

Interview with Anahit Bayandur

Speaking Out

Elections Today: How would you assess the health of civil society in Armenia today?

Anahit Bayandur: There are over 1,000 NGOs. However, among these, only 20 to 30 take on civic responsibilities. But it is an ongoing process and NGOs have a future, especially now that they have gained experience, share information and are able to cooperate. Some NGOs have come together in forums, especially those that work for human rights. Despite this, the president and parliament do whatever they want and they do not intend to change. Things are tense in Armenia; the opposition has announced its intention to come to power. People are very disappointed in politics – and tired.



ET: In 2002, Armenia committed itself to bringing its national legislation into conformity with European human rights laws. In your opinion, is sufficient progress being made toward that goal?

AB: No, it is just a formality. It is just like during Soviet times: there were rules to playing the game in that system and now there are rules for playing the game in European democratic systems. They have learned the rhetoric, but it is all a formality. The people in power are very rigid, and they never check in with the people. They have their own agenda, and that is the most important thing to them.

ET: How might the actions of civil society organizations promote progress on this issue?

AB: Certainly, there are people who are willing to speak out. There are still a couple of independent newspapers. But the country is very small and the political position of each person is known. During the elections, NGOs and independent members of the press protested when Arthur Sakunts (coordinator of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly in Vanadzor, Armenia) was arrested. Several organizations united and appealed to the government to release him, which it did. In that sense, there is an established system, an established procedure. But too often the government does its own thing. Unfortunately, these united actions can't completely change the system, though in some cases they can partially influence the process and minimize abuses. This is mitigated by the fact that these organizations are supported by international organizations. This support is really important.

ET: What are the largest challenges facing former Soviet states in the transition to democracy? How can civil society help overcome these challenges?

AB: First, there is the region's isolation from the rest of the world. People there do not know enough about democracy in other

parts of the world. Armenians do not know what level of public discussion other citizens have. They don't have the Internet to stay informed; rather they are more concerned with surviving. But at the same time, when they get invited to events, they are interested and want to get involved.

The second challenge is Russia. There are a lot of negative processes going on in Russia, moving away from democracy. This is true in Armenia, too. Our government looks to Russia and aligns with Russia. The cultural and historical ties with Russia get confused with political ties. It is very interesting; I came out against the political line of the Russian government, and people said, "You lived in Russia, you speak Russian. How can you say these things?" But this is different. You can love Chekhov but not like Putin. Such is the situation and there is a lot of work to be done. It is a dire situation.

“People...do not know enough about democracy in other parts of the world.”

Another challenge is the unresolved conflicts in the region. Georgians and Azeris have worked well together since the war, but it is often difficult to meet. Azeris are afraid to come to Armenia and Armenians have not been able to travel to Baku for the past two years. Right now international organizations need to pressure the government of Azerbaijan. It cannot continue to impede NGOs that are working for peace, education and democracy.



Ms. Bayandur is a leading peace and human rights activist in Armenia and currently co-chair of the Armenian Committee of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly. She was a 2003-04 Reagan-Fascell Democracy Fellow with the National Endowment for Democracy.