
OLEG KUZNETSOV: "ARMENIA HAS TURNED OCCUPIED AZERBAIJANI REGIONS INTO DESOLATE WASTELAND"

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Yesterday marked the 23rd anniversary of the occupation of Azerbaijan's regions of Fizuli and Jabrail by the Armenian armed forces. On August 23, 1993, 51 villages and center of the Fizuli region were seized by the Armenians, after which more than 55,000 inhabitants left their native lands. The number of internally displaced persons from the Jabrail region reached 61.1 thousand people. Today, IDPs settled in more than 2 thousand settlements in 58 regions of Azerbaijan. The historian and political adviser Oleg Kuznetsov told Vestnik Kavkaza about what is happening in the occupied territories and the prospects of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement.

- In your estimation, what is the current condition of the seven occupied Azerbaijani regions around Nagorno-Karabakh, including the Fizuli and Jabrail regions?

- The condition of these regions from the economic and social points of view is absolutely depressing. These territories were places of traditional residence of ethnic Azerbaijanis, in the late 1980s the Meskhetian Turks have started to move there - that is, there was mainly the Azerbaijani population before the outbreak of hostilities in Nagorno Karabakh and adjacent territories, which started leaving after the beginning of the war. After the occupation of the regions the Armenian forces carried out ethnic cleansing, Azerbaijanis were expelled from places of traditional residence. Subsequently, the Armenian population did not move to these territories: neither the Jabrail region, nor the Fizuli region didn't become a place of resettlement of ethnic Armenians from the Middle East. As of today, these regions are practically a desolate wasteland, which is inhabited by soldiers of the so-called 'the NKR Defense Army'. There is no economics, no investment in the development of social infrastructure. At the same time, the natural resources of these areas are actively being stolen by the occupation regime, because there are such minerals as gold and oil, and now there is illegal mining going on there. As a result, Armenia is holding a rather rigid colonial policy in the occupied regions aimed on the use of the resources of the occupied territories for domestic consumption or for export, for example, to Georgia.

- How difficult and costly would be the restoration of these regions after their de-occupation?

- I am aware of some serious works, prepared by the Azerbaijani economists in this regard, in particular, by Eldar Ismailov, who made the corresponding calculations in dollars. [This refers to the book 'Conceptual basics for recovery of the post-conflict territories of Azerbaijan' by Nazim Imanov and Eldar Ismailov, which was published in 2011 and presented by Vestnik Kavkaza, the

Russian State Humanitarian University and the Azerbaijan Institute of Strategic Studies of the Caucasus in Moscow [VK]. If we talk about all of the occupied territories, then only reintegration in the first year will require about \$ 5.3 billion, of course, in the case of the peaceful settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the voluntary de-occupation of the occupied territories by the Armenian armed forces. If there are clashes, the infrastructure, roads, rudiments of plumbing and other systems will be destroyed, and then even this amount will increase by 2-3 times. [Investigation made by Nazim Imanov and Eldar Ismailov shows the need for an investment worth about \$30 billion in recovery of the de-occupied territories - VK].

- In your opinion, is there enough understanding of the international community what these areas around Karabakh mean for Azerbaijan and Azerbaijani people?

- I think for the bulk of the population in absolutely all countries of the world except for Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey, there is no understanding of the differences between Nagorno-Karabakh and other occupied territories of Azerbaijan. Moreover, the majority of politicians also has no understanding of the differences in status of different occupied territories. There is such an understanding at the level of the well-known UN Security Council resolutions and there is a clear distinction between the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and other occupied Azerbaijani territories around it. Depending on the degree of people's awareness of the problem there is a completely different approach to the understanding of its content.

- How likely is a voluntary de-occupation of the districts around Karabakh by Yerevan now? Is there a growing probability of their release by military means?

- Most experts I know believe that the issue of voluntary de-occupation of five Azerbaijani regions by Armenians is virtually a foregone conclusion now. I do not share such optimism, because there is no real politicians, willing to participate in the negotiation process on this issue in Armenia except of the President Serzh Sargsyan. In the second half of July, implacable Armenians organized the attempt of an armed rebellion in Yerevan, when the Armenian society started to understand that they have to voluntarily release part of the territories. I should say that Armenia's state policy for the last 25 years was to admit only those people the power who either participated in the Karabakh war, or served in the occupation army in the territories of Azerbaijan. Now these people are the basic layer of politicians in the country, and for them the issue of withdrawal from the occupied territories is psychologically unacceptable. Therefore, the political establishment of Armenia is not ready to solve the issue peacefully. Until the appropriate documents are signed, until the Azerbaijani troops take control of the occupied territories and the process of returning of Azerbaijanis to their places of traditional residence, the issue of voluntary liberation of the territories will be open for me.

- In general, in your opinion, at what stage is the process of peaceful settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict now?

- I think it is still at the beginning. There are almost no major progress in practical terms in this matter, and I think they are not expected in the near future. Russia as the main moderator in the talks, which practically received the authority of the OSCE Minsk Group, must work out some new strategy to influence the political elite of Armenia to force them to agree with at least some progress in the these negotiations. Of course, there could be an impact on the Armenian business in Russia as a coercive measure to use it as a very significant lever of pressure on the internal situation in Armenia, so Russia can fulfill its peacekeeping function in this region of South

Caucasus.

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