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## Nagorny Karabakh's *De facto* Non-Governmental Organization Domain: Political Society vs. Civil Society?

By Nona Shahnazarian, St. Petersburg

*To mold and to raise a citizen is the long-term goal of the Nagorni Karabakh Republic.  
We were cut off from the flow of a peaceful life, and we have much to learn...*  
(G. Petrosyan, assistant/adviser to the NKR president, 2004)

### Abstract

This article traces the history of civil society in Nagorny Karabakh and provides an overview of the current situation.

### The Rise of the Civil Right Movement or Self-Determination?

Nagorny Karabakh was an autonomous region within Soviet Azerbaijan with a majority Armenian population. During the shaky days of Soviet rule, the Armenians of the Nagorny Karabakh Autonomous Oblast, encouraged by the notion of Perestroika and Glasnost, once again sought independence or reunification with Armenia, just as they had done through repeated petitions to Moscow as early as the 1960s. In 1988, an independent social movement emerged in Nagorny Karabakh and sought to move quickly. It was launched by the Krunk coalition, which consisted of 11 members under the leadership of A. Manucharov and was spearheaded by the Karabakh Committee *Council of Directors* (led by B. Arushanyan), and *Miatsum* (R. Kocharyan). This independent social movement worked through various dissident actions, challenging the pattern of post-totalitarian liberation, which can be considered decolonization actions and prerequisites for establishing a post-communist civil society.

On 30 August 1991, Azerbaijan announced its secession from the USSR. Immediately after that, in September, Baku annulled the special autonomous status of Karabakh (NKAO). In response, Karabakh successfully held a referendum creating an independent state on December 10<sup>th</sup>, the International Day of Human Rights. In the first parliamentary elections in 1991, ten seats were allocated to local Azerbaijanis. However, they refused to participate.

According to G. Petrosyan, as a consequence two parallel trends occurred—NK established a regular army and a civil society. Relations between these two sides reached a crisis when Defense Minister S. Babayan allegedly sought to assassinate President A. Ghukasyan in 2000. That was not the only problem. With little support from the international community, NK residents worked to prevent the merging of military and civic structures in NK post-war society. As a result, NK avoided the creation of an authoritarian entity, though in the context of full-scale war, it was necessary to make decisions quickly

(which was difficult given that the Soviet mentality considered any change extremely dangerous). The newly born state had to provide social programs, such as privatization, addressing inequality between the haves and have-nots through subsidies and pensions, and providing free education for the orphaned children (G. Petrosyan, 13.09.2004).

In establishing Karabakh and confronting Azerbaijan, the people of NK were far from passive. Grassroots level activism in the context of a power vacuum and the absence of state institutions was essential for survival. Ordinary people played an active role in the restoration and normalization of life in the conflict zone. Those turbulent events helped initiate the rise of civic identity, culture, and institutions. According to A. Gulyan (NKR Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2004), in the procedural sense, the situation with the NGO sector in the NKR was problematic because, due to the republic's unrecognized status, the civic/social institutions are not able to represent themselves on the international level. The fledgling self-proclaimed state faced many challenges coming from Azerbaijan's continual and incessant accusations of "terrorism" and "drug trafficking." "In response, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on several occasions invited various international organizations to conduct independent monitoring in different areas of state institutions. Their observations showed no abnormalities. Thus, the state frequently conducts itself as an NGO, trying to defend the elementary rights of citizens for security, mobility, access to information" (Ashot Ghulyan, MFA, 13.09.2004). Some international monitors and commissions after having observed other self-proclaimed states consider the situation in NKR as a paragon for others to emulate, including the civic liberties dimension, according to David Babayan, Head of the Information Department, NKR Presidential Office, in 2009.

### Structure of the NK Civic Sector

NK NGOs are developing networks at the national, regional and international level and this process is con-

stantly progressing. The shortlist of the most active NGOs include at the national/local level: NK Helsinki Initiative-92, Stepanakert Press Club, Centre for Civic Initiatives, European Friends' Society, Refugee (since 1988), Women, Veteran, Youth NGOs; at the regional level: IDP NGO network—GRINGO, POW—prisoners of war and hostages, Caucasus Forum for NGO Cooperation since 1998; while the international bodies include two diverse sources—Armenian Diaspora entities and western governmental and non-governmental organizations (INGOs): Consortium Initiative—LINC (the London Information Network on Conflicts and State-building), Catholic Relief Service, Conciliation Resource (CR), and International Alert (IA). Many successful initiatives were launched by NGOs like Red Cross International Committee, Medecins sans frontier (MSF-France), CICR, USAID, Safe Children, and Halo Trust (the project on de-mining). Four organizations, British Consortium, International Alert plus two more, financed by the British government are mostly involved in reconciliation efforts. The European Partnership for the Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (EPNK), funded by the European Union, seeks to positively impact the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement process, working with local partners in the South Caucasus on a wide range of peace-building activities to contribute to lasting peace in the region (made up of five member organizations) (epnk.org)

