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Changes Within the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's Society: Involvement of the Non-Governmental Actors

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) activities in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) are specified by missing mutual diplomatic representation between the two Koreas, and also between the DPRK and the US. This fact helps to increase the importance and prestige of NGOs, the role of individuals and groups in cultural, sport and civic exchanges when participating in mediation of humanitarian and development aid to the DPRK. The entrepreneurs, who are willing to invest in DPRK (despite the adverse conditions) and employ North Korean workers, play an irreplaceable role as well. A summary of these activities provides an overall picture of the presence and impact of non-governmental actors.

Keywords: *Democratic People's Republic of Korea, North Korean society, non-governmental actors, famine, Juche, sanctions*

1. Introduction

When the hard grip of the Soviet Union weakened in the second half of 1980s, the Eastern European nations lost their "center of gravity" and they were left for themselves. After four decades they could encounter a new wind of changes. It was right after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, when other East European regimes¹ started to fall like "leaves from a dead tree." People in the Eastern European region had a dream that oth-

¹ Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria.

er communist countries around the world as well could be freed from the shackles of communism. But reality was somehow different. Few of the remaining communist countries underwent some form of transformation (China, Vietnam), while the others did not at all (Cuba and North Korea). The hope that came from Eastern Europe was unfounded for North Korea at that time. Simply said, the situation in North Korea was not ripe for change yet (Frank 2010, p. 6).

For the past 25 or so years we have been witnesses to a periodical recurring phenomenon of the DPRK's collapse predictions. There are numerous scholars, "Pyongyang watchers," former advisors on North Korea and even North Korean defectors who predicted a collapse of the North Korean regime over and over again (Rosen 2012). On the contrary, there are also those who oppose that idea (Lynn 2012). Nonetheless, even after 70 years the Korean Peninsula is still divided and for external observers it seems that the North Korean regime remains stable today (partially seen from the perspective of successful power inheritance from Kim I to Kim II and finally to Kim III).² We observe that the changes in the international environment together with sanctions against the regime have not contributed to its collapse. We could have concluded that the predictions of the North Korean collapse expected to happen right after the end of the Cold War were made on wrong assumptions and, very likely, the North Korean regime is going to survive another decade or two. But it is essential not to make the same mistake in predicting the future when the surge of changes within North Korean society happens now.

What is the probability that the North Korean regime will survive another decade? Many experts tend to believe that the regime under Kim Jong-un has embarked on the path of reforms and this will enable him (with support of regime friendly China) to ensure the continued persistence for a long time (Ulfelder 2012). But the "reforms" are more ideological proclamations of the regime with an intention to hide structural problems of society targeting the vulnerable population. And there is no guarantee that China will continue to provide subsidies (food, crude oil or other commodities) worth 1 billion USD per year (Manyin 2014, p. 15) in the next future without no return value (except quasi stability on the Korean Peninsula) and to have a protective hand over North Korea (Babson 2013, p. 163). If not, the fate of North Korean collapse is inevitable. Despite of proclaimed stability there are certain signs that the

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2 Kim I refers to Kim Il-sung, Kim II to Kim Jong-il and Kim III to Kim Jong-un.

North Korean regime is gradually declining. It could be perceived from various perspectives – economic, political, strategic, military, societal etc. As Bruce Bennett (2013, p. 6) said outspokenly “A collapse would clearly be the more challenging case, and thus it makes an appropriate focus for planning.” It is better to be prepared in this non predictable environment.

In fact, this paper is not focusing on counting the probability of the North's collapse. It is rather an account of possible implications of non-governmental activities that have been present in DPRK for the past twenty years, and how are they connected to a change within North Korean society that could undergo in the near future.

2. A Picture of North Korean Society

Historically, Korean society (regardless whether in the North or in the South) has always been highly stratified where place of birth, inborn social status, family origin, etc. determined the value and valence (proximity to the center of power) of an individual (Collins 2012, p. 6). Communism did not change this characteristic, only regrouped it. North Korea's geographical conditions, namely mountainous terrain, richness in natural resources, scarcity of arable land,³ relatively higher concentration of industry compared to the southern part of the Korean Peninsula are essential in explaining the structure of North Korean society (Noland 2004, p. 19). These left deep imprints in the overall structure of the society in the North even before the peninsula's division.

Another aspect that predestined the character of North Korean society was ideological foundations of North Korea. In short, the ideology⁴ evolved over time and developed into a mixture of remains of Confucianism, anti-imperialism and colonialism, North Korean nationalism, strong sectarianism (regionalism, origin of birth etc.), Marxism (only minor), Stalinism and self-reliance (Myers 2010). It is referred to as “Kimilsungism” or Juche ideology (in Korean: *Juche sasang*). This in turn conditioned the creation of societal structure which perfectly reflects these ideological predispositions.

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3 In fact, one of the reasons why Kim Il-sung started the Korean War was to gain access to arable land rich South, in order for Korea to be independent of external powers.

