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South Caucasus's Kinship Networks as Obstacles to Civil Participation

Abstract

The research to date on informal networks of the post-communist South Caucasus has tended to focus either on the informal institutions' role in providing social safety nets for the population or on the networks' economic functions. This article examines the impact of informal kinship networks on participation in organized civil society in the present-day Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. In order to explore how kinship institutions affect membership in civil society organizations across the South Caucasus, this research builds on a variety of primary and secondary sources. The findings of this study reveal that kinship-based networks serve as a significant source of social capital in the South Caucasus: they offer social support to their members and encourage intra-network bonding, making participation in civil society unattractive. However, the prevalence of kinship networks does not significantly affect popular attitudes towards organized civil society and the reliance on kinship structures is not seen as substitute for membership in formal civil society.

Keywords: kinship networks, civil society, informal institutions, South Caucasus, 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital, civil participation.

Introduction

The collapse of the USSR and independence of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia have led to dramatic political, economic and social upheavals in the South Caucasus region. Transition to market economy and the end of single-party politics, among other things, encouraged the creation and growth of independent formal civil society.¹ Yet during the last two decades, the post-communist civil society in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia remains disorganized, often inefficient and, above all, is characterized by deficit of popular participation and organizational membership. In contrast, informal associational life of the South Caucasus's societies is abundant with a diversity of social networks and other informal institutions and structures. Of these networks, according to the literature, kinship institutions are the most widespread and influential forms of informal association across the region (Schatz 2004; Aliyev 2013; Babajanian 2008). A substantial portion of research on the South Caucasus's informal institutions has focused on their relationship with economic and political actors. However, far too little attention has been paid to how the informal sector interacts with formal civil society. Though many researchers have shown an increased interest in the South Caucasus's informal structures as coping mechanisms, employed by the population to address economic and socio-political challenges (Dershem and Gzirishvili 1998; Hasanov 2009; Valiyev 2011), so far, however, there has been little discussion about informal structures' effects upon formal civil society.

This study addresses the following question: How the reliance on informal kinship networks affects participation and membership in formal civil society organizations (CSOs)² in the contemporary South Caucasus? This question follows in line with the claims made in the literature about the adverse effects of 'bonding' social capital and the lack of 'bridging' capital on participation in organized civil society (Putnam 2000; de Souza Briggs 2003; Bandura 1997; Gibson 2001). Following this logic, it is argued in the literature that the lack of social capital³ transfer from private into public sphere, hampered by the dominance of informal networks, serves as an obstacle for membership in CSOs and prevents 'bridging' of the tightly knit informal networks (Howard 2003;

Rose 2000). This study will investigate interaction between the homogenous South Caucasus' kinship structures, notorious for their high 'bonding' and low 'bridging' social capital, and low registered membership in CSOs. This article, however, does not attempt to present kinship networks as either potential obstacles to civil association or as a factor contributing towards the weakness of CSO sector in the Caucasus. Instead, the goal of this study is to examine the nature of a complex relationship between the South Caucasus's kinship structures and the burgeoning, but riddled by numerous problems, civil society.

While accepting that civil sector in the South Caucasus is not limited to formal CSOs only, but that it also consists of multitude of other forms of formal and informal civil association, the scope of this research is limited to the analysis of kinship networks' influence on popular participation and membership in CSOs.⁴ Rather than ignoring the definitions of 'informal' or 'communal' civil society – which explain alternative meanings and manifestations of societal organisation in non-Western contexts, this study aims to understand the development of one particular form of civil association – formal civil society organizations. However, this research does not support a Western-centric conceptualisation of civil society, in which informal associational life is viewed as an antidote to formal civil association rather than a form of civil society. Instead, the main goal of this research is to examine the impact of kinship networking on a relatively new to the South Caucasus form of civil association – independent CSOs.

This article does not claim that the high levels of reliance on informal networks is a phenomenon unique to the South Caucasus or that the low 'bridging' social capital is not of importance in other regions. What this research does suggest is that, given the role of Soviet legacies, due to the ubiquitous nature of kinship networks and their significance for the South Caucasus's societies, such structures play an important part in daily lives for a far greater number of individuals in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia than they are in many other developing or developed regions of the world. This study admits that both the importance of kinship networks and their impact on organized civil society in all three countries are also influenced by specific contextual conditions that shape civil society in

each country. However, this paper assumes that country-specific differences, as it will be seen from statistical data on civic participation and the importance of kinship ties, are not very notable; which allows discussing the above presented processes on a region-wide basis.

To explore the relationship between the strength of kinship networks and participation in civil society, this study combines quantitative close-ended survey data with qualitative open-ended interviews. For its analysis of survey data, this article employed the Caucasus Barometer (CB) representative nation-wide surveys conducted by the South Caucasus-based research institute, Caucasus Research Resource Centres (CRRC), in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia from 2007 to 2013. This study also borrows insights from two nation-wide CRRC survey projects: the ‘Volunteerism and Civic Participation 2011’ in Georgia and the ‘Social Capital, Media and Gender survey 2012’ in Azerbaijan. The bulk of qualitative interview data has been collected by the author during a total of 30 open-ended in-depth interviews with area experts, scholars, policy-makers and civil activists in the South Caucasus and throughout Europe conducted for this project in 2013.⁵

Theoretical argument

Independent civil society organizations began mushrooming in the South Caucasus immediately after the break up of the Soviet Union. For instance, Ishkanian (2008, 30) mentions that only 44 CSOs existed in Armenia before 1994. By 1996 their numbers expanded to over 1,500 and in 2007 over 4,000 CSOs were registered in Armenia. Similarly, numbers of CSOs in Georgia between 1992-1996 reached several thousand organizations (Nodia 2005, 14). In Azerbaijan, the number of CSOs was also burgeoning since the start of independence: the official estimates by 2007 state the number of CSOs at around 2,800 (USAID 2007). Although many of the officially registered in the South Caucasus CSOs are the so-called GONGOs (government-organized non-governmental organizations) and many more exist on paper only (Civicus 2010), the expansion of the

CSO sector also led to the appearance of a diversity of independent civil society organizations operating both in service-delivery and advocacy.

