

The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, now unfreezing?

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1) Introduction

Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, a number of conflicts arose in areas of some of the post-Soviet states, usually where the new international borders did not match the ethnic affiliations of local populations. These conflicts are often referred to as Frozen conflicts. The term is used for situations in which there is no active armed conflict but at the same time no peace treaty or other political agreement that would satisfy the conflicting parties. Therefore, the conflict can start again at any moment, creating an environment of insecurity and instability.

This reports dwells upon a deep-rooted and lasting conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, which is now in serious risk of “unfreezing” following the recent on-going violations of cease-fire agreement thus putting the South Caucasus region in situation of dangerous instability.

2) Conflict Background

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan has a long history. The two states sources have different, conflicting, points of view on the ancient history of the Nagorii Karabakh region. Their confrontation is to some extent related to the fact that Azerbaijan is predominantly Muslim, and Armenia is predominantly Christian.¹

Today Nagorno-Karabakh is a landlocked region in the South Caucasus, part of Azerbaijan, governed by the self-proclaimed “Nagorno Karabakh Republic”, which is largely dependent on Armenia. It has an area of 4,400 square kilometres and an estimated population of 140,000. 95 percent of the Nagorno-Karabakh population is ethnically Armenian, but the territory is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan.²

After the Russian Revolution of 1917, Karabakh became part of the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic, but this soon dissolved into separate Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Georgian states. Over the next two years (1918–1920), there were a series of short wars between Armenia and Azerbaijan over several regions, including Karabakh.

¹ Армяно-азербайджанский конфликт в Нагорном Карабахею
<https://ria.ru/spravka/20160310/1387410475.html>

² Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. <http://www.cfr.org/global/global-conflict-tracker/p32137#!/conflict/nagorno-karabakh-conflict>

In 1921 the three states were taken over by Bolsheviks and soon after the region division agreement achieved, the conflict over its control died down for several decades. The question of Nagorno-Karabakh re-emerged when Armenia and Azerbaijan attained independence and after Nagorno-Karabakh tried first to formally join Armenia and then declared independence in 1991.

The open military conflict erupted in 1992 resulting in victims and multiple refugees from both sides. By the end of the war in 1994, the Armenians were in full control of most of the enclave and also held and currently control approximately 9% of Azerbaijan's territory outside the enclave.³

While Armenia itself has never officially recognized the region's independence, it has become its main financial and military backer.⁴

A cease-fire was reached in 1994 in Kirgizstan through Russian negotiation. But the serious problem remained: during the fighting, more than one million from both sides fled their homes, and neither population group has been able to return home since the end of the war.⁵ So the cease-fire did not end the hostilities. Violations were frequent throughout

³Post-Soviet “frozen conflicts”. <http://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/linksdossier/post-soviet-frozen-conflicts/#ea-accordion-further-reading>

⁴ Nagorno-Karabakh profile. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18270325>

⁵ Ibid

the following years, and in the first days of April 2016 the conflict re-escalated drastically leaving soldiers killed on both sides. Clashes reproduced in October 2016, the two parties accused each other of violating the truce.

3) Conflicting parties positions

Despite all efforts, the positions of the parties remain diametrically opposed. However, on its side, Baku has the force of international law, which recognizes Karabakh as Azerbaijani territory. Theoretically, this gives Azerbaijan the right to return its territories by military force. To avoid military action, Armenia should continue with the peace talks, although the “frozen” status of Nagorno-Karabakh satisfies Yerevan.

That is why, some experts argue, the Armenian leadership keeps maneuvering. Armenian President regularly conducts negotiations with the leader of the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, and keeps visiting the disputed territory. Armenia seems to be doing everything possible to slow down progress by trying to shift the focus to the expansion of the OSCE observation mission, the investigation of incidents in Nagorno-Karabakh and other problems.⁶

⁶ Two alternatives to the current status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh. http://www.russia-direct.org/opinion/two-alternatives-current-status-quo-nagorno-karabakh?utm_source=Russia+Direct+free+weekly+newsletters&utm_campaign=6ba3686fcf-RD_Newsletter_july_25_2016&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_cd2cf54b82-6ba3686fcf-78602273

According to another point of view, Azerbaijan is considered to prefer the current status quo while it is building up its military power, while Armenia is more prone to have a permanent end to the conflict.⁷

As a result, each side in the conflict has entered 2016 without any sign of compromise over the key issues – namely, the status of Nagorno-Karabakh and some other Azerbaijani territories controlled by Armenian forces, as well as the problem of refugees.⁸

Instead, in recent years parties have been actively preparing for the phase of open armed confrontation since more than 20 years of negotiations have not moved things forward from the point reached in 1994 in Bishkek. Azerbaijan, being a significant oil and gas exporter to Europe and Central Asia, was spending money to purchase weapons from South Africa, Belarus, Russia and Israel.⁹ Armenia has been in less favorable economic conditions, since the closure of borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan has caused landlocked Armenia severe economic problems.