4 Kim Il-sung is officially the author of the Juche ideology, but in reality it was a team of his ideologists.

The last, but not least, aspect when looking at North Korean society is the relatively high degree of urbanization (compared to other Asian countries – China, Vietnam, Philippines etc.) that raised over decades. So, currently around 70 percent of the population in North Korea lives in cities. Unlike the Chinese who are still living mostly in the countryside and who can sustain themselves due to their farming lifestyle, the North Korean urban population have no such a choice. They are heavily dependent on food subsidies from farmers.⁵

It was this reasoning based on which the North Korean regime developed its Public Distribution System (this concerns not only food, but extends also to daily necessities such as clothes, shoes, radios, home appliances and TV sets – actually given as incentives during public holidays, in order to maintain a gratitude of the people to the Great Leader who was said to be the donor in person of these gifts) in the 1950s and 1960s and the central government used it very wisely as a tool for manipulating the whole population (Lankov 2013, p. 107). The regime did not choose money as the sole means of expressing labor value.⁶ The easiest way to control the ordinary people is through the very basic needs – food and shelter. The government promised to supply people with their basic necessities as far as the people were loyal to the government. If not, they were cut off from food, kicked out of their homes, moved to the countryside or eventually sent to a labor camp (for re-education). In this way, the whole population was not only under strict control but they were deprived of the desire to live in an oppression-free society.⁷ In this way people became passive in relation to the state, expecting nothing more than meeting their basic physiological needs. Even farmers working in collective farms, technically owned by state, were not allowed to possess private plots exceeding 100 m² (many times even not that much). Whereas farmers in other communist countries who were able to sustain themselves or even help other family members, their North Korean counterparts were heavily dependent on rations, even if they themselves produced food for the whole state (Frank 2010, p. 6).

Gradually a “3-tiered” structure of North Korean society, based on proximity to the center of power, evolved over time (Lankov 2013, p. 122).

5 This phenomenon is vital during the whole history of North Korea, not only for a specific period as it was in the case of China or other Communist countries.

6 Wages are a mixture of salary expressed in money, combined with rations and different kinds of subsidies.

7 That they have never experienced – 40 years of Japanese colonialism turned to Kim’s despotic regime right after liberation.

The highest in ranking is a privileged group composed mainly of members of the Kim family loyal to the Leader, Kim Il-song's comrades in arms from guerilla fighting times and their descendants, highest party cadres and army generals. The second and largest group, which is located in the middle of the social standing, are common people striving to survive every day, together with the vast group of middle and low level officers, bureaucrats and party members (who were even under stronger surveillance from power forces). There is also a third group – politically “untouchables” who lost their social status due to adversity of the regime or sometimes caused by external conditions (a family member accused of treason). Transferring from one group to another (from lower to higher) is almost impossible (Lankov 2013, p. 124). This is the reality of “classless” society formally proclaimed by the regime. North Korea from its inception imposed the system of total control, widening its range and depth after the end of the Korean War. So, virtually every North Korean citizen has been thrust into a system of surveillance and ideological indoctrination – the “organizational life” in a workplace⁸ along with the “inminban”⁹ system in a neighborhood (Lankov 2013, p. 118). Army and police have an irreplaceable position in this system. The regime tries to control people's activities (at work or at home) through not letting them have a private life, but live and concentrate their thoughts solely on work for the “socialist paradise” and central ideology. The magnitude of subjugation exceeded even that of Stalinist Soviet Union. If compared to other socialist systems around the world, the North Korean regime resembles much more Soviet style (known also in Central and Eastern Europe) than Asian style (in China or Vietnam) (Myers 2010).

3. Structural Changes Within North Korean Society

Everything would go well and the regime would have persisted in an unchanged form until today if not the turning point at end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s. Until the 1990s there was no internal source, or a driving force of reforms that could have initiated possible changes of North Korean society – no civil society, no opposition (either political,

8 Everyone belonged to one of five organizations: Party Youth organization, Korean Workers Party, Trade Union, Agricultural Union, or Women's Union.

9 “Inminban” means local community in the neighborhood – one block of flats, near houses etc.

ideological or economic), not to speak about dissent.¹⁰ But 25 years ago the international system suddenly underwent a substantial shift, getting rid of decades long Cold War divisions. North Korea found itself in unenviable position, isolated and unable to reflect changes in the international community. With cutting off the subsidies from “brother nations” (the Soviet Union, China, Central and Eastern Europe), the difficulties with sustaining its own population became even more visible. The North Korean regime, that was seeking more its own immediate survival than pursuing long-term solutions, showed a low ability to adopt to the new circumstances in the international environment which led to the sequence of unfortunate (but in advance easily anticipated) events that stimulated structural changes (Cha 2012, p. 12).

It was 1994 when the Public Distribution System (PDS) after years of difficulties to fulfill its basic functions finally collapsed across the board. In the coming years North Korea experienced the worst famine in modern history of a developed nation (Haggard 2007, p. 1). Not only that, a collapse of the PDS was only the first step, the others followed soon leading to an erosion of North Korean societal structure that brought about a disruption of the whole system at all levels. Self-reliance of the people in the means of income and food sustenance became the first objective of their everyday life. Since then North Korean society has changed and it will never be the same as prior to the famine. Even though the regime attempted to reverse that status (to return to the “good old days”) it was never successful. With the gradual, but inevitable collapse of the PDS in North Korea at the beginning of the 1990s, and the central government’s abandonment of its own people, the center of gravity shifted more and more to the heads of the people who were trying to feed themselves. The regime left no space for the people – they are caught in a trap. While the majority of men are involved in state collapsed economy (state-owned companies, government agencies, army, police), North Korean women embarked on a difficult path to provide income for their families. Currently more than 70 percent of household income comes from female entrepreneurial activities (Lankov 2013, p. 188). People rely on themselves, and not anymore on rations given by the government. It gave rise not only to dozens but hundreds of local markets (in Korean called *jangmadang*) that recently appeared all across the country where people (women above all) exchange goods, do barter or sell things to get hard currency – normally illegal in

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 10 Due to constant purges from the very beginning of the DPRK’s existence.

