Why ideas matter: exploring the potential and limits of local civil society agency in peacebuilding

Abstract
Drawing on research conducted with a range of actors in Armenia during the aftermath of the 2020 war over Nagorno Karabakh, we examine the potential and limits of local agency peacebuilding. In examining how agency is manifested and constrained in situations of conflict, we draw on social and political theories of agency and power to consider the dialogic interplay between actors, structures, and ideas. By adopting the framework of discursive institutionalism (Schmidt 2008), we analyse the importance of ideas in shaping politics and policy. We argue that in the field of peacebuilding in Armenia, the agency of local civil society actors is on the one hand affected by the liberal peacebuilding paradigm advanced by international actors and on the other hand, by hegemonic State and societal discourses about the conflict. Together, these have engendered forms of disciplinary power that have led to self-censorship and reticence among civil society actors, limiting their agency in peacebuilding.

The dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the territory of Nagorno Karabakh (NK), a former autonomous region (*oblast*) within the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic that had a majority ethnic Armenian population, dates back to the early 20th century (Broers, 2019; Chorbajian, 2001; Geukjian, 2016). The current period of conflict began in February 1988 when the legislative body of the NK *oblast* adopted an unprecedented resolution requesting the region's transfer to the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic (Grigoryan, 2018: 844). This action was met with immediate violence when a three-day pogrom (27 February – 1 March 1988) took place in Sumgait claiming the lives of twenty-six Armenians and six Azerbaijanis (Broers 2019: 29). In 1991, as the Soviet Union was nearing collapse, the Armenian population of NK (later self-proclaimed the Republic of Artsakh), unilaterally declared independence and the conflict escalated into full-scale war. The first Karabakh war took the lives of up to 30,000 people and left almost 1 million refugees and internally displaced people on both sides. It ended in 1994 with a ceasefire but no peace agreement (Ayunts, Zolyan, & Zakaryan, 2016).

From 1992, the Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group[1] has engaged in Track I negotiations (i.e., official negotiations) with the governments in Armenia and Azerbaijan to reach a diplomatic solution and a final peace agreement. While the Armenian side demanded the recognition of the right to self-determination for the Armenians living in NK, the Azerbaijani side insisted on its territorial integrity. Although negotiations involved the core issue at stake – Karabakh's political status, the government of the self-proclaimed independent Republic of Artsakh was excluded from the negotiations. The irreconcilable demands of self-determination versus territorial integrity resulted in a stalemate that lasted until 2020, when war erupted as the Azerbaijani military launched an aerial and ground attack on 27 September. While full scale fighting ended in November 2020 and Russian peacekeepers were deployed, continuing border attacks and incursions into the sovereign territory of the Republic of Armenia by Azerbaijani forces mean that peace remains elusive.

In the intervening 26 years between the first and second wars, alongside the OSCE-led Track I negotiations, there was a Track II (i.e., unofficial contacts between non-state actors) process that sought to engage civil society (CS) actors by including a "plurality of voices" in dialogues and empowering "local stakeholders" (Broers, 2020: 154). The two tracks, however, took place in parallel and without much effect on each other. Liberal peacebuilding was the dominant model of conflict transformation in Armenia (Broers, 2019; Gamaghelyan, 2021) as indeed in conflicts around the globe (Sriram, 2007). It advances a form of "governmentality" (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013: 775) that is centred on the notion that the development of market economies and liberal democratic domestic politics are essential for peace (Pugh, 2005; Sriram, 2007: 580). The involvement of CS organisations in liberal peacebuilding is

[1] The OSCE Minsk Group, co-chaired by France, Russia, and the US, has been working since 1992 at finding a peaceful solution to the NK conflict.

"undisputed" (Paffenholz, 2010: 43) as these are considered crucial agents who can transform conflicts through a series of small or large changes (Kopecek, Hoch, & Baar, 2016: 445). Professionalised NGOs in particular are considered "an important component of the peace-making process, capable of promoting sustained reconciliation" (Aall, 2001: 365) and having the potential for "reducing enmity and building prerequisites of peace between conflicting sides" (Ayunts et al., 2016: 554).

Despite these normative assumptions, questions remain about the potential and limits of local CS agency in conflict contexts and the factors that shape it. In this article, drawing on research conducted with a range of actors in Armenia during the immediate aftermath of the second war, from November 2020 - April 2021, we examine the potential of local CS agency in the field of peacebuilding. **We ask, what are the possibilities of local civil society agency in peacebuilding and what factors shape agency?** Adopting Bourdieu's concept of field, we consider the field of peacebuilding as a "structured space with its own laws of functioning" (Bourdieu, 1993: 6), that is shaped by institutional structures, power dynamics, history, as well as social norms, cultural understandings and ideas. Our conceptual framework draws together social and political theories of agency and power with the theory of discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008, 2011) to analyse the role of ideas and discourses in the processes of continuity and change in politics and policy. We examine the potential of CS agency from a relational and temporal perspective by focusing on the dialogic interplay between actors, structures, and ideas to analyse how these shape agency.

We define CS as an "arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values" where there are a "diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power" (Centre for Civil Society, 2010). In the article, we primarily focus on NGO because since the late 1990s, professionalised NGOs have been the dominant CS actors in the field of peacebuilding in Armenia. However, we also

consider the spectrum of CS actors. On one end of the spectrum are the professionalised NGOs and at the other end, are informal groups, border communities, and individual activists.