Yet, regardless of CSOs' numbers, registered participation and membership in civil society in all three countries remained dramatically low throughout the entire post-communist period. The data from the World Values Surveys (WVS) for 1996-1997 reveals that participation in charitable and humanitarian organizations in the South Caucasus was incredibly low not only by the Western but also by the post-communist standards. In Azerbaijan and Georgia less than one percent of respondents, in Armenia one a half percent said that they are active members of civil society organizations. By contrast, over 27% in the US, 20% in New Zealand and in Austria, around seven percent in Bosnia-Herzegovina, two and a half percent in Hungary and over three percent in Macedonia reported to the WVS active membership in charitable organizations.⁶ Similar results were also provided by the European Values Survey (EVS) held in the South Caucasus in 2008: slightly over one percent of respondents in Armenia, three percent in Azerbaijan and less than one percent in Georgia mentioned membership in civil society organizations.

Not much has changed in the present-day South Caucasus. The Caucasus Barometer (CB) survey conducted in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia in 2011 reported similarly low levels of participation in civil society organizations: 97% of respondents in Armenia, 94% Azerbaijan and 96% in Georgia mentioned that during last six months they never went to a meeting of a club or a civic organization. Nevertheless, the CB survey also presented that in spite of the deficit of civil participation, 30% in Armenia, 36% in Azerbaijan and over 33% of respondents in Georgia mentioned that they trust CSOs. Furthermore, according to the CRRC (2011) survey in Georgia, 41% of respondents said that they would join a civil organization working on important issues for the society. It also appears that a decent number of people in the South Caucasus occasionally participate in unpaid volunteering. As based on the CB survey data in 2013, 31% in Armenia, 23% in Azerbaijan and 19% in Georgia volunteered with no payment during the last six months. However, the positive attitude towards formal civil society and casual

participation in voluntary work do not transfer into membership in civil society organizations and regular participation in voluntary activities. If the overall attitude to civil association is positive, which factors can explain deficit of civil participation in the South Caucasus?

The existing literature on post-Soviet civil society offers a number of hypotheses that explain the situation in the South Caucasus' countries (Ishkanian 2008; Diuk 2012; Nodia 2005). Firstly, poor governance affects people's ability to get together to influence service providers and government officials and claim social rights, demand compliance with legal or programme commitments, and express their preferences about service performance and quality. The inadequate ability of the state to enforce the rule of law in all three countries creates an environment in which service providers and government officials in line ministries are not responsive or accountable. The situation in Georgia has improved in the recent years but the effects of institutional and political reforms on popular participation in civil society are not clear yet. Secondly, the existing laws and political regimes in all three countries do not encourage political associational activity. In Azerbaijan, civil society is blatantly persecuted, while in Armenia it is generally ignored and sometimes harassed. Political and social contestation still remains the prerogative of few courageous individuals. Among other socio-political problems, the post-communist culture of clientilism is entwined into state-society relations and significantly affects the performance of CSOs in the South Caucasus (Panossian 2001; Muskhelishvili and Jorjoliani 2009; Ergun 2010). Patron-client relations between CSOs and political actors result in politicization of civil society and reduce its independence from the state.⁷ Thirdly, formal associations can hardly help citizens to solve economic problems and improve their well-being. In particular, it is through their reliance on cash remittances transferred by labour migrant family members that people can buy food and pay user charges for health care and essential utilities. This present study, however, has no intention of challenging these well established in the literature socio-political, socio-economic and socio-cultural explanations of low civil participation in the South Caucasus. Rather, this article contributes to the growing literature on the weakness of post-communist civil society by providing an additional explanation of the phenomenon.

In contrast to the above detailed factors, the lack of ‘bridging’ social capital is a far less often mentioned in the literature factor of post-communist civil society’s weakness. As presented by Putnam (2000), ‘bonding’ of social capital is a process of inter-personal networking occurring within homogenous groups of individuals. ‘Bridging,’ links those groups to each other creating diverse and vibrant society. If ‘bonding’ of social capital does not result in its ‘bridging,’ civil processes within a society will be limited and the transfer of social capital from the private to public sphere remains minimal. Granovetter (1973) argued that individuals within a society are linked to each other by *strong ties* developed as a result of ‘bonding.’ The strong-tie networks are groups of people linked to each other by family, kinship or friendship connections.