North Korea (to do private business and possess foreign currency). People involved in business have less time for ideological indoctrination that has actually weakened over two decades. They give bribes to local authorities who are responsible for regular ideology sessions in order to avoid them. Brian R. Myers's (2010) account on the current ideological situation in North Korea may be true but only for North Korean elites. Ordinary people are not bound to ideology anymore, they are more independent than ever before and the peoples' trust toward Juche has withered. Ordinary people can feel that the regime has nothing to offer to them and thus a gap between the government and people has grown even bigger.

Even though consequences of these structural changes are not met with physical reality immediately, rather they are steady and long run, these changes are unavoidable and what is more important, irreversible. The contrast is even bigger in North Korea where individual activity, private business or even farming for oneself was eradicated already in the 1960s and Kim's social experiment of a "classless" society appeared (Collins 2012, p. 9). It is therefore fascinating that mushrooming *jangmadang* markets gave way to the marketization and, as explained earlier, the politically stratified society of North Korea is gradually disappearing. On the other hand, another aspect of the polarization of North Korean society starts to prevail – wealth. But we cannot forget that a substantial part of the society is still marginalized, not only in the form of income, but also in access to resources (not only material, but also to education etc.).

But not everyone is able (or wants) to adapt to new circumstances. Some chose a different path – defection. Many escaped to China in the second half of the 1990s, never returning back. But there were also those who were able to earn some money and then came back to their families whom they left behind. Many started businesses, based on these experiences, illegally crossing the border with China and bringing back valuable and scarce goods. But for high officials to escape the system, they must have found a very good reason for it (as was the case of Hwang Jang Yop¹¹ and others). It is this condition that prevents elites from escaping from the North. And that is why defectors from the North in general have a lower educational background¹².

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11 North Korea's main ideologist, marked as an original author of Juche.

12 If social stratification would be compared to a chemical bond then the closer an electron is to the nucleus, the stronger bond they have. And vice-versa, the more distant, the easier way out of the influence of an atom. The same characteristic could be applied to the society in North Korea.

When the East Asian nations were hit by “Hallyu” (Korean Wave) in the 2000s, North Korea was not an exception. At the end of the 1990s there were videos, in 2000 DVDs and currently USBs are being brought to North Korea (of course illegally) in droves causing ideological “pollution.” Those who defected to the South (and can afford them) make trans-border financial transactions to support left behinds (in the past Japanese Koreans supported their relatives in North Korea until the 1980s). The society that has been cut of any contacts with the outside world is now “online” (Lee 2013, p. 195).¹³

Rising economic polarization due to increasing wealth of the new business class together with political inequalities has brought about not only a break of equitable society but this has accumulated “free” money that their owners could spend on whatever they want. It was not in accordance with the classless society concept propagated by the government during the past 50 years. While the regime before could simply lie about the situation outside North Korea because the people had no idea what the external world looked like, currently no one is going to believe empty slogans that are easily confronted with reality. And it creates a huge gap between the people and their government.

Those three factors, namely disposable money, loosening ideological pressure and a picture of the outside world brought about another natural consequence – perception that the system has become a burden. Evidence of that is the widespread corruption, economic criminality (bribery), together with still existing food shortages present in everyday life. This leads to ever rising inequalities of living standards. As Eastern Europeans experienced in the 1970s and 1980s, skepticism and cynicism arouse as a natural fruit of an eroding socialist society. Now people in North Korea are becoming less willing to believe that this is the foreigners’ fault and they start to blame the government (Haggard & Noland 2011b, p. 29).¹⁴ With the disintegration of the army and forces, people feel more confident to stand up against power.

Besides an overall development there are still huge regional differences and disparities. Pyongyang takes the central and somehow peculiar position. As a capital, Pyongyang has always been preferential over

13 Of course not in absolute terms, but people have a relatively better picture of the outside world than ever before.

14 These facts are brought to light by many refugees escaping DPRK not only to China but also to South Korea.

the rest of the country. Not everyone was allowed to reside in and even visit the city. Changes in North Korea are primarily reflected here and could be seen just walking its streets (billboards, mobile phones, cars, restaurants, hair styles, the latest fashion etc.). Another important city, Kaesong, sitting just on the border with South Korea, was the best suitable place for opening an industrial zone for South Korean companies (already running for more than ten years) (Manyin 2011). A presence of capitalist companies has a direct impact not only on the circa 50,000 North Korean employees working here, but it is felt also in the whole region. With "Choco pies" – South Korean sweets that became an unofficial "currency" – people can pay for the goods or barter them. The situation of citizens living in big industrial cities (Hamhung, Nampo) differs from those who live in the countryside. On the other side of the country lie the regions bordering with China that have a very special position. They develop under the rising influence of Chinese businesses – mostly mining.

