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CIVIL SOCIETY

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Armenian Civil Society: It is Not All about NGOs

By Yevgenya Jenny Paturyan, Yerevan

Abstract

For the past two decades, Armenian civil society was largely equated with the NGO sector. International development organizations, public officials, scholars and the few informed among the general public saw NGOs as the core element of Armenian civil society. The NGO sector is by now fairly developed and institutionalised, but it is detached from the broader Armenian society, remaining a post-communist civil society in that sense. However, recently a new actor has entered the arena of civil society and made its presence very visible. The so-called “civic initiatives” are on the rise since around 2007, and have already registered a number of successes in impacting government decisions, despite the small numbers of people involved. Armenian civil society is no more simply about NGOs, though NGOs unquestionably remain a very important component of civil society.

Introduction

When discussing contemporary Armenian civil society, it is important to distinguish between two interconnected yet very distinct types of actors: the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the civic activists. Civic activism in Armenia is a relatively new phenomenon; it is distinct from the “NGO approach” in a number of ways. Civic activist groups maintain minimal levels of formal organisation and explicitly reject foreign funding. Largely confined to Yerevan, consisting mostly of young educated people, the so-called “civic initiatives” have registered a number of successes since 2009 despite low numbers of participants. Civic activism seems to be the arena where civil society is able to overcome the post-communist syndrome of disengagement, but it remains to be seen if civic activism will gain momentum and engage more people.

This article discusses these two dimensions of Armenian civil society: the NGO sector and civic activism, describing the current situation and the main strengths and weaknesses of both. It first looks at the NGO sector in Armenia today, highlighting some of its achievements and main challenges. After that, civic activism, as the new component of the Armenian civil society, is described, focusing on how it is different from the NGO sector. In the conclusion some observations are offered as to how these two elements of Armenian civil society can (and sometimes do) complement each other.

Armenian NGO Sector

Since independence, Armenia has witnessed rapid growth of its NGO sector, but the exact numbers of truly functioning organisations have remained elusive. As of June 2014, there were 3,981 officially registered NGOs. The most recent research estimates that most of these exist on paper only, with some 500 to 800 NGOs actually operating in the country.¹ Focusing on those

NGOs that do operate, it is clear that the Armenian NGO sector has by now achieved a fairly good level of institutionalization. Many organisations have overcome the “one-person show” problem when their founding leaders dominate. Roughly two-thirds of actively functioning organisations have undergone leadership changes and, interestingly enough, are doing slightly better than those run by their old founding presidents in at least one aspect: they tend to attract more grants per year (Paturyan and Gevorgyan 2014). Most surveyed NGOs exhibit fairly well-developed organisational structures: they have staff, volunteers and basic decision-making bodies in place, as Table 1 on p. 4 and Table 2 on p. 5 demonstrate.

However, the Armenian NGO sector faces the typical problems of post-communist development.² These problems can be divided into two broad categories. The first category is about individual attitudes and behaviour of citizens: disdain towards volunteering, distrust towards associations, and low membership in associations. These are mostly a legacy of communism (Howard 2003), under which people were forced to join organisations and “volunteer” on a regular basis. The second category of problems faced by NGOs in post-communist countries has to do with the rapid donor-driven development of the NGOs after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The manifold challenges of regime transitions, often accompanied with an economic collapse, created demand for social action, while generous international donor support boosted supply. This process led to a mushrooming of NGOs heavily dependent on external donors. While this influx of funds helped to establish a vibrant NGO sector, it created a set of constraints that NGOs currently struggle with. If international develop-

[of_Transition_Manuscript_November_2014-fin.pdf](#)>

2 This article discusses “internal” problems of civil society, rather than the “external” problems, such as the poor socio-economic conditions of the population, corruption, lack of political avenues of representation and so on.

1 The report can be found online here <http://tcpa.aua.am/files/2012/07/Armenian_Civil_Society_after_Twenty_Years

mental aid is withdrawn, most NGOs have only questionable organisational sustainability. More importantly, the legitimacy of civil society organisations to represent local voices is often disputed on the grounds that many NGOs are funded from abroad.

Public trust towards NGOs is low and declining, but NGOs do not seem to be aware of it. They overestimate public trust towards them, as can be seen from Figure 1 on p. 5. Participants in an organisational survey were asked to estimate public trust towards NGOs, replicating a Caucasus Barometer question in a study conducted by the Turpanjian Center for Policy Analysis (TCPA) within a research project funded by the Academic Swiss Caucasus Net. The comparison with public opinion data clearly shows that NGOs overestimate the amount of trust towards them. According to Caucasus Barometer 2013, one-fifth of the Armenian population fully distrusts NGOs, yet NGOs themselves are not aware of this negative attitude. NGOs also clearly exaggerate the percentage of people with moderate levels of trust: while only 15 percent of the Armenian population somewhat trusts NGOs, NGOs estimate that percentage to be around 43 percent. This is yet another example of the sector's detachment from the broader public.

Civic Initiatives

An important new development in Armenia is the recent rise of a new type of activities called “civic initiatives.” These are various grassroots issue-oriented groups of individual activists united around a common, often very specific, cause (preventing construction in a public park, preserving an architecturally valuable building, protesting against a new mine, among others). Usually civic initiatives are small in numbers and are often confined to Yerevan, or spearheaded from Yerevan, if a regional environmental issue is at stake. The core activists are young educated people; they use social media to organize and to spread information regarding their activities. These new forms of civic participation have emerged roughly since 2007 and have registered a number of victories since then. Examples are preserving an old open-air cinema amphitheatre (Kino Moskva, 2010) set to be demolished, preventing a hydropower station from being constructed at a scenic waterfall site (Trchkan, 2011), and the most recent mass protests against a mandatory component of a pension reform (2014).³

³ The reform has been delayed and re-formulated and the mandatory component was dropped (at least for the time being). The prime minister resigned from his post. Although officially the resignation had nothing to do with the opposition to the pension reform, many believe that widespread public discontent with the proposed reform was at least partially the reason for the resignation.

There are also examples of failures despite mobilisation, or inability to sustain momentum.

In their report, Ishkanian et al. (2013) list a total of 31 civic initiatives for the period 2007–2013. Of these, seven were resolved positively (i.e. the activists achieved their aim), four were resolved negatively, six were abandoned and the rest were continuing. Since then the TCPA team has updated the table, adding two new initiatives and checking the status of ongoing initiatives. Table 3 on p. 5 presents the most recent snapshot of civic initiatives in Armenia. It is worth highlighting that nine out of 33 cases, i.e. more than a quarter of issues taken up by the activists were resolved positively. Given their small numbers, the overall apathy of the population and lack of cooperative culture on behalf of the government, this is not a small achievement on behalf of the activists.

