

# **Transcending Borders: Transnational Approaches to Conflict Resolution**

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The idea of federalization of the South Caucasus today seems purely utopic. The level of trust among political regimes is almost zero. The memory of recent wars is still alive, and a new war in Nagorno Karabakh seems increasingly inevitable. It would be very naive to expect any, even the weakest, form of unification within a confederation framework similar to the European Union (EU). Each country looks at the neighbors with suspicion, if not outright hostility. Most borders are either difficult to cross or firmly sealed.

However, these statements are true compared to the ideal models of relations among states at the macro level. In real life, everything is much more complex and simple at the same time. Thinking about the so called geopolitics, the focus usually tends to be on “state interest” leaving out individual interests of the citizens of these countries and the civil society in general. Meanwhile, history knows many examples of how civic initiatives have changed the meaning of borders in people’s lives. Following the citizens’ change of perception of the neighbors on the other side of the border, the governments have set new rules of communication with the neighboring countries. This is, for example, how the EU was created and developed.

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# Societies and state borders

In order to identify resources or possibilities for federalization, a change in the level of analysis is needed taking the discussion to the level of the civil society. The activities of the civil society on developing strategies that overstep borders can be condensed into two main types.

The first is typical to the behavior of the communities living in the border areas, where residents use the existence and the possibility of crossing the state border in their everyday strategies. This is the level of the *routine* and the casual everyday practices aimed at certain gains.

The second type of activities that are aimed at transcending borders can be characterized as *projects*. If at the routine level, citizens use quite pragmatic private goals (primarily improving personal livelihoods), then at the project level, these goals are part of a certain ideology. Civil society activists gradually come to understand that globalization processes dilute borders within various fields and promote the development of cross-border links and networks. And it's not just about the movement of capital and labor, but also about the formation of transnational networks of civil society activists and organizations who are united by virtue of common interests and joint activities (including peacebuilding).

What follows is a reflection on the examples of both types of societal activities that compel politicians to take into account the citizens' interests when establishing the rules of interactions with the neighbors.

## The routine use of borders

In the routine use of borders for everyday strategies, the residents of the border regions develop their own codes of conduct in relation to the neighbors living across the border. Regular people, businesses, nonprofit organizations, and even local administrations devise strategies for stepping across the borders.

Undoubtedly, over time processes that have been typical for many border areas in the European countries during the last several decades of the 20th century, will develop in the South Caucasus as well. This vision of the predictable future

was borrowed from literature reflecting the development of the so-called “Euroregions”<sup>1</sup>, as well as our long-term studies of border areas in the countries of the South Caucasus, as well as Russia, and several other countries.

The emergence of these processes is rather simple. Often international borders are home to underdeveloped peripheral regions. The remoteness of these regions from the capital and the scarcity of own resources dim the prospects for closing the increasing gap in economic development and quality of life between the population of the center and the periphery. In rare cases – and only in developed countries – a special economic policy that directs significant investments into these areas through tax reduction and incentives enabling the movement of capital, provides new opportunities for social and economic growth.

In contexts of impenetrable borders, these areas usually turn into zones of social disaster. Low employment, backward industry structure, poor engineering and social infrastructure, poverty, poor quality of life characterize these areas. Consequently, the escape of the most vigorous parts of the population to the more developed regions of the country (or abroad) further exacerbates local problems.

However, as the border regimes weaken, new development strategies are possible for the peripheral areas. The close cooperation between neighboring regions on both sides of the border could lead to a new focus of development on the border of the two states. Such cross-border strategies that are primarily economic lead to the development of new socio-economic networks that include residents on both sides of the border areas. In Europe, these regions that evolved within the last two decades along various international borders, are called Euroregions. The obvious analogy leads us to the concept of the *Caucasus-zones* or *Caucasus-regions*, that is a relevant description for the prototype of such a cross-border space presented below.

