

Social Cohesion in Post-Soviet Georgian Society

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Author note:

This paper has been produced with the fellowship grant from the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) at the Eurasia Partnership Foundation. The content of this paper is the sole responsibility of the authors and can be in no way taken as to reflect the views of CRRC or the Foundation.

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Abstract

Recently introduced market economy solutions have significantly questioned the social integration of vulnerable groups in post-soviet society that deprives them from participation in decision making and civil processes. Targeting increased social cohesion has been acknowledged as the useful tool for decreasing socio-economic inequalities and protecting human rights in western society. The author of this article aimed to explore and introduce culturally sensitive definition of the concept of social cohesion, for contributing to creation of equal opportunities for marginalised groups in Georgian society.

Participants of the research were persons with disabilities aged 25-83 years (15 male, 7 female) including Georgians as well as of different ethnic minorities living in the capital of Georgia, Tbilisi.

Research implied qualitative methodology and data analysis, based on grounded Theory principles.

Basic findings of this empirical research included multiple characteristics shaping the concept of social cohesion in post soviet reality of Georgia. Major discovery was the understanding of the social cohesion in relation to micro-groups labelled on the basis of disability or other stigmatising concept. Means of strengthening social cohesion inter and intra individuals were also identified in results of the research.

Keywords: social cohesion, persons with disability, social integration, human rights.

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Points of interest:

- Even though recent studies strongly support social inclusion of persons with disabilities, micro-society of persons with disabilities is tend to be discussed in isolation from global issues; Discourse on social cohesion overrules this segregation.
- This research discloses the process of transformation of old-soviet society into modern one, which appears to be painful, since it has gone and is still in the process of changing value system as well as collective and individual behaviour patterns in the society, which resulted in marginalisation of vulnerable groups.
- In spite of existing difficulties in Georgian society, current research presents narratives of persons who managed to turn personal crises into victory over context and they have become leaders, role-models for not only persons with disabilities, but to others as well.
- This research gives understanding how global problems, e.g. lack of social cohesion, can be tackled by individual action, once elaborated strategies are in place for managing crises. The latter requires to deeply analyse the crises on individual as well as on the community level, which has been tried out in current research.

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Introduction

The context of globalization and driving welfare regime of market economy in Georgia put the interest towards social cohesion ideas on the top agenda. As it was formulated by saint-Arnaud and Bernard (2003): "countries with a liberal regime rely first and foremost on the market economy to meet everyone's needs, and they avoid as much as possible social programme expenditures, which would threaten economic performance... Theoretically the market affords all participants the opportunity to satisfy their needs, even if in practice such regimes "promote market solutions [and] disfavor citizens' entitlements".

Persons with disability represent one of the most vulnerable groups of society in Georgia. Post soviet heritage and recent military conflicts resulted in disadvantageous infrastructure and social welfare system - failing to meet basic needs. More than fifty percent of the country's population lives below the poverty line, but poverty incidence is higher among the households with disabled persons World Bank (WB 2007). As the recent study (WB 2008) reports, even the existing disability benefits are ineffective to target most vulnerable in this context: Two low-income CIS countries, Tajikistan and Georgia... are among the poorest in the region with \$2.15 per day poverty rates of 74 percent and 52 percent respectfully. In these countries, too, a substantial portion of the disability pensions reach the poor, but not the extreme poor.

Though, the social exclusion of this population cannot solely be ascribed to social-economic conditions without paying significant attention to the societal stigma and discriminative values. Broadly Speaking, even sufficient economic mechanisms cannot fully ensure the well-being of these persons, unless social solidarity backs up their dignified work, life and education in rights-based society.

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Exploring the roots of lack of social cohesion in reference to the persons with disabilities in the frame of this research will consider all the above mentioned factors on the background of accumulated academic knowledge in this field.

Joining academic discourse on Social Cohesion,

The debate over the essence of social cohesion accounts for many years however, as some scholars claim (Jeannotte, 2003), there is still not a single mutually acceptable definition of the concept. Consequently the term was labelled as “quasi-concept” or “concept of convenience” that is flexible enough to allow the meanderings and necessities of political action from day to day (Bernard, 2000).