Civic initiatives are distinctly different from NGOs. First and foremost, activists engaged in these initiatives explicitly refuse any foreign funding. They do not want to risk de-legitimation in the eyes of the public and government officials by accepting funding from international development organisations and thereby becoming accountable to a force, which is ultimately outside of Armenia. They believe that relying on foreign funding (in some cases on any funding except voluntary labour and personal contributions) would diminish their ability to speak on behalf of themselves, and people affected by decisions they attempt to overrun. Another difference is a strong preference to maintain organisational structures at a minimum and avoid hierarchies, thereby encouraging a “participatory democracy” style of self-organization that can tap into the creative energies of all people involved and create experiences of empowerment and ownership. On the negative side, such structures are hard to maintain on a large scale and over extended periods of time. Institutionalisation does not happen; groups are at a constant risk of “petering out” if participants become disillusioned, busy, interested in something else, and so on.

Several other weaknesses of civic activism can be noted here. Most civic initiatives are reactions to government decisions or events, rather than pro-active goals of changing the Armenian reality. Many activists position themselves as “outside of politics,” although some of the issues they raise are inherently political, such as the opposition to the government-proposed pension reform. The rejection of politics also means rejection of political players, such as the opposition political parties, who could be valuable allies in many cases.

Conclusion and Discussion

Armenian civil society has undergone some development since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The NGO sec-

tor of civil society is consolidated and fairly well developed. It is, however, detached from the broader society and largely donor-driven. In that sense, Armenian civil society still suffers from the typical post-communist “weakness” in Howard’s (2003) terms.

Focusing on NGOs when talking about civil society in a post-communist context is somewhat ironic, since the concept of civil society was popularized in the late 1980s, referring to mass mobilization and social movements that challenged the communist regimes of the respective countries. As those lost momentum, NGOs came to replace them as the main “substance” of civil society. Empowered mostly through foreign development aid, rather than grassroots involvement, NGOs perform a wide range of tasks, from humanitarian assistance to advocacy, but fail to attract most Armenians’ trust or interest in their cause. An entirely new development is the rise of civic activism of a novel type: case-focused, largely spontaneous, mostly driven by youth, and powered by social media.

About the Author

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Table 1: “Does Your Organisation Have...” (yes answers)

	N	%
President	182	97
Board	146	78
General assembly	137	73
Accountant/financial manager/cashier	129	69
Working groups	114	61
Secretary	82	44
Executive director	68	36

Source: TCPA ASCN Organisational Survey of NGOs

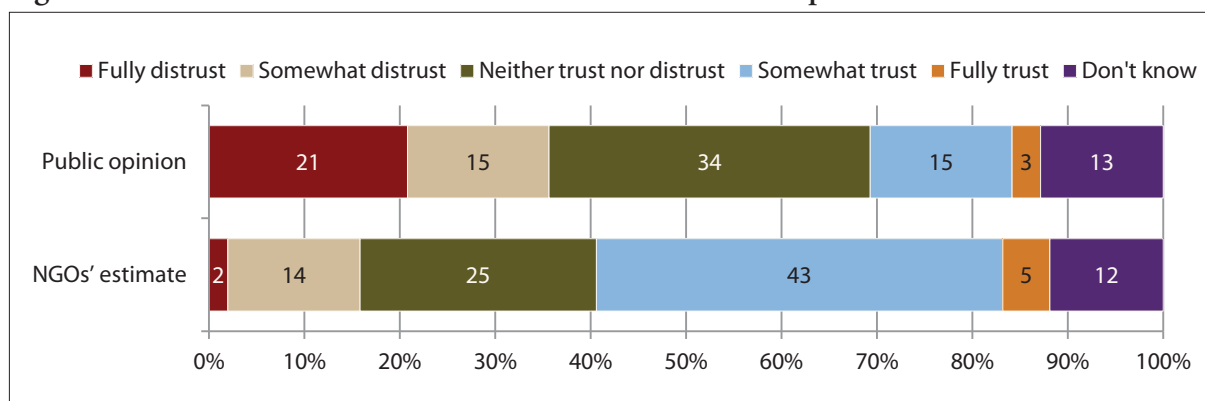
Each of these two elements of civil society has its strengths and weaknesses. They could complement each other. For example, NGOs could offer their expertise to the activist groups, while the civic initiatives could energize NGOs and provide the much needed link to the public. There is plenty of evidence of NGO members actively participating in civic initiatives as individuals. NGOs as organisations have so far remained behind the scenes, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

Spearheaded by young activists, often acting outside of the formal NGO format, Armenian civil society has recently registered several victories in overriding unfavourable governmental decisions and in voicing mounting public concerns. These examples are sources of inspiration and optimism for those engaged with Armenian civil society. The challenge for civil society actors now is to learn and multiply these positive experiences, while being more self-reflective and thoughtful in attracting citizens, in addition to attracting grants.

Table 2: Number of Paid Staff and Volunteers in Organisations

Number of staff/volunteers	% of NGOs that have <i>x</i> staff	% of NGOs that have <i>x</i> volunteers
0	37	10
1–5	26	29
6–20	22	28
21–30	6	13
31 and more	9	19
Total	100	100
<i>N</i>	188	188
Mean	11	58
Median	3	8

Source: TCPA ASCN Organisational Survey of NGOs

Figure 1: Trust Towards NGOs: NGOs' Estimate vs. Public Opinion

NB: "Public opinion" refers to the Caucasus Barometer 2013, "NGOs' estimate" refers to the TCPA ASCN Organisational Survey of NGOs.

Table 3: Outcomes of Various Civic Initiatives, 2007–2014

Outcome	Number of initiatives
Resolved positively	9
Resolved negatively	4
Abandoned	7
Continuing	13
<i>Total</i>	33

Source: Current TCPA ASCN Research Project

Civil Society in Azerbaijan: Testing Alternative Theories

By Rashad Shirinov, Baku

Abstract

This article provides a new framework for analyzing the concept of civil society and applies it to the case of Azerbaijan. For almost three decades, academics and practitioners have discussed civil society using a very particular framework based on a specific paradigm: the Tocquevillian notion of civil society, a liberal-democratic vision of civil society in which civil society is an autonomous, independent political actor to check the state's power. I believe it is time now to shift perspective and try to look at things from a different angle. This article offers a Gramscian view of the concept of civil society and tests it on Azerbaijan. I believe it is important for theoreticians and practitioners to think outside of the box that was built for the last two and a half decades of post-communist life and see various opportunities to interpret reality in a new way, particularly when the previous frames seem to be insufficient.

Introduction

One of the biggest challenges participants in the political and public discussions face in the course of dealing with civil society in the post-Soviet context is defining the very concept of civil society. This problem is not unique to post-communist political and social debate, but has been a universal concern to the extent that some scholars simply refused to define it.

When we refer to Post-Soviet civil society and try to define it, it is important to be aware of several important aspects of the problem. The first question that should, perhaps, be asked in this regard is: "Who is defining it?" Depending on the answer to this question, we would be able to shed more light on "which civil society" is the object of the discussion.