## **The level of routine: The case of Sadakhlo**

Today border areas with prospects for mutually beneficial cooperation already exist in the South Caucasus (Yalçın-Heckmann and Demirdirek, Introduction: Encounters of the postsocialist kind; the movement of goods and identities

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<sup>1</sup> Publications in this field, including sociological ones, number probably over several hundred. It seems that a new interdisciplinary field studying cross-border cooperation is emerging. See, for example: (Garcia-Duran, Mora and Millet 2011) (Medeiros 2015) (Sezgin and Gülden 2014).

within and beyond the former socialist world 2007) (Yalçın-Heckmann, Openings and Closures: Citizenship regimes, markets and borders in the Caucasus 2007). The following areas adjacent to state borders can be cited as examples: Sadakhlo (Georgia) – Bagratashen (Armenia), Sarpi (Georgia) – Sarp (Turkey), the village Vesylloe (Russia) located on the border with Abkhazia, the city of Astara that is divided by the Azerbaijani-Iranian border. Perhaps, as international conflicts get resolved in the future, other prospective areas for such development will evolve<sup>2</sup>. The highlighted cases are unique, because the border crossing points here are very busy and play an important transit role. In a sense, these are divided settlements on each side of which the state border created a certain model of development.

The analysis of the situation on the Georgian-Armenian border in the region of Sadakhlo-Bagratashen can help understand the prospects for development offered by different forms of border cooperation. The Red Bridge border crossing between Georgia and Azerbaijan<sup>3</sup>, located nearby, and can add to the value of this area if a different political environment emerges.

Sadakhlo is a big village (according to the 2002 census it had 9.5 thousand inhabitants). It falls under the jurisdiction of the Marneluli municipality in the Kvemo Kartli region. The city of Marneuli is 28 km away. The village became famous due to the border market that stretched into Bagratashen on the Armenian side of the border, and where buyers and vendors from the three countries – Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia – would meet. Goods from Azerbaijan, Turkey, and other countries were sold here.

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<sup>2</sup> Make no mistake about the absence of developed cities near the borders of any of the Caucasus states. The prospect of economic benefits works wonders. A prime example is the case of the Chinese municipality of Heihe on the banks of the Amur River across the Russian city of Blagoveshchensk. The beginning of the 21st century witnessed a real miracle here. Just within one decade, from a gray and ordinary small town Heihe turned into a bright and attractive popular center for shopping, healthcare, and tourism with a population of about two million(!) people. See, for example: Ryzhova, Natalya. "Blagoveshchensk. V poiskakh "chaynatauna"." *Etnograficheskoye obozreniye* 4 (2008): 17-31.; Ryzhova, Natalya. "Rol' prigranichnogo sotrudnichestva v razvitii okrainnykh gorodov Kitaya i Rossii." *Problemy Dal'nego Vostoka* 4 (2009): 59-74. (Ryzhova, Blagoveshchensk. V poiskakh 'chaynatauna' 2008) (Ryzhova, Rol' prigranichnogo sotrudnichestva v razvitii okrainnykh gorodov Kitaya i Rossii 2009).

<sup>3</sup> For a long time, this segment of the border was also a very dynamic space of cross-border trade (Yalçın-Heckmann and Aivazsihveli, Scales of Trade, Informal Economy and Citizenship at Georgian-Azerbaijani Borderlands 2012).

The market provided income for the 90 percent of the local population. Commercial relations and friendly ties were emerging among the residents of the three neighboring countries. All the relationships were built on trust. Local traders would get goods for significant amounts in credit from vendors that arrived from Azerbaijan, and would send them to Armenia again in credit. Thanks to the market, both villages were quickly developing (“People drove SUVs and built two-story houses.”<sup>4</sup>). Such a market could become a development center for the entire surrounding territory.

However, in 2006 the market was shut down by the order of the Georgian government. Later there was an attempt to recreate a similar market in Bagratashen, but the “reboot” was not successful. In a matter of hours, all local entrepreneurs and traders went bankrupt. The flow of goods (in some cases worth tens of thousands of dollars) was stalled. Huge debts accumulated. The lifestyle that had been common as a result of good income changed significantly (“Now fewer people attend weddings and give smaller gifts.”).

Nowadays, there are very few job opportunities in the village. People mostly engage in agriculture; however, this happens on a very basic level since there are difficulties with irrigation due to the lack of water and basic trade. The latter is more vibrant on the train station. The village is conveniently located on the Tbilisi-Yerevan train route and highway. Remittances sent by relatives working in Russia and Azerbaijan play a significant role in maintaining life in the village.

