



TOPICAL
DIALOGUES

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ONE TOPIC - TWO ARTICLES

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TOPIC - PUBLIC DIALOGUES IN THE ARMENIAN-AZERBAIJANI CONFLICT: THE PAST AND PROSPECTS

See the comments of the authors on the other article here -
<http://www.publicdialogues.info/node/783>



BORIS NAVASARDYAN

Yerevan Press Club

FATIGUED FROM DIALOGUE

<http://www.publicdialogues.info/node/779>

From enthusiasm to disillusion

Everybody, having been, one or another way, involved in the Armenian-Azerbaijani dialogue in the past couple of decades, hold their own history and perception of the successes and failures, their own evaluation of what was done right and lead to avail, and what, contrariwise, harmed the process. This is why I hasten to admit that my own impressions and practice, which underpin this analysis, are subjective. In certain phases the interactions on the levels of civil society, politicians, journalists and experts (Track-2) were excessively eventful, complicated and multi-faceted, so that the comprehension and the assessment of the process would not provoke significant controversy.

I suppose that for the Azerbaijani participants of these dialogue projects the most memorable were the attendances of Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh, which served as a basis for them for own understanding of the transformation of the conflict. For me personally, the dynamics of the entire process could be consolidated into the two-year-long period between 1999 and 2001, when I had the chance to visit Azerbaijan four times. I later

paid another visit in 2011, which only reestablished the unhappy inference formed in the course of the previous 10 years, that the irenic potential of Track-2 in the existing political context was exhausted.

My impressions of the first post-soviet visit to Azerbaijan in November 1999, arranged in the framework of the longstanding joint project of two German foundations- Ebert and Naumann, were quite bright: the Armenian group of 8 people had the total freedom to move around without the evident convoy of the special services. (In fact, if it wasn't for the terrorist attack in the Armenian parliament on October 27, the cast of our "assault group" would be much more presentable, including also the vice-chair of the National Assembly.) And even though the troubled situation in Armenia disengaged certain parliament members and high-ranking officials, who had primarily given willingness to participate, the shifted status of the visitors was almost unreflected on the high level of the hosts foreseen far in advance. The prime-minister, leaders of political parties, far unordinary staff members of the President Administration... And when during the sessions we expressed sorrow that the official Baku did not express condolences to Armenian people in connection with the recent tragedy, which could have, certainly, reformed the climate of the official negotiations, our words were perceived by Azerbaijani counterparts with understanding.

From that very same visit comes to mind the 40-minute-long live interview given to the leading Azerbaijani television channel, which came to be satisfactory not only for the Armenian colleagues, but also the local audience: when the following day our group went to the market in Baku, we were granted the respectful attitude of the merchants, who immediately knew who they are dealing with.

I am bringing up these scenes in order to display the dynamics of the decline in relations. Not more than a year later the TV interview I gave was recorded and, although broadcasted without distortions, increased apprehension could be felt in the conduct and the questions of the journalist. To test the reaction of the audience appeared unfeasible, since at the very moment of arriving at Baku airport it became clear that freedom in moving around and unrestrained communication with the local public should be forgotten about.

A year later, in September 2001, the interactions of the Azerbaijani media representatives covering the visit of the group of journalist from Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh were really serving one sole goal- to demonstrate how meaningless peace-building projects actually were and how the citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan participating in those projects were deserters of national interests. But how we were escorted exceeded our worst expectations. "Armenian terrorists camouflaged as journalists have visited Baku and holidayed in the best resorts of Azerbaijan"- is what the headline of the article covering our joint seminar in the very modest "Ganjlik" lodging house looked like, positioned at the most observable part of the fairly solid newspaper. The same publication also bestowed "details on the terroristic occupation" of the rather famous journalists taking part in the visit.

The aforesaid, as I see it, covers a rather short period of time- the period lying in between the peak of success of those dialogue projects and the getting rid of illusions that civil diplomacy, in the settlement of the Karabakh conflict, can play a significantly independent role in the process of regulation. The unofficial initiatives proved to be in great dependence

on the interests of the authorities. The nonexistence of perspectives in the dialogue on an official level in principle determined the marginalization of Track-2. This is not quite the place to investigate the political nuances and the context why this come about exactly in the years of 1999-2001, but at the very turn of the millennium civil initiatives were annexed with an apathetic-skeptical attitude in Armenia and an aggressive-repressive one in Azerbaijan.