We found that in Armenia, NGOs' actions and discourses in relation to the conflict were mainly in line with the hegemonic stance adopted by successive Armenian governments from 1998 onwards. Moreover, despite privately expressing misgivings concerning liberal peacebuilding, local NGOs for the most part exercised an instrumental and compliant form of agency by reproducing donor-driven agendas. When asked what vision or understanding of peace had shaped their work or what peace meant to them, most respondents spoke of not having had an idea or vision of what constitutes peace in relation to the NK conflict. We argue that in the field of peacebuilding in Armenia, the agency of local NGOs and CS was on the one hand affected by the liberal peacebuilding agenda advanced by international donors and on the other hand, hegemonic State and societal discourses about the conflict. Together, these produced disciplinary power that led to self-censorship and compliance with hegemonic ideas, practices, and agendas, thus limiting the transformative potential and agency of CS in the context of peacebuilding.

Our work, which queries normative assumptions about the role of CS in peacebuilding and focuses on the role of ideas, contributes to the literature on local CS agency in peacebuilding and conflict contexts (Björkdahl & Gusic, 2015; Džuverović, 2021; Kamatsiko, 2017; Kunnath, 2021; Mac Ginty, 2014; Paffenholz, 2010; Richmond, 2011; Theros, 2019) and more broadly, to sociological and political theories of agency and power by advancing our understandings of how ideas shape CS agency as well as continuity and change in policy and politics (Béland & Powell, 2016; Piketty, 2020; Schmidt, 2008; Seckinelgin, 2016).

We begin by introducing our conceptual framework before discussing our methodology and findings, which examine the development of peacebuilding from the 1990s to the present and the actors and factors that have shaped local agency in this field.

Agency, Power, and Peacebuilding

Defining Agency

Social scientists have long examined the nature and meaning of agency and how it is shaped by social structures, institutions, and relations of power. Described as an "elusive term", agency is seen as encapsulating "self-hood, motivation, will, purposiveness, intentionality, choice, initiative, freedom and creativity" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 962) and involving both the "reproduction or transformation of relations of power and inequality" (Ortner, 2006: 11). The focus on intentionality acknowledges the purposive nature of agency and the potential of an actor, understood as a deliberative and cognizant subject, to bring about a situation "which would not come into existence if something were not done about it by the actor" (Parsons, 1968: 45). Giddens' structuration theory, which gained prominence in the late 20th century, advances the notion of the "duality of structure" and "expresses the mutual dependence of structure and agency" (Giddens, 1979: 69) acknowledging how even in situations of unequal access to power, subjects are always partially knowing and thus able to act on and sometimes against structures by finding ways to evade or resist.

A relational approach to agency recognises how individuals are not free-floating agents but rather "truly and inescapably social beings" who are "enmeshed within relations of power, inequality and competition" (Ortner, 2006: 131) and how their decisions are shaped by their position in society, social and cultural understandings, psychosocial dynamics, and emotions (Abu-Lughod, 2002). A temporal perspective of agency is also important if we are to consider the ways in which history, collective memory, and past experiences, at both the individual and collective levels, affect agency (Sahlins, 1985). In theorising the temporal nature of agency, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue that individuals are located and operating within "many temporalities at once, they can be said to be oriented toward the past, the future, and the present at any given moment" and propose the notion of "projective agency", which involves actors imagining and enacting "alternative possibilities", ideas, and futures (Emirbayer & Mische,

1998: 963-964). In writing about actors' agency to resist and alter systems and structures of power, Ortner argues that "history makes people, but people make history" (Ortner, 2006: 277) and in the conclusion of his book on the NK conflict, Broers argues for the "necessity of change from within, enacted through the agency of human communities and creative leadership" (Broers, 2019: 316). **But questions remain about the potential of local agency and what factors shape the agency of local CS in situations of conflict and heightened insecurity?**

Agency in Conflict Contexts

In relation to conflict contexts, Jabri draws on Giddens' theory of structuration arguing that a structurationist analysis of conflict resolution ought to consider how a conflict occurs against "a background of discursive and institutional continuities which are drawn upon and reproduced by actors in strategic interaction" and which shape the "transformative capacity" of actors who are embedded in "a complex network of constraints and enablements" (Jabri, 1995: 60). Current debates on the potential of local agency for conflict transformation (Džuverović, 2021; Kunnath, 2021; Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013; Richmond, 2011; Theros, 2019), focus on the extent of the "vernacularisation of global norms" (Björkdahl & Gusic, 2015: 269) and the significance of everyday actions in conflict contexts (Mac Ginty, 2014). Advocates of the local turn accentuate the potential of local actors "to resist and subvert, but also to modify and accept what is being thrown upon it under the guise of liberal peace" (Džuverović, 2021: 24).

Caveats include avoiding the fetishization of the local (Randazzo, 2016), an acknowledgement of the heterogeneity of local CS which can also include "partisan, discriminatory, exclusive and violent" actors (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013), and actors who can hinder the peacebuilding by exacerbating conflicts (Kopecek et al., 2016: 446). Richmond seeks to avoid the normative trap, instead considering the possibilities for the "critical agency" of CS which embraces "an agonistic and contested, post-liberal conception of peace and to a post-colonial civil society" (Richmond, 2011: 420). Such an articulation of CS aligns with

Gramsci's iteration of CS as the space for the (re)production of and resistance to hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses (Gramsci, 1971). In this emancipatory iteration, CS is considered an "intellectual and associational space in which to reflect openly and critically and to experiment with alternative ways of organizing social, economic and political life" where people have the "freedom to imagine that the world could be different" (Howell & Pearce, 2002: 237).

