

Nagorno-Karabakh: The Endless Conflict in the Black Garden

Written by Roland Benedikter

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ROLAND BENEDIKTER, JUL 14 2021

Following U.S. President Joe Biden's April 2021 recognition of the mass murder of Armenians in the 20th century as genocide, there is new movement in the Caucasus. Both Turkey and Armenia have been involved in the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, the "mountainous black garden" in the South Caucasus. In 2020, the latest war between Azerbaijan and Armenia occurred in a seemingly endless history of conflict. The situation seems intractable to many. The war over the territory has hardened the fronts and plunged Armenia, the losing nation, into chaos. Many questions remain unresolved. Nevertheless, there are (limited) prospects, including the diplomatic initiatives of the OSCE as well as individual states such as Russia. A very special institutional-regulatory model of pacification has been repeatedly brought into play since the 1990s: South Tyrol. Territorial autonomy there has transformed ethnic conflicts into institutionalized coexistence. The question is how realistic it is to adapt this model in the Caucasus.

Aspects of the conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh region between Azerbaijan and Armenia are indeed not dissimilar to those of the South Tyrol conflict between Austria and Italy. Already since the second half of the 1990s – especially after the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1994, which led to a "frozen" transitional situation until November 2020 – delegations from the 1994 loser nation Azerbaijan have repeatedly visited the Autonomous Province of Bolzano-South Tyrol in the border triangle of Italy-Austria-Switzerland to study the model for possible conflict solutions involving the international community. There is an East-West focus at the Eurac Research Center for Advanced Studies in Bozen-Bolzano. An international Nagorno-Karabakh conference of the Eurac Research Institute for Federalism and Minority Rights took place at the end of October 2020 with the participation of Mario Raffaelli from Trentino province, who acted as mediator of the OSCE Minsk Group between Armenia and Azerbaijan and helped to develop the six "Madrid Principles" for Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution in 2007. In addition, there has been the work of the Eurac Institute for Comparative Federalism for the Minsk Group in particular, especially for minorities and displaced persons. The region was a topic at the major Central Asia Conference in Moscow in 2019, where a re-ignition of the conflict was already emerging as a possibility in wordings and a certain populist rhetoric of nationalism.

This article presents some thoughts over the following four points in order to provide a minimal basis for discussion on the current situation:

1. What is the conflict about?
2. Causes and backgrounds
3. Possible solutions
4. Perspectives

What is the conflict about?

The conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, the "mountainous black garden" in the South Caucasus, has a long and complex history, including the autonomy issue involved. Similar to other "hyper-complex" conflicts, the conflict presents religious, ethnic and civil-religious-nationalist components in addition to political and economic ones, which make it particularly difficult to resolve. Identity narratives play an essential role in the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, which has

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repeatedly led both the territorial powers and the major powers behind them to engage in symbolic policies that encouraged conflict. For centuries, the coexistence of the closely interlocked Armenian and Azerbaijani populations has produced both positive and negative examples. In addition, the multiple changes in the ethnic-territorial distribution of the population have not made things easier. In modern times, after the Russian November Revolution, Nagorno-Karabakh was annexed to Azerbaijan in 1921-23 despite an Armenian majority (though with a larger Azerbaijani minority at the time than today), partly because the Bolsheviks there had greater influence in Moscow than their Armenian counterparts. Despite repeated attempts by Armenia and the representatives of Nagorno-Karabakh to change the affiliation to Armenia, nothing changed until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The decline of the Soviet multi-ethnic state under Mikhail Gorbachev in 1988 led to a resurgence of nationalism also in the Caucasus and resulted in Nagorno-Karabakh's renewed application to change from Azerbaijan to the Soviet Republic of Armenia, which was rejected by Moscow. As a result, the region unilaterally declared itself independent in 1991 under the name "Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh", since 2017 under the name "Republic of Arzakh" (the Armenian name for Nagorno-Karabakh), which was not recognised by any other state, nor by Armenia itself for lack of prospects of success. As a result, a full-scale war developed from 1991 to 1994 with the participation of regular army units from both sides, which claimed up to 30,000 victims and forced about 700,000 Azerbaijanis and 400,000 Armenians to flee the region. It ended with an Armenian victory, the maintenance of Nagorno-Karabakh's de facto autonomous status and the occupation of surrounding Azerbaijani territories, the so-called seven districts, which Armenia henceforth occupied as "buffer zones" on the grounds of military security. Between 1991 and 2020, a "frozen conflict" emerged from this constellation without a definitive solution. The "freeze" appeared to the background powers and the international community, including Russia, Turkey, Iran and the OSCE, as well as various EU states in the diplomacy-oriented Minsk Group, including France, to be the only way to keep the region in balance and stability, given the complexity and lack of prospects for a definitive consensual solution.

