

Active Participant: Democratization as a Stabilizing Force in Nagorno-Karabakh

Note: This paper was written prior to the recent outbreak of conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and therefore does not include an analysis of recent events in Nagorno Karabakh. (4/29/2021)

ABSTRACT

Although still faced with international non-recognition and emphatic opposition from Azerbaijan, an independent Nagorno-Karabakh presents itself as a relatively stable unrecognized quasi-state 20 years after the original ceasefire agreement. Prior analyses tend to focus on external players and internal shortcomings, while downplaying the impact of democratization in Nagorno-Karabakh. This article finds that democratization efforts within Nagorno-Karabakh actively contribute to the relative stability which Nagorno-Karabakh enjoys, and examines the ways in which this takes place.

INTRODUCTION

The worst period of fighting between Azerbaijan and Armenia over what is now an unrecognized independent territory, Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh), ended with a ceasefire agreement signed over twenty years ago. Contrary to the pessimism of political analysts, Nagorno-Karabakh has not imploded amid dire predictions for the future of the territory (The Economist, 2014; Kaplan, 2008; Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2012, p. 143; Sheets, 2012). The conflict is commonly characterized as a ‘frozen’ conflict, with no negotiated resolution yet achieved and an active ceasefire line which remains largely stable despite regular small-scale violence such as sniper fire and aging land mine hazards (Rowland, 2008; Smolnik, 2012; Krikorian, 2012; Sheets, 2012).

However, to treat this conflict as ‘frozen’ ignores the manner in which the political ground shifted in the last 20 years. Choices made by the political leadership in the interim yield new dynamics which bear consideration. Remarkably, out of the chaos of Soviet disintegration and intercommunal warfare, Nagorno-Karabakh established territorial and institutional continuity in the face of international isolation and Azerbaijani obstructionism. Not only that, Nagorno-Karabakh consolidated both the form and function of reasonably effective state governance while maintaining a commitment to democratic reforms (Caspersen, 2012, p. 54). Karabakh’s success stands in sharp contrast to the experience of other post-Soviet unrecognized territories, so much so that Karabakhi authorities now seek to disassociate themselves from their fellow quasi states in order to leverage this difference (Gardner, 2011).

While Nagorno-Karabakh's oft-cited special relationship with Armenia and the Armenian diaspora is certainly crucial to these accomplishments on many levels, a singular focus on this aspect of Nagorno-Karabakh's survival strategy minimizes the agency of Karabakhis and the role of governance within Nagorno-Karabakh. In this paper I argue that democratization efforts in Nagorno-Karabakh also contribute significantly to its relative stability. Nagorno-Karabakh's democratization efforts expanded its legitimacy both at home and abroad, enabled key economic improvements, and insulated the emergent state against common pitfalls experienced by unrecognized states. These in turn yielded internal and external security against many perils which face an isolated quasi-state such as Nagorno-Karabakh.

BARRIERS TO DEMOCRATIZATION IN NAGORNO-KARBAKH

There is no shortage of reasons for why it might come as a surprise that any impact of significance could result from the present situation of democracy in Nagorno-Karabakh. Until recently democratization in Nagorno-Karabakh received little attention. However, critical analyses increasingly acknowledge the existence of democratization in Nagorno-Karabakh and speculate at the probable motivations behind these reforms. However, many still regard the democratic nature of Nagorno-Karabakh with skepticism. For one, it is suggested that these are only surface-level reforms. In 'Unrecognized States' Nina Caspersen writes about the emphasis on 'form over substance' in Karabakhi democratization (Caspersen 2012, p. 92). This sort of observation creates the reasonable perception that Nagorno-Karabakh is democratic in name only. Furthermore, previous literature points to the dubious role of the military in Nagorno-Karabakh, where governance still (at least technically) operates under martial law, the omnipresent threat of Azerbaijani aggression suggests that Karabakhis may be trading democracy for security, and the population is among the most militarized in the world. (Berg & Molder, 2012, p. 539; Caspersen, 2012, p. 90; Caspersen, 2008, p. 126; Smolnik, 2012, p. 155) Illiberality is also cited as a counter-democratic aspect of the Karabakhi situation. Ethnic cleansing by both Armenian and Azeri sides of the conflict resulted in a de facto population which is 99.7% Armenian. (Rowland, 2008, p.108)The Constitution of Nagorno-Karabakh establishes Armenian as the only official state language and the Church of Armenia as the state religion. (Office of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, 2015; Caspersen, 2012, p. 95, 97) This emphasis on a titular ethnicity is decidedly at odds with some aspects of the Western liberal conception of democracy, particularly individual, religious, and cultural freedoms. Additionally, Nagorno-Karabakh is a presidential democracy, characterized by a

