



THE EUROPEAN PARTNERSHIP FOR THE PEACEFUL SETTLEMENT OF THE CONFLICT OVER NAGORNO-KARABAKH

Progress and prospects



THIS INITIATIVE IS FUNDED
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About EPNK

The European Partnership for the Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (EPNK) is a European civil society initiative which seeks to work with local partners in the South Caucasus on a wide range of programmes and projects to positively impact the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement process. The partnership builds on previous work that its five member organisations carried out in this field, individually or in groups, such as the Consortium Initiative (2003–2009). The members of the partnership are: Conciliation Resources, Crisis Management Initiative, International Alert, Kvinna till Kvinna and the London Information Network on Conflicts and State Building.

EPNK activities, which are funded by the European Union, started in June 2010. The period since has been one of the most challenging in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement process. The peace process itself, under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group, has so far been unable to achieve a long-expected and much hoped for breakthrough. The rhetoric coming from both government and societies across the conflict divide has been increasingly polarised and highly charged, making the work of EPNK more and more difficult.

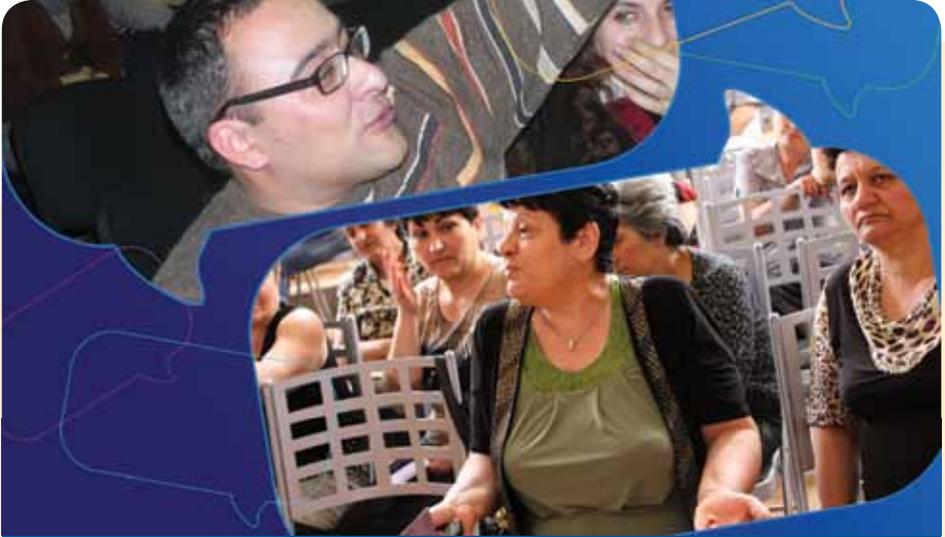


Nonetheless, the partnership has been able to maintain a dynamic dialogue between a wide range of Armenian and Azerbaijani policymakers, media and civil society actors – including relevant activists in and from Nagorno-Karabakh itself. This has contributed to mutual understanding and confidence building – essential ingredients for any sustainable peaceful resolution of the conflict.

The work of EPNK is organised around three themes: media, public policy and conflict-affected groups. Its work is organised in a flexible manner so that it can evolve quickly in response to the broader regional dynamics. The partnership's activities, while mutually re-enforcing, are also free-standing so that problems in one sector will not slow down the rest.

EPNK provides an innovative framework for European non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to work in, supported by the European Union. This framework operates in complex contexts and with multiple local partners.

The following case studies give a flavour of the range of activities underway as part of the EPNK initiative.



Breaking down barriers through film

The film-show project helping build bridges between Armenians and Azerbaijanis

Over the past year, people divided by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict have had a rare chance to get a glimpse of life on the other side thanks to a film project funded by EPNK. The films on show have all been made by young Azerbaijanis and Karabakh Armenians involved in a bridge-building initiative called “Dialogue Through Film”.

