



# KIDS' CROSSROADS

A Pan-Caucasus Media Project  
Building Cross-Cultural Ties Among Youth

“ Working with my peers from Georgia and Azerbaijan, **I REALIZED** there are no Armenians, no Georgians and no Azeris. **There are simply people WHO DON'T WANT WAR.**”

— ARTAK VARDANYAN, ARMENIAN YOUTH



**Beginning of Kids' Crossroads in 2004. Left to right, Sona Abrahamyan, Seda Grigoryan, Anna Harutyunyan and Armine Hakobyan rehearse for their first studio recording.**

Cover photo:

**Television camp in Batumi, Georgia 2007. Left to right: Mahmud Abdullayev; Mariam Sargsyan, Ani Martirosyan, Fariz Rzayev.**

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## SUMMARY

The Kids' Crossroads pan-Caucasus youth media project is a unique vehicle using journalism to link young people from Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. The heart of the project is a weekly television program reported, filmed, and edited by teenagers from all three countries and broadcast nationally in each country. Providing information selected and produced by their peers, focused on the issues that are important to teenagers, the broadcasts give young people in the region a new view on the challenges of the tense political environment they will inherit from their parents.

Strong ratings and focus group responses demonstrate that the show is opening minds to learning about neighboring countries. The program continues to build an audience on broadcast television, by far the most influential mass medium in the South Caucasus. This position of popularity and trust creates immense potential for the program to expand its impact using both interactive new media technologies and more traditional outreach, such as work to integrate with school curricula or after-school activities.

“ I don't want a war to start, I don't want my friends to join the army and fight. I am for the peaceful settlement of this issue. ... But you can't report only positive things. Watching this program you should understand, that there are both good people and bad people.”

— ARMENIAN YOUTH, 2006

### Fostering Change and Conflict Resolution in the South Caucasus

The three countries of the South Caucasus – Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia – are working to overcome their Soviet legacies, establish democratic governments, find their places in the global economy, and ensure their security in a region torn by conflict. The countries are also defining their religious identities: Armenia and Georgia are Christian; Azerbaijan is Muslim. One of the chief disputes is over Nagorno-Karabakh, an enclave of ethnic Armenians completely surrounded by Azerbaijani territory. In 1994 fighting there was temporarily halted and a ceasefire was announced. While fighting has ceased, the problem has not been solved and several negotiation groups, such as the Minsk group, have not made any serious progress in resolving the conflict. This continuing situation creates an atmosphere of intense hostility between the countries.

Pessimists can certainly point to the long-term nature of the political, economic and social problems of the region, stressing in particular the cultural and religious divides between societies. The challenge now is for a



new generation to see the problems of the South Caucasus differently. Only such changed perceptions will help today's young people overcome the problems passed on by their mothers and fathers.

Changing opinions about deep-seated problems and forging progress toward their resolution requires long-term approaches. The local Internews organizations in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia have been working for more than a decade to promote tolerance and dialogue by increasing the information available to ordinary citizens about the lives

of people in neighboring countries. Since 2003, a major focus of that work has been to look to the future by working with and for young people through the media of television and the Internet. The centerpiece of this effort is Kids' Crossroads, a television show produced by youths (ages 14-18) for an audience of their peers (ages 12-18). Television is by far the most popular source of information for people living in these countries and offers a powerful way to bring together the young people of the region.



“Other programs tell us about show business news. This one tells us about youth.”

— AZERI YOUTH, 2007

## GEORGIA



### Chveni Expressi

(“Our Express”)

Broadcast on Georgian Public Broadcasting on Saturdays at 12:20 pm reaching a potential audience of 3.5 million viewers.  
[www.teentv.ge](http://www.teentv.ge)

**Levan Jobava**, 17, an anchor on Chveni Expressi and now a student at the Journalism Department at the State University of Theatre and Drama: “Working on the program helped me become independent, gain a sense of responsibility, learn about different cultures and achieve a greater sense of tolerance.”

