



# Nagorno-Karabakh – Embedded in Geopolitics\*

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**Abstract.** This article gives background information on the origins of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh taking into account the different perspectives of the various parties involved in the conflict. The author recommends focusing on the process of peaceful settlement and gives some step by step concrete suggestions.

**Keywords:** Nagorno-Karabakh issue, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey, ‘energy politics’, self-governance

## 1 Introduction

The European Union’s foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton declared the parliamentary elections in Nagorno-Karabakh<sup>1</sup> scheduled for May 23, 2010 to be illegal. On May 12, the same year it was the 16th anniversary of a cease-fire agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Although the frozen conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh in the EU neighborhood merits our permanent attention, developments in 2010 concerning the Minsk negotiations in the context of geopolitics ask for a recapitulation of the situation.

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<sup>1</sup>The Russian name is Nagornyi Karabakh, whereby ‘nagorny’ is Russian for mountainous, ‘kara’ is Turkic for black or dark, and ‘bakh’ is derived from the Persian ‘bagh’, meaning gardens, or Turkish ‘bahçe’, also garden. The Armenian name for Karabakh is Artsakh.

Nagorno-Karabakh used to be an Autonomous Oblast (AO) in the Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) of Azerbaijan. But after a bloody war between Azerbaijan and Armenia it has become a self-proclaimed independent republic not recognized by any state<sup>2</sup> but protected by and connected to Armenia through a corridor<sup>3</sup> on Azerbaijani soil. The occupied zone involves seven districts of Azerbaijan including the better known Lachin and Kelbajar provinces.

In the run-up to independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, upheavals in Nagorno-Karabakh began in 1988, escalating in vicious fights, and in the occupation of territory around Nagorno-Karabakh by Armenia until a ceasefire was signed in 1994 between Azerbaijan and Armenia. With its 8,322 square kilometres Nagorno-Karabakh is a bit larger than inhabited Israel without the Negev desert, or almost twice the size of South Ossetia. Its capital is Stepanakert. It has a predominantly Armenian population of about 140,000 people, mostly Apostolic Christians.

During the fights and upheavals both Armenians and Azerbaijanis had to flee from each other's territories. In total over half a million Azeris have been living as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Azerbaijan, having fled from Armenia, the provinces around the disputed area, and from Nagorno-Karabakh itself.<sup>4</sup> The situation is complex, multifaceted and multilayered involving different issues: local, regional and foreign forces. The various 'layers' and issues will be unpacked in this article.

## 2 Different parties and issues involved

First of all, of course all the people from Nagorno-Karabakh – both the Armenians inside the self-proclaimed independent republic (140,000) and the Azeri IDPs surviving outside of it (more than half a million) – are concerned, although they are not involved in the talks. The two sovereign countries, Azerbaijan and Armenia are involved together with their allies. Turkey is a staunch supporter of Azerbaijan. These latter countries share a common heritage engendering mutual solidarity. Both closed their borders to Armenia in 1993

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<sup>2</sup>Not even by Armenia.

<sup>3</sup>Various terms are used for this territory depending on one's perspective: Armenia refers to "liberated territory", "security belt" or "buffer zone". Azerbaijan refers to "occupied territory".

<sup>4</sup>UNHCR refers to approximately 586,000 IDPs on a total Azeri population of 8.8 million: it is difficult to get exact, verified numbers. The Military Balance 2010, for example, mentions total Azeri population of 8,238,672. <http://www.internal-displacement.org/> (accessed December 8, 2009).

as a means of pressure to resolve the conflict. Armenia, on the other hand, can count on the support of the Russian Federation. Fourthly, Russia, the USA and France are involved as OSCE Minsk group mediators and as countries representing interests. Finally, two issues are also linked to the conflict: the question of genocide in 1915, and the rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia about reopening borders.

Since Armenia is landlocked between Turkey, Iran and Azerbaijan, the closure of borders in 1993 by Turkey and Azerbaijan, with the exception of recent years, has meant slow economic development for Armenia. All goods to Armenia formally have to come in through Georgia or Iran.<sup>5</sup> The BTC (Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan) pipeline, which could have followed a more direct line from Baku to Ceyhan through Armenia, was built with a detour through Georgia. Thus, both Armenia and Azerbaijan suffer from the frozen conflict: Armenia is relatively isolated and misses out on revenues; Azerbaijan misses part of its territory and is stuck with almost 600,000 IDPs.

