

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION: MOLDOVA-TRANSNISTRIA

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This article examines the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the Moldova-Transnistria conflict. After a violent conflict in 1992, Transnistria became a *de facto*, but unrecognized state. While much has been written on the official diplomatic processes for the settlement of this conflict, little has been written on the contribution of CSOs. The article focuses on concrete projects for peace run by activists from both the Moldovan and Transnistrian sides. The study states that the intervention by CSOs were in place and they have played a relevant role since the mid-1990s. However, the situation of Moldovan civil society has kept organizations from exclusively focusing on peace and conflict resolution. This has limited the know-how in the field, which is still low. Moreover, political institutions are giving little support to this specific work. The main exception in the last years is the EU, which is showing a new interest in involving CSOs in conflict resolution.

INTRODUCTION

Literature on peace dynamics is predominantly focused on top-level actors. This is also true for the age-old Moldova-Transnistria conflict. The aim of this paper is to shift the analysis on how Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) contributed and are still contributing to the de-escalation—or, at least, to a non-escalation—of this “frozen conflict.” We will evaluate the relative effectiveness of these actors, both on peacebuilding activities and on the influence on peacemaking efforts.

Some key questions guided the study: how do CSOs, as mid-level and grassroots actors, impact conflict dynamics in Moldova? What is the interaction between CSOs with local institutions and with international organizations? What types of initiatives are undertaken by local CSOs in order to influence peace efforts?

In order to tackle these questions, this paper proceeds in four parts. We start by outlining the Moldova-Transnistria conflict. We then describe the situation of the Moldovan and Transnistrian civil societies and their changes during the last two decades. The subsequent section examines some theoretical issues on CSOs working for peace, with a specific focus on the former Soviet Republics. Finally, we specifically consider the contribution of CSOs to the peace process in Moldova, presenting the most important case studies.

These issues are addressed by combining a selective analysis of the documents, research in the field and secondary literature on conflict resolution and transformation applied to the empirical cases of civil society engagement in Moldova-Transnistria. In conclusion, a plea is made for research that includes both theory and data, mixing quantitative data and qualitative analysis, in order to produce new insights in the peacebuilding and peacemaking sector.

One last preliminary remark: in writing this article, we kept in mind the importance of bottom-up reality checks. During a round of interviews in Ingushetia in 1995, Valery Tishkov (1999: 588) was asked by one interviewee: “Why are we living an everyday life here which is so very different from what is said about us?” Questions like this one, which we heard so often during field research, encouraged us to stay close to reality.

THE BEGINNING OF THE CONFLICT AND NEVER-ENDING DIPLOMACY

The situation of the Transnistrian¹ region in Moldova is considered a frozen conflict due to its unresolved and static condition since 1992. Transnistria is *de facto* independent and provides the region with many visible state-like attributes as well as a separate “national” identity; however, no other state has recognized it.

The roots of the Transnistrian conflict are much older than the collapse of the Soviet Union (Hensel, 2006). Over the last centuries, the whole Bessarabia region—of which Moldova is a large part—was in contention between Romania and the Russian Empire since before the USSR.²

The language problem was a litmus test (Nantoi, 2009): the fears of Russian-speaking Moldovan citizens, supported by Soviet authorities to slow the break-up of the Soviet Union, played an important role during

the 1980s (Hensel, 2006), and the ghosts of lost language rights supported the Transnistrian declaration of independence from the rest of Moldova in September 1990. After more than one year of confrontation, the escalation of tension between the Moldovan government and the separatists culminated in an armed conflict of significant scale on 19 June 1992. The intervention of the Russian Army forced the condition for a cease-fire in July 1992, but the search for a lasting peace is still ongoing.

In 18 years, many official diplomatic efforts have sought a feasible solution. In order to understand the grassroots work for peace, it is useful to have a bird's-eye view on how the negotiation process has changed over time. It is reasonable to split this high-diplomatic work into four periods characterized by different approaches and diplomatic strategies (Botan, 2009). Firstly, the "Post-war Period" (1992-1996) started on July 27, 1992 with the cease-fire and the signing of an Agreement of Peace Settlement between Russia and Moldova. This is the only period during which the Transnistrian representatives were not involved in the negotiation.

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During the "Period of Equality of the Parties" of the negotiation process (1997-2000), two significant agreements were signed. A first Memorandum, agreed on in 1997, stated that Moldova and Transnistria were equal parties in the process of building up a common state. The expression "equal parties" is quite unusual for this kind of circumstance in which one side is totally unrecognized by other states. The second accord of this period was signed at the OSCE Summit in Istanbul, and committed Russia to withdraw its troops from Transnistria by the end of 2002.

The "Kozac Memorandum" is the key document of the "Confrontation Period" (2000-2005). The presidents of Moldova and Transnistria declared their intention to sign this agreement drafted by the Russian Federation and based on the principles of a united federal state. However, due to strong pressure from the USA, the EU and OSCE and to mass protests, the Moldovan President Voronin refused to sign, just the day before. The most controversial issue in the memorandum, prepared by the Russian

experts under the guide of Dmitry Kozak, was that Transnistria would maintain all its state administrations and it would acquire veto rights for all the institutional reforms of Moldova.

Finally, the “Period of Internationalization of the Negotiation Process” (2005-onwards) has been increasingly conditioned by global actors, such as the EU and the USA. The study will show how these actors are becoming more important also for CSOs working for peace. The negotiation took the “5+2” format, involving around the same table the Russian Federation, the USA, the EU, Ukraine, OSCE, plus, of course, Moldova and Transnistria. The more concrete result of this period is a joint statement between Moldova and Ukraine aimed at controlling the goods in transit across the common border of these countries. This agreement—signed at

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the end of 2005 and forcing the use of Moldovan customs documents even for the companies based in Transnistria—was the beginning of the “European Border Assistance Mission” (EUBAM) refinanced until 2011.

