

Participation of the NKR civil society in regional initiatives



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Known paths of European integration: the island of non-integration

In the South Caucasus the roadmap for the process of European integration is defined by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership. While civil society institutions in Armenia and Azerbaijan are fully involved in all the formats through which European integration is carried out, the Republic of Nagorno Karabakh (NKR) has been left out of almost all them, and this seriously impedes the resolution of the conflict. The NKR has been alienated from the negotiation process within the framework of official diplomacy, and in addition, unfortunately we are currently witnessing the gradual alienation of the NKR civil society from the cooperation initiatives in the region in the context of Track-Two diplomacy.

Requirement of the Azerbaijani government: bilateral or nothing

Azerbaijani authorities boycott almost all international projects that involve the participation of Armenia. Moreover, violating the fundamental principles of democracy and interfering with the process of Track-Two diplomacy in a rather rude manner, the Azerbaijani government forces their own format of regional cooperation to both the civil society in their country and the donor institutions. The pressure from the government of the neighbouring state is particularly directed towards maintaining civil society initiatives within the "Armenia-Azerbaijan" bilateral format, thus excluding the participation of the NKR people in this process. In cases where the involvement of the NKR civil society in one or another initiative is inevitable, Azerbaijani authorities impose on donors the four-lateral format, stressing the participation of the so-called 'Azerbaijani community' of the NKR. Syndromes of such a state of affairs are already obvious.

The game of the other and our players

Though the Armenian civil society is more and more aware of the danger of the above-mentioned a format, due to either ignorance or indifference, many institutions still keep on participating in bi- and four-lateral cooperation projects, following inertia. However, an effective resource necessary for the development of civil society in the NKR is international cooperation and participation in regional initiatives. It is necessary that the NKR civil society be involved in the process of European integration within all possible formats, whether bilateral, or multi-lateral, such the initiatives of Eastern Partnership, and it is crucial that it does so as an independent party. At the same time the artificial involvement of the so-called 'Azerbaijani community of the NKR' and the improper politicization of projects involving the civil society and respectively, their manipulation, should be banned, since the strategic orientation underlying such initiatives threaten the national security of the Republic of Armenia and the NKR, shattering a number of fundamental principles of the conflict resolution process.

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Excluding interference

Regardless of how the Azerbaijani government interferes with the activities of the civil society, such interference in Armenia and the NKR would eventually jeopardize democratic governance and development of civil society institutions, and consequently, would result in an unacceptable phenomenon of state control over these institutions. Therefore, neither the government of Armenia nor of the NKR should go on interfering with the cooperation initiatives which involve civil society participation and are carried out with the support of international development partners. However, in this case it seems that we end up in a situation where the Azerbaijani government indirectly interferes with the activities of civil societies both in Armenia and the NKR; when all civil society institutions are reluctant to refute the temptation of unfavourable bilateral formats of cooperation and in particular, when such initiatives imply acquiring vitally necessary resources for these civil society institutions. On the other hand, excluding interference does not infer exclusion of cooperation. Eventually, those think tanks which are denied the cooperation of their governments are compelled to cooperate exclusively with the governments of other countries. Obviously, the latter have their own agendas and restrictions, sometimes pre-determined by the government of Azerbaijan.

Active policy of mutual complementarity

In order to react to the non-democratic interference of Azerbaijan, the state policies regarding the development of civil society, European integration, conflict resolution and regional integration should consider one important element: the Armenian government should respond to any regional initiative in a bilateral format proposed by international development partners by urging them to involve the civil society institutions in the NKR by all means. More specifically, resources necessary to financially support the participation of the NKR civil society institutions should be provided from the state budget of the Republic of Armenia, in alignment with the existing mechanisms, since the state budget is the primary and most reliable instrument of the state policy implementation. No development partner can refuse such a proposal of matching and mutual complementarity. Meanwhile, both RA and NKR civil society institutions should refuse participation in any four-lateral initiatives. The state agencies should expand and intensify cooperation with domestic think tanks in order to implement more balanced and less coercive policies in this regard.

The paper is elaborated based on the opinions passed by the participants of the discussion "The impact of conflicts on European Integration in the Region", which took place on April 23, 2010. The roundtable discussion was attended by independent analysts, government officials, and representatives of the international organizations.

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