

Report on the Armenian-Georgian Civil Society Dialogue meeting, April, 2011

1. Background:

- a. On February 6-9, 2010 Eurasia Partnership Foundation in cooperation with Open Society Georgia Foundation has conducted a strategy meeting with involvement of Armenian and Georgian experts representing media, civil society, higher education, and science and culture sectors of both societies. The meeting took place in Aghveran, Armenia, and was aimed at discussing existing issues between the Armenian and Georgian societies in different fields and revealing possible activities and strategies that can support the development of productive dialogue between civil societies of Armenia and Georgia. The meeting consisted of presentations of Armenian and Georgian experts on general situation in Armenian-Georgian relations (perspectives from both sides) as well as introduction of Eastern Partnership as a perspective for developing closer ties between Armenia and Georgia. Each presentation was followed by discussion with involvement of all participants of the meeting. Afterwards 5 thematic working groups were created and possible joint activities in spheres of Civil Society, Media, Culture, Research and Science, Economic Relations, as well as Bordering Regions were discussed.
- b. In 2010 only one attempt to implement a joint Armenia-Georgian project was made. Yerevan Press Club and Studio Re applied for funding series of talk shows with involvement of Armenian and Georgian experts and aired both countries. The project was submitted for funding but did not receive it.
- c. Based on the outcomes of the first meeting and the experience of the 2010 it was decided to structure the meeting in 2011 as an activity aimed at developing detailed descriptions of 5 selected topics from the above mentioned directions.

2. Joint Study tour to Samtskhe-Javakheti:

Prior the meeting a joint study visit of three civil society representatives from both countries to the Samtskhe-Javakheti region of Georgia was organized. The group of CS representatives visited Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda and met with representatives of the local authorities, media and CSOs. Based on the observations a joint report was developed and presented to participants of the second Armenian-Georgian Civil Society meeting.

Following observations were reflected in the joint report:

a. Infrastructure:

The main achievement on this issue is the construction of the roads that connect the region with Tbilisi and other regions of Georgia. This was done through the Millennium funding and increased significantly the possibilities of the region for integration to the rest of Georgia.

Another issue that is being actively promoted is the language program which also falls under the infrastructure category, as it is also a mechanism that is aimed at connecting the

region to the rest of Georgia. In this respect Language centers have been established and provide Georgian language courses for all interested people regardless to their age or position. This issue however suffers from lack of interest from the local population, but on the other hand needs more time.

Other infrastructure related issues, such as irrigation, gasification, reconstruction of internal roads are in process and are still a problem (ex. currently around 80% of the arable land is not being irrigated and around 30% is not used at all).

b. Business

The improvement of the roads provides access to the Georgian market. This fact creates the necessary atmosphere for the regional business development. Another positive change that creates better opportunities for business development is the improvement of the Georgian legislation particularly for the SME. There is also a tendency of establishment of businesses from Armenia in the region. Particularly Garmy beer is opening a new beer factory in the region.

However the business infrastructure is still underdeveloped regarding business skills and investments. The main area of business is food products (potatoes, milk and meat products) and in this respect the storage of the production and the packaging need improvement. Another issue is the Armenian customs legislation that creates obstacles for development of trade with the region.

c. Migration

Migration has been a major issue for the region prior the Georgian-Russian war. The labor migration to Russia was significant. After the war however the visa related issues have reduced the possibilities of the population to work in Russia. However many people have also Armenian passports that are used for traveling to Russia.

The positive developments that took place in the region within the period of last 2 years also influence the migration and transform the migration trends from permanent to seasonal.

d. Cross-Border Cooperation

As it has been mentioned there are certain investments from Armenia (Garmy beer factory, etc.). There are also some international programs (Karsakhi reserve being implemented by German Development Agency) that are being implemented on the territories of Georgia, Armenia and Turkey.

The tax reform for SMEs in Georgia and negative tax environment in Armenia attract Armenian businessman to invest in Georgia in general and in the region particularly

e. Language Policies

Scarcity of qualified human resources affects overall impact of the government policies on state language. Lack of professionals that can synchronize Georgian and Armenian texts influence the quality of educational material (this can be a field for bilateral cooperation on state and CS levels).

f. Civil Society

The Civil Society sector in the region is underdeveloped. One of the main issues in this area is that mainly Tbilisi based organizations are implementing their activities in the region and thus the donor community prefers to work with them rather than with local NGO's. Another issue of concern is the fact that although there are many young people both in Akhalkalaki and in Ninotsminda the level of involvement of youth in the NGO sector is very low. There are very few youth programs and NGOs in the regions although community activism can play significant role in the region.

g. Media

The majority of the population has satellites and thus watches Armenian and Russian TV channels. Georgian channels are not popular due to the language issues. There are also local TV channels Parvana TV is popular in Ninotsminda as it provides interesting material on the local news. Akhalkalaki TV channels are not popular and are not developed at all.

