

# Imagining the Future: Visions for Conflict Transformation

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**IMAGINE**

Center for Conflict Transformation

The Imagine Center 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.

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In March 2017, 24 analysts, journalists, and social scientists from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, Russia, and Ukraine gathered together in a beautiful and castle-like venue in the famous-for-its-wine Kakheti region of Georgia for this year's edition of the "Breaking the Impasse" Series<sup>1</sup>. Building on the previous work of the Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation and its partners in the context of post-Soviet conflicts, the meeting aimed at the expansion of the regional network of professionals who engage in constructive dialogue and joint analysis, advocating for a joint vision and strategy for the peaceful transformation of conflicts in the South Caucasus.

The specific objectives for the gathering were to identify the topics of the second hard-copy issue of the *Journal of Conflict Transformation: Caucasus Edition*, form working groups around these topics, and engage in dialogue and build consensus within the groups. The analysts agreed, however, that starting the discussion from the realities on the ground which are rather grim is likely to lead the group to a dead end. Instead, the experts present decided to start from expanding the horizons of what's possible and sharing the vision for the transformation of the conflicts in the region and the development of inclusive and democratic societies that each person present in the room aspired for. The individual visions were then grouped into a few categories, creating a group vision. Some of them, such as the ideas of demilitarized peace zones and transitional justice, immediately became the topics around which some of the analysts coalesced. Others remained for now at the stage of ideas to be developed by future cohorts of analysts and scholar.

Some of the ideas discussed during this visioning exercise, such as democratization, are well-known, long-discussed, even commonsensical, and yet adopted by the societies in the South Caucasus in name only. The other ideas are antithetical to the current conventions, and thanks to that, innovative and inspirational.

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<sup>1</sup> The "Breaking the Impasse" Series started in 2008 as analytic meetings of conflict resolution experts, civil society representatives, and diplomats facilitating the coordination of Track I and Track II efforts in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Over the years, the Series has expanded to include all of the South Caucasus and its neighborhood. The current phase of the Series advocates for a common vision, strategy, and action for regional peace and development and contributes to positive changes in the public discourses about the conflicts in the region and in the peace processes.

# South Caucasus Integration

Call it Utopia or Dystopia, the idea of some form of a South Caucasus integrative process is as old as the region's nation-states themselves. That same timing, perhaps, can also explain why the idea never gained enough recruits either among the populations and the intellectual communities or the political elites, most of whom over the past century have been continually preoccupied with their mutually exclusive nationalist projects.

The failure to be heard, however, never deterred the intellectual minority invested in the promotion of the civic (as opposed to ethnic) form of statehood from keeping the idea of a united South Caucasus alive. The proponents see the integration of the South Caucasus as the only sustainable way toward a peaceful future that will benefit all, since the more traditional conflict resolution mechanisms are based on the model of the ethnic state and result in win-lose solutions when one group achieves its exclusivist goals at the expense of the others.

Throughout the past three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, various versions of such integration have been proposed. Many of them are detailed by Abasov and Khachatryan in their discussion of the variants of settlement for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict<sup>2</sup>. The scholars and analysts who gathered in Kakheta in March 2017, developed their own version of this integration.

Two possibilities were discussed. The first can be framed as an early-EU-style union where the constituting parts remain independent political ethno-nations, yet integrate economically. And the second one assumes a deeper socio-politically integrated confederacy where the constituting parts retain certain autonomy yet turn away from the concept of the ethno-nation and move toward an inclusive civic nation. This second and more integrated option would require also the creation of a regional identity, based on the revival of the notion of shared cultural heritage. The analysts also mentioned the need to take on the "dolma wars" and the promotion of the notion of cultural similarities in cuisine or music as shared rather than contested heritage and celebration of differences.

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<sup>2</sup> Abasov, Ali, and Harutyun Khachatryan. 2005. *The Karabakh Conflict. Variants of Settlement: Concepts and Reality*. Yerevan and Baku: Noyan Tapan and Areat.

While they disagreed on the extent of integration, both the proponents of the less integrated economic union and the deeply integrated confederation, agreed on the need for open borders and the development of free trade within the region and with its neighborhood. Further, the need for gradual demilitarization and the investment of resources into other spheres of social life, such as art and science, was discussed.

The ideas of demilitarized zones and free trade were further developed in the piece on the zones of peace in this issue. We will aim to pick up the bigger questions of South Caucasus integration in one of our future issues.