Firstly, there is a civil society of those people who believe that *they are* civil society. This is the (loose) group of people who are represented in various voluntary associations and institutions, but not only there. Intellectuals, academics, journalists, activists, politicians, human rights defenders and some other categories of individuals may consider themselves as representatives of civil society.

However, it is important to stress that the tendency in the post-Soviet context has been to equate civil society to the pool of NGOs (sometimes even *one man* NGOs) existing in that particular country. It seems that this has become an unexpected (or unintentional) consequence of the cooperation between the so-called international community (governments, international organisations, donors etc.) and various autonomous groups inside post-Soviet countries.

Consequently, there is another civil society—of external governments and donors. External governments and donors saw civil society as a concept that is a function of something else, e.g., an independent community of free associations checking the power of the government and advancing democracy. Certainly, here

we are talking mostly about Western external actors, whose agenda of democratization seemed to be central to the discourse of the civil society, which is not equally relevant for other external actors in the region (Russia, Iran, Turkey) whose policies towards civil society differed from the Western one.

The national state and national government are other actors seeing civil society as an object of their policies and political action. Many newly independent states have thought of civil society not necessarily as a counterweight to state power, but as of integral part of the state: they saw civil society institutions as complementing public institutions as opposed to criticizing and undermining them. Therefore, in more authoritarian formats the state tries to coopt civil society into the realm of its control and governance. Domrin suggests that:

In the Russian interpretation, civil society cannot be established at the state's expense. The state is responsible for maintaining social justice in the country and approximately equal levels of material wealth for its citizens. With its protective foreign and defense policy, the state exercises its role as the ultimate guarantor of the existence of civil society and the Nation.¹

Therefore, an important point follows here: although external donors and national states have seemingly different goals and agendas (democracy promotion versus state-building) both of them look at the concept and realm of civil society as a function of their end goal: of building democracy or building state. Hence, the relevance of the Gramscian approach, which claims that civil society is an area of hegemony.

In this article, I will try to explain how these various actors and concepts interact in the public sphere in Azer-

¹ Alexander N. Domrin. Ten Years Later: Society, "Civil Society", and the Russian State. *The Russian Review* 62 (April 2003): 193–211 p. 201

baijan, and to challenge some of the basic notions of the liberal-democratic (Tocquevillean) approach towards civil society. Before that, let us look into two various paradigms of analyzing civil society. The first one is Tocquevillean, which dominated the discourse of civil society in the post-communist world. Tocquevilleanism has become basically a replacement for communism, since everybody, including former communists, advocated it initially. The second one is the Gramscian theory of civil society, which has not been systematically applied to the post-Soviet context, meaning that there have been no major studies using this framework.

Tocquevillean and Gramscian Concepts of Civil Society

With the demise of communism and the advance of liberal democracy in the post-Cold war period, concepts started to change (or to emerge) and new approaches to the phenomenon and concept of civil society began to gain urgency. The new vision of civil society was a Tocquevillean one, meaning the new leaders believed and promoted associational life, and thought it will be a good solution to many inherited ills. The new liberal-democratic elites conceived civil society as an almost independent actor to counterbalance state power. Civil society has become a generic term for active institutions different from the ruling elite/party and opposition. The Third Sector was another name for it, highlighting the range of organizations that belonged neither to the public/state sector nor to the private sector.

Historically, this understanding of civil society emerged within the communist world throughout several stages and is believed to be linked to three major crises of communism and related dissident movements: the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the Prague Spring of 1968, and the Polish Solidarnost movement of 1980–81². As an old Azerbaijani dissident scholar said once: “after Prague we all realized that there was no way back.” It is this dissident, oppositionist, anti-statist nature of the concept as well as the corresponding reality to it, which has shaped what we have labeled as civil society, including our understanding and perception of it today. *This* civil society has a political spirit, a political ambition.

The Gramscian understanding of civil society not only differs from the perspective described above but also gives us a unique and creative analytical framework. According to Gramsci, civil society is not the area of freedom, but area of *hegemony*. Political society (the state) is always in competition with various political and social groups to exert hegemony over civil society. Hegemony

is non-coercive, non-physical: it is about the consent of the ruled to the state. In this regard, civil society, meaning all sorts of associations, including churches, schools, professional associations and, sometimes, political parties, are the target of the state and other political groups. No authority can survive without relying on those institutions, without *hegemony over civil society*.

The Gramscian Perspective for Azerbaijani Civil Society

The struggle over civil society (in the Gramscian sense) started from the early 1990s in Azerbaijan. Mainly, it was two political forces that started the fight for control of civil society—the old Soviet nomenklatura and the new emerging liberal-democratic political forces and networks.

Using the examples of religion, education, professional unions and NGOs, we will look into how the contesting forces were fighting for these areas.

Religion. Religious liberalization during the early 1990s increased the number of religious organizations, a development which made newly established post-Soviet regimes feel vulnerable vis-à-vis such formidable popular beliefs. Thus, the second half of the 1990s through the 2000s became a period when states used their administrative apparatus to make the lives of religious organizations difficult. Complicated (as well as unclear) registration procedures, requirements for re-registration, arbitrary de-registrations and bans became typical for almost all post-Soviet regimes.³ In Azerbaijan, throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the Islamic Party was banned, religious communities were dismantled, even some mosques demolished. The government has tightly regulated the spread of religious literature. Religiosity has started to be seen as a threat to the state. Religious leaders have been jailed and now even secular oppositionists started to consider them as political prisoners, a development which was not the case before. Opposition parties also used religious rhetoric to gain support among believers. Some political party leaders even attended the Hajj pilgrimage in order to add to their reputation among Muslims. On the other hand, the government invested considerable amounts into building new mosques and restoring old ones in Baku and other places in Azerbaijan.

Education. In education, for the old elites, the new academia, concentrated in and around independent universities, research centers, journals etc., and backed by foreign embassies and international organizations, was a

2 Jacques Rupnik. The Postcommunist Divide, *Journal of Democracy* 10.1 (1999) 57–62

3 S. G. Safronov. Territorial Structure of the Confessional Space in Russia and Other Post-Soviet States. *Regional Research of Russia*, 2013, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 204–210 p. 204

powerful competitor in the struggle to influence society.⁴ It was important for the old elites to bring up the young generation within the frames of conservative, patriarchal values and make them respect the authority and live in line with the official ideology of Azerbaijanism and national moral values (*milli mənəvi dəyərlər*). Part of the control over the students was exercised through administrative means, e.g. university deans and administrators instructed students not to attend the opposition's meetings and, in general, refrain from oppositional activity or rhetoric. On the other hand, political and social forces outside of the ruling elite used a variety of non-formal education platforms (political parties, NGOs, youth movements) to educate youth in their own values of western principles to support democracy and advocate for openness, transparency and more freedom. Azad Fikir Universiteti (Free Thought University) run by a civic group called OL! was one of the most successful non-formal education projects, before being shut down in 2013.

