ENC SUMMARY

Visions and Strategies for Conflict Transformation: Dominant and Alternative Discourses on Gender, Militarism, and Peace Processes

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Research staff at European Neighbourhood Council (ENC)

This publication is a summary and analysis of the roundtable discussion "**Visions and Strategies for Conflict Transformation: Dominant and Alternative Discourses on Gender, Militarism, and Peace Processes**" that took place on the 7th of December 2017. The event was co-hosted by the European Neighbourhood Council (ENC), the Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation and the Center for Independent Social Research (CISR), Berlin.

The information in this publication outlines the main points discussed by the panellists as well as by the ENC Academic Council Member.

ABOUT THE EVENT

On the 7th of December, the **European Neighbourhood Council (ENC)** co-hosted a roundtable discussion to present the second hard copy issue of the **Caucasus Edition: Journal of Conflict Transformation** produced in the framework of the project "Joint Platform for Realistic Peace in the South Caucasus" of the Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation in partnership with the Center for Independent Social Research (CISR), Berlin. More than 20 experts and social analysts from the South Caucasus, as well as Turkey, Ukraine and Russia contributed in the issue by engaging in dialogue, systematic joint analysis of the region, and development and advocacy for a common vision, strategy, and action for regional peace and development.

The roundtable in Brussels represented a platform for presenting and discussing the joint work of the book with the representative of the European Union (EU), policy-makers and academics. After the opening remarks of ENC's Director, **Samuel Doveri Vesterbye,** and the editorial team of the Caucasus Edition**,** two panels of discussion took place. The first panel focused on the **rise of militaristic sentiment and patriotic discourses, political parties and movements and the representation of minorities in the media.** These topics were discussed by **Dr. Sergey Rumyansev**, Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation and co-founder of the Centre for Independent Social Research (CISR), **Dr. Andrey Devyatkov**, Center for Post-Soviet Studies of the Institute of Economics of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Caucasus Edition: Journal of Conflict Transformation), **Maria Karapetyan**, Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation, **Bakhtiyar Aslanov**, Peace and Conflict Research Department at the Humanitarian Research (Caucasus Edition: Journal of Conflict Transformation) and **Dr. Pınar Sayan**, Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation. The session's official rapporteuring – with the role of adding an external analytical view - was provided by **Boris Iarochevitch**, Head of the Central Asia Division at the European External Action Service (EEAS). In the second panel of discussion, **Anna Iluridze**, Office of Public Defender of Georgia (Caucasus Edition: Journal of Conflict Transformation), **Dr. Philip Gamaghelyan**, Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation and **Nisan Alıcı**, Demos Research Center for Peace, Democracy and Alternative Politics (Caucasus Edition: Journal of Conflict Transformation) concentrated on

gender, alternative peace process resolution and future visions for conflict resolution. **Professor Bruno Coppieters**, Head of the Department of Political Science at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), provided critical feedback as the session's official rapporteur.

CONTEXT

Considering the protracted nature of the conflicts in the region and the modest results in peace resolution, the **South Caucasus** is one of the most challenging areas of the European neighbourhood. The puzzle is worrying and it affects the discourse of political parties and movements, reinforces the **militaristic behaviours**, and has a negative impact on **gender relations** and **minorities**. In the zones of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, undemocratic and military practices still exist. Democracy in Turkey is also at stake, as the coup attempt in 2015 and the consequential **suppression of civil society** and academia demonstrated. The Azerbaijani authorities also **lowered** the **human rights** standards by **restraining the freedom** of independent civil society organisations and media. The same practice is witnessed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well as Armenia. Furthermore, **Russia** has a strong impact in the region, but also it **reinvigorates these dynamics**, as it uses its leverages to influence the neighbouring region to pressure their own government and institutions.

In such unfavourable circumstances, official peace processes took place, yet without achieving effective outcomes. For this reason, in order to break the societal deadlock and move towards peace reconciliation, alternative solutions and ways forward should be unfolded.

WHERE DO WE STAND?