Gibson (2001, 53) wrote that strong-tie networks “tend to be internally homogenous and cohesive, thereby inhibiting interactions with those outside the network and resulting in the atomization of small groups, if not individuals.” He further suggests that “family or clan is an exemplar of a network characterized by strong ties.” In order to stimulate the transfer of social capital resulting in societal interaction, it is essential for strong-tie networks to be connected by *weak ties* (Granovetter 1973). Weak ties serve as ‘bridges’ connecting strong-tie networks and ‘bridging’ social capital – a process responsible for construction of civil society. Without the connecting strength of weak ties, social capital accumulated as a result of ‘bonding’ in strong-tie networks remains within the confines of private sphere, locked in strong-tie networks rather than being ‘diffused’ to the public sphere. As stated by Gibson (2001, 52) “a vibrant civil society profits from well-developed *social networks*”. However, “the social networks must be composed of “weak ties”; that is, they must span relatively heterogeneous segments of society, rather than being clan or kinship based (ibid).” This means that in order for kinship networks to positively contribute to formal civil society, ‘bridging’ social capital is fundamental.

The post-communist society in the former Soviet Union is notorious for its high ‘bonding’ and low ‘bridging’ of social capital. As emphasized by Howard (2003, 107) “[t]his hypothesis predicts that those people who have maintained their vibrant friendship

circles with, will feel less need or desire to participate in voluntary organizations.” Howard explained the low organizational membership in post-communist civil societies of East Germany and Russia by the distrust of communist organizations, post-communist disappointment and the persistence of friendship networks. The lack of ‘bridging’ – the absence of social linkages connecting homogenous clusters of social capital, was also identified as a cause of weakness of the South Caucasus civil society – vibrant and complex networks of social capital do not become ‘formalized’ or organized into CSOs (Hough 2011, 2). For instance, a representative civic engagement survey, conducted in Georgia in 2011 (ibid), has found “a deep discrepancy between the Georgian public’s low levels of bridging social capital as evidenced by formal engagement with the civil society sector and high levels of bonding social capital as shown by informal engagement with family, friends, neighbours and other citizens” (ibid, 2). A similar observation has been made by Ishkanian (2008) and Babajanian (2008) in Armenia, as well as by Hasanov (2009) and Valiyev (2011) in Azerbaijan. However, in spite of identifying the problem, the existing research fails to provide a definitive answer as to how the reliance on kinship and other forms of informal structures affects participation in civil society.

The existing literature that examines the kinship and other informal networks in the South Caucasus presented that in absence of effective and transparent state institutions (Babajanian 2008; Hasanov 2009; Aliyev 2013), the networks serve as private safety nets for the population and that, for instance in Georgia “without these informal social networks the number of vulnerable households ... would be much greater” (Dershem and Gzirishvili 1998, 1835). Careful context-bound analysis can reveal that it is the existing institutional environment in the countries of the Caucasus that has produced and reinforced informal networks: limited accountability and poor governance that have pervaded state institutions for many decades have compelled citizens to rely on kinship networks in their daily lives. The reliance on such networks helps people solve administrative problems and take advantage of societal opportunities, which are otherwise accessible only to the elites. A number of scholars have demonstrated the importance of the institutional systems in shaping societies in the former Soviet countries (Ledeneva 2006; Rose 1995; Gel' man 2004). In addition, systemic problems – such as

malfunctioning labour markets that leave citizens without the possibility to earn sufficient income and compel them to rely on kinship. A substantial portion of the research on informality in the South Caucasus, presented that kinship networks serve as important safety nets, which provide their members with a diversity of public goods and services. For instance, Dershem and Gzirishvili (1998, 1828) in their study on Georgian informal networks confirmed that “[i]nformal social networks are a potential resource that can provide individuals and households with the exchange of food, financial assistance and as a pool of labour.”

How the reliance on kinship networks can affect participation and membership in organized civil society? The absolute importance of ‘bridging’ social capital for democracy and civil society was reiterated by numerous studies (Cohen 1992; Tocqueville 1969). Putnam (1993, 175) emphasized that “[d]ense but segregated horizontal networks sustain cooperation within each group, but networks of civil engagement that cut across social cleavages nourish wider cooperation.” The literature to date on informal networks’ influence upon formal civil society has been somewhat ambiguous. Studies by Wells-Dang (2012) on kinship networks in China and Vietnam, Baylouny (2006) on informal networks in Jordan and by Singerman (2006) on kinship groups in Egypt point out that involvement of kinship structures in grassroots activism and other forms of civic association bolsters formal civil society and increases the transfer of social capital from private into public spheres.

While the role of post-communist informal networks is often perceived as positive for transitional societies due to the networks’ performing as coping mechanisms and because of the networks’ ability to supply their members with public goods which neither state nor NGOs are capable of providing (Rose 1994b; Ledeneva 2001; Round 2010; Sik 1994), informal networks are also known in their role of preventing the ‘bridging,’ or transfer of social capital from private into public spheres. Gibson (2001, 53) argues that the existence of strong-tie networks is not “conductive to the development of a civil society,” and Ledeneva (2001, 73) mentions that the post-Soviet informal networks “could hardly be considered as embryos of ‘civil society’”. A similar assumption was

also suggested by Rose (2000, 147) who points out that “[w]hile some capital networks are used to produce goods and services in every society, their form is distinctive in an ‘anti-modern’ society—that is, a society characterized by organizational failure and the corruption of formal organizations.” Having demonstrated that the existence of homogenous kinship networks can both positively and negatively affect civil participation, the next task is to investigate the role of kinship structures in the contemporary South Caucasus societies.