Set up by the British NGO Conciliation Resources, “Dialogue Through Film” helps young people divided by war to work together. So far, the participants have made more than 30 films recounting stories of life, love, laughter and sadness in communities affected by the Karabakh conflict.

Audiences in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh are now getting a chance to watch the films at a series of monthly screenings in local community centres. A total of 90 film screenings have been planned over a 15-month period – two per month each in towns and villages across Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh, with audiences of around 30 people taking part. Each screening is followed by a discussion, moderated by local partner organisations.

This gives people the chance to share their reactions and to talk more broadly about the conflict. As Anahit Grigorian of the Stepanakert Press Club, who is one of screening moderators in Nagorno-Karabakh, outlined: 'Thanks to these films, we can find out about the fears of people living on the other side of the conflict and hear what they think about us.'

'Projects like these are helping to break down the atmosphere of enmity that exists between us, so we can talk more calmly about our problems and how to resolve them.'

ANAHIT GRIGORIAN, STEPANAKERT PRESS CLUB, NAGORNO-KARABAKH

Watching the films can be an extremely emotional experience. In the 17 years since the war ended, there has been very little contact between the opposing sides. For the older generation, the films allow them to reconnect with a lost world of once familiar places and people. For young people, the films offer an alternative image to the enemy stereotypes that they have grown up with. For many, they are a revelation. Farid Zulfugarov, who attended a film screening in the Azerbaijani town of Gyanja, explained: 'These films help us to see that young people in Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia are all facing the same kind of problems. We would never be able to make connections like that by watching television or reading our daily newspapers.'



Youth building peace through dialogue

Young leaders break down barriers of hate to work for peace in their communities

'A new generation of youth is growing up, between which the chasm of misunderstanding is broadening. They are active people, they influence their societies and thus the chasm between the whole societies is growing too', says Ilgar Velizade, a senior journalist and peacebuilding trainer. He and nine of his senior colleagues have been working for the last year with a group of 21 young leaders from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh.

The senior, experienced peacebuilders have been training and mentoring young women and men from the generation that will take over from them in working for peace in the South Caucasus. 'We've achieved a lot', says Edgar Khachatryan, a professional peacebuilder and trainer. 'The youth have changed; they have become ready for dialogue and cooperation. The hate which was inside them has begun to evaporate. They have grown in knowledge and as human beings. They are no longer indifferent; they care about how this conflict affects their society.'

The young leaders involved in the project received specialised training in peacebuilding and then an opportunity and resources to design and implement their own peacebuilding mini-projects. They then met face to face in nearby Georgia to get to know each other, share the results of their projects and build a common team across the conflict divide. For many of the participants it was the experience of a lifetime. Ilgar explains: 'The most important effect is from contact and communication, because the gap between people and between societies is so great that even meeting each other is very risky. We managed to achieve contact, which is crucial, although it was a very difficult process'.

At the end of the 12 months working on their own projects and after the days spent together in Georgia, the young participants said:

'It was not just a dialogue between us; it was a stage where I could stand and see who I am, and what I should do for a better future.'

'I understood that people trust me and believe in me, so I want to use this ability of mine to do something good.'

FIDAN AND HAIK

'Dealing with Azerbaijani young people made me more tolerant and I also changed my attitude towards this nation.'

'I do want very much to continue this work.'

TIGRAN AND NIGAR

'I never liked Azerbaijanis, because I always heard only bad things from the speeches of some of their politicians. But a lot of things have changed now. When I met and was able to communicate with the young people, I liked them. I understood the fact that they cannot be blamed for our conflict. Besides, something has changed in me. I began to appreciate people. I began to take into consideration others' opinions. I began to think about things from different angles, taking into consideration every point.'

'At first, I did not think and even imagine that the participation in this project would change something in me – not just something, but the views on some things that are important to me. It's very hard to renounce your beliefs or even to understand that some of your beliefs are not true, but you know, I'm glad that there has been such a transformation in my subconscious.'