In his first remarks, **Dr. Rumyansev** noted how the escalation of the clashes in the Middle East and the post-Soviet space was complemented by a change in the military and official government discourses. In the book chapter he presented, the rise of militaristic sentiments and patriotic discourse are analysed by different authors in the cases of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkey and Russia. To give one example, Dr. Rumyansev mentioned the case of the **Armenia-Azerbaijan border**, where the scandal of the 'Azerbaijani Apples' in 2017 led to a shift in the perception of the conflict. In the case mentioned, commentators badly reacted to the fact that by importing Azerbaijani product, the Armenian customers were subsidizing the "enemy's army". Yet, according to Dr. Rumyansev, the main driving force for this conflict escalation was the so-called **"four-day war"** in April 2016, which was characterised by patriotic mobilisation and harsh reactions between the clashing parties. As a response to last year's violent developments, the government spread the idea of **"one nation, one army",** as to strengthen the defence of the country. However, the opposition and the independent media tired to push this political

move back. Dr. Rumyansev noted that, in response, the recently appointed Minister of Defence Vigen Sargsayan has labelled the oppositions'' criticism as 'unpatriotic'.

In the sub-chapter focusing on Russia, **Dr. Devyatkov** claimed that in order to understand Russian behaviour since 2014, both its internal domestic politics and foreign policy habitus should be analysed carefully. Focusing on the first dimension of the Kremlin' policy, the **elections in 2011** and the related dissolution of societal consensus led to a **need of the** restoration of symbolic unity in the country. With frustration and disappointment spread throughout the population and the authorities, the actions in Crimea represent a historical event, which was meant to **restore the unity of Russian people**. As the Crimea case demonstrated, internal and external policy are strongly interconnected. To explain such dynamics, Dr. Devyatkov explained that "**Russia is a *status quo* power and its foreign policy is a reactive one**". In other words, the only element that persists in the Russian foreign policy is its position towards **NATO** and the **Eastern Enlargement**. For this reason, **every time a move towards one of this direction occurs, Russia reacts consequently**.

The situation in Ukraine was opposing the change of *status quo* and represented a **geopolitical change**. In a nutshell, the **Crimea crisis was an "ad hoc" situation**, where the Russian discourse of the intervention in the region was based on the idea that Moscow needed to protect Russian-speakers people. Specialists nonetheless argue that the evidence is ample to demonstrate the real and often invasive intention of geopolitical and territorial interests. Considering the upcoming elections in 2018, Dr. Devyatkov concluded by saying that there is evidence of a **return to a postmodern type of official rhetoric**, in which security and development are prioritised. Moreover, securitization practices are adopted as a means to strengthen the governmental control over the society.

Shifting to another dimension of triangle 'conflict, militarism and politics', **Ms. Karapetyan** shed light on the relationship between **political parties and conflicts**. She explained the positions of official political parties and movements in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey concerning the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the normalisation process of the Turkey-Armenia relationship. Looking at the **Armenian** case first, Ms. Karapetyan stressed that **only one party in Armenia upholds a "proactive" approach** in relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan. Except for the Armenian National Congress (*Hay Azgayin Kongress*, HAK) party, the majority of the political parties tend to avoid specific vocal programs for conflict resolution. While the ruling party tends to write off the conflict existence, the opposition parties are usually acting with tougher and even more nationalistic stands, sometimes using the Nagorno-Karabakh question to blame the government' actions.

In the **Turkish case**, Ms. Karapetyan mentioned that despite the recent events, namely the failed coup d'état in 2016 and the constitutional referendum in 2017, which obviously increased the tensions among the political parties and polarized their positions, "**parties**

on each side of the political spectrum tend to view a conflict resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict by being in favour of Azerbaijan". This is the main position of the Justice and Development Part (AKP), which has also signed an Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Support in 2010 with the Azeri government. A tougher stance is taken by the Nationalistic Movement Party (MHP), the Great Union Party (BBP), the Patriotic Party (VP) and The Facility Party (SP), while the normalisation of relations without any preconditions is foreseen by the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), the Freedom and Solidarity Party (ÖDP) and the Communist Party of Turkey (TKP).

Finally, **Mr. Aslanov** illustrated the political party's scenario for the case of **Azerbaijan**, stating that "the **resolution of the conflict is always on the agenda** of these parties because it is also **interconnected with the human rights issue**, including the **restoration of territorial integrity** and of the sovereignty of **Azerbaijan**". For the ruling party, the April war was a victory, which also create an enormous sentiment of mistrust. For the **normalisation of the Turkey-Armenia relations, the approach is two-fold.** While some political parties believed in the positive impact of such process, others consider the stabilisation of the two countries as detrimental, hence pursuing an isolation policy.

