

From May 9 to May 13, within the framework of the program "Support of initiatives of the civil society in Central Asia" administered by "Association of support centers for civil society" and financed by USAID through counterparts of Kyrgyzstan, an internship for Yelena Romanova, the coordinator of the Network of right protective organizations of Fergana valley was organized in the office of Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor.

Romanova Yelena

Fund of assistance and support for legal and economic reforms

We Have Much in Common ...

The idea of internship has arisen during submission of Association of the Centers of support of a civil society which opened the program «Exchange visits/internships for network associations». At first there was a problem to choose the most interesting network organization from the point of view of organizational development and right protective experience, as the purpose of visit was not only an establishment of partner relations but also acquaintance with the activity, introduction of experience in the work of the Network of right protective organizations of Fergana valley. The choice fell on HCA Vanadzor, as one of the centers for right protective activity, included in the developing network of HCA in South Caucasus region.

Armenia always seemed to me a surprising country. "A monument under the sky" - this thirty thousand square kilometers of land is frequently called so, which is full of great events. To think only, more than thirty thousand monuments were kept here, and each of them reflects turns of destiny of Armenian people, the dramatic moments of its history, images of the greatest events and heroes. Maybe because I wanted to see at least a small part of an imaginative "Hayastan-Karastan" (Armenia - a country of stones). Maybe because the well-known expression "and here on stones they grow a garden" offered to see really great results in any sphere of work, maybe, because in an establishment of cooperation with the Armenian organizations a special sense was gained... Anyway, I went to Armenia.

"Thanks, thanks, thanks ...", - from the first minute of my arrival here I realized, that in my whole life I did not say so many "thanks". Great hospitality and boundless goodness! Though it is difficult to surprise me with it as I grew up and worked among Asian peoples. But I am surprised. I am surprised with the hospitality and boundless goodwill of everyone, beginning from the stranger at the airport to the employees of the organization where I was carrying out my internship. And the second feeling – the desire to see, hear, try everything keeps weariness away. I shall satisfy the curiosity of the reader and my desire to express my impressions. I have seen a lot - both the nature, and people, and creations of their hands - majestic lively Yerevan, small, but not less majestic Vanadzor (former Kirovakan), ensemble of monuments of Sanahin, Aghpat and many others. I have heard many legends, stories, philosophical reflections ... I have tried lavash - Armenian bread, which is baked in tonir (big jar dug in the earth in which fire is made) like our well-known flat cakes, a lot of salads and others delicious things. I am finishing the emotional part with this. They, however, as it seems to me, are as important now as scientific treatises, reports, at least for those readers who understand the great sense of human love to each other, a unification, tolerance ...

A little about Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor and its about the friendly team. It is a non-commercial, non-governmental organization founded on March 21, 1998 as an office of the Armenian Committee of Helsinki Citizens' Assembly, On April 9, 2001 it was registered as an independent organization by the Ministry of Justice of Armenia. The mission¹ of HCA Vanadzor is the support for the formation of civil society in non-capital towns. The mission is executed through activities which correspond to 3 main directions: human rights defence, promotion for civil initiatives and peace-building.

To list all projects executed by this organization is probably, long and not necessary. I shall mention the most interesting ones. In particular, within the framework of the direction of protection of human rights the organization provides free-of-charge legal consultations for citizens, representatives of commercial and noncommercial organizations, methodological, information and organizational support to the nongovernmental organizations. Within the framework of support of civil initiatives work on formation of mechanisms of cooperation of citizens with local self-government institutions, protection of the ecological rights and interests of citizens, support of civil initiatives in struggle against corruption, protection of electoral rights and interests of citizens, protection of the rights and interests of journalists and journalistic

¹ The mission of HCA Vanadzor is the promotion and support for civil initiatives, strengthening right protective and peace building activities on local, national and regional levels.

organizations is carried out. Within the framework of the third direction – peacebuilding, activities directed to the protection of the rights and interests of military, former prisoners of war, families and relatives of missing persons of Southern Caucasus conflicts, formation of cross-border cooperation between Southern Caucasus countries, an atmosphere of mutual trust between societies involved in the Karabakh conflict is promoted.

During the internship I got acquainted with the current activity of the organization. From aside it looks like so: movement, movement, movement ... endless stream of people who come to get legal consultation, or just to read. Quick reaction to any violation of citizens' rights through applying to authorities, through the newspaper² issued in three languages (Armenian, Georgian, Azerbaijan) – here there is not only articles but also caricatures of the artist of the organization whose name is Artak, through a web-site, by means of press conferences which are carried out in an equipped press club, etc. Lobbying of legislation was interesting for me, for example, the law on missing persons, which, is certainly, very actual not only in South Caucasus region, but also in our country from the point of view of arranging administrative procedures. In general, I can note that forms and methods which Armenian right defenders use are the same, as we use, maybe with some exception, but the position of the organization can be an example for many other right protective organizations. The coordinator of HCA Vanadzor Arthur Sakunts expressed it like this: "Right defenders are dogs protecting democratic principles, if the right defender keeps silent he is not a dog, but a cat, though the cat also sometimes scratches ...".

If to speak about network work, that, as Vanadzor residents say, it is a very complicated process. On the one hand, all seven organizations who are included in the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly, represent independent organizations which carry out certain work in their region. On the other hand, they are united by a process of creation, the support of Interchurch Peace Council (IKV, Netherlands) and many problems of inter-regional character, which need to be solved in partnership. What are the difficulties? From a number of opinions I heard, a conclusion could be mad that there is no joint strategy of the Network, there is no joint concept of principles, purposes and objectives of the Network. So far, some meetings of heads of separate offices of HCA have been carried out to solve these problems. What this Network will be, we probably can see on the web-site reflecting the activity of HCA and Vanadzor office. It is important that members of this Network are aimed at unification of efforts, resources that can and should give each office and the Network more power and opportunities.

You have already noticed – we have much in common. I can repeat that, in my opinion, it does not cause any doubt. Right protective community in our countries, experiencing the period of formation, has still many internal difficulties: right protective activity exists in the information space insufficiently; the main resource - trust of people is insufficiently used; replenishment of the number of right defenders require increase of their knowledge in the field of human rights and mechanisms of their protection, etc. I also think, that unification of resources and efforts of right defenders through network relations, partnership, active information cooperation is not the last aspect in the decision of these problems. Though right protective community both in Fergana valley and Armenia rather seriously claim, the search for the most active forms of work, mechanisms of stable relations, new ideas, new ways of resolution of problems will always remain actual.

I am going to answer the last question: anyhow, what was the real benefit of the internship and not only for me personally, but also for the right protective organization which is somewhere in the village of Alabuka or in the town of Kanibadam and which is included in the Network of right protective organizations of Fergana valley. First, all of us got new friends, colleagues with whom we can exchange information. We shall include invited experts in projects that will raise the level of educational and information programs. With Armenian right defenders we exchanged some ideas of joint projects which will necessarily appear in the near future. Finally, all of us have much in common ...

² The newspaper mentioned above is still being prepared and the first issue will be soon printed.