

European initiatives in the regulation of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict



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Laying asphalt concrete in the pouring rain

The attitudes of Armenian, Azerbaijani and Karabakhi societies towards the regulation of the Nagorno Karabakh (NK) conflict toughen with every year. The positions of the governments are even more divergent. The recent official rhetoric of Azerbaijan and the regular and intensifying violations of the ceasefire come to prove that the governments downplay their interest in negotiations in favor of non-negotiation strategies: intensifying the arms race, pressuring each other using a third power and a number of other influences.

It seems that the initiatives to support the regulation of the conflict should take into account such developments and use the most effective of influence mechanisms. However, the reality is different. Most initiatives in essence continue the same approach adopted decades ago. European initiatives are not an exception. It is but natural that the regulation intermediaries should have their own interests, which do not change as fast as the needs of conflict regulation. Moreover, there are times when the resolution of the conflict is not in the interests of the intermediaries.

We believe that the initiatives targeting conflict regulation should seriously consider the reality and the process of conflict transformations. It is crucial to realize that different stages of the regulation process require specifically targeted influences: trust building, conflict management and peacebuilding. For instance, in the current phase of the NK conflict regulation the top priority is to ensure the elimination of any possibility of using a military force. However, surprisingly, civil society institutions in general do not expound this issue.

The initiatives often ignore the phase of conflict regulation and start with the peacebuilding phase instead. However, the latter often fails, because the necessary conditions are not ripe yet. Whereas, peacebuilding initiatives are effective when there is both a possibility and necessity to build on achievements. Such an approach can be compared with laying asphalt concrete during a pouring rain.

Unfortunately, the failures of the initiatives supporting the NK conflict regulation are not duly recorded, and in the result, no lessons are learnt, which first, would have allowed raising the effectiveness of future initiatives, and second, would save resources and efforts from being wasted. Meanwhile, turning a blind eye to the inadequacy between the necessary influence and the existing initiatives does not mean that the problem will disappear; it will simply degenerate further.

Waltzing standing on the feet of the partner

How do the civil societies of the region respond to this situation? They act according to the logic and rules which in one case are strictly defined by their own governments, and in other cases are recommended by intermediaries, and by few organizations which mostly originate from the same European country, and which have adopted almost an identical approach: only five European, mostly British organizations implement projects in Nagorno Karabakh, whereas, for instance, in Kosovo there are hundreds of international organizations involved in conflict transformation and peacebuilding activities.

Azerbaijani civil society institutions reject the initiatives which the government finds unacceptable, thus compelling its society to function in a certain prescriptive manner. In Armenia the concept of pluralism has taken certain tangible shapes and the spectrum of the civil society is incomparably wide. This indeed is a positive tendency in a long run. However, from the short-term perspective it seems to be problematic: the total sum of the idiosyncratic and at times divergent efforts of the society often does not seem to be sufficient for addressing the current issues. According to some

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assessments, pluralism in Nagorno Karabakh is rather limited as compared to Armenia, though it is more widely practiced than in Azerbaijan.

The Azerbaijani government has chained the hands of its civil society. For instance, the so-called “Charter of Four” signed in 2001 by the political and non-governmental organizations, media, intelligentsia and religious activists under the auspices of the President of Azerbaijan, excludes any possibility of pluralism from the start, and smothers in cradle any dialogue attempting to find ways for the regulation of the conflict. It seems however that this is an issue about which the civil society should have had considerably higher freedom. This eliminates almost any advantage of involving the civil society in the regulation process.

Thus, it is not surprising that the Azerbaijani civil society organizations which are involved in European initiatives in most cases are not the ones that influence the formation of the public opinion, in contrast to their Armenian partners, who have significant impact on the development of the public opinion. For the Armenian organizations it is quite a challenge to find serious and influential partners in the neighboring country, a partner to whom the Azerbaijani society listens. It is pertinent that the Armenian organizations find influential partners in Azerbaijan.

The Armenian partners should adopt a principled position on the initiatives or certain components of those initiatives that are explicitly non-beneficial for the Armenian side. Only then will the European project implementers start seeking solutions that will satisfy both societies, and they need to do so by changing the current approach of compromising at the expense of the tolerance of the one side, which eventually will jeopardize the reputation of the initiatives, their implementers and finally the European institutions both in Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh, and consequently in the whole region. Such an approach will compel all the partners to deliberate, discuss, search and find issues and solutions which satisfy real common interests.

The European Parliament Resolution as an unprecedented opportunity

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The European Parliament Resolution on the Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy - Eastern Dimension as of April 7, 2011 can perhaps turn into a significant impetus for the required transformation. The resolution urges the European institutions “to step up their involvement in finding a solution to the protracted conflicts in Transnistria and the South Caucasus based on the principles of international law – in particular non-use of force, self-determination and territorial integrity.”¹ The resolution essentially emphasizes the necessity of involvement of the European institutions in the development of realistic and innovative initiatives in trust building, granting the NK civil society an opportunity to engage more actively and functionally. The European Parliament has indeed acknowledged the need to raise the effectiveness level of the initiatives and recommend adequate directions. We are certain that the Azerbaijani partners will draw relevant conclusions from this resolution: the time of “Charters of Four” which contradict the European values is gone.

The paper is elaborated based on the opinions passed by the participants of the discussion “The role of European initiatives in the regulation of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict: on the way to peacebuilding” which took place on May 17, 2011. The roundtable discussion was attended by independent analysts, government officials, and representatives of the international organizations.

The round table was organized within the framework of a BSPN project.

¹ The European Parliament Resolution on the Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy - Eastern Dimension available online at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P7-TA-2011-0153+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=EN>, retrieved on June 14, 2011