

## NAGORNO-KARABAGH CONFLICT - SOME FACTS

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Karabagh, as its name indicates in Turkish "Karabağ" means "black vine-yard" while Nagorno, added afterwards by the Russians and means "mountainous" or, better still, "upper"- can very easily become a touristic land, in fact just like the whole of Caucasus. It is a province of 4392 square kilometres situated roughly at the centre of Azerbaijan. Its first known inhabitants were the Iskits (Scyths) and the Albans, all kin to Azerbaijanis. The main Armenian migrations came rather late and with the help of Russians, towards the middle of the 19th century. Until very recently, before the Karabagh Azerbaijanis had to flee, the area's population could be described as a mosaic or rather as a Karabagh rug or kilim, those colourful handmade masterpieces which symbolise so well what these talented people can do together if and when they can coexist in peace and prosperity. Unfortunately Karabagh is known today in the world not by its natural assets or the artistic talents of its inhabitants, but by a cruel armed conflict resulting in continuous suffering for all concerned. In spite of the efforts of the international community, mainly through the OSCE mechanism, this conflict remained unresolved with all its unavoidable implications for regional and international security. By now the cause of the conflict is known to all. While Azerbaijanis rightly consider Karabagh, which is situated within their country, as their own territory and its inhabitants as Azerbaijani citizens, the Karabagh Armenians, basing themselves on the autonomous status attributed by the Soviet Regime to the area, demanded independence and expressed desire for a union with the Armenian Republic, the western neighbour of Azerbaijan. After the collapse of the Soviet system these Armenian claims and the Azerbaijani reaction resulted in bloody clashes with much loss of life and brought also Azerbaijan and Armenia to a state of armed hostility.

My aim here is not to dwell on the details of this confrontation nor to speculate on the real intentions of the various opponents or parties including Armenia, although the Armenian leadership from the outset extended quite open encouragement, moral and material support to the Armenians of Karabagh. I want simply to shed some light on an episode in which I was closely involved, namely the CSCE negotiations which took place between June 1992 and August 1993 within the framework of the so-called Minsk Group, and with the participation of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, France, Germany, Italy, the Russian Federation, Sweden, Turkey and the United States of America. Armenian and Azerbaijani representatives of Nagorno-Karabagh were also invited on an informal basis.

In fact it all started quite well. Our task was clear enough. In conformity with the decisions approved by the CSCE bodies, therefore also by the Armenians, we had to define the required emergency measures in order to ensure the cessation of hostilities, the withdrawal of the Armenian forces from Lachin (an Azeri town situated on the line of communication between Karabagh and Armenia) and Shusha (in Karabagh and again historically and culturally very dear to the Azerbaijanis, being hometown of many Azerbaijani poets, composers, intellectuals), both occupied by the Armenians in defiance of the said CSCE decisions. Thus we hoped to pave the way to a conference to be held in Minsk in order to find a peaceful solution to the conflict in accordance with the principles of the CSCE. The negotiations were held at the magnificent Villa Madama overlooking Rome, generously put at our disposal by the Italian chairman of the Minsk Group. But, in spite of these rather encouraging conditions, we soon realised that we were heading towards a deadlock. Our difficulties stemmed mainly from the intransigence and the uncooperative attitude of the Armenian side. The Armenian representatives continuously pursued obstructionist tactics together with the representatives of the Armenian inhabitants of Nagorno-Karabagh, who after a two month-long empty-seat policy, came to Rome only to state that they could not accept equal treatment with the representatives of the Azerbaijanis of Nagorno-Karabagh and asked for national status.

Such conditions were of course incompatible with the relevant CSCE decisions and, therefore, unacceptable to Azerbaijan. It was obvious that matters relating to the status

question were not included into the mandate of the Minsk Group and these had to be dealt with in the Minsk Conference. So through acrimonious polemics between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, the negotiations stalled while fighting continued in the field. Nevertheless, in our session of March 1993, we were able to realise an agreement on the terms of reference of the team which we hoped would monitor the cessation of hostilities. This was of course rather a small step but led us to expect a breakthrough in the process. Unfortunately, our expectations were short-lived. At the following session, out of the blue, we received the news of Armenian occupation of another Azerbaijani city, Kelbajar, situated in the north-west of Karabagh. This was a most unwelcome happening, something like a deliberate blow, a coup de grâce, to the whole process. In fact, from then on, the Armenian offensive continued in and around Karabagh, resulting in the occupation of 20 per cent of Azerbaijani territory, with around one million refugees who are today enduring their third winter in the most harsh conditions before the curiously indifferent eyes of the international community.

The Minsk Group still exists today, but unfortunately in spite of all its efforts no solution is in sight.

At present Azerbaijan may seem to all as the losing side of course, mainly because of its military inability, but certainly not because of its lack of bravery. Contrary to the Armenians, Azerbaijanis did not get the outside military support they needed. On the other hand, on the substance of the matter, they could not in any way prejudice their position before the final stage of negotiations; but the fact that they had agreed to participate in the Minsk Conference together with the representatives of the Armenian inhabitants of Karabagh, showed their willingness to find a peaceful compromise for the resolution of the conflict. In the meantime, they had to defend their territorial integrity as far as they could.

The Armenian side's position is, to say the least, ambiguous. The Kelbajar action and the operations which followed it put a big question mark on their real intentions. Do not all these point to an expansionist policy rather than a struggle for legitimate rights? One wonders. They may very well become prisoners of their own ambitions. Furthermore time could be on the side of Azerbaijan after all.

From an objective assessment of the present situation, one can only derive the obvious conclusion that a need for a solution is now more urgent than ever. And the mandate and the work of the Minsk Group still constitute a framework for such an outcome. It does not prejudice the position of the parties while it renders possible a constructive dialogue on a fair basis.

The illegal occupation of Azerbaijanis territory is quite obviously a blatant violation of all international principles. Certainly no one can -and no one did- condone such a situation. There is today a de facto cease-fire. It is insufficient but it provides an opportunity to be seized by all, in particular by the Karabagh Armenians for they cannot continue to exist in temporary, elusive conditions and feel secure about it.

The aim of all the people in the Caucasus should be, without doubt, to realise as soon as possible harmonious relations through independent cooperation among themselves and avoid a Balkanization of the region.

By creating such conditions they will finally seize the opportunity that the unexpectedly great upheaval brought them in recent years and open new horizons for themselves and the entire region.

For the neighbouring states including Russia -which was intimately involved in the conflict- such an evolution in the long-run will also serve their own interest, being the only rational outcome for the historical changes Russians in their exemplary realism offered to the whole world. Otherwise, everything will fall back into the sterile conditions of the recent past.