Examples from the Eurasia programme:

Civic space being closed down is a trend that we are seeing in many countries across the post-Soviet space, following the example of changes to the domestic policy environment in Russia. Where we work, this has been particularly noticeable in Azerbaijan, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Tajikistan.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia

Since the early 1990s Georgia has struggled with its conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, who have been *de facto* independent for the past 20 years. A whole generation has since grown up with no experience of co-existence, as the three societies are isolated from each other and contacts between them nearly impossible due to closed borders and political policies. Isolated and with limited opportunities, moods amongst young people are quite radical – having absorbed the enemy images and historical narratives passed down by their elders. If young people do not develop an alternative vision of the future and aspirations remain low, violence may not appear an unattractive option.

The recent actions of Russia in Ukraine demonstrate how fragile the ‘no-war, no-peace’ situation is in Georgia and speak to the importance of strengthening a vibrant civil society with agency that can resist manipulation of conflict narratives and identities.

An example of how to counter the trend of the civic space being restricted can be found in our project proposal submitted to USAID due to start this year.

* Our **theory of change** in this instance draws from the ‘inside-out peacebuilding’ (promoting shifts in consciousness and attitudes of the target group as well as stimulating individual agency) and the ‘building bridges’ theories of change (fostering positive relationships across the conflict divides), working towards a goal of mobilizing future leaders from the three societies, so that they are actively influencing pro-peace social change.
* The **people-to-people** approach is central in this respect, and the project provides a safe space for face-to-face and virtual interaction between conflicting sides. The target group is male and female Georgian, Abkhaz and Ossetian students or recent graduates, who demonstrate leadership potential. The project takes a civic education and activism approach, contributing towards the **expected** **outcomes** which are that participants will: a) develop knowledge, skills and values important for civic leadership and activism; b) form bonds and maintain relationships with peers from across the conflict divides; and c) become actively engaged in local discussions, civic initiatives and policy dialogues at a local level and across the conflict divides.
* **Activities** take a phased approach, starting with an introduction to conflict transformation through a ‘Civic Education’ program, followed by workshops on conflict analysis. These activities prepare participants for the first of three cross-conflict dialogues. The civic strand is then developed further, supporting discussion clubs and small-scale community based initiatives and finally shifting to a more strategic influencing agenda, leading to learning, analysis and recommendations from the project, which will be the focus of policy seminars in each entity.
* The **sustainability** of the project will be ensured by the strengthened capacities and motivation of the target group; by engaging universities and institutionalizing ‘Civic Education’ into their curricula; producing training materials which remain at the partners’ disposal. But the main sustainability element is that through the young participants’ contribution to reinvigorated peace processes, we expect to see the results emerge in years to come when a select few take office or try to shape the agenda on their own initiative.
* The project is designed and will be implemented in partnership with Caucasian House (CH) and Center for Humanitarian Programs (CHP) who form the project management team with Alert and CDA. There is a high level of ownership, as this project has evolved from earlier partnerships between Alert, CH and CHP, and it is the result of joint strategizing. Alert is a leading peacebuilding NGO, working in the Caucasus since mid-90s with a strong track record and one of the few organizations still able to work in South Ossetia after 2008. CDA brings strong methodological support and capacity building elements to the partnership, in particular in collaborative learning and M&E. CH and CHP are leaders among the Caucasus peacebuilding community, as such this project draws together in one process a formidable team.

We have had success with these kinds of projects in the past. An example for this is the South Ossetia Youth Empowerment project, which has made progress in increasing citizen engagement in civil society by providing civic activism training and supporting the development of a number of new local civic initiatives.