⁷ http://www.mountainous-karabakh.org/book_19.html#.WA6zKjJeO9Y

⁸ <http://www.russia-direct.org/opinion/nagorno-karabakh-may-become-another-headache-russia-west>

⁹ How to prevent new escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh. <http://www.russia-direct.org/opinion/how-prevent-new-escalation-nagorno-karabakh>

The renewed hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh threaten not only regional balance of power and European energy security but most importantly – people's lives . In these circumstances, the peace talks with international mediation are of crucial importance.

4) The mediation process

There were many initiatives to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, but little success in finding a lasting solution.

In 1994 the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Minsk Group, was established to work out a solution to the conflict. The Minsk Group's permanent members are Belarus, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Finland, and Turkey, as well as Armenia and Azerbaijan. Russia, France and the US co-chair the Minsk Group. Unfortunately, it has failed to produce a permanent solution to the conflict. Russian-mediated peace talks have also not resulted in any concrete steps toward de-escalation.

The roadmap to a peaceful solution has been written down in the Basic Principles or Madrid Proposals (2011): international peacekeepers, return of land, security for the people in the conflict region, safe return of refugees, a corridor between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, an interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh providing guarantees for security and self-

governance and eventual determination of the final legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh through a legally binding expression of will.¹⁰

However, neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan has quite accepted these proposals as satisfactory. Azerbaijanis fear that the future promised referendum will most likely result in Karabakh's separation from Azerbaijan, while Armenians are concerned about the fact that no specific date is given for this referendum.¹¹

The lack of concrete progress on the diplomatic arena has also resulted in an ever increasing tension in the region, mainly in the form of Azeri frustration. The threat has also manifested itself in increasing violations of the ceasefire agreement in which both sides have accused each other of having caused the breach.

An important factor that has been missing for all years of mediation efforts, however, remains Karabakh's absence in the direct negotiations. To date, Azerbaijan has refused to recognize Karabakh as a counterpart to the conflict and insisted on their exclusion from the negotiations and instead discussed the issue with Armenia.

¹⁰ Settlement Of Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Requires Restraint And Political Dialogue – Analysis <http://www.eurasiareview.com/26042016-settlement-of-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-requires-restraint-and-political-dialogue-analysis/>

¹¹ http://www.mountainous-karabakh.org/book_19.html#.WA6zKjJeO9Y

These approach to deal with this conflict obviously can not bring satisfactory lasting results. Even if military confrontation in Nagorno-Karabakh ends, political problems – including the status of the disputed territory and the refugee crisis – will remain unresolved.

Azerbaijan focus on its major priority – the restoration of the country's territorial integrity and “liberating of the occupied territories,” while Armenia insists on the national self-determination of the Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Azerbaijan ignores the problem of the dialogue between Azerbaijan's government and its Armenian minority and sees the challenge as the external intervention of its neighbors. Meanwhile, Armenia sees the occupation of Azerbaijan's territory in Nagorno-Karabakh as securing “the safety zone.” If these approaches remain unchanged, compromises between two sides are hardly likely to be expected.¹²

5) Conclusion

The conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh is complex. It is fueled by historical and cultural factors, psychological reasons on individual level, lack of political will, third parties with their own political agendas. There can not be easy ways to resolve this complex of issues. Mediation measures taken

¹² <http://www.russia-direct.org/opinion/nagorno-karabakh-may-become-another-headache-russia-west>

until now obviously does not achieve goals. It is time to concentrate on conflict transformation rather than its “resolution”.

Both sides fuelled the conflict by spreading hate propaganda. But in order to get any closer to the real peace, a lot of work needs to be done by people and organizations close to the people, who educate people for dialogue and peaceful coexistence, who set up think tanks to think of practical solutions to bridge the gap. This is the only way to reach sustainable peace.

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