval, turned into inter-ethnic violence and eventually a fully-fledged war between the newly independent Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1992 following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Russian-brokered ceasefire was signed in 1994 in Bishkek, Kirgizstan[6]. Armenia came out of the war with a military victory, taking control over NK and the Lachin corridor connecting it to mainland Armenia. To guarantee strategic depth and create a security buffer zone, it also occupied seven Azeri districts (15% of Azeri territory) surrounding Karabakh[7]. The war resulted in an estimated total of 25,000 to 30,000 casualties on both sides, 750,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Azerbaijan both from Karabakh and the occupied districts, and around 360,000 Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan[8]. Today, the internationally unrecognised Republic of Nagorny Karabakh is a de facto independent state with a democratically elected government and population of 140,000.

The current situation in NK rests on conventional military deterrence and self-regulation by the parties. Since 1994, a self-controlled ceasefire has been in place, but sniper shootings have been taking place along the LoC between NK and Azerbaijan, causing both military and civilian casualties[9]. Since early 2014, the regular ceasefire violations along the LoC and along the Armenian-Azeri border have intensified, leading to an escalation in August 2014—the worst since 1994[10]. As a result of the increased shootings and incursions both along the LoC but also the Armenian Azerbaijani border, both sides had considerable human losses, raising the possibility for a new outbreak of war.

The NK conflict has a multidimensional nature including political, socio-economic and security related issues ranging from territorial disputes to ethnic hostility[11]. Legally, it is a clash between the law of territorial integrity for Azerbaijan and the right to self-determination for NK. Four main issues have been on the negotiating table for the past 18 years: the political status of NK and the Lachin corridor; the withdrawal of the Armenian forces from the occupied Azeri territories; security guarantees for Karabakh and Armenia in case of the return of the occupied territories; and the return and resettlement of the Azeri IDPs. These four issues are at the core of the Madrid principles, which is the main framework for the peace process led by the OSCE Minsk Group[12].

For the past 20 years, international efforts to mediate in the NK conflict have been led by the OSCE Minsk Group, comprised of three co-chairs from Russia, USA and France. The peace process has been monopolised by Armenian and Azerbaijani political elites, excluding both the de facto authorities of NK and respective civil societies. Despite the 20 years of negotiations, the two sides have been boosting their military capabilities, which has resulted in an asymmetric arms race[13] endangering regional security. They have also been continuously engaged in psychological warfare, consolidating mutually exclusive narratives of their national identities and dehumanising each other as historical enemies.

### Bridging Gaps
Proponents of multitrack and inclusive peace processes, including the author of this article, argue that Track 2 peacebuilding initiatives

5    For more in-depth analysis of this factor, see: Cheterian, Vicken. *War and Peace in the Caucasus: Russia's Troubled Frontier.* London: Hurst & Co., 2008.

6    Hess, Anna. "Berg-Karabach: Hindernisse Für Eine Verhandlungslösung." *CSS Analysen Zur Sicherheitspolitik, no.* 131 (2013).

7    Op. cit.

8    See: "United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees." United Nations Armenia. http://www.un.am/en/agency/UNHCR.

9    Hess, Berg-Karabach.

10   De Waal, Thomas. "Karabakh's Guns of August." Carnegie Moscow Center. August 5, 2014. http://carnegie.ru/eurasiaoutlook/?fa=56322

11   Hess, Berg-Karabach.

12   See: Geukjian, Ohannes. *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in the South Caucasus: Nagorno-Karabakh and the Legacy of Soviet Nationalities Policy.* London: Ashgate, 2012.

13   In 2012 Armenia`s defence budget reached around USD 400 million, up from around USD 180 million in 2006. Azerbaijan has increased its defense budget from USD 175 million in 2004 to USD 3.74 billion in 2012, which is twice as large as the entire Armenian state budget. See J*ane`s Intelligence Review,* November 2012, 28.

have no tangible effect if they are by and large detached from official peace processes. In the absence of any channels of influence between governments and civil societies in Armenia and Azerbaijan, the civilian peacebuiling efforts remain in a vacuum, creating loose and informal networks of professionals and boosting personal transformation at best[14].