## De-Colonization

Somewhat an antecedent to the South Caucasus integration idea has been the voiced need for the discursive and political de-colonization of the South Caucasus. The idea was expressed through a number of interconnected visions concerned with the ongoing political, economic, and military dependence of the new nation-states from their former metropole. Even those in the post-Soviet space, such as Georgia, that tried to assert their independence, paid a steep price in form of a direct confrontation with Russia and became home to intractable ethnically-framed conflicts that have kept them in the orbit of Russian influence.

Russia's "soft power", particularly the latest incessant promotion of social conservative values by Russian media and Russian-government backed local NGOs are seen as particularly problematic. The analysts described these as openly promoting anti-LGBTI, anti-gender equality, and otherwise anti-human rights agendas, discrediting the human rights and pro-democracy NGOs as agents of western influence. All this contributes to the weakening of strong and independent civil societies and democracy.

The analysts, however, did not advocate for severing the relationship with Russia as their former metropole. Instead, they focused on the possibility of transforming the relationship with Russia into one of equality and partnership, rather than of dependence and domination.

A related vision focused on changing the role of the South Caucasus states in the world arena from the played-by-others chess figurines on the "West"- "East" frontier into active players.

## Democracy Building

Perhaps a more expected, yet not less important or forward-looking vision concerned democracy building with all its attributes.

The analysts who chose to envision the future in discursively dominant and therefore seemingly more achievable and realistic categories focused on familiar notions of developing functional civil societies and democratization as necessary conditions for conflict resolution. Espousing liberal-democratic values, developing stable economies and the rule of law, forging transparency and accountability were all seen as integral parts of a democratic future.

The 2.0 thinkers in this category talked about “digital democracy”, or employing the up to date technology to the service of democracy building.

Popular among the analysts who favored the vision of building democracies within the existing nation-states, as opposed to focusing on regional integration, was the idea of transforming their states from exclusivist ethnic into inclusive civic nations. The idea gave rise to the civic nation section of the paper “The Mosaic of Solutions: Alternative Peace Processes for the South Caucasus”.

## Reconciliation and Inclusive Societies

The next cluster of ideas for the vision of the future focused directly on conflict resolution, or to be more precise, conflict transformation. In the context of a few decades of fueling mutual hatred and isolation by the nationalist state machines, immediate conflict resolution (understood as a political settlement) does not look possible, or even if achieved, does not promise to be sustainable. A longer road toward reconciliation, transformation of the inter-group relations, and even of the notion of the groups themselves were seen as necessary for conflict transformation.

The specific steps and a comprehensive strategy toward such transformation were discussed and included the following areas.

First of all, there is a big need for countering stereotypes and enemy images, which are currently promoted through the education systems, the media,

memory politics and official commemoration practices. The present volume takes on the topic of media in the paper titled “Representation of Minorities in the Media in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey”.

In order to forge diverse and inclusive societies, the group considered it critical to develop de-politicized historical narratives. These would not downplay the events from the past where the inter-group relations were neutral and positive, nor would they ignore the events where their own group acted as the perpetrator. While this topic has not been covered by the co-authors of the current issue, previous publications of the Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation have addressed it comprehensively<sup>3</sup>.

Ongoing reconciliation work was also deemed as very important, namely numerous inter-group dialogues that would culminate in the rehumanization of the other. Non-violent conflicts have to be accepted as a normal part of everyday life, but mechanisms developed to manage them creatively and peacefully, and not through violence that is direct (physical) or structural (discrimination, displacement, marginalization, exclusion, etc.). Peace education, learned from successful examples of its application in other post-conflict societies, can be one important vehicle toward building a culture of dialogue and resulting in celebration of diversity and coexistence of culturally distinct groups.

The analysts also paid particular attention to the political and cultural rights of minority groups. Multilingualism, was agreed to be an institution that can contribute to the formation of both multicultural and economically advanced societies. It is better than monolingualism which alienates the minorities and isolates the country from its neighborhood. It is also better than limited

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<sup>3</sup> See for example: Akpınar, Alişan, Sos Avetisyan, Hayk Balasanyan, Fırat Güllü, Işıl Kandolu, Maria Karapetyan, Nvard V. Manasian, et al. 2017. *History Education in Schools in Turkey and Armenia. A Critique and Alternatives*. Edited by Bülent Bilmez, Kenan Çayır, Özlem Çaykent, Philip Gamaghelyan, Maria Karapetyan and Pınar Sayan. History Foundation (Tarih Vakfı) and Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation. Accessed August 5, 2017. <http://caucasusedition.net/analysis/history-education-in-schools-in-turkey-and-armenia/>; Karpenko, Oksana, Philip Gamaghelyan, and Sergey Romyansev. 2014. *Проблемы и перспективы подготовки учебников и преподавания истории на Южном Кавказе [Challenges and Prospects of History Education and Textbook Development in the South Caucasus]*. Tbilisi: Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation. Accessed September 20, 2017. <http://caucasusedition.net/hard-copy/>.