Some external and internal actors coordinate “national” civil society organizations in NKR—western Armenian Diaspora organizations, as well as the local branch of Dashnaktutyun. The Dashnak organizations educate young people in the military-patriotic tradition working in winter and summer youth camps; summer schools in English language taught by English-speaking foreigners of Armenian descent in remote villages; and other educational programs. Similarly, Diaspora funding also brings a nationalistic agenda close to governmental priorities (Diaspora affairs are regulated by NK Ministry of Foreign Affairs-MFA). Some representatives of the “former” western Diaspora, returnees, organize three month international youth camps in NK, like Birth Right Armenia's camps.

A number of factors influence the effectiveness and impact of NGOs in NKR: capacity, the political culture and environment as well as the nature of the society of which civil society itself forms a part. Poverty and inertia inherited from the Soviet era in the early period of statehood reduced the efficiency of NGOs. Because of the politicization of NGOs, in a way following Russian political standards, western funded NGOs are considered a fifth column. At the same time, from

the beginning the NKR authority showed its eagerness to demonstrate its viability. They assumed that the diversification of sources would facilitate the development of CSOs working on conflict-related activities, as well as human rights and democratization, or addressing specific problems, such as refugee issues. This multi-vector structure works as a way to overcome the limitations of resources, enhancing the effectiveness and impact and providing greater visibility and coherence to public actions. However, dependence on external funding can also marginalize CSOs and give them the image that they are co-opted and, in extreme cases, even traitors, especially when society is polarized. Impositions of the foreign donors' agenda, such as pushing for reconciliation and dialogue, has left local CSOs in fragile security conditions and has alienated them from the wider public. A strategy favored by governments in addressing the “threat” of NGOs as covert vehicles of opposition has been the proliferation of GONGOs—government-organized quasi-NGOs. A recent term that has come to describe GONGOs in Armenian is *grpanayin* (pocket) NGOs, a term used to describe NGOs seen as working for or “in the pocket” of the authorities (Hasanov, Ishkhanian, 2005).

## Donors

Following the Soviet collapse, democracy promotion became a central part of Western aid programs as civil society development came to be seen as critical for western style democratization and a successful transition. The US leads a successive policy in NKR since it is the only country that helps with post-war reconstruction of the country since 1998 (A. Gulyan, 2004). These efforts led to the phenomenal growth in the number of NGOs. Currently, there are approximately 135 registered public organizations (K. Ohanianian, 2013). There were about 71 NGOs in 2002, but only 7 or 8 were actually active (FIDH, 2003). *De facto* state aid was present and visible from the creation of Nagorno-Karabakh statehood. From the beginning of NKR, the authorities' cherished organizations are Veteran and Refugee NGOs. In the context of the general deprivation of former combatants and their relatives, these groups remain active political players, some of them also are well embedded into civic niches. As a result, war veterans as well as the widows of fallen combatants enjoy great respect and legitimacy.

The dialogue between the state and non-state institutions has become much more vigorous since 2005, when these interactions were put on a legal basis. The current legislature, according to experts' assessments, allows both organizations and individuals to realize full-fledged social activity. The juridical base for that

is formed by the laws (statute) on social organizations, trade unions, TV and media.

The registration procedure of CSOs is conspicuously easy; the government makes no obstacles for the improvement of civic institutions/organizations. Moreover in 2005 the NKR government decided to allow for CSOs expenses putting them into the state budget, which consists of two million Armenian Drams in total (the sum would be starkly inadequate without international grants). It seeks to support particular programs on a highly competitive basis. An ad hoc commission that distributes government grants for NGOs includes NGO leaders as well. About five NGOs receive state funding. Auditing procedures are stringent in spite of the fact that the accountability procedure is unprecedentedly transparent—financial reports are displayed online.