### By Teens, For Teens

Each segment of the program is created by teen journalists, chosen each year for one-year participation in the show, on Internews premises. The kids identify and report stories, shoot videotape, and edit each program.

Kids’ Crossroads was launched in 2003 and is carried nationally in the three countries on public television. Ratings and Internews research from the capital cities show that the program reaches up to 20 percent of its target audience each week. So far the program has trained four cohorts of young TV journalists in each country. In addition to working with youths in the capital cities, the shows reach out to include young people who live outside the capital. Stories have come from such places as Ganja, Azerbaijan and Gori, Batumi and Akhmeta, Georgia.

In each of the three countries, the TV program has its own name, design, and local on-screen hosts. The basic content, however, is the same, since the three production teams agree each week on the stories and other materials from each country that will be used. The materials from the other two countries are translated into the local languages for broadcast.

The young journalists receive extensive training in all the skills necessary to air a professional production. In addition to their hands-on work in their own countries, the journalists from the three countries gather in the summer time to participate in intensive training sessions and to exchange ideas among themselves. The best individual journalists who evolve out of this process are likely to have a real impact on their societies.

### Difficult Media Environment

Journalists in each of these countries are working in difficult conditions. Freedom House ranks the media in Armenia and Azerbaijan as “not free” and in Georgia only “partly free.” Journalists often steer clear of sensitive topics to avoid government crackdowns. In both Armenia and Azerbaijan, the situation surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh is one of the most delicate issues and journalists have been repeatedly intimidated while trying to conduct interviews in the region.

This environment affects the teenaged journalists as well since they must constantly keep in mind the possible reactions of their peers in the other



**Summer television camp, Chakvi, Georgia in 2005. Elene Gvasalia of Georgia interviews talk-show anchor Elina Chilingaryan of Armenia.**

countries. The reactions to even the most non-political stories have led to long discussions with the production team. The appreciation of these different points of view and the need to resolve conflicts to create a unified product is a valuable part of the difficult work the young journalists do.

### Content

Kids' Crossroads covers a wide range of themes, chosen by the teenage producers, seeking to draw the interest of their youthful audience. Some of the more notable segments covered the following topics:

- University students in Armenia work three jobs in addition to their studies in order to cover expenses and contribute to paying tuition costs.
- A seminar for school kids in Armenia explained about AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases and how to prevent them.
- An international theater group created by young actors from Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan is touring the three countries with shows that draw the audience into the performance.
- Students at the Medical University of Yerevan continue to eat fast food even though they know it is bad for them.
- With many students in Ganja, Azerbaijan skipping classes, the police have started sweeps of the streets, Internet cafes, and tea houses. Reporters investigated specific cases to see what the students were doing instead of going to school and how fair the police raids were.
- Two teenagers in Azerbaijan run a business collecting discarded bottles and selling them to a bottling factory.
- Teenagers in rural Azerbaijan face chores that urban kids never think about. The story shows the hard work that goes into making various types of food.
- Georgian journalists investigated school repairs, finding that some schools are fully refurbished, while others remain untouched. They examined how the students' surroundings affect the level of their education.
- Journalists in Georgia interviewed young people on what the appropriate age for marriage is.
- A nine-year-old Mongolian girl in Georgia helps her family by begging for food.
- Georgian journalists listed creative ways of spending free time when there are few resources available.

Other programs discussed mobile phones, student loans, coping with divorced parents, children in orphanages, the 2004 terrorist massacre of students in Beslan, various news about teens in Russia, musical trends, break dancing, what is taught in schools, young criminals, shopping, travel, leisure, and a wide variety of exceptional young people, including talented musicians and artists.



“ They should discuss the Karabakh problem. Young people should know about it.”

—ARMENIAN YOUTH, 2006

## ARMENIA



### Menk Enk (“We Are”)

Broadcast on Armenian State TV on Saturday at 4 pm with a potential audience of 3.5 million viewers in Armenia and reaching Armenians across Europe via satellite.