However, from 27 September to 10 November 2020, a new six-week regional war unfolded in which the Azerbaijani army, supported by the "brother nation" Turkey, "responded" to alleged Armenian provocations with a large-scale attack. This allegedly involved Arab, including Syrian and Libyan mercenaries mediated by Turkey, as well as state-of-the-art weaponry, including drones and heavy long-range bombardments. Even before that, in 2016 and in between, there were repeated smaller skirmishes with casualties that were barely registered by the international community. The all-too-small OSCE border control mission, with a team of only six, was overwhelmed by the situation. This latest war claimed at least 4000 victims and ended with a clear victory for Azerbaijan. On 10 November 2020, after the failure of EU and OSCE peace missions, a ceasefire was agreed under more or less mono-lateral mediation by Armenia's protecting power, Russia. The ceasefire provided for the deployment of Russian mediation troops, the territorial return of the seven occupied districts as well as parts of the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan, and the restoration of Azerbaijani sovereignty over the territory in principle, although many individual modalities remain to be clarified. Of the approximately 150,000 inhabitants of Nagorno-Karabakh, 99% of whom are Armenians according to reports by the German Federal Agency for Civic Education (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung), about 90,000 had fled in the course of this war.

Causes and backgrounds

The causes and backgrounds of why a new open war broke out in the autumn of 2020 after repeated smouldering small conflicts lie, as always with larger military confrontations, in the coincidence of various factors. Essentially, five dimensions worked together here, which mutually reinforced each other under the given conditions of the time. As always, the historical situation was decisive, since individual reasons usually only interact to produce a war when the surrounding larger historical moment makes it possible or favours it.

The five dimensions are as follows:

i) De-internationalisation and the trend towards neo-nationalism in the global grand scheme of things

The Caucasus has long been seen as a powder keg with many "unsolvable" conflicts that many stakeholders believe must be frozen until the historical moment for a more consensual solution arrives. But this would presuppose a

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certain recognition of primacy of multilateralism and international law by all sides. The respective readiness has been weakened in recent years; and with it the international and, depending on that, the territorial climate changed. Since the second half of the 2010s, neo-nationalisms have sprung up globally, encouraging more nationalist initiatives, so that there was a growing willingness in the area to suspend balances in order to satisfy national interests. States returned to their own interest policies, including with regard to Nagorno-Karabakh. The politics of spheres of influence also experienced its resurrection by means of the “return of geography” (Paul Dobb), also called the “revenge of geography” (Robert D. Kaplan), as a strategic mentality. Therefore, the recent war of 2020 can be described as a neo-nationalist war, especially between the two states involved, Azerbaijan and Armenia, but also of the interested powers behind them, Russia (Armenia) and Turkey (Azerbaijan) respectively. Iran, as a regional power with a direct common border with Nagorno-Karabakh, was indirectly involved as a third party, but has up to a third of Azerbaijanis in its population and therefore does not want to be drawn into a new Azerbaijani nationalism.

