



## **RSC PROJECT**

### **“BRIDGING THE DIVIDE: ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN ENGAGEMENT”**

Since our founding as an independent think tank in 2012, the Regional Studies Center (RSC) has been actively supporting “track two” dialogue and collaborative engagement between Armenia and Azerbaijan. As an independent think tank based in Armenia, our efforts and activities in support of Armenia-Azerbaijan engagement align with our record of work conducting a wide range of strategic analysis and objective research, implements a number of educational and policy-related projects, and develops policy initiatives aimed at bolstering political and economic reform and conflict resolution in the broader South Caucasus region.

The RSC is actively engaged in the public policy process and seeks to serve as a catalyst for democratic reform and sustainable economic development through the empowerment of civil society and by contributing to the formulation of public policy through innovative and objective research, analysis and policy recommendations.

More specifically, our latest project, entitled, “Bridging the Divide: Armenia-Azerbaijan Engagement,” seeks to expand “track two” people-to-people contact and enhance confidence-building measures between civil society actors in Armenia and Azerbaijan. This project seeks to leverage the synergy from our earlier track two efforts while initiating new, more innovative and bold measures aimed at challenging the negative narrative and discourse, defending moderate voices, deepening mutual understanding and exploring new opportunities for engagement. With the generous support of the German Marshall Fund’s (GMF) Black Sea Trust (BST), we have launched the latest round of this project, running through February 2018.

#### **Project Overview**

The unresolved conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh has long served as the primary impediment to regional stability in the South Caucasus. For both Armenia and Azerbaijan, the conflict has also tended to disrupt political reform and democratization, distort economic development and deepen mutual animosity, fear and militant nationalism in each society. Although the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is a focus of international mediation by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and has been subject to repeated attempts at confidence-building, peace-building and conflict transformation efforts, the more recent period of an escalation of military hostilities only necessitates renewed attempts at finding common ground, forging new avenues of engagement and fostering an atmosphere more conducive to diplomatic concessions and compromise.

Moreover, the outbreak of hostilities in April 2016, which stood out as the most serious military clashes and combat operations since the early 1990s, demonstrates the immediacy and urgency of increasing efforts to find an alternative to war and the force of arms. Therefore, this proposed project, “Bridging the Divide: Armenia-Azerbaijan Engagement,” seeks to expand “track two” people-to-people contact and enhance confidence-building measures between civil society actors in Armenia and Azerbaijan.

## Summary of Project Activities

For this project, there are five general activity areas:

- (1) collaborative analysis and media support to challenge the conflict narrative and negative discourse in each country;
- (2) professional cooperation to foster mutual understanding;
- (3) convening workshops to broaden the constituency for peace, with Georgian and Turkish facilitation and support;
- (4) exploring innovative measures in business and economics, based on new “platforms” and on shared opportunities for entrepreneurship;
- (5) holding special “focus groups” within Armenia aimed at fighting stereotypes, combating the conflict narrative and to “brainstorm” new ideas and innovative peace-building initiatives.

## Specific Project Activities

1. *Challenging the conflict narrative and changing the negative discourse*, with an emphasis on the media, academia and the analytical community in each country;

**Activities:** In some ways, one of the projects bolder and more innovative objectives is an ambitious effort to confront negative stereotypes and challenge both the conflict narrative and negative discourse by initiating new efforts of Armenian-Azerbaijan collaboration in the areas of research and analysis and a media campaign to publish the analysis of Armenian and Azerbaijan “experts” in media outlets in each country. This is aimed at not only raising the level of media coverage and improve mutual public perception, but to also begin to build a foundation for possible later cross-border cooperation and collaboration between Armenian and Azerbaijani journalists.

A second, but related area of activities will include joint Armenian-Azerbaijani collaborative research and analysis, based on professional scholarship for the publication of joint reports and studies devoted to a broader range of issues and interests. This will also include efforts to widen the audience, combat stereotypes and misunderstanding, and as part of a public education campaign focused on promoting mutual understanding. And a third specific aspect includes an equally ambitious plan to hold a joint Armenian-Azerbaijani conference in Tbilisi, Georgia to advance this effort and to garner greater public support for such collaboration.

2. *Empowering moderate views and voices* in each society against assaults by more militant actors through efforts aimed at collaboration and cooperation to foster mutual understanding;

**Activities:** Despite the difficulty to publicly embrace and defend fellow civic activists and CSOs in each country, there is a need to empower and enable moderate voices and peace advocates on each side. In order to accomplish this, albeit in a more modest and realistic sense, this project plans to raise the prominence of such partner through efforts of collaboration and cooperation with international organizations and external NGOs already engaged in the region. More specifically, this involves our efforts to invite, sponsor and support partners from each country to join cross-border initiatives and projects in the areas of research, analysis and other, less controversial areas, such as environmental, economic development and cultural issues.