<http://home.internews.am/kids-cross/index-e.asp>

**Elina Chilingaryan**, a former Menk Enk anchor and now a student in the Journalism Department of the Russian-Armenian State University: “My dream is for all the young journalists who worked on the show to found our own TV company: we have already outlined its ideology and programs.”

**Artak Vardanyan**, also a former Menk Enk anchor and now a first-year student at the Journalism Department of Yerevan State Pedagogical University: “Working with my peers from Georgia and Azerbaijan, I realized there are no Armenians, no Georgians and no Azeris. There are simply people who don’t want war.”

### The Audience: Sizeable and Engaged

Kids’ Crossroads has been successful in reaching its target audience of young people. Research shows that nearly half the 12-18 year olds in each country have watched the show and are aware of it:

Armenia – 46.4%

Azerbaijan – 40.2%

Georgia – 42%.

In Armenia, the show attracted an average 16.5 percent share of the audience for its time slot during January-March 2007, according to AGB-Nielsen Armenia. This share is very high, considering that the program is aimed at teenagers. The most popular information program in the country scores 27 percent.

### Evaluations of the Show

Kids’ Crossroads is “unbiased,” “comprehensive,” “from the source,” “trustworthy,” “lively,” and “unique,” according to focus group respondents in each of the countries conducted in June 2006. Participants stressed that there is a lack of quality TV programming for teenagers, making Kids’ Crossroads the only attractive broadcast about the lives of teenagers

not only in the South Caucasus region, but in their own countries as well.

Viewers in all three countries emphasized that the regular reports from other countries of the South Caucasus are key to the uniqueness of the program. All participants stressed that there is no other source of such information in local media. Most respondents in Armenia and Azerbaijan were reserved, at best, toward the other country, while enthusiastic about information from Georgia.

Nevertheless, despite their suspicions, many expressed satisfaction that Kids’ Crossroads allowed them to learn about developments in the opponent’s country. One Azerbaijani youth noted that “It is possible that some of the information we receive in this program can be found on the Internet, but not everyone has the opportunity to go on the Internet, and showing this program on TV gives everyone a chance to see it.”

The show also helps to spread ideas across borders, allowing people in one country to borrow the best practices of their neighbors. “It was interesting for me to see the charity concert held to benefit the orphanages. I would like



**Kids' Crossroads participants learn camerawork as well as reporting skills.**

to see similar acts of charity in our country," another Azerbaijani youth noted.

The shows are having a beneficial impact on their local television markets. The respondents praised the high quality of the show's production values, pointing out that they could be used as a benchmark of TV production for local television stations.

### Program Impact: Promoting Conflict Resolution

While the show does not address the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan head on, it has had an impact on the way that young people think about the issue. Viewers said that the show has influenced their perceptions on both the conflict and the parties to it. "The antagonism is not over, but having watched the show, I now find myself being interested in Azerbaijan. I was surprised to learn that women do not wear head scarves there," a 17-year-old Armenian in Yerevan said. An Azeri youth said, "The program changed my view of these countries [Georgia and Armenia] for the better."

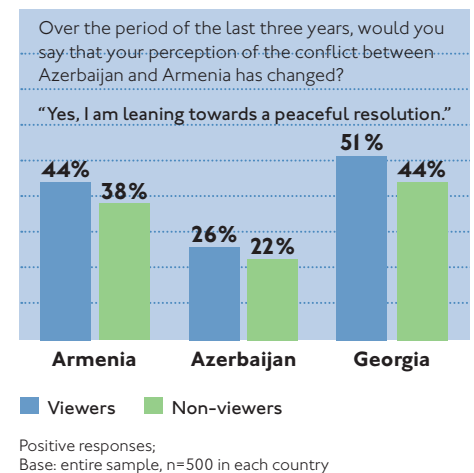
A 2006 survey of 500 young people in each of Armenia, Azerbaijan,

and Georgia showed that many had changed their minds in the past three years and are now leaning toward a peaceful resolution of the conflict (see Figure 1). Support for a peaceful outcome is stronger among young people who have watched Kids' Crossroads than it is among those who have not seen the show. These data suggest that the show is either helping to change the minds of the people who watch the program or is attracting the attention of those who are interested in a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Most likely, it is doing a little bit of both, helping to create support for a peaceful resolution of the conflict among young people and giving that group information to support their position and a feeling of connection to others who share their views.