ASHOT AND MARINA

'Thanks to this project, I saw a new world – the world that I have desired. I finally found those people with whom we can struggle for peace.'

ILKIN

'I dreamed for many years about such a project', said Janna Krikorova, a journalist, civil society activist and peacebuilding trainer. 'Today, when I see concrete results, I feel incredibly happy. None of the youngsters who took part in the dialogue will say now that they should hate the Azerbaijanis. Many of them grew fond of each other and miss each other now. They don't want to hate anymore. Now their interest is to work together.'

'We work to cure the sickness of hate between the youth, to allow them to focus on developing themselves and their societies.'

JANNA KRİKOROVA

'The essence of the project is to build a team of young leaders from the opposing sides of the conflict, who will become like-minded and able to implement peacebuilding projects', said Rahman Badalov, a philosopher and peacebuilding mentor for the youth. 'Let's not forget that politicians have burdened the shoulders of the youth with a mutual lack of acceptance and some historians have made them hostages of a history of mutual hatred.'

On the future of the project, civil society representative Tevan Poghosyan says: 'We need to increase the network of the young people involved in the project, so that more and more people think about cooperation and not conflict. The youth want to continue. We have opened a window in their consciousness and a desire in their hearts and that's a great thing.'



Kvinna till Kvinna



Pushing the limits

Armenian and Azerbaijani young women's activism for peace

As part of the ongoing work to promote women's empowerment and participation in peace processes, the Swedish foundation Kvinna till Kvinna supports the organising and strengthening of young Armenian and Azerbaijani women affected by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The foundation encourages women to take peace building initiatives, break enemy images and strengthen their potential for dialogue. In September 2011, 12 young Armenian and Azerbaijani women went to Israel and Palestine to discuss with and learn from Israeli and Palestinian women's rights and peace activists.

Across the globe, young women and girls face the risk of being discriminated against simply because of their gender. Patriarchal norms, prevalent in all societies, take a strong hold in conflict-stricken societies. Such norms affect young women in particular and restrict their lives. Young women are often subjected to violence, denied sexual and reproductive health and rights, and deprived of their freedom of movement and the opportunity to meet and organise.

The study trip to Israel and Palestine was the culmination of a one-year mobilisation to empower young women affected by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to become future leaders and prime movers for peaceful and sustainable developments in their communities. In partnership with the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, four local Armenian and Azerbaijani women's organisations worked together to empower young women so that they can use and build on their own strengths, learn to cooperate across all borders and be part of the change needed to promote a sustainable peace. Hundreds of young women have taken part in seminars and trainings on women's rights and peace building. The aim has been to empower young women to take part in decision-making processes in society.

‘We have discussed a lot with young women the issue of gender roles. They say that the predominant social norm is that politics is a male domain and that women should be passive. But after our seminars, the young women said that they were ready to be part of all processes related to solving the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.’

RENA TAHIROVA, A MEMBER OF THE AZERBAIJAN FEMINIST GROUP OF YUVA HUMANITARIAN CENTER

During the study trip, the group of 12 young Armenian and Azerbaijani women, together with Israeli and Palestinian women's rights activists, discussed and explored definitions of peace building and security. In particular, they examined young women's needs and discussed how they can contribute to such work through their own activism or political and social organising.

‘With this trip, we wanted to contribute to the young women's ability to speak with confidence on their needs and views with regard to their own security and human rights, to push the limits for traditional gender roles.’

SOFIE WESTERBERG, KVINNA TILL KVINNA.



Staying the course

Peacebuilding experts from Cyprus and Northern Ireland share their experiences

In the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the divisions are deep and protracted: there is almost no contact between societies and hardly any interaction between people living on different sides of the divide; images of “the enemy” and a hostile language of blame are widespread in the mainstream debate. As one observer notes: ‘Both sides see themselves as the victim and the other side as the perpetrator of all wrong doing. The nationalistic discourse among politicians and in the media is accepted by all as the norm. Those who try to understand the other side’s point of view are seen as traitors.’ The media reinforces negative stereotypes and “blame narratives”, which in turn shape public attitudes and inhibit balanced debate about the peace process within societies as well as dialogue between them. This widespread division makes governments and societies hostages to maximalist positions and averse to compromise.

