

CO-CHAIRMANSHIP SYSTEM OF THE MINSK GROUP

(MINSK GRUBU EŞ BAŞKANLIK SİSTEMİ)

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The “Minsk Group” works of the CSCE, established to settle the Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, is conducted since 1994 through means of “Co-chairmanship” constituted by representatives of the US, France and Russia. While questioning how this arrangement that has no other example within CSCE has emerged, we also interviewed retired Ambassador Ali Hikmet Alp who served until 1997 as Permanent Representative of Turkey since 1989, when the CSCE had gained character of being a permanent organization rather than being a series of conferences.

In summary, the Ambassador told us the following:

“A foundation like “Co-chairmanship” does not exist within CSCE rules. Its emergence must perhaps be seen as one of the interesting games of the history of diplomacy. As to the background of the story, the idea of finding a peaceful solution to the conflict that arose between Azerbaijan and Armenia due to the occupation of Karabakh was put forward within the framework of “CSCE principles, commitments and provisions” in the “corridors” when a meeting was convened in Helsinki in 1992 with the participation of several countries (Belarus, US, Germany, France, Italy, Sweden, Finland, Russia, Turkey and Azerbaijan and Armenia as the parties). That year CSCE had achieved great success in finding a common foundation in East-West relations, but it was a process whose continuity was not connected to a system and convened with unsteady periods. Therefore the conference that was proposed on a serious issue like a member country occupying the territories of another member country and then was later on named the “Minsk process” could have been an arrangement formed not right in the middle of CSCE, but on its corner or under its “protection”. Since those putting forward this idea believes that Turkey and Azerbaijan will object due to the nature of the CSCE, before Turkey they have made contacts with the actual party, the Azeri Delegation. The young and talented Azeri diplomat, who became

Deputy Minister later on, came to me during the conference and explained to me the issue. I told him that I will cite what he said to our Minister Hikmet Çetin, but that since CSCE rules on these issues have not yet been determined, the proposal should be approached cautiously and that our participation is a precondition for its acceptance. When the Azeri diplomat, who I for the time being find it inconvenient to give his name, said that the participants have not yet been determined, that they want our participation, but that heads of committee accepted this proposal and my answer to this was “I think he rushed it, how was it that you quickly received instructions in such short time”, he said that the Chairman made his decision. Their Chairman was Ambassador to Bonn who for some reason tried to remain distant to us and who sent his assistant instead of personally talking to our Minister. It was also obvious from his statements that despite being an expert in bargaining in daily life, he was not experienced in international diplomacy. After meeting with our Minister Hikmet Çetin, I told him that he holds the same opinion. The Azeri delegation must have not shown any attempt to change the promise they made because in addition to Armenia, despite the objections of the Russian Federation, raised underhandedly, there is no other way than to try to put ourselves among the participants. We accomplished this, but a crippled born child was given to the hands of the CSCE.

Actually perhaps the best way would have been for Azerbaijan to seek within the UN Security Council rather than in the CSCE which had no sanction power and in fact did not even have a status of organization. Albeit, the Security Council confirmed that Karabakh is within the territories of Azerbaijan, but that too took the easy way out. It did not go beyond listening to the reports of the Minsk Group, which is considered as the master of the issue, and giving proposals for a peaceful solution. Of course apart from the Russian Federation, which had interests in the continuation of the conflict and which insisted on the sending of troops consisting only of Russian soldiers to be deployed between the two sides, the US and EU Westerners also did not clear Azerbaijan’s path. As known, those years were the period of “Russia first” policy which Deputy Minister Talbott had to change later on. I know that Ambassador Jack Maresca, who was a US delegate back then, was held under pressure by American senators and was subjected to complaints.

The Minsk Group, given the task of providing an agreement or at least common suggestions, during the international conference presumed to continue for 15 days with an imaginative design in the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict, was thereby established. The first chairmanships of the group were granted firstly to Finland and then Sweden who had no special interests in the conflict. Both countries assigned their most talented diplomats for this

task. Although introducing some unacceptable proposals, they have worked with seriousness and patience. Turkey did the same. It helped the Azerbaijanis.

We do not have the opportunity to go into details here. I attended a small part of the following conferences. There is quite some detail in my beloved colleague Candan Azer's book entitled "Southern Caucasus from Father to Son". Ambassador Ömer Ersun also wrote articles which convey his own experiences.