Professional associations. All sorts of professional associations, called *profsoyuzy* (*həmkarlar ittifaqları* in Azerbaijani) during Soviet time, remain under strict control of the government. Most of them are public; private ones are almost non-existent. The Azerbaijani Confederation of Professional Unions is a public structure which unites all official professional unions in every civil service institution, which are in turn highly formal and pseudo-representative bodies.

Some of the privately initiated professional unions such as the Karabakh Veterans Public Union (established in 2002 and led by Etimad Asadov) and the Azerbaijani Employers' Confederation (1999) were active at the beginning, but were weakened or co-opted by the government.

NGOs. NGOs emerged in the 1990s and survived mostly because of Western financial support. There have been few domestic donors for NGOs and they relied almost completely on Western funding, a circumstance that made them highly vulnerable vis-à-vis the authorities. The government's policy gradually shifted towards estranging and targeting NGOs as foreign agents, which undermine the state.

Legislation was also adapted towards obstructing easy financial flows to NGOs. Another strategy was about inundating the NGO sphere with GONGOs (government NGOs) to counter the ideological influence of the opponents. The irony of the situation was

that Western funded NGOs would label themselves as "independent," while they were totally dependent on funds coming from other governments.

Part of the government's strategy was to finance NGOs and in 2007 the president signed a decree to establish the State Council on Support for NGOs. The strong argument behind it was: "If Western governments believe it is good to finance NGOs, we should do it ourselves."

Conclusion

More than twenty years of Azerbaijani independence and civil society development have largely been viewed from a liberal-democratic or Tocquevillean perspective. In this short paper, we tried a different view.

The notion of civil society as an area of hegemony of contesting political forces offers a different vision, which is about realizing that the story of an "evil state" and "benign civil society" was an oversimplification. The Gramscian approach offers the perspective of an ideological and cultural struggle of various groups that exclude each other and have very little consensus on what the state of affairs in the country should look like. Certainly, it is also the struggle between old and new. However, many of the "new forces" also originate from the old environment.

One of the features of post-Soviet politics is that it is about the struggle of two types of people, groups and networks: those, who want to preserve their positions and power, and the emerging class of other contestants who claim power, position and space within the new post-Soviet realm. In this context, liberalism versus statism is just an ideological part of the struggle.

Thus, when we look at Azerbaijani civil society from a Gramscian point of view, we see something else, compared to if we looked at it from liberal-democratic perspective. It seems that the ruling political forces won the struggle and established their hegemony over various elements of the civil society. In contrast, the opposing political and social forces seem to have lost it, and their influence over organized and associated groups in the society has been dispersed. Political parties, activists, intellectuals etc. have little influence on universities, religion, and associations and other segments of civil society. The conservative, patriarchal culture promoted by the ruling elite has become more efficient and resulted in the acceptance and consent of the society, whereas the revisionist, reformist, revolutionary approach of the opposing political groups and individuals have little impact on the same society, which is also spoiled by widespread consumerism.

Apparently, the old forces won the ideological (or cultural) struggle over the new ones, bringing their cul-

4 Elena Gapova. Post-Soviet academia and class power: Belarusian controversy over symbolic markets. *Studies in East European Thought*, Vol. 61, No. 4, *Wither the Intelligentsia: The End of the Moral Elite in Eastern Europe* (November 2009), pp. 271–290, p.278

ture to dominate the public and private realms. Surely, this is not an isolated game, since it is also part of the defeat of the Western ideological stance in most of post-Soviet space.

It remains unclear when, and whether, the emerging new groups will exert hegemony over civil society

in Azerbaijan, or at least be able to restart the competition over it. So far, the tendency is in the direction of the conservative groups remaining in charge.

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NGOs and the Georgian Public: Why Communication Matters

By Dustin Gilbreath and David Sichinava, Tbilisi

Abstract

The civil society sector in Georgia has gone from near non-existent at independence to a vibrant sector with a multitude of competing voices aiming to affect change. While cynicism towards the third sector was pronounced in the 1990s in Georgia, relatively positive attitudes toward NGOs have developed in Georgia over time. Today though, these attitudes have likely been endangered by Bidzina Ivanishvili’s statement that one of his organizations was preparing reports on the heads of three of Georgia’s most active NGOs. This article looks at knowledge and perceptions of NGOs in Georgia using data from the 2011 and 2014 Volunteering and Civic Participation in Georgia surveys funded by USAID and implemented by CRRC-Georgia. Survey results indicate that while knowledge of the third sector is relatively low, Georgians are generally not misinformed, and that those who have interacted with NGOs have more positive impressions of NGOs than those who have not. With these findings in mind, the article suggests that if NGOs want to maintain or improve the positive attitudes that have accrued toward them over time in Georgia, especially in light of the recent and widely discussed accusations against NGOs, an active communications and engagement strategy is critical.

Introduction

While cynicism towards the third sector was pronounced in Georgia in the years following independence, as in Armenia as discussed in this issue, relatively positive atti-

tudes toward NGOs have developed over time. Today, the civil society sector in Georgia is populated by a wide diversity of actors. They include national chapters of well-known international NGOs like Transparency

International—Georgia, local NGOs, such as the Civil Society Institute, and NGOs which have unclear motivations, such as Bidzina Ivanishvili's Mokalake.

Today though, these positive attitudes have been endangered by a number of accusations made against prominent NGOs in Georgia. In February 2015, Bidzina Ivanishvili, the former Prime Minister and billionaire, suggested that his organization, Georgia 2030, held compromising information on the heads of three of the most important NGOs in Georgia: Transparency International—Georgia's Eka Gigauri (TIG), the Georgian Young Lawyers Association's Kakha Kozhoridze (GYLA), and the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy's Nino Lomjaria (ISFED). Adding impetus to the situation, Goga Khaindrava, former Minister in Charge of Conflict Solutions, accused the same three NGOs of corrupt relations with the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) aimed at supporting the previously governing United National Movement. These claims, however, have yet to be substantiated, and significantly, the NGOs accused of wrong doing have released all pertinent information in regards to their interactions with SIDA. On April 26, the day Ivanishvili claimed he would release the 'research' on these NGO leaders, he instead backed away to a certain extent from Lomjaria and Kozhoridze, but claimed that Gigauri backed the United National Movement.

Complicating matters, many experts believe that Russia has begun to fund a number of civil society organizations in the country, including the Eurasian Institute and the Georgian–Russian Public Center. As William Dunbar reported for *Newsweek*, the Eurasian Institute funded a transvestite protest in the lead up to the signing of the anti-discrimination bill required for the signing of the Visa Liberalization Action Plan with the EU, with the goal of disrupting further Georgia–EU integration. Since then, the same organization has also engaged in anti-NATO protests.

In light of this great diversity of voices and the threats at hand to the third sector in Georgia, this article explores the population's knowledge of NGOs in Georgia, what Georgians think NGOs do compared to what they think they should be doing, and attitudes towards NGOs in light of the impact of communicating with the public.