The last part of the panel was dedicated to the analysis of the **representation of minorities in the media** in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey. **Ms. Sayan** explained that improper diversity management and the role of minorities in the media were considered as starting point for this study. Examples of minorities considered are the Yezidis in Armenia, the Lezgis and displaced persons from Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan, the Armenians and the Kists/Chechens in Georgia or the Kurds and Syrian refugees in Turkey.

In this part of the issue, the authors looked at online media and their principles of reporting on minorities by **comparing the international standards** (such as the principles stated by the Council of Europe (CoE) or the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)) with the national ones. The main findings showed an **increase in state pressure over media outlets** as well as very **limited coverage of minorities** in the media. Overall, in all these countries, there is a 'brotherhood discourse' to describe minorities but there is almost **no coverage on the cultural aspects or routine life of them**. When reported, however, the argument of minorities is usually supplemented with **negative ideological connotation.** For example, Ms. Sayan mentioned that some groups are nearly only mentioned in relation to conflict, including the Kurds with terrorism in Turkey.

The **Kurdish question** was also part of the second panel discussion with regard to the gender discourse and its connection with militarism. **Ms. Iluridze** mentioned that "the Kurdish question has been **burning since the 1980 coup d'état and still remains on the top of the national and civil society agenda**". To give an example, when the HDP passed the electoral threshold in 2015, the government' discourse tended to discriminate

the HDP by associating it to terrorism. Against this background, in her analysis, Ms. Iluridze examined the writings on the walls of houses and public buildings, which were left by individuals from the security forces in the city of Silvan (Turkey) during the paramilitary operations in 2015. The graffiti showed a **predominant masculine, nationalist, and militarist discourse**. Furthermore, they mirror an idea of **hierarchy and oppression, which is interlinked with the feminism discourse**. One of the writings she mentioned clearly illustrated the **misogyny and sexualised hate speech**. Examples recorded included: "girls, we came into your caves" and "we will make you wear thongs once spring comes".

Gender and sexuality were also analysed in the conflicting scenario of Georgia and **Armenia**. Given the last case, Ms. Iluridze claimed that despite the fact that the government has ideally committed itself towards gender equality, **the practice of media and public speeches revealed that there is an image of a 'proper' Armenian 'man' and 'woman', which indeed manifest an expected traditional gender**. She continued saying that this led to the creation of an image of 'enemy', which is affiliated to those ones who transgress the conventional sexual identity. In the **Georgian scenario**, the so-called **'night of the Tatar'** showed that the representation of the nationalistic argument is made both through the construction of a fantasy of the nation as a comfort area and through the creation of fear through exaggerated or sexual images of the 'Enemy'. More interestingly, she mentioned that the Tatar has a derogatory connotation towards Georgian Muslims. Against this historical backdrop, the protests started in Batumi, a city closed to the border with Turkey. Initially, the riots were quite peaceful, but they turned into a spontaneous and chaotic protest after the news spread that the head of police referred to the people of Batumi as Tatars. This shifted the focus of the protest **from the social issue to the more nationalistic one**, making the protest even more violent.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

Considering this worrying scenario and the violence, which is increasing and featured by nationalistic and gender discourses, **Mr. Iarochevitch** stressed the importance to think about potential ways forward. To answer these concerns, **Dr. Gamaghelyan** presented potential venues for conflict transformation, which were gathered by different authors in the issue presented during this roundtable discussion. Among others, **democracy building** and **South Caucasus integration** – either in political or socio-economic terms – are the most **traditional and common positions** for conflict resolution.

Furthermore, bearing in mind both the historical and geographical dimensions, Dr. Gamaghelyan highlighted the Soviet legacy of countries discussed. In fact, he identified another possible solution for the conflict with the **decolonisation** process. "There is little awareness about it, but the education system is very similar for instance", Dr.

Gamaghelyan commented. The general idea is to reshuffle the relational ties with Russia basing them on equality and partnership instead.