bilingualism, not least because of the political implications of choosing the “second” language. Should it be the minority language? If yes, which one? Or should it be English that signals a pro-European orientation yet cuts off the country from Russia and other neighbors? Or should it be Russian that provides continuity but hinders prospects of European integration? Multilingualism – investment into the state language, English, Russian, and minority languages of choice – is certainly an expansive and resource-consuming investment, but one that – as the example of countries that have implemented it shows – pays off both economically and in regard to the development of a peaceful and integrated society.

Finally, transitional justice which is better known to be applied in post-conflict contexts was brought up as a mechanism of conflict resolution. Colombia, in particular, was cited as a success case where transitional justice led to national dialogue and catalyzed the peace process advancing reconciliation and resulting in a peace agreement. Transitional justice in the South Caucasus would require focus on the victims of the conflicts and on the restoration of their voice and their rights, on the return of the displaced and the acknowledgement of responsibility and possibly retributive actions towards the perpetrators of injustice.

The topics of transitional justice, rehumanization, peace education, and multilingual education were all taken up by the co-authors of the current issue who contributed to the paper “The Mosaic of Solutions: Alternative Peace Processes for the South Caucasus”. Moreover, it was agreed that a lot remained unsaid on the topic of transitional justice in the South Caucasus as a mechanism of conflict transformation. To fill the gap, one of the future issues of the *Caucasus Edition* will be devoted exclusively to transitional justice.

## Post-Nation-State Form of Social Organization

When discussing conflict resolution mechanisms such as confederation, transitional justice, and democratization that are absent from the South Caucasus yet otherwise well-tested, most of the analysts stayed within the confines of the liberal-democratic nation-state system. Others, at the same time, argued that the centralized nation-state model in itself has created conditions

for nationalisms and ethnic competition, and through this has been perpetuating conflicts. Therefore, a number of alternatives to nationalist forms of social organization were also discussed, some innovative and others reminiscent of early 20th century revolutionary ideas, which never materialized.

Institutionally, these alternative visions were rooted in the concept of decentralization and vesting the power into localities. The decision making locally, then, would be consensus-based. In other words, democracy (decision making by the majority) would have to evolve into “cooperacy” (consensus-based decision making). The needs of the minorities and other formerly discriminated groups would be moved from the margins of the society to the center of the conversation with the understanding that a society is as good as its least privileged members. The well-being of the previously marginalized, therefore, should become the cornerstone of the conflict transformation process. The society will focus on ongoing self-reflection and the acknowledgement and restitution of all past atrocities and will commit to the prevention of new ones. Moreover, as no society is immune to these, and in the future new groups might be marginalized or suppressed, civic dialogue and reconciliation should become an ongoing process.

The central government will continue to exist and its social functions expanded, while its repressive functions, such as police, prison, and army, will be very limited. It would have to necessarily represent the diversity of its society. The focus of the state identity will be the life and the well-being of all people and not the territory. In the reversal of the established doctrine that life has to be given for territory, the ultimate value will be placed in the person, not in citizenship.

The concept of citizenship itself would also change, away from its current patriarchal and gendered understanding and toward a pluralistic and inclusive one. This particular topic is discussed in more detail in the paper “Gender and Sexuality in the Discourses of the Nation-State in Conflict Contexts: Armenia, Georgia, and Turkey”. No identity should be deemed illegitimate (including various expressions of gender and sexuality, nomadism, and more), provided that they hold others free of harm. Ethnicity, while certainly important for many, can be celebrated similar to all other identities as a unique form of cultural expression and should be depoliticized.

Such shift away from politicization of cultural identities, celebration of diversity, decentralization of power, and the establishment of an ongoing dialogue intended to bring in the marginalized and underprivileged has been described by some of the forward-looking analysts as the most effective form of conflict transformation where the voices of all are heard and included in the political process. The state, in turn, becomes in effect an affirmative action state committed to addressing marginalization and other forms of structural violence through ongoing intra-societal dialogue and building structural peace and an integrated society.

The same principles of inclusivity, diversity, and championing the welfare of the underprivileged, supplemented by the all-important global cause of environmental justice can become the cornerstones of inter-societal and international dialogue aimed at building a sustainable world.