

A monument near Stepanakert, nicknamed Tatik Papik (Grandfather and Grandmother) and seen as a symbol of Karabakh.

Source: Laurence Broers

A Karabakh Armenian perspective

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The state of 'no war, no peace' and the complete absence of official relations between Azerbaijan on the one hand and Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) on the other pose serious obstacles to the democratic development of all the states and political entities involved in the conflict. In recent years Azerbaijani officials have used increasingly strong language regarding the possible use of force to resolve the conflict. In Armenia and Nagorny Karabakh the populations are seemingly accustomed to this and reconciled to the prospect of renewed war.

Karabakh Armenian demands

The official position of the NKR is based on three key tenets. First, there can be no direct subordination of one party to the conflict to another – that is, no vertical relationship between Azerbaijan and the NKR. Second, the NKR cannot be an enclave within Azerbaijan: the population of Karabakh must have overland access to the outside world. Third, the NKR must have security guarantees at a level determined by its leadership and its people. The fate of the territories surrounding the NKR – referred to in Armenian sources as the 'security buffer' – is an object of negotiations. This position has converged with the official position articulated by Yerevan following the accession of Robert Kocharian, formerly president of the NKR, to the Armenian presidency in 1998.

The NKR authorities do not reject outright the idea of the return of the Azeri population that fled Karabakh as a result of the war, but consider this a question to be resolved in tandem with the return of Armenian refugees to Azerbaijan. Nonetheless, in April 2005 the Foreign Minister of the NKR, Arman Melikian, announced the promulgation of a citizenship law for the NKR that would extend full citizenship rights to any Azeris returning to Karabakh in addition to a number of cultural rights as a national minority.



Azerbaijan's rejection of direct contacts with the NKR authorities, boycott of all processes concerning the NKR and attempt to cast Armenia in the role of aggressor are seen in Stepanakert as unconstructive and intransigent. The attempt to isolate Karabakh and create an economic and humanitarian crisis for its population flouts the rights of the Karabakh Armenians and is seen as an effort to force them out of their homeland. The Stepanakert authorities believe that the negotiations process can only become effective once the NKR has been properly incorporated into it; after all, it is the Karabakh authorities that are in a position to make decisions on issues of key interest to Azerbaijan, such as territory and refugees. For the Karabakh Armenians, the absence of a sober assessment of the current situation on the part of Azerbaijan is the key barrier to progress in resolving the conflict. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev's pronouncement that adherence to non-violent methods of resolution is the maximum compromise that Azerbaijan can undertake merely reinforces this view.

Yerevan-Stepanakert relations

It is not just Azerbaijan but Armenia that poses problems for the NKR's hopes of securing participation in the peace process. Stepanakert diplomatically states that meetings between the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents are viewed with "the necessary understanding". However, dissatisfaction with the current format is easy to discern in these statements, and in Nagorny Karabakh displeasure at exclusion from the peace process is increasingly vocal. Many find Armenia's effective monopolization of the right to resolve the conflict unacceptable, and there are increasing calls for Armenia to assume no responsibilities other than guaranteeing the security of Karabakh Armenians. This has contributed to increased debate on the respective

rights and obligations of the two Armenian states in the resolution of the Karabakh conflict.

For Karabakh Armenians the question of status is paramount. The 'step-by-step' proposal of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Minsk Group was rejected in Karabakh precisely because it proposed to delay the resolution of the status issue. Nonetheless there are differences of position within Karabakh; according to public opinion surveys the population is split between those favouring union with Armenia and a narrow majority that favours independence. Either way, the apparent non-participation of the NKR authorities in what are clearly their own affairs is increasingly incomprehensible to Karabakh Armenian society.

Both government and society in Armenia look upon the prospect of the NKR's independence with scepticism, favouring instead a unified Armenian state. That the Armenian state plays a determining role in the political fortunes of the Karabakh political elite plays no small role in this perception. Yet the relationship works two ways: since the war 'the Karabakh factor' has been a determining one in internal Armenian politics, a reality that neither government nor society in Armenia can ignore. This intricate relationship – the influence of the Armenian state over the Karabakh authorities and the decisive nature of the Karabakh factor in internal Armenian politics – forms a Gordian knot so far resistant to unravelling, and which contributes to the impasse in which we find ourselves.

Societies or elites?