After 2007 there is a greater level of connectedness between governmental structures and mid- and top-level local NGOs. Leftist critique links this to the burgeoning of a real political opposition. The top local NGOs actually facilitate interactions and dialogue between state-actors and grassroots activists, linking them as mediators and exchanging essential information.

### CSOs and the Peace Process: Conflict Transformation and Resolution

The efficiency of CSOs action in the area of peacebuilding used to be extremely low. Previously Karabakh CSOs made contacts with the other side (Azeris) with suspicion, reflecting the manipulation of the conflict in domestic politics. In 1999 President Heydar Aliyev announced that “for as long as we have not signed a peace agreement with Armenia there is no need for cooperation between our NGOs and Armenians. When Kocharian and I resolve the issue, it will inevitably involve compromises with which many will disagree. Then let NGOs reconcile the two peoples.” In other words, NGOs are assigned the role not of active players in the peace process, but mitigators of public criticism directed at their leaders. The authorities of the three republics tried to maintain their monopoly in the negotiation process and peacemaking. Particularly, in 2005 the regime was more reluctant than ever to loosen its monopoly on peacemaking (Hasanov, Ishkhanian 2005).

Attempts by civil society actors to influence the Armenian–Azerbaijani peace process actually have been simultaneous in their emergence. Though there was also a problem of incorporating Karabakh Armenians into the Armenian–Azerbaijani peace dialogue because of Baku’s reluctance to approve meetings between the Azerbaijanis and Karabakh Armenians. This has been in part a question of access, as Baku and Stepanakert have

not been able to agree on a common mandate arrangement allowing international NGOs to have a mutually approved presence in Nagorny Karabakh. Nonetheless, since 1994 civil society initiatives, often working in very difficult conditions, have addressed various issues, including the protection of human rights, the release of hostages and prisoners of war (POWs), watchdog activities in Shushi prison (supervised by A. Voskanian, who progressed from the Soviet style *silovik* into a human right activist). The professionalization of CSOs improved their ability to impact the conflict. It also makes CSOs work visible. Nevertheless, the “give us your armaments and we’ll provide your security” formula of the Madrid principles still has no credibility even among the NKR’s most advanced and democratic NGOs (Gegham Baghdasaryan, 2014). The breaking point was the 2008 Russo–Georgian war, when conflict resolution became a top issue.

The return of the refugee topic is a litmus test for NK NGOs—ten years ago there was no way of even discussing it. It was partly provoked by Baku’s policy of non-integration and resettlement of IDPs close to the front line (since 2006). Nonetheless the return is now at least a debated topic and can be discussed in a context of stability. Local NGOs in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nagorny Karabakh have organized and participated in dialogues between the parties involved in the conflict, they have worked for the release of POWs, organized youth camps, and led civic education and conflict resolution training programs as well as skills training programs for refugees and IDPs. The aim of these activities has been to keep the lines of communication open, to allow individuals from Armenia and Azerbaijan to meet, and to combat processes of de-humanization and enemy stereotyping (Hasanov, Ishkhanian 2005).

In addition to NGOs, there are some smaller grassroots organizations comprised of refugees, the mothers or wives of soldiers, and families of hostages or POWs. These organizations often work with NGOs and there is an increasing tendency for these organizations to institutionalize over time and to register as NGOs themselves. Armenian diaspora communities, particularly those in the US, have lobbied for foreign aid and publicized the Armenian position. Although diaspora NGOs and individuals from the US, Europe, and the Middle East have contributed to humanitarian aid and development initiatives since independence, there has been little in the way of cooperation with and support for local NGOs involved in peacebuilding and conflict resolution initiatives in Armenia. On the contrary, some diaspora organizations, especially nationalist political parties, have taken more intransigent positions.

## The Role of the EU

EU involvement in the civil society domain in Armenia and Azerbaijan has been very limited. In 2005 some experts reported that, inside Nagorny Karabakh the EU is completely absent, and there is a long road ahead before it is regarded as a trust-worthy partner by local CSOs (Mailyan, 2012). The EU–Armenia ENP Action Plan was launched in 2006. From 2007 to the present, Frank Engel, a member of the European Parliament, who visited NKR in April 2014 and then made assurances that Armenia's attachment to the Custom Union will not affect the EU's active position in NKR, has declared that conflict resolution in Eurasia has gradually become a priority for the EU and its member states (Propescu 2007). The NK conflict rose to the top of the EU's agenda only after the 5-day war in South Ossetia, in 2008. Moreover, the gradual improvement of Armenian–Turkish relations has also opened a window of opportunity for movement in the NK peace process. Though the Armenian–Turkish rapprochement failed, the mechanism of confidence building measures was improved.