Wars, while highly destructive, are also a type of critical juncture, which can usher in a period of rapid social change. Yet the direction of change is uncertain and policy and political developments are contingent on the alignment of actors and the strategic choices they make. Within the policy studies literature on continuity and change, there is emphasis on windows of opportunity which open in the face of momentous events as old policies or approaches are no longer feasible or tenable (Schmidt, 2011: 108). As Seckinelgin argues, conflict in general, not limited to war, is an essential part of social change and a "productive force within which new ideas are developed and new social relations are articulated" (Seckinelgin, 2016: 264).

Ideas, Power, and Agency

In analysing the transformative potential of local CS agency in peacebuilding, we draw on Schmidt's theory of discursive institutionalism, which examines the importance of ideas and discourses in shaping political and policy change. Over the past decade, there has been increasing attention to how ideas and discourses (Béland & Powell, 2016; Piketty, 2020; Schmidt, 2008; Seckinelgin, 2016) explain incremental as well as paradigmatic changes in policy and politics. Schmidt's model of discursive institutionalism draws on theories of agency and examines how ideas and discourses developed and conveyed by "'sentient' agents" can either maintain the status quo or lead to change in politics and policy (Schmidt, 2011: 107). Discourses are important in terms of explaining continuity and change, as they inform and shape the agency, values, and politics of actors both within and outside of institutions

(Schmidt, 2008). Whilst acknowledging the agency of CS actors in terms of explaining policy continuity and change, Schmidt does not suggest we ignore the constraints of institutions; after all, structural power also includes the ability of powerful actors and institutions to *not* listen (Schmidt 2011: 121) [emphasis added] and she draws on the work of Gramsci and Foucault, to consider how ideas and discourses perpetuate the power of elites (Foucault, 1980; Gramsci, 1971). Our use of Schmid's theory of discursive institutionalism, allows us to consider the role of ideas and discourses coming from international actors and from within the national context (e.g., Government, political elites) in shaping local agency in the field of peacebuilding in Armenia.

Finally, in analysing local agency, we adopt Foucault's approach to power, in which he describes power not solely as the capacity to oppress, constrain or limit, but also, as a productive force which "produces things…forms knowledge, produces discourse" (Foucault, 1980: 119). He argues that the production of knowledge is shaped by each society's "regime of truth", which identify the discourses which are accepted and those which are rejected (Foucault 1980: 131). We find Foucault's concept of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1975 [1991]), particularly relevant in explaining how hegemonic ideas and discourses influence and shape agency through determining what is considered sayable and doable in any context. Disciplinary power is a particular form of power exercised by individual actors over their own person, such as the adoption of accepted rules of conduct, appropriate behaviours, and understandings.

Methodology

The research for this article took place from November 2020 – April 2021. We initiated and implemented this research in the immediate aftermath of the second Karabakh war. As with any research, we acknowledge that the timeframe impacted interviewees' perspectives and responses.

Three of the four authors are based in Armenia. Collectively we have over 20 years of experience of academic and policy research in Armenia, which informs our analysis. Research questions guided the collection and analysis of existing local and international research and analytical reports on the NK conflict and CS peacebuilding efforts. The literature review informed the scope of the research and development of the questionnaire. Alongside the literature review, we conducted a discourse analysis of relevant policy and media publications. In the second stage of the research (January – April 2021), we conducted interviews with key actors involved in peacebuilding, including representatives of peacebuilding NGOs, researchers and analysts, independent journalists, politicians, and international experts.

As of December 31, 2021, the number of NGOs registered in Armenia was 5,659 (Electronic Register of the Republic of Armenia, 2021), however the majority are "nonfunctional" and "only 15%–20% of the registered organizations are active" (Asian Development Bank, 2021). Based on our mapping of CS, we found that there were only fourteen registered peacebuilding NGOs. We compiled a preliminary list of respondents and expanded the final sample using the snowball method. Snowball sampling is widely used when studying sensitive topics or specific groups that necessitate contacts with insiders. Referrals from the preliminary list of respondents led to repetition of the same names.

Considering our sensitivity to gender issues, we have maintained a gender balance both in compiling the preliminary sampling list and in applying the snowball method. Thus, eight out of sixteen respondents are female and eight are male. Due to COVID, some interviews were held virtually via Zoom or Skype. Interviews lasted approximately an hour and were conducted in Armenian or English. All interviews were transcribed and coded.

Civil Society and Peacebuilding in Armenia from 1992 – the present

Civil society-led conflict transformation and peacebuilding practices in Armenia have evolved and changed since the early 1990s. During the first war, Armenian and Azerbaijani

intellectuals and human rights defenders, who shared a common Soviet culture and Russian language, were in direct contact with one another and organized many meetings between the sides without the involvement of international actors. For example, in 1992, during the height of the first war, local CS leaders and intellectuals organized several meetings at the Red Bridge checkpoint in the Gazakh region in Azerbaijan to discuss possible paths to a peaceful solution to the conflict, the matter of refugees, and humanitarian issues. Similarly, in 1994 the national committees of the human rights organisation, Helsinki Citizens' Assembly, together with the Helsinki Initiative-92 based in Karabakh, organized a meeting of Azerbaijani-Armenian youth on the Gazakh-Ijevan border. Two human rights defenders, Anahit Bayandour from Armenia and Arzu Abdullayeva from Azerbaijan, who were key actors in the aforementioned initiatives, were jointly awarded the 1992 Olof Palme Prize in recognition for their work.