Kinship networks: from Soviet to post-communist

Among many forms of informal networking in the South Caucasus, networks centred on kinship links and involving members of immediate and extended family are not only the most widespread form of informal networking but are also the most well-entrenched into the social culture of the South Caucasus’ nations. The strength of kinship networks and their pervasiveness in both Soviet and the post-communist South Caucasus were frequently emphasized by scholars (Altman 1983; Dershem and Gzirishvili 1998; Schatz 2004; Valiyev 2011). As a primordial form of social organization, the Caucasus’s kinship networks were known to historians and ethnographers as the dominant social structure existent in the region well before the inclusion of the Transcaucasus into the Russian Empire (Gadlo 1998; Kosven 1960; Petrushevskii 1948). Yet it is the start of Soviet collectivization, standardization and urbanization that has not only undermined the traditional social structures in the Caucasus replacing them with a standard ‘Soviet way of life’ but also induced the proliferation of kin-based networks as means of countervailing the Soviet totalitarianism and preserving the traditional forms of social organization.

The massive Soviet social and cultural standardization largely de-traditionalized the indigenous ethnic groups of the South Caucasus replacing the pre-Soviet image of the Transcaucasus’s residents as mountaineers (*gortsy*) with a concept of *Homo Sovieticus*, or a Soviet person (*sovetskii chelovek*). However, despite successfully eradicating or

rendering obsolete the local forms of social association, the Soviet authorities were never successful in rooting out the traditional kinship and family structures. As a result, the indigenous kinship-centred civic traditions blended with the Soviet socio-cultural standards creating a form of social organization which was neither truly Soviet nor indigenous. In contrast to mainly ethnicity-based local communities of the pre-Soviet Caucasus, the communist era informal networks were above all kinship-centred and often sub-ethnic (Schatz 2004, 61). Apart from performing their traditional role, the kinship structures also harboured an intricate system of informal networking which penetrated formal institutions and tied the former to kinship and family.

In the Soviet Caucasus, traditional family and kinship structures were seen by the Soviet authorities as archaic, feudal and anti-Soviet (Ishkanian 2003; Platz 1995; Sumbadze 2003). Ishkanian (2003, 19) wrote that “[t]he Communist regime identified the traditional Armenian family as a ‘backward’ institution and sought to transform it by dismantling family loyalties.” In consequence, the preservation of traditional family values and structures, albeit unavoidably blended with the Soviet way of life, as a means of defying the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) was a key characteristic of the Caucasus’s ethnic groups under the Soviet rule. Ishkanian (ibid, 20) noted that in Armenia “[f]amily not only became a mode of resistance to the state, but it also remained the primary means of identification, support, and advancement during the Soviet period.” Furthermore, describing the importance of kinship networks in Soviet Georgia, Altman (1983, 4-9) wrote that “[o]ne’s family are one’s roots and the entrance ticket into society.” Indeed, in absence of transparent and efficient state institutions, family and kinship circles served as essential coping mechanisms and often remained as the only sources of mutual support and free expression.

Thereby, two key explanations can be offered as to why kinship groups became the dominant form of informal networking in the Caucasus. First of all, reliance on kin-related clan members and blood relatives was a deep-rooted form of societal organization, which traditionally served as centres of civil association and for-profit activities. Second, persecution of traditional social structures, in particular extended

patriarchal families, by the communist authorities forced kinship structures to evolve into clandestine, homogenous and exclusionist networks. Unlike informal structures in Central Asia and other non-Russian parts of the USSR, informal networking in the Caucasus often required involvement of all family members, thus strengthening kinship ties. Mars (1992, 103) explains that in contrast to informal networking in Uzbekistan, in Georgian networks “since women form the kinship link between the cores of [these] male-focused networks, and are the principal source of their extension, there is a stability to marriage and an emphasis on kinship links in Georgia that is absent in Uzbekistan.”

Realizing the potential of kinship networks, as noted by Kilbourne-Matossian (1962, 63), the Soviet authorities in Armenia “attempted to appropriate kin- or clan-based power by legislating against arranged marriages, family vendettas in the punishment of crime, and the transferral of some kinds of private property.” Yet, notwithstanding the Soviet government’s efforts to undermine kinship structures in the Caucasus, the Soviet policy of *korenizatsia* or indigenization of local communist cadres designed to elevate loyalty to the CPSU among the indigenous ethnicities, in fact contributed to the proliferation of kinship and clan networks. To be precise, by allocating high-ranking administrative and political positions to local individuals, the Soviets *de facto* transferred power to families and kinship networks represented by those individuals. As Platz (1995, 30) put it, discussing the case of Soviet Armenia, while “converse manipulations (in which state institutions are manipulated for the benefit of the family) proliferate, attention to their utility and directionality obfuscates the associative and polysemic ways in which notions of kinship, nation, and state may intersect in practice.” Indeed, by the 1980s the CPSU has turned a blind eye as the kinship networks flourished in the South Caucasus empowering families of Eduard Shevardnadze in Georgia, Heydar Aliyev in Azerbaijan, and others, to cement their position and continue their rule even after the break up of the Soviet Union. In Azerbaijan, as described by Valiyev (2011, 12), the spread of kinship networks “led to a situation in which certain positions in the Soviet administration were filled only by the relatives of people who already worked in the system, preventing a regeneration of elites.”