The main problematic issue has been identified as the source of misunderstanding of the concept from the scientific perspective. As Chan et al. (2006) formulate some authors (e.g. Duhaime et al. 2004) are trying to unite "means and ends approach" in the final concept of social cohesion. In other words, they are putting together the pre-conditions (e.g. equality and availability of social contacts) of social cohesion with the final, desired result of this process

This factor puts the concept of social cohesion at risk of losing its original discrete, scientific rigor and power of expression for which it has been accentuated from the times of Emile Durkheim (1965).

To prevent this situation, the present research bases on the grounded definition of social cohesion of Chan et al. (2006) and proposes empirical investigation of this concept. The operationalisation of the concept by these authors merely stands on the primary linguistic connotation of the word “cohesion” – meaning unity, interrelatedness. Subsequently, the scholars identify two interconnected dimensions of social cohesion: (1) trust, help or cooperation from a “state of cohesiveness” and (2) their behavioural manifestation. Within the same framework

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cohesion can be manifested horizontally (person to person, person to community, community to person) as well as - vertically (person to the State, State to the person). It can include subjective experience of trust and unity (sense of belongings, willingness to cooperate) as well as objective behaviour (e.g. voluntarism, social participation in civil initiatives).

As one of the primary goals, this research aims to foster scientifically based approach towards shaping and managing social problems in Georgia. Present study doesn't have the ambition to measure actual level of social cohesion in the society, but to accurately depict society's experience and reflections upon social cohesion. The study will consider issues related to disability integrated within the larger concept of social cohesion that puts each and every member of the society in equal reference.

Related to the applied value of this study, researcher acknowledges dual resistance on both sides of decision-makers and academics: decision makers and politicians find it extremely hard to base their decisions on ideas originating from social science research versus tough economical solutions; since that would require them to treat own decisions with far more caution. However, on the other side are the scientists who are also hesitating to engage in practice-based, research programs with strong applied value. But, in the context of developing country like Georgia, applied value of the research has paramount importance. Consequently, the present study which is the first attempt to scholarly discuss social cohesion concept in relation to Georgian Society, will try to find consensus between the right amount of applicability and scientific ideals in this regard.

Research question

How the social cohesion concept and its underpinning ideas are considered, experienced and reflected by persons with disabilities in Georgia - How they see their interrelation with the community and what is community feedback.

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Methods

The present study is conducted based on the qualitative research tradition. Main principles of grounded theory (Glasser & Strauss 1967) have been applied while constructing study design. Sampling strategy implied purposive sampling which followed the pre-set criteria for getting inclusion of 22 participants aged 24-83 years (15 male, 7 female) including Georgians as well as different ethnic minorities living in the capital of Georgia, Tbilisi with the physical disability status. Prior to conducting the research an approval was received from the National Council on Bioethics of Georgia

Data Collection,

Data-gathering was guided by in-depth interviewing process of the semi-structured character. Interview guide was designed based on the conceptual two-by-two framework following Chan et al. (2006).

Analysis of Data,

Detailed transcripts of all interviews were made. Constant comparative method of data analysis by Glaser and Strauss (1967) was applied for the purpose of analyzing qualitative transcripts. "Constant comparison is a naturalistic data analysis technique in which each datum is compared and contrasted with previous information to fit inductively together into a bigger puzzle" (Depoy & Gitlin, 1998.).

Transcripts were read and re-read continuously, which naturally ended up with the coding of the data. Thematic codes were assigned. So called "open codes" later on have turned into "Axial Coding" which eventually turned into categories and thematic networks. Codes reflect the similarities and differences among themes and continue to test the category system through analysis

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of each datum and category assignment as it is collected. The process was going on until the saturation was reached.

Trustworthiness of the data analysis was reached by the means of peer-debriefing methodology with other researchers.

Results

The data was richly reporting about different aspects of social cohesion in Georgian society. Though, results were markedly grouped in two major categories: positive and negative perception of social cohesion. Participants in the first group reported about positive signs related to social cohesion and society in Georgia. While – second group - intensively focused solo on the lack of social cohesion or its full absence in their experiences and reflections.