One of the famine's most severe consequences was the brutal reduction of the North Korean population in the second half of the 1990s (Haggard & Noland 2007, p. 1), thus causing essential changes in age structure, namely an aging population. In order to feed themselves North Korean farmers have no other choice than divert some portion of their food production (Hassig & Oh 2000, p. 51) and not to give everything to the government. In fact, selling these diverted portions in the market bring a needed income to their decrepit households (Bennett 2013, p. 33). Famine brought about a change in family structure and family bonds. Thousands of children lost their parents (or even worst the whole family) leaving them vulnerable.

The society frozen in the 1960s has finally started to thaw. Not every aspect of these changes promises a better future for its inhabitants. On the other hand, we cannot forget about today's new reality – North Korean elites are helplessly staring at the changes within North Korean society perceiving that a power center has shifted from the central government to the masses. The government has realized that structural changes are threatening the very existence of regime but they are indispensable (Lankov 2013, p. 119). Currently elites are more and more separated from the people. A rising number of recent executions (Kwon & Whiteman 2015) of the highest level officials is evidence of Kim Jong-un's fear and despair about the rising North Korean society's awareness

(at all levels) of the regime's weaknesses. One thing we can be pretty sure of – there is no will to further any political or economic reforms in the North, unless a certain pro-reformist clique would come to power. But that scenario is less probable due to frequent purges among political and military elites.

4. Changes in North Korean Society and What Superpowers Have to Do with It

Looking at the changing environment within North Korea the question arises what was the impact on North Korean society caused by the changes in the international environment and what role the major powers played in it.

During the Cold War North Korea used divisions within the Communist camp and shifted its preferences alternately from the Soviet Union to China. North Korea during four decades learnt how to use others for its own benefit (Michishita 2010, p. 6). With the fall of Eastern European socialist countries (the Soviet Union followed soon after) and with the transformation of China these advantages suddenly ended. But acquired "skills" were not forgotten. North Korea adjusted to the changed international situation in their own way. The regime used its developing nuclear program for deterrence. In this way the first nuclear crisis emerged (Armstrong 2013, p. 25). The United States (US), with help of international community (at the beginning with non-state actor mediation), got involved and resolved the crisis (Wit, Poneman & Gallucci 2004). But North Korea was already on its way to famine that hit the country while superpowers were helplessly sitting by. The first response came only in 1995 when the famine broke on a grand scale. Massive aid from international donors flowed into the country until 2001 (Manyin 2014).

Another shift came in 2002 when US President George W. Bush described North Korea as a "rogue regime" (Becker 2005, p. 1), placing her among the "axis of evil" countries (countries supporting international terrorism) and pushing other countries to play the same game. North Korea responded with the traditional approach – deterring others with nukes. As a natural consequence, sanctions followed soon. The second nuclear crisis developed on a large scale (Joo & Kwak 2007, p. 29).

Six-party talks were only a lifeline thrown to save the situation. But participating countries (China, the US, Russia, Japan and South Korea) tried to meet unrealistic expectations with respect to North Korean transformation. Seen from the perspective of superpowers' effort during the past two decades to compel North Korea to change, we can see that the North Korean regime wants not to be reformed (under pressure from the outside). The gradual transformation caused by the transformation of the regime is pure illusion. Unless the change would come from inside (society). Moreover, within the past 25 years we have witnessed how diplomacy with regard to North Korea failed across the board. The Korean Peninsula is nor safer (North Korea did not give up its nuclear endeavor) nor is it more stable (economic downfall seems to be unstoppable).

Despite many proclamations, the Great Powers play this (egoistic) game – they are willing to keep benefits for themselves, thus maintaining the status quo (powers do not concern themselves about North Korea's welfare). Powers are more likely to donate humanitarian aid than letting the free flow of changes with an uncertain end. On the other hand, the North Korean regime is unable to fully consolidate its power (not only political, but also economic, ideological and in no less degree also prestige). Apart from the superpowers, it is principally South Korea that should care about a common solution. But the South Korean society's interest in unification faded substantially, reaching the lowest levels ever (Lankov 2013, p. 158). This disinterest is spreading mainly among the younger generation who would be a potential bearer of unification and who would take upon their shoulders the burdens of a unified state (not only economic). South Korean elites (political and economic) should show their readiness (or goodwill?) to backup costs of unification economically, but the reality is different. So far, South Korean "unification policy" has only been a pile of verbal expressions not followed by substantial action. So the real intentions of the government are thus dubious.

On top of that, in recent years we are witnessing major shift in Chinese military power. China is no more third-class player. To the contrary, China became local military and political dominant leader that no one will dare to challenge.¹⁵ Along with the US, China plays the premium position in international trade and according to GDP (in purchasing pow-

15 Chinese dominance over South China Sea (conflict with Vietnam), with the Philippines etc.

er parity) is also the biggest economy of the world (Knoema 2015). Thus China plays a decisive role in the Northeast Asian region and no measure could be done without Chinese approval. Especially if China shares a 1600 km long common border with an unstable neighbor that could be a source of streams of refugees in the case of North Korean collapse (Vox 2015). China is the last of superpowers that would wish dramatic changes in its neighborhood. This is the primary reason why China is currently so involved (in the North Korean problem) and supports North Korea directly (food, heavy oil subsidies) and indirectly (investment in mining, industrial parks).