weak parliament and expansive presidential powers, which invites accusations of autocratic governance. (Smolnik, 2012, p. 158; Berg & Molder, 2012, p. 538)

Perhaps the most significant challenge to Nagorno-Karabakh's claims to democracy come from the significant role which Armenia and the Armenian diaspora have played in enabling Nagorno-Karabakh's economic development and military security. (De Waal, 2013, p. 257/258, 289) In 2005 the budget for Nagorno-Karabakh was approximately 53.7 million dollars, where local revenues only covered 14.3 million of this amount. Meanwhile, in the same year Nagorno-Karabakh received a loan of approximately 28.9 million dollars from Armenia, and the terms of loan repayment appear to be favorable to nonexistent. The Armenian diaspora provides another generous source of income, lobbying successfully for funds from USAID to the tune of about \$23 million in 2004, as well as raising \$11 million in the same year via a world-wide telethon. (International Crisis Group, 2005, p. 12) Such a disproportionate flow of income from external actors quite realistically reduces the accountability of Karabakhi political leadership to the population which it claims to represent (Caspersen, 2014)

DEMOCRATIZATION IN CONTEXT

Yet in spite of these many problematizations of Karabakhi democratization, I argue that democratic changes adopted by the Nagorno-Karabakh government still manage to contribute actively to Nagorno-Karabakh's stability. It is important to acknowledge here that while Nagorno-Karabakh's political reality does not match up point for point with the Western ideal of liberal democracy, it is still impactful and democratic. Democratization efforts in Nagorno-Karabakh thus far emphasize institution building (e.g.: legal structures, social services, infrastructure), popular sovereignty, democratic processes, economic reforms, and symbolic capital. (Smolnik, 2012, p. 155) This does not include some other aspects of liberal democracy. Due to the ethnic character of the conflict with Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh struggles to reconcile the idea of a 'titular nation' with individual, cultural, and religious rights and freedoms. (International Crisis Group, 2005, p. 2, 4; Rowland, 2012, p. 108; Caspersen, 2012, p. 92, 95, 97-98, 152; Özkan, 2008) For example, in the Nagorno-Karabakh Constitution the only official language is Armenian and the Armenian Church is the religion of state, whereas Nagorno-Karabakh is a territory which was historically home to a wide variety of religions and ethnic groups up until the Soviet breakup. While the right of return for Azeri refugees is not ruled out, it is not welcomed either. A 2009 law required the registration of

minority religious groups in order to operate, but not all petitions are accepted. (Freedom House, 2014)

Additionally, Karabakhis demonstrate preference for a presidential model of democracy, with sweeping powers vested in the office of the President and a comparatively weak parliament. (European Friends of Armenia, 2010) It is important to note here that coercion has not been a factor in Nagorno-Karabakh, and these preferences seem to come instead from the perceived need for unity and strong authoritative leaders. (Caspersen, 2008, p. 124) Even to refer to oneself as ‘opposition’ is a political liability in an environment where it is generally believed that any division would undermine the very existence of Nagorno-Karabakh. As one Karabakhi observed, “The electorate is not fooled by the political game, but it is by no means bothered by it”. (as cited in Smolnik, 2012, p. 160) Still, it is important to allow for population preferences which may be conditioned by the situation (Berg & Molder, 2012, p. 543), and acknowledge that liberal Western democracy is not the only kind of democracy possible.