Not the Finns and not the Swedes

In this regard, it is riveting to come to reason why up until the times certain progress was nevertheless existent in the Track-2 diplomacy between Armenia and Azerbaijan. I think that apart from the smoldering hopes for a chance for the regulation of the conflict there was great interest in resolving specific issues. In the period of national movements in late 1980s and the initial steps towards independence, the main summon for contact was getting rid of the communist empire. Particularly intense was the dialogue between the representatives of the Armenian National Movement and the Azerbaijani Popular Front through the intercession of the democratic forces of other Soviet republics, Baltic ones, in particular. The everyday activities of the editorial staff of the newspaper "Republic of Armenia", established in 1990 by the post-communist parliament of the country, entailed daily telephone interviews between its journalists and eminent Azerbaijani politicians of the new wave, especially when in the neighboring republic events important for the coverage were taking place. With the collapse of the USSR the mutual interest was, indeed, exchanged with animosity between the new authorities.

During the years of the war- 1992-1994, the cooperation between human right defenders on the issues of war prisoners, captives, the search for those gone missing and the retrieval of dead bodies gained considerable relevance. In this stage a great number of Armenian and Azerbaijani non-governmental organizations instituted active cooperation with the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Committee, other international humanitarian missions, as well as the state structures of the two countries. It comes to mind how the Armenian journalists meeting with the Minister of National Security of the Republic of Azerbaijan Namik Abbasov were astounded by his propositions connected with the exchange of information between human right defenders from Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh regarding captives. Quite certainly, the performance of the officials could hardly ever be labelled with sincerity and constructability, but their inescapable cooperation with international organizations and civil activists played a major role in the fate of many people.

Along with practical humanitarian work, in the first half of the 1990s the dialogue on peace between the Armenian and Azerbaijani human rights activists gained significant momentum. The prime event in this process was the Olof Palme's award granted to Arzu Abdullayeva and Anahit Bayandur as respective chairwomen of the Azerbaijani and Armenian chapters of Helsinki Citizens' Assembly in 1992. The evidently "Scandinavian focus" of the activities of the Assembly was exhibited in the presentation to the civil society representatives of the conflicting parties of the model of Aland Swedish autonomy within Finland. Immediately after the war this model was considered by peacemakers as pertinent also for Nagorno Karabakh.

By the initiative of HCA, also official individuals were drawn to the “Aland process”, but this incited a scene that put a big question mark on the applicability of the Scandinavian experience in South Caucasus. In one of the meetings in 1995, the then minister of foreign affairs of NK Arkadi Ghukasyan spoke out that the model was excellent, but that Azeris were not Finns. To this the deputy minister of foreign affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan of the time Tofik Zulfugarov responded as follows: “Sure, but neither are you Swedes, our Armenian comrades!” In addition to that, the process itself came to be a precedent which destroyed the monopoly of the official sides involved in the deliberations of the future of NK and the Azerbaijani-Armenian relations.

In search of form and content

The agreement on the ceasefire signed in 1994 by the government officials of Armenia, Azerbaijan and NK flew the doors open for new possibilities which would allow international organizations, contributors and Western NGOs to actualize a vast array of diverse projects in accord with the Track-2 logic. At the beginning such events were perceived by the participants from this region as a mere continuation of war by way of public disputes. They were striving to prove the opponents of their rectitude and of the responsibility they have taken for the conflict, anticipating complete and unconditional capitulation.

Journalists organization of Armenia and Azerbaijan were one of the first to unearth pragmatic forms of cooperation. Understanding that, in spite of the inimical attitudes of the two societies towards one another, their interest in what is happening in the neighboring country is rather immense, they exploited frequent interaction to establish information exchange between mass media. “Internews” organized a series of thematic teleconferences (“TV bridges”), which, though still carried out in the mode of “ideological wrestling”, gave the chance to the Armenian and Azerbaijani audiences to learn about the life of their neighbors from “real living people”.

Yerevan Press Club and its counterparts in Azerbaijan took advantage of the vigor demonstrated by their countries to extensively blend into the global community, progress determinedly towards the EU membership by fulfilling certain requirements. In this regard mutual interest proposed an exchange of skills in advocating freedom of speech. The second half of the 1990s became the period when the Armenian and Azerbaijani situations in the sphere came near like never before. In Armenia, the rights of journalists and the pluralism of media were better protected, however, in Azerbaijan, especially after the annulment of military censorship and due to international investments, legitimate medium entrepreneurship began to develop.

The discussions of purely journalistic topics not only lead to a refined comprehension of problems, but also taught the participants to show respect to the opinions of opponents. From then on it helped to foster better mutual understanding when addressing issues in connection with the conflict. The same can be related to the projects in other fields, which stimulated professional collaboration and intimate interpersonal connections in the restless

arena of contrariety. Common solicitude over different social problems, ecological challenges, later also educational reforms helped see what really unites us.