There are no internet and radio media outlets. One radio channel has been closed as it was managed by radical activist Vahan Tarkhanyan who is currently imprisoned. Two local newspapers are not popular as well as they do not provide interesting information.

h. Culture and Education

There has been an important improvement in sphere of higher education for ethnic minorities. The Presidential program offers young people to pass the national exam in their national language and study one year prior passing the exam in Georgian.

The issue of Armenian cultural monuments seems to be an issue that is not relevant for the local population in sense of decision making. It is percept as an issue of higher level to be decided by the Georgian Church and the Government.

3. Meeting in Tbilisi:

The study visit to Javakheti was followed by the second Civil Society Meeting, that took place in Tbilisi, Georgia, 16-18 April, 2011. The structure of the agenda of the meeting aimed at developing recommendations for the donor community identifying the major importance of supporting the Armenian-Georgian format, as well as detailed descriptions of 5 projects selected from 5 thematic directions that were discussed during the previous meeting. Below are recommendations and description of 5 projects.

a. Recommendations to donor community:

So far the relations between Armenia and Georgia had been the prerogative of the state institutions and in conditions of the South Caucasus civil society has been engaged as an active player in spheres of conflict resolution. This situation has influenced negatively the effort of Armenian-Georgian relations on the level of civil societies, thus the lack of communication has contributed to the development of harmful stereotypes and lack of information that is necessary for adequate mutual understanding. Thus there is a need for confidence building and

development of bilateral format that will help two sides to resurrect the existing ties and create new connections. These connections are necessary for conflict prevention as well as identification of ongoing problems, and advocacy for their solution. At the same time the productive development of the Armenian-Georgian relations will serve as an important local point of stability and cooperation in South Caucasus and a basis for regional cooperation throughout South Caucasus. This cooperation has various formats and among others it can take place in frames of European integration (EaP in particular) that will create a productive context for establishment of institutionalized infrastructure of non-state relations to promote democratization of the region,

b. Presentations of projects on 5 thematic directions:

• Consultative Board for Armenian and Georgian EaP National Platforms

The idea of the creation of the Eastern Partnership Consultative board for Armenian and Georgian CSO's is based on the need of more active involvement of the civil society in the process of European integration of South Caucasus countries. The civil society sector can play an important role in addressing actual needs of region's European integration and in order to provide more productive mechanisms for regular information and experience sharing on democratic participation Armenian and Georgian civil societies can create a structured and synchronized framework of cooperation.

The major objectives of this project are the establishment of civil society network to facilitate dialogue between EaP National Platforms of Armenia and Georgia, creation of a regular Consultative Board for EaP National Platforms that will become a mechanism for immediate information exchange and response on urgent issues of concern based on European Integration agenda. This kind of information and experience sharing can become an important contribution for creating an environment to support existing multilateral frameworks on issues related to European integration.

• ArmGe@MEDIA. Georgian-Armenian Joint Monitoring and Networking

This project addresses the provision of independent and unbiased information to Georgian and Armenian public. It is aimed at creating capacities for monitoring the topical problems of Georgian-Armenian relations in media and enhancing public awareness about the sensitive issues. An important objective of the project is breaking stereotypes on each other in both countries. This aims are proposed through involvement of young journalists in working with sensitive issues in respective countries and thus creating a qualified team of young journalists with new media skills. One of the main components of the project is media research and monitoring that consists of identification of thematic interests of media in respective countries and monitoring of biased approach in selected media outlets.

Another component of the project is the organization of joint journalist tour/investigations on various mutually important topics. These materials together with the results of the monitoring

will lay as a basis for a joint online resource that will become both an important communication instrument and a unique source of information.

- **Youth without borders (Summer/winter school for youth from borderline regions)**

Bordering regions of Armenia and Georgia are suffering from lack of contacts of regional youth with the centers and involvement in the social life of the country. Another problem that exists in the region is the lack or absence of cooperation between bordering regions of neighboring countries. This project addresses the above mentioned problems and is also targeted at such issues as high level of unemployment and migration of youth from the bordering regions and underdevelopment of the community life in bordering regions which causes lack of motivation among youth to stay in their home regions.