Thirty years on, these initiatives remain some of the boldest examples of local peacebuilding. After the ceasefire in 1994, the loss of territories by Azerbaijan and the deportation of Azerbaijanis from Armenia and Karabakh fueled the growing attitudes of anger and hatred in Azerbaijan, which was also supported by the government's anti-Armenian propaganda. Similar attitudes and anti-Azerbaijani rhetoric were prevalent in Armenia.

After the first war, the territories were variously referred to as 'occupied' by Azerbaijan and 'liberated' by Armenia, which affected perceptions of the conflict in each country and deepened the polarization. In these circumstances, as mutual enmity grew, peacebuilding became exceedingly difficult and the locally led initiatives between Armenians and Azerbaijanis that had taken place during the war, ceased and all future meetings and initiatives between the sides were held in third countries and were primarily initiated and facilitated by international NGOs (INGOs).

After 2000 external actors, namely INGOs, took the leading role in Track II processes serving as organisers and facilitators (Yerevan Press Club 2019: 16). As the role of INGOs

grew, the nature of Track II work changed, becoming more professionalised and strongly shaped by the liberal peace paradigm and discourses of international actors. Through a process of "NGOisation", the locally led CS efforts of the early 1990s, came to be "dominated by technocracy" and top-down directives by INGOs which tended to exclude or marginalise smaller, grassroots groups (Dilanyan, Beraia, & Yavuz, 2018: 163). These INGO-led initiatives had "poor outreach to relevant audiences" (NGO Monitor, 2018: 3) and were "little known to the public" (Yerevan Press Club, 2019: 4). Some argue that in the place of genuine, local engagement and grassroots action, a "simulacrum of local participation" developed, wherein local NGOs who benefitted from the "benevolent attitude of international organizations", came to portray themselves as representatives who could speak the voice of "ordinary" people and "identify local 'real' needs" (Romashov, Guliyeva, Kalatozishvili, & Kokaia, 2018: 15-16).

The key finding to come out of our research was that despite working for many years to transform the conflict and build peace, none of our respondents could articulate a clear idea, understanding, or vision of what peace was or should be. One respondent said, "I don't know what peace is or means" (Journalist 1), while another stated, "Peace has always been an abstract thing [in Armenia]" (CSOR 1). Some, such as CSOR 5, said they had only begun to think about what peace constitutes after the 2020 war:

> You are asking a very interesting question, about which, truth be told, I have only started to think about more seriously after this second war. I think we have never had a doctrine of peacebuilding. This refers to the activities at the state level, as well as to different layers of the country, including in civil society. There has never been such an idea that we must struggle for something. Obviously, we were fighting for peace, but there is no abstract peace. Each of us imagines some version of peace, and I think that these different conceptualisations of peace have led to a situation wherein we didn't understand what we want after all.

Similarly, CSO representative 7 said,

> Almost no one knows what peace is. Even if you ask people who have been involved in peacebuilding for years, what peace is for you, they may not be able to answer…Our culture does not allow us to sit and imagine utopian, idealistic things. We have lived so

> much in this militarism and in this reality that we cannot imagine what peace is… It is very rare to see a person, a group, who could clearly formulate what "peace" is either for them or their organization.

If, as the respondents above argue, States actors and NGOs implementing the liberal peacebuilding initiatives lacked an understanding or vision of peace, what about other local actors, such as grassroots groups, border communities, and the population of NK itself?

There has never has there been a grassroots peace movement in Armenia. While critical, grassroots movements have emerged in Armenia in the fields of environmental protection, social rights (e.g., around pension reform, electricity, and transport fees) and women's rights (e.g., against domestic violence) (anonymised), similar forms of autonomous organising have been notably absent in the field of peacebuilding. As one of our respondents said,

> Armenia, at least since 2008, has gone through a period of active civil struggles…People have fought for different things on different fronts. Unfortunately, the Karabakh issue was outside of those struggles. It should not have been like that. Everyone thought that the Karabakh issue was a frozen conflict, that it was not possible to question [the status quo]. Every day there should have been demands for peace in Armenia, for the lifting of the blockade. But we were simply persuaded that this was a matter of security, a matter of danger…It is understandable that the power of CS is limited, but there were struggles on the streets and resistance movements – from the feminist to the environmental, which are linked to the criticism of war and the appreciation of peace. (Researcher/analyst [RA] 1).

In the absence of a local, grassroots movement for peace, professionalised NGOs dominated the field of peacebuilding. NGOs worked largely in closed circles with a narrow group of beneficiaries, most of whom were middle class, university educated, and spoke English. Their work did not serve as a catalyst for change. To be clear, we are not arguing that NGOs lacked agency, on the contrary, as we discuss below, they clearly exercised instrumental, compliant and at times, even resistant, forms of agency.