A random observer, operating with the usual “ethnic lens” could be surprised that the vast majority of the Sadakhlo residents consider themselves Azerbaijanis and their neighbors on the other side of the border identify themselves as Armenians<sup>5</sup>. At the same time, the same observer wearing the “ethnic lens” will keep in mind the Nagorno Karabakh war, in the context of which the Armenians and Azerbaijanis are seen as mortal enemies. Some politicians who capitalize on Georgian nationalism add fuel to the fire by intimidating the residents of Georgia by the irredentism of Azerbaijanis in Kvemo Kartli or Armenians of Samtskhe-Javakheti.

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<sup>4</sup> Hereinafter, regarding to the situation in Sadakhlo, the text presents the observations of Victor Voronkov collected during a research school conducted in 2007.

<sup>5</sup> By the way, next to the Sadakhlo on the Georgian side is located the village of Tsopi that is divided by the Azerbaijani and Armenian communities.

Based on this perspective, some researchers consider the economic ties between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Georgia as peacebuilding<sup>6</sup>, believing that the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia should naturally cause mutual hatred among those who consider themselves Azerbaijani or Armenian. However, specific studies refute this persistent misperception. People are not necessarily loyal to the regime; they do not belong to the state that requires them to hate the “enemy”. Business or friendly relations among Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Sadakhlo, St. Petersburg, and Berlin are the common pattern rather than a reason for surprise. In view of this, business activity in between Sadakhlo and Bagratashen has nothing to do with peacebuilding. A stable peace is already in place here.

In this case, all the people are neighbors regardless of self-identification and native language. Local Azerbaijanis are citizens of Georgia the same way as local Armenians or Georgians. Armenians do not have an urge to move to the neighboring “ethnic homeland”, where the living conditions are no better than on Georgia’s periphery. In search of income, local residents leave for Russia or Europe.

The residents of both villages often visit each other since the border crossing is extremely simplified. However, local residents often simply cross the narrow border river. Usually they are not detained for that. In routine life, for the local population a real border exists only near the official crossing point. A short distance away, one can easily walk into another country. For example, some Sadakhlo residents have their favorite recreation areas on the Armenian side. From time to time, of course, the border guards patrol the area along the border (that in reality is only a drawn line on the map), but they try not to notice the “offenders”. At the same time, very often one can see an Armenian border guard walking into a restaurant on the Georgian side to discuss some commercial issue with Sadakhlo businessmen over a glass of wine.

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, business contributes to peacebuilding. However, in this particular case it has nothing to do with peacebuilding. See: Juvarly, Togrul, and Ilham Shabanov. "The potential impact of Sadakhly market on the settlement of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict." In *From war economies to peace economies in the South Caucasus*, edited by Phil Champain, Diana Klein and Natalia Mirimanova, 216–238. London: International Alert, 2004.; Poghosyan, Anna. "Sadakhlo Neutral Zone for Armenian-Azerbaijani Contacts: Use of Trade as a Tool for Conflict Transformation." *Caucasus Edition: Journal of Conflict Transformation*. April 1, 2011. <http://caucasusedition.net/analysis/sadakhlo-neutral-zone-for-armenian-azerbaijani-contacts-use-of-trade-as-a-tool-for-conflict-transformation/>. (Juvarly and Shabanov 2004) (Poghosyan 2011)

This is relevant for the development of mutually beneficial business projects on both sides as well. For example, the river crossing is also used for smuggling (from single suitcases to whole trucks). Sometimes under the cover of the night, trucks laden with cargo transit in haste to return unloaded before dawn. A local reputable businessman told in detail how smuggling takes place here. Most of the business rests on the price difference on both sides of the border.

Unfortunately, the research ethic does not allow for a detailed elaboration of the exchange of services between the neighbors from the two countries (these relationships are often on the verge of the law, or outright illegal). Nonetheless, the observations from the Sadakhlo-Bagratashen area lead to the conclusion that on the peoples' level, the border is not an impediment for the development of good neighborly relations; on the contrary, it is a powerful incentive for their development.

Very little is known about the local authorities' official attempts of cooperation across the border; quite possibly these are limited to the friendly exchange of delegations on festive occasions. However, time will come when resources, as scarce as they might be, will be invested in the implementation of joint ambitious projects (for example, the construction of a modern hospital complex or other similar projects).