EVIDENCE FOR DEMOCRATIZATION IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH

From the very beginning of Nagorno-Karabakh implemented a democratic vision for its independence, however the meaning and nature of what that meant evolved over time (Caspersen 2012, p.70; Freizer, 2006). In 1991 Nagorno-Karabakh held a referendum to declare independence and based the claim for independence on the principle of the right to self-determination and freedom from ethnic persecution (Avetisyan & Nikoghosyan, 2011). After the ceasefire in 1994, Nagorno-Karabakh constructed a parliamentary democracy, although later adjustments (date) gave significant power to the president (International Crisis Group, 2005). Then in 2003 The United Nations cited a policy of ‘standards before status’ to rationalize Kosovan independence. While Nagorno-Karabakh possessed the architecture of a democracy previously, democratization acquired new urgency once identified as a path to independence in itself (Stiensdorff, 2012, p. 205; Caspersen, 2008, p. 123). In 2006 Nagorno-Karabakh adopted a constitution with 83% approval from the population. Nagorno-Karabakh’s president at that moment, Robert Kocharian, characterized the constitution as an intentional addition to a continuum of Nagorno-Karabakhi democratization in Nagorno-Karabakh (Gardner, 2011). Indeed, democracy in Nagorno-Karabakh is trumpeted on all the official websites, repeated in official rhetoric, and consistently endorsed by Karabakhi civilians. (International Crisis Group, 2006; Berg & Molder, 2012, p. 539). Nagorno-Karabakh regularly holds elections and while these elections are not officially monitored due to non-recognition, unofficial observers give

positive reports. Freedom House scores for free and fair elections in Nagorno-Karabakh are historically on par with Armenia and better than Azerbaijan (Freedom House, 2014; Kolstø, 2012, p. 145, 149). While the main critique focuses on the lack of an electoral upset by the opposition for the presidency, the opposition has achieved victories at lower levels of government in the past. It is also significant that even this degree of plurality is of a rare or non-existent occurrence among Nagorno-Karabakh's Caucasian neighbors (Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2012, p. 145/6; Smolnik, 2012, p. 157-159, 160; Ishiyama & Batta, 2012, p. 124; International Crisis Group, 2005).

RELEVANCE OF DEMOCRATIZATION TO NAGORNO-KARABAKH

In spite of many significant obstacles Nagorno-Karabakh attained at least a modicum of democracy. In the given circumstances this is no small achievement. Moreover, democratic reform is a key factor enabling stability in Nagorno-Karabakh. In this paper I address the ways in which democratization supported Nagorno-Karabakh's development into a relatively stable, autonomous state in spite of international isolation. In the first section of this paper I address the degree to which Nagorno-Karabakh's democratization affects external legitimacy. I then consider the relationship between internal legitimacy and democratization in Nagorno-Karabakh. In the second portion of this paper I demonstrate how democratization sheltered Nagorno-Karabakh from two common failures experienced by unrecognized states, namely military rule and warlord rule. Finally, I describe Nagorno-Karabakh's critical economic success as a consequence of democratization.

DEMOCRATIZATION AND EXTERNAL LEGITIMACY

Democratization in Nagorno-Karabakh is a public affair. For Armenians everywhere the Armenian 'victory' in Nagorno-Karabakh is a source of pride. For them Nagorno-Karabakh is a symbol of Armenian survival, seemingly reversing a history of persecution and defeat (De Waal, 2013; Carley, 1998). After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, democracy seemed almost a default starting point, but increasingly international pressures narrowed the focus in Nagorno-Karabakh specifically to a liberal democratic ideal. Nagorno-Karabakh now successfully cultivates the image of a 'civilized' Western-oriented democratic entity, even if there is yet room for improvement. (Caspersen, 2012; Özkan, 2008) International recognition continues to elude Nagorno-Karabakh, however. Hope for international recognition via the standards before status route clearly motivated Nagorno-Karabakh to democratize, but democratization also has other incentives to offer. In the face of continuing non-recognition despite Nagorno-Karabakh's highly publicized efforts to implement the aforesaid

‘standards’, democratization continues in part due to additional pressure from the Nagorno-Karabakh population and the Armenian diaspora.