Table of findings incorporates following major thematic units:

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Themes	Sub themes
Positive	
1. I have overcome social segregation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -I have trust in society -I love the community which still needs to progress towards social cohesion. - I have managed my problems
2. I represent my community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -A lot of people depend on my work and activism. -people change their mind about ‘disabled persons’ when they meet me.
3. Joint issues and interests make us cohesive, not – the disability status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I work for the benefit of different vulnerable groups (refugees, street children etc.) - I try to communicate and work with as many persons as possible. - I am open to speak about my disability.
Negative	
4. Everyone has forgotten about us	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The state does almost nothing for persons with disabilities. - Non-disabled persons should understand that we need special protection.
5. Lack of social-economic conditions restrict my social activism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Absence of basic living conditions doesn't leave any space for confronting social isolation. - Conformism with discriminative policies as a result self-stigmatizing attitude

Positive signs:

Theme 1: I have overcome social segregation,

There appeared significant group of study participants who estimated social cohesion as credible concept in Georgian society, with the strong self-reflective argument. These interviewees all could be characterised by certain moment in biography – strong personal crises - which they have overcome with the support of society.

Sub-theme 1.1: I have trust in society,

Trust in society appears to be one of the major pre-requisites for self-determination and being active in overcoming difficulties. This type of safe attitude towards society is not perceived as -for granted by participants, contrary - they have developed reciprocal positive relationship through continuous pro-activeness: *“I usually try to be part of the society through getting engaged in all kind of activities. Often there is resistance and the reason could be a fear. People often don’t know how to behave in my presence since they do not know my capacities. They think they should treat me in a special manner (since I am disabled) and they fear to fail in that...” (M.24 years old)*

Thus, the study participants report a great lack of information in the society not concerning disability per se. as it has been usually mentioned but –how to have casual relationships with persons with disabilities.

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Sub-theme 1.2: I love the community which still needs to progress towards social cohesion,

Lack of social cohesion, in the views of these participants cannot be charged on behalf of the community as such. Intentions of many community members can be very positive concerning social cohesion, however, historical and socio-economic pre-requisites have limited chances to transform these intentions in tangible actions. One of the interviewees says: „*The reason (of low social cohesion) is that local society is not free. We were still in closed Soviet Union space, when in Western Europe and America Human Rights movement started in 1960-70ies. Our society has fallen behind*“(M. 24 years old).

Subsequently, study participants, reporting about positive signs of social cohesion were taking certain responsibility to contribute society's development towards higher social cohesion. At the same time, they were more optimistic in evaluating society's potential for development.

Sub-theme 1.3: I have managed my problems,

The same participants acknowledged that they all had gone through very difficult times and it took them energy to return self-control and strength to keep going. Most of them had applied for help to their friends, relatives or even to international organizations. They have been persistent to ask for support and most of them reached self-realization through civic actions: “*My people enabled me to overcome physical pains, though - the spiritual pain was even more severe. I was losing my independence at the age of 30 and it cost me 1 year of total isolation. I was even not stepping the door edge to come out. However, finally I overcame that and the biggest role has played international organization OXFAM who proposed to get involved in Woman Leadership group*” (M. 56 years old).

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Theme 2: I represent my community,

Study participants reporting about positive signs of the social cohesion feel strong sense of belonging to the society, in which they play distinguished – often leader - role. Sense of belonging includes also sense of responsibility to support the development of social cohesion that naturally limits pessimistic vision about its future.

Sub theme 2.1. A lot of people depend on my work and activism,

Participants' sense of belonging didn't refer to only the micro-society of persons with disabilities. On the contrary, they have been discussing the problematic issues referring to general society in Georgia, such as: post-communist transformation problems, rose-revolution, State administration etc. However, focus of their work and concern were those who have become marginalised due to different social-economic problems: refugees, street children etc. Participants have underlined their unique role in enabling socially isolated persons (disability, one of the reasons for that) to overcome marginalised status and get integrated into society. Following one of the participants: *“There was a kid, who had lost both his legs due to bomb explosion. Afterwards he refused all kind of social activities and left the school. We had long discussions with him, organized his meetings with peers, got him involved in different capacity-trainings; gradually his attitude was changed and he even returned to his educational classes and graduated it consequently” (M. 56 years old).*

Sub theme: 2.2. People do change their mind about “disabled persons” when they meet me,