The border does not divide people into "friend or foe". The state attempts to do so. However, official border management rules are viable only in certain situations. In the majority of cases, customary law dominates; informal rules formed as a result of routine life near the border region prevail despite the contradiction with the declared rules. Throughout the years, tight social networks among residents of the border areas have developed including also between the border guards. In general, the topic of convergence through economically beneficial strategies of joint development for all sides have their history in the Caucasus (Champain 2004) (Huseynova 2009) (Nelson 2000).

## The civil societies and borders

Discussing civil society initiatives on "blurring borders", the *project-oriented* form of these activities becomes clear through concrete examples. Two of these examples showcase how group interests of the citizens of different countries change their perception about the neighbors and form an environment of goodwill and mutual cooperation instead of the previous suspicion and even hostility. Often such "citizen diplomacy" lays the way for the states' options for



engaging in close and friendly relations and, for the least, contributes towards the normalization of relations between societies.

## **The pan-Caucasus peacebuilding experience: The Caucasus Forum<sup>7</sup>**

The idea of the Caucasus Form (CF) – a network of non-governmental organizations came up in July 1998 during the meeting at the foot of Mount Elbrus within the project framework of building trust between Georgian and Abkhazian non-governmental organizations (NGO). Upon the suggestion of Abkhazian and Georgian colleagues, the representatives of the NGOs from twelve regions of the North and South Caucasus, as well as from Moscow were invited to this meeting. Offering a pan-Caucasus format, the Abkhazian side explained that in bilateral Georgian-Abkhazian dialogue, they feel a certain pressure and the peace process is perceived as an attempt to return Abkhazia to Georgia.

Another argument in favor of the pan-Caucasus format, was the view that the peace initiatives should be discussed in a regional context, since virtually all the post-Soviet Caucasus became an arena of armed political conflicts (which were immediately ethnicized): the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, the Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts, the Ossetian-Ingush conflict, the conflict in Chechnya. Some of these conflicts were complicated by the presence of volunteers from other regions of the Caucasus. For example, voluntary armed groups from Chechnya, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, and Adygeya were involved in the war in Abkhazia.

The London-based international non-governmental organization (INGO) International Alert (Alert), who was the organizer and mediator of the Georgian-Abkhazian peace projects, welcomed the proposed initiative for the sake of a more effective implementation of the project.

However, during the meeting in the Elbrus region, the initiative that was based on the idea of using the pan-Caucasian format to improve the efficiency of an existing process took a completely different vector: the pan-Caucasian aspect

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<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed account of the experience, see: International Alert. *Mediatsiya i dialog na Yuzhnom Kavkaze: osmysleniye pyatnadtsatiletnego opyta po transformatsii konfliktov*. 2012.

<http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/publications/201208MediationSCaucasusRu.pdf>.

(International Alert 2012)

become more dominant. During the discussion of the situation in the Caucasus at the Nalchik meeting, attended by more than forty activists, including experts and NGO leaders, the participants concluded that the efforts of the representatives of the civil societies should be directed at overcoming alienation and the development of a pan-Caucasian civic space. The decision to establish a pan-Caucasian NGO network was reflected in the “Elbrus Declaration” – a document adopted at this meeting. It proclaimed the establishment of the Caucasus Forum NGO and defined the goals and objectives of the network. The declaration was not simply the founding charter, but also became the bylaw of the CF throughout its existence.

The “Elbrus Declaration” focused on strengthening trust and cooperation between the peoples of the Caucasus, contained provisions on the revival of the Caucasus culture and support for joint civic initiatives aimed at building tolerance, development of political culture, assertion of civic consciousness, the revival of traditions of peaceful coexistence, and overcoming ethnic hostility and prejudice. The main goals of the Forum included: ensuring regular contacts and political dialogue in the Caucasus; establishing an effective communication network among the Forum participants; and supporting the development of the NGOs and specific projects initiated by the Forum.