Looking back on 20 years of civilian peacebuilding initiatives in the NK context, two main gaps can be identified:

1. Diverse peacebuilding efforts have not brought much of a change in the Track 1 peace process and,

2. have not resulted in a tangible change of societal attitudes towards conflict settlement. The Track 1 peace process remains largely exclusive and opaque, while bellicose rhetoric has led to a hardening of positions and deepening of the constructed enemy image among respective populations.

The first gap, the lack of influence on the official peace process, can be explained by the internal set-up of socio-political life in Armenia and Azerbaijan. In both countries, to varying degrees, governments have the monopoly not only on economy and politics, but also on war and peace. This automatically excludes civil societies from any meaningful engagement in bringing policy changes in any of the above-mentioned realms.

The second gap, the failure of the peacebuilding initiatives to bring in change in societal attitudes towards the conflict settlement, is mostly, but not only, due to the fact that the peacebuilding community consists of a small group of professionals, leaving the larger population rather uninformed about their activities. As a result, the small and closed peacebuilding community is most likely stigmatised by the rest of the society as "traitors" since they are seen as working with the "enemy."

Despite the detachment from their larger constituencies and their governments, there is a group of prominent peacebuilders that admirably keep their efforts going. A question, however, worth reflecting on is whether there is a danger that this environment would eventually lead to peacebuilding fatigue. To avoid a disgruntled, even if well-intentioned civil society sector in the long run, the international community should gear its support for peacebuilding efforts in the NK context towards carefully selected initiatives fulfilling clear-cut conditions.

How much space is there then for international actors to help bridge the above-mentioned gaps? In the first case (detachment from Track 1 peace talks), there is very little the international actors can do to exercise any influence, as the issue is of a very internal nature. It is the social contract between a particular society and its own government, and remains solely in the hands of the local actors. In the second aspect however (detachment from the larger population), there are some measures the international community can undertake to minimise the level of detachment of Track 2 peacebuilders from their own larger constituencies and guarantee efficient continuity of select peacebuilding activities.

According to findings of the comparative study of the Centre on Conflict, Development & Peacebuilding (CCDP) on Civil Society and Peacebuilding[15], civilian peacebuilding initiatives are most effective if they are chosen according to the demands and the needs of the particular conflict phase, based on the so-called functional approach[16]. In the current protracted phase of official talks in the NK context, focusing predominantly on Track 2 and 1.5 dialogue initiatives[17], which in essence have become the replica of the official process, very little change can be anticipated, if at all.

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14  For more detailed analysis of civilian peacebuilding initiatives, see: "Advancing the Prospects for Peace: 20 Years of Civil Peacebuilding in the Context of the Nagorny Karabakh Conflict." International Alert. August, 2013. http://www.international-alert.org/resources/publications/advancing-prospects-peace-en.

15  Paffenholz, Thania. "Civil Society and Peacebuilding: CCDP Working Paper 4." Center on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP). 2009.

16  Op. cit.

17  The focus on dialogue activities here is mainly due to the author`s own experience and observations. For a more detailed and comprehensive overview of the peacebuilding initiatives, please see: International Alert, Advancing the Prospects for Peace.

Given the contextual limitations, it is well worth supporting efforts that are targeted at preparing the peacebuilding community for an eventual context change. In this particular case, context change entails either military or political settlement of the situation. In case of the military option, according to Paffenholz, the most important function of the civil society during the phase of war or an armed conflict is to "monitor human rights, protection of civilians," essentially narrowing the space for the civil society to be effective. This however would be a rather counterintuitive effort and no international actor would be interested in supporting peacebuilding initiatives by essentially preparing the civil society for effective work during war.

Thus the only reasonable way forward is to prepare the civil societies in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the de-facto Republic of NK for an eventual context change that would possibly lead to the conflict parties to return back to inclusive and structured negotiations. This preparation would entail providing the civil society actors with the necessary knowledge of peace processes and peace agreement topics so that they are ready and able to impact the negotiation process and advocate for their voices to be heard and included in the official talks. With the ability to influence the agenda for the political settlement of the conflict, it should also be able to have the buy-in of a larger population and act as a link between respective governments and their societies at large.