The survey data also show that there is plenty of work left to do. Support for a peaceful solution is much stronger in Armenia than it is in Azerbaijan (See Figure 2). The current media and political environment in Azerbaijan is far more antagonistic to the idea of a peaceful resolution of the dispute. The impact of a single program is small but all the more important.

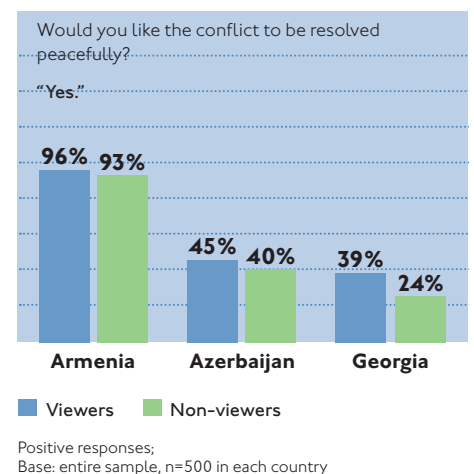
**Figure 1**

**Kids' Crossroads viewers changed their minds about the conflict**



**Figure 2**

**Kids' Crossroads viewers prefer a peaceful resolution**





“Would you recommend this show to a friend?” “Yes, because this show is thoughtful. It is possible to get information about Georgian and Armenian youth from it.”

— AZERI YOUTH, 2007

## AZERBAIJAN



### Keçid dövrü

(“Transitional Time”)

Broadcast on ITV Public Television

Company Mondays at 4:30 pm

teentv.narod.ru

**Vugar Safarov**, 19, currently the supervisor of the Kids’ Crossroads project: “This work shaped my character, opened my mind, and liberalized me. I have learned that taking the initiative is effective and this insight helps me in my studies and personal life.”

### The View from Azerbaijan

Focus groups conducted in Azerbaijan during the summer of 2007 revealed that the conflict with Armenia has had an impact on Azeri youngsters, and many do not want to hear about what is happening in Armenia. They stress that it is important that teenagers outside Azerbaijan know their belief that one fifth of their country’s lands are occupied by the Armenians. Despite this general situation, several individuals did express interest. Based on what they saw in the shows, the Azerbaijanis were particularly impressed with the Georgian youth and concluded that they were more active than either the Azeri or Armenian youth.

Given this difficult environment, one thing that the show can do is channel the anger about Nagorno-Karabakh into more fruitful directions of competition. For example, one Azeri youth participating in a focus group discussion said: “I think that it makes sense to show the Armenian and Georgian materials here [in Azerbaijan], so that we can learn something useful from them, and in Armenia to show the achievements of our youth.”

### The View from Armenia

In Armenia, surveys of youth in 2006 showed that regular viewers of the Armenian Kids’ Crossroads have better attitudes towards Georgians and Azeris than the rest of the respondents: 32.9 percent of the regular viewers are favorably inclined towards Georgians (as opposed to 23.1 percent of the rest of the respondents) and 8.3 percent have positive attitudes towards the Azeris (as opposed to only 2.2 percent of the other young people). The data cannot determine whether the broadcast contributed to the improved attitudes or more favorable attitudes made the children interested in the show.

Armenian viewers enjoyed learning about the life of teenagers in Georgia and Azerbaijan. In fact, some said the segments prepared in those countries were more successful than the segments produced by the Armenian contributors because they focused on the everyday life of teenagers and concentrated on the present, while the Armenian-produced segments frequently emphasized the past. The kids were particularly gratified that the broadcast did not focus on political problems.