The institutional development of the Forum with its network structure continued virtually throughout its whole lifetime. Besides the “Elbrus Declaration”, the Forum adopted two other documents regulating the activities and reflecting the dynamics of its development – “Resolution of the Caucasus Forum: Towards Peace and Stable Development” (Vladikavkaz, March 2002) and “Regulatory Standards of the Caucasus Forum” (Vladikavkaz, March 2004).

The main organizing body was the Coordinating Council, staffed by one NGO representative from each of the Caucasus regions represented in the Forum at that time. If initially the Coordinating Council had 12 members, later the number increased to 16 people as new regions joined. It was later decided to rotate the post of regional coordinators. An executive body was also created. The overall coordination was trusted to the Executive Secretary, who worked in tandem with a regional representative. All positions were rotation based.

The decisions were made only if a consensus was reached, which meant that each member of the Coordinating Council of the Forum had a right of veto. However, there was no case when any one of the members had to use this right. This was another important aspect of the Forum’s work, which was very

precisely described by Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan, then the Eurasia Program Manager at International Alert. It has to be mentioned that the establishment and development of the Forum was made possible through the active contribution of this organization and Ter-Gabrielyan's personal efforts. He called this particular aspect "minimal consensus", when, for example, the suggestion was supported by the main "opposing sides" (for example Armenian and Azerbaijani) and they were joined by one other neutral member, then the rest would easily accept the proposal.

One of the factors usually impeding the work of different Caucasus networks has been the issue of the difference in status of the various regions. The NGOs involved in the Forum came from entities within the Russian Federation, sovereign states in the South Caucasus, and unrecognized republics in the South Caucasus. In the Forum, this problem found its solution: the Forum's coordinators were not authorized to represent their territories or any political formations or forces. They merely represented themselves and their NGOs. Geographically their location was identified by the city and not the region. This transformed the Forum into a community of citizens-experts sharing the ideas of the Forum, exercising tolerance, adhering to civic values, and believing in and prescribing to a pan-Caucasus identity. In addition, this depoliticized the activities of the Forum, making it an exclusively civic process. Hence, the Forum truly rested on shared civic values.

An important part of the Forum's work was the dissemination of its ideas. Here too the context was kept in mind – for example, the different levels of interest of various participants towards different ideas. The civil societies in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia were developing actively, without any limitations in their cooperation with the donors. Being part of multiple networks and working on dozens of projects, they did not see the Forum as particularly special, in any way different from others or a vitally necessary structure.

The perception of the network was completely different in the North Caucasus and the unrecognized republics of the South Caucasus. Here they saw the Forum as a way out of their isolation, an opportunity to establish connections in the Caucasus and internationally, and an opportunity for development. The level of interest in the Forum also varied between Baku, Yerevan, and Tbilisi. Tbilisi was always happy with the pan-Caucasus idea. Part of the Yerevan-based NGO establishment supported the Forum for the sake of the idea, while others supported it for the sake of Stepanakert<sup>8</sup>. In this situation, Baku simply

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<sup>8</sup> The city is called Khankendi in Azerbaijan.

could not afford to be left out. Everyone knew that the interest towards the network would grow naturally once the Forum gained credibility as a structure in the region.

Both the executive bodies and coordinators in the regions were involved in disseminating the Forum's ideas. The position of the regional coordinator was unpaid. Besides being involved in the Form, many participants worked in other projects or had their own projects. At one stage, the coordinators themselves offered to integrate all the work they did locally into the Forum; they expressed willingness to contribute their own efforts and those of their NGO colleagues to one Forum "piggy bank".

However, for a large-scale impact, only human resources are not enough. Financial support plays a huge role. In addition, large-scale effect takes time. The seven years of the Forum's activities involved around 600 to 700 activists. Even though the Forum possessed potential and legitimacy to implement its ideas, at that particular moment in times, there was no opportunity to transform these ideas into a sustainable ideology that could serve as a conceptual platform for the establishment of a system of regional interaction. First of all, this was due to a strong political divide in the Caucasus. Neither state authorities in the Caucasus countries, nor the external forces were interested in a model of cooperation advocated by the Forum.