The fall of state communism in the South Caucasus not only did not weaken the well-entrenched and sophisticated system of kinship networks but also seemingly strengthened it. The networks appeared to be vital in filling vacuum left by ineffective post-communist state structures and often provided citizens with the means to survive. Ishkanian (2003, 20) confirms that in Armenia “[i]n the Post-Soviet period family and kinship networks, continue to be vitally important not only for career advancement but also for sheer physical survival.” The latter statement is also applicable to Azerbaijan (Valiyev 2011) and Georgia (Dershem 1998). For instance, Valiyev (2011, 12) argues that in post-Soviet Azerbaijan “the system of patronage did not disappear, making bonding social capital the most important resource for the people. Connections through family networks allow insiders to acquire resources much more easily than outsiders.” The enduring entrenchment of authoritarianism, lack of democratic developments and, most importantly, social insecurity during the last two decades continue to serve as an impetus for sustaining kinship-centred groups. Moreover, with the dismantling of the Soviet system of free-for-all education, healthcare, welfare and employment security, kinship networks in the Caucasus were left as the main coping mechanism in societies governed by ineffective and corrupt autocratic political systems. Doing things through kin connections, the South Caucasus’s residents manage not only to avoid unpleasant experience of dealing with corrupt institutions but they also are infiltrating formal institutions and tying the former to kinship and family.

What are the structure, organization and functions of kinship networks in the present-day South Caucasus? According to the 2011 CB survey, the average household size in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia is four to six people. A typical urban or rural household usually consists of immediate family which constitute the core of a kin network. The semi-periphery of such a network includes close kin relatives: cousins, nephews and nieces, in-laws and so on. On the periphery of each family’s kinship network there are distant relatives. An average South Caucasus’s kinship network may consist of anything from 30 to over 200 people connected to each other by blood kinship of different proximity. These networks can also be characterized by high level of intra-network ‘bonding’ maintained via family gatherings, famous in the South Caucasus

feasts, and other public events involving participation of all kinship groups' members. Such kinship-based structures can be described by Granovetter's (1973) term *strong-tie* networks. Indeed, the South Caucasus' kinship networks possess all the prerequisites of homogenous and segregated strong-tie networks. The practical function of kinship networks in the South Caucasus is in distribution of services and favours among the network members. Such services may extend to different forms of social support, including but not limited to employment assistance, healthcare, financial support, social security and the provision of a whole range of other public goods. However, these services are only available to the network members or, for a reciprocal favour and/or financial remuneration (often in a form of bribe), to non-network members. Valiyev (2011, 12) describes that "[i]n Azerbaijan reliance on bonding social capital prevents people who are not members of the family or group to gain access to lucrative positions, jobs or financial resources. Meanwhile, membership cannot be obtained unless you are born or marry into the right family."

Thereby, in spite of the high level of 'bonding' within kinship networks, there is only a limited 'bridging' of social capital outside of such networks. Kin-based networks, however, maintain a system of weak extra-network ties which enable them to provide their members with public goods beyond the network's boundaries. Yet, the weak ties connecting the networks cannot be described as 'bridges' diffusing information and encouraging cooperation between the strong-tie networks: their only purpose is in ensuring transfer or exchange of public goods. Due to the entrenched exclusivist and elitist nature of kin networks in the Caucasus, the extra-network ties are neither willing nor capable of breaching and 'bridging' these networks. Granovetter (1973, 1370) described such a phenomenon as an "extended network." Despite encompassing a number of strong-tie networks connected by a loose system of weak ties, extended network is not a part of a community or society as a whole.

The South Caucasus's kinship networks are essentially hierarchical, since it is the core family members who usually reap the highest benefits from their immediate family. Next, services and favours can be expected to reach extended family and remote kin

members. Most importantly, the distribution of services and favours is not intended to leave the family circle. Although close friends can also benefit, their share of network's resources is well below that of kin members. In contrast, regular participation in unpaid civil association and membership in civil society organizations requires both time and efforts of individuals, which diverts resources from kin networks and distributes services to non-network members with no reciprocal rewards. Though the network members can be engaged in charitable and voluntary activities on a short term basis, the majority would hesitate spending their time and labour doing unpaid work for strangers. However, it is not only the time and labour invested into civil work that poses a threat to the integrity of kinship networks but, above all, it is the breaching of homogenous and secluded nature of a kin network occurring when its members begin transferring social capital beyond the network's boundaries. Having presented that the South Caucasus's kinship networks, apart from their positive functions, may also be detrimental for organized civil society, this article will now focus on the question of how, if at all, kinship networks affect civil participation in the present-day South Caucasus.

Kinship networks and civil participation

Survey results

On analyzing data borrowed from representative surveys held in the South Caucasus during the last several years, this study observed generally positive attitude of the South Caucasus's public towards volunteering and charitable work. In contrast, declared membership in civil society remains low throughout the whole post-communist period and is often sustained by a lukewarm attitude towards participation in registered civil association. The data also portrays a heavy reliance on family and kin networks – sometimes seen by the population as a far more attractive alternative to membership in civil society.

The CRRC surveys in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia present that despite a notable gap between the attitudes and actual participation in volunteerism, the numbers of

people involved in voluntary work in the South Caucasus are relatively high (Figure 1).⁸ By contrast, the survey data reveals markedly low involvement in regular civil activities and membership in CSOs. As it appears only a small percent of respondents in Georgia ever took part in events organized by CSOs. For instance, only five percent attended a CSO organized meeting and even smaller two percent of people called or went to an office of a CSO during the last two years. Among survey participants only six percent signed a petition addressing a specific issue and four percent participated in training sponsored by a CSO during the last two years.

Figure 1. Volunteering and charity

Source: CRRC 2011; 2012

Furthermore, regardless of relatively positive attitude towards CSOs, a significant percentage of the Georgian public (20%) believe that a person actively involved in civil work cannot be trusted. Although a higher number of people (33%) said that such a person can be trusted, the plurality of respondents (47%) was not confident enough to support either statement. Moreover, a 60% majority of population do not think that, if they were looking for a job, it would be beneficial for their CV to have a membership in a civil society organization. In asking ‘why would you not join a NGO,’ the vast majority of respondents said that they rather prefer taking care of their family’s affairs, 19% mentioned that they do not have time for that, 12% believe it is a waste of time and 11% felt that they would not be able to change anything. However, the majority (over 60%) of those who chose kinship-related issues over participation in civil society also appear to be rural residents. The respondents’ choice of dedicating their time and efforts to family issues leads us to the next observation.