In the focus group discussions, some





**Television camp in Batumi, Georgia in 2007. Fuad Zergeryly of Azerbaijan, seated left, and Ketii Gvaramashvili of Georgia, right, lead a live broadcast.**

of the Armenian viewers argued they would never be able to overcome their hostility to the Azerbaijanis. However, others pointed out “It is not that we have to eliminate the hostility. But we can still communicate with each other.” Still others found the program useful as a way to get to know the “enemy.” As one participant explained, “My hostility will not disappear by watching the program. I am just interested in their lifestyle, in their everyday life, also in what is wrong and what is right for them. You must know your enemy well. This program is strategic in a way.”

Some of the older Armenian teenagers thought that the show should deal more head-on with the political realities of the situation in the South Caucasus. “If I knew nothing about politics, watching this program I would think that everything is all right in Georgia and Azerbaijan. But this is not the reality. I did not like this. We shouldn’t think that everything is all right when in fact there is hostility between us,” one Armenian teenager said. Older viewers said they learned that there are “open-minded and modern” youth in Georgia and Azerbaijan. Most of the participants in the focus group discussions said that seeing the

programs increased their interest in the other two countries.

One Armenian adult reviewer pointed out that, although the programs are interesting and important, they will have a difficult time changing the current situation, given the amount of propaganda in each country.

According to one expert, “When you watch the program, it seems that it works, but as I read the Azeri press and I’m well acquainted with our school books and their school books too, I would say that Kids’ Crossroads is too small to make a difference.” Nonetheless, the adult focus groups agreed the show is clearly making a valuable contribution.

### **The View from Georgia**

Young Georgians who watch Kids’ Crossroads are more likely to have favorable attitudes toward their neighbors than those who do not. Among the program’s regular viewers, 36 percent are positively inclined toward Armenia, compared to only 22 percent of non-viewers. Likewise, 37 percent of viewers are positively inclined toward Azerbaijan, versus 26 percent of non-viewers. Nevertheless, interest among Georgian teenagers in the conflict between Armenia

and Azerbaijan is relatively low, with only about 20 percent expressing concern about the conflict in 2007. In fact, more than half have never even heard of the conflict. Of those who have heard about the conflict, 90 percent consider a peaceful resolution possible.

The Georgian young people expressed tolerant attitudes toward other ethnic groups. Perhaps because there is less media freedom in Azerbaijan and Armenia than in Georgia, the Georgians considered the segments from those countries dull and less relevant than the Georgian ones. The Georgians noted that the other country segments were less independent and incisive than the local product. In most cases, the reports made a neutral or negative impression on the Georgian teenagers. They claimed that previously they thought much more highly of the development level of their neighboring countries. “I had a much higher opinion of these countries. I was surprised that the teenagers are so constrained.” They complained that the segments did not give a good picture of life in the other countries. But they did express an interest in knowing more about their musical tastes and culture.



I have no idea about developments in other countries, what kind of culture they have. Thus reports on those countries are more interesting.”

— GEORGIAN YOUTH, 2007

In this sense, the show creates a kind of competition between the countries, as viewers in one country compare the different presentations from each of the countries. The Georgians seem to come off the best, with Georgians themselves liking the way that they were presented and winning praise from viewers in the other two countries. The Armenians felt that the Georgians had done a good job of spreading the message that they were more “Europe-oriented and humanistic.” The Armenian viewers criticized their own country’s segments for not succeeding in getting across a similar message. The Azerbaijani viewers were also complimentary toward the Georgian producers.

Such feelings are natural as the representatives of the different countries look at themselves and their neighbors and start making comparisons among themselves. Such comparisons provide the basis for further interaction and hopefully provoke healthy competition. In particular, seeing what the Georgians have accomplished may inspire the Armenians and Azerbaijanis to push for better portrayals of their own society, a demand that

could help improve the local media environments.

### Expanding Interactivity

Feedback from early viewers of the show stressed the need to increase the level of interactivity by allowing the audience to more actively participate in the show. To stimulate audience involvement, the Armenian and Georgian shows announced competitions for story ideas on the air, with one winner selected each month and invited to help produce the show.