* In this, **Alert’s long term goal** is a transformation of attitudes and discourse around the conflicts so that they are de-politicised and informed by analysis and dialogue rather than by propaganda and prejudice. To achieve this, Alert aims to stimulate civic activism in young people and strengthen their capacity to manage conflict and negotiate compromise. We will develop leadership skills enabling them to get more active in promoting social change within their own communities; and provide opportunities for professional development, including skills in critical analysis, debating. We also aim to include youth in dialogue processes, facilitating relationship development with peers across the divides.
* At this point, we have already conducted one training course in November and we are in the process of developing the concrete project ideas. Ideas were developed during the training (and outlined below), but since most of the participants are new to this type of organised social activity, and given the sensitive political context, it is important to manage the process carefully and ensure fears/risks are mitigated and that the first steps do not undermine longer term objectives. Project ideas included cultural, educational, business. On reflection, some of the interesting ideas are around business, but in particular social business or the cultivation of a service culture. We are currently developing these ideas further, but the underlying rationale for such projects would be: a) the initiative comes from the more entrepreneurial participants – they have an interest in it, it could be financially sustainable, they are willing to commit energy and source resources themselves; b) the concept of ‘service’ is totally lacking in SO and this translates into uncivil relations between fellow citizens. Fostering more respectful, customer-oriented services can translate into wider societal demand for order. E.g. providing receipts, opening on time, being pleasant with customers – none of these are norms in South Ossetia, which is both result of and contributory factor towards wider societal apathy, aggression. This can contribute towards societal post-war, post-isolation rehabilitation. People got unused to being respectful of one another, living in such a degrading society.
* While some project ideas were identified by participants during the November 2014 training workshop, it was necessary to elaborate them further in situ. This was in part to give the participants some time for reflection, to ensure their ideas were realistic and not put together in the euphoria of a workshop setting; but also perceived necessary from a ‘do no harm’ perspective due to the deteriorating political situation in relation to civil society in the interim. Alert’s local coordinator (Vladikavkaz based) visited South Ossetia a number of times in December 14, February and March 15 to follow up and develop project ideas (and again in April, May). We should note that even during this time, the situation and possibilities for civic action deteriorated. For example, initial partnership discussions with the University resulted in an offer from them to provide a lecture room for a ‘discussion club’ project. However, this offer was subsequently withdrawn (by the same person), and Alert was told ‘we cannot host an NGO project here in the University’. It appears that in the meantime, the University was warned not to work with us. Other innovative project ideas appeared to be too ambitious (e.g. Civic education in schools; training centre for entrepreneurs in ‘service culture’), and we had to review our ambitions.
* In all, it proved difficult to get the new participants (who participated in November 2014 training for the first time) to start to implement their own initiatives, without them having first been part of civic life in South Ossetia. The concept of civil society remains theoretical for them, and the types of projects they came up with to address the problems they identified were either too grandiose (akin to government style projects) or business related. Thus Alert’s role in identifying projects had to be greater than original expected. We decided to focus on a significant problem highlighted during the training workshop which was the absence of a dialogue/discussion culture inside South Ossetia. People either abstain from discussing things (to avoid arguments, or out of political sensitivities) or get over emotional, defensive, even aggressive and unable to be rational, pragmatic, or listen to the other argument. The reasons for this absence of a problem-solving culture appeared to be directly related to trauma over years of unresolved conflict and political pressure. The absence of any alternative discourse meant the culture of discourse has been stamped out. Only a few brave ones dare to speak out.
* This analysis influenced the choice of small projects to be supported in the end. Some of them were initiatives of young people who *previously* participated in peacebuilding projects, rather than those who participated for the first time in the November training. However, Alert is ensuring that they remain involved, and the purpose is to begin to rehabilitate the idea of ‘civil society’ before they see that they are in its ranks already and it is not a ‘subversive club’.
* Due to the sensitivities of discussing these issues with our partners and local coordinator over email or phone or skype (after an increase in surveillance and public criticism of NGOs in South Ossetia, including details of bank accounts and emails of individuals being published on the internet, and fears of falling fowl of opaque and politically motivated interpretations of the ‘law on treason’), we decided to hold a meeting with the local coordinator in Belgium in April (since he has a Schengen visa and also we could combine it with meetings in Brussels), to discuss all the details and elaborate workplans further. Criteria for selected projects included ‘do no harm’ to ensure safety of all involved (including on financial transactions); and whether they are realistic, implementable within a short term, but also could form the basis for new initiatives in the future.