The EU impact on civil society has mainly been built through the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), which was missing a direct link to conflict resolution. Until the ENP was in place, the European Commission focused on the promotion of legislative reforms, strengthening the rule of law and democratic institutions in the framework of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA) and TACIS program (Simao 2010). Nevertheless, the EU has to compete with other donors (including the Armenian Diaspora) for an impact on civil society and conflict resolution, since it remains a relatively complex and new donor in the region.

## Youth NGOs

The NK Ministry on cultural affairs, Education, Sport & Youth oversees a Council Youth NGO. It is noteworthy to mention that 11 organizations come under the wing of the Youth Council and they are currently working on developing a draft of a law on youth. The creation of an All-Armenian Youth organization with an office in NKR's capital is also on the agenda.

## Women's Organizations and Networks

A striking feature of NGOs in the former Soviet states is the considerable number of women involved. Some regional initiatives are important for this cluster. Women from Armenia and Azerbaijan have been working together through NGOs as well as transnational advocacy networks to promote peacebuilding and conflict resolution. An example of women's NGOs' collaborative efforts is the Transcaucasus Women's Dialogue, which was established in 1994 under the aegis of the National

Peace Foundation in Washington, DC. From 1997–99, the Transcaucasus Women's Dialogue organized various projects involving the environment, democratic rights and education, including a three-year summer school at Tbilisi State University. Another women's regional initiative was the "Working Together—Networking Women in the Caucasus" program (1997–2002) sponsored by the Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe (IDEE) with funding from the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the US Department of State. "Working Together" was a program for women leaders in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia to promote greater cross-border networking. Through a range of training, civic education, NGO development and cross-border networking activities, the IDEE programs attempted to enhance the leadership abilities and capacity of women leaders and their NGOs, and to advance women's participation in public life.

Specific contextual factors can also enhance or curtail the efficiency of CSOs action in the gender equality movement. Nagorny Karabakh's women say they are tougher now than they were, and that the society will not turn back. "War has so hardened us women," said Julietta Arustamyan, the widow of a fallen officer and now head of the Harmony NGO (K. Ohanyan & A. Danielyan, the Armedia news agency; Shahnazarian 2011). The Karabakh war changed women's role with women retaining the greater equality they gained on the frontline. Just three ministers and five members of parliament are women, but in the non-governmental and business sectors women often outnumber men. That is a major reverse for a society that was strictly traditional towards the end of the Soviet period, with women crediting much of the change to the full part they took in the fighting. "Despite the fact that the main burden in actual fighting was born by men, the role of women in the war was no less important," said Zhanna Krikorova, chairwoman of the International Cooperation Centre of Nagorny Karabakh, which coordinates connections between non-governmental organizations in Karabakh with international non-governmental bodies.

There is no law regulating the number of women who should hold particular jobs, but politicians say female representation is increasing steadily. Some 29 per cent of judges are now women, and four of the 12 ministers are women, as are four of the 33 members of parliament. "I do not think there are any restrictions on women's participation. We are more concerned with improving the living standards of our citizens," according to Ludmila Barseghyan, one of the four women in parliament. Most women in NK believe their rights are respected. Narine Aghabalyan, minister for culture and youth issues, says the proportion of women in top jobs is higher in Kara-



bakh than in Armenia, so they do not suffer discrimination and are happy with their position in life.

Still there are some limitations on the influence of CSOs in NK (LGBT rights) which has its own ideological explanations. Domestic violence is considered as an irrelevant topic in NK because of non-involvement into family/citizens' private life. Women in Karabakh are unlikely to speak out against domestic violence, since they do not see it as being in any way abnormal. Hasmik Khachatryan, a judge in the Karabakh Appeals Court, said the paucity of domestic violence cases before the courts was not a reason for complacency. However, this could mean that women are keeping quiet about domestic violence. "I cannot say for sure whether women's human rights are being violated or not, but I think they are," said J. Arustamyan, the above mentioned head of Harmony. "Nor can I say why girls do well at school and university, but the jobs mostly go to men. Not only that, but more senior the position, the more it is to be held by a man."