The strengthening of connections in various thematic fields was largely maintained by the general interest of the international community towards South Caucasus as a unified region, emerged in the mid and late 90s. This was greatly preconditioned by the involvement of USA and EU, as well as of influential companies to infrastructural, more specifically, energy related projects. Civil society organizations, more inclined towards regional layouts, only benefited from this. Tripartite projects (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia) received their largest proliferation due to the “Synergy” (“Cooperation”) projects started up by “Eurasia” Foundation in 1997. Thanks to this initiative, dozens of NGOs built expertise in cooperating with partners from other South Caucasus countries. Such kind of immensity in and of itself greatly contributed to the destruction of the “image of the enemy”, at least, for the immediate participants of those events.

Such multi-lateral frameworks allowed to also compare differing approaches to conflicts and their possible resolutions for the yet unrecognized Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh. And one of the most advantageous project ideas was the observations of the perspectives for the development of the region as a whole, if the conflict did not hinder cooperation. Moreover, the Armenian side was officially set to give consideration to the corresponding possibilities even before the final resolution of the Karabakh conflict. However, Azerbaijan, anticipating that Armenia's interest in joining regional infrastructure projects will challenge it to make unilateral concessions, insisted on recognizing its territorial integrity as a prerequisite for cooperation. Mutually exclusive approaches gradually reduced the relevance of regional initiatives involving the countries of South Caucasus in both economic and all of the other spheres, including Track-2.

As far as the region is concerned, I will take my courage in both hands and question the efficiency of popular projects among Western organizations in the 1990s that united the Southern and Northern Caucasus. Neither the status of the subjects of this framework (participants from internationally recognized countries, from unrecognized entities and from the autonomies of the Russian Federation), nor positioning oneself in relation to problems (the strive to solve issues within the framework of national sovereignty in some states and the natural dependency on the center, like in the case of Russian autonomies) did not contribute to its efficiency. Besides, the absence of participants representing the all-Russian context in such events unsurprisingly emphasized the artificiality of the format. Nonetheless, their presence would have hardly added to the expediency of those initiatives, since it would have eroded regional identity and made it difficult to find common priorities. The Armenian-Azerbaijani dialogue lost, rather than benefited from the common Caucasian formats, for the specifics and the nuances of the Karabakh conflict, requiring focused attention, were treated extremely superficially, and the assembled assorted audience was seen as the addressee for appealing and reaffirming their correctness. Even though all the positive in interpersonal communication and the constant repetition of mutually acceptable slogans for all that's good and against all that's bad, indeed, strengthened the friendly relations between the participants of such projects, including Armenians and Azerbaijanis, it neither contributed to

moving forward nor to passing on a good atmosphere to the broad circles of the publics of the conflicting parties.

In this sense, much more beneficial were the initiatives not directly imposed on Caucasus, encouraging the study and familiarization of the Armenian and Azerbaijani public with interethnic conflicts in other regions of the world. Films and a comparative expert analysis of the hindrances and the attempts to overcome them - both successful and failed - in the Balkans, Cyprus, Palestine, South Tyrol, Northern Ireland and other parts of the world helped to seek for and discuss models that could eventually work in NK case. And just like in the proposals of the co-chairs of the Minsk Group of the second half of the zeros, also in expert products (for instance, the brochure "The Karabakh conflict: understanding each other", published in 2005 on the initiative of the Yerevan Press Club serving as the fruit of the efforts of the group of active participants of dialogue initiatives from Armenia and Azerbaijan) reflected the enormous expertise in peacekeeping, passed through the filter of the peculiarities of the Karabakh conflict.

The entangled nature of the Turkish-Armenian and Armenian-Azerbaijani contradictions (particularly in Azerbaijan, the rejection of the topic of the Armenian genocide is far more aggressive than in Turkey itself, and Ankara, since the closure of its border with Armenia in 1993 determines, with varying persistence, the normalization of the relations with Yerevan with through unilateral concessions in the Karabakh issue) prompted innovative and promising projects covering the three countries. However, as the positions of the sides of the triangle become tougher, the format lost all of its affinity. And many of its immediate participants in Turkey and Azerbaijan were imprisoned, exiled, or forced to cease their activities related to Armenia.

The involvement of Turkey (the latter being in quite amicable relations with the Baku authorities) in the Armenian-Azerbaijani dialogue conditioned their approval of the contact between citizens of the RA with Armenians in 2001-2004. However, during the period of the intense football diplomacy between Yerevan and Ankara in 2008-2009, The Azerbaijani authorities, irritated by the prospect of the normalization of the Armenian-Turkish relations, dramatically changed their attitude towards the format.