Knowing What You Don't Know

To understand how susceptible Georgians may be to misinformation from different local and international actors, it is important to examine the Georgian population's knowledge of NGOs. On the 2014 Volunteering and Civic Participation in Georgia survey funded by USAID, respondents were asked, "Please tell me which

of these, in your opinion, is an NGO, and which is not," and a list of 15 organizations, some NGOs, some state agencies, and some commercial enterprises, was read to them (see Figures 1a and 1b on p. 13). Answer options for each organization included NGO, not an NGO, never heard [of the organization], don't know, and refuse to answer.

Survey results demonstrate that the Georgian public is more informed than misinformed, but they are most informed about the limits of their knowledge, i.e. they know that they don't know. Socrates might smile. Of 2,140 respondents, 151 responded "Don't know" to every organization, which, when weighted, corresponds to almost 6% of the population. For individual organizations, "Don't know" responses varied from 11% (Parliament of Georgia) to 40% (Open Society Georgia Foundation).

Georgians were most likely to correctly identify the Parliament of Georgia (85%) as not an NGO, but still, 15% failed to provide a correct answer. The Georgian Young Lawyers Association was the second most correctly identified organization with 67% of the public correctly identifying them as an NGO. (also meaning that it is probably the most widely recognized NGO in Georgia). GYLA aside, other NGOs were correctly identified by between 30% (Identoba) and 47% (Liberty Institute) of the population. Georgians were least likely to know that USAID and British Petroleum are not NGOs.

In order to gain a better understanding of Georgians' knowledge of NGOs, a scale was generated based on the 15 NGO identification questions (see Figure 2 on p. 14). The scale ranges from -15 to 15, with -15 being an incorrect response to each of the 15 questions and 15 being a correct response to every question. "Don't know", "Refuse to answer" and "Never heard of" responses were coded as 0, since respondents presumably reported accurately that they did not know or had never heard of an organization. Among the 15 questions, there was one trick question. The organization "Association of Unemployed People" does not actually exist, and was included in the list of 15 organizations to check how thoughtfully respondents answered the questions. In the case of the Association of Unemployed People, the answer "never heard of" was coded as a correct answer, while both "NGO" and "not an NGO" were coded as incorrect answers. Other responses were coded as 0.

The results are positive in that, generally, while Georgians do not necessarily know a great deal about whether an organization is or is not an NGO, they do know that they don't know this, and report accordingly. Overall, Georgians reported more correct answers than incorrect ones. The highest score on the scale was 15 (4 respon-

dents in total) and the lowest was -8 (1 respondent), with an average score of 4.6. Approximately 4% of the population scored below 0, 12% scored 0 (meaning that they report not knowing about NGOs, but are not necessarily misinformed), and 84% scored 1 or above.

Considering the above, the question who knows more and who knows less about NGOs in Georgia comes to the fore. One difference that appears when looking at average scores is that those with some higher education know more about NGOs than those with either secondary technical education or secondary or lower education (average scores 5.99, 4.17 and 3.56, respectively). Age is another interesting characteristic which shows some difference between groups, although the differences by age are smaller than those by education. The most knowledgeable age group is those between the ages of 36 and 55 (average score 5.03), while the least knowledgeable age group includes those 56 years old and older (average score 4.05). The youngest age group (18–35 year olds) scores between the two, with an average score of 4.61.

The Gap

Not only do Georgians frequently report not knowing whether an organization is an NGO or not, but 22% also report they don't know what NGOs do (see Figure 3 on p. 14). Despite not knowing what NGOs do, Georgians do have opinions about what NGOs should be doing, with only 6% of the population reporting that they don't know. In the 2014 survey, Georgians were asked, "In your opinion, what issues do the NGOs in Georgia address most frequently?" and "What issues would you like to see NGOs addressing more often?" Georgians reported that NGOs most frequently address elections, healthcare and/or social assistance, minority rights, and media and freedom of speech. In contrast, Georgians most often mention increasing prices, poverty or unemployment, combined in a single answer option, as issues which they think NGOs should address more often. They also think that NGOs should focus more on healthcare/social assistance and education, even though they believe that NGOs already work on these issues to a certain extent.

Notably, there are a number of gaps between what Georgians think NGOs should be doing more often and what they think NGOs actually do. The largest of such gaps is on issues related to increasing prices, poverty or unemployment. While NGOs may not be the right agents to affect change on the economy, policy issues aside, this expectation coincides generally with what Georgians consistently report to be the greatest problems in the country – unemployment and poverty. Answers "healthcare and social assistance" and "education" come in next. Georgians think that NGOs work on elections,

minority rights, and freedom of speech more often than they report these as issues NGOs should work on more.

What accounts for these gaps? The fact that NGOs and their activities are frequently funded by donors rather than the general public in Georgia may explain some of the discrepancies. While donor priorities often coincide with what the population demands, this is not always the case and hence, NGOs may address particular issue(s) that donors believe to be important, but which the population may be unaware of or uninterested in.

A second potential factor is the role of the mass media. Two of the issues which Georgians are most likely to think are covered by NGOs—elections and minority rights—receive concentrated media attention, clustered around specific events. The protests against the May 17, 2013, International Day of Homophobia and Transphobia demonstration and every election in recent memory come to mind in this regard.

A closely related third factor which could contribute to these gaps is the communication strategies of NGOs. Considering that Georgians often lack knowledge of NGOs, this may imply that information on what NGOs are working on does not reach the general public. Hence, there may be a number of NGOs working on poverty, healthcare, and/or education, but compared to those working on elections and minority rights, their communication efforts are less effective.

Communication and Outreach Work

While there may be a communication gap, communicating works. Surprisingly, roughly 20% of Georgians were contacted by NGOs between 2012 and 2014, according to the Volunteering and Civic Participation survey, compared with only 13% between 2009 and 2011. "Contact" includes participation in trainings or meetings organized by the NGOs, receiving a call or a visit at home from an NGO representative, and visiting an organization's office(s). Over the same period of time, the public's trust in NGOs increased from 22% to 38%. Importantly, Georgians contacted by NGOs were more likely to trust NGOs and their staffs. In 2014, half of the contacted group expressed positive attitudes towards NGO staff and NGOs, while only 35% in the non-contacted group did so. Further exemplifying the value of communication with the public is the difference in knowledge between the two groups (see Figure 4 on p. 15). Using the same scale given above, the mean score of the contacted group was one point higher than that of the non-contacted group (5.42 and 4.34 respectively).

Knowing that communication is effective at increasing trust, the question which comes to the fore is—which segments of the population do NGOs tend to and tend not to contact? This is of particular impor-

tance given that, if a specific group is under-contacted, it presents NGOs with a clear target demographic to aim communications at with the goal of increasing societal support.