All these periods are characterized by two common elements: the signing of agreements and the presence of the Russian Army in Transnistria. This “high-level process” is in the middle between, on the one side, political and economic interests of local elites, and, on the other side, rivalry for international influence (Botan, 2009). This negotiation process has made very little progress to date: the conflict is still frozen and a solution similar to the Gagauzian district is still far away.³ At the same time, the bottom-up work for peace and conflict resolution promoted by the Moldovan civil society is growing, and this study shows how it could have contributed to avoid the eruption of direct violence.

CIVIL SOCIETY IN MOLDOVA

In order to analyze whether grass-roots activities for peace in Moldova have a concrete impact, it is essential to highlight the mean features of Moldovan

civil society, in particular in the Transnistrian districts. Some features are similar to other former Soviet Republics. However, in the last two decades, peculiarities have come out. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, civil society had a hard time to emerge and consolidate, insofar as Soviet people had no experience in building civil institutions (Mikhelidze, Pirozzi, 2008). It is possible to identify the main general causes of these difficulties. Firstly, because citizens in communist USSR were often coerced into volunteering, many still consider volunteering and civic engagement as something to be avoided. Only youngsters, born in the second part of the 1980s, have been volunteering in the last decade without this approach. Secondly, civil society in this region emerged as an anti-systemic (state) movement for popular mobilization in the late 1980s and early 1990s and was instrumental in peoples' revolutions ending communist rule in the region (Mati, 2008: 17). Hence, often the relationship with the state is adversarial, and the connection with the private sector is weak. Finally, foreign donors and the strings attached to contributions created strong dependency on international actors. Notably, civil societies lost their own local constituencies and part of their grassroots energy. Many NGOs were created in the new states only to pursue international money (Mati, 2008).

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Nevertheless, Moldovan civil society today looks livelier than in some other post-Soviet countries (USAID, 2008). Even if international dependency is still quite predominate, CSOs in Moldova are political actors that cannot be considered only as a shadow of other powers. This comparatively good development of civil society is also a consequence of the fact that Moldova had one of the most robust democratic political systems in the former Soviet Union outside of the Baltic republics (Way, 2002).

Moldovan civil society is therefore well developed in some aspects, but still weak in others (Hensel, 2006; USAID, 2008). A range of real

and effective NGOs exists, and social actors are providing assistance to the government, defending civil rights and lobbying for transparency (Hensel, 2006). In April 2009 the reaction by many Moldovans to the results, and to the presumed gerrymandering in the national election, showed a widespread desire and attitude from the young generation to participate actively to the political life of the country. The so-called “Twitter Revolution” of April 7 asked for reforms, greater transparency and the possibility to discuss alternative political options. The main local CSOs were also involved in a coalition devoted to be on the lookout for fair Parliamentary elections in the two rounds that took place in 2009.⁴ In general, collaboration between government and civil society has expanded (USAID, 2008).⁵

Today the main limits of Moldovan civil society are rooted in the country’s economic and social structure. The economic context is still extremely fragile. Consequently, the society is affected by a bleeding: one million citizens live abroad, many of them youth, in percentage one of the biggest in the European continent; 36.2 percent of GDP comes from remittances, the world’s most remittance-dependent economy together with Tajikistan (Ratha, Xu, 2008; Mosneaga, 2009). Staff turnover is still high: frequently young leaders leave their organizations to study or work abroad. This is one of the reasons that

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can explain the lack of sustainability for long-term programmes (Doroftei, Nantoi, 2009).⁶ The Transnistrian districts are not spared the depopulation process, which is actually stronger, and is having disastrous socio-economic implications (Fomenko, 2009).

Data are not very helpful to fully understand the Moldovan and Transnistrian civil society. In Moldova a total of 7,000 NGOs are registered, both at the national and local levels (USAID, 2008),⁷ but only some of them are active and stable. In addition, the legislative system discourages CSO registration, it does not help external foundations to make donations, and day-by-day bureaucracy is still very complex.

Furthermore, the concept of civil society in the post-communist countries of Eastern Europe and Eurasia was the subject of a high international attention from political actors, scholars and donors, but its dynamics remain difficult to define and even more difficult to measure (Petrova, 2007). Qualitative studies are therefore able to demonstrate the importance of civil society on some post-Communist contexts, but the quantitative literature has generally lacked a measure of the organizational reality of civil society. Moreover, quantitative studies are limited to some selected and easier cases studied and compared frequently (Petrova, 2007). Often Moldova is not among them, but we must have also some quantitative frames in order to better analyze the impact of CSOs in the peace process. One useful tool is the “NGO Sustainability Index for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia,” a comparative cross-national quantitative measure of civil society created by USAID in 1997. It estimates the strength and overall viability of the non-governmental sectors using seven different dimensions: legal environment, organizational capacity, financial viability, advocacy, public image, service provision, and NGOs infrastructure.⁸ The sustainability index for the Moldovan NGO system is 4.2, which is defined as “in mid-transition” (USAID, 2008). The stronger aspects of Moldovan civil society turn out to be advocacy, infrastructure; the weaker financial viability, legal environment and a low level of trust in NGOs.⁹

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NGOs are active in a broad range of fields, but almost 50 percent of them are involved in the social and educational sectors. The majority of active NGOs have broad missions in order to attract donor funds, but these wide areas of activities limit NGOs’ ability to build strong expertise and networks based on the needs of their constituencies (USAID, 2008). This “thematic approach” is well exemplified by the peace sector: almost no CSOs are working only on peace and conflict issues or on the Transnistrian status (Mirimanova, 2010) and the specific capabilities are still low.