Hostage to political realities

Quite frankly, the field for Armenian-Azerbaijani dialogic initiatives has been narrowing down for more than fifteen years now. If before the start of the zeros, certain activation in the direct cooperation between local organizations could be witnessed, in recent years, as in the first post-war years, the key role was handed over to players outside of the region to moderators of contact. The possibilities of paying visits to one another, whose programs in 1998-1999 also comprised meetings with the presidents (Heydar Aliyev and Robert Kocharyan), had to be forgotten. The most suitable forms of cooperation appeared to be the expert studies and media products, which, however, have long ceased to convey open peacekeeping messages and, at best, only adequately reflect the history of recent decades and modern realms. Thus, the very last attempt of the peacemaking project of Yerevan

Press Club was the glossary (1) of hate speech prepared in 2010 with Azerbaijani colleagues, which comprises recommendations on how to avoid stereotypes irritating the audience on the other side of the conflict. And although in certain journalistic circles of both countries there was an interest in genuinely applying the results of the research in practice, the general tendency to tighten the confrontation of information was immeasurably stronger.

The causes hindering the participation of Azerbaijani organizations in joint projects with Armenian partners are very well known. To a certain extent, they are linked with the weakening of the influence of international organizations on the observance of the principles of democracy and human rights in general. After the swiftworsening of the relations between Russia and the West back in 2013, what is now called "world order" began to change, including the role and the active presence of the Council of Europe and the OSCE in our region. Besides, internal mechanisms of the protection of freedoms and diversity of opinions are far from working in all countries.

In Armenia, where the well-being of the civil society and the media has only improved due to the "velvet revolution" of 2018, the absence of the former interest in engaging in a dialogue with flawed neighbors - Azerbaijan and Turkey - is dictated by the lack of faith in the realism of mutual compromises and the widespread belief in the meaninglessness of conversation from the standpoint of values and principles. If in 2004, even against the background of the general resentment towards the deeds of Ramil Safarov, a group of leading Armenian NGOs resolutely condemned (2) the racist statements regarding the entire Azerbaijani people made by two politicians, now they would have hardly been paid any attention to. The voices of the critics speaking about the "unconstructive politics" of their authorities in the Karabakh issue have practically been completely silenced. And not really because of the fear of something, but because such criticism does not receive any proper response from the society and immediately discredits itself by the association with propaganda initiatives such as "Baku", and later "Tbilisi" types of "platforms of peace" (their dubious manipulative character is seen even in quite well-intentioned publications (3) about them).

A crisis with a regulation of interethnic conflicts and simply with a peaceful dialogue is inherent in the entire post-Soviet space. However, its depth is always different. As for me, the attitude of the non-governmental sector towards the possibility of securing the same kind of representatives of civil society, journalists living and working in unrecognized entities, is indicative in this sense. After all, without them it would be impossible to run serious talks about strengthening the measures of trust necessary for the peaceful overcoming of conflicts. At the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (CSF), in particular, the issue of providing an opportunity for NGOs from Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria and South Ossetia to participate in CSF events is raised almost annually. This is by no means about displaying flags or other symbols, but only about the participation of organizations from territories formally included in the Eastern Partnership region, the nearby neighbor of the European Union. However, every time this possibility is denied. Moldovan members of the forum, regardless of this, include NGOs from Transnistria in the list of the participants on their own initiative. To them this seems as natural as the free movement of people from Chisinau to Tiraspol, or the matches of the Transnistrian teams in the Moldovan football championship. Georgian colleagues do not really mind, but do not imagine

mechanisms for selecting Abkhaz and South Ossetian organizations for the annual assembly of the Forum. And only for Azerbaijani representatives, the invitation of NGOs from Nagorno-Karabakh is categorically unacceptable if they do not recognize NK as part of the AR.

At the same time, especially before Moscow's recognition of the independence of Sukhumi and Tskhinvali, the following approach in Georgia was predominant: "we must become a state of which Abkhazia and South Ossetia would want to be a part of." Up until 2008, the Georgian authorities would show interest in the activities of the offices of international organizations and agreed to their financing of non-governmental sector in these unrecognized republics. In Moldova, they would not go against such initiatives even now, but the restrictions are imposed by the authorities of Transnistria itself. And Azerbaijan is making more and more efforts to further isolate NK and its population, excluding all platforms for formal or informal dialogue.

Therefore, there is no rationale to talk about any prospects for activating the Track-2 diplomacy between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Moreover, the constant killings of civilians and military servicemen on the line of contact of the Karabakh conflict and on the border of the Republic of Armenia and the Azerbaijani Republic, as well as the aggravating propaganda war continue to alienate these nations from each other. For a breakthrough, either consistent efforts of the international community to implement the agreements from two years ago on strengthening control over the observance of the cease-fire regime, reducing the degree of militant rhetoric and concrete steps to strengthen trust-building measures, or a radical change in the political context are necessary.