While it is commonly believed that NGO activities are concentrated mainly in urban areas, and especially in Tbilisi, the survey data shows that there is no visible regional gap in terms of contact rates. Nor is there a gender gap, but representatives of the older generation (65+) are less involved with NGOs. While there are no differences between those contacted and not contacted by NGOs in terms of reported household monetary income, there are differences between perceptions of financial well-being. Those contacted by NGOs report to be well-off more often than their non-contacted fellows. Almost half of the contacted group reports they have enough money to purchase food or clothes, while only 34% of the other group reported the same. Educational attainment is higher for those involved in NGO activities than those not. The contacted group also possesses better self-reported skills in English and Russian languages and are more computer literate. Finally, NGO-involved people are more likely to have highly educated parent(s), commonly considered to be a class marker, compared with non-involved people.

Given the above, it appears that NGOs have successfully communicated to the relatively well off and members of higher social classes than they have with other groups. This suggests that NGOs may need to expand outreach efforts to those Georgian citizens in most need if they intend to gain a greater level of trust, thus enabling them to affect wider change.

Conclusion

Georgians do not know much about NGOs, but they know that they do not know. When it comes to what Georgians think NGOs do and what NGOs should do, there are a number of notable mismatches with Georgians reporting that NGOs should focus more on economic issues, education, and healthcare. While NGOs in Georgia are collectively well trusted, they still need to expand their communications and outreach efforts in order to maintain or garner greater public trust. This issue is especially important in light of recent accusations against NGOs, which despite any demonstrated veracity have likely discredited NGOs in the public eye, on the one hand, and Russian involvement in the NGO sector, on the other hand.

About the Authors

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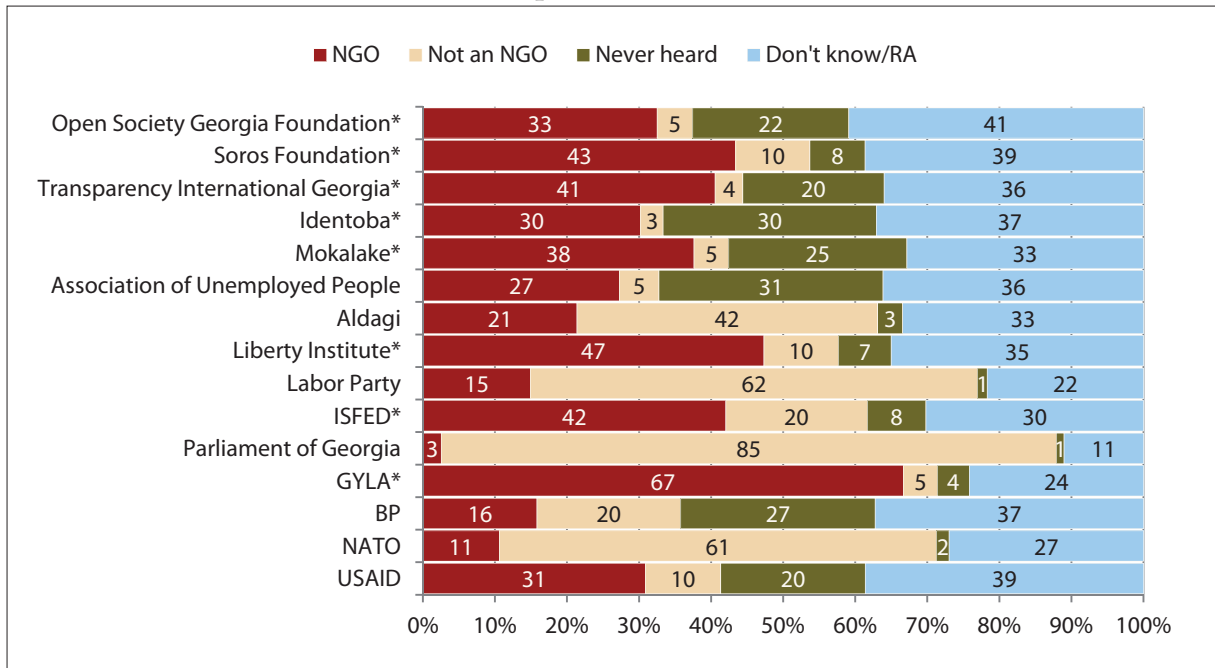
David Sichinava is a Senior Researcher at CRRC-Georgia. He received his PhD from Tbilisi State University's Human Geography Department and lectures on research methods at Tbilisi State University.

The opinions expressed in this article are the authors' own and do not reflect the views of CRRC-Georgia. Some sections of the present article originally appeared on the CRRC's Social Science in the Caucasus blog.

Further Reading:

- Policy, Advocacy, and Civil Society Development in Georgia (G-PAC) 2014 Follow-up Report on Civic Engagement, <http://www.crrc.ge/uploads/files/reports/FINAL_GPAC_2014_Civic_Engagement_Report_04.08.2014_ENG.pdf>
- Volunteering Survey, <<http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/vl2014ge/codebook/>>

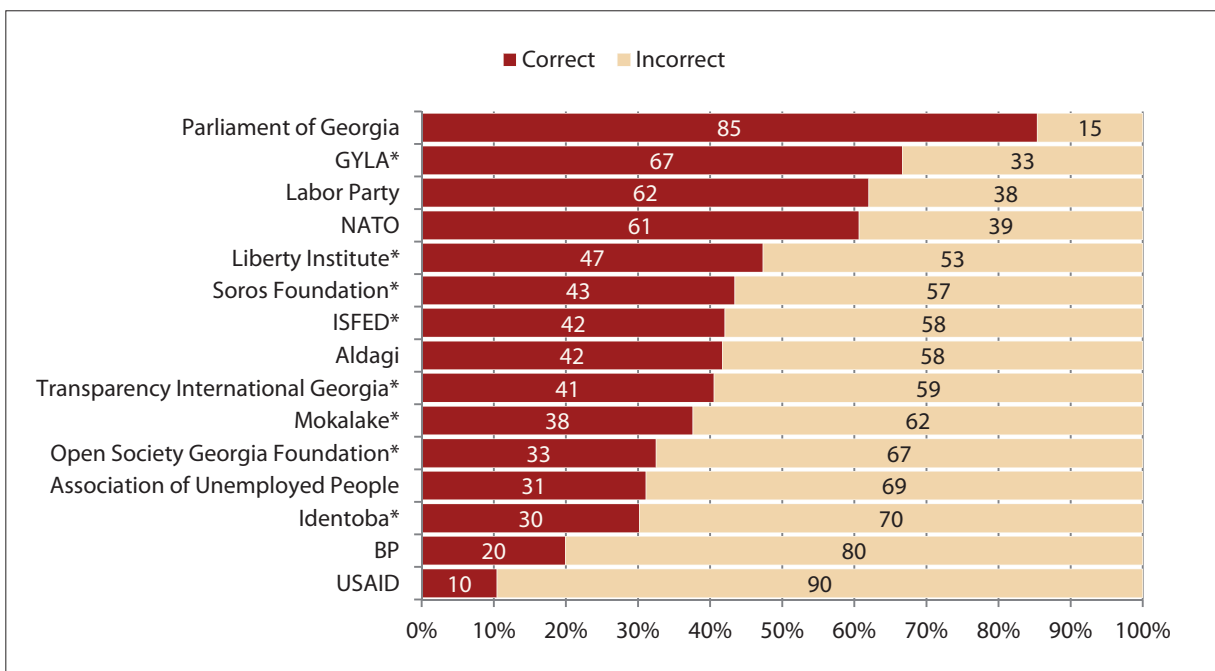
Figure 1a: Which of These, In Your Opinion, Is an NGO, and Which Is Not? (Volunteerism and Civic Participation, 2014)



