

The role of the European institutions in the development of Nagorno Karabakh



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Cinderella in the Ball

The involvement of the European institutions in the process of the regulation of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict can be defined in two formats: multilateral and bilateral initiatives. The major multilateral players are the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the European Union and the various agencies of the Council of Europe. At the official level the involvement of the European institutions implies the work of the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs with the representatives of the Nagorno Karabakh Republic (NKR) authorities and the documents ratified on the conflict of the Nagorno Karabakh and its resolution. Several projects have been implemented in NK with the involvement of civil society institutions. The further expansion of the role of the European Union in the region, particularly in the process of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict resolution is indisputable. Incidentally, if the European Union is rather 'slow' in political terms, i.e. the 27 members do not necessarily reach an easy agreement, the third party, the implementer, is often the one to suggest political solutions to the programs being implemented with the EU financial support.

Within the bilateral format the projects implemented with the participation of the British civil society organizations are the ones that stand out. Still, according to some experts, the voice of the NKR government and people cannot yet catch 'Europe's ears', the negative implications of which are rather obvious. Is there any need to enlarge the participation of the NKR government and society in the international, specifically European, initiatives? The answer is unequivocal: yes. The alternative to this position is the isolation and marginalization of the NKR government and society, confused in the quest for 'its own direction', which Europe actually cannot understand.

A glance from Brussels

The legitimate question then is how do the European institutions understand their own role in Nagorno Karabakh and what is our perception of this very role? Conceptually, the support of the European institutions which targets the establishment of the democratic principles in the whole region, including the unrecognized states, should be considered significant. The fact that the Nagorno Karabakh Republic is an unrecognized state should not impede the provision of international support to the development of democracy and a civil society in Nagorno Karabakh Republic. On the contrary, the further democratization of the NKR, the strengthening of the civil society and the integration with the whole region will undoubtedly contribute to the process of effective resolution of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. The various European initiatives of democratization should not bypass the NKR. Moreover, it should be accepted that any regional project neglecting Nagorno Karabakh is actually damaging the prospect of peaceful resolution of the conflict.

A glance from Yerevan

In terms of national interests, it is indisputable that the level of democracy in Nagorno Karabakh should develop progressively. In the value system of the European civilization such a development justifies the priority of the right to self-determination of the people of NKR over the principle of territorial integrity. However, political pluralism in the Nagorno Karabakh Republic is still underdeveloped and the insufficient capacities of the local media and civil society organizations naturally restrict the possibilities of exercising the society's right to freedom of expression. Such a situation is conditioned with the unacceptably low level of development of the civil society institutions in Nagorno Karabakh, as well as with undue comparison against the level of development democracy and civil society in Azerbaijan. It seems that the authorities are satisfied with the fact of being just a step ahead Azerbaijan in this dimension.

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A glance from Stepanakert

Indeed, our perceptions of the role of European institutions may not necessarily coincide with the ones these institutions per se have. For instance, according to some experts, several projects within the process of the conflict resolution are being implemented based on the inadequate 'community' approach. Where does such an approach come from? Does this demonstrate an unserious attitude of the reputed institutions? Is this a pre-meditated 'pro-Azerbaijani' bias behind which one can see the oil interests? Perhaps, no! This may sound rather counterintuitive, but actually we are the ones to be blamed for such a situation. Or to clarify, it is the lack of policy of the Armenian government for the last decade that is to be blamed. First, in the result of unenterprising behavior of Yerevan, the government and society of the Nagorno Karabakh Republic have significantly been left out of the whole process and today have appeared in the margin. Second, manipulating with the line of argument such as "The borders of pluralism define the priority of the national security" and neglecting the issue of "who defines this priority and how" have resulted in political marginalization of the civil society institutions in the Nagorno Karabakh Republic. Third, in the result of weak cooperation between the NKR government and civil society institutions, any initiatives of the latter to cooperate with international organizations are being perceived with considerable bias, often being labeled as 'destructive-hostile' and sometimes drawn by the logic of 'witch hunt'. Eventually, we start wondering why our voices are not heard in the NKR civil society developmental initiatives. Is the current situation conducive for the involvement and participation of the Nagorno Karabakh Republic in European initiatives? Obviously, the answer is negative. Is it necessary to improve the relations, change approaches and the practices? The answer is unequivocal: yes. Who is responsible for such changes? The state and civil society institutions in the Republic of Armenia.

The fiery key

This deadlock should be broken. Certainly, any initiative of support to the development of the civil society is a double-edged iron bar. Still, it should not be abandoned on the road, as the key to the lock of the independence of the state of Nagorno Karabakh and the international recognition of the right to self-determination of the people of NKR can be forged only from this iron bar. Were we unable to lift it up from the road, the others would. If we, the Armenian state and civil society institutions fail to develop a civil society in Nagorno Karabakh, the third countries and institutions will do so. If we fail to engage in our own issues, the other will instead. It is necessary to assist the civil society institutions in the NKR: on one hand, the communication and cooperation between these institutions and the NKR government need to be strengthened, and on the other, the integration of the civil society institutions in the NKR and Armenia should be enhanced.

The de-blockading time

There is no need to reinvent the wheel. It is perhaps enough to consolidate the numerous lessons learnt from the implementation of numerous programs aimed at enhancing civil society in Armenia, failures and achievements of the last decade and a half and launch own initiatives in NKR. Indeed, the turn to help is ours. It is necessary to allocate a line in the state budget of the Republic of Armenia for the development of the NKR civil society institutions, including the development of the media, cooperation among local civil society organizations in Armenia and NKR and the creation of an e-society. The Armenia Fund's Telethon 2010 should prioritize the development of the civil society in the NKR. The Diaspora organizations should be encouraged to actively participate in the realization of this mission. Moreover, these organizations should participate in the tenders for projects supported by the European Union. It is necessary to promote evaluation studies in the NKR, carried out by famous international organizations (for instance, the implementation of the World Bank governance indicators project). Even if such studies are often politicized, their implementation in Nagorno Karabakh Republic can already be considered an achievement. Eventually, Europe seems to be ready to 'de-blockade' the people of Nagorno Karabakh and open the borders of the civil society. It is time for us to have our say.

The paper is elaborated based on the opinions passed by the participants of the discussion "NK Issue and the role of Europe", which took place on November 25, 2009. The roundtable discussion was attended by independent analysts, government officials, and representatives of the international organizations.