With Turkey's efforts of meeting criteria to join the EU, under the zealous leadership of its Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, it is showing the world that it can be a regional power of significance. Turkey and Armenia began doing what was unthinkable during a good dozen years, namely talk about opening borders. Some of the meetings between Turkish and Armenian officials were arranged informally around soccer matches, hence the term 'soccer diplomacy'. But under the auspices of the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs the opening of borders was formalized in a protocol which, although was signed by both parties in October 2009, has not been ratified yet. The Swiss realizing the complexity and interconnectedness of various issues, purposefully disentangled them: the protocols therefore state no preconditions on either the genocide question or on Nagorno-Karabakh. In this strength lies also its weakness because the issues do influence the process of opening borders and vice versa. Thus, even the meeting arranged with President Obama for both Prime Ministers Sargsyan of Armenia and Erdogan of Turkey on April 12, 2010 did not bring ratification of the border protocol closer. The problem is complex. Various issues are at stake.

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<sup>5</sup> Armenia has an estimated US\$200 million trade with Turkey - indirectly through Georgia and Iran. An estimated 40-75,000 Armenians work in Turkey illegally. J. Valiyev, *Azerbaijan in the World*. Vol. III. no 7, April 1, 2010.

### 3 Issues

Azerbaijan is of course not too thrilled with this protocol. Perhaps even feels a bit betrayed by 'brother' Turkey because Armenia had not met any conditions on the problem of Nagorno-Karabakh, reason why the borders were closed in the first place. Then there is the issue of genocide: Armenian pressure groups are lobbying various governments to have the massacre of 1915 recognized as genocide; thirdly, the United States wishes for a possible alternative corridor to Afghanistan through Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan; fourthly, 'energy politics' cannot be excluded from the Nagorno-Karabakh negotiation politics. These four points are explained in the next paragraphs.

Armenia is traumatized by the loss of at least one million lives in war and deportations fighting the Turks in 1915, as the Ottoman Empire was crumbling. The Armenian Diaspora has a strong lobby in Washington D.C. and in European capitals to have the massacre of 1915 recognized as genocide. About 15 to 20 countries have recognized the genocide in the meantime. Turkey claims Turkish lives were also lost, and the Turkish government denies genocide, the difference lying in premeditated systematic murder or 'normal' casualties as a result of war.<sup>6</sup> In an effort to conduct rational foreign policy, the question of genocide has been delegated to a scientific Turkish-Armenian commission. However, the Armenian Diaspora in the United States is relentless and more hawkish in its demands than the Armenian government itself. Mr. Obama, during his presidential election campaign in 2008 made some promises to the Armenian Diaspora on recognizing the genocide of Armenians. After Obama's election, in view of important relations with Turkey, this promise was played down, using the building up of relations between Turkey and Armenia as a reason.

The US Senate however, in April 2010 proposed and accepted an amendment with regard to the genocide, reintroducing this delicate and painful issue in present day US-South Caucasus politics. As a gesture of protest, Turkey temporarily summoned back its ambassador from Washington D.C. The USA does not want to put too much pressure on its relations with its NATO ally Turkey, but also needs cooperation from Armenia and Azerbaijan if it wants to open a possible new corridor to Afghanistan. This would be an alternative

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<sup>6</sup>The term genocide did not exist in 1915 and was introduced by the UN in 1948. The criteria named in 1948 were then in retroaction applied to the killings in 1915. In the context of 'genocide in the Caucasus' the case of the Circassians (or Adyggs) in the North Caucasus should be mentioned. Almost one million were deported with an estimated 400,000 killed in 1864 during the Russo-Caucasian War.

route in case the way through the Persian Gulf and Pakistan should become too unstable.<sup>7</sup> As it turns out, this plan is an incentive to help resolve the conflict about Nagorno-Karabakh, or the alternative route will not offer much stability either.

Finally, ‘energy politics’ are also chipped in the negotiations around Nagorno-Karabakh. Some changes in energy supply deals can be read as a message of Azerbaijan’s discontentment with Turkey’s unconditional signing of the protocols. Azerbaijan has signed a deal with Russia, and Russia and Turkey have a gas line project going on. If Turkey and Armenia factually manage to open borders, this will weaken Russian influence in Armenia. But in view of the global economic crisis (from which Russia suffers as well) trade and energy revenues may be more important than politics.

In view of the complexity of the situation involving regional politics between Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan embedded in geopolitics with Russia, the USA and the EU, with each party having its own interests, it is not surprising that the protocols have not been ratified yet, nor that the updated Madrid principles in the negotiations around Karabakh have not been accepted yet.

