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YENİ NÖSİL
AZƏRBAYCAN JURNALİSTLƏR BİRLİYİ

ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN: SEARCHING FOR NEW MODELS OF DIALOGUE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The main purpose of this study was to consider the feasibility and prospects of revival of the Track-2 diplomacy and the development of appropriate recommendations. Although it was conceived and supported by the US government even before the political changes in Armenia, its relevance was confirmed by the intensification of the dialogue at the official level between Yerevan and Baku in the summer of 2018. Certain characteristics of the renewed interest in the informal communication was the visit of the Azerbaijani journalist Shahin Hajiyev to Yerevan in February 2019, and the interest of his Armenian colleagues towards the trip to a neighboring country.

The work in the framework of the study, including the preparatory period and the summarizing of the results, was carried out for 14 months. Its components were as follows:

- The “Historical background” (see Chapter “Thorny Track-2”), which reflected the path of “civil diplomacy” over the past 30 years (of course, it to some extent reflects the subjective hindsight of the project implementers, but in any case it allows to present the main trends of the process).
- Focus group discussions on a single list of issues (see Annex 1). Both in Azerbaijan and in Armenia, 4 focus groups were formed, which included representatives of NGOs, the expert community, journalists and the mixed group of the social network activists.
- In-depth interviews (on the same questionnaire as in focus groups) with representatives of official structures, opposition politicians, NGO leaders, experts and journalists. Both in Azerbaijan and Armenia, interviews were conducted with 20 respondents (40 in total).
- Monitoring of mass media of different political orientation. In each country, four media were selected, which were studied over two different time periods (from September 16 to October 15 and from November 16 to December 15, 2018) - to identify possible dynamics in approaches, in particular, taking into account the campaign for the elections to the National Assembly of Armenia on December 9, 2018, as well as different reactions to the results of the meetings of Azerbaijani and Armenian officials and international mediators (see the monitoring charts with quantitative data in Annex 3). The monitoring studied the frequency and attitude of each media to the 24 conditional statements related to the Karabagh conflict and formulated jointly by the project partners (see methodology and list of statements in Annex 2).

The last three components of the study formed the basis for the analytical notes, which became the main product of this project (see Chapter “Different views on common problems”).

The study confirmed that the intensity and content of the informal dialogue between the parties to the Karabagh conflict are currently at the lowest level since the beginning of the confrontation in 1988. Separate initiatives supported by international organizations and involving certain groups of Armenians and Azerbaijanis remain little known to the public. In contrast to the situation before, around, 2010, when the contacts and interaction between the non-governmental organizations and the journalists were carried out relatively autonomously from the official negotiation process, today their revival is directly dependent on the interest of decision-making personalities and structures at the state level. At the same time, as practice shows, the lack of communication in an informal format, adversely affects the nature of the official process of the problem resolution.

Distrust in matters regarding Nagorno-Karabagh largely determines the nature of relations not only between the representatives of Armenian and Azerbaijani societies, but also within each of them. Therefore, initiatives of a disruptive, challenging, “shock” nature, such as joint peace-making statements by the well-known public figures, or loud demonstrations rejecting stereotyped perceptions of each other, often lead to discrediting their initiators in the eyes of the public, or at best are ignored by the latter.

However, as the results of the study show, the parties depart from the total denial of the idea of Track-2 diplomacy, although they are not inclined to treat it with the enthusiasm inherent in the times after the end of the “hot phase” of the conflict in 1994. The linkage between the Track-1 and Track-2 does not imply the acceptability of artificial, manageable, manipulative forms of dialogue, such as so-called “civil platforms for peace” or meetings organized at the nomenclature level. Those were forgotten as quickly as sharply they had activated after the relative freezing of the vibrant interaction.

This does not mean giving up any formats of dialogue - be they initiated by absolutely independent organizations, “first ladies”, clerics or representatives of the Armenian or Azerbaijani diaspora - the main thing is that they are aware of the responsibility for any steps that can aggravate contradictions, and sincere interest in the modest but positive final result of their initiatives.

The study of different aspects of the conflict reveals which of them have a perspective in determining the content of the civil dialogue, and which are at risk zone and can hinder mutual understanding. Naturally, the factor of persons involved in the initiative with a specific content, as well as the degree of openness of the latter to the general public, is also important. At the same time, as the secondary analysis of the research data shows, preferences are given to the open contacts that send positive signals to the whole society.