The field of peacebuilding in Armenia was a structured space (Bourdieu 1993) that operated according to implicit and explicit rules that shaped agendas, practices, ideas, and discourses. Recognising how even in situations of unequal access to power subjects are

always partially knowing and able to act on and sometimes against structures (Giddens 1979), we now turn to first consider how local CS agency was affected and shaped by the agendas, practices, and discourses of international actors and secondly, those of domestic actors (e.g., the Armenian Government, political elites).

The Hegemony of International Actors and the Paradigm of Liberal Peace

International donors' and INGOs' ideas, policies and practices were mentioned by many respondents as factors that limited local agency in peacebuilding by shaping the types of interventions, projects, and at times, even which actors were included or excluded from initiatives. Peacebuilding NGOs in Armenia were funded either directly by international donors or were sub-grantees of INGOs.

Internationally funded projects included dialogues in which parties from both sides of the conflict were brought together in a third country (most often Georgia) and at times, these dialogues involved discussion of topics unrelated to the conflict. Projects also including joint research initiatives, business projects to produce regional products (e.g., Caucasus honey, tea), media projects, academic collaborations, as well as various workshops and trainings aimed at conflict transformation for young people, etc..

While this funding enabled NGOs to collectively implement scores of joint and unilateral projects, when interviewed about the projects' impacts, respondents stated that this was minimal (CSOR 6, CSOR 7), a "drop in the ocean" (CSOR 3, CSOR 5), and even, counterproductive (CSOR 4). As CSOR 4 said,

> 80% to 90% of the projects, including ours were ineffective, because the objectives came from the donors. The donors wanted us to report how Armenians and Azerbaijanis hug each other during meetings. Many NGOs used this to obtain more funding and many meaningless projects were implemented, which harmed the real peacebuilding projects. This was because they created tensions among locals instead of helping them to understand the conflict.

While respondents acknowledged that some projects were better than others, none claimed that either the unilateral or joint projects had a significant impact on changing public perceptions or Track I negotiations. Where impact is mentioned, questions remain of how closely such claims correspond to events on the ground. For example, the European Partnership for the Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (EPNK) was a consortium of INGOs, funded by the European Union from 2010 to 2019, that sought "to positively impact the NK conflict settlement process and contribute to lasting peace in the region" (International Alert, 2019). The five INGOs involved in EPNK were: Conciliation Resources (UK), Crisis Management Initiative (Finland), International Alert (UK), the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (Sweden), and LINKS (UK/Netherlands). The EPNK, which was the main funder of peacebuilding projects in this conflict, worked with a range of local actors in the region to build mutual understanding and confidence in the settlement process (Broers, 2020). Whilst acknowledging that "the space for peacebuilding was extremely constrained" in July 2019, precisely 14 months before the start of the second war, the lead NGO in the EPNK consortium declared in its evaluation that-

> …despite the volatile context (four-day war at the onset of the project in 2016, and then the Armenian Velvet Revolution in 2018), **EPNK3 achievements have been significant…**.evidence shows that these **outputs have contributed towards intended effects which will provide increased opportunities to push the peace agenda further** (International Alert, 2019)[emphasis added].

In hindsight, these claims of having advanced the "peace agenda" and made "significant" achievements seem overly optimistic and premature.

Respondents spoke of the pressures to conform, specifically describing how non-compliance with international actors' objectives would lead to loss of funding (CSOR 6, CSOR 7) and contacts with international media (Journalist 1). Despite these criticisms, we found many examples of compliant or instrumental agency from NGOs, who continued to work within the liberal peace paradigm. However, there were also instances and certain issues on

which local NGOs exercised agency by pushing back against international actors. One such issue was the need to include local people from NK in initiatives. For instance, CSOR 1 said,

> Recently there was a conference in [Europe]. An Armenian delegation was invited, and I especially wanted a girl from Artsakh to participate with us. I got terribly angry when they said no. In that case, I said I would not participate. The inviting party was an INGO. … It is especially necessary to create an environment for people to speak, their voice to be heard. If we close the environment, if we do not acknowledge them [as subjects], how are we going to hear their voice? … If you do not recognise the territory [of NK], does that mean that you do not recognise the people?

Similarly, CSOR 4 said,

> They [donors] wanted to force us to sign a document, that we agree on a peaceful resolution to which I was categorically opposed, because firstly, there were no representatives from Nagorno Karabakh… moreover, they wrote the text, they did not even let us talk about it, they just said, "Sign."

One respondent also spoke of how in recent years their NGO had changed the focus of dialogue meetings from what INGOs were suggesting to instead tackle the difficult and contentious issues. They said,

> Unlike other NGOs, we decided to talk openly about the conflict…we were one of the few NGOs who created a format where people do not come to meet each other, drink coffee, and talk about the problems of the education system, but to notice the elephant in the room and to talk about the conflict. In other words, the others were trying to create platforms where people would get to know each other and to work on, say, a social problem… which would not be related to the most painful topics (CSOR 9).

Several respondents, including both those who worked in NGOs and those who did not, pointed out that while some local NGOs sought to maintain their independence, others were satisfied to maintain the status quo from which they were benefitting financially and in terms of access to global networks (CSOR 4, CSOR7). They argued that for some NGOs, peacebuilding had become a type of business that was monopolised by a "closed group" (RA 1) or "caste" of CS elites (RA 3). Several respondents maintained that these NGOs were entirely disengaged from working class and poor people as well as communities living near the

conflict's line of contact and in NK itself (RA 1) and instead, reproduced hierarchies and exclusions towards those communities (CSOR 4, CSOR 6, CSOR 7, CSOR 9, Journalist 1).