The goals outlined in the "Elbrus Declaration" only provide an idea about the desirable historical perspective. The document is called a declaration because the goals outlined in it are declarative in nature. They reflect a value-based and civic approach, and in no way are a strategic plan for building a stable and peaceful Caucasus. In any case, the Forum could not have other goals. In the margins of the Form, people expressed the need for more specific aims, for example, using the foundation of the Form to create an organization similar to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). However, there was never a formal proposal as such. Everybody knew that on the one hand, this idea would never gain consensus, and on the other hand, the majority did not believe in such a possibility considering the idea unrealistic.

With time, the Forum realized the need of a dramatic institutional transformation in becoming independent and influential. However, soon after that it ceased operations. Why? Perhaps it was because of the circumstances. The funding ended; the donors lost their interest in regional projects; the position of the Russian authorities toward international non-governmental initiatives tightened and the latter significantly affected the partners in the

North Caucasus. The unfortunate lineup of external circumstances is obvious, but there was also an internal rationale. The ascend of the Forum to a new level of institutionalization required new goals and objectives – things that were not developed.

In a nutshell, the Forum operated within the framework of its goals. The main vectors of activities were related to the development of the civil society in the Caucasus; the support to peace initiatives, peacebuilding, and humanitarian missions; the analysis of the ethno-political situation with the aim of conflict prevention. The Forum had a diverse portfolio of activities: seminars and conferences, trainings, monitoring, creative games, humanitarian events, as well as statements and petitions directed at the protection of human rights when their violation threatened the peace and stability in the region.

The list of the Forum's success stories can take up several pages. However, the most prominent ones are worth a mention:

- A conference on traditional forms of conflict resolution in the Caucasus. A book based on the conference materials was subsequently published in two editions, demonstrating the high relevance of the topic.
- The project "Forgotten Regions", aimed at supporting and developing civil society in Nagorno Karabakh, South Ossetia, and the regions of the North Caucasus.
- Meetings between ex-combatants of the Caucasus and between people with disabilities affected by armed conflict.
- The meetings of women civil society leaders which later led to the formation of the new pan-Caucasus network – "The Caucasus Women's League".
- The peacebuilding mission to Karachay-Cherkessia in 1999. This marked the start of real peacebuilding by the Forum. Moreover, according to international experts, the report with the mission's findings contained an outstandingly objective and comprehensive analysis.
- The monitoring of the presidential elections in Kabardino-Balkaria in 2002. At the time, a serious new force appeared on the political scene representing a real alternative to the incumbent president and potentially destabilizing the situation. The Forum's report was used by presidential candidates who disputed the election results at an international court.
- The publication of a collection of short stories by writers from the South Caucasus, entitled "Time to Live".

The Caucasus Forum was a unique model for regional cooperation. Its experience can serve to build transnational systems of collaboration that are

indispensable for security and peaceful development in the wider region. The pan-Caucasian format of mediation that launched the Caucasus Forum confirmed an old and crucial principle: if a community cares for each individual, each individual will care for the community. It reconfirmed that an evolutionary and transformative form of conflict resolution is the way to achieve long-lasting peace. Cooperation and joint development on their own, regardless of the conflicts, give rise to a sustainable model of peaceful coexistence. The pan-Caucasian format demonstrated that in a regional context, it is much easier to ensure such processes and to achieve concrete results.

The main methodological achievements of the Forum were the flexibility in the choice of methods, the openness to new and creative methodology, and the ability to adapt work schemas to peculiarities and the geography of the project. A project team could include representatives of conflicting regions and such a team evoked trust among project participants. With time, the Forum adopted other criteria for team member selection – commitment to the Forum ideals, professional qualities and personal abilities, and only then affiliation with a region.

An analysis of the Forum's history allows to conclude that, despite the termination of activities, the Forum helped many representatives of the civil societies of the Caucasus to acknowledge the shared goals and values, and it greatly changed the perspective on the neighbors in the region.

Many different organizations whose activities transcend state borders can stimulate federalization. These can be, for example, transnational professional associations and unions of non-governmental organizations in the fields of science, culture, education, health, sports, and others. The very activity of these organizations implies common interests aimed at the "blurring borders". In this regard, a union of professionals whose main goal is the immediate influence on peacebuilding processes in the region would be even more effective. What follows is the history of the development of a successful initiative which directly impacted the collection of articles presented in this publication.