In preparation of civil societies for an eventual opening of the peace negotiations, a number of conditions should be in place to guarantee a more conducive environment for the peacebuilding initiatives to be as effective as possible. Thus, the international peacebuilding community should make sure to:

**Enlarge the peacebuilder pool** beyond the urban, capital based peacebuilding elites and include those groups of the population most affected by the conflict. They might not be speaking the international peacebuilding language and lack certain trainings to be equally engaged, but they are the ones who have been bearing the brunt of the conflict and will most likely be the ones who would be bearing partial responsibility for the implementation of any potential agreement.

Guarantee **sustainability** of the initiatives, making sure they are not donor driven but based on the needs of the stakeholders. In many cases, there is a donor burnout on the account of not achieving the desirable results in a short period of time, which might lead to short-term engagements.

Strengthen **local ownership** of peacebuilding initiatives led by local organisations and gradually minimise the presence of the main international peacebuilding NGOs. After 20 years of civilian peacebuilding, local NGOs are still marginal in the field, with most projects still initiated by the international peacebuilding community[18].

Find **creative ways** to guarantee equal participation from all sides. In the face of recent crackdowns on the Azerbaijani civil society, it has become rather challenging to engage Azeri peacebuilders in ongoing or new initiatives. Faced with this challenge, most international actors are willing to work with anyone they can recruit or with everyone who is ready to take the risk to work with the Armenian side, which limits the choice for partners tremendously. The international community should consider working with the Azerbaijani civil society in exile, however this has its limitations as well, since over time they will be even more detached from their government and the respective society. However, if peacebuilding initiatives continue operating with only one conflict party, it is essentially preparing Armenia for peace, while Azerbaijan by default is preparing its population for war and the Karabakhi civil society remains largely excluded.

**Ways Ahead**
In the logic of protracted conflicts, tangible contextual changes open up windows of opportunity for new conflict dynamics and related peace processes. In the current phase of protracted peace process and despite all the contextual limitations for effective civilian peacebuilding, there is still a need to support carefully selected and targeted peacebuilding initiatives in the NK context. In order to guarantee optimal effectiveness, however, these

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18   The author has made this observation based on her experiences, but it is also backed by: International Alert, Advancing the Prospects for Peace.

initiatives must have a clearly defined goal of enabling the civil societies and the larger societies to influence the peace process, if ever there is a shift in internal and external political realities around the NK conflict that would allow for opening up the negotiation process.

With a view for an eventual change in the internal and external context, selective efforts need to be supported that would allow the civil societies and the societies at large to influence the agenda of a more open and inclusive peace process. To guarantee sustainability of any peace deal, it is crucial to have well-prepared civil societies, knowledgeable enough to influence the peace process, and not be brought in only at a post-agreement phase to get the buy-in of the society. It is equally important to prepare the civil societies in Armenia, Azerbaijan and the de-facto Republic of Nagorny Karabakh on a balanced and equal level of engagement. Currently there is a big asymmetry in terms of the nature of civil societies in Armenia and Azerbaijan, the latter being either arrested or exiled at the moment of writing this article[19]. Lopsided initiatives are at best counterproductive and at worst following an agenda that is not serving a common prospect of peace and security in the region.

Therefore, it is recommendable that the international peacebuilding community consciously promotes carefully chosen initiatives in line with the needs of the current conflict phase, in a sustainable manner and with equal commitment from all affected parties. This is by no means an easy task, given the internal political restrictions in Azerbaijan. With the Azeri civil society either being jailed or exiled, can the international community reach out to them outside Azerbaijan? How can their activities then translate into tangible impact for their population if they remain physically outside of the country? As insurmountable as this dilemma seems, it cannot be swept under the carpet for the sake of expedient project implementation.

It is worth mentioning however that even the most effective peacebuilding initiatives implemented under the above-mentioned conditions would have a very limited impact on the overall peace and security, since as Paffenholz says, "the role of the civil society is not so much decisive in building peace, but rather supportive. The central impetus for peacebuilding comes mainly from political actors, and above all, the conflict parties themselves.[20]"

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19  "Guilty of Defending Rights: Azerbaijan`s Human Rights Defenders and Activists Behind the Bars", Amnesty International Publications, 2015, https://www.amnesty.nl/sites/default/files/public/guilty_of_defending_rights_-_az.pdf

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20  Paffenholz, Thania, op. cit.