Public trust in CSOs is quite low, even if it has remarkably increased. In November 2009, 31 percent of the population had little or no trust in

them and 34 percent of the population expressed relative or total trust¹⁰ (IPP, 2009). This situation is due primarily to the low visibility of NGOs and their impact (IPP, 2009). To address this lack of trust, many Moldovan CSOs adopted of the “Code of Ethics” in March 2008 (Dura, 2010). The lack of trust in the NGO sector is also a high barrier for organizations working for peace when they try to build confidence among the Moldovan population.

The legal framework is still not helpful for CSOs. Even if, for instance, Article 32 of the Constitution guarantees freedom of opinion and association, the whole legal system is vague, and the many legislative gaps allow for corruption and arbitrary application of the law.¹¹ Tax incentives to encourage individual and corporate donations are lacking,¹² as are legal provisions to allow CSOs to engage in income-generating activities such as social enterprises or contracting with the government to provide consultancy or other services (IPP, 2007; USAID, 2008).¹³

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These issues are affecting all the CSOs working on peace, and they must be taken into account in order to analyze their potential and limitations in conflict resolution efforts.

TRANSNISTRIAN CIVIL SOCIETY

Transnistria’s civil society is clearly less active than in the other districts of Moldova. The local administration is indifferent towards CSOs acting at the social level, but it is against any political interference from civil society on the frozen conflict or on other issues. Therefore, the main fields of activity are limited to Education, Social protection, Youth problems, Sports and tourism, Human rights protection, Culture and arts, and Development of patriotism (Abramova, 2007). CSOs in Transnistria for the most part remain weak and play a limited role. Moreover, the unrecognized status of Transnistria has increased their international isolation.

In the period 1989-1996, public organizations were promoted by the government and they often had a military-patriotic orientation. A second period was characterized by independent CSOs (1996-2002) and the last one, 2002-2009, by increased civil activity (Lysenko, 2009).

In July 2009, 2,310 NGOs were registered in local bodies of Justice of Transnistria (Lysenko, 2009). However, a huge part of them are just nominal, and many can still be called “GONGO,” governmentally organized NGOs. Only around 20 organizations are properly functioning NGOs, five or six independently built up in recent years with the support of Moldovan or international partners (Hensel, 2006; Comai, Venturi, 2009; Belitser, 2005). Consequently, they still have little capacity to push the Transnistrian administration toward a collaborative approach to the conflict (Hensel, 2006).

The problem of depopulation, and therefore of closing CSOs and of leaders’ turnover, is extremely strong in Transnistria too. In the early 1990s, 730,000 people were living in this region, but by 2008 they were 533,500, and, according to Moldovan statistical authorities, the total was of some 410,000 people (Fomenko, 2009). The demographic situation is clearly controversial, but certainly this “demographic echo”—using Vladimir Fomenter’s expression—is one of the most important consequences of the conflict.

The brainwashing in school or in other public environments of old myths and stereotypes pertaining to the Cold War epoch is another limit to the development of a plural civil society (Belitser, 2005). At the same time, many youth are studying or working in Chişinău or abroad for a period, and are not too influenced by the Transnistrian propaganda. This aspect is very relevant for peacebuilding initiatives, as it creates the conditions for the establishment of projects involving Transnistrian people without strong prejudices on Moldovan people. It is also relevant for these kind of initiatives that a relevant part of CSOs are also registered in Chişinău under Moldovan law, as it provides Transnistrian organizations with potential access to funds from national and international donors, whereas those registered in Tiraspol cannot access these funds directly, Transnistria not being recognized internationally or by the Moldovan government (USAID, 2008). Notably, Igor Smirnov, the president of the separatist government, signed a decree in 2006 prohibiting foreign funding of CSOs registered in Transnistria. Specifically, CSOs were prohibited from receiving funding directly or indirectly from any international or foreign organization, foreign government, Transnistrian organization with a foreign capital share in excess of 20 percent, foreign citizen or stateless person, or any anonymous

source. The scope of the decree was later reduced to include only those organizations which are directly involved in political activities (Dura, 2010).

Several donors are interested in becoming involved with Transnistrian civil society. However, few outside actors are actually able to do so (Hensel, 2006). At the same time, CSOs from the Moldovan and Transnistrian regions are strengthening their collaboration, even in the peace sector. For instance, in 2008, a National Forum of NGOs from Transnistria was organized for the first time.

Finally, we highlight how many international studies and articles on civil society and civil rights in Transnistria contain some inaccuracies due to surface perceptions. For instance, Mikhelidze and Pirozzi wrote that “it is practically impossible to organize joint meetings, seminars or workshops with Moldovan counterparts” and “travel to the separatist region is restricted by the authorities” (2008: 38). In fact, many international (Soros Foundation, UK Global Conflict Prevention Pool, USAID, etc.) or Moldovan (CReDO, CONTACT, Foreign Policy Association, etc.) organizations are regularly working in partnership programs involving groups from both sides of the Nistru/Dniestr river. This element is significant in order to evaluate CSO contribution to the peacebuilding and peacemaking processes.

CIVIL SOCIETY IN CONFLICTS AND PEACE PROCESSES

CSOs have gained a great deal of popularity in the last two decades. For instance, the awarding of the Nobel Prize to *The International Campaign to Ban Landmines* in 1997 and to *Medicins Sans Frontieres* in 1999 has highlighted the emergence of these organizations as relevant forces in international politics (Ahmed, Shamina Potter, David M., 2006). In order to explore the role of CSOs working on conflict, it is essential to have a preliminary view on what “civil society organizations” are, and how far they can elicit policy-makers’ attention. It is obviously possible to find several definitions of CSOs. A useful one, for instance, according to the World Bank, is defining them as the “wide area 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). Another definition by the Civil Society Index (CSI) describes civil

society as “the arena, outside of the family, the state and the market where people associate to advance common interests” (Fioramonti, Heinrich, 2007: 8). The latter description is helpful for our work because it defines the “arena” as external to common social institutions such as “family, state and market.” Besides, the CSI is presenting civil society as a political actor rather than an economic one, and it explicitly includes individual citizen’s actions such as participation, demonstrations, social movements and other “un-organized” forms of civic activism (Mati, 2008). We are therefore using the broader expression CSOs and not just NGOs even if in Moldova practitioners are often using the second concept as CSI is defining CSOs.