To sum up the facts, we can expect with a high degree of probability that the main actors in East Asia, namely the US, China, Japan, Russia and South Korea (even though the US together with South Korea worked on a contingency plan for North Korea (Feffer 2014)), are not well prepared for a possible collapse of North Korea. There is no common approach toward North Korea because every player defends their own interests, often contradictory. On the accounts of foreign-imposed regime change (FIRC) research (Downes & Monten 2013, pp. 90–131) it has been proven that regime change caused by an external force did not bring about regime democratization in most cases. It is therefore naïve to think that in the case of North Korea the process of change caused by e.g. military intervention (as was the case of Iraq) would result in the adoption of democratic principles by North Korea.

Maybe those scholars who oppose a viewpoint that North Korea will (sooner or later) collapse are right. But we have to consider the consequences of their ratio. Does it mean that there is no need to be ready for a possible collapse? If powers would follow their opinion the negative impact of such actions could possibly cause a greater damage to the people of North Korea. It is better to be ready and to create in advance a roadmap for actions after North Korea's collapse in case this scenario would come true.¹⁶ We need to embark on the exploration of twofold change – one is a fundamental change in the approach of US and China towards North Korea and the other is a change in North Korean society itself. For now, there is no political alternative for the people, so we cannot expect political change in coming months.

16 There is a greater degree of susceptibility to collapse in the near future according to some researchers. Among them are Bruce Bennet, Andrei Lankov and Paul French.

5. Changes in North Korean Society and What Non-State Actors Have to Do with It

The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

International relations theories (neo-realism in particular) show us that the main role in North Korean issue is played by nation states – notably superpowers involved in the six-party talks (South Korea, the US, Japan, China and Russia), imposing sanctions or providing humanitarian assistance to the DPRK. But the six-party talks led to the stalemate, sanctions just worsen the everyday lives of millions in North Korea (while the top elite still live in luxury) and their humanitarian assistance is weakening. Even though superpowers have “power” to change the situation on the Korean Peninsula in a jiffy, relations between North Korea and them have not changed substantially.

On the other hand, NGO involvement, as a part of what is called “soft power” (Merickova 2014, pp. 187–197) is basically a long distance race. We cannot expect immediate results when looking at the society. In fact, the prime objective of NGO activities in a certain country (maybe except for Human Rights advocacy NGOs) is not to bring about the collapse of that country's regime (Feffer 2012). Looking at the role of NGOs in general, we can take as an example a document listed in “Principles and good practice of humanitarian donorship” endorsed in Stockholm on June 17, 2003, in the part titled “Objectives and definition of humanitarian action” where the primary objective is defined as: “The objectives of humanitarian action are to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity during and in the aftermath of man-made crises and natural disasters, as well as to prevent and strengthen preparedness for the occurrence.” (Lewis & Kanji 2009, p. 188).

Besides that, NGOs are primarily “implementers” (mobilization of resources to provide goods and services to people who need them), “catalysts” (ability to inspire, facilitate or contribute to improved thinking and action to promote change) and “partners” (work together with another and share the risk or benefit from a joint venture) (Lewis & Kanji 2009, p. 12). So NGOs can bring about a change in the society, but only indirectly through a process of the society's involvement in many projects initiated by NGOs in an environment of “complex political emergencies.”¹⁷

17 The term means multi-casual humanitarian crises as stated in “There is broad agreement that complex humanitarian emergencies can be generally defined by: the

Structure of Assistance to the DPRK

We can look at the structure of assistance from the donor perspective and recipient perspective. If seen from the recipient perspective, basically, we can categorize a three-fold approach to the DPRK based on the target group within (3-tiered) North Korean society (Foley 2013, p. 3). The widest group – the middle class (of course in North Korean terms) is targeted by humanitarian (lower part of that group) or developmental (upper part) assistance from international organizations, NGOs or governments aiming to help the most needed (by aiding them with basic necessities like food, medicine, water sanitation projects) or to recover its decimated agriculture (irrigation, farms, seeding plants, reforestation, greenhouses etc.) and industry (mining, Kaesong Industrial Complex, Pyonghwa Motors), respectively. Businessmen focus on an emerging entrepreneurial class that rose among the current political elite. On the opposite side of the societal spectrum is a group of gulag prisoners, a focus of human rights advocacy groups. They did not choose engagement, but confrontation as a means of approach toward North Korea (Feffer 2012).¹⁸

The structure of donorship, that is international assistance (engagement approach) to the DPRK, differs substantially according to each donor's (the US, China, South Korea, Japan and EU) preferences. To a greater degree the aid is under heavy constraints of each nation's foreign policy.

