



BUILDING BRIDGES, REMOVING MISPERCEPTIONS: TOWARDS A PEACEFUL FUTURE

The PeaCE¹ program that EPF-Armenia, EPF-Azerbaijan, CRRC-Georgia and International Alert are engaged in, funded by EU, has several aims, and some of them are to demonstrate to the Armenian and Azerbaijani societies that joint projects among the civil society members are possible; challenge stereotypes; recruit ‘new faces’ and therefore expand the ranks of ‘usual suspects’, who have been engaged in such projects for many years, but recently have become quite pessimistic of their worth. This program aims at moving at least some members of the societies to discuss difficult issues, between themselves as well as inside their societies; and overcoming the taboos that are being imposed by the daily official and social propaganda, which usually promote exclusively the war and conflict discourses. Many of the projects of numerous partners of EPFs within PeaCE are still in the making, but some of them have already come to fruition.

Together is Possible



Figure 1. Nelli Shishmanyán. The traces of Armenian and Azerbaijani children's hands on the wall of the House of Culture in Tsopi village, Georgia.

1. Epfarmenia.am. (2019). *Peacebuilding through Capacity Enhancement and Civic Engagement (PeaCE) | EPF*. [online] Available at: <https://epfarmenia.am/project/peace> [Accessed 19 Sep. 2019].

Nelli Shishmanyanyan from 4Plus Documentary Photography Centre captured this image in Tsopi village in Georgia, where Armenians and Azerbaijanis share the same community to this day. They live in peace even though many other points of contact between these two nations have nearly disappeared due to the conflict. Nelli together with her Azerbaijani colleagues Ahmad Mukhtarov and Famil Mahmudbeily decided to shed light on the fact that these two nations used to live side by side, share many cultural customs and build joint communities. The three photographers travelled to the places where Armenians and Azerbaijanis used to live together. Nelly visited Tavush and Ararat regions in Armenia, while Ahmad and Famil visited Shamakhi and Aghdam regions in Azerbaijan. They also made a joint trip to Tsopi and Khozhorni villages in Georgia where Armenians and Azerbaijanis continue living together until this day.

In Georgia, the partners compiled photographs, video and interviews to produce a multimedia film² that presents the life of the villagers who are engaged in farming. These villagers share the common space: children study at the same school and play together; people drink water from the same fountain, celebrate together and take part in each other's sadness or joy. These simple, yet impactful captures of the 'forgotten shared past of peaceful cohabitation' were first presented at a two-week joint exhibition called "Together is Possible" in Tbilisi, Georgia.



Figure 2. "Together is possible" photo exhibition in Brussels.

In early 2019, the photographers also held exhibitions in Yerevan and Baku. The opening of Nelli's exhibition in the Armenian Center for Contemporary Experimental Art (NPAK) was attended by over 120 people.

While implementing this project, the partner photographers lived through a unique cultural experience: they were accepted with hospitality and kindness in the mixed Armenian-Azerbaijani communities in Georgia. Nelli shares her experience:

“When I was leaving for Khozhorni, Georgia, my mother said with a worried face: “Be careful there...” My answer was as always: “Everything will be fine.” I knew I was right when I had my first cup of tea in the house of an Azerbaijani family.

2. Nelli Shishmanyanyan. (2019). *Together is possible*. [online] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p-1GnTXo1sA> [Accessed 19 Sep. 2019].

Later I enjoyed borshch in Hamlet's house, and had some more tea, this time in Nazim's house, who was Hamlet's close friend. I had many chances to interact with people from neighboring countries, but it is a unique experience when you are hosted in an Azerbaijani home, and share a family meal. This project changed a lot in me. For the first time, I have seen with my eyes and captured with my camera the friendship of an Armenian and an Azerbaijani.

Human relationships and affinities evolve in spite of the conflict. The project confirms the importance of cultural exchange and dialogue between people, and the importance of humanization of the images of ordinary people in each other's eyes.