One of the peculiarities of the study was the respondents' perception of their own role in it. Some of them, participating in the discussions or answering the questions, considered the problems regardless of their own affiliation to a particular party to the conflict, while the other part proceeded solely from their own national interests and aspirations. This difference of approaches has particularly affected the content of the thematic sections on the methods of settlement (peaceful or military), the formats of the negotiation process and, of course, the models for solving the problem. It is in these very sections that the most fundamental differences are recorded. And the conflict between the desired and the realistic, given the aspirations and capabilities of the other side, makes it difficult to find compromises.

Meanwhile, these disagreements are not the basis for the denial of the dialogue. The recognition of the priority of a peaceful settlement (even if a certain part of the societies allows war as an alternative in case of failure of negotiations) serves as a basis for at least attempts to find a common language. The mediation of the Minsk Group co-chairs, despite all the expressed discontent and preferences of other formats, is taken for granted and, at least, does not impede the dialogue. And actually the search for a settlement model is one of the tasks of interaction, therefore the temporary status quo despite the contradictions regarding its duration is another reality on the basis of which contacts can be built today. It should be borne in mind that any dialogue without a progress towards a solution to the problem sooner or later leads to fatigue. This factor, along with other obstacles, was one of the causes of the Track-2 crisis in the previous stages.

Another significant difference is due to the mutually controversial perceptions of the cause-and-effect relationships. For the majority of Armenian respondents, the involvement of the representatives of Nagorno-Karabagh in the frameworks of official negotiations and civil diplomacy, the normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations, the removal of restrictions on various forms of contacts and other steps towards reducing tension are conditions for an effective settlement process. For their Azerbaijani opponents all these steps should follow the result of the progress in the agreements achieved at the official level.

A characteristic feature of the study was the relative proximity of opinions of different categories of Armenian respondents, as well as the media, which became the object of monitoring, on most issues, while in Azerbaijan the positions differed significantly. This has affected attitudes connected to the “war and peace” thematics, and the assessments of the international organizations activities.

The comparison of the results of this study with the statements of the authorities and other categories of the public of previous years allows us to conclude that the current “disposition” of many aspects of the conflict was formed in the last three years and it was largely influenced by the April escalation of 2016. To be precise, the most tangible changes caused by the four-day war occurred in the mood of the Armenian public, including in the circles most prone to compromise – they became much tougher. Whereas in Azerbaijan the effect of the war and the changes of positions caused by it are less noticeable. In fact, the difference in the level of uncompromising attitude to many problems in Armenia and Azerbaijan has been significantly smoothed. On the one hand, this greater polarization of views may be a cause for concern, but on the other, it creates an environment in which participants in a potential dialogue are ready (or, more precisely, not ready) for it to the same extent. And however paradoxical it may sound, we cannot exclude that the new “disposition” will allow a better understanding of each other...

In addition to the relations of the parties to the results of the April war, the study recorded several topics that appeared in Azerbaijan and Armenia in “different weight categories” both in the perceptions of respondents and in media coverage. In particular, the Armenian public information sphere was largely focused on the topics related to the mission and format of the Minsk Group, the implementation of agreements on the expansion of the monitoring on the contact line, which were of less interest to the public of the neighboring country. In turn, Azerbaijan, according to the study, attached importance to a number of topics that were of much less interest to Armenia - in particular, the intervention of external players in the settlement, different aspects of relations between Baku and Moscow in the context of the Karabagh problem.

One of the themes of the study, where opinions were divided not on the national, but on the world view border, was the role of democratic reforms in the settlement of the conflict. Here, the assessment of the importance of this factor depended on whether the introduction of the principles of democracy was considered in the context of the same social sentiments that exist in the two countries in the current realities, or whether democratization was supposed to affect the approaches of citizens and society to various problems, including the conflict resolution. Accordingly, the first category of respondents, both in Armenia and Azerbaijan, considered democratic transformation as insignificant or even an obstacle to reaching agreement. And the second category was inclined to believe that these changes are important, if not a prerequisite for a stable settlement.

The difference of these positions was also projected on the attitude of the respondents and the media to the “velvet revolution” in Armenia. Some believed that it would not change

anything in the negotiation process, while others pinned certain hopes on it. At the same time, on the Armenian side, the limited influence of internal political changes was caused by the absence of such changes in Azerbaijan. And the majority of respondents and media publications in Azerbaijan reacted to the changes in the neighboring country with a certain degree of skepticism.