Some examples include plans to expand prior and existing region-wide projects by the UN in the field of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the EU agenda of Eastern Partnership countries and the review process of the Eastern Neighborhood Policy (ENP), the regional activities of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) organization, and other related “alternative venues” allowing Armenian and Azerbaijani researchers, activists and professionals to come together and to carry out joint research and collaborative projects.

**3. *Broadening the constituency for peace and preparing society for compromise;***

**Activities:** In this area, the proposed project activities center on larger meetings and workshops hosted and facilitated by Georgian and Turkish partners, aimed at both creating the space in which Armenian and Azerbaijani counterparts can meet and review efforts at confidence-building and trust-building efforts, while also encouraging and empowering informal mediation efforts by Georgian and Turkish partners.

These meetings and workshops, closed to the public, will provide an opportunity for the planned public conference and unlike other conferences, these workshops will be designed to produce recommendations, ideas and initiatives beyond the confines of this project, in order to sustain momentum and secure sustainability. These activities will include a focus on deepening and expanding people-to-people contacts and informal activities focusing on youth, musicians, artists and other specific target groups as “agents of change,” aimed at garnering a more sustainable effort to continue beyond the duration of this project.

**4. *Exploring entrepreneurship and innovation*** in the IT sector of business and economics, based on new “platforms” and alternative avenues based on opportunities for IT start-ups and entrepreneurs.

**Activities:** Based on the recent success of our efforts to bring together venture capital and “angel investors” from Turkey and Europe interested in the Armenian IT sector, this activity seeks to put aside the conflict and overcome the closed border by facilitating an expanded meeting of IT professionals and entrepreneurs from the wider region (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey) for a one-day workshop devoted to the possibilities for IT-specific projects between start-ups and entrepreneurs. This would also include a collaborative analytical study and publications assessing the IT sector of the South Caucasus region.

**5. *Convening special “focus groups”*** within Armenia aimed at fighting stereotypes, combating the conflict narrative and “brainstorming” new ideas and innovative peace-building initiatives.

**Activities:** The RSC has a long record of successful Western-style “focus groups,” engaging key cohorts, such as graduate students, young professionals, entrepreneurs, educators, youth activists, etc., and soliciting new ideas and testing our own analysis. Similarly, the RSC has also held a series of closed monthly briefings, providing an informal “off-the-record” closed discussion of current developments in Armenia and the broader region. Each of these activities are aimed at providing a safe, informal setting for an open discussion of taboo issues related to the conflict and to challenge the negative image of Azerbaijan within the Armenian society.



### **About Us: Organizational Description**

The Regional Studies Center (RSC) is an independent think tank conducting a wide range of strategic analysis and objective research, and implementing a number of educational and policy-related projects. As a leading think tank based in Armenia, the RSC conducts research and analysis and develops policy initiatives aimed at bolstering political and economic reform and conflict resolution in the broader South Caucasus region.

As an independent think tank, the RSC is actively engaged in the public policy process and, over the longer term, seeks to serve as a catalyst for democratic reform and sustainable economic development through the empowerment of civil society and by contributing to the formulation of public policy through innovative and objective research, analysis and policy recommendations.

The RSC is also actively involved in supporting the Armenian-Turkish “normalization” process and works closely with other think tanks, research institutes and civil society organizations in both Armenia and Turkey. Similarly, although more limited, the RSC is also engaged in a consistent dialogue with Azerbaijani counterparts and partners and media outlets.

And by virtue of our role as an active independent think tank, we seek to offer objective analysis and innovative ideas as parts of a broader effort to elevate the level of political discourse and spur debate in Armenia, often by leveraging our professional, non-partisan reputation to bridge political differences and to broker policy cooperation and compromise. In addition, the RSC also regularly challenges the closed nature of Armenia’s current political landscape, offering a fresh degree of moderation and alternative views on such taboo issues as the Nagorno Karabakh conflict and normalization of relations between Armenia and Turkey. Within this context, we actively strive to challenge the mainstream nationalist narrative.

Moreover, we are actively involved in contributing to the public policy process, working both formally and informally with government ministries, state bodies and the Armenian parliament. At the same time, we are also engaged in efforts to encourage, enhance and empower civic activism, through measures aimed at capacity-building both among and between civil society organizations in Armenia, often by forging new networks based on issue-based advocacy.

Moreover, our efforts in this area also concentrate on “creating, defending and expanding the space” for civil society, while also empowering emerging “agents of change,” such as youth and civic activists. And in terms of our strategy, therefore, we seek to actively inspire, involve and institutionalize a broader degree of constructive engagement in the public policy process by civil society organizations (CSOs) and more informal civic groups, and among individual concerned citizens, such as students, activists and youth. In this way, the RSC partners with various actors within society, including civil society, international organizations, representatives from the private sector, academia and state bodies and institutions.