

## WHICH WAY FORWARD FOR INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT AND CONFIDENCE-BUILDING IN NKR?

Yerevan, AGBU offices, June 10, 2.30- 5.

### *Report*

#### **BACKGROUND TO THE MEETING**

It will be up to governments to finally resolve the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (a.k.a Artsakh), but it is up to civil societies to prepare the ground for that resolution. Based on that premise, AGBU Europe advocates for more effective and bolder confidence-building and for engagement in NKR.

This workshop was convened in Yerevan on June 10 to develop a **consensus among key practitioners and experts on confidence-building in Armenia and Artsakh and to formulate recommendations intended for the next phase of the EU's future confidence-building programme for Nagorno-Karabakh** as well as for others seeking to play a role in promoting confidence-building and engagement in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The workshop was prompted by the ending of the current EPNK programme and by the concurrent preparations of a new EU-sponsored confidence-building programme in connection with this conflict. The moment is therefore particularly appropriate to draw on experience of Armenian civil society itself and to formulate recommendations for future confidence-building projects.

#### **LIST OF PARTICIPANTS**

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Artak Kirakosian, Civil Society Initiative  
Karin Marmsoler, Political Advisor to the EUSR for the South Caucasus  
Vazgen Karapetyan, Eurasian Partnership Foundation  
Natalya Mardirosyan, Helsinki Citizens' Assembly (Armenia)  
Ruben Melikyan "Path of Law" NGO  
Varouzhan Geghamyan, ARDI Foundation  
Artak Beglaryan, Human Rights Defender of the Republic of Artsakh  
Nicolas Tavitian, AGBU Europe

#### **MEETING CONCLUSIONS**

##### ***i) Our approach***

As actors of civil society, the participants in the workshop aim to help build a strong, open, responsible, competent and peace-minded civil society in NK and in Armenia. We intend to give our young people in

particular the skills and the motivation to contribute to society.

We are committed to this work because it is indispensable to helping our society meet the challenges of the future, including building a sustainable democracy and peace in our region.

We cannot prepare peace on one side alone however, so we look forward to working with others, in Azerbaijan and in Europe as a whole, towards that goal.

That is where we want to go: if the rest of Europe is ready to work with us, they will find in us willing partners.

### ***ii) Issues raised regarding the old EPNK programme***

1. The EPNK programme has so far been run only by EU-based international organizations, not by regional or local players. This has reduced the potential local ownership of the programme's activities and therefore its effectiveness.

2. The international NGO's running the programme have had limited access both to Nagorno-Karabakh and to Azerbaijan. Their activities have accordingly been limited there and their impact has also been limited.

- These organisations have not been able to access Nagorno-Karabakh in recent years due to objections on the part of Azerbaijan;
- and they have often been barred from contacts with some Azerbaijani partners due to government interference.

The working environment in Azerbaijan for any organisation seeking to promote peace building, human rights or contacts with Armenians is increasingly difficult. This contrasts with the environment now prevailing in Armenia, whose civil society is increasingly dynamic and free.

The ability of international NGOs to operate with partners in Azerbaijan is further complicated by the fact that NGOs in that country can no longer receive funding from abroad.

3. There are virtually no opportunities or channels remaining for Armenians to communicate directly with Azerbaijani society. When avenues for dialogue are closed, danger increases as the only remaining form of communication is the "dialogue of sharpshooters". Since his election, the new Armenian Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, has tried to carry out public diplomacy towards Azerbaijani society, but it is too early to say that this has had any impact.

The absence of channels of communication between civil societies is due to the government of Azerbaijan effectively not allowing Armenians into their country (as illustrated by the incident with footballer Henrik Mkhitaryan, who was due to play in the UEFA finals in Baku); nor does it allow its citizens to travel to Armenia.

As a result, Armenian civil society organisations cannot work with their Azerbaijani counterparts; the best they can do is to work in parallel, and that is not producing results.