Another resolution could be the creation of forms of societal organisations alternative to the nation-states. Considering the arguments about gender and militaristic discourse put forward by Ms. Iluridze and Dr. Rumyansev respectively, Dr. Gamaghelyan called the attention to the fact that **centralised nation-states have created conditions for perpetuating conflicts**. In particular, nation-states are heavily investing in militarisation rather than social issues, such as education. In this regard, Mr. Iarochevitch emphasised **the heavy economic burden of wars and protracted conflicts**. The states increased the defence budget expenses – sometimes without even publishing it – at the expense of local populations and their societal or economic needs.

Finally, **Ms. Alıcı** identified **reconciliation and inclusive society** as a different approach for transformation in the South Caucasus. In her presentation, she explained that some **practices adopted by Turkey and Colombia** in the field of transitional justice, peace and multilingual/civil-nation education **could be emulated in the Caucasian region.** By differentiating from the traditional peace-building approaches, which tend to focus on conflict resolution, Ms. Alıcı explained that her focus was on the **conflict transformation** and in particular on **how to build long-term infrastructure** for peace building, to **transform social relations**, as well as how to **empower society of peace building capacity**. In particular, Ms. Alıcı displayed how the Turkish civil society tried to pursue transitional justice by addressing the Kurdish question or the Armenian genocide. For instance, a commission for the Diyarbakır Prison was established in 2007 with the aim of sharing information to the public about human rights violation in the jail.

Dr. Gamaghelyan also argued that **learning from the best practices of other countries** could have a potential in the South Caucasus. For instance, he mentioned Kazakhstan as a good example of a multi-lingual education pattern that works well. In fact, since the education is both in English and Russian, many benefits can be identified. On the one hand, many communication discrepancies could be solved. On the other hand, the economic market became more appealing and competitive internationally. Eventually, this can restrain possible drivers for conflict as it reduces inequalities and provides more socio-economic growth. In **Georgia**, for instance, there are several minorities, such as the Azerbaijanis and the Armenians, which do not speak Georgian and face several troubles in communicating, hence escalating tensions.

Since the current official negotiations are in a deadlock, Mr. Aslanov suggested that a potential conflict transformation mechanism could be to create "**Zones of Peace" or demilitarised areas in the South Caucasus**. By learning from the experience of other countries such as Colombia, the Philippines and Ecuador, Mr. Aslanov believes that **replicating these models in the Caucasian conflict setting could be useful for restoring a multicultural and peaceful society.**

Finally, when considering possible scenarios for the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Mr. Aslanov stressed that two interconnected elements must be taken into account. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan should see it in their national interests to implement **pro-western foreign policies** in order to increase their international foreign policy potential, ownership capacity and independence from Russia.

CONCLUSION

Many panelists imagined a potential conflict solution by emulating good practices and functioning blueprints borrowed from other countries. However, **Professor Coppieters** raised some concerns about the issue of **how to legitimise the use of concepts** such as regional integration, conflict transformation or "Zones of Peace" considering their difficult circumstances as well as the long-term perspective of conflict transformation. To answer these concerns, Dr. Gamaghelyan highlighted the fact that policy-makers must be aware of the limited impact of the current strategy for conflict resolution because, for now, it did not produce tangible results. Therefore, he suggested that **conflict transformation could be an alternative way to overcome this impasse**. Ms. Alıcı built on that by highlighting the key role of peace-building efforts of **grass-roots organisations** and **the civil society** from different sectors. In the specific case of gender and militarism for instance, Ms. Iluridze recommended that civil society pay more attention as to how **hostile discourses around gender and sexuality complicate and sustain** the conflict dynamic. She further stressed the importance of reaching out to those organisations that specifically deal with gender equality and human rights.

In his remarks, Mr. Iarochevitch concentrated on society, its trends and its volatile nature. He highlighted that even if there are some nationalistic sentiments, more carefulness should be given on the militaristic argument. With state capture and socio-economic problems related to the conflict expenses, the societies in the region are the ones which suffer the most from both the conflict and the state militarisation, hence being less inclined to pursue any conflict. The **media plays a crucial role** in shaping the opinion of the population and therefore he suggested the need to work towards concrete societal channels to increase the positive tendencies which exist in societies to avoid conflict. To conclude, Ms. Sayan recommended for media organisations and outlets, editors and journalist to **provide more training in how to report on minorities in order to help media organisations** standardize their procedures for minority inclusion and objective reporting.

PARTNERS

The event was co-organised and hosted by the European Neighbourhood Council (ENC), the Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation and the Center for Independent Social Research (CISR), Berlin.