ii) A proxy war of new great power ambitions between Russia and Turkey

The Nagorno-Karabakh war of 2020 was also a “proxy war”. New regional great power ambitions of neighbouring powers became effective – not least as a consequence of the return of geography. The neo-nationalist wave encouraged a new “chess game” mentality and resulting strategic manoeuvres in the zone. A paradoxical logic prevailed: both proxy war powers, Russia and Turkey (Putin-Erdogan), were able to profit from the conflict. For by means of the recent Nagorno-Karabakh conflict of 2020, both powers have in fact helped each other to strengthen their presence in the Caucasus and to “dialectically” expand their territorial power in the style of the 19th century. De facto, they have divided the overall zone between them. On the one hand, Azerbaijan has become more dependent on Turkey; on the other hand, Russia, in addition to its already existing military base, has become even more entrenched in the area by providing the pacification troops, and Armenia has become even more dependent on its protecting power. However, there is a danger that when this process of mutual strengthening of both background powers is completed, it may eventually lead to conflicts between Russia and Turkey – which at the same time are partners or at least partly strategically cooperate in other conflict contexts such as Syria. This could make the overall cooperation between the regional powers even more complex.

iii) Domestic political reasons

Rearmament, provided by Russia to both Armenia and Azerbaijan after 1994 on a rather strict business-basis, was paired with an increasing civil-religious charge of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute on both sides. Identity-revanchism became stronger with the global rise of “imaginal politics” and the return of “tribal politics”. In addition and following another global trend, a certain populism emerged on both sides, which “naturally” played with the ethnic component in the disputed area. Nationalist populisms on both sides used symbolic strategies, albeit to different degrees and not in the same way. One domestic nationalist point of contention was the Yerevan-Stepanakert highway, which was an instrument for the “integration” of Nagorno-Karabakh into Armenia and was also understood as such by both sides (similar to the Tirana-Prishtina highway between Albania and Kosovo in the Balkans).

iv) Religious fault lines

Armenia is not only Christian, but even sees itself as an “Original Christian” nation; Azerbaijan is Islamic with a Shia majority. Both sides were forcedly secularised in Soviet and post-Soviet times, and those in charge tried to tone down the religious component. But since the “return of religion” in the 1990s, it has been reinforced again. This included the role of Christian activism of the Armenian diaspora in France, but also of Islam, likewise in France, a nation that in recent years has been repeatedly shaken by religion-based terror and religious conflicts. This had repercussions which echoed in the conflict area. The fact that France sits on the OSCE Minsk Council is a footnote that seems not entirely unimportant here.

v) Economy

Two pipelines run close to the disputed area. The issue of resource control should not be underestimated, as it is perceived to be of particular importance for nations dependent on it, especially in times of pending transformation of

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the energy issue.

Understandably, many questions arise about the outcome of the recent conflict. Why did Azerbaijan win the 2020 war when it lost the 1994 one? Because it is now economically and, as a consequence, militarily far stronger than it was in 1994, mainly because of its wealth provided by mineral resources, especially oil and gas – and because it was actively supported by Turkey. In contrast, on the Armenian side, Russia tended to act more cautiously because of its previous Ukraine and Crimea policies. The generally more expansive attitude of the authoritarian Turkish government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, especially since his “comprehensive” assumption of power in 2014 and after the failed coup of July 2016, also played an important role in the re-escalation to open conflict. Erdogan dreams of an Islamic superpower between East and West and sees the “brother nation” Azerbaijan as his natural sphere of influence similarly to the Chinese province of Xinjiang (Uyghurs). He is pursuing great power politics from the Caucasus to Syria and Libya. That is why some thought that this war was ironically the end of an independent Azerbaijan, because the country had strategically become part of the Turkish influence sphere. As is always the case in conflicts, the behaviour of Turkey is also due to the desire for revenge on the part of those who consider themselves underestimated or not taken seriously – in other words, it is also due to political psychology. Above all, Erdogan wants to show the EU that he has influence.

To summarize, the Executive Director of the World Trends Institute for International Politics Potsdam, Erhard Crome, in a dialogue with the author put the situation in these words:

The actions of Russia and Turkey in the region are usually portrayed as competition. The quintessence of their actions in the Caucasus and the