The idea of the proposed project is to organize periodical joint summer/winter schools for youth from bordering regions of Armenia and Georgia. This will create opportunities for young people to implement joint projects aimed at strengthening cooperation and community development between their regions. An important feature of the project is the fact that the summer schools will be multidisciplinary and will unite young people with different interests. Another feature of the project will be the rotation of the hosting region of the school and the possibility of involvement of new regions and new countries.

The alumni and expert networks that will be created will provide sustainability of the project both in terms of possible fundraising and connections between the alumni in the future.

- **Georgian-Armenian Summer School and Permanently Functioning Conference of Young Scholars**

In order to ensure confidence building atmosphere for young people from neighboring countries and establish sustainable framework for further cooperation in cultural, educational, and scientific fields the project proposes to create a long term format of joint cooperation in mentioned spheres. In this respect the project plans to organize two-week long summer school with involvement of 25 participants from each side. The first week of the school will take place in one country and the second in the other.

The summer school will consist of series of creative workshops on the topics of the conference (culture, science and education), academic lectures on the European integration on mutually interesting topics, various cultural events (ex. presentation of cuisines and mixed group activities), seminars on grant writing and work with donors, etc.

It is also planned to establish a board of senior scholars that will design the permanently functioning online conference of young scholars and coordinate the framework of its activities and studies.

• Armenia – Georgia. Business without barriers

Armenian and Georgian financial and economic resources are concentrated in capitals and big cities. Currently there are several levels of business, economic and financial cooperation between two countries. In order to support the process of de-centralization of business and economic recourses from centers to bordering regions aimed at promoting economic development and decreasing of unemployment rate in regions the project proposes to summarize existing researches and analysis in the fields of business and economic cooperation conducted by various NGOs in Armenia and Georgia and to make recommendations on de-centralization of businesses and transferring to bordering regions.

The project suggests evaluating the current trends of money transfers both from Armenia to Georgia and vice versa, analyzing mutually interesting goods, productions and services, as well as to conduct comparative analysis of banking systems (accessibility to credits),

More practical products of the projects are a guidebook on doing joint business in Armenia and Georgia (FAQs on legislation, taxes, customs, private business, etc.) and organization of Business Days and Business Fairs in Armenia and Georgia.

Described activities will encourage businesses in Armenia and Georgia to organize trade at borders and will promote the development of enterprises and services in bordering regions.

4. Post-event meeting of Armenian Participants in Yerevan

On Saturday April 30th EPF has invited participants of the Armenian-Georgian meeting in Tbilisi to discuss the further steps to be implemented.

In this regard it was decided to identify funding opportunities that fit to the concept of the projects which project fits better to which donor.

It was also decided that on the basis of its own specifics each of the participant organizations will prepare a 3 page concept on the projects listed below

Below is the list of projects with possible applicants and partners from Georgian side.

1. Cultural Scientific Summer School (Center for Culture and Civilization Studies, possible partners Tbilisi Universities either Javakhishvili or Chavchavadze)
2. Media Monitoring (Yerevan Press Club, there is no clear understanding of who can be the partner form the Georgian side)
3. Mobile journalists' Groups (Yerkir Media, possibly with Studio Re)
4. Bordering Regions Summer School (HCAV and Gyumri Sakharov Center, can be implemented with Arnold Stepanyan's organization)

5. Election Monitoring (Transparency International, NCI are good candidates but it should be found out if the legislation of Armenia and Georgia give the opportunity to foreign observers of this type to take part in the observation process)
6. Civil Society Joint Platform (Yerevan Press Club, HCA and OSGF)
7. Business Opportunities/ Comparative study (UMBA, Georgian partner is not clear)

Three other possible activities were discussed as well

- TV Talk Shows project that was submitted and rejected last year by YPC and Studio Re is worth being resubmitted
- Armenian-Georgian Strategic Meeting for a general action plan for the development of the bilateral relations
- A project on humor and culture (conference, research, documentary, etc.)

The Donors identified at the discussion:

1. Black Sea Trust
2. Ebert Stiftung
3. OSGF
4. Nauman Foundation
5. Matra Program
6. EPF ARM program specifically (small scale media projects)

It was agreed to circulate the consolidated report on two Armenian-Georgian meetings and the Javakheti trip and to disseminate them widely, as well as to organize a series of presentations for potential donors in Armenia and Georgia.