The WVS surveys conducted in the South Caucasus from 1996 to 1997 revealed the strong commitment to family and blood relatives among the region’s population: 86% of respondents in Armenia, over 85% in Azerbaijan and about 95% in Georgia felt that family plays very important role in their life. The EVS survey conducted in the South

Caucasus ten years later reports very similar figures: some 94% in Armenia, 87% in Azerbaijan and over 90% in Georgia confirmed that family is important in their life.

However, not only the kinship networks flourished during the first decade after the collapse of USSR, but also they continue retaining their significance in the present-day South Caucasus. For instance, according to the CRRC (2012) survey in Azerbaijan, 96% of respondents identify themselves, first of all, as members of their kinship group and only then as members of a local community (50%). When asked ‘how important the family ties are,’ 91% of respondents in Azerbaijan emphasized that the family connections are very important. When asking ‘how would they pay for damage in car accident’ the majority of Georgian population (42%) said that their family will pay for the damages or that they would get money from a relative (29%), while only nine percent mentioned that they would borrow money from the bank.

Regardless of the development of financial institutions in the South Caucasus, kinship networks continue occupying a significant position as sources of financial support and micro-crediting to the population. Indeed, the reliance on kin networks is understandable in light of low household rung in all three countries (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Household finances

Source: CRRC 2011

Hence, support from family members and relatives might be crucial in case of emergencies and situations requiring extra-budgetary spending. Apart from offering material and financial support to their members, kin-based networks also provide social security (Figure 3). In Azerbaijan, the vast majority of respondents (98%) expected to get support from family and kin if they need help around the house when ill, 85% said that they would ask only a family member for advice on personal or family issue and 58% would need support of family only when depressed and want someone to talk to. Not surprising, the majority of respondents in Azerbaijan (82%) said that they spend their free time with their family or relatives.

Figure 3. Assistance in emergencies

Source: CRRC 2008

The above analysis reveals that reliance on kinship structures is very important for the daily lives of the South Caucasus's population. In terms of differences in answers to survey questions between urban and rural residents in each country, no significant disparities in answers to questions about civil participation and reliance on kinship institutions has been observed in all three countries. However, while no notable differences were recorded in the Armenian and Azerbaijani cases in questions asking respondents' preference of kinship institutions and services provided by such structures over formal institutions, including those of civil society, in the Georgian rural settlements there were a notably higher number of respondents who preferred kinship institutions over civil society than in the urban areas. From the survey data, it also becomes apparent that membership in CSOs in all three South Caucasus's countries is seen as less advantageous than involvement in kinship networking and, as a result, participation in the work of CSOs is often understood as of limited benefit. These shows that 'bonding' social capital is more important than 'bridging' and, therefore, the transfer of social capital into public sphere is very limited. Provided that informal networks continue prioritizing strong links over weak ties, participation in formal civic life is very likely to be affected by the prevalence of strong-tie networks. However, notably positive attitudes towards organized civil society suggest that reliance on kinship institutions is not necessarily seen as a replacement to participation in formal civic activities. While this survey data underlines the importance of kinship networks and demonstrates that a connection exists between the deficit of civil participation and the dominance of kinship structures, these findings need to be supported by a qualitative analysis.

Qualitative analysis

To put the survey data into qualitative context, interviews with experts, policy-makers and civil society activists were conducted by the author between July and September 2013 in Azerbaijan, Georgia and in different locations in Europe. Informants

were asked to elaborate on the following questions: Which types of informal networks are most widespread in the South Caucasus? How important these networks are? Do kinship networks affect civil participation? And, why ‘bonding’ social capital overshadows ‘bridging’?

When asked ‘what type of informal networks is the most widespread in your country’ the majority of interviewees, in the first place, identified kinship structures followed by friendship networks. In both Armenia and Azerbaijan, kinship networks were described as the dominant form of social organization. In the Georgian case, however, it was noted that, although kinship networks are very important, in urban areas they often have to compete with friendship-based networks. This observation accords with the above presented results of the survey data analysis which emphasize the higher levels of reliance on kinship institutions in Georgia’s rural areas in comparison to urban settlements.

As for the role of kinship networks in the present-day South Caucasus, although the majority of informants agreed that the informal networks are “important because they are the basis of developing formal networks,” it has been emphasized that due to prevalence of kinship networks ‘bonding’ social capital is flourishing at the expense of ‘bridging.’ In Azerbaijan, as revealed from interviews, kinship networks are essential in search for jobs, access to formal institutions, preferential treatment in education and healthcare. Armenia’s kinship networking closely resembles Azerbaijan’s networks; kinship connections are essential in dealings with formal institutions and they are used extensively in many areas of public and private sphere. The importance of Georgian kinship networks in gaining access to formal institutions and in solving problems have been described by experts as steadily decreasing: often due to effectiveness of institutional reforms implemented under Mikheil Saakashvili. For instance, if a decade ago “to obtain many goods and services [in Georgia] one had to depend on personal networks,” after the reforms “the importance of informal connections decreased.” It was emphasized by the majority of Georgian informants that, largely because of institutional

improvements, the popular attitude towards the use of kinship connections has changed and that “people are less willing to use kinship networks.”