A broad-spectrum key issue to keep into consideration for a comprehensive understanding of civil society organizations working locally is how they are connected globally. This is because the process of globalization, increasingly developed in the last decades, has one of the most important dimensions at the civil society level, which may be considered also as “global civil society” (Kaldor, 2006). In this regard, in the Moldova-Transnistria scenario we have to consider all the actors involved (Russia, EU, etc.), their interests, and how they are interacting with or manipulating the CSOs.

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One more dilemma of political theory on civil society, presented by different scholars, is to define “good” and “bad” organizations: civil society organizations may reject fundamental principles on which the state is organized (Phillips, 2002). This challenge for political theorists is accentuated in conflict areas in which civil society may be divided along the lines of the conflict, and in which both state and non-state actors use violence to further their aims (Bell, O’Rourke, 2007). However, this problematic aspect is not present today in Moldova, where episodes of organized violence are rare and where the same self-proclaimed Transnistrian State is illegal according to international law. In this context, one of the main dilemmas is rather to distinguish between “true” and “fake” civil society, as presented in the previous paragraph (Lysenko, 2009).

It is also difficult to define the extent to which CSOs can influence political processes. However, it is widely accepted that CSOs play a crucial

role in promoting good governance and people-centred development (Mati, 2008). The last few decades have also seen a great shift in the perceived role of CSOs as an increasingly important player. A clear evidence of this process is a stronger recognition by individual governments as well as international organizations (Fioramonti, Finn, 2008; Tocci, 2008; Mirimanova 2010), a trend also clear in Moldova.

More specifically, there has been a growing interest in the contribution of civil society to peace since the end of the Cold War. For instance, CSOs can play a crucial role going beyond negotiating interests to meet all sides' basic needs because they often have better access to the parties involved in a conflict (Mikhelidze, Pirozzi, 2008; Bartoli 2009), and they can work for a lasting peace or for the reconciliation process.¹⁴ CSOs also have direct connections with the many groups and individuals on the ground, and they may prepare strong conflict assessment and analysis. They may have a relevant role in all different stages of the conflict. However, their intervention is considered more effective in the efforts and activities at conflict prevention stage, and in post-settlement reconciliation and peacebuilding. Early warning systems, violence prevention, peace education, or the establishment of peace zones are examples of conflict prevention activities, while truth and reconciliation commissions, facilitation of dialogue among conflict groups, or reintegration of ex-military and paramilitary groups are common cases of post-conflict activities. In this article, therefore, it will be not directly considered the so-called "conflict sensitivity", the roles and responsibilities of CSOs in the humanitarian and developmental sectors that started to be discussed in the mid-1990s (Anderson 1999), but the direct role that CSOs can play in peacebuilding and supporting diplomatic efforts.

It is important to highlight two directions in the last two decades. Firstly, it is possible to find significant examples of intervention during the conflict, such as civil peacekeeping and confidence-building, even if we do not have such examples in Moldova. In these cases, it is quite frequent to witness a *peer-to-peer* cooperation between local civil society based in the conflict area and international NGOs working even in western civil society.¹⁵ Secondly, the peculiarities of the new wars (Kaldor, 2003) have changed the perception of *pre-* and *post-* conflict. In many complex and long conflicts—such as Israel-Palestine, Sudan, Colombia, etc.—it is simply impossible to distinguish these stages clearly. For this reason, it is also correct and sometimes

more appropriate to use the terminology “peacebuilding activities,” that for some international organizations—for instance the EU—is not merely post-conflict. This is quite clear even for the case study analysed in this article: the CSOs are post-conflict if it is considered the 1992 war, whereas it is conflict prevention if the risks of violence outbreak in the Transnistria region are taken into account.

Another distinction is that peace efforts can be conducted both on track one and track two (Diamond, McDonald, 1996; Williams, Fisher, 2007; Bartoli 2009). According to Williams, in Moldova, but also in similar conflicts, first- and second-track collaboration is possible and the approaches used by both types of actors are compatible and productive (William, 2005). Track two work is not seen as a substitute for official interactions, but is regarded as supplemental and complementary.¹⁶ Notably, Bell and Rourke (2007) analysed 389 peace agreements (addressing 48 intra-state conflicts) and they noticed that only five intra-state processes did not mention civil society in any of their peace agreements: Moldova-Transnistria is among them.¹⁷

In Moldova and in similar conflicts, first- and second-track collaboration is possible and the approaches used by both types of actors are compatible and productive.

CSO PROJECTS FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN MOLDOVA-TRANSNISTRIA

We will now analyze whether civil society in Moldova has made significant contributions to peacebuilding and to official peacemaking, using three different analytical frameworks with emblematic project examples. Firstly, the effects are analyzed using the five criteria identified by Ronald Fisher (Fisher 2007). Secondly, the framework developed by the “Research and Policy in Development” (RAPID) program at the Overseas Development Institute will be applied to this regional context. Finally, in the last paragraph the focus will be on how the political institutions—in particular a major player as the European Union—can improve the peacebuilding approach in Moldova through CSOs. These models, commonly applied to the whole

civil society, are utilised *mutatis mutandis* choosing some aspects for this study in order to analyze the CSOs working on conflict transformation.