## 4 The origin of the conflict in more detail: differing perspectives

The problem around Karabakh dates from the time when the South Caucasus countries, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia were about to be incorporated into the Soviet Union, after the Bolshevik revolutions in 1917, yet managing to remain independent for a few years (1918-1921) before the Soviet Army invaded the South Caucasus. The three South Caucasus countries had united shortly as a Federation before becoming independent Republics, thereby managing to postpone their incorporation into the Soviet Union. But by 1920, the intervention from Bolshevik Moscow was increasing: part of the population was against the Bolsheviks, but communist Azeri were helping them. It was a time of relative confusion with decisions being made and retracted even without the knowledge of who was formally and legally in charge.<sup>8</sup> The young Joseph

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<sup>7</sup> *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, May (2010: 8-13) points out that “the US-Pakistan relationship is fragile”, that both countries have different regional imperatives, and that “further disagreements are probable”. On June 9, 20 NATO tractor trailers ferrying supplies to Afghanistan were torched, illustrating the desirability of a new corridor to Afghanistan.

<sup>8</sup> The Azerbaijani Communist leader Nariman Narimanov declared Nakhichevan, Zangezur and Karabakh to be part of Soviet Armenia. His statement was soon retracted. It is unclear why.

Stalin was working for the ‘Kavkas Bureau’ at that time, dealing with issues of organizing the territory and its peoples from different ethnic backgrounds.

The Soviets developed an ethnic-territorial policy giving different (ethnic) regions various degrees of autonomy.<sup>9</sup> Nagorno-Karabakh also needed to be given a formal place.<sup>10</sup> According to Armenians, based for example on ancient texts of Strabo and Plinius the Second, this area has from times immemorial been Armenian, whilst Azeri can point to the city of Shusha in the Karabakh khanate, which was a big, predominantly Azeri cultural-political center founded by Panah Ali khan in the 1750s.<sup>11</sup> In the 19th century the Karabakh area came in Russian hands during Russian expansion into the South Caucasus after winning the Russo-Persian War (1826-1828). From the 1830s onwards, Shusha split into an Azeri Muslim part and an Armenian Christian part of the city.

Thus, the origin of ‘ownership’ of Karabakh is defined differently at different points in time – even up to the final decision of the Bolshevik Caucasus Bureau in 1921, because it first attached Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, and shortly afterwards this decision was reversed by Stalin, who added it to Azerbaijan. The Armenians can refer to ancient history, to the Russian pre-Soviet period, and to the first decision of the Kavkaz Bureau, before it reversed its decision. The Azeri can refer to the 18th century khanate, to the 20th century Soviet period: Nagorno-Karabakh was part of the AzSSR and ‘thus’ belongs to Azerbaijan. This argument is not flawless in the eyes of Armenians since Azerbaijan in proclaiming its independence from the Soviet Union addressed the period 1918-1921, when it was independent from both Russia and the Soviet Union. At that time Nagorno-Karabakh was not formally part of the Democratic Republic. However, allegedly Stalin’s decision states: “to leave [sic!] Nagorno-Karabakh within the borders of Azerbaijan’s Soviet Socialist Republic”. Thus, Stalin perceived this area to be Azerbaijani territory, although Armenians can also defend that it was not.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, by 1923 Nagorno-Karabakh was proclaimed an Autonomous Region of the SSR Azerbaijan and so it remained

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<sup>9</sup>AO or Autonomous Oblast, ASSR or Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, with more autonomy and SSR or Soviet Socialist Republic, with sovereign power.

<sup>10</sup>Along with Nakhichevan and Zanzegur. The first came under control of Azerbaijan, the second went to Armenia: <http://www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/nagorny-karabakh/chronology.php> (accessed June 4, 2010).

<sup>11</sup>Unesco world heritage <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/1574/> (accessed June 4, 2010).

<sup>12</sup>Webpage Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nagorno-Karabakh, Commentary on Thomas de Waal’s report “The Karabakh Trap: Threats and Dilemmas of the Nagorno Karabakh Conflict” (accessed May 31, 2010).

during the whole Soviet period, confirmed in the Soviet Constitutions of 1936 and 1977, until unrest grew during *glasnost* and *perestroika* policy of the late 1980s.