Several respondents spoke of the late Armenian peace activist Georgi Vanyan,[2] who established the Caucasus Center for Peace-making Initiatives NGO, as being the singular individual who chose to pursue a very different path and sought to create alternative approaches. Vanyan was described as a "radical" (RA 2) and of breaking "taboos" (CSOR 2). He worked with the local population of the village of Tekali in Georgia, that also shares a border with Armenia and Azerbaijan and where most residents are ethnic Azerbaijanis, to host direct dialogues. The participants were people from the border communities who chose to travel to the village to take part in these dialogues. They differed from the more typical participants in NGO peacebuilding dialogues who tended to be middle class and university educated. As CSOR 7 said,

> Participants of the Tekali process have never been part of NGOs, they have been people from the surrounding villages. That process was exceptional. No such programmes have ever been made with people from Karabakh, veterans, refugees, family members of the victims, and those living in border villages. This is the biggest problem of peacebuilding. In my opinion, there can be no peacebuilding until there is a process with those people. I don't believe that any organisation sitting in an office in Yerevan can bring peace to people. It can contribute to the creation and dissemination of discourses, it can use social capital to bring different kinds of support to that process, but peacebuilding must be the movement of people, the movement of beneficiaries who will come and say, "We are residents of the border region, and this is what we want".

While CSOR 7 discusses the exceptionality and importance of such meetings, they also mentioned the challenges and how Vanyan's approach, came at a great personal cost. Not only was Vanyan's work criticised in the media, but he was also put under surveillance from the security services, hounded by nationalist groups, and even ostracised by some peacebuilding NGOs. RA 2 explained how "mainstream NGOs", who were "more institutional", distanced

[2] Unfortunately, we did not manage to interview Vanyan, who passed away from COVID in 2021.

themselves from Vanyan. Journalist 1 saw this distancing by mainstream NGOs not only as a form of caution, but also in part as driven by the perceived threat of Vanyan's grassroots work to their approaches. He argued that these NGOs closed ranks against Vanyan, adding,

> [The NGOs] would say Vanyan is like this, Vanyan is like that. You think, why is it so important to shut him down? There was the issue of funding. In other words, why should Vanyan do something cheaply, when what we do is at a high price? Isn't it nicer to meet in a good hotel in Austria, for example, instead of Tekali? It was a clannish thing, and they shut him out.

In this section, we discussed the power of international actors in determining agendas, discourses, and approaches through limiting who could be present in a meeting (CSOR 1), what topics could/not be discussed (CSOR 9), and in CSOR 4's case, the text of a document local actors were asked to sign. On the other hand, we see the agency of local actors in choosing to comply or to resist and challenge top-down directives. We found that while there was some resistance, some NGOs replicated the agendas and practices advanced by donors. In the aftermath of the second war, there is now disillusionment, as expressed through open letters and in public discourses, with international actors and the value they claim to espouse (e.g., liberal peace, human rights) but seemingly do not practice (Human Rights House Yerevan, 2020).

Thus far, we have considered how international actors, operating within the field of peacebuilding (Bourdieu, 1993) perpetuated the ideas of liberal peacebuilding and shaped the work and agency of local NGOs. But this is only part of the story. In the next section, we turn to examine how the persistence of hegemonic societal narratives, coming from the State, political elites, but also reproduced within CS, shaped understandings that in turn limited the potential for CS agency.

Hegemonic State and Societal Narratives

Every society has its narratives, ideas, and myths that serve to uphold the power of elites (Bailey, 2001; Foucault, 1980; Gramsci, 1971) and that generate compelling stories to

explain the way things are, the causes of problems, and what actions need to be taken to remedy them (Schmidt 2008: 309). In this section, we examine on the role of societal ideas and narratives on shaping perceptions, actions, and agency of CS actors involved in peacebuilding. The period after the second war in Armenia has been one of political upheaval as the status quo of 26 years was transformed in just 44 days. Current and former political leaders accuse one another of adopting flawed political and policy approaches to the conflict and many now ask what could have been done to prevent the war and loss of life.

The hegemonic narratives in Armenia concerning the conflict, which were advanced by successive governments and political elites, were summarised by CSOR 3 as follows: "We can keep the situation like this forever and our army is the strongest of all." CSOR 5 elaborated saying,

> The State's approach was the following - we are victorious, we will not give our lands, we will negotiate but we will also not tell the truth to our people. If there will be a favorable negotiation, let that be. But, as the Azerbaijanis will always reject [any negotiations], we will keep the status quo, and the Russians are on our side. So, this was the narrative, there was not a serious approach…some NGOs contributed to the creation of myths and false values. We did not say, "People, the territories must be returned, it is part of the official negotiations or that the Armenian army is not the strongest army in the region, etc." NGOs did not want to challenge or break the taboos, and this contributed to the further strengthening of the myths.

CSOR 2 argued that society was, "fed by false myths for years, and all those myths brought us to the situation that we have now - war and defeat." Several respondents discussed how this led to a silencing of questions and discussion of how to achieve a final peace agreement. Subsequently, the hegemonic narratives that the Armenian side were the victors of the first war, that Russia would always protect Armenia, and that the status quo (i.e., the stalemate of no war, no peace) would and could hold indefinitely, went largely unchallenged.