Notes

1. <http://ypc.am/studies/cross-monitoring-inaccurate-information-cliches-and-stereotypes-in-online-media-of-azerbaijan-and-armenia/>
2. http://ypc.am/2004/03/?bulletin_id=40773&lang=en
3. <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/317673/>



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DIALOGUE AND PEACE-MAKING INITIATIVES IN THE ARMENIAN-AZERBAIJANI CONFLICT: THE PAST, THE PRESENT AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

<http://www.publicdialogues.info/node/778>

Implicit Pressures in the 1990s

The Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over the territory of Nagorno Karabakh has been going on for over 30 years. In the relations of both peoples, another process has been developing practically concurrently in the form of multiple meetings, initiatives, and contacts over the peaceful resolution of the conflict. And this is understandable for the conflict started in the USSR where both peoples had lived next to each other within one state, they had a lot in common, and this circumstance significantly facilitated holding such meetings and initiatives, if we are to compare this conflict with many others on the planet Earth. Moreover, the first contacts were largely perceived as the continuation of the new policy of the USSR that was popularly known as “perestroika”, when the initiators and organizers of such meetings were not the leaders of the Communist party and the leaders of republics, but the so-called “nonformals” or human rights defenders.

But the USSR collapsed in 1991 and very soon the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict grew into a large-scale war. But even in these conditions, peace-building meetings continued, even though the changed situation had brought in some adjustments – the majority of the meetings among human rights defenders and the representatives of the newly-emerging civil society had to do with negotiations on releasing hostages, war prisoners, and related to the settlement of a number of humanitarian problems of refugees and displaced persons.

After the ceasefire agreement in 1994 a new stage in the history of such meetings and initiatives was launched. It is exactly at this point that the Azerbaijani society had to face the very acute issue of its attitude to the unrecognized, but factually independent new state in

the territory of the republic. Before that Azerbaijanis, too, lived in Karabakh, and at the very beginning, the Azerbaijani society still cherished illusions that the conflict was only temporary, external forces had provoked it and sooner or later it would be successfully resolved, and Karabakh would again be a part of Azerbaijan. But now these illusions are left in the past. The war was lost, and along with the former autonomous territory (ATNK) 7 other regions adhering to Nagorno Karabakh appeared beyond the jurisdiction of Azerbaijan. Moreover, in the former Azerbaijani territory a new statehood formed which bore a new official name (NKR) at that time. Over time Azerbaijanis started to hear a different name – Artsakh – in the stead of the usual “Karabakh” more and more frequently. In fact, there were already no Azerbaijanis in the territory beyond Baku’s control. These people already resided in other regions of the republic as refugees.

A question arose: how should all of this be dealt with? How should the meetings with Karabakh Armenians be perceived? Who are they now for the Azerbaijanis? Former citizens who had temporarily got beyond control and attempts should be made to return them in some way or other under the control of Baku again? Or should they be recognized as citizens of another independent state? And all of this against the background of a dramatic defeat which was perceived by the society as a humiliating fact.

It is exactly at this time when a movement emerged, globally known as “public diplomacy.” This word combination was used to denote contacts between Armenians and Azerbaijanis that were not usual, because the representatives of the conflicting peoples live together in many other countries and first of all in the neighboring Russia and Georgia. Moreover, in the 1990s in Georgia, in the Azerbaijani village Sadakhlo a non-formal Armenian-Azerbaijani market (bazar) emerged that was attended not only by the inhabitants of many other settlements in Georgia, but also by the citizens of Armenia and Azerbaijan. The parties made commercial deals, sold things to one another, and this would bring the goods of the other, enemy country into Armenia and Azerbaijan. And in Russia there were quite a few cases when Azerbaijanis and Armenians jointly led a business.

But this was not perceived negatively, since the matter here was business as well as contacts in the territory of other states and, besides, they did not relate to the Karabakh conflict and the future of the Armenian and Azerbaijani relations. One did not hinder the other.

As for the conflict per se and the Armenian-Azerbaijani relations, a clear frontline already existed and it clearly separated the parties from one another. Crossing that front line was fatally dangerous. No meetings or trips by ordinary citizens across the frontline were possible. And this is what made the Karabakh conflict different from the conflicts in the neighboring Georgia and Moldova. They had peacekeeping forces and checkpoints, but no front. Citizens there could, especially before August 2008, move freely and contact on different levels. There was nothing even close to this in the Armenian and Azerbaijani relations.

There was another important difference between the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict and other conflicts in the post-Soviet space – the role of the state in all this. For example, in Georgia the power changed more than once in the last 2 decades, but their attitude to the

contacts of Georgian NGOs and other representatives of the civil society with Abkhazians and Ossetians was positive. Even more so, international organizations dealing with all these issues enjoyed significant support. But in the case of Karabakh conflict there was no agreement between the official Baku and the leaders of Armenia, moreover, the leaders of Nagorno Karabkh, on the mandate of the involvement of Armenian and Azerbaijani civil society representatives, as well as the role of international organizations.