## **A brief history of the Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation<sup>9</sup>**

In 2005, a group of Armenian and Azerbaijani students working on their graduate-level degrees in conflict resolution in the US pitched the idea of an Armenian-Azerbaijani dialogue for youth. In the beginning, the plan was to raise funds for the dialogue from Azerbaijani and Armenian business people since it would serve to a two-level cause: a dialogue among youth and a case of collaboration among business people. Soon enough funds were raised. However, in the last moment, the meeting was cancelled due to the interference of the governments.

Two year later, at the beginning of 2007, in cooperation with the US Embassies in Baku and Yerevan, the aspired dialogue program became reality for the Armenian and Azerbaijani fellows of the US State Department-supported Edmund S. Muskie Graduate Fellowship Program that is led by the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX). The aim was to build a cross-border network of US alumni.

The first dialogue for 12 participants took place in May 2007 on a remote island in Maine, US. It was led by a team of one Armenian, one Azerbaijani, and one American facilitator. Two similar dialogues were organized in the US in 2008 and 2009 for the Muskie and later also the Global Undergraduate Exchange Program (UGRAD) fellows. This led to the gradual growth of the alumni network. In 2009, the fourth dialogue was held – this time in the region of the South Caucasus.

The methodology of the dialogue program was initially designed to work in the Armenian-Turkish context in 2005-2007. Starting from 2007, the Imagine Center has been employing its methodology with the Armenian-Azerbaijani, Syrian, Georgian-Abkhazian, Georgian-South Ossetian, as well as Caucasus-wide, and other regional contexts.

Already for the first dialogue initiatives, the team of organizers and facilitators faced a conceptual choice of methodology. In peacebuilding, there are three distinct approaches each with its own conceptual foundations. *Conflict management* is close to the realist school of thought and rests on the belief that conflicts are practically insolvable, and the best one can do is manage them and

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<sup>9</sup> The Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation is an independent, non-political organization that is dedicated to positively transforming relations and laying foundations for lasting and sustainable peace in conflict-torn societies.

minimize violence. The approach of *conflict resolution* is closer to the liberal school of international relations and believes in a cooperative human nature and that win-win solutions are possible among antagonists. The approach of *conflict transformation* is based on a constructivist paradigm; it does not accept identities or relations as givens and aims to transform relations between identity groups, as well as the identities themselves.

The team chose *conflict transformation* as it is an approach with a long-term vision and implies a deep transformation in the societies of their relationship to one another and to the conflict. This choice was reflected in the name of the organization – Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation (Imagine Center). Based on the general frames of conflict transformation, the Imagine Center developed its own detailed methodology for dialogues that are usually led by a team of moderators originating from the societies in conflict, as well as from Europe and the US.

The dialogue methodology evolves first and foremost around personal transformation. Throughout the entire dialogue process, informal and formal sessions help to establish personal relationships among the participants. Confidence-building exercises make the process more dynamic at the same time addressing important issues of communication and group work. Events held in the evenings after a day of intensive dialogue sessions help to blur the lines dividing the participants and establish a spirit of collaboration among them regardless of the tensions that build up during the day. The joint living and structured leisure time also contribute to the building of mutual understanding and trust between participants.

In between dialogue sessions, conflict transformation workshops are conducted. Participants learn how to manage difficult conversations, articulate emotions and vulnerability without confrontation, recognize and address their own stereotypes and triggers. Applying the knowledge and skills built together, participants can engage in a more informed, aware, and constructive dialogue.

Dialogue sessions – the core part of the program – include discussions of the key issues related to the conflict, such as history, war and violence, and present-day relations. Throughout the dialogue, with the support of the facilitators, participants process the dynamics of interaction between groups in conflict. Different from many conflict resolution projects that deliberately put aside differences and focus on commonalities, the Imagine Center's methodology allows the participants to express their differences, understand each other, and



analyze the underlying drivers of the conflict. The participants are encouraged to step back from the traditional adversarial positions and discuss the conflict as a common problem that needs to be solved jointly and in a way that meets the basic security needs and interests of all the parties involved.

Putting individuals at the heart of the program, the dialogue methodology gives an opportunity to the participants to articulate the impact of the war and the conflict not only on the societies, but also on their own lives through sharing personal stories. Only after working out their differences and developing strong relationships, the participants move on to the final phase of the dialogue program – future planning. This phase challenges them to identify activities and directions of collaboration for addressing the existing issues between the two societies.