One obstacle to this process is the absence of official statistics on this issue, and looking from the outside one may be tempted to conclude that CSOs do not engage this type of peace work.¹⁸ However, donor-based analyses are available and it is possible to utilise and combine the most relevant among them. Hence, a qualitative approach of key projects and actors contributes to understand the actual contribution of civil society organizations to the de-escalation of the Transnistrian conflict.

Starting with the first analytical framework—the one proposed by Fisher—it identifies five criteria: “cognitive changes (e.g. realizations or improved attitudes); creative ideas or cognitive products (e.g. directions, options, recommendations); substantive products (e.g. joint statements of principles, written proposals); relationship changes (e.g. increased empathy, trust and cooperation); structural connections (e.g. participants becoming negotiators)” (Fisher 2007: 312).

Fisher used this analytical framework to examine case studies in order to identify the links between unofficial and official interventions. The case study presented by Fisher in the Moldova-Transnistria scenario contributes to show that unofficial interventions made contributions to official peacemaking through identified transfer effects. The case describes problem-solving workshops that took place from early 1993 to 1996 and were facilitated by a team of mainly academic scholar-practitioners associated with the Centre for Conflict Analysis at the University of Kent and the Foundation for International Security, based in London. Notably, Williams (2005) maintains that track two took over when track one was faltering and was able to provide useful input. In this project Joe Camplisson—a community development and conflict resolution specialist from Northern Ireland—and some of the specialists who had been assisting him formed the Moldovan Initiative Committee of Management (MICOM).¹⁹ Simultaneously, Camplisson’s local associates came together with the “Joint Committee for Democratization and Conciliation” (JCDC),²⁰ whose membership equally drawn from Moldova and Transnistria.

Is it possible to identify other examples of Fisher’s five criteria in Moldova? Two other case studies suggest that we should answer affirmatively to this question: the work done after 1996 by JCDC, and the “IMPACT

Project.” JCDC implemented “shuttle diplomacy” between the authorities and people of Moldova and Transnistria. Their non-nationalist attitude and openness to the search of different solutions within the entire spectrum of options, including self-determination for Transnistria, earned the JCDC respect and trust on both sides of the river (Mirimanova, 2010).

In 1997, 1998, 1999, and 2000 a JCDC-MICOM seminar series took place in Albena, Bulgaria. The main aim of the meetings was to facilitate collaboration between governmental and non-governmental sectors in Moldova and Transnistria, focusing on the troubles of ordinary people. It also aimed to “kick-start” the stalled process of negotiations between the two sides. The seminars were attended by different participants: NGO representatives, local and national authority leaders, journalists, lawyers, business people, military personnel, Moldovan and Transnistrian governmental officials, but also students, housewives, and mediating ambassadors from Russia, Ukraine, and from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Two subsequent developments were attributed to the interaction between all these levels undertaken at the seminar: the resumption of the intergovernmental negotiations, and the reduction of peacekeeping troops in the security zone separating the two sides. Many non-governmental initiatives were also brought forward.²¹

Cognitive changes, creative ideas or cognitive products, relationship changes, and structural connections were concretely present in these projects. The third of Fisher’s criteria—substantive products—was strongly present in Kiev at a more conventional seminar held in 2000 and organized by the same group. This session produced a common state document, which may be seen as a result of the fusion of track one and track two processes (Williams, 2005; Fisher, 2007).²²

Another more recent example filling at least the first four criteria is the IMPACT Project.²³ This project was developed for two years (2007-2009) with the specific aim of strengthening joint work of analytical CSOs and independent expert analysts from the two banks of the river Nistru/Dniester plus Russia, Romania and Ukraine. The main goal of this work was to develop a joint analysis of the socio-economic effects of the protracted political conflict and to develop policy proposals in order to contribute to developing effective strategies and options for transforming the conflict. The most substantive product of the project was the joint research on the

social and economic impact of the conflict and on the negotiation process (IMPACT, 2009).²⁴ The research is showing the negative effects of the conflict on society and on the economy of both sides. The research is also relevant for its uniqueness: it is very hard to find such studies, mainly due to the absence of updated official data from Transnistria. At the same time, it presents the weaknesses and points of strength of the official diplomatic process. The final conference, held in Odessa, on 28-29 May 2009, was attended by all the main experts, local stakeholders and opinion leaders from both sides.

The IMPACT project seems to answer positively even to the criteria identified by the RAPID Framework. The RAPID Framework aims to improve the use of research and evidence to influence policy processes and it facilitates the analytical focus on the relationship between CSOs' policy influence and key factors. Particularly, it highlights the importance of four factors: political context, the links between CSOs and other important players, evidence generated through CSOs' work and external influences (Start, Hovland, 2004). For these features, it may be a useful analytical tool in examining the relationship between CSOs and policy in post-communist countries (Fioramonti, Heinrich, 2007). The IMPACT Project took into consideration the political context and it tried to exploit institutional channels to contribute to policy-making. At the same time, it created well-constructed links between communities, networks and intermediaries—such as the media²⁵—in affecting policy change. Moreover, the collection of “evidence” was a key issue in the project, as shown by the expert essays. Finally, the impact of external influences, forces and donor actions on research/policy interactions were taken into consideration with direct contribution of external partners from Romania, Russia and Ukraine, and with the support of international experts.