More information, including outlines of projects agreed, can be found in our latest donor report from June 2015 and the previous one from January 2015, which we will be glad to share.

Azerbaijan

The following paragraphs describe how the civic space is being closed down in Azerbaijan has made the implementation of our EPNK2 project difficult:

* The start of our project coincided with arguably the most volatile and tense period in the history of the post- ceasefire agreement period of the Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) conflict. At the start of the project in 2012, there were hopes of renewed efforts at the level of the MINSK process on negotiation of the Madrid principles and the presidents were seen to be meeting more regularly. However, relations have since worsened at the official level, while hostile rhetoric on the conflict by senior government officials on both sides has escalated, and fatalities on the frontline have increased dramatically over the past 18 months.
* A number of highly publicised and politicised incidents occurred during the timeframe of the project that escalated levels of polarisation and animosity between the societies as well as at the official level. These include: the release and pardon in Azerbaijan of Ramil Safarov, convicted of the murder of an Armenian lieutenant, following extradition from Hungary in September 2012; the vilification in Azerbaijan of renowned author Akram Aylisli for his novel ‘Stone Dreams’ on the Karabakh war in late 2012; the clashes on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border and Line of Contact in the summer of 2014 with the highest number of casualties reported since the ceasefire; and the downing of an Armenian military helicopter by Azerbaijani forces in November 2014.
* Increased activity by lobbying groups working for the interests of the conflict sides in Europe and in the US, often with access to funds much larger than were available to EPNK2, has made the work of EPNK in the international arena much more difficult than previously. EPNK2 found itself confronting a huge amount of disinformation, often played back to domestic constituencies.
* This period has also seen a severe increase in political constraints on civil society actors in the region, particularly (but not restricted to) those working in the areas of human rights, women’s and LGBT rights, and independent media. This has narrowed the already limited space for peacebuilding activities in the societies. In a spate of repression and arrests of Azerbaijani human rights and civil society activists in 2014, a number of key figures were accused of being Armenian agents, and some current and former partners of CR were arrested. Following a new law on NGOs in Azerbaijan, in 2014 and 2015, civil society organisations receiving foreign funding, including a number of EPNK2 local partners, were subject to bank account freezes and suspended re-registration procedures that left some unable to operate legally for many months, and led to the effective closure of others, including Internews Azerbaijan. A sharp crackdown on journalists and media agencies providing a critical voice in Azerbaijan resulted in many independent media actors being imprisoned or leaving the country and the closure of media agencies. Since late 2014, a law introduced on frontline security has restricted journalists from traveling to or reporting on events in frontline regions. In Armenia and NK, a backlash against ‘European values’ perceived to threaten traditional values led to public campaigns against local actors defending women’s and LGBT rights, and posed serious threats to their security. Kvinna till Kvinna’s local partners in Armenia were threatened by nationalist groups and were portrayed in the media as traitors, working against national interests.
* Underlying all of these trends has been a backdrop of unforeseen changes in the geopolitical context, which have brought to bear significantly on politics and public opinion across the region. In particular, EPNK2 has coincided with the crisis in Ukraine and a serious deterioration of relations between Russia and the West. Negotiations on membership of the Eurasian Customs Union and on EU Association Agreements have carved out diverging directions for the different states, de facto and de jure, of the South Caucasus. Added to this, the economic fallout of the Ukraine crisis in Russia, felt across the region, has put new pressures on the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan, exacerbated in the latter by the fall in global oil prices.
