

The Nagorno Karabakh Conflict: An Inside View

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Executive summary

The Nagorno Karabakh conflict is a long-lasting ethnic conflict in the South Caucasus. Currently, the negotiation process is frozen and violations of the ceasefire agreement come from both sides. The borders between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and between Azerbaijan and the unrecognized republic of Nagorno Karabakh remain closed. Also, there is a lack of communication between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. The importance of the publication of International Alert research titled "An analysis of grassroots views on the Nagorno Karabakh conflict" is immense, because it is reflecting the current situation in the region and the way people see the conflict resolution. In all three societies, the conflict became a normal part of daily lives and all societies are ready to pay a big price for it. People are not ready for compromise and for many of them, the only solution is war and military actions. The respective authorities sometimes use the enemy image to cover their ineffective policy or corruption. The trust in the negotiation process held by the OSCE Minsk Group remains low but there is also a potential for peace and dialogue.

Acknowledgements

This Policy Paper is based on the research "An analysis of grassroots views on the Nagorno Karabakh conflict." [1] It was implemented in the framework of the project of "Envisioning Peace" which is one of the projects of the International Alert. The aim of the research is to hear the opinions of ordinary people whose voice is often ignored regarding the conflict. The study was conducted in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nagorno Karabakh. The research uses qualitative methods based on in-depth semi-structured interviews from different social groups. The analysis was published based on this research. A team of young researchers from Karabakh was involved in the project, including the author of this paper. This research is unique in its sense because, for the first time, it was focused on the common people's vision about the conflict.

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Historical overview

The Nagorno Karabakh conflict is a typical ethnic conflict with its origins rooting to the 20th century with the collapse of the Russian Empire. Since 1918, the predominantly Armenian-populated region of Nagorno Karabakh first became a disputed territory between Armenia and Azerbaijan. [2] During 1918-1920, Armenia and Azerbaijan fought a series of short wars over Nagorno Karabakh while the region was governed by the Karabakh Council. [3]

On 4 July 1921, in the Georgian capital Tbilisi, the Caucasian Bureau of the Communist Party of Russia reconfirmed that Nagorno Karabakh is part of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR). However, under the dictation of Moscow and Stalin's direct interference, on 5 July the decision was reviewed and the region was incorporated into Azerbaijan, forming an Autonomous oblast. [4]

The current phase of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict began in 1988 when in response to the self-determination claims of its population the animosity and mutual clashes between ethnic Armenians and Azeris intensified. The crisis escalated with several massacres and ethnic cleansing of Armenians organized by the Azerbaijani authorities on the entire territory of the Azerbaijan SSR, particularly in Sumgait, Baku, and Kirovabad. [5]

On 10 December 1991, the Karabakh population declared the establishment of the Nagorno Karabakh unrecognized republic (NKR) by a referendum, boycotted by the Azeri population. Thus, on the territory of the former Azerbaijani SSR, two state formations were created – the Nagorno Karabakh unrecognized republic and the Republic of Azerbaijan. In Nagorno Karabakh and the surrounding areas populated by Armenians, the policy pursued by the Azerbaijani authorities turned into overt aggression and large-scale military actions against Nagorno Karabakh. The subsequent conflict between Armenia with Nagorno Karabakh and Azerbaijan resulted in tens of thousands of casualties, caused considerable material damage and created a host of grievances. In May 1994 Azerbaijan, Nagorno Karabakh and Armenia signed a ceasefire agreement.

The conflict settlement negotiations are held in the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group.² Before 1997, Nagorno Karabakh officially participated in the negotiations but when Robert Kocharyan, the first president of Nagorno Karabakh, moved to Yerevan and become the head of Armenia, Karabakh was left out from negotiations.

² The OSCE Minsk Group was created in 1992 by the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE, now Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe – OSCE) to encourage a peaceful, negotiated resolution of the conflict between Azerbaijan, Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh. The Minsk Group is headed by a co-chairmanship of France, Russia and the United States.