Let me be content here with touching upon the reasons for the Group's failure. Even in the situation of a small possibility for an agreement emerging, the Armenians of Karabakh have broadened their occupations by mounting a new attack with all kinds of support by Armenia. According to statistics of the United Nations, more than 900,000 Karabakhians and Azerbaijanis in the neighboring region have been exiled. There are several reasons why Azerbaijan has not been able to counter these attacks with success. Azerbaijanis during the period of the Soviet Union, opposite to the Armenians, were kept apart from the army and did not have much military leadership or culture. In fact, the Russian forces had left their weapons to Armenia and to the Armenian militia of Karabakh while withdrawing. Of course the domestic politics in Azerbaijan also did not help them in recovering. With the occupation of five Azeri provinces, the problem quit being a disagreement on Karabakh and frankly turned into a policy of gaining territory, of broadening for Armenia and they sold this to the community and world public opinion as a security requirement. It is clear that in the majority of Western public opinion, although not openly spoken out, an idea of "let us not give the poor Armenians such a hard time, after all the Turks have occupied their territories" exists. This belief, also benefitting from the propagandas of "genocide", has also provided the governments of countries, which have significant or influential Armenian minority, the ease of being an advocate of Armenia.

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This Group convened for two years, formed various formulas and the deployment and logistical details of the peacekeeping force foreseen to be

sent were even planned, but no further progress took place apart from the ceasefire agreement accepted in 1992 between the two sides.

Apparently, the governors of international policy felt disturbed by the Finn and Swedish diplomats being too objective and did not support them enough. The Westerners abstained from directly confronting the Russian Federation. Apart from the Soviet Union period, Ambassador Kazimirov, the Russian representative back then, displayed approaches that surpass the diplomats of the most violent imperialist periods of Tsarist Russia. It was said that he took orders in the CSCE not from the Russian Federation's Foreign Ministry, but from the Minister of National Defense General Grachev. The Finn and Swedish diplomats did not receive enough support; no pressure was exerted on Armenia, who occupied the territories of its neighbor, to the extent observed in other examples.

Righteously, Turkey supported Azerbaijan in the Minsk Group. Apart from our friendly relations, Azerbaijan was right. It was obvious that we would not accept an agreement that foresaw Karabakh's de facto separation from Azerbaijan through misleading and artificial regulations. It would not have been possible for Germany to strongly lend support despite our objective stance on this issue. I suppose that Russia and the Westerners agreed on a "co-chairmanship" system in order to limit the powers of this group and take a short cut. The draft of assignment they accepted gave the initiative and even the powers to the chairmen within the Group's task. Even the voting system was uncertain.

Since I returned to the CSCE conferences after attending the first meeting held in Rome I do not know the details of the developments taking place later on. But I witnessed how this system was accepted or was pushed into being accepted during the Budapest Summit in 1994. During the summit, our head delegate was Tansu Çiller and I was her assistant in the Conference due to my position of the head of delegation. In the preparatory works made before the conference of Heads of State or Government, the Minsk Group also convened. Ambassador Kazimirov, being one of the passionate implementers of the "near abroad" policy, finally spilled the beans and now clearly said that unless Russia's mediation and the sending of a compound peacekeeping force consisting of Russian forces is not accepted, he will not accept the Chairman's proposals conveyed in the report. The summit starts at 10.00 o'clock the next day and to meet with friends at 9 o'clock I walked towards the room reserved for our delegation near the conference room. A while later I came across the Azerbaijani advisor mentioned above. When he asked with a sullen face whether I knew of what happened, I asked what happened. He said that the Minsk Group's chairmanship was given to the US, France and

Russia as three co-chairmen. When I said this cannot be possible, we will not accept this, he said “Ali you say this but you accepted it already” and I asked him who gave approval from us. He said it was “our Prime Minister’s advisor”. As a matter of custom and honesty, the delegations attending the group should have been informed at least a day before and their intentions became clear since they did not. Those accepting this from us came from the center and in principle, must have received the necessary orders.

In theory, everything has not ended. Although a rarely used method, we thought that opening such a decision at the conference could create the opportunity to prevent it. For this, the issue must have been considered of high importance and the Prime Minister must have personally intervened. We were not able to obtain this opportunity, because although the Chairman could be convinced in an hour, it was not possible to call the Group to convene again and they had not brought the issue to the agenda of the General Assembly. When the Azerbaijanis, which is the actual side, did not express their objections during the conference, without any discussion on this bizarre arrangement, it was included in the final document as the “President’s statement” instead of a decision. According to procedures, since no one objected from before, the Chairman’s statement meant it was a decision. In short, with a method frequently observed in international conferences, it is almost impossible for them to agree on a common point such as the US, France and the Russian Federation. Exerting effective pressure on the sides was left to the three countries’ initiative or mercy. But still, during the period in which I intervened, I could say that the US Delegation was the delegation acting the most neutral among these three countries. I believe that the main reason for this is the difference in strategic goal between the US and Europe. A similar situation was experienced during the dissolution of Yugoslavia. An arrangement similar to the Minsk Group was also present there, but it did not have multiple chairmen.

The co-chairmen still continue to work. I have no doubt on the efficiency and even the good will of the diplomats on duty, but eventually those making a decision are not diplomats, but are governments. Annual reports continue to be presented to the CSCE Group and the Security Council. Of course the chairmen are also changing every two years. God knows for how many more years it will continue to convene. If it was not for Azerbaijan’s petroleum, the problem would already have been resolved to Azerbaijan’s disadvantage.