According to the study, the positions of the parties regarding the role of third countries, except Turkey, in the settlement of the Karabagh conflict turned out to be quite close. If we present them in a simplified way (a more detailed analysis is presented in the Chapter “Different views on common problems”), they are as follows:

- Russia has the greatest influence on Armenian-Azerbaijani relations and the situation in the South Caucasus as a whole. This influence is not always positive, but it should be taken for granted. Moscow is actively using its integration projects (EEU, CSTO) to strengthen its dominant position in the region.
- For the US, the settlement of the Karabagh conflict is not a priority of its foreign policy. For this country, stability in the region is important at this stage, regardless of whether a final solution to the problem is found or not. However, changes in Washington's policy are not excluded.
- The European Union has no effective levers of influence on Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. At the same time, it does not even use the existing levers of influence on the situation. This is partly due to the internal problems of the EU and the different positions of the member states regarding the Karabagh conflict.
- Georgia's balanced position deserves respect, although there is little it can do to resolve the problem. As any other country would do in that situation, Tbilisi seeks to use the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict in its own interests. The main role of Georgia is that it provides a space for dialogue between the parties.
- Turkey is viewed in Azerbaijan as an important factor in exerting pressure on Yerevan. In Armenia, Ankara's policy is regarded as destructive and impeding the solution of the region's problems.

All of the above research data and their detailed presentation in the relevant Chapter allow to more purposefully determine the agenda of Track-2 diplomacy, if better opportunities for its implementation are created than there exist now. Based on the answers of the focus group participants and the in-depth interviews in both countries, the following areas of cooperation can be identified as the most popular:

- humanitarian (providing assistance to the victims and those, who find themselves in a difficult situation due to the conflict, the joint solution of environmental problems, etc.);
- information (exchange of journalists, countering hybrid wars and formation of the image of the enemy, etc.);
- discussion at the expert level of the conflict resolution models. In particular, the joint analysis of the proposals put forward earlier (as the study showed, the ideas about them in Armenia and Azerbaijan, even at the expert level are quite different);
- studies allow to determine the sentiments of citizens, the impact on the process of settlement of the institutions, whose activities affect the conflict (political parties, civil society organizations, media, etc.).

The data of this study form the basis for the following recommendations of the project implementers:

1. All interested parties, structures and individuals are invited to consider the possibility of reviving the Armenian-Azerbaijani dialogue at the informal level in the new circumstances. It is recommended to be cautious, take into account the experience of previous contacts and avoid repeating mistakes.
2. The agenda of the joint initiatives should take into account the content of the formal negotiations between the parties.
3. The parties to the negotiation process should take into account the fact that the freezing of the “dialogue of the second level” and the complete alienation of the societies from each other cannot but have a negative impact on the effectiveness of formal negotiations.
4. International mediators are encouraged to contribute to the inclusion in the documents, following the official meetings and negotiations, of the specific points on the support of civic initiatives relevant to the corresponding stage of the Karabagh conflict settlement process.
5. In determining the priorities of Track-2 diplomacy to pay special attention to the initiatives that have a positive impact on the general public, to give priority to the thematic areas of cooperation that receive the greatest support of the conflict parties.
6. In order to determine the most effective forms of Track-2 diplomacy, regular independent studies should be carried out to measure the pulse of this process and the perception of different aspects of the conflict by the societies.
7. To use different formats of dialogue, including the interested parties (international, diaspora and other circles) taking into account the effectiveness of the issues raised in each of them.
8. To pay special attention to the reflection of the settlement process in the media. Facilitating mutual visits of journalists to the neighboring countries and the conflict zone, obtaining first-hand information, discussing professional problems, monitoring coverage of the Armenian-Azerbaijani relations in order to identify trends and timely respond to them.
9. To support the initiatives to develop codes of conduct for the participants in dialogue initiatives both in the media and in other professional areas.
10. International organizations, including donors, should consider the interest of the Armenian and Azerbaijani representatives of the civil society, experts and journalists to take greater responsibility for the implementation of projects and, in certain cases, cooperate without intermediaries.
11. To combine the use of the experience of the participants of Track-2 diplomacy at the previous stages and the enthusiasm of the representatives of the Azerbaijani and Armenian youth, on the involvement of which depend the prospects of the dialogue at the official level and the settlement of the conflict as a whole.

To read the full study in English please follow this link: https://ypc.am/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Armenia-Azerbaijan-Research_eng.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3vKWxhFtWoF5ii9o4oy58fXd5H0xR9L3So-n4lxNqwCb6ZjmFwGa7LnCI

To read the full study in Russian please follow this link: https://ypc.am/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Armenia-Azerbaijan-Research_rus.pdf.

This study of the Yerevan Press Club (Armenia) and “Yeni nesil” journalists’ union of Azerbaijan was coordinated by YPC President Boris Navasardian (boris@ypc.am)