Currently, the negotiation process remains frozen. All sides of the conflict are engaged in high-level propaganda and hatred. The 2016 “April war”³ aggravated the situation and it seems nearly impossible to resolve the conflict.

Conflict and people living in the conflict areas

Thus, the Nagorno Karabakh conflict is 100 years old. During the last century, there were serious clashes between Armenians and Azerbaijanis but there were also times when they peacefully lived together in Nagorno Karabakh, in Azerbaijan or in the Soviet Union.

Since the Nagorno Karabakh conflict exists over a hundred years, it has become normal part of people’s daily life in the Nagorno Karabakh unrecognized republic, and in Armenia and Azerbaijan. The conflict became a part of their identity.

As the conflict becomes the part of the people’s normal lives, the price that they sacrifice for the conflict becomes normal, too. The price is the death of young men at the frontline; the price is an uncertain future without long-term plans, the price is a militarized society, poor economic growth, low level of democracy and migration.

Of course, there is a variety of opinions among the people who live near the borderlines and people who live in the capital cities or abroad. For the people who live near the borderline, the solution of the conflict is an urgent issue because the conflict influences their daily life. They are ready for dialogue, finding solutions and compromise. Despite such a high price of the

“We used to live with Armenians very well. So why not live together again? There were a lot of Armenian workers, who used to build our roofs and houses. They used to be our “krive” (a person who holds the baby boy during circumcision). Our men used to marry Armenian women. Armenians are very kind people. Ordinary people in Armenia are not at fault.” [1, p.7]

conflict, there are people from the cities who see positive things. For example, the conflict and the presence of an external enemy are directing the population to be more patriotic and to protect national interests. But, of course, the death of people and losses which are the price of the conflict are negative for everyone.

“If people realize that every individual and every family is paying for the conflict and not for peace, this could help to alter the dynamics of the conflict.” [1 p.15]

“I was born during the war and I consider myself to be part of the “independence” generation. I cannot imagine my life without conflict. My father fought in the war and I have felt the effect of war on myself since I was a child.” [1 p.6]

³ Also called the “Four-day war”. The Azerbaijani armed forces launched a large-scale attack on the Nagorno Karabakh Defense Army positions and civilian settlements on the night of 1-2 April 2016, causing Armenian response. This was the largest offensive since the 1994 ceasefire agreement.

Who is most affected by the conflict?

The most vulnerable parts of the respective societies are people who live near borderline.

The common people suffer the most from the conflict. The respondents from all three societies are sure that rich people are not suffering from the conflict because they are able to escape from going to the army or to the frontline.

But sons of the poor families have to go, they do not have a choice. The conflict affects young people because they are on the frontline and they should carry the burden of the security. The war destroys the best. The women and children suffer from war also psychologically and the society is not able to develop normally in the conflict condition.

Another part of the society who suffered a lot as a result of the war and is often ignored in their societies are the refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). The role of the refugees and IDPs is often used as a propaganda tool by the authorities. One of the “Madrid

“People in disputed and border areas must unfortunately get used to being shot at. In fact, they are already used to it.” [1 p.9]

“Of course, it’s the ordinary person and people who suffer. I do not think anyone can influence the oligarchs in this country. They just do not care”. [1 p.10]

Principles”⁴, part of a unique document discussed at the so-called “negotiations table”, is about the return of lost homes to the IDPs and refugees from both sides. The conflict sides (but mostly Azerbaijan) refer to this principle in every possible international and domestic platform but the research showed that not all refugees and IDPs are ready to return back their homes.

“I see very few people who would want to go to Karabakh, even among old people. They have got used to it. If they go back, then, yes, they will suffer. Because life in Baku and in Agdam is not the same as each other.” [1 p.10]

The situation of refugees and IDPs is a very complicated one. From one side, everyone should have a right to return to the place where they were born. But from the other side, there are also hundreds of Armenians who left their houses in Baku, Sumgait, and Kirovabad, most of them went abroad, but there some escaped to Nagorno Karabakh and live in the houses where Azerbaijani families lived before the war. These people never had an official refugee status. This situation lies opposite to the IDPs and refugees in Azerbaijan, who enjoy a lot of privileges.