There is no single magic formula in this context. However, a series of roundtable discussions organised by International Alert between prominent political figures and experts from the Northern Ireland and Cyprus conflicts, along with politicians and public figures from the region, sought to raise an important point for discussion: ‘however intractable a conflict is, however long it has gone on for, however many times negotiations have failed in the past, it is still possible to find a solution if leaders and societies believe they can achieve peace and demonstrate the patience and endurance necessary to get there.’ Peace processes need to continue regardless of how intractable

the problems may seem. Jonathan Powell, one of the chief negotiators in the Northern Ireland peace process, referred to this as the “bicycle theory”: ‘if you let it fall over, it is incredibly difficult to get it up and running again. So you must keep it moving!’

These debates, however modest in scale, injected alternative, nuanced and balanced messages into the public discourse across the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict divide. The rare moderate voices heard during the debates emphasised that ‘you can only get to a lasting peace when both sides come out of the negotiation feeling like winners rather than feeling that something has been imposed on them’. This can only be achieved through a compromise that is both meaningful and realistic for all sides – in other words, it is ‘not about what the parties want but about what they decide they can live with’.

The larger audiences of the media outlets began to hear a new discourse: that the only way to achieve trust between the two sides is by avoiding tension and by continuing to talk to each other. As one participant outlined: ‘Improvement in communication could then help to reduce prejudices and increase mutual understanding of each other’s perceptions and concerns. The resulting positive climate would be more conducive to the much-needed generation of innovative ideas on how to achieve a mutually acceptable negotiated solution.’

The events’ participants – encompassing policymakers and representatives of authorities, parliamentarians and leaders of opposition parties, along with journalists, civil society leaders and young people – discussed the role that media and social institutions can play in contributing to the sense of mutual gain rather than a zero sum game. They discussed how ‘the politicians on each side need to think about the views and feelings of the other side, and not just their own side, if the agreement is to be successfully sold to the people’. As one participant explained:

‘You need to get to know the other, to understand how they experienced the conflict, and to understand their hopes and aspirations for the future.’

However, the main lesson that was spread across the conflict divide was regarding the need to maintain the goodwill and efforts, because ‘peace is a process not an event’ or a piece of paper. Successful closure can only be achieved through a negotiation process that is accompanied by confidence-building measures and a process of reconciliation. ‘This takes a lot of work, patience and courage’ but is absolutely essential for achieving a lasting settlement.


commonspace.eu
a forum for all those interested in Armenian-Azerbaijani
relations and the future of the Caucasus Region

Developing public policy and creating spaces for dialogues

Public policy development

An essential part of the work of LINKS, in the framework of EPNK, has been to map out the positions of important political and social stakeholders on the conflict and conflict settlement process. Face-to-face interviews were held with leaders and senior officials of 46 political parties in Armenia and Azerbaijan, with important political and social leaders in and from Nagorno-Karabakh, and with a range of other stakeholders. The results of the interviews with the political leaders were discussed in policy seminars held in December 2010 in Baku (Azerbaijan) and Yerevan (Armenia).

As a partner with extensive experience of engaging with the politics of the region, LINKS also regularly provides updates on the situation to other project partners and to the wider international community, when requested.

Media

In addition, LINKS has initiated a collaborative project with two media outlets – one in Armenia and one in Azerbaijan. Run by LINKS, the ArmlInfo News Agency of Armenia and the 1news.az news portal of Azerbaijan, **commonspace.eu** is a web portal that offers a space for dialogue on issues related to Armenian-Azerbaijani relations and the future of the Caucasus region. The portal is delivered in English and Russian. Given that the sides are engaged in an information war, managing such a portal has its difficulties. However, the overall positive tone of the site makes it an important addition to the information space on the conflict and its ancillary topics.

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