* organization is an NGO

Source: CRRC Volunteering and Civic Participation in Georgia Survey 2014, <<http://www.crrc.ge/20563/Volunteering-and-Civic-participation-in-Georgia>>

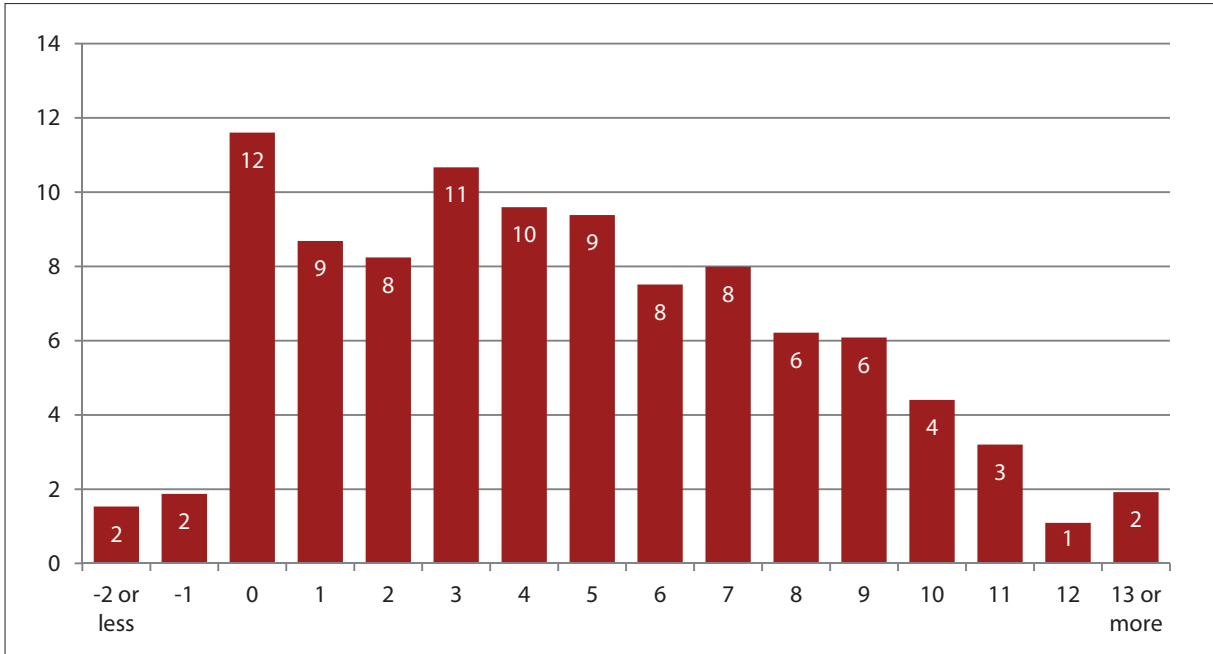
Figure 1b: Which of These, In Your Opinion, Is an NGO, and Which Is Not?



* organization is an NGO

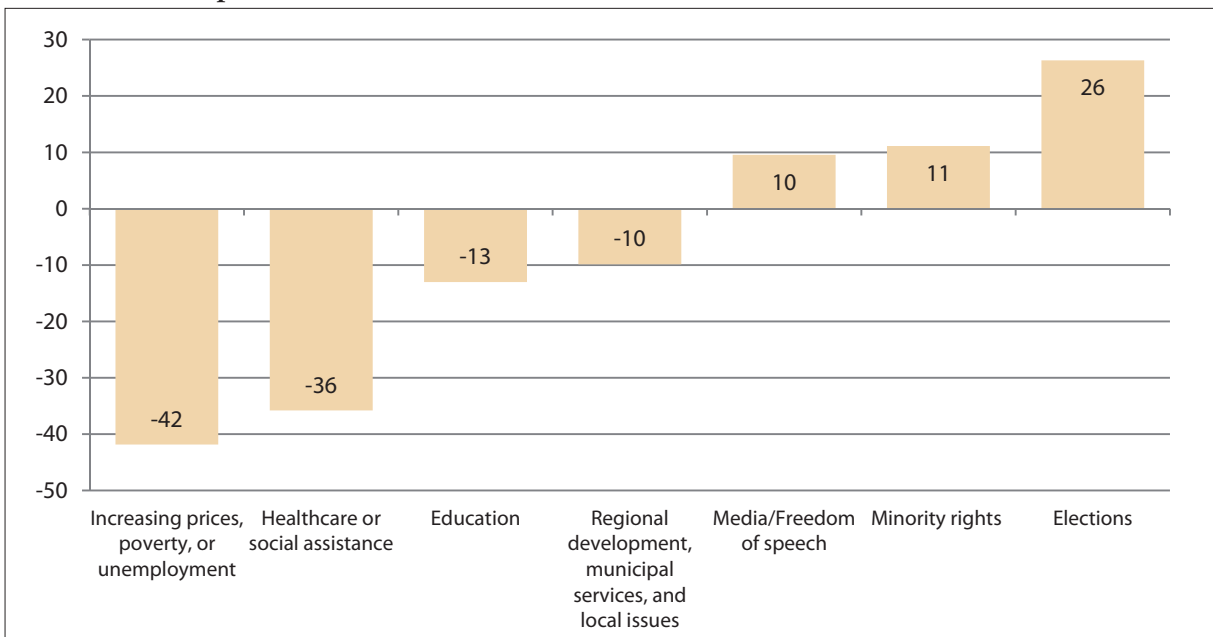
Source: CRRC Volunteering and Civic Participation in Georgia Survey 2014, <<http://www.crrc.ge/20563/Volunteering-and-Civic-participation-in-Georgia>>

Figure 2: Knowledge of NGO scale (%) (Volunteerism and Civic Participation, 2014)



Source: CRRC Volunteering and Civic Participation in Georgia Survey 2014, <<http://www.crrc.ge/20563/Volunteering-and-Civic-participation-in-Georgia>>