The dialogue program that brings together people from across conflict divides is the core program of the Imagine Center. Hundreds of participants have been part of these dialogue processes and are now a strong support network for the Imagine Center.

By 2008, a new component was added to the portfolio: planning workshops bringing together the most active alumni of the dialogues and bridging them for the follow-up activities. During the workshops, the participants design and plan specific joint activities or entire projects. This allows the participants to build on the skills acquired and to become coordinators of new projects.

Today the organization has expanded to include an office in Georgia and team members in Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Turkey. Currently, the organization carries forward several directions of work.

The “Breaking the Impasse” Series was launched in 2008 as a joint Armenian-Azerbaijani analytic initiative that brought together conflict resolution experts, civil society representatives and diplomats from Armenia, Azerbaijan, the OSCE, and the US. The goal of these meetings was to provide input to policy making and facilitate the coordination between the official (Track I) and citizen (Track II) diplomacy efforts in resolving the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. By 2015, the “Breaking the Impasse” Series became a regional initiative bringing together into a virtual think tank scholar-practitioners and analysts from all corners of the South Caucasus, as well as Turkey and Russia.

In April 2010, a journal focused on the Nagorno Karabakh conflict with a joint Armenian-Azerbaijani editorial board was launched. By 2015 the Journal became regional focused on all conflicts in the South Caucasus, as well Turkey,

and is managed by a joint Armenian-Azerbaijani-Georgian-Turkish editorial board. Today, the Caucasus Edition – Journal of Conflict Transformation is an independent online publication that provides a forum for scholars, practitioners, policy analysts, journalists, and novice researchers others to discuss conflicts and related issues in the South Caucasus and Turkey.

Another direction of work led by the Imagine Center are the dialogues, trainings, and workshops for journalists. This direction resulted in the establishment of professional networks of journalists across conflict divides who, going through joint skill building, exchange of experience, and dialogue, contribute to building alternative discourses in the media that counter the biased coverage of the conflicts.

The most recent projects in the area of media and journalism, the project on “Ethical Conflict Coverage in the South Caucasus” and the “Fall School and Dialogue for Journalists and Analysts” have mobilized a group of analysts and journalists from the South Caucasus and Turkey. They have come together in the framework of the Caucasus Edition as a source of alternative media coverage, policy analysis, and applied research, to develop a shared vision and strategy, and advance transnational professional networks.

Yet another direction of work crucial for conflict transformation is aimed at the development of a critical view of the official ideological and conflict-promoting approaches to historiography and history education. Through efforts in this direction, the Imagine Center has established a network of historians across conflict divides, who identify the current problems in historiography and history education and work together on the creation of alternative approaches to these disciplines contributing to the transformation of narratives and discourses. Within this direction, in 2013-2014 historians and history educators originating from the South Caucasus authored a methodological manual titled “Challenges and Prospects of History Education and Textbook Development in the South Caucasus”. Based on the Manual, professionals engaged in this direction of work have been producing Pilot History Lessons illustrating the application of the new methodologies. The Pilot History Lessons have been piloted in Georgian, Armenian, South Ossetian, and Azerbaijani schools and have gained positive feedback from the teachers and the students alike.

To date, the Imagine Center remains a unique organization co-founded and co-managed initially by a joint Armenian-Azerbaijani team and today by a regional team.

The realities of the Caucasus until transnational regional organizations and today are two different types of realities. It seems that despite state-led propaganda aimed at inciting hostility toward the people living on the other side of the divides, the societies of the Caucasus will never be plunged into total xenophobia, suspicion, and hostility towards neighbors. The civic initiatives described above as well as many others inspire hope in the hearts of thousands of citizens that political conflicts can be resolved, that borders can become simple lines on the map, and that the day will come when the people of the region will be able to coexist without conflict in a shared Caucasus space in a confederation or another alternative form of organization.

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# Acronyms and Abbreviations

EU European Union

CF Caucasus Form

NGO non-governmental organization

INGO international non-governmental organization

OSCE Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

IRES International Research and Exchanges Board

UGRAD Global Undergraduate Exchange Program