Are other projects responding to the RAPID Framework criteria? five or six local or international organizations are certainly working on programmes in this direction. However, only a few of them are focussed directly on peacebuilding or peacemaking. The analysis of the main donors is a useful approach to show some evidences. The “Department for International Development” (DFID) of the British Embassy based in Chişinău was one of the most active in the conflict resolution sector in the last years. In fact, one of its main goals is “strengthening the UK’s contribution to conflict

resolution and peacebuilding.” Among 79 completed projects of direct aid commissioned since 1991, 11 (13.9 percent)²⁶ are on “Conflict Resolutions and Human Rights” and all of them clearly target the Moldova-Transnistria conflict (British Embassy in Moldova, 2010). Some project titles can be good examples: “Conflict Resolution and Community Development in Moldova,” “Strategic Conflict Assessment,” “Transnistrian Dialogues” or “The Peacebuilding Framework Project (PBF).” In particular, PDF—four years long (2003-2007) and with a large budget (£450,000)—is interesting for this research, as it was aimed at contributing to development through a range of peacebuilding activities designed to support conflict resolution in the country. One of the 4 key components was titled “Strengthening the Non-governmental Sector” (British Embassy in Moldova, 2010). Notably, many of the projects were contracted and directly implemented by local CSOs.²⁷

It is possible to conclude that the British Government—within the framework of the cutting edge Global Conflict Prevention Pool—was specifically devoted to the peace process on different tracks.²⁸ Another organization working directly on peacebuilding is the Austrian Development Cooperation which collaborates with partners from Chişinău and Tiraspol in supporting a Centre for Peace Initiatives, Democracy

In Moldova and in similar conflicts, first- and second-track collaboration is possible and the approaches used by both types of actors are compatible and productive.

Changes and Conflict Resolution, and organizing an International Summer School and Distance Learning since 2007. One ongoing project focussed on conflict resolution and peacebuilding is the project “Prevention of Ethnic Conflicts through Meaningful Educational Integration Policies” financed by the Dutch Foundation “Cordaid” and implemented by three Moldovan organizations.²⁹ The project works on the prevention of ethnic and linguistic conflicts in Moldovan society through educational practices. The Cooperative Peace Project is a project aimed at strengthening capacity for peacebuilding work within Moldova-Transnistria CSOs. As part of this objective, one output of the project is a comprehensive document presenting the views, experiences, and proposals of the many sub-sectors

of Moldovan-Transnistrian civil society (lawyers, academics, etc.) on the regional conflict.³⁰

The Cooperative Peace Project is not the same kind of “work on conflict” project as those of other major donors implementing projects in Transnistria. Addressing socio-economic issues that are directly or indirectly linked to the existence of the conflict is considered in Moldova, but especially in Transnistria, as more important than finding a political solution to the conflict, and it is also easier to engage with Transnistrian authorities at this level (Dura, 2010). For instance, USAID (2001) is assisting political institutions and CSOs in Moldova by financing several projects, some of them implemented in Transnistria but none focussed directly on conflict resolution.³¹ Also, about 50 US Peace Corps volunteers present in the country are working on other issues, such as development, education, etc. Some other important donors working in Transnistria—such as the U.S. Embassy, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Swiss Cooperation Office Moldova, UNFPA, and WHO—are targeting youth organizations, media, or health care. Others are working on different issues that may indirectly facilitate a de-escalation of the conflict. For example, the Embassy of the Czech Republic is working on “Reinforcement of the Civil Society—Building Contacts between the Transnistrian NGOs” and on “Stabilization of Potential Migrants through support of Small Entrepreneurship on both banks of the Dniester River”; or the Soros Foundation, supporting the development, consolidation, and coordination of CSOs and local communities on the two banks, paying particular attention to democracy and human rights.³²

THE CONTRIBUTION OF POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

In this section, we will make considerations as to how political institutions can improve the conflict resolution multi-track process through CSOs in Moldova. We have already considered the contribution of some Embassies and national governments as major donors for projects in Transnistria. The Moldovan government was always very engaged on the diplomatic level though the Ministry of Reintegration. However, it gave no contribution to CSOs working on conflicts. The Transnistrian authorities, as we have already seen, created many problems for the genuine local CSOs working

on issues related to politics, conflict or peace. OSCE has been mediating and facilitating peace processes in the region since the early 1990s from grass-roots level to high diplomacy. It financed several projects and supported local initiatives both financially and politically.

However, the main actor that has political and economical opportunity to improve the CSO peace activities is the European Union. How has the EU employed the instruments at its disposal to contribute to the resolution of the conflict in Moldova? Beyond the official negotiations, the EU's neighborhood policy is active in many other ways. This wide range of activities is generally viewed as "Euromodernisation," which represents a new model for conflict resolution that not only gives support to democracy and governance, but various EU standards and forms of cooperation that may advance the peacebuilding agenda of governments facing internal conflicts (Doroftei, Nantoi, 2009). The

European Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM), for instance, is a good example of "soft power" concurrent to the negotiation process: Transnistrian companies are pushed to register in Chişinău and in this way the economic power of the region is increasingly less dependent

The main actor that has political and economical opportunity to improve the CSO peace activities is the European Union.

on Transnistrian political power. However, not having contacts with CSOs and opinion polls, the mission is still quite unknown and far from the people. Generally, a great part of the EU's policy towards Moldova is focussed on internal reforms (i.e., constitution reforms) which can improve the attractiveness and capability of Moldova to effectively reintegrate the Transnistrian territory.

Notably, the EU objectives in conflict resolution are not explicitly stated in any public document. Effectively, the EU has taken over existing assistance programmes such as the UK's Peacebuilding Framework on working with civil society without having undertaken clear conflict analysis (Doroftei, Nantoi, 2009). The society level in general has not been taken into wide consideration, partly because several small actors would not have the capacity to manage multi-million Euro projects at the community level. Consequently, Oazu Nantoi (2009) underlines that the civil society programme remains without a proper start.