The impact of kinship networks on popular attitudes towards CSOs has been identified as both positive and negative. On the one hand, over 60% of interviewees have argued that the strength of kinship structures is not always an obstacle for formal civil society and “on the contrary, [over time] it will contribute to formal institutions.” Due to existence of well-developed ‘bonding’ social capital, people are more likely to get together with those outside their kinship groups to pursue common interests and objectives. In Armenia, as noted by numerous informants, ‘bonding’ social capital sometimes encourages people to participate in civil work at communal or neighbourhood levels. Although in Azerbaijan associational life remains limited to the realms of family and kinship circles, the network capital slowly begins to engage in formal types of civil work, such as irregular volunteering. In the Georgian case, because the kinship institutions become more and more limited to “very traditional things, such as birth and death issues; that is, weddings and funerals and other immediate family-related issues,” “people can still form formal institutions and [at the same time] have these informal [kinship] structures.” One particular case of transformation of ‘bonding’ capital in Georgia has been illustrated on an example of the so-called ‘condominium associations’ in Tbilisi: volunteer groups made up of residents of apartment buildings who are to oversee the spending of funds allocated by the Mayor’s office to be used for repair and renovation of buildings. As explained by an informant: “people are, if not willing, but at least encouraged to form condominium associations because a random person cannot apply for funding.”

On the other hand, the South Caucasus populations’ heavy reliance on kinship networks was also identified as an obstacle for volunteerism and other forms of civil participation. Similar to findings of CRRC surveys, over 80% of informants believed that volunteering and membership in NGOs are negatively affected by the dominance of kinship structures, because “people are mostly interested in assisting their families and not inclined to do voluntary work for others.” While over half (60%) of interview

participants hypothesized that due to homogenous and individualistic nature of kinship networks, such structures can be detrimental for formal civil society organizations, including CSOs, some 20% of informants were confident that low participation in CSOs is due to people's engagement in kinship circles and because of kinship networks' high capacities of problem-solving.

Many interviewees emphasized that 'bonding' social capital is dominant in the South Caucasus's societies mainly because of reliance on informal institutions, of which, kinship networks are still the most widespread structure. In case of Armenia and Azerbaijan, kinship networks were described both as the most prominent form of social organization and as the key source of 'bonding' social capital. In the Georgian case, it has been argued that "[w]hat Georgians have kept from the Soviet period is the 'bonding' capital and the attitude that we can share [useful information, etc.] only with family members or your neighbours but not with someone from outside. We do not have much of 'bridging' capital and that is what is hindering this [civil society development] process". The lack of 'bridging' social capital was also associated with the culture of 'individualism,' as a result of which there is "no tradition of meaningful collective action." Over half of interviewees thought that the tradition of individualism is sustained by people's preference to rely on their immediate family and kinship circles and that "nobody will go beyond households and beyond relatives. That is why collective action normally does not exist." Therefore, the unwillingness of the South Caucasus's residents to engage in collective action is closely associated with the preference of maintaining kinship networks as result of which "people think about families ... and they do not want to go out and solve some social problems."

In sum, the opinions of expert community on the relationship between the South Caucasus's kinship networks and civil participation support presented in this study assumption that strong 'bonding' social capital negatively affects civil participation. However, most informants avoided directly linking kinship networks with the deficit of civil participation in the South Caucasus. The majority of interviewees presented kinship structures not as substitute to formal civil society but as its supplement. Although

preference for kinship networks is seen as more important than civil participation, people across the South Caucasus invest heavily in maintaining kinship ties to address social and economic problems that cannot be solved formally due to the weakness of formal institutions.

Do kinship networks affect civil participation?

This paper argued that high ‘bonding’ social capital, produced as a result of reliance on kinship ties, and low ‘bridging’ social capital occurring due to limited social and institutional trust, observed across the region, should not be overlooked as one of the causes leading to low membership in organized civil society in the South Caucasus. This article, however, has not suggested that the reliance on kinship institutions is a phenomenon intrinsic only to the South Caucasus’s countries, rather the above discussed kinship structures can be observed in many developing regions of the world. What is different in the South Caucasus’s case is the degree of their spread within societies, partly explained by legacies of the Soviet rule, which conditions the impact of these structures on civil participation. Several conclusions emerge from this analysis.

Firstly, the bulk of social capital in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia is embedded in kin-based networks – homogenous, segregated and isolated, yet, dense and rich with intra-network ‘bonding’ groups. The analysis of primary sources confirms that, in contrast to the Russia’s networks of friends mentioned by Howard (2003), the present-day informal sector of the South Caucasus is dominated by kinship networks. Not only the South Caucasus’s population has higher reliance on kinship ties rather than on friendship connections but they also emphasize family and kin as the key source of social and economic support. The covert elitist nature of kinship networks, characterized by the right of passage only through birth or marriage, is needed to protect the network capital from the autocratic state and to procure hard-to-find goods and unavailable services in the times of economic hardships. Far from disappearing after the collapse of state communism in the South Caucasus, kinship networks continued proliferating. Two

decades after the independence of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, representative surveys conducted in these three republics show strong reliance on kinship structures not only for economic assistance but also for social support and civic association. If low average household incomes and limited usage of formal financial institutions sustain the economic function of networks, the inefficiency, or absence, of social and civil services allow kinship networks to maintain control over private sphere in order to provide their members with social support, welfare and a range of other services. Hence, kinship networks generate social capital and serve as a medium of civic association – vibrant yet limited to kin boundaries.