Overview of Assistance to the DPRK (1995~2014)

Soon after North Korea asked for humanitarian aid from the international community in 1995, South Korea (the government in fact) responded as first donating 150,000 metric tons of rice worth 232,000 USD (Snyder 2004, pp. 272–275). And the South Korean government remained as South Korea's sole donor of humanitarian aid to the North

deterioration or collapse of central government authority, conflict and widespread human rights abuses, food insecurity, macroeconomic collapse, and mass forced displacement of people. Humanitarian action in such situations requires managing an extremely sensitive linkage with a number of security agendas, the most basic of which involves the security of the humanitarian actors themselves and their ability to obtain access to affected populations." (Foley 2013, p. 4–5)

18 Along with South Korean fanatic Christian groups sending leaflets in balloons across the borders.

until 1997.¹⁹ South Korean NGOs were among the first to respond to famine in North Korea, but it was not until 1998, after Kim Dae-Jung took power, when they were granted a more independent approach from the South Korean government. Since then they acted independently and supplemented the government's aid. South Korean NGOs played a significant role in activating South Korean society for support to pro-North attitudes (Lee & Kim 2014, pp. 121–143). Since then the situation has become slightly better allowing some South Korean NGOs to take initiative (Snyder 2007, pp. 423–430), but the government still plays a major role. The disadvantage of such a system is that aid donations and development projects are heavily dependent on current political preferences of the ruling party. The shift was particularly notable when the sunshine policy of Kim Dae-Jung and No Moo-Hyun changed to Lee Myung-Bak's confrontational policy (Paik 2013, p. 245).²⁰

The US in a very similar manner (as South Korea) was a major donor to UN Agencies and almost an exclusive donor to KEDO²¹ (Calder 2004). In 1998 the US government initiated the US Private Voluntary Organization Consortium that roofed US based NGOs working in North Korea as a way to transfer the help of NGOs and private donors. The Consortium operated in North Korea between 1997 and 2000. Then it dissolved and each NGO played on its own. The total amount of assistance coming from the US (between 1995 and 2014) was 1.2 billion USD (Manyin 2014, p. 1) which is 40 percent of overall assistance to the DPRK. After North Korea withdrew from the six-party talks in 2009 and fired missiles in 2012, the US has halted all support to North Korea (Lankov 2013, p. 164).

China's trade with North Korea dropped radically in the first half of 1990s, but after 2000 the mutual trade shows steady growth reaching nearly 1 billion USD in 2014 (Haggard & Noland 2011, p. 17). If we look at the trade deficit of North Korea with China it is evident that China is

19 There was no possibility for anyone (individual, business, or organization) from South Korea to be directly involved in aid for North Korea until 1997 according to South Korean law.

20 Government not only completely stopped the aid sent to the North, but on top of that they did not allow the South Korean NGOs to bring it instead.

21 KEDO (Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization) is an organization founded by South Korea, Japan and the US in 1995 in order to implement 1994 US–North Korea Agreed Framework to stop the North Korea's nuclear power development in Yongbyon in exchange for light water reactor built in North Korea and supply of fuel oil until a new power plant is constructed.

trying to tie North Korea to itself. China is not providing food and other commodities to North Korea based on internationally acclaimed principles of humanitarian aid but China is providing food either as direct subsidies or at subsidized prices (Kim 2011, pp. 257–271).

Other international organizations and international NGOs joined soon after and they played a major role in assisting to overcome famine in the North from 1996. Among those organizations involved in aid were major UN agencies²², regional branches of the Red Cross²³, Government Organizations²⁴, International NGOs²⁵, European NGOs with residential status²⁶, US²⁷ and South Korean NGOs (Lee 2009)²⁸.

Europe has quite a different approach to North Korea compared with its American, South Korean or Chinese counterparts (Lee 2010, pp. 45–51). At first, Europe is a multinational union of states (and thus a mixture of often competing interests) (Park 2010, p. 35). European NGOs participation in North Korean restoration is somehow inferior in scope but they are quite successful in the stability they offer. Out of many NGOs who were present in North Korea over the past two decades

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22 UN Development Program (UNDP), World Food Program (WFP), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Health Organization (WHO), UN Population Fund (UNFPA), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA).

23 International Red Cross/International Federation of Red Cross (IFRC), International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

24 EU Food Security Unit, EU ECHO, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, Italian Development and Cooperation Office, French Cooperation Bureau, Centre for Agricultural Bioscience International.

25 Action Contra La Faim, Adventist Development and Relief Agency, Associazione con I Fatebenfratelli per i Malati Lontani, Children's Aid Direct, Cap Anamu, Cooperazione e Sviluppo, Campus fuer Christus, German Agro Action, Help Age International, Medicines du Monde, Mediciens Sans Frontieres, Oxfam, PMU Interlife, Gesellschaft für Nachhaltige Entwicklung (Association for Sustainable Development), Global Resource Services, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), Mission East.

26 Premiere Urgence, Save the Children, Concern Worldwide, Deutsche Welthungerhilfe, Triangle Generation Humanitaire, Handicap International.

27 American Friends Service Committee, Mercy Corps, Samaritan's Purse, Global Resource Services, Christian Friends of Korea, World Vision International, Eugene Bell Foundation.

28 Korean Sharing Movement, Okedongmu Children in Korea, Join Together Society of Korea, Eugene Bell Foundation, The Presbyterian Church of Korea, Lighthouse Foundation, World Vision Korea, Good Neighbors International, Korean Welfare Foundation, Food for the Hungry International, Green Doctors, Korean Medical Association, Unification Agricultural Production Forum, Korea Maranatha Foundation, Agape International, Chosun Exchange.

six European NGOs still have resident status. Others left the country due to different reasons – either willingly (lack of accountability and transparency on the North Korean part) or by force (loss of credibility in North Korean eyes).