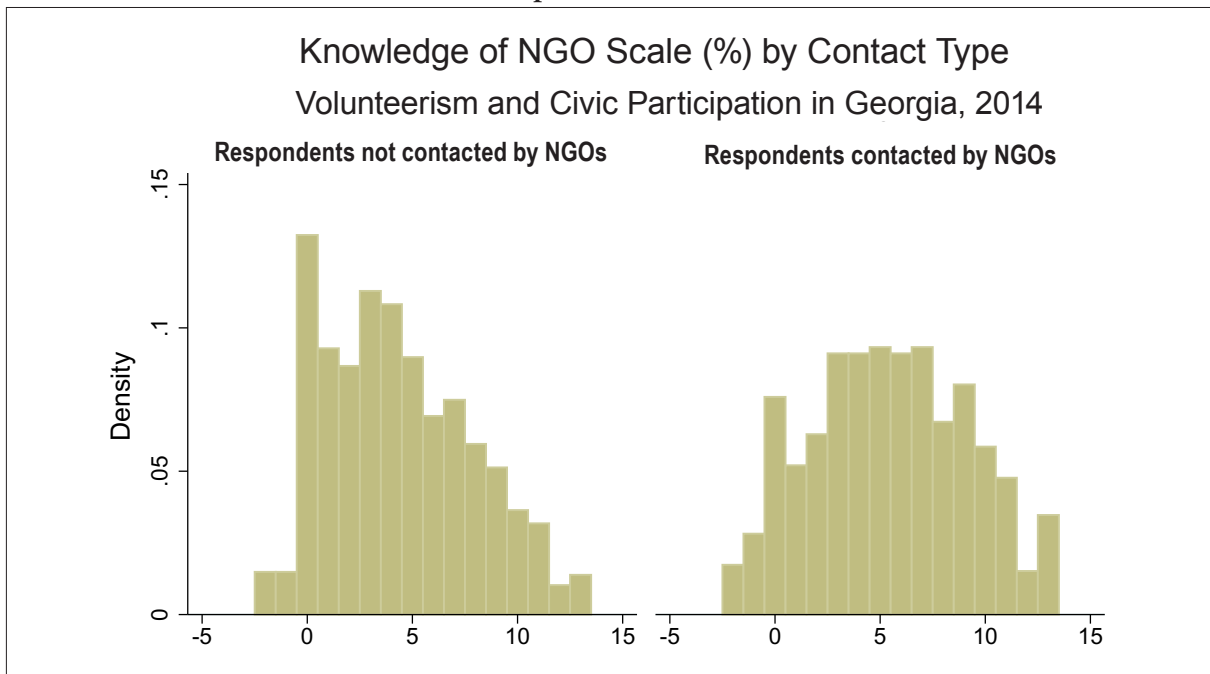
Figure 3: Gaps Between the Issues the NGOs in Georgia Address Most Frequently and Issues People Would Like to See NGOs Address More Often (%) (Volunteerism and Civic Participation, 2014)



Note: The gaps are calculated as simple differences in the shares of answers to the two questions given above. Only gaps larger than 10% are shown.

Source: CRRC Volunteering and Civic Participation in Georgia Survey 2014, <<http://www.crrc.ge/20563/Volunteering-and-Civic-participation-in-Georgia>>

Figure 4: Knowledge of NGO Scale (%) by Contact Type
(Volunteerism and Civic Participation, 2014)



Source: CRRC Volunteering and Civic Participation in Georgia Survey 2014, <<http://www.crrc.ge/20563/Volunteering-and-Civic-participation-in-Georgia>>

CHRONICLE

29 April – 25 May 2015

29 April 2015	Georgian Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs, Levan Kipiani, resigns, becoming the third member of the cabinet to resign within a week
1 May 2015	Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili names parliamentary deputy Tina Khidasheli as new defense minister
4 May 2015	Georgian Foreign Minister Tamar Beruchashvili visits Germany and meets with her German counterpart Frank-Walter Steinmeier in Berlin to discuss Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations and bilateral relations
4 May 2015	The Georgian Foreign Ministry summons Armenia's ambassador over the meeting between the Armenian parliament speaker and the parliament chairman of the breakaway region of South Ossetia in Nagorno Karabakh
5 May 2015	Deputies from the parliamentary committees on EU integration of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine issue a joint declaration on inter-parliamentary cooperation
6 May 2015	A court in Baku finds a leading Azerbaijani opposition activist guilty of large-scale dealing in narcotics
7 May 2015	Armenia signs a trade deal with the United States in Washington aimed at boosting investments
7 May 2015	Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian attends a service at the Washington National Cathedral together with US Vice President Joe Biden to commemorate the mass killings of Armenians during World War I
7 May 2015	Georgian Interior Minister Vakhtang Gomelauri tells members of parliament that a new reform proposal envisages decoupling security and intelligence agencies from the Interior Ministry and creating a separate State Security Service
8 May 2015	The Georgian Parliament approves a legislative package aimed at easing visa and migration rules that were tightened some months ago
11 May 2015	The Chinese Agriculture Minister Han Changfu meets with Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili during a visit to Tbilisi with Garibashvili stressing that the strengthening of trade and economic relations with China is of special importance to Georgia
11 May 2015	Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili meets with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg during a visit to Brussels with Stoltenberg saying that Georgia is moving closer to NATO and NATO-Georgia cooperation is "well on track"
11 May 2015	Georgian-US military exercises set to last two weeks start at the Vaziani military base in Georgia
14 May 2015	A court in Baku prolongs the pre-trial detention of Azerbaijani investigative journalist Khadija Ismayilova
14 May 2015	Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili signs a memorandum of understanding on the establishment of an Investors Council with EBRD President Suma Chakrabarti to address obstacles faced by investors in Georgia
15 May 2015	Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili meets with his Armenian counterpart Hovik Abrahamyan at the Georgian Black Sea resort of Batumi to discuss strengthening bilateral economic cooperation between the two countries
18 May 2015	The office of Abkhaz leader Raul Khajimba announces that Russian General Anatoly Khrulev, who was wounded during the August 2008 war, is named Chief of the General Staff of the armed forces in the breakaway region of Abkhazia
19 May 2015	The head of the Georgian Orthodox Church Patriarch Ilia II emphasizes during a meeting with Austrian President Heinz Fischer Georgia's European choice and says that the country will "definitely achieve" the goal of European integration
19 May 2015	An apartment building in Baku catches fire killing 15 people and injuring about 60
19 May 2015	Georgian Economy Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili visits Iran and says that an agreement was reached with Tehran to resume cooperation in energy, tourism, agriculture and education
20 May 2015	President of the European Council Donald Tusk says during the Eastern Partnership Summit held in Riga that the Summit is not about taking giant steps, but going forward "step-by-step"
21 May 2015	President of the Georgian National Bank Giorgi Kadagidze says that no additional pressure is expected on the Georgian lari in the medium term
22 May 2015	Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili says that the Eastern Partnership Summit in Riga was very successful for Georgia as the country is expected to get visa waivers in the Schengen area
25 May 2015	Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov holds talks with his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, in Moscow to discuss the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and the strengthening of bilateral relations between the two countries
25 May 2015	Business associations in Georgia say that a proposed bill that envisages transferring supervisory functions from the Georgian Central Bank to a separate agency poses a threat to the country's banking sector

Compiled by Lili Di Pippo

For the full chronicle since 2009 see <www.laender-analysen.de/cad>

ABOUT THE CAUCASUS ANALYTICAL DIGEST

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