How can we move on from this impasse? It is often claimed that while elites are ready for compromise,

societies are not. This is misleading: one of the key shortcomings of the Karabakh peace process has been the underestimation of the role of societies in conflict and the role played by elites in ensuring that societies are not ready for compromise. In the current context, the establishment of mutual contacts between the two societies (those of the NKR and Azerbaijan) is especially important for the confidence-building needed for progress in the peace process.

Mediators have all but ignored this highly significant aspect of the task they face. It is, however, gratifying to observe a more serious approach to this issue in the societies themselves. Murad Petrosian, Karabakh politician and editor of the newspaper *What is to be done?* has observed:

“If the construction of peace begins...without fundamental changes in public consciousness, then this edifice – even if replete with a roof – sooner or later will share the fate of the Palestinian peace. ... The key to real peace for Armenians lies not in the ruling elite of Azerbaijan but in Azerbaijani public consciousness; likewise for Azerbaijanis, the key lies in the public consciousness of Armenians.”

Outwardly it appears that Azerbaijani society is not ready for conciliation, but this reflects the position of the Azerbaijani political establishment rather than public opinion. A few years ago I was part of a group of Karabakh Armenian journalists visiting Baku and we encountered more constructive views among Azerbaijanis. The atmosphere surrounding our visit was very tense, as the newspaper headlines from the day of our arrival attest: “Armenian terrorists in Baku.” We nonetheless asked if it could be arranged for us to meet some ordinary citizens, and after long deliberations our security escort agreed that we could venture out into a crowded street in central Baku and talk with the first passers-by we encountered. Nine out of the ten we spoke to received us cordially, speaking calmly about the conflict and their problems. Only one of the ten threatened us with vengeance.

The media can play an enormous role in objectively portraying the Karabakh conflict and peace process, and in rejecting ‘enemy’ stereotypes. However, while governments have it within their power to influence public opinion and to prepare the ground for inevitable compromises, they fear that a developing civil society and media could empower ‘underground’ (i.e. real) public opinion vis-à-vis the political establishment. Thus elites maintain a propaganda war, most graphically illustrated by media approaches in Azerbaijan. Leading media, especially television, are government-controlled (as they are in Armenia) and project the ruling elite’s

views masquerading as public opinion. In Armenia and Karabakh the media have until recently resisted the propaganda war, although certain symptoms have appeared suggesting that the Armenian media have taken up the challenge. This was evident in the reactions of some Armenian media to the brutal murder of an Armenian officer by an Azerbaijani counterpart in Budapest, Hungary, in 2004, leading some to claim the ‘genetic incompatibility’ of the two peoples. Nothing has changed in the Karabakh media, yet the authorities reproach journalists for their ‘pacifist’ leanings at a time when Azerbaijani journalists are banging the war drum.

Paths to political development

The way out of the current impasse lies along the path of democratization, a factor long underestimated in mediation efforts. Events in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan have demonstrated the revolutionary potential of post-Soviet societies; however, a more evolutionary path of development without serious upheaval is far preferable in unrecognized states like Karabakh.

After the opposition’s success in the 2004 local elections, it prepared itself to strengthen this achievement in the parliamentary elections of June 2005 in Nagorny Karabakh. However, a historic opportunity was lost and the opposition suffered a crushing defeat. While the opposition was critical of the election, especially the excessive use of administrative resources by the authorities, the overwhelming majority of foreign observers (of which there were approximately 130) praised the elections, asserting that they were of higher quality than analogous elections in Armenia and Azerbaijan. The absence of mass falsification and public disturbances up to and after the election played a key role in this assessment. Many in Karabakh reject the comparison with Armenia or Azerbaijan, preferring to evaluate the recent elections against international standards and the experience of developed Western states, by which measure there is concern that Karabakh’s political evolution may be stagnating.

The key issue for the peace process is whether the elections influence the resolution of the conflict and to what extent the two issues are interconnected. Many Karabakh Armenians look upon democracy as a means of survival and of protecting their rights. However, democratization also allows for more direct public access to the peace process. At present Karabakh society is poorly informed about the peace process and remote from discussions about it. It is only through democratic transformation that Karabakh society can become more aware of the concrete details of different peace proposals, better placed to articulate its concerns and, most importantly, establish a civic dialogue with Azerbaijani society beyond narrow elite circles.