Nelli and Ahmad arranged a poster exhibition of their photographs at the Brussels Press Club, in June 2019. The participants of the event, including EU officials, took copies of the posters with them, and currently many of these posters are on the walls of various offices of the EU at Schuman Square.


Deconstructing the Myths: Alter'notion

EPF's signature Conflict Transformation School³ (CTS) aims at providing youth with critical thinking and confidence-building skills. One example of its longer-term impact is the Alter'notion project, implemented by a team of four Armenian and four Azerbaijani young individuals, some of whom are the alumni of CTS 2016.

In February 2018, the team used the Travel Grants Opportunity of the PeaCE programme to get together in Tbilisi and jointly develop a project proposal. By that time, the team members from the two sides were already friends: they studied in the US through an exchange programme years ago. The motivation to continue their friendship and their CTS experience led them to come up with a joint initiative.

The team engaged 20 Armenian and 20 Azerbaijani young people into a mutual learning platform comprising in-country and regional (joint) workshops. The in-country workshops focused on basics of blogging, tools for creating multimedia content, storytelling, and on their use for cross-conflict dialogue. The most motivated participants of in-country workshops attended a regional workshop in Georgia where they discussed topics such as society, gender, soviet influences, common vocabulary, family values, etc. The regional workshop moved participants to identify a co-author (peer-blogger) from the other side with whom they would work on a draft article/blog-post. Below are some of the experiences that the participants of the regional workshop shared with us:

 My best experience was the one where we were all dancing together. At that moment, we were in a world where everything had a potential of getting better.

The project was one of the best experiences in my life. It made me understand how similar we are, our languages, culture, memories, everything. It's both scary and pleasant. Another best gift that I will take with me is friends. 

3. Epfarmenia.am. (2018). *Conflict Transformation School. Towards a New Generation of Peacebuilders* | EPF. [online] Available at: <https://epfarmenia.am/document/CTS-infoleaflet> [Accessed 19 Sep. 2019].

“ The best part was discussions with people from the opposite side, because we have realized how we were “fooled” by media, political discourse, history books, “facts” throughout these years. It was surprising to learn about some customs that we thought were related to our religion particularly and practiced by us only, but it turned out that they were common in both societies.

Not surprisingly, when asked whether they would agree if a participant from the other country is their roommate in a similar future meeting, 15 out of 19 participants of the regional meeting answered “Yes”.

Thirty joint blog-posts have been co-created and published since then on the blog-platform⁴, covering a wide array of topics: similar cultural influences inherited from the Soviet Union-times’ common traditions; social issues that are similar and yet different in both societies; discrimination on the ground of gender and sexual orientation⁵.

An issue that both societies are still struggling with is the articulation of women’s rights and raising awareness about the societal impediments women face. There is a need in changing perceptions of women’s roles in both societies which often promote patriarchal values⁶.

One of the most viewed blog-posts is the joint performance of the song “Sari Gelin | Sari Aghjik” that both nations claim as their own. The Armenian and Azerbaijani versions of the song united in one recording transform the topic of conflict into one of interaction.

As of August 2019, there were around 80 thousand visits to the blog-platform, and the figure keeps growing. Presentation of similar problems in both societies is an eye-opener and mind-changer, effects so much needed for civil societies to work together for peace.



Peacebuilding through Capacity
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4. alter’notion. (2019). *alter’notion | alternative frame to caucasus*. [online] Available at: <https://alternotion.org/> [Accessed 19 Sep. 2019].

5. alter’notion. (2019). *Alienation of LGBT+ Rights in Azerbaijan and Armenia | alter’notion*. [online] Available at: <https://alternotion.org/alienation-of-lgbt-rights-in-azerbaijan-and-armenia/> [Accessed 19 Sep. 2019].

6. alter’notion. (2019). *How We Celebrated March 8th in USSR and How We Do It Now | alter’notion*. [online] Available at: <https://alternotion.org/how-we-celebrated-march-8th-in-ussr-and-how-we-do-it-now/> [Accessed 19 Sep. 2019].