In February 1988, the Assembly of Nagorno-Karabakh asked the authorities in Moscow for unification with the SSR Armenia. This request was not granted because the Soviet Constitution did not allow for borders to be changed. The request in itself however, was enough to trigger violence between Armenia and Azerbaijan with Azeris being expelled from Karabakh and pogroms held on Armenians living in Baku and Sumgait. The Russian army managed to reinstate some order but failed to restore a feeling of justice and the unrest spread. Azerbaijan declared itself independent from the Soviet Union in August 1991, and Nagorno-Karabakh did the same in the following month. Before the end of 1991 a referendum was held in Karabakh, pro-independence. This independence was formalized on January 6, 1992. Fights broke out again. Massacres took place on both sides, forcing thousands of ethnic Azeri and Armenians to flee. According to Human Rights Watch, the Khojaly Massacre on February 26, 1992, where about two hundred Azeri villagers, women and children were killed, is the largest massacre to date in the conflict. Armenians gained the upper hand with the assistance of the Russian 366th Rifle Regiment. A zone connecting Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia was also conquered.

## 5 After independence from the Soviet Union: negotiations

Without going into further details of recent political history of Armenia and Azerbaijan we can conclude that so far, since the ceasefire of May 12, 1994, various leaders from both sides have lost their positions over the frozen conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh. Even if the Prime Ministers were prepared to make concessions, the voters back home dominated by feelings of nationalism were not, and people preferred to see their leaders resign.

Since the ceasefire was signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 1994, little tangible progress has been made after the many meetings which took place between the Armenian and Azeri presidents. The OSCE mediators presented the Madrid principles<sup>13</sup> on July 10, 2009 and called on the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan to endorse and finalize the following basic principles: “1) the return of the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani control; 2) an interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh providing guarantees for security

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<sup>13</sup>Preceded by the Paris and Prague principles.

and self-governance; 3) a corridor linking Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh; 4) future determination of the final legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh through a legally binding expression of will; 5) the right of all internally displaced persons and refugees to return to their former places of residence; 6) international security guarantees that would include a peacekeeping operation”.<sup>14</sup>

These points were generally agreed to by both parties. In December 2009 and January 2010 the OSCE mediators handed over an ‘update’ of the Madrid Principles, stating with reference to point 4 that Karabakh should be included in the peace talks. Both presidents discussed this update jointly in Sochi, in January 2010 in the presence of the Russian foreign minister.<sup>15</sup> In the meantime, president Aliiev claims to accept also the updated principles, although his answer implicitly assumes a final legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh as a part of Azerbaijan, whereas point 4 does not stipulate this. Armenian President Sargsyan made it clear earlier that Karabakh could not return to Azerbaijan’s control, but he did not add his intentions with regard to the Armenian-controlled territories around Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>16</sup> So far, not even point 1 has been put to execution, although more details have been thought out as to how to withdraw from the districts.<sup>17</sup> Partial withdrawal would allow for borders to open and communications and programs to be launched – such as the beginning of the return of IDPs to some areas under the watchful eye of international observers. The next stage would be to determine the status of Nagorno-Karabakh: for example a federation or confederation, independent, or a solution inspired by other existing models (Cyprus, Kosovo, Scotland, Åland, etc.)

Since a purely legal solution has not been found, a political solution is needed. Some argue that a solution will only be possible when it is in the interest of external powers to work together more intensively. At the United Nations level, resolutions were brought to the fore to recognize Nagorno-Karabakh and to allow the return of IDPs to Karabakh, but these resolutions so far have not won a majority of votes. Where, then, is the leverage for a break through? Russia has an important role in the negotiations, but it is also trying to control it for its own interests. If Turkey and Armenia open borders and enjoy the

<sup>14</sup><http://www.osce.org/item/38731.html> (accessed June 4, 2010).

<sup>15</sup><http://asbarez.com/76649/update-madrid-principles-to-include-karabakh-in-talks/> (accessed June 4, 2010).

<sup>16</sup>[http://www.armenianow.com/news/20959/armenia\\_azerbaijan\\_peace\\_talks](http://www.armenianow.com/news/20959/armenia_azerbaijan_peace_talks) (accessed June 4, 2010). Ghazinyan in ArmeniaNow.com, May 21, 2010 (accessed May 31, 2010).