The Georgian broadcast has already produced several segments based on viewer suggestions received via the Internet. Georgian fans can interact with the show’s creators through an on-line forum at: <http://teentv.ge/forum>. The site encourages a wide-ranging dialogue between the show’s producers and the audience, allowing the conversation to spill over into topics that were not part of the broadcast.

Members of the focus groups suggested taking these ideas even farther and stressed the need for a new format that would allow for interaction between the show’s presenters and the audience on the air. The participants suggested live

call-ins to the studio during the broadcast. They also called for more of a talk show format that would allow for a greater exchange of opinions and the expression of different points of view. Both Armenian and Azerbaijani young people suggested inviting guests from the other country to discuss issues on the show.

### Improving Outreach

Both Armenian and Georgian viewers thought that it would be interesting for the production team to examine a common theme in each of the three countries. Currently, each of the segments is produced independently and there is no connection between them. Having segments from the three countries on a similar topic would greatly increase Georgian youths’ interest in the affairs of other countries because it would provide a hook to bring the topic back to their own situation and give them a basis for comparison. “Yes, it would be really very interesting. For example, Armenian and Azerbaijani teenagers’ attitudes toward wearing knives would be interesting to observe,” one Georgian youth said.

Another idea suggested by a Georgian youth was to send the teenage journalists from one country to

“Support for a peaceful outcome is stronger among young people who have watched Kids’ Crossroads than it is among those who have not seen the show.”



**Television camp in Chakvi, Georgia in 2006. Valeh Nabiyeu (right) practices his interviewing technique with Zaur Osmanli (left).**

another. For example, the program could send Georgian journalists to Armenia to report on things there and vice-versa. This approach could prove interesting because an outsider would notice things that would not necessarily be interesting to a local. If the security and political situation allows, cross-border reporting

**“I have not seen Tbilisi and I thought it [Georgia] was a retrograde country, but as I saw they are economically developed.”**

— ARMENIAN YOUTH, 2006

between Armenia and Azerbaijan has enormous potential. “I would like our moderators to go there and shoot material and their reporters to come here and shoot shows here, so each of them doesn’t present only their best sides,” an Armenian youth said.

Much of the feedback naturally focuses on additional topics that could be covered in future shows. In particular, viewers would like to see in-depth coverage of Islam and its traditions, historical profiles of the three capitals and their inhabitants, relationships between kids and parents and kids and teachers in

European countries, as well as more music and entertainment related stories.

### **Building New Audiences**

The journalists have sought to expand beyond the medium of television to reach new audiences and build greater interest in their project. The Georgian team, for example, held a charity auction in May 2006 in order to raise funds for a local orphanage. In November the team worked to earn money for another children’s home with an intensive music program that badly needed support to repair its xylophone and purchase a television. Ultimately, the orphans expressed their gratitude by putting on a concert for the journalists.

The young journalists are now exploring a number of ways that they can reach out to currently underserved parts of the youth population. These include:

- tours to schools to lead discussions on a host of timely topics;
- speaking events to teach media literacy and discuss the media climate generally;
- teen-led workshops during school vacations to create new materials for the show;

- increased interactivity by creating a Russian or English language web site, offering translation, where young people from all three countries can make comments and read the opinions of others.

### **Funding Opportunities**

Initially, Kids’ Crossroads received generous funding from the US Agency for International Development and UNICEF, making it possible to launch the program and establish it on a solid foundation. Subsequently, the UK’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office provided funding to continue the shows. With this support, Kids’ Crossroads has developed a recognized and appreciated brand in the three Caucasus countries and the participants are working to expand it beyond television through the Internet, in-person work in schools, and ties to other projects as a way of giving it a more stable financial base.

However, current support will run out in March 2009 and existing funds are not enough to keep the programs alive. Internews is currently seeking additional funding for the program from a wide variety of sources in the region and outside of it.

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