* In this challenging environment, the EPNK2 consortium has persevered in seeking to increase the credibility and popular legitimacy of peacebuilding efforts around the NK conflict, and indeed the need for this has been greater than ever. The issues described led to some delays in implementation, particularly where EPNK funds were frozen and where local partners or key participants withdrew from activities temporarily or permanently due to the sensitive nature of the work. For this reason, a no cost extension was required in order to complete the project. In addition, CR, Alert and Kvinna till Kvinna in particular had to devote additional time and effort to project administration, political support and accompaniment, and facilitation of dialogue between partners.
* Nevertheless, it is a significant achievement of the local and international partners that the work has continued throughout the three years. During this time, we have through complementary approaches pushed to keep open the space for civic peacebuilding to operate and succeeded in engaging broad sectors of the societies on different levels, as well as international actors. This has been achieved thanks to the use of creative and sensitive approaches to navigate challenges as they emerged, reconfiguring planned activities so that they remained appropriate, and ensuring *do no harm* was observed. At a time when local civil society actors were vulnerable to pressure from the authorities, the media and the public, EPNK2 provided a supportive umbrella, giving them the stability, legitimacy, networks, space and technical and moral support to build and promote trust across the divide, and widen debate on peaceful, inclusive ways forward in resolving the conflict. The project’s analytical outputs and advocacy to national and international stakeholders have also played a key role in enhancing the relevance of civil peacebuilding in the eyes of decision-makers. EPNK2 has been instrumental in challenging official rhetoric about the conflict and the peace process, often based on hate speech and disinformation. Even those who did not agree with our analysis broadly accepted it as unbiased
* **Alert**’s work with media actors and its analysis and outreach activities both contributed to broadening the pool of peacebuilding actors across the region and introduced fresh perspectives on the conflict through joint processes that demonstrated positive examples of cross-divide cooperation. Firstly, we worked with mainstream and independent media professionals reporting on the conflict in the region. We built their capacity in ethical, balanced conflict reporting, fostered in them a sense of their roles as peacebuilding actors, and built confidence across the divide through contact based on common professional interests. Training and dialogue activities and the inception of the Unheard Voices project brought together journalists and editors from Armenia, Azerbaijan and NK to produce regular thematic multimedia reports to stimulate reflection across the societies on the ongoing human cost of the conflict. Altogether, as part Unheard Voices, 53 journalists published 262 multimedia reports on a combined total of more than 20 national, regional and international media platforms. Secondly, we conducted an analytical and outreach process to stimulate public debate with fresh ideas for ways forward in resolving the conflict in all the societies based on lessons from other peace processes. We engaged six experts from Armenia, Azerbaijan and NK in a dialogue and research process that produced three joint publications: a participatory analysis of civil society peacebuilding initiatives in the region, and comparative studies of mechanisms for public participation and multi-track diplomacy in peace processes in Northern Ireland and the Basque Country. The resulting research reports formed the basis for a total of 82 outreach events across the region, with a total attendance of 1407 people, where the analysis and its lessons paved the way for critical discussion of new inclusive mechanisms for transforming the NK conflict.