### Free Speech

Freedom of expression seems to suffer from the general situation. There is no official censorship. However there is no circulation of ideas and opinions that would represent any opposition to government. The role of media is a fundamental aspect in the formation of local perceptions. An NK authority official reported in 2004 that "We do not have democratic media, except Demo newspaper (issued in Armenian and Russian). It positively poses sharp questions. There is the Helsinki [Initiative]-92 organization, but that is the only case" (G. Petrosyan 2004). However, the situation has radically changed over the last ten years. Since 2004 projects under EIDHR (EU) have focused on improving media standards. One of the most notorious initiatives is the Cross Caucasus Journalism Network, implemented by Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), which includes journalists from Nagorno Karabakh. Among the local entities, the Stepanakert Press Club (which was founded in 1998) is one of the key NGOs in NKR. It is connected with relevant journalist associations in the Caucasus and Russia, creating possibilities for the free circulation of ideas. It collaborated with the above mentioned "Demo" independent newspaper (2004–2008). The latter was replaced by the monthly Analyticon magazine (TheAnalyticon.com) that gave voice to the political and intellectual opposition and covered wider regional aspects.

A special law on the press has been adopted, similar to the one in Armenia. Particular space is given to Helsinki Initiative-92 (HI-92). Its founder Karen Ohanian made an unprecedented declaration immediately

after the tragic events in Hovak, crying out for the human rights of the civilians who suffered in "a spontaneous genocide" committed by irregular bandit units. Today HI-92 is one of the most prosperous and multi-funded (including state support) NGOs in Stepanakert. The trilingual on-line daily newspaper "Karabakh Open" touches upon NKR's economy, policy, sport and other societal problems and receives methodological and financial support both from international donors and the local authorities. The global Armenian Diaspora is reluctant to help this organization because of its national romanticism.

Still there are taboo topics such as the army, pacifism, and LGBT and gender inequality issues (some local experts consider that some of them are not discussed because of their irrelevance to the NK's social reality and society in general). The most problematic niches are sexual minorities, as well as religious ones (Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses). During the war and subsequently unfavorable attitudes were reported towards Jehovah's Witnesses because they were seen as "unpatriotic" for refusing military service. "Legalization" of those topics would be ideologically too dangerous for the authorities. Although there has not been widespread military confrontation between the two sides for 20 years, the current cease-fire is fragile. Religious minorities are often seen as advocating pacifism, which is deeply unpopular with the government. Nevertheless, there is some visible improvement even in this domain. The situation in the army is now a hotly debated topic in the NKR. Under pressure from several CSOs some tangible measures were undertaken to fix the situation in military institutions. One can see substantial, even radical changes in "hierarchical" relationships in the army. This change nurtures space for other relevant social movements. The soldiers' mother movement (there is no formidable NGO yet) has great potential at the moment, looking like a rare prospect for united Armenian–Azerbaijani civic actions to improve reconciliation in the long run.

### Human Rights

Individual and collective complaints are currently impossible because of NKR's unresolved status. Since 2004 projects under the EU's European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) have focused on improving human rights protection, as well as local government and elections. Additionally, the fact that from the early stage of NKR's statehood, the institution of the prison was present speaks volumes (W. Reno, 2004). Albert Voskanyan, a blogger and leader of the "Centre for Civic Initiatives" NGO, is the only one who monitored the Shushi prison and was in the center of organizing the hostage exchange that took place there.

## Coda

Karabakh, which has declared independence from Azerbaijan but has not been recognized internationally, is out of the mainstream of political and economic life in the region. The conflict over Nagorny Karabakh, pitting Armenia and Azerbaijan against each other, is the longest conflict in the OSCE area and a fundamental security threat to the South Caucasus and surrounding regions, preventing full and inclusive economic development and constraining regional relations. Although NKR has unrecognized status and is a kind of hybrid (not quite consolidated) democracy today, the current

situation features fundamental freedoms and NGOs, which are necessary for the development of civil society. Experts see positive dynamics. Civic actors may have particular capacities to channel the concerns of their own constituencies to the leadership, and to open difficult or taboo subjects. Most of the NGO projects can at best have an indirect impact on conflict transformation and resolution. CSOs play a huge role in stopping the mutual process of de-humanization between Armenians and Azerbaijanis who are constantly surrounded by militaristic rhetoric.

## About the Author

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