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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.

About the Author

Rashad Shirinov is a PhD researcher at Radboud University Nijmegen in the Netherlands. He has more than ten years of practical experience in the areas of civil society, democracy and governance, elections and youth participation. Currently he focuses on academic research in the area of civil society and public space in the post-Soviet city. He graduated with a MA from Bosphorus University in Istanbul and had fellowships and graduate studies at University of York (UK) and Monterey Institute of International Studies (US).

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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