

Karabakhi Anger Over Phone Promises

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Locals giving up hope of an improvement in their antiquated phone system.

Earlier this year, residents of the unrecognised republic of Nagorny Karabakh were excited by the government's pledge to improve their decrepit telecommunications system. Now many fear their phones will never work properly again.

"A few months ago, people were hailing a new era of communications for Karabakh," said Samvel Khachikian from Stepanakert. "And what do we have now? The quality of the line and service has deteriorated. Frequently you just can't get through, which is really frustrating."

The authorities had announced their decision to hand over Nagorny Karabakh's telecommunications system to Ralph Eirikian, a Lebanese Armenian, in February.

Eirikian promised to bring the systems into compliance with modern international standards through a 15 million US dollar investment programme - one of the largest in the region. Moreover, the bosses of TMF, the Lebanese firm on behalf of which Eirikian acts, pledged to invest additional funds should the need arise.

As the Nagorny Karabakh telephone system is over fifty years old, has never been properly maintained and has almost stopped working altogether, the promised investments became a subject of great public interest.

Eirikian sought to reassure people of his determination to improve things by committing himself to the region. " We are going to live here, sharing all problems and worries of the people of Karabakh," he told journalists.

His daughter did in fact start attending a Stepanakert school this autumn, but many locals are disappointed over his other pledges.

It turned out that when the new management of Karabakh Telecom spoke of the beginning of a new era, they were referring to the development of a cellular phone network, hitherto unavailable in the republic.

"Mobile telephones are indispensable in Karabakh today," Stepanakert entrepreneur Ashot Kazarian told IWPR. "How can you work properly and make a business grow without them? You need to be able to make and receive calls at any time."

However, no more than around one per cent of the local population can actually afford to use a mobile telephone at the moment because of the high charges they entail.

Subscription costs almost 50 dollars, plus a monthly deposit, which comes to the same amount - quite expensive when one considers that the average salary is only 30 dollars a month.

At the time of writing, there were only around 1,500 mobile phone subscribers registered in Nagorny

Karabakh and efforts are being taken to improve the service. Construction work is due to start on a new cellular station in the Aterk Gorge in the north of Karabakh, which should give even coverage throughout the enclave.

Meanwhile, the quality of ordinary calls leaves much to be desired. "Our phone was out of order for a whole week," said Silva Gasparin of Stepanakert.

"We complained several times, but they said a cable had been damaged. Finally we brought home a repairman, who fixed the problem quite easily. I'm not sure if the service staff just couldn't be bothered."

Some locals complain that Karabakh Telecom has done little to improve the landline network, yet have increased prices. Calls inside the republic remain free, but phoning outside the enclave costs between 2,500 and 5,000 drams - around five to ten dollars.

The company's ambitious plans for the cellphone market are being seen as an attempt to postpone the overhaul of the ordinary network, which caters to the majority of population.

In response to subscribers' complaints, Eirikian told Azat Artsakh newspaper that the agreement he struck with the government required the investors to support only one of the republic's networks. "With the approval of the Karabakh authorities, the preference was given to cellular communications," he said.

He said that "certain work" would be carried out on the ordinary phone system as well, but did not specify what form this would take and when it would be done.

Eirikian's understanding of the deal, however, appears to conflict with that of the authorities. "The agreement with the Lebanese company envisages comprehensive development and re-equipment of the entire Nagorny Karabakh communications system, not only the cellular sector," David Mikaelian, spokesman for the government of the breakaway republic, told IWPR.

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Location: [Karabakh](#)

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