<sup>17</sup>Ghazinyan in ArmeniaNow.com, May 21, 2010 (accessed May 31, 2010). [http://www.armenianow.com/users/aris\\_ghazinyan](http://www.armenianow.com/users/aris_ghazinyan) “Updated Madrid Principles: Baku claims to have accepted document, expects Yerevan to follow suit” (accessed June 4, 2010).



profits of trade, Russia will have less influence in the region. On the one hand, the prolongation of the conflict can be in its interest. On the other hand, various plans are being made for building pipelines. This energy aspect is also good for Russian economy. The building of new, alternative pipelines is also in the interest of the EU. After the August 2008 war in South Ossetia, Europe again received a wake-up call about being dependent on Russian gas. The United States has both strategic and economic interest in the region. It is in the interest of the USA to have the protocols ratified and press to get the updated principles accepted so that a new corridor can be opened. Since some suggested solutions involve European institutions, perhaps the 'soft' and 'hard' powers had better work together on this problem involving almost 600,000 Azerbaijani IDPs living in stressful circumstances for 16 years now, not to mention the feelings of insecurity of many citizens in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh itself! In approaching the subject of possible solutions, we must remember that the non-resolution of a conflict can sometimes be in the advantage of the ruling powers, in spite of formal discourses claiming the contrary. Azerbaijan does not formally want to lose 15-20% of its territory, therefore may procrastinate. As long as the conflict is not solved, certain groups perhaps even hope for compensation in money or in land, especially in Armenia, should the genocide be formally recognized. The conflict is also used conveniently by both parties every now and then as distraction from national affairs. Even though resolving the conflict may be economically advantageous, politically, the conflict has an advantage for Russia to use the general feelings of insecurity as a means of influence in its 'backyard'. Iran has a balanced approach but currently does not have a significant role in the conflict resolution.

## 6 The military-geographical aspect

In the meantime, record oil revenues are being used to build an Azerbaijani army which aspires to be independent from NATO and Russia. Billions of US dollars are being pumped in the defence budget, although a relatively small amount is being used for equipment and training. In spite of agreements to use peaceful means for problem solving, a military solution is not totally unimaginable after what happened in South Ossetia in August 2008, but it is very unlikely. With recent investment and its population of more than 8 million, Azerbaijan has a bigger active capability than Armenia with a population of almost 3 million.<sup>18</sup> However, Armenia is backed by a Russian military pres-

<sup>18</sup>For detailed comparisons see Armenia (2010: 174) and Azerbaijan (2010: 176) in *The Military Balance 2010*.

ence and air base in Yerevan.<sup>19</sup> The military-geographical situation is, moreover, difficult. Karabakh is a small mountain area preceded by plains easy to overlook and defend. Whereas especially a sophisticated air attack might be needed, it is the Azerbaijani navy which has significantly increased its capabilities,<sup>20</sup> but which would be of little use in Nagorno-Karabakh. Finally, in a country with authoritarian rule, a real military force paradoxically remains a threat and a rival to the president. Therefore, we should not underestimate but nor overestimate the capacity of the Azerbaijani army in the coming decade.

## 7 Focus on the process

If perfect solutions are too difficult to find at the negotiation table, conflict theory recommends to focus on the process instead of the result, (Langer 1997) and begin work on practical issues such as: how to involve the citizens of Nagorno-Karabakh in a public debate on the future of Karabakh? The debate, of course, should be based on truthful and versatile information in a non-coercive environment. It is important that people can consider the various options. The second question at stake is: how to create a fair and just method for a population-vote on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh? It is important to involve the displaced people originally from Nagorno-Karabakh, or it would not be a fair referendum (even though this may pose some practical problems such as proof of where one has previously lived). Thirdly, how to involve spokesmen of Nagorno-Karabakh in the conflict resolution process? Finally, the Lachin corridor – Azerbaijani territory but strongly associated with the safety aspect of the Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh – should be included in the debate, referendum and conflict resolution process. It is suggested that the Armenian forces could leave the 13 villages, not the whole territory. How to go about this? These points can be worked on, for example with the help of NGOs, and more EU involvement in helping to redefine the situation away from the old Soviet politics based on territorial integrity and self-determination. Ratification of the protocols between Turkey and Armenia on opening borders should help develop trade and prosperity for all, thereby increasing stability and constructive solutions in the area.

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<sup>19</sup>In Armenia, Russia has both a military (Gyumri) and airforce (Yerevan) presence. See *The Military Balance 2010*, 231, 174.

<sup>20</sup>Looking to 2020: Azerbaijan's military aspirations. Richard Giragosyan, May 2008, Noravank Foundation, partly based on *Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst*, April 29, 2008.

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- xxx *Jane's Intelligence Review* May 2010, 8-13.
- xxx *The Military Balance 2010*, 174, 176.