The Armenian diaspora provides significant cash inflows to Nagorno-Karabakh, so it would be natural to expect a degree of accountability from Nagorno-Karabakh authorities to the diaspora. In this, democratization perpetuates the image of Nagorno-Karabakh as a shining example of success for ethnic Armenians around the world (Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2012, p. 144). In addition to private donations from the diaspora, the Armenian lobby in the United States secured significant aid for Nagorno-Karabakh from the United States government via USAID, international non-recognition notwithstanding. According to the International Crisis Group report in 2005 USAID pledged approximately \$23 million in aid to Nagorno-Karabakh by 2004. Later estimates from the Armenian National Committee of America show approximately \$35 million in aid pledged by 2010. (Armenian National Committee of America, 2010) Democratization in Nagorno-Karabakh facilitates both diaspora support and U.S. aid.

Additionally, although the international community does not recognize Nagorno-Karabakh’s independence, neither do they support an attempt by Azerbaijan to retake Nagorno-Karabakh by force. While war would certainly disrupt key economic interests in the region, it is also increasingly unpalatable to reverse the development of democracy in Nagorno-Karabakh by unifying it with a corrupt and illiberal Azerbaijan. (Özkan, 2008) An indication of changing international attitudes came in a nod to continuing Karabakhi demands for self-determination. Whereas negotiations regarding the status of Nagorno-Karabakh historically excluded official Karabakhi representation in favor of talks between the political leadership of Armenia and Azerbaijan, in 2015 the OSCE Minsk Group stated that the Nagorno-Karabakh population ought to be consulted before any settlement is reached (OSCE, 2015).

DEMOCRATIZATION AND INTERNAL LEGITIMACY

Nagorno-Karabakh is characterized as a bottom-up conflict, where the impetus for independence from Azerbaijan originated with the population. The nature of the political environment in Nagorno-Karabakh pressured leadership in Nagorno-Karabakh to provide democratic reforms, social services, protect property rights, uphold rule of law, and encourage economic development. These actions consequently earn legitimacy and unify support among Karabakhis. As Kolstø and Blakkisrud point out, the holding of elections itself serves to legitimize the political system. (as cited in Steinsdorff, 2012, p. 203) The provision of social services and security are also part of the

legitimizing process, and democratization supported both of these by making politicians accountable to population demands for rule of law and public services.

While pluralism has been elusive, there is progress towards increased pluralism in Nagorno-Karabakh. In the two most recent presidential elections, an arena where pluralism is historically least developed, the opposition saw its share of the vote increase from roughly 15% to 34% between 2007 and 2012 (Office of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, 2015; Freedom House, 2014). Meanwhile parliamentary and mayoral elections demonstrate even more plurality than the presidential elections. Even if Karabakhis do not wish to jeopardize their current situation with a vote against the political leadership at the polls, they still possess the right to ‘vote with their feet’ by emigrating to Armenia or abroad. Karabakhi engagement in political processes and government provision of social services helps prevent population flight in spite of post-war poverty and restricted opportunities for education and business in Nagorno-Karabakh. Cognizant of this fact, Karabakhi authorities adopted policies to encourage inward migration and boost the birth rate by enticing individuals and families with financial benefits. (International Crisis Group, 2005; Rowland, 2008; Kololian Foundation, 2013; International Crisis Group, 2005; Blakkisrud & Kolstø, 2012, p. 287; Caspersen, 2014, p. 5)

Another way the Nagorno-Karabakh government has stabilized the population is by effective provision of security and rule of law. One new immigrant family, Syrian-Armenian refugees, highlights their feelings of safety as the number one factor in deciding to stay in Nagorno-Karabakh permanently, regardless of the outcome of the conflict in Syria. For this family life in Nagorno-Karabakh is safer for their children than life in Armenia or in pre-war Syria (Arterbury, 2015). This anecdote is apparently symptomatic of general sentiment. A 2013 Gallup poll returned a 70% confidence vote for the fairness of the Nagorno-Karabakh justice system, up from an already high 52% approval rate recorded by the International Crisis Group in 2005 (Rochelle & Loschky, 2013; Khojayan, 2014). Overall, a European Friends of Armenia poll found that 80% of Nagorno-Karabakhis believe that their new country is going in the right direction (EUOFA, 2010). It seems to be the case that the reason Nagorno-Karabakh experiences minimal political opposition activity is in large part because most Karabakhis actually agree on the topics of primary importance to them.