It is true that Heydar Aliyev who came to power in 1993 was not publicly against such contacts at the very beginning. However, along the reinforcement of his personal power in the republic the stance with regard to the expediency of such meetings started to change. In 1999 Heydar Aliyev clearly expressed his position: "Before we have signed a peace treaty with Armenia, there is no need for our NGOs to cooperate with Armenians. When we have this political issue resolved with Kocharyan, this will be a compromise, and many will not agree with it, this is exactly when the NGOs will reconcile the peoples."⁽¹⁾ In other words, the ruling regime of the Aliyevs in Azerbaijan perceived these contacts of "public diplomacy" as an auxiliary factor in the regulation process.

There was another reason for the negative attitude of the Azerbaijani authorities towards these meetings and initiatives. Heydar Aliyev initially did not want to have a "grassroot" process beyond his control. All the processes in the country had to be the monopoly of the state. Besides, in the 1990s the representatives of the civil society in Azerbaijan were largely dependent on the power and stood close to the political opposition due to their views. This caused an even higher degree of mistrust and the apprehensions of the ruling regime.

This is why since the late 1990s Heydar Aliyev took the course of limiting all these contacts of Azerbaijani NGOs with their Armenian counterparts, especially from Nagorno Karabakh. And if before the representatives of Armenian NGOs, also from Nagorno Karabakh, could arrive in Baku, these trips started to gradually decrease. And the representatives of the Azerbaijani NGOs started to be intimidated.

However, Heydar Aliyev was an experienced politician and understood the role and significance of the West for the region and especially for Azerbaijan. And since Europeans and Americans constantly spoke about "public diplomacy" for the resolution of the Karabkh conflict, the pressure by the authorities was not explicit. And hence, even though the contacts of the parties kept shrinking, some work did unfold in this direction.

The Policy of Repressions by Ilham Aliyev

The situation for Azerbaijani NGOs and the representatives of civil society changed noticeably after Ilham Aliyev took office in 2003. Unlike his father who somehow perceived the existence of contacts between Armenians and Azerbaijanis and wished only to keep all this under his control, Ilham Aliyev took a tough and negative position in this issue from the very beginning.

During his term in office, all communication with Armenians was declared to be the job of “the enemies of the Azerbaijani people” and respectively was evaluated as “betrayal of national interests.” All activists of the civil society, who collaborated with colleagues from Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh within the framework of “public diplomacy”, were subjected to very strong pressure explicitly applied by the authorities.

As a result, the authorities of Azerbaijan scared many representatives of local NGOs, and the latter started to refuse from not only trips to Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh, but also any form of joint projects. Fear crawled into the hearts of many Azerbaijanis. The number of those who wished to play the part of “traitors” and “supporters of Armenian aggressors” was shrinking more and more. This could be accounted for by the fact that besides aggressive campaigns by mass media and on TV, by means of groups of “patriots” fully controlled by the authorities, the latter organized direct attacks on the offices of those NGOs and persons who agreed to collaborate with Armenian colleagues. It was very hard to withstand such a powerful pressure. The already scarce resource was quickly depleting. As a result, even those who agreed to travel to Armenia asked not to promote their participation in conferences and meetings so that they could return to Azerbaijan without any problem. Unlike traditional diplomacy, all measures of “public diplomacy” must be transparent. It is exactly at that time that the ironic term of “secret public diplomacy” started to be applied about these persons’ trips to Armenia.

International organizations immediately readjusted themselves and started to take into account the positions of Azerbaijani authorities. Currently meetings among the representatives of the public started to be held in Georgia, Russia and other countries. For a number of years by the initiative and with the financial support of the American Kettering Foundation and the Russian Center of Strategic and Political Research in Snegiri, meetings among the representatives of the Armenian and Azerbaijani civil society were held within the framework of Dartmouth conference. For six years (2001 – 2007) they would seriously discuss various models of conflict resolution like diplomats. Later, in 2004 – 2014 it was already the turn of Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly which already in Helsinki (Finland) organized a series of Armenian-Azerbaijani discussions on the so-called “Aland model” of the conflict resolution within the framework of the so-called “Independent Civil Minsk Process on Karabakh Conflict Resolution.” (2)

It would be all right if it were not starkly evident that practically the same small number of people engaged from both parties would travel back and forth from one capital to the other and asked issues related to the resolution. It is even more surprising that often the same participants supported the idea of the meetings and the proposals voiced there when they were not in their motherlands, whereas at home they turned into patriots and spoke categorically against peace-building ideas (3).

In other words, the phenomenon that was named “public diplomacy” within the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict with great pathos, in fact was a profanation of the idea. The vast majority of the population in Azerbaijan did not know anything about these meetings and issues discussed there at all. Practically, the same can be said with regard to the awareness level of the population in Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh. An absurd situation emerged; the wide circles of the population in Azerbaijan, Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh had much more

information on the closed-door meetings of the Presidents, the Foreign Affairs Ministers of Azerbaijan, and the proposals of the Minsk Group mediators than the results of meetings within “public diplomacy.”