More information about our EPNK2 project in Azerbaijan can be found in the final donor report from this year- to be shared upon request. Since the end of the project, the situation in Azerbaijan has since continued to worsen, with our local partners reporting that the legal premise for Azerbaijani CSOs receiving funds from abroad has not been clarified and they cannot implement activities in-country funded by international donors.

Tajikistan

In Tajikistan, we had success with a three-year project Upstream Conflict Prevention in Central Asia (UCPCA) in engaging young people in civil society. A final evaluation of the project, which was conducted internally by International Alert in February-March 2015, identified **lessons** learned about the project’s ability to promote the desired outcomes:

* The project Upstream Conflict Prevention in Central Asia (UCPCA), funded by the Conflict Pool of the Department for International Development (DfID), the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Ministry of Defence (MOD), was implemented by International Alert from April 2012 to March 2015 in the bordering provinces (oblasts) of Soghd in Northern Tajikistan and Batken in Southern Tajikistan, in the Ferghana Valley.
* The goal of the UCPCA project was to improve the ability of communities along the Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan border to resolve disputes at the local level and to become more resilient to nationalism and radicalisation. In Tajikistan, the project targeted young people, primarily university students, through a country-wide youth camp on tolerance, a series of participatory training events in mediation, public lectures on tolerance and cross-border trust-building events together with youth from Kyrgyzstan. In Kyrgyzstan, the project targeted young people and also people working directly with youth such as teachers, social pedagogues and local officials responsible for community services in the three administrative districts comprising Batken Oblast: Batken, Kadamjai and Leylek districts, which border on Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and contain ethnically mixed populations. Activities consisted of training courses in mediation and mediation showcases to raise public awareness of mediation as an effective approach to conflict resolution at the community level. Training courses for journalists in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan provided capacity building in ethical reporting on sensitive issues including conflict through two separate trainings and one joint event. In addition, the project produced a written assessment of mediation in Tajikistan, and two research reports on the media sector in the region.
* The project was well designed to address a range of needs in a context of interethnic and inter-regional tensions based on historic grievances and youth disengagement from society and vulnerability to radicalisation. It adapted effectively to the tightening of space for civil society actors and new geopolitical pressures on conflict drivers, maintaining constructive relations with the authorities, while continuing to address key needs. Staff turnover and funding difficulties led to some management challenges, which meant that some parts of the project, notably media capacity building and business skills training, were not strategically integrated.
* The project was highly effective in shaping the mentality of participants and transforming them into tolerant, active citizens with the motivation and skills to mitigate escalation of local level conflict. Going forward, many will have the influence to positively engage others in civil society, and help prevent conflict and radicalisation. Effectiveness in reaching out to the wider community could have been enhanced through more strategic selection of target groups.
* Noteworthy sources of sustainability were: the establishment of a joint plan by the Soghd and Batken Oblast authorities on cross-border youth trust-building activities; the registration of a society of mediators in Batken Oblast; and the research on mediation in Tajikistan and the media sector in the region to inform the future peacebuilding work of international and local actors. The sustainability of mediation practice could be further developed by focusing more on advocacy, and sharing learning more widely and systematically with relevant stakeholders.
* **Lessons:**
* The project team’s careful approach to visibility and relations with the authorities in Tajikistan in response to increased scrutiny meant that the authorities were increasingly prepared to collaborate. Looking ahead, political sensitivities in Tajikistan must be considered. Migration and gender inequality are less politicised areas for intervention, under which more sensitive issues could be tackled.
* The planned output of establishing a referral mechanism in Batken Oblast, while strategic as a step towards sustainability of mediation practice, was too ambitious for this project alone to achieve.
* A reduced number of target groups for mediation training would have allowed for more strategic, focused and in depth work to develop their potential to multiply the benefit of the training in the communities.
* The media component of the project generated valuable insight into the needs and constraints of the sector in both countries and entry points for developing capacity for ethical, balanced conflict reporting. The training was a good next step, but this area of work has greater potential and would be most effectively pursued in a separate project.
* Business skills training responded to a clear need for increasing economic opportunities for young people, however as a stand-alone activity its effectiveness was limited and a more comprehensive approach is recommended.
* It would have been useful to systematically collect mediation case studies from participants to enable analysis of impact and a better understanding of further entry points for preventing local conflict in the target areas.
* **Recommendations:**
* Future project plans should ensure that overall project oversight is fully costed for the project duration and appropriate handover procedures in place in case of staff turnover.
* In future, outcome indicators should be designed to reflect the likely achievements of the project alone, with cumulative outcomes noted as contingent on additional projects.
* Gender issues around target group engagement should be addressed at project design stage. For example, in Kyrgyzstan, where girls and women are more easily engaged in mediation training, specific training methodology and activities could be developed to target boys and men.
* Future projects should consider how best to engage with the different roles of men and women at different life stages in the target society in order to better understand, maximise and capture the long term impact of training.
* Engagement of local media should be considered as a method of raising awareness of mediation as an effective tool for conflict resolution at the community level among the broader population in Batken Oblast.
* Communication and dissemination plans should be developed for research outputs produced as part of the project to maximise learning.
* In order to further advance sustainability for mediation practice in Southern Kyrgyzstan, Alert should engage in advocacy at the national level to incorporate mediation training into standard education of social pedagogues, teachers and local aksakal court leaders, and into the secondary school curriculum.
* Destabilising factors associated with migration are increasingly relevant in both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and future programming should consider this as a potential area of focus.

You can find out more about the success of this project in our evaluation report for UCPCA. The report also includes some information on the crackdown on civil society.