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Literature Review:

The role of civil society in managing memories of disputed territories

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THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN MANAGING MEMORIES OF DISPUTED TERRITORIES - Ruzanna Tsaturyan

Ruzanna is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography (National Academy of Science, Armenia) whose main research interests are cultural heritage, nationalism, gender studies and food anthropology. In this review, Ruzanna sets out the challenges for civil society in peacebuilding processes and through the example of Armenia and Turkey, demonstrates the potential for agonism in facilitating dialogue and understanding.

The aim of this literature review is to tackle one more aspect of civil society's roles in cultural and conflicting memory management processes. Whilst there are many cases of projects involving civil society in resolving political conflicts and conflicting memories and establishing a dialogue, there is lack of research on the role of civil society in managing conflictual and competing memories of disputed territories. The evaluation of the effectiveness and expediency of these projects vary widely. As this part of the literature review aims to examine the available research on the subject matter, it is important to consider different connotations given to the term 'civil society.' This is a highly debated topic in social science and it should be noted, that the discussions on the interpretation of 'civil society', its coverage and boundaries entail varying opinions.

A report by the World Bank describes civil society as 'the wide array of non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations' (World Bank, 2006). Researchers debating the concept of 'civil society' since the times of Cicero, Greco-Roman philosophers and the period of enlightenment, mostly characterise it as a platform separate from the state, formed on the basis of citizens' desires and aspirations (Anheier, Helmut K., 2004). Edwards sees it as an integrated 'ecosystem,' where the boundries and coverages are not certain. Moreover, with its 'chameleon

like qualities,'' civil society is not completely separate from the state and business (Edwards, 2014).

Within public consciousness the role and existence of civil society has evolved throughout different periods of history. Argued to have become a 'mantra' in the 1990s used by Presidents to political scientists, the boundaries and meaning of 'civil society' have been stretched. In line with this period, the following provides one of the broader definitions of civil society; 'Properly understood, civil society is a broader concept, encompassing all the organizations and associations that exist outside of the state (including political parties) and the market. It includes the gamut of organizations that political scientists traditionally label interest groups-not just advocacy NGOs but also labor unions, professional associations (such as those of doctors and lawyers), chambers of commerce, ethnic associations, and others. It also incorporates the many other associations that exist for purposes other than advancing specific social or political agendas, such as religious organizations, student groups, cultural organizations'. (Carothers, T., & Barndt, W., 1999:20)

By defining volunteerism and self-organization as a characteristic for describing civil society agents, a number of groups are distinguished: interest groups, charity groups, grassroots associations, and sociopolitical movements. The notions of social trust and social capital therefore are also closely associated with the descriptions of civil society (Paturyan & Gevorgyan, 2014).

Civil society and the state

Debates on civil society are inherently linked with the nature of democracy, as well as the boundaries of the state and other social institutions. Some scholars believe that civil society actions should be aimed at improving democracy, supporting democratic transition, and increasing citizen participation in governance (Putnam, 1993; Putman, 2000). The possibilities of civil society in democratization are assessed

in several core dimensions: providing a free space for public activity, representing the people, bridging social gaps, and enhancing social integration (Yishai, 2002).

Regarding democracy and the potential of civil society, Dagher notices that setting out broad definition in an attempt to form a comprehensive understanding of the society and the 'crystalized' agenda of the civil society represents. This overlooks what may be termed 'uncivil' groups of the same society which become an active challenge for what is broadly defined as 'civil society' and the democratic values it defines (Dagher, 2016:16). Dagher reflects that ''This tendency to focus on the positive aspects of civil society arises from a Western historical context, in which the rise of civil society was and continues to be associated with urbanization, strong legal systems, tolerance, and non-violence.' (Dagher, 2016; Mudde, 2003).

Defining civil society as a phenomenon acting separate from the state (Keane; 1988) makes the nature of democracy crucial in assessing the potential and effectiveness of civil society. Debates around whether democracy defines the functioning of active civil society, or active civil society promotes democratization are regularly discussed in social science. There are also critical views on how political power is becoming dictatorial, even when it has a culture of active public self-organization (Berman, 1997). The World Bank report summarizes the roles of civil societies in promoting democratization, noting that despite non-democratic contexts, active functioning of civil society in many cases contributes to a little more democratization; 'In Latin America, the concept of civil society has been framed primarily by the fight against military dictatorship in the 1960s and by socio-economic exclusion. In Eastern Europe, the concept was shaped by collective actions to overcome authoritarian regimes and establish democratic structures' (Merkel 1999).