On the whole, the EU looks unable to create partnerships with CSOs that professionalize them in the field at all stages and levels of conflict intervention. In EU documents, the involvement of civil society in peacebuilding is regarded as essential. However, in the concrete case of the Moldova-Transnistria conflict, there is a lack of recognition on conflict transformation and peacebuilding by civil society,³³ even if emphasis is shifting in recent years from diplomatic talks to supporting civil society activities. The main point is that no specialized peacebuilding cross-conflict projects have been supported so far. Besides, CSOs in peacebuilding are regarded as supplementary. This attitude extracts civil society from the conflict as if it were not a part of the conflict itself (Mirimanova, 2010). The EU justifies this approach by emphasizing how difficult it is to implement any “political” project through CSOs in Transnistria. However, in the previous section of this article, we showed different examples of how it is possible to work directly on the conflict dynamics involving the local civil societies. In addition, it must be considered that—differently from other conflict areas—in the Moldova-Transnistria context it is relatively easy for civil society representatives to participate in meetings and events on the other side.

The EU appears to offer more possibilities to change the conflict’s status quo. According to Natalia Mirimanova (2010), in the near future the development of the EU Peacebuilding Partnership (PBP) may improve the EU support to CSOs working in the peacebuilding sector in the European Neighborhood. In fact, the PBP is recognizing peacebuilding as a professional field that requires specialised funding mechanisms. Furthermore, civil society organizations are recognised as key actors with expertise and skills (Dura, 2010; Mirimanova, 2010). These political choices on CSOs working in the peace sector will probably affect the EU’s attitude toward Moldova, the country in which the EU is investing the highest per capita amount of all Eastern neighboring countries.³⁴ The EU is already investing a big slice of the Neighborhood Partnership cake supporting civil society and involving them in different ways.³⁵ At the present time it also has the political support and tools to focus more on the direct conflict dynamics. The main limit may be that the EU has a clear view of the type of resolution which is desired—Transnistria remaining part of Moldova—and this may lead to a loss of trust on Transnistrian CSOs. However, this can be reduced by the positive impact of funds allocated for other sectors in Transnistria.

CONCLUSIONS

Since the beginning of the Moldovan-Transnistrian conflict, local and foreign CSOs were involved in several peacebuilding and peacemaking initiatives. This study firstly showed that these projects are a small part of the programmes financed by the main donors. However, they contribute to reduce micro and meso violence creating the necessary preconditions (Dura 2010) to help the population on the two banks of the Nistru/Dniestr River to keep collaborating in many sectors.

The examples reported by Ronald Fisher (2007) and other initiatives considered in the study show how CSOs can also contribute to official diplomacy in this context. Here, indeed, many organizations are still having contacts and exchanges with similar organizations of the other side and for them it is not difficult to cross the river.

However, mainly due to the general conditions of Moldovan civil society, none of the local CSOs are focusing only on peace efforts, but all are mixing several sectors (human and civil rights, social care, etc.). Therefore, the specific know-how of these organizations in the peace sector is on average quite low. This situation is also due to the fact that the majority of donor interventions in Transnistria—except the DFID or few other quoted examples—are not focussed directly on conflict resolution, but, mainly, on social, agricultural or medical issues or on the indirect effects of the conflict. The refusal of the Transnistrian authorities to work directly on the conflict is considered the main cause of this lack. Nevertheless, the peace efforts promoted by CSOs and presented in this study show that it is possible to work on both track one and track two through the non-governmental actors. We also argue that the “peripheral vision” of CSOs on conflict transformation approach is not very supported by the political institutions. Mainly, the EU is currently showing interest in supporting direct “interventions and peacebuilding by civil society on the *peace as change* versus *peace as stability* approach and the notion of *civil society as an institutional basis for peacebuilding*” (Mirimanova 2010: 37) and this process may also involve Moldova, and contribute with new tools to unfreeze the conflict toward a suitable and lasting agreement.

Notes

1. The region takes the name from the “Dniestr” River—in Romanian “Nistru”—which divides the area from the rest of Moldova.

2. It is not possible to describe the whole historical background in this study. Oazu Nantoi (2009) wrote a well-balance article, briefly describing the main historical aspects of the conflict.

3. Gagauzia, a southern region of Moldova, declared independence on 19 August 1990, before then Transnistria, but the Moldovan and Gagauzian leaderships agreed on the decentralization of political power and the creation of an autonomous territorial status in 1995.

4. NGOs and parliamentary commissions increasingly work together in the legislative drafting process and in ad hoc working groups.

5. Another example of cooperation between NGOs and government is the drafting of the “Law on Assembly,” which was achieved with the direct involvement of three organizations (CReDO, Promo-Lex and Amnesty International Moldova).

6. For instance, Doroftei and Nantoi (2009) show that from the 30-40 NGOs which were involved in the capacity-building component of the “Peace Building Framework Programme”, “only ten remained active and very few—approximately three—have better capacity and sustainability at present” (p. 23).

7. For instance, the Institute for Public Policy (2007) wrote about 3,700 NGOs. One of the methodological misunderstandings is the same definition of “NGO” itself: instead of using the standard Western definition, all voluntary associations are invariably classified as NGOs.

8. This attempt to address the “data problem” with a framed and organic comparative approach in Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia since 1997 is the first in this sense.

9. The detailed results in a range from 0 (ideal situation) to 7 (worst situation) are: advocacy (3.7), infrastructure (3.7), financial viability (5.2), legal environment (4.3), NGO sustainability (4.2), organizational capacity (4.1), service provision (4.5), and public image (4.2).

10. In October 2008 the results were quite different: 52 percent of the population had little or no trust in NGOs and only 21 percent of the population expressed relative or total trust in NGOs (IPP, 2008). The main reasons of this growth of trust are: the profitable work of the coalition monitoring the Parliamentary elections, the organization in November 2008 of the Nation Forum of NGOs and the approval by the Forum of a “Code of Ethics of NGOs”. The range

of trust since November 2001 to November 2009 was between 20 percent (Nov. 2002) and 38.7 percent (May 2007) (IPP, 2009).