Current Situation

Looking back to the beginning of the 2000s, the sharp decline has been recorded in overall funding of aid to the DPRK (Manyin 2014) (maybe only with the Chinese exception that is providing food to North Korea not on humanitarian principles). UN Agencies are not an exception. Between 2004 and 2014 there was reduction from around 300 million USD to some 50 million USD of aid per year (Reliefweb 2015). It is far less than what millions of North Koreans need in order not to stunt or die.

Recent surveys show that out of the total population (24.62 million), almost 18 million North Koreans do not consume an adequately diverse diet (WFP 2015) and they are marked as “food insecure” (they lack nutritional diversity). Out of them, 1.8 million people (notably children up to 5 years, pregnant and lactating women, and elderly) are in need of specialized nutritious foods to combat malnutrition. Still, the general population cannot afford basic necessities of life – food, clothing, medication, healthcare. Even though global chronic malnutrition (stunting) decreased over the past 15 years (Reliefweb 2015), still 27.9 percent are severely hit (UNICEF 2012). The even more urgent thing is that 4 percent suffer global acute malnutrition (wasting). This is a stunning fact. Agricultural production, despite of few developmental projects aiming to grow outputs and modernize vintage agriculture in North Korea, is vulnerable due to impending natural disasters – either floods or droughts. Climate vulnerability is high due to the plundering style of agriculture over the past decades (large-scale use of fertilizers, neglecting care for irrigation, deforestation etc.) causing reduction in soil quality. This has led to a decrease of food production on one hand and on the other, it led to environmental instability (which is a full circle). Together with outdated water pipes it shows us an overall picture of the sanitation situation and health care needs. As a result, around seven million North Koreans lack access to clean water and over six million people need basic health care which they do not get. The only natural result is the spreading of infectious diseases – tuberculosis, diarrhea, pneumonia (Reliefweb 2015).

Pros & Cons

Like with any other human endeavor, there are certain controversies connected to humanitarian and developmental assistance. Scholars do not agree on the same interpretation of assistance impacts. Some scholars blame aid activists to be naïve and idealistic, reckoning numerous negative consequences that their operations brought to the society. Let us mention a few of them.

Regime's survival

Hardliners like to stress that humanitarian aid policy did not contribute to regime change – either reforms, giving up of nuclear development etc. But this stance is likable only to the voters' ears, not to the affected people (North Koreans). The North Korean government knew very well already at the beginning of the 1990s that the food situation was unsustainable. They took no steps to correct the situation. On the contrary, they used millions of dollars for nuclear development instead. They let the situation come to a state where famine had already come. If hardliners suggest that in 1995 the international community should not have intervened (and stopped food aid to North Korea), then we must reckon with the consequences – not only in North Korea (much wider population would be affected by famine), but implications would affect probably South Korea, if not the whole region (see what a hard-line stance did in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria).

Lacking reliable information about the situation of the society

The changes occurring within North Korean society are for the (majority of) outside observers obscure. The changes within do not hit the headlines of newspapers and television news. In a similar way that the changes in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s took place underneath, something alike happens in North Korea now (Frank 2010, p. 6). The only thing is to capture and interpret them in the right way.

The secretive character of the regime makes us subjected to scarce information flowing out of the North Korea. Even though some of the high representatives of the state escaped (and this could be seen as a precious source of information) and the rising number of North Korean defectors

in South Korea can bear witness to the present situation in the North, it is risky to be dependent only on them. The reliability of data and its accuracy is lowered by a small number of samples and inaccessibility to (or simply missing) surveys.

UN agencies and NGO workers that stayed in North Korea over the years following the famine are another valuable source of information. Even though their help was limited in scope and outreach, basically, they could gather some data on North Korean society otherwise inaccessible for external research.

Diversion of food aid

During 20 years of aid to North Korea it often happened that some organizations withdrew their help due to different reasons. One of them was the suspicion of humanitarian aid diversion to the military and loyal subjects (Haggard & Noland 2007, p. 117). The withdrawal was justified, partially, based on true facts. What is more striking is that the government diverted rations from the PDS (normally given to ordinary people) to the military to a much greater extent (compared to a diversion of rations from food aid). But the government would have done it anyway, so it is a better choice to bring food to the needy (and not let them die) even if it means indirect support for the government. Some part of the food aid has been diverted to local markets, too. This at least contributed to the marketization of society and raised pressure to cut food prices (Haggard & Noland 2007, p. 121). Anyway, accountability in North Korean conditions is a great challenge.

Limited scope of influence

Unlike UN Agencies, NGOs focus mainly on small scale projects helping to restore irrigation, sanitation, hospitals, kindergartens, build greenhouses, farms etc. Such projects in their scopes do not hit a huge crowd of millions, but try to improve the lifestyles of those directly connected to project areas. In this way, NGOs try to build personal connections and bonds with local people (common citizens and authorities as well). It helps to build trust that is a base for sustainability of projects (and accountability as well).

Black hole

The PDS has collapsed many years ago and today's youngest generation has never lived in a functioning PDS system. Opponents accuse humanitarian and developmental assistance supporters of trying to fill the "black hole," pouring tons of food into the system that is diverting and misusing the aid for keeping itself alive. Opponents try to discourage aid donors to continue their help hoping that the discontinuation of "gifts for free" would result in regime collapse. This concept is somehow naïve because you cannot isolate the country absolutely, there will always exist a way the regime could illegally trade with other states or non-state actors (international drug dealers, terrorist organizations, arms dealers etc.) and receive much needed money to sustain its power.