As research on the role of civil society in modern society have predominantly emerged in Western European societies, there is also a need to compare and contrast the reality formed in this context with non-Western and developing

contexts (Lewis 2002; Pinkney, 2003). Scholars are exploring the ways in which civil society can exist and function in contexts of failed states, authoritarian rule and ethnic nationalism, underdevelopment or overbearing international presence? (Marchetti, 2009)

These questions are interesting for the Armenian case, where the civil society is active in positively promoting the process of democratization in the country. Here the issue of participation in memory management is closely linked to public trust and the areas 'conquered' by civil society. While various studies on Armenian civil society value consistent steps taken to institutionalize civil society, they also note a low level of public trust (Gevorgyan, 2017; Armine Ishkanian et al., 2013; Ishkanian, 2008; Babajanian, 2005; Blue, 2001; 2004). For example, public trust in NGOs has been low in the past decade, according to the Caucasus Barometer, the percentage of those who trust NGOs was 18% in 2013, but the percentage of those who distrust NGOs increased from 28% in 2012 to 36% in 2013 (Paturyan, 2014: 17). By 2017, this had improved once again to almost 2013 levels at 29%.[1]

Of course, this situation is not only a cause, but also a consequence of the discourse brought forward by non-democratic public administration in recent years, which resulted in targeting civil society organizations as marginal, opposed to national, ethnic interests; especially in the debates on violence, women's rights and peacebuilding. In fact, for different reasons, such things are common in the other countries of the region. Thus, 'A common strand among countries in Asia is that civil society is still not protected, as the state continues to be the central, and often the most repressive, actor in the region. Political and economic interests steered democratization toward a type of social organization that placed state institutions, special interest groups, and economic sectors into a single associated sphere' (Paffenholzv, 2010).

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[1] For more information see Caucasus Barometer;
https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2017am/TRUNGOS/, accessed 20.01.2020.

The institutionalization of civil society, (i.e. through the establishment of NGOs), is more typical for Armenia than active social movements. This is a typical 'weakness' of a post-communist associational political culture (Howard 2003) that remains unchanged in Armenia. (Paturyan 2014:17); (Beraia,Yavuz & Dilanyan, 2019). In general, primarily viewing civil society issues and activity through the NGO sector allows for further consideration of NGO participation in conflict resolution, which is of interest to us in DisTerrMem. Financial instability of the Armenian civil society is the challenge that makes them 'donor-driven,' and at the same time more importantly, the legitimacy of civil society organizations to represent local voices is often disputed on the grounds that many NGOs are funded from abroad (Paturyan, 2014). Civil society becomes reduced to professionalized service delivery or advocacy NGOs (Ishkanian, 2009, 10).

For discussing the role of civil society agents in memory management, and specifically within the DisTerrMem project, it would be useful to examine the experience and approaches in peacebuilding and conflict transformation. While civil society participation in conflict resolution is recognized, as a tool it is not fully utilized and directly involved in peacebuilding. The role, expectation and perceptions of various civil society groups and organizations in peacebuilding are also not clear: from antagonistic and even agonist approaches (Marchetti, 2009).

Modern discussion and measurement of the effectiveness of peacebuilding activities have changed from outcome-oriented approaches to conflict management, to relationship-oriented conflict resolution, and to more comprehensive transformation approaches. For example, the People to People peace program funded by Norway following the 1994 Oslo peace agreement between Israel and Palestine supported dialogue projects between Israeli and Palestinian groups. A recent evaluation found that activities resulted in better relations between the individuals involved, but had little impact on the peace process at large (World Bank, 2006). It is therefore also

important to think about what connections, or lack of, exist between grass roots efforts and the agendas of nation states or regional organizations.

It is also important to understand whether civil society plays the same peacebuilding role in all societies in conflict situations. Especially in the societies like Armenia, where the cultural importance of social connections is stronger, the role of civil society agents becomes ambivalent in the situations of conflict escalation, and social relations and kinship are given greater prominence for security and self-defense considerations (Pouligny, 2005). In the context of weak state order following conflict, the influence of uncivil, xenophobic, or mafia-like groups gets stronger and pose a challenge to civil society, especially when there are issues with inter-ethnic dialogue (Belloni 2006, 8–9).

The DisTerrMem project proposes discussing memory management models based on an agonistic memory model as a research starting point for possible direction in the future. Of course, agonistic theory has a constructive potential with respect to conflicting memories as the diversification of opportunities to have a voice for as many parties as possible implies involvement of as many actors as possible, and here the role of civil society is worth examining (Bull & Hansen, 2015).