Secondly, since the collapse of the USSR declared membership in formal civil society organizations in all three South Caucasus's republics remains consistently low. The unwillingness to join organized civil society is often explained by the preference of 'taking care of family issues,' thereby, emphasizing the centrality of kinship networks in the day-to-day lives of the South Caucasus's residents. Although citizens of the post-Soviet Caucasus occasionally volunteer and donate to charity, they evidently remain rather negative towards registered membership in CSOs. Though part of the explanation for why post-Soviet population shuns organizational membership could be in what Howard (2003) described as the negative experience of communist institutions, it is obvious that the persistent deficit of civil participation among people with no experience of life under the communism, that is, of post-communist generations, suggests that the causes are most likely to be in the social structure. Furthermore, this study has found no evidence that the South Caucasus's residents distrust CSOs *en masse* or associate civil participation with membership in communist organizations. Rather, membership in organized civil society is seen as less advantageous than involvement in kinship networks and, therefore, the latter cannot be ignored as one of the causes of low participation in the post-Soviet civil sector.

In answering the main question of this study – 'how the kinship networks affect participation in organized civil society in the South Caucasus' – the findings of the current study are consistent with those of Putnam (2000), Howard (2003) and Gibson

(2001) who argued that the high levels of ‘bonding’ and levels of ‘bridging’ prevent the transfer of social capital from private into public spheres and may potentially hamper the development of organized civil society. This finding is also in agreement with Babajanian’s (2008), Hasanov’s (2009) and Hough’s (2011) findings which showed that the South Caucasus residents’ heavy reliance on kinship structures increases the ‘bonding’ social capital. Theoretically, the prevalence of kinship networks reduces the necessity of taking part in regular civil activities and holding membership in formal civil society organizations. However, on practice the kinship groups’ role in affecting civil participation is not exclusively negative.

This study has been unable to demonstrate that the population’s reliance on kinship networking decisively affects participation in formal civil society. The evidence shows that the reliance on kinship institutions steady shifts towards more family-related issues and the networks become less influential in public sphere. Although the high levels of ‘bonding’ social capital present a challenge for civil participation, the generally positive attitudes towards volunteerism and civil society suggest that the impact of kinship networks on the South Caucasus’s civil society is filtered through other factors. Given that the weakness of civil society in the South Caucasus, as demonstrated by numerous studies (Ishkanian 2003; Hasanov 2009; Nodia 2005), is due to a variety of interrelated socio-political and socio-economic factors, the populations preference for informal networks over formal civil institutions occurs not only because of the significance of informal structures but is also due to the lack of effectiveness of formal institutions. While the de-atomization of kinship networks could bolster population’s interest in participating in organized civil society, the transformation of networks is not likely to happen until the underlying political, economic and social causes which in the first place led to the proliferation and strengthening of the South Caucasus’s kinship institutions, are addressed. Further research needs to be done to closely investigate the causes of populations’ reliance on kinship structures throughout the post-communist period and the kinship networks influence on participation in particular types of formal civil society organizations.

Endnotes

¹ This study distinguishes civil society from political and economic societies and understands it as a sector consisting of independent, non-violent organizations, associations and movements not in pursuit of material gains or a political office (Habermas 1996; Tocqueville 1969). The above definition of ‘civil society’ excludes “uncivil” elements of civil society (Kopecky 2003), such as extremist groups, as well as radical religious organizations.

² The term ‘civil society organizations’ (CSOs) is employed here as a generic term encompassing a diversity of legally registered groups and organizations, including, but not limited to political, environmental, educational, cultural, professional, charitable, humanitarian and rights groups. Rather than specifically focusing on particular types of CSOs, this study analyzes participation in CSOs as a sum of registered membership in all forms of civil society organizations. Unlike non-governmental organizations (NGOs), CSOs constitute a broader segment of civil society.

³ The concept of ‘social capital’ is much broader than that of civil society, albeit civil society is an inseparable and central component of social capital. In contrast to civil society, most definitions of social capital include family, market and a variety of interpersonal networks constituting an aggregate of modern society.

⁴ The term ‘civil participation’ employed in this article refers to organizational membership, and other forms of regular formal participation in the work of CSOs.

⁵ All interviews were conducted in confidentiality and the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement. Apart from fieldwork in Tbilisi, Georgia and Baku, Azerbaijan, a number of elite informants were interviewed at universities and international organizations in Europe, for instance at the University of Amsterdam and the European Commission in Brussels. Interview participants were selected based to their expertise on the topic determined on the basis of their publications and/or relevant work experience. Interviews were structured as semi-formal discussions, where informants were asked to elaborate on topics of civil participation and kinship networks in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

⁶ Although Pop-Eleches and Tucker (2013) have found a significant deficit of civil participation in such post-communist countries as Poland, Hungary and Czech Republic, participation in NGOs in these Central Eastern European countries is still above the South Caucasus’s average. However, Howard (2003: 58) suggests treating Poland as an “exception” among other non-Soviet post-communist countries because of its “unusually weak civil society.”

⁷ Informal networks play an important role in sustaining patron-client relations in the South Caucasus. Yet, although the involvement of kinship networks in patron-client relations affects the strength of formal civil society, the linkage between clientilism and civil participation is not easy to observe.

⁸ For example, the European Values survey (EVS) reported that only 2.4% of people in the UK, 2.2% in Germany and 2.5% in France indicated that they currently participate in voluntary work.

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