AVOIDING COMMON PITFALLS OF UNRECOGNIZED STATES

The current degree of political stability in Nagorno-Karabakh evolved out of a particularly chaotic beginning. New states, and especially states facing the additional challenges of non-recognition are

vulnerable to some common pitfalls. Nagorno-Karabakh managed to evade these in part because democratization created structural resistance which empowered civilian leadership. The fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan took place as these states were just emerging on the international scene as independent entities. Not only that, inter-ethnic tensions festered under Soviet rule (De Waal, 2013; Bolukbasi, 2011). The result was a conflict which was characterized by irregular fighting groups; including partisan groups, Georgian paramilitaries, criminals attracted by the opportunities present in a conflict zone, and infighting within ‘official’ militaries. (De Waal, 2010) While ultimately this yielded a military victory, these very groups commonly pose a threat to state-building after fighting is concluded. Warlord rule and criminal license are types of state failure which commonly plague unrecognized states.

As Kimberly Marten has pointed out, modern warlords rely on the cooperation or tacit support of states in order to flourish. (Marten, 2012 p. 25) In Nagorno-Karabakh democratization served to hold warlordism in check by incentivizing state leadership to eradicate warlords. Early on, accusations of warlordism presented a significant liability to Nagorno-Karabakh’s independence. Azerbaijan sought to delegitimize Karabakhi statehood by highlighting criminality and corruption in Nagorno-Karabakh. (International Crisis Group, 2005) Inside Nagorno-Karabakh Samvel Babayan presented a very real threat to Karabakhi democratic governance as he consolidated personal control over significant portions of the economy. President Ghoukasian would later characterize it as a ‘...struggle between democracy and dictatorship’ (Caspersen, 2008, p. 124). In the end, warlordism presented too significant of a liability to democratization, which was seen as a necessary prerequisite to independence (Caspersen 2012, p. 79). Thus, when Samvel Babayan was accused of an assassination attempt on President Ghoukasian’s life, Nagorno-Karabakh successfully captured, convicted, and imprisoned Babayan.

Support from both Armenia, whose president was himself from Nagorno-Karabakh, and the local Karabakhi population were key to Babayan’s removal. As Nina Caspersen notes, the fact that Nagorno-Karabakh’s struggle for independence was very much a bottom—up conflict means that the civilian leadership is empowered against the military leadership, and discourages individual attempts to seize power. Also, a consensus in favor of democratic development rendered warlordism unacceptable. (Caspersen, 2012, p. 81)

Unrecognized and weak states are also susceptible to military takeover of civilian rule. Here again Samvel Babayan in part serves to represent how Nagorno-Karabakh eliminated this problem since

Babayan was a top military commander who built a personality cult around his identity as a war hero. More recently there are additional examples of how Nagorno-Karabakh has insulated the state against such a threat. Caspersen cites a story about the acting chief of the Karabakh army staff who, "...was quoted as saying that the state was not ready for full democracy as long as the war was not over,' and subsequently hauled into parliament, reprimanded, and forced to state that he had been 'misquoted'. (Caspersen, 2008, p. 126) While this anecdote indicates the tension between the military and civilian rule, it also demonstrates the ability of civilian leaders to limit military authority. Indeed, as with democracy in general, political rhetoric is prolific on the subject of the separation of the military from civil governance in Nagorno-Karabakh. Karabakhi officials frequently speak with pride of how Babayan was eliminated. Indeed, although 30% of the Nagorno-Karabakh population participates in the military, the relatively unified voting record and high government approval ratings suggest that public support for a military coup does not exist.

DEMOCRATIZATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

An important byproduct of a stable political environment in Nagorno-Karabakh is economic development. As part of the pursuit of liberal Western-style democracy, the Nagorno-Karabakh government actively pursued economic liberalization in order to attract business investment and rebuild commercial infrastructure. These measures include privatization, protection of property rights, and favorable tax regimes which all work to gain the confidence of investors. (Office of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, 2015; Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2008, p. 495) Here President Ghoukasian's comments provide insight as to why the Nagorno-Karabakh authorities might choose this route beyond seeking international recognition, "During my first presidential campaign, when I asked the wish of the people, they would answer: let there be no more war. Five years later, their answer to the same question is; give us flats and jobs" (International Crisis Group, 2005, p. 15). In addition to an externally imposed incentive to follow a liberal democratic model, the Nagorno-Karabakh government is responding to population demands for greater economic opportunity and international engagement. In fact, the strongest evidence of plurality in Nagorno-Karabakh politics results from debates over economic matters. As such, the adoption of liberal Western economic structures and democratic processes brings it all full circle in Nagorno-Karabakh by inspiring a self-perpetuating movement towards democratization.

These policies successfully attracted significant funding from the Armenian diaspora in particular. (Avetisyan & Nikoghosyan, 2011; International Crisis Group, 2005) Diaspora funded projects

include the modern highway connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, the revitalized Karabakhi carpet industry, and a reopened a gold and copper mine. Due to non-recognition, Nagorno-Karabakh's economic viability is severely restricted (Caspersen, 2012, p. 42). These investments represent crucial steps towards increased economic autonomy. While Nagorno-Karabakh relied heavily on Armenia for financial aid and reconstruction after the war in the form of exceedingly favorable loans, officials claim that Nagorno-Karabakh is less and less reliant on these loans (Caspersen, 2008, p. 121; Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2008, p. 496).

Whatever the actual amount of aid which Nagorno-Karabakh takes from Armenia, the mere fact that Karabakhi authorities publicly pursue economic autonomy as a goal is significant. Democratic governance, economic development and liberalization facilitate a high degree of integration with Armenia. Armenia provides the only open border on Nagorno-Karabakh's frontier (Caspersen, 2012, p. 41, 56), and without Armenian support Nagorno-Karabakh would be unable to defend itself militarily or to travel abroad to study and conduct business using Armenian passports. Remarkably, this relationship has endured without alienating the Armenian population. (Krikorian, 2012) In Armenia the perception of Nagorno-Karabakh continues to be a narrative of Armenian victory, and the politicians and residents heroes, rather than the welfare child or criminal neighbor. The continuing acceptance of Nagorno-Karabakh citizens in the office of President of Armenia is an example of the credibility Nagorno-Karabakh enjoys (Caspersen, 2012, p. 58).

CONCLUSION

Reliable data on Nagorno-Karabakh remains challenging to obtain as long as non-recognition prevents internationally accepted objective assessments from taking place. However, currently available evidence does suggest a considerable role for both the Nagorno-Karabakh political leadership and population in designing and effecting democratic self-governance. Further, the conscious pursuit of democratization enables a degree of stability in Nagorno-Karabakh which is rarely enjoyed by other unrecognized states (Caspersen, 2012). While democratization has failed to yield recognition so far, engaging in 'waiting room state-building' (Blakkisrud & Kolstø, 2012) increasingly presents an end in itself.

Although democratization impacts governance within Nagorno-Karabakh positively, it still remains to be seen how far reforms can progress in the face of a continuing military threat and international non-recognition. Reliance on Armenia, economic isolation, and Azerbaijani aggression perpetuate the vulnerability of Nagorno-Karabakh. Meanwhile, Nagorno-Karabakh is busy building an

independent future in spite of non-recognition. As seen with regard to economic reforms, this preoccupation with quotidian issues of livelihood invites plurality in spite of a powerful reluctance to undermine Nagorno-Karabakh autonomy. Also, prolific official rhetoric endorsing liberal democracy in Nagorno-Karabakh fosters democratic expectations and deepens popular understanding of what it means to be democratic. Nagorno-Karabakh is already surprising analysts with its relative success as a quasi-state, perhaps it will continue to do so.

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