Adding to this is an extensive list of sensitive topics in Armenia, either driven by policy direction (due to the work of manipulated GONGOs) (Gevorgyan, 2017:11), or by the burden of historical memory. Civic initiatives around such issues are more than cautious, given the potential public reaction to the projects that seek to change prevailing public perceptions. International experience shows that despite the expectations and ambitions, civil society organizations as a rule play a secondary role in conflict management, and are usually only indirectly involved in peacebuilding processes (Marchetti & Tocci, 2009).

In this regard, it may be more appropriate to apply Bull and Hansen's approach of agonistic memory in the context of post-conflict societies, when the acute conflict phase is over and a window could be opened for the voices to be heard (Bull & Hansen, 2015:7). Therefore, in this next part of the literature review I'll try to discuss some narrow examples, such as civil society participation in Armenian-Turkish reconciliation attempts.

Opportunities for civil society in cross border peacebuilding

There are various attempts to involve civil society in the initiatives aimed at normalizing Armenian-Turkish relations and reconciliation, including the creation of committees, educational projects, exchange visits of businesspeople, signing of memorandums between the universities, and so on.

Armenia and Turkey are bordering countries with closed borders. There is no direct war or violent conflict at present between the two countries. One of the main problems between Turkey and Armenia is the lack of trust and confidence (Çeviközv, 2017). The controversial issue is the denial of the 1915 Armenian Genocide and mass deportations by Turkey. During the Karabakh war in 1993, Turkey closed its border with Armenia in support of Azerbaijan. There were different initiatives to resolve the issue, from football diplomacy to mediation missions, however, diplomatic relations between the two countries remain inexistent.

Tigran Mkrtchyan writes, that civil society actors cannot be ascribed a key role in Armenian-Turkish normalization/reconciliation process, however they have changed public perceptions, trying to prepare 'matured' (Marchetti & Tocci, 2009:211) political negotiations (Mkrtchyan, 2011). In case of Turkey, the initiation of Armenian-Turkish reconciliation process was important for its possible EU

membership, while in case of Armenia it was initiated by donor-funded reconciliation projects between non-governmental organizations by increasing links between businessmen, youth, academics, artists etc. In 2008, Turkish president Abdullah Gul arrived in Yerevan to watch a World Cup match. This was intended as a form of 'second track diplomacy.' Despite the cancellation of the Zurich protocols on normalization of relations (De Waal; Wilson & Sanamyan, 2010), international organizations continued providing support to initiatives that aimed at normalization of relations. Such examples include an EU-funded consortium of 8 CSOs that implemented 20 projects in 2014-2015; the establishment of the Armenia-Turkey Cinema platform; Memories without borders - a mutual project by Golden Apricot International Film Festival of Yerevan (Armenia) and Anadolu Kultur (Turkey), where a group of filmmakers from the two countries use cinema to make joint productions to help facilitate reconciliation and peace building. [2]

The projects implemented by DVV International (the Institute for International Cooperation of German Adult Education Association) and its partners between 2009 and 2016 are particularly important from the perspective of issues interesting for the DisTerrMem project.[3] These projects were aimed at building bridges between the people of Armenia and Turkey through adult education, exchange visits, journalism, oral history and art. The projects resulted in several books, including 'Speaking to One Another: Personal Memories of the Past from Armenia and Turkey' (Neyzi, Kharatyan & Simonyan, 2010; 'Prospects for Reconciliation: Theory and Practice' (Kharatyan-Araqelyan and Leyla Neyzi, 2011), 'Moush Sweet Moush: Mapping Memories from Armenia and Turkey' (Kharatyan et al., 2013). During these projects, student groups from Armenia and Turkey had an opportunity of speaking to each other, reflection, dialogue and revising the conflict narratives through joint work.

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[2] See www.armenia-turkey.net; http://www.cinemaplatform.org/intro.aspx; http://www.c-r.org/featured-work/memories-without-borders)

[3] More information on these projects can be found at: http://www.dvv-international.ge/armenia/projects/armenian-turkish-reconciliation-projects/.

The borders between Armenia and Turkey are still closed, the Genocide is still denied in Turkey, and the effectiveness of civic initiatives at this phase is important from the perspective of creating platforms for face-to-face meetings and conversations, which surely will have an impact, if political processes re-activate.

Similar to other post-conflict societies, in Armenia civil society organizations are mostly involved in capacity building, reconstruction and rehabilitation initiatives, with local and international support. Often, the main issues of such dialogue projects and initiatives related to conflicting memories, remain their polarization from general public moods, their narrow beneficiary base, and still a low level of mutual trust.

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