



NAGORNO-KARABAKH: THE CONFLICT, THE STATE, AND THE REANIMATION OF DIALOGUE

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Since last-year's exceptionally intensive escalation of the conflict at the border between the non-recognized state of Nagorno-Karabakh (the NKR) and Azerbaijan in April 2016 – which is also largely referred to in media as a '4-day war' – the Armenian and Azerbaijani sides have held a series of meetings at various levels, including with the involvement of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE Minsk Group), Ministries of Foreign Affairs, as well as in trilateral and multilateral settings.

Regardless of the very fact that the meetings have been conducted and the sides met each other several times, which in some way may be considered as a positive phenomenon per se, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the prospects of its solution at the current stage are almost doomed to failure even in a mid-term perspective, if the given format and agenda of the peace talks remain the same. This affirmation is based on 3 fundamental points.

1. The nature of the on-going meetings is formal and declarative. The current meetings do not reflect the real state of affairs at the NKR-Azerbaijani and Armenian-Azerbaijani borders, where the ceasefire is under permanent violation. The conflict parties do not even send each other any positive signals at an informal level, not to mention

their de facto unavailability to solve the issue peacefully. This is largely thanks to the Azerbaijani side, which has very often torpedoed the negotiated decisions while accusing the mediators of inaction. Indeed, there has been evidence suggesting that Azerbaijan's officials, including the President and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, have been consistently expressing their partial or complete dissatisfaction with the proposed roadmaps for the solution of the problem (such as: the Kazan documents, Minsk documents, Madrid principles, 'Lavrov's Plan' and so forth).

2. The absence of a representative of the self-declared Nagorno-Karabakh Republic at the negotiation table and Azerbaijan's unwillingness to engage in direct dialogue with the NKR severely constrain the ability of the parties to proceed in the peace talks. In 1994, the ceasefire was signed in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan. There, the signatories included a representative of the NKR, Karen Baburian, chairman of the NKR parliament. Since then, the Azerbaijani side has actively promoted an approach of complete exclusion of the Karabakh representative from formal negotiations, arguing that the conflict is between the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan, completely neglecting the NKR.

Considering the fact that the NKR has a 20+-year history of de facto independence, the very possibility of

establishing at least a basic platform for mutual understanding and reconciliation depends on the readiness of all sides to accept each other. Furthermore, the exacerbated military rhetoric from all three states prompts them to treat any mutual assurance of peace in the region with scepticism. This happens because the government and, especially, the people living in the NKR will never agree to transfer any territories around the NKR to Azerbaijan. They have taken this hard-line position because the territories in question are considered a ‘safety belt’, protecting the current population in the conflict zone from the threat of more violent and bloody escalations. This simple but crucial fact is often left behind during the negotiation processes. Additionally, local Armenians, people who live both in the Republic of Armenia and in the NKR, express their concerns and scepticism of any possibility of redefining and debating the status of the Karabakh Republic. Unfortunately, the bitter experience of the harsh hostilities that occurred in April 2016 does not prevent the conflict parties from continuous militarization, which gradually brings the whole region to the verge of detrimental consequences.

3. The third point is the absence of any direct regional contacts between Armenians and Azerbaijanis on the civil society level. This is a fundamentally important point, which is for some reason disregarded by mediators and by those who research the conflict. The sides can talk about the conflict, they can try to solve the problems with surrounding territories, or try to find an agreement on the status, but as long as the people who inhabit these South Caucasian states are out of the reconciliation process and totally deprived of contact to one another due to the deepening hostility, the negotiation process is not only de facto suspended but, more importantly, it does not reflect the state of affairs. As the evidence suggests, both Armenians and Azerbaijanis can find common ground and are willing to talk to each other when living abroad, even in neighbouring Georgia. However when in their own countries, they become very sensitive to everything that could undermine their personal position on the conflict. In most cases, the latter is consonant with the approach of their respective national governments. This uncompromising and largely unquestioned rhetoric, spread by the governments, provides a breeding ground for rising extremist sentiments and for justifying and maintaining total control of all information concerning the issue of Karabakh, while suppressing the consideration of opposing points of view.

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Understanding these three fundamental features may eventually become a key to reconciliation and a potential solution to the conflict, which, otherwise, will require decades to be implemented.

Last but certainly not least, the increasing misunderstanding of those powers which have direct geopolitical interests in the region may potentially damage the negotiation process, as maintaining the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in a ‘hot’ state may give those powers additional leverage to influence the local governments of Armenia, the NKR, and Azerbaijan. A solid argument in favour of such an opinion is the recent sale of heavy weaponry, drones, satellites and other arms to all sides of the conflict.

Needless to say, although a military

balance should be maintained, peace may not last long when other actors actively arm the conflict parties. The key to this challenge may be found only in the capitals of South Caucasian states, not in Moscow, Washington or elsewhere: Yerevan, Stepanakert, the capital of NKR, and Baku should rationally measure the impact of aggressive rhetoric, together with measuring the prospects of potential peace. Showing a solid and persistent demand for peace at the level of civil society may also become a substantial incentive for the governments of these states to address the issue in a more inclusive manner. ■

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