“There are IDPs and refugees who have taken up important positions in our society. Before (they)... never played an important role in Baku society, but now they... play a more important role than local people. Without them society would be different” [1p. 10]

⁴ The Armenian Research Center ANI publishes the Madrid Document (full text) for the first time. “All internally displaced persons and refugees from the conflict-affected areas will have a right to return on a voluntary basis, as soon as the Office of the U. N. High Commissioner for Refugees has determined that conditions are appropriate, in the places of their former residence...” (<https://www.aniarc.am/2016/04/11/madrid-principles-full-text/>)

Who benefits from the conflict?

When a conflict lasts for so many years it means that there are many strong factors which keep the conflict in its hot stage. For the respondents the main actors for whom it is profitable to keep the conflict in its current stage are third parties who are selling arms to the conflicting parties. These countries – mainly Russia, Israel and Turkey – have their own interests in the region. Also, in all three societies people point out that their authorities benefit from the conflict as they are using the enemy image to divert attention from their own corruption. Hate speech in all levels also has its impact on the conflict. The hate propaganda starts from the kindergarten and is especially vivid in Azerbaijan. The respondents from Azerbaijan put a lot of emphasis on state propaganda.

For the Armenian respondents the issue of propaganda is not seen as a serious problem. The propaganda is not based on hate speech like in Azerbaijan, but it rather focuses on raising patriotism and nationalism.

The new generation thinks differently, everything has become scared. If you stop the bus at the park and start chanting "Karabakh is ours", the people will join in the shouting. And then if you open the bus door and say "Let's go and take Karabakh", everyone will suddenly remember that they have to collect their kids from the kindergarten and so on". [1 p.11]

"We want peace, A just peace. We do not need unjust peace." [1 p13]

What is peace for ordinary people?

The survey shows that sometimes peace means no shooting. Peaceful morning is when there are no bomb explosions. Everyone wants peace and the ordinary people from all three societies are ready to pay a tremendous price for peace.

But their desired peace is not always a positive peace. Positive peace implies the development of the society, negative peace implies the absence of war. Unfortunately, most of the respondents see the way to achieve peace by strengthening the army or through the means of war. Generally, we can divide the vision of people into the following approaches.

Pessimistic Approach

Most of the respondents are sure that it is impossible to find a way out of the conflict. They cannot believe that their generation will be able to see the resolution, two or more generations must be changed. They believe that even if the societies will agree on something the authorities will be against that. The respondents explain their pessimistic vision because of the unfavorable geopolitical correlation and the lack of interest to resolve the conflict by the powerful international actors. An ineffective negotiation process and unproductive mediation by the OSCE Minsk Group cause the sense of impossibility to resolve the conflict. Also, the generation brought up in an atmosphere of hatred has no memory of peaceful

coexistence idea about peaceful coexistence. The fact that the societies have no opportunity to interact with each other also adds to the pessimism. As a result, they often have mythological perception about each other.

Use of Force Approach

One of the dominant views about the conflict resolution is to solve it by military means. The respondents see the most effective way to resolve the conflict by military actions. This is seen as the only way by following the famous Machiavellian principle "The ends justify the means."

The followers of this approach from the Azerbaijani side see the resolution in giving back the lost territories by initiating a large-scale war. The view from the other side is that Armenia should have a professional and well-equipped army so everyone will be scared. However, an important component is missing in this approach. When people are talking about forcing the enemy to peace, they are not talking about the ways of achieving peace.

One-sided view of the conflict resolution

Of course, each side of conflict has a desired vision of the future. However sometimes, it is a unilateral vision that is acceptable only for one side of the conflict.