In a socio-political context shaped by collective memories of pogroms (e.g., Sumgait 1988) and genocide, even in the absence of overt governmental repression, there was self-disciplining of what could be said. Libaridian discusses how a paradigm of fear, that is

informed by shared collective memory of genocide has long been a part of Armenian political thinking and public discourse (Libaridian 1991). He writes, "the fear – both justified and imagined – of the Turk, the Muslim, Pan-Turkism, pogroms, massacres, and a new genocide" that was generated by the 1915 Genocide of Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire continues to shape thinking (Libaridian 1991: viii). This is not to say that this thinking has never been challenged. For instance, the mid to late 1980s, was a vibrant period of Armenian emancipatory political thinking, when some intellectuals (e.g., Rafael Ishkhanian, Ktritch Sardarian, etc.) began to critically analyse Armenian history, to question the validity of the political "paradigm based on fear [of neighbours]", and instead, to articulate a new agenda for the Armenian nation based on new strategic principles including "decolonization, sovereignty, and nation-building through self-reliance, redefinition of national interests, realistic assessment of one's geo-political environment, and good neighbourly relations with all neighbours; and democratization" (Libaridian 1991: vii-viii). The logic that underpinned Rafael Ishkhanian's arguments of self-reliance (Ishkhanian, 1991), became "the core of the doctrinal vision" of the Armenian National Movement (ANM), which from 1989 adopted a course advocating independence from the Soviet Union and "openly insisting that Armenia should strive to build normal relations with all of its neighbours" (Grigoryan, 2018: 846-47).

Although the ANM-led administration of the first president of independent Armenia, Levon Ter Petrosyan (1991-1998), attempted to adopt some of these ideas in shaping foreign policies, such ideas fell out of favour once Ter-Petrosyan was deposed in a bloodless coup in February 1998. Subsequent governments, led by presidents Robert Kocharyan (1998-2008) and Serzh Sargsyan (2008-2018), rejected those ideas and instead governed through a politics and climate of fear [*vakhi mt'nolort*] (anonymised) and extended Armenia's reliance on Russia, not just in terms of national security, but also in the sphere of economic development.

Respondents spoke of working in this climate of fear, which subsequently constrained and shaped their actions, often have a chilling effect on what they permitted themselves to articulate. One respondent explained,

> The reality drastically changed after 1998[3]. Silencing of the topic in public spheres emerged and formed a state dictatorship over the issue. All those who would question it, came under attack. An illusory situation was formed; on the one hand there is the territory of NK, its 7 adjacent regions, which have been occupied, and are presented as an achievement, and on the other hand, the people questioning that achievement are portrayed as "traitors of the homeland" (RA1).

Closing off discussions or limiting them through delineating what is sayable, is a form of disciplinary power (Foucault 1975). As the civic space for critical thinking and questioning of the policies in relation to the conflict closed down, subsequently ideas that "could have won public approval" in the 1990s, became "unacceptable" 10-15 years later (Yerevan Press Club 2019: 16).

With the coming to power of the democratically elected government in 2018 after the so-called Velvet Revolution, led by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and his My Step party, which included many former CS activists, many hoped that this would lead to a new approach to the conflict and generate public discussions. However, even after 2018, the hegemonic discourses concerning the unresolved conflict continued to be reproduced and respondents stated that the change of government did not lead to greater CS – State cooperation and peacebuilding NGOs remained marginalised. As CSOR 4 said, "CS representatives had joined the government and they were the ones not taking CS seriously. They would say, 'yeah, OK, we don't need anything from you." Similarly, CSOR 3 argued,

> A and B, who were now MPs and who understood these processes did not want to go against the current. Others who were not part of the new government did try to speak about the conflict, but they would tell them, 'Thank you, goodbye, we don't need you.' But if there were a lot of people pushing them to deal with the conflict, there would be pressure. If there were insiders saying, 'we must answer to the people, if war happens,

[3] 1998 refers to the coup which brought Robert Kocharyan to power.

> how will we get out from under it?' But the people who could do it [i.e., the insiders], did not do it and we are now where we are.

Some officials from Pashinyan's government we interviewed for this and previous projects (anonymized) stated that the post-revolutionary authorities have never censored CS actors working on any policy issues, including peacebuilding, a point which was confirmed by our NGO respondents. State officials who argue that NGOs failed to be more vocal in demanding a peaceful resolution to the NK conflict, are ignoring their elected duties *and* agency as political leaders to advance public discussions about the situation. Moreover, as our interviews demonstrated, while they may not have censored CS actors, they simply ignored them. Thus, while the civic space may have become freer after 2018, State officials continued to avoid critical and difficult public discussions about the need to resolve the conflict.

It is important to note that hegemonic narratives were not only perpetuated by successive governments or political elites; they were also advanced by some CS actors. Nationalist movements have been on the ascent in Armenia for the past decade. They have fuelled public criticism of peacebuilding as a traitorous activity and perpetuated the maximalist discourse of "not one inch of land" (*voch mi t'iz hogh)*. They branded anyone who dared suggest the return of the territories adjacent to NK, that were captured in the first war, as part of a negotiated solution, a traitor to the homeland. These groups view themselves as the *real* CS in contrast to professionalised NGOs whom they accuse of being foreign agents, traitors, Turks,[4] or the "children of Soros" (anonymised).