4. A further obstacle to confidence-building is the limited capacity of Artsakh civil society in general. With limited resources and few civil society organisations (CSO's), their general ability to run projects or initiatives is limited.

This situation is aggravated by NK's (forced) isolation. With virtually no international NGO present on the territory, and rare project funding, they have little opportunity to accumulate experience of running projects, including confidence-building activities. Civil society actors therefore find themselves unprepared

and lacking in experience when the opportunity to take part in an international project does arise.

5. Attitudes also generally contrast markedly between people in Artsakh and Armenia. People in NK are likely to be less confident of the supposed benefits of confidence-building, and more aware of the risks involved. They are therefore less inclined to seek out opportunities for confidence-building or dialogue.

6. Communication is an important part of confidence-building. Publicity has often been limited. Some of the NGOs involved in confidence-building were asked by their Azerbaijani participants not to publish project or meeting reports for fear of reprisals after their return to Azerbaijan.

By contrast, some well publicised initiatives such as the “Baku Forum” have been detrimental to confidence-building. This short-lived initiative was a hollow dialogue project established at the initiative of the government of Azerbaijan. This was in fact intended as a public relations exercise and in no way contributed to confidence-building.

### ***iii) Recommendations***

#### *EU & EPNK*

1. It is essential that those running any future confidence-building project should be able to travel to Nagorno-Karabakh (NK). This would include those responsible for designing and evaluating projects as well as those implementing them.

2. People living in NK are particularly affected by the conflict. Our colleagues in NK civil society should be able to reach out and take part in activities relating to confidence-building. Future confidence-building projects should therefore also involve activities and participants in Karabakh.

3. NK civil society should also benefit from support for capacity-building. Their skills, experience and knowledge of the international environment are essential if they are to contribute productively to Confidence-building. The EU should therefore allocate some funding under future projects for capacity-building for Artakh CSOs.

4. There should be greater local ownership of the (EPNK) programme; international conflict management NGOs have a key role to play in confidence-building in the region, but so do organisations based in Armenia, NK and Azerbaijan.

5. Civil society is not limited to NGO's. Future confidence- or capacity-building projects should include not only formal NGO participants, but also other types of non-government actors (such as farmers, local businesses, economic associations, doctors, local administrators...)

6. Activities under EPNK or other confidence-building projects should be well and accurately publicised: publicity is essential to generating impact.

7. Contacts between the societies of NK, Armenia and Azerbaijan remain an urgent necessity. Future projects should find creative solutions to overcome the obstacles to cooperation between Armenians and Azeris and to involve Karabakhtsis in particular. This may involve promoting projects under other formats. One possible option is the regional format, involving participants from the entire South Caucasus region, regardless of residence; this would naturally facilitate the involvement of participants from the three non-recognized states in the region.

8. In order to be able to build on experience, initiatives must be recorded and publicised. This allows

subsequent social entrepreneurs to benefit from acquired experience. Publicity also increases the level of trust of participants as it ensures that activists and authorities on either side know that their reputation will be affected by their behaviour and that betraying partners' trust, in particular, involves a cost.

9. Armenian and NKR authorities and civil societies should express clearly what they expect from the EPNK programme. A broader, public discussions should be held on the subject.

Other recommendations

10. In view of the current reluctance of international actors to engage in NK, Armenian Diaspora structures should contribute to building up civil society there. In doing so, they could attract contributions and expertise from specialized international organisations.

11. NGOs of Armenia should do more work on relations between Armenian and Karabakhi societies, and involve their Karabakhi counterparts more in the life of Armenian civil society.

12. Organisations in Armenia should also mobilise resources to help their Karabakhi counterparts. They should for instance do more to involve NK organizations in their programmes, calls etc.

13. Education is key: in order to educate third parties, whether international NGOs or people from neighbouring countries, a special effort must be made to bring them to Karabakh to ascertain the situation for themselves.

14. Those in the Armenian government who are following confidence-building measures should be more clearly identified so that NGO's or foreign partners might know who their interlocutors should be.

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