The examples of the unilateral visions from the Armenian and Karabakhi side are:

- "Karabakh cannot be a part of Azerbaijan because there are Armenians living there. They are speaking Armenian, their government is Armenian, everything there is Armenian."
- "The conflict is already solved. The problem is that the other side is not accepting it. There was a war which had a winner and a loser."
- "The most optimal option is to recognize the independence of Karabakh."
- "It is possible that Azerbaijan will have a right to return back Karabakh, but the authorities should be Armenian."

The examples of Azerbaijani one-sided visions are:

- "Karabakh should reunion with Azerbaijan without any territorial compromise."
- "The Azerbaijani authorities should set economic preferences for Armenians living in Nagorno Karabakh. At that time, they will understand that being under the control of Azerbaijan will be more profitable than being a part of Armenia."
- "The most optimal option is to give the highest status to Karabakh, but de jure Karabakh should be a part of Azerbaijan."

Idealistic approach

The idealistic vision of the people living in the region is far from current political reality. They often mention a world that will be without any borders the conflict will be solved or that the societies should become so developed that they will refuse any kind of violence.

The respondents also mention that the territory of Nagorno Karabakh could become a free economic zone for Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and international actors, then it will be possible to solve the conflict. It is also recommended that both sides should abandon the sacredness of these lands.

Of course, the above-mentioned ideas are far from reality, but it is important that people are trying to find a way out, no matter how realistic are the ideas.

Compromise

On one hand, a compromise is usually identified as returning/losing territories and it seems that societies are not prepared for any kind of such compromise. On the other hand, people realize that it is impossible to live in such a condition (no peace, no war) and that a compromise is the only way to resolve the conflict.

Because the conflict lasts too long, the way how it can be resolved seems unimaginable for the ordinary people. It is difficult for them to imagine a peaceful life on the border lines without a conflict resolution. They delegate responsibility to the third parties: the state/government, mediators, international organizations or the international community. It is noteworthy that most of the people do not trust these actors.

Instead of conclusion: How is it possible to achieve peace?

The negotiations should be the only way to resolve the conflict. Of course, no one wants to die or lose their natives. The authorities of all three societies should be ready for the long-lasting dialogue, they have to negotiate until a resolution is possible. Simultaneously, the societies should also be prepared for the resolution. They will have opportunities to communicate and the civil society should undertake the role of mediators for preparing the societies for peace.

All sides of the conflict are suffering but they are not ready for the compromise. The so-called third parties here have much work to do. First of all, it should be noted that this public opinion research was conducted before the April 2018 “Velvet revolution” in Armenia. After the revolution, the citizens of Armenia began to realize that they are deciding on the future of their country and, thus, they are responsible for the political course of Armenia. If all citizens realize this fact, it will be easier to begin resolving the conflict. The role of the mediators is also

crucial, they need to change their agenda. The trust level in the OSCE Minsk group co-chairs is generally low due to their uncertain activity. The situation and the generation have changed and they should take these realities into account and be a little more flexible.

The role of the European Union is also essential in terms of working with the local authorities, civil societies and the NGO sector. The European Partnership for the Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (EPNK) is a unique initiative of the European Union. But there are many spheres where the European Union may have a more active role. For example, basic human rights are very often violated – the right to life, access to education or the right to water and others – and there is a lot of work to be done in the development of civil society and democratization.

At a first glance it seems that there is no potential for peace among the people living in the conflict region but there is an enormous human potential. Firstly, the word refers to the refugees and IDPs who have an experience of peaceful coexistence and many of them still keep friendships with people of the opposite nation. Also, in all three societies, there are many young people and NGO representatives who actively participate in peacebuilding and peacekeeping projects. These people should become active “preachers of peace” in their societies.

Important first steps can already be seen. For example, the new first lady of the Republic of Armenia, Anna Hakobyan, called for peace in the Moscow Tretyakov gallery during her initiative “Women for Peace” [8]. This is a big contribution for the establishment of a peace discourse in all three societies, the need of which is immense.

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