Regardless of repressions and pressure, there were still NGOs in the Azerbaijani society that proposed to collaborate with Armenian colleagues and even traveled to Armenia. This brought about serious frustration among the Azerbaijani authorities who even aggravated the situation with the pressure on independent NGOs in the republic. At the same time, the authorities decided to take “public diplomacy” under their control. The first such attempt came in the form of a meeting between the “representatives of the Armenian and Azerbaijani intelligentsia” organized jointly by the President of Armenia and the Russian side. In 2007 and 2009 the Ambassadors of these two republics, jointly with a group of the representatives of the Azerbaijani intelligentsia, visited Nagorno Karabakh and Armenia. In the course of these meetings, the parties talked a lot about peace in the future and the need to exclude the forceful settlement of the Karabakh conflict. However, upon the return of the Ambassador of Azerbaijan Polad Bülbüloğlu and other Azerbaijani representatives started to make statements from aggressive positions that could not help but trigger frustration among Armenians. And later this would become recurrent. The same Ambassador Polad Bülbüloğlu who constantly spoke of peace would similarly freely speculate over the necessity of war and the forceful settlement of the Karabkh conflict in 2016 – 2017 (4). The first attempt to monopolize the meetings of the public from 2 peoples failed back then.

Taking into consideration the mistakes of the previous period, the low level of awareness and the involvement of conflicting societies at the beginning, the idea of creating shared web sites was becoming more and more popular. And in January, 2013, Baku and Yerevan witnessed the official presentations of the first and only joint Azerbaijani-Armenian web site – Public Dialogues, created as a result of long-term cooperation of two non-governmental organizations, namely, the Azerbaijani Institute for Peace and Democracy and the Armenian Region Research Center. Articles by Armenian and Azerbaijani authors were published here, Internet discussions with the participation of specialists from other countries, video bridges, online interviews with foreign figures for the Armenian and Azerbaijani mass media, the texts of which were later published in the Armenian and Azerbaijani press, and video materials on various events and processes in Azerbaijan and Armenia were posted.

Smashing the Civil Society in Azerbaijan in 2014

All this was perceived by the authorities of Azerbaijan as an explicit threat. At the beginning, they decided to deal with the Azerbaijani NGOs that were not yet under legal control. In May 2013, a draft law named “On the Occupied Territories of Azerbaijan” was submitted to the Parliament. In particular, it envisaged criminal liability for the employees of non-governmental organizations, as well as individual citizens in Azerbaijan (besides the members of official delegations) for cooperation with Armenia “for the sake of liberation of occupied territories”. However, this legislative initiative could bring about the acutely negative reaction of the West and that is why the authorities not only ceased the

preparation to its adoption, but in general, began to deny the existence of such a draft law (5)!

But in 2014 the authorities in Azerbaijan gave up all games with the West and took the course of the final resolution of the issue on the activities of independent NGOs and activists of the civil society. During this year a wave of arrests unfolded in the republic, leading to the arrest of many activists of the civil society who actively cooperated (IPD) or had participated in joint meetings or projects with Armenians. Though with bitterness, it is necessary to admit that the authorities succeeded to solve the issue that was unpleasant to them and to clear the stage from all independent participants of suchlike meetings from the Azerbaijani side. It is true that there was still a political opposition in the republic, journalists and the survived representatives of NGOs are desperately struggling. But there is no more ground to speak about meetings and joint projects with Armenians. This period in the history of post-Soviet Azerbaijan belongs to the past.

Imitated and Propaganda “Public Diplomacy”

Dealing with independent NGOs, the authorities of Azerbaijan moved on to Part 2 of their plan, according to which now “public diplomacy” should be used maximally as a component of the propaganda campaign. Quite a lot of means were allocated from the budget for the organization of this campaign. After that some time was spent on the search for Armenians, who were ready to take part in it. In December 2016 Baku pompously announced of the creation of “Platform for Peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan” which not only had a website, but also Armenians who participated in the project started to live in Baku and received salary for it. (6)

However, immediately afterwards it became clear that this “Peace Platform” had no relation to “public diplomacy”. Those who took part in the project from the Armenian side turned out not residents of Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh, but Armenians who resided in CIS countries and Sweden who agreed to take part in the project for financial reasons. But very soon disagreements arose among the participants from both sides over money. As a result, one of the founders of the “Peace Platform” Vahan Martirosyan, who before that gave interviews in Azerbaijan on the horrors of life in Armenia, was now fleeing Azerbaijan and in his speeches started to provide thorough description on the reasons of financial machinations that had led to his escape. (7) And though even after this the Azerbaijani authorities continue imitating activity on this “Peace Platform”, in reality it is clear that all this has no relation to the resolution of the Karabakh conflict or “public diplomacy.”