Alongside the pressure coming from nationalist groups, respondents discussed the peer pressure among their own social circles, discussing how this had a chilling effect and constrained their work. One respondent said, "There have always been psychological constraints. That irrational self-censorship raises questions - does what we do, as civil society,

[4] In Armenian society, calling someone a 'Turk' is an insult.

go against our state's direction? Will we not be considered traitors for doing this work?" (RA 2). Fear of public opprobrium (CSOR 3) stopped many NGOs from challenging the dominant narratives. As CSOR 2 explained,

> The price would be that they would discredit us and call us Turks…if you opposed the dominant narratives, you would be seen as an idiot, you would lose your authority, and your voice would become nothing…They [elites] have consciously narrowed the world of our perceptions and forced us to look at the world through that hole. And our task as CS was to enlarge those holes, which we did not do. We did not do enough work to make the public look critically at the news it was receiving, to be able to disagree with some positions.

In this section, we discussed how the perpetuation of hegemonic State and societal discourses about the conflict, which were also reproduced within civil society, constrained the agency of CS actors by delineating what could be said and done. Disciplinary power (Foucault 1975) functioned to create a state of inertia wherein the hegemonic discourses concerning the conflict went unchallenged and discussions about how the conflict could be resolved and what would constitute peace were silenced and pragmatic policies rejected in favour of "rigid dogmas" (Oskanian, 2022). The space for peacebuilding was severely constrained, which in turn limited the "transformative capacity" (Jabri, 1995) and projective agency of CS (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), instead engendering a situation where local CS actors wittingly or unwittingly perpetuated the status quo. In the absence of alternative or counter-hegemonic ideas (Schmidt 2008), there was continuity of the policies and political approaches vis a vis the NK conflict for over two decades.

Conclusion

In this article, we examined the potential and limits of local agency in the field of peacebuilding and how agency is manifested and constrained in conflict contexts. By adopting Bourdieu's concept of field, we considered how the field of peacebuilding in Armenia was shaped by institutional structures, relations of power as well as ideas and discourses (Bourdieu

1993). We adopted relational and temporal perspectives of agency that consider the dialogic interplay between actors, structures, and ideas in this field and over time (1991 – present). Drawing on Schmidt's theory of discursive institutionalism (2008), we examined the relationship between ideas, power, and agency, highlighting the importance of ideas in shaping politics and policy.

While CS peacebuilding efforts in the 1990s were locally led and bolder (YPC 2019), the ascendancy of internationally funded peacebuilding initiatives from 2000 onwards, which were shaped by the liberal peace paradigm, meant that professionalised NGOs became the dominant actors in Track II peacebuilding. NGOs advanced largely technocratic, but ultimately ineffectual projects. Whilst privately criticising international actors' approaches and at times exercising resistance, more often local NGOs tended to adopt compliant and instrumental forms of agency as they continued to work in the liberal peace paradigm. Whereas, domestically, disciplinary power led to a situation where the dominant narratives advanced by State actors, political elites and public pressure from nationalist groups, constrained CS agency and its transformative capacity (Jabri 1995, Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Together, these processes engendered self-censorship, inertia, and compliance with the status quo by local NGOs. Civil society, rather than being the space "to imagine that the world could be different" (Howell & Pearce, 2002: 237) and to develop counter-hegemonic discourses and ideas (Gramsci, 1971), became the space where hegemonic discourses and approaches to the conflict went largely unchallenged.

To be clear, our aim is not to blame local NGOs but to acknowledge the challenges they faced of working in a severely restricted field of action. This case study, which explores the potential and limits of local CS agency in peacebuilding, prompts us to reconsider the normative assumptions about CS in the liberal peace paradigm and to further research what factors can enable CS agency.

At the time of writing (June 2022), PM Pashinyan announced that his Government is working to advance a peace deal with Azerbaijan, which he claims is supported by the international community. This has been met with daily protests, as demonstrators accuse Pashinyan of bungling the 2020 war and making unacceptable concessions on the status of NK. They demand Pashinyan's resignation, labelling him a "traitor" and "Turk" (Mejlumyan, 2022). The protests are led by supporters of former president Kocharyan as well MPs , members, and supporters of two opposition parties: the Armenian Revolutionary Federation and the Republican Party of Armenia, which lost power after the 2018 Velvet Revolution.

However, alongside the demonstrations, some people are also beginning to demand that peace be considered seriously (Manifesto, 2022) and new CS groups have emerged in the peacebuilding field (e.g., Bright Garden Voices and Caucasus Crossroads Facebook group) which create space for difficult conversations. In this highly polarized context, where discussions of peace are often equated with capitulation and treason, it remains to be seen how the situation will develop. However, one thing is clear, without a space for difficult discussions and critical questioning, new ideas and thinking of what needs to be done to address the political, social, and economic problems facing Armenia will not emerge.

Armenia is not unique in this regard. Globally, we are witnessing two parallel processes: on the one hand, the space for civic action is shrinking space due to governments enacting restrictive legislation (Youngs & Echague, 2017) and on the other hand, there is heightened mistrust, anger, and polarisation within societies around policy issues (e.g., Covid vaccines, climate change, reproductive rights, etc.) that is characterised by angry rhetoric, conspiracy theories, and vitriolic accusations both in online and offline spaces, which constricts the free and civil exchange of ideas (Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019). These processes should prompt researchers to examine wider questions about the role and agency of

civil society not just in the context of peacebuilding, but also in democratic governance and policy processes more generally.

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