Incoordination

Despite of the great efforts of parties involved in international donorship to North Korea, coordination is actually a great challenge to all. Actions of humanitarian and development aid that are not coordinated can lead to chaos. On the other hand, the only counterpart of aid is the North Korean government (and local officials as an extended arm of government). So the government is in the more advantageous position, able to select those donors who "play their game."

Benefits of NGO Involvement

Lessons learnt

The non-state actors have an irreplaceable role in this process (even though there is a split view on the role of non-state actors as relevant players in international relations). During their 20 years of presence and active participation in North Korean society's issues, NGOs could learn certain "lessons" that can help them understand North Korean society and make their assistance even more effective (Reed 2005, pp. 51–72).

NGOs could accumulate valuable experience working with North Koreans (ordinary people and officials). The response of North Korean professional counterparts was positive and enthusiastic. Specifically, they

received not only physical help (technology), but also participated in lectures and training programs at home or abroad. With time passing by, even officials have become more open and cooperative (to the degree of their capacity). NGOs could focus on respective project areas over a longer period of time. So they could build relationships with local people, understand them and help them in a more responsive way.

Positive attitudes

Giving the ratio to Wendy Sherman, an adviser to Madeleine Albright and a special adviser to US President Bill Clinton on North Korea, who described the dilemma:

"I have no illusions about Kim ... he is a leader who has left his people with no freedom, no choices, no food, no future. People are executed. There are labor camps. But the decision we have to make is whether to try to deal with him to open the country so that the people of North Korea do have freedom, do have choices, do have food. Do I think it would be preferable to not deal with him? Yes, but the consequences are horrible, so you have to deal with him." (Park 2015)

We can just agree with such an opinion. Moreover, we cannot expect that during turmoil in North Korea, the Korean Workers Party²⁹ or military would change and help people. They would be caught in self-indulgence, taking care of nothing else but their own well-being. In this case NGO workers would be the only actors ready to help – and what is more important that North Korea would be fully aware of that. North Koreans cannot rely on the state, party, military, police – old regime structures – but on foreigners (Americans, South Koreans, Germans, etc.).

Necessity of aid

Without the help of international donors there would be hardly enough food for North Korean citizens (Dalton & Jung. 2009). The behavior of the North Korean regime, particularly over the past three decades, is a living proof of such a statement. Challenging this fact would only lead to the worsening of an already bad situation of millions of North Koreans.

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29 Leading party in North Korea, with a secured position in constitution.

Preparedness

If current situation in North Korea looks threatening, what about a situation of North Korean society during collapse? It would be many times worse than today. In order not to get into such a state, it is necessary to explore the two aspects of involvement of non-state actors in the collapse of the DPRK (with respect to two decades of experience in helping North Korean society). One is the role that non-state actors could play in the (indirect) preparation for North Korean collapse and the other is the role in the course of probable collapse itself (a massive flow humanitarian aid). A part of such a strategy is to target North Korea with involvement of non-state actors that can participate in specific fields of activities. This is a real way that NGOs in general could be even more involved.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was not to predict the collapse of the North Korean regime. Instead, analyzing structural changes of North Korean society show us possible ways of future development. We have to put aside naivety and idealism dealing with the North Korean regime. Assessing the real situation, we can surmise that superpowers (or any other state that would be involved) are incapable to do any substantial progress on the Korean Peninsula with the current approach, rather to the contrary, they have no real plan or roadmap created (peaceful, not a military one). The only real thing that we can count on are NGOs, UN Agencies, optimistic businessmen and a bulk of other engaged supportive people. In this sense, this paper is rather a careful outline of the way that North Korean society could be heading in the near future based on previous experience with the work of humanitarian organizations.

For over 20 years many people have been watching North Korea as closely as they could, but scarce information flowing out of the country makes it even more difficult to outline any future development. Still there are much more unknown variables than those we can say are known. They wish that North Korea would be changed for the better, but there are no signs of such a peaceful top-down change. Rather to the contrary, there is more and more evidence of social change from the bottom that can eventually lead to unrest.

In the case of social or political unrest (civil war) in a particular, usually help from NGOs for the country comes after such unrest occurs (Bennett 2013, p. 147).³⁰ The international community usually has difficulties to anticipate coming crises even though we capture some signs of impending disaster in advance. But if we suppose that a crisis on the Korean Peninsula is an inevitable result of past decades we can much more easily anticipate the coming events with a certain probability and thus prepare concrete steps for appeasing tough times that could come.

In every society women, children (especially those at a very young age) and elderly are the most vulnerable and marginalized social groups when social unrest is a viable form of change. A collapse of the regime inevitably brings such unrest into account. Unless they stay at home, some form of aid can come to them. But if the situation is unbearable and they decide to leave their homes in multitudes (see refugees all around the globe), access to help becomes difficult.

The recent involvement of NGOs could prove that the most important result of their activities is a creation of bonds and connections all across North Korea. If rampant changes occur in North Korea this could be a viable alternative for the country's citizens that can substantially help people to overcome crisis. People can stay at home where living conditions are more bearable compared to those in refugee camps.

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