What is Next? Are There any Prospects?

As it can be seen from the brief overview of the past and present of the Armenian-Azerbaijani relations, the situation today is very dramatic. In fact, now we cannot speak about a real opportunity of organizing such meetings of the parties in the territories of Azerbaijan or Armenia. This happened largely because of the authorities of Azerbaijan who

did everything to destroy the civil society and to take all processes in peacebuilding sector under full control.

The noticeable fatigue of the Armenian and Azerbaijani societies with the fruitlessness of the negotiations process and the peace-building meetings of the parties was an additional factor. And all this happened against the background of hostilities on the front line that have become more and more frequent in the recent years, especially after the fights in April 2016, which significantly radicalized both societies, making the arena for peace-building projects even smaller.

However, the aspirations of the Azerbaijani authorities to monopolize “public diplomacy” and turning the quite common lack of trust in the societies into the efficiency of these meetings are in fact subjective in their nature. On the one hand, no such meetings and initiatives within the frames of “public diplomacy” lead to the resolution of the conflict. They cannot substitute for real players in the person of authorities (Presidents and Ministers) and mediators as leading political players. This toolkit has a different task – to help to prevent the further radicalization in the relations of the peoples, reduce stereotypes and negative views, inevitably arising in the course of any conflict in the opponent country.

At the same time it is worthy to note that the Karabkh conflict is in its initial stage. It is even hard to assume how much time it will take to have the conflict regulated. Consequently, both illusions on such meetings as a chance to settle peaceful relations and the disbelief in their necessity are equally dangerous. Time has come to realize that even though the resolution of the conflict is still far and light may appear at the end of the tunnel due to the efforts of a new generation of politicians and the representatives of the civil society, the foundations for all this need to be laid today. The former failures should not lead to pessimism and it is necessary to start reviving these meetings and initiatives. For the start, in social networks and on the Internet. And to understand, that the distance can be covered by the one who walks.

Notes

1. Avaz Hasanov, Armine Iskanyan. Building Bridges: the Peace-Building Initiatives of the Civil Society. – *Accord Series*. Limits of Leaders' Capacity: Elites and Societies in the Peaceful Process of Nagorno Karabakh. - London, 2005, p.47.
2. It Happened in Snegiri. – The *Golos Armenii* of March 18, 2004. During the meetings of the representatives of the Armenian, Azerbaijani and Karabakh public, regression was noted. - <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/932590.html>; The Aland Model is practically inapplicable to Nagorno Karabakh - <https://regnum.ru/news/514112.html>; Human rights defenders propose their own solution for Karabakh- http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/russian/in_depth/newsid_3906000/3906993.stm; A Statement on the Nagorno Karabakh Conflict - <http://www.aravot-ru.am/2014/11/13/184697/>

3. See: The Aland Model: possibilities for citizens and non-governmental organizations to promote models of Karabakh Conflict Resolution Models – <http://www.southcaucasus.com/index.php?p=tekali12>; Zardusht Alizadeh: “The application of the Aland model in Karabakh will lead to a point when we will spoil Armenians” - <http://vesti.az/news/32010>
4. Mustafayev R. “Public Diplomacy”: Attempt N2. The Azerbaijani Delegation Arrived in Khankendy and Yerevan – the *Caspian*, July 4, 2009, Polad Bülbüloğlu, Farhad Badalbeyli and Kamal Abdulla Visited Occupied Shusha - <https://news.day.az/politics/84262.html>; Polad Bülbüloğlu: “We will solve the Karabakh conflict by military means.” - <https://regnum.ru/news/2110410.html> and so on
5. The Law on The Occupied Territories of the Azerbaijani Republic must be adopted in the near future, MP Zahid Oruj declares. The *Echo* (Baku), May 16, 2013. The Parliament rejected the preparation of the law on occupied territories. <http://www.contact.az/ext/news/2013/5/free/politics%20news/ru/11225.htm>
6. A Platform for Peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan is created. - http://ru.apa.az/nagornyj_karabakh/sozdana-platforma-dlya-mira-mezhdu-armeniej-i-azerbajdzhanom-.html; The Civil Platform of Peace Between Armenia and Azerbaijan. - <http://arm-azpeace.com/index.php?lang=ru>
7. The Armenian Opposition Figure Vahan Martirosyan who Fled to Baku Speaks about Armenia. - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_-8yE8wOpM; An interview by the Armenian human rights defender Vahan Martirosyan APA TV. - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LgSnYNSGD_s; Ваан Мартиросян: Time has come to disclose another lie of the Azerbaijani propaganda - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DEAghGHBF AE> and so on.