11. Other laws with regard to CSOs are: law on public associations of 23 January 1997 (modified in 2007), the law on foundations of 28 October 1999, the section on NGOs in the Civil Code, the law on philanthropy and sponsorship of 25 December 2002. Many of these laws were drafted with the assistance of Moldovan CSOs (Dura, 2010).

12. NGOs, as private companies, have to pay all taxes. An NGO is exempt from paying income tax only if it has obtained a “Public Benefit Certificate.” However, this Certificate does not allow an NGO to recover VAT on purchased goods or services.

13. The most important legislative acts regulating the activities of NGOs in the Republic of Moldova are: Law on Public Associations, no. 837-XIII of 17.05.1996; Law on Foundations, no. 581-XIV of 30.07.1999; Law on Philanthropy and Sponsorship, no.1420-XV of 31.10.2002; Civil Code, no. 1107-XV of 06.06.2002; Parliament Decree no. 373-XVI of 29.12.2005 on the Approval of the Concept of Co-operation between the Parliament and Civil Society. According to USAID (2008: 165), “Amendments to the Law on Civil Associations made in 2007 excluded three out of four legal forms of NGO, allowing only NGOs in the form of civic associations to have the organizational and juridical status of a legal entity. All other NGOs must re-register in the legal form of civil associations. These changes affect a substantial number of NGOs whose status no longer exists under the law. Many of them lack clarity on whether they should re-register as associations or not, and they face a cumbersome registration procedure.” In 2008, UNDP Moldova financed the development of an electronic registry of NGOs within the Ministry of Justice, which may improve management and access to data on NGOs.

14. Andrea Bartoli (2009: 393) declares that “the use of NGOs in conflict resolution reveals a certain ‘maturity’ of the state.”

15. In any circumstance and activity, authentic peacebuilding processes is home-grown and not imposed from outside, even if it can be supported by foreign funds.

16. The core idea is to create “interaction that change attitudes and perceptions and allow parties to explore options and develop solutions outside of the charged arena of formal negotiations” (Fisher, 2007: 311).

17. The other four are: Azerbaijan/Nagorno-Karabakh, Indonesia/Moluccas, Nicaragua and the Solomon Islands.

18. For instance, Mikhelidze and Pirozzi (2008) claim that “In general NGOs and research institutes are engaged with projects related to European integration and not with conflict resolution issues” (p. 40) and “There is practically

no interaction between Moldovan and Transnistrian NGOs, not least because of the tight cap on Transnistrian organizations” (p. 37).

19. MICOM obtained funds from different donors, for instance Charities Aid Foundation (UK) and the C. S. Mott Foundation (USA).

20. JCDC is an independent voluntary group created in 1992 that comprises men and women from Moldova and Transnistria.

21. Among these, the setting up of an information centre for NGOs, a mutual jazz festival in Bender, a programme for assistance to unemployed people in Transnistria and a rehabilitation programme that assists people who suffered from the Transnistria conflict and the Afghan war.

22. The constitutional document approved at Kiev has lately been superseded by a proposed federal constitutional document which includes some elements of the earlier document (Fisher 2007).

23. The project was financed by the British Embassy, Chişinău, with £238,973. The exact title of the project is “Making Visible the Economic and Social Costs of Frozen Conflict and Benefits of Peace—Moldova-Transnistria.” The partners of the project were: Romanian Peace Institute (PATRIR), Cluj-Napoca, Romania; Center for Strategic Studies and Reforms (CISR), Chişinău; “Independent Centre for Analytical Research “New Age”, Tiraspol; “Joint Commission for Democratization and Conciliation” (JCDC), Chişinău; “Russian Information Agency “New Region”—Pridnestrovie”, Tiraspol; “Center for Independent Television Development,” Chişinău.

24. The project also produced a documentary entitled “Transnistria: When the Guns Fell Silent.”

25. The “Center for Independent Television Development” and Russian Information Agency “New Region”, for instance, are partners of the project. Great attention was dedicated to press releases and to those in different media, with two people focusing on it (<http://impact-project.org/index.shtml?apc=etIn16>, June 2010).

26. From a budgetary point of view, on £30 million committed, more than one thousand projects were on this budget line.

27. For instance, “Contact,” “Independent Journalism Center,” “Foreign Policy Association”, etc.

28. However, DFID is closing its bilateral programme in Moldova in March 2011 because Moldova no longer fits the category of world’s poorest countries having reached Middle-Income Country status in January 2009. DFID declared that in the coming years, the UK will continue to support Moldova in its goal of joining the EU through funds managed by Embassy, the European Commission, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the World Bank.

29. Resource Centre for Human Rights (CReDO), Centre for Minority Issues, and Association of the Ukrainian Youth in Republic of Moldova ZLA-GODA.

30. The project partners are: CreDO (Moldova), JCDC (Moldova), “World Window” (Transnistria) and PATRIR (Romania).

31. This was confirmed even by Ina Pislaru of the Chişinău staff during a talk with the author hold the 21 of July 2009.

32. The main NGOs implementing Soros Foundation’s projects are “Promo-LEX” and “Contact Center.”

33. Parallel apolitical projects in areas directly or indirectly related to the conflict (i.e. social care, ecology, health) receive funding from the EU Delegation in Moldova mainly through the UNDP. In 2009 the EU earmarked £ 1.8 million for projects in these fields. The EU has the funds and a political agenda while the UNDP has know-how (Dura, 2010).

34. 209.7 million Euros for Moldova under the European Neighbourhood Partnership Instrument (ENPI) for the National Indicative Programme of 2007-2010.

35. For instance, Moldovan CSOs have been monitoring the implementation of the EU-Moldova Action Plan (including on the Transnistria issue). CSOs have also become involved in the early stages of drafting new legislation on anti-corruption or strengthening the independence of the judiciary (Dura, 2010).

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