This group of participants identify themselves as agents for change in the society. Ultimately, increased social cohesion is perceived as the result of many people targeting it. One of the

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participants, with visual problem, expressed: *“Everywhere, including at the restaurant, theatres and cinemas, where I attend I act as a proof that people should change their stigmatized attitude towards persons with disabilities” (G 27 years old).*

Theme 3: Joint issues and interests make us cohesive, not – the disability status,

This group of participants identify common interests and occupations as the biggest factor influencing social cohesion in the society. The borders among different micro-societies (e.g. persons with and without disabilities) become ultimately conditional, which means that: *“If we have the purpose of community integration, we should consider mainstreaming Disability Persons organisations which means that we should not distinguish problems connected with disability. Though we have unique experience of disability but I do not agree with the position that only persons with disabilities are legitimate to work in this field and vice-versa”.* (M 56 years old).

Sub-theme 3.1: I work for the benefit of different vulnerable groups,

Participants have been proud to accentuate their nation-wide expertise in working at different (not related to disability issues) fields: e.g. peace-keeping process, empowering internally displaced population, running political campaigns etc.). This kind of work appeared to expand and strengthened their identity as civic actors. One of the participants was feeling very proud with the fact that he took active part in protesting manifestation motivated with political reasons (that was not related with the disability issues): *“I have been on a hunger strike when there was president X in Georgia. I was protesting in the street for 4 days sitting in a wheelchair. Because I am a patriot of my country and wanted to contribute. So what, if I cannot walk, patriotism and humanity do not rest in legs...”* (Z 43 years old)

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Sub-theme 3.2: I try to communicate and work with as many persons as possible.

Participants representing this group do not leave the initiative of communication to random happenings. They think that communication difficulties might be due to simple reasons which should be clarified and reasonably managed. Consequently, they not experience lack of communication. As one of the participant reports: *“personal communication destroys the boarders between persons with and without disability. Sometimes, I witness certain old-fashioned terms used addressing disability and when I protest, my fiends acknowledge that they simply have forgotten that I am also a person with disability. When we engage in true discussion, others see you as a discussing person with certain position which they might agree or disagree with and it has nothing to do with assigning me with any status” (M. 56 years old).*

Sub- theme 3.3: I am open to speak about my disability,

One of the final sub-themes identified by this group of persons, is the condition of neutrality towards their disability status. As one can see from the interviews this condition has been the result of long-term work and self-reflection, but currently it serves as the most de-mystifying factor concerning disability. Several study participants provide awareness-raising trainings on disability in which they act as role-models for the attending persons.

Negative signs

Another group of participants, who focused mainly on negative signs concerning social cohesion, has focused on following thematic issues:

Theme 4: Everyone has forgotten about us,

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This group of participants report about total negligence and ignorance towards the problems of persons with disabilities on behalf of the society. They have strong feeling of isolation, abandonment and powerlessness.

Sub-theme 4.1 State does almost nothing for persons with disabilities,

This group of persons put the most responsibility for the lack of social cohesion on inactiveness of the state administration. They report that none of the effective actions have been taken; ultimately they feel degraded and live in inhuman conditions. They think it is the primary responsibility of the state to ensure the well-being of persons with disabilities in the country. *“State has the responsibility to provide minimum standards giving chance to stay alive to persons with disabilities... Government does nothing to prevent my depression and demoralisation. I have no assistance with mobility and ultimately I have to spend several months closed up in my room” (M. 27 years old).*

Many participants report that their living conditions do not satisfy basic needs: lack of medications, lack of food and housing, lack of medical and rehabilitation facilities, lack of adapted environment, lack of employment etc. some of them report the condition of severe depression and suicidal efforts undertaken: *„I am in so much pain, I ask for drugs. I have a constant pain, thus I cannot meet my friends, since nobody likes ill-face. I have not met my friends for several years, but when society learns that I am 75 years old they expect me to die. I would conduct suicide, because of such intense pain, but I feel sorry for my son, it would be too much stress for him...” (V 75 years old).*

Sub-theme 4.2: Non-disabled persons should understand that we need special protection,

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Participants from this group put discrete line between persons with and without disability. They perceive own position as disadvantageous and consider that the other group should have clear awareness about that. They report about the lack of solidarity and decreased community networks, due to social-economic changes. They express strong concern about society becoming less cohesive. They report of having very limited or non of the trust in their surroundings. They mostly consider non-disabled persons as “society” and think that they are detached from them.

Theme: 5 Lack of social-economic conditions restrict my social activism,

Insufficiency of resources is believed to be the key factor of low social cohesion in Georgian society.

Sub-theme 5.1: absence of basic living conditions doesn't leave any space for confronting social isolation,

As participants report post soviet period has been marked with the worsening of social-economic conditions that ultimately limited citizens' area of concern with gratifying basic needs. Social cohesion appeared to be closely linked with the perception of charity and hands-on assistance in certain cases. Solidarity on more general level seems to be abstract and unrealistic term for certain groups of people. As one of the study participants note: *„I have not asked assistance in making gifts like car, house or traveling abroad. The only thing I have asked is to carry me by hands on the floors (as there is no accessibility) and to help sitting in transport. If it appears problematic for the persons, than I can see no kindness and love in him. There are people who are bored with helping me“ (M. 27 years old).*

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Sub-theme 5.2. Conformism with discriminative policies as a result self-stigmatizing attitude,

Most of the study participants from both groups agree that persons with disabilities show strong conformity and rarely consider their situation as the battle for human rights. Rather, disability issues are solely ascribed to economic reasons. Thus, countries in transition from soviet period to democracy seems to be natural excuse for all the above-mentioned miseries.

Particular attention has been drawn to self-stigmatization, which causes people to not appreciate own capacity for change. One of the explanations for that issue has been provided as over-dependence on state support and so called “consumerism” approach. Both issues, have been marked as negative by participants, however not an easy subject for self-reflection.

As one of the participants explains lack of civic activity on his behalf: *“I want to be more radical in defending the rights of persons with disabilities, but my behavior is not in compliance with my thoughts. I need basic social protection mechanisms in place, to ensure that my protest will not deprive me and my child of daily-bread. I am hopeless...”* (K 45 years old)

Discussion:

Qualitative data generated throughout this study has made it explicit that when it comes to shaping the concept of social cohesion one should not target the micro-group only which has acquired this status due to certain type of vulnerability. As the results show, strong cohesion within the micro-group of persons with disabilities might report about overall lack of social cohesion within broader society. Thus, the expectation and the unit of analysis have been significantly changed throughout the research process. In fact, participants of the study who experienced and discussed social cohesion in reference to broader social issues (not limited to disability issues) were most realised and successful.

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Following the model of Chan et al. (2006) this research has shown two different images of cohesion in the same society: one group or persons who expressed clear signs of social cohesion: Trust, sense of belonging and its manifestation in behaviour and the other group with apparently different subjective feelings and manifestation of the lack of social cohesion. However, this situation was largely expected, since the aim of the present study was not to evaluate the actual level of social cohesion in Georgia but its experience by persons with disabilities. Vertical cohesion – involvement in civic and governmental process appeared to be more problematic than the horizontal – relationships among neighbours, relatives, friends. However, establishment of horizontal social cohesion appeared to be greatly dependent on pro-activeness of individuals.

Perception of social cohesion varied from person to person; civic activism has been identified strongly connected with high level of cohesion of the participants. Important to note that low socio-economic status appeared to be directly connected with the lack of social cohesion, which is in coherence with existing studies on this topic. The author of this study would extend this subject through transforming the issue of social-economic disparities into Human Rights discourse. Disparities which selectively affect more vulnerable groups stem from Human Rights issues and practise of inequality.

One of the unique characteristics of social cohesion in local society was that participants often linked it up with charity that could be connected with the outdated understanding of health and disability model. Overall, only very little group of participants discussed disability in the Human Rights context and largely stayed in medical and illness framework throughout interview process.

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Conclusion:

As Study shows social cohesion is the useful concept for measuring social integration and social activism of vulnerable groups, which means that it could be beneficially integrated in political agenda.

On the other hand, scholarly work is necessary to elaborate unique, culturally sensitive ways for its strengthening on horizontal, as well as vertical level.

Particular focus should be made on shifting disability and illness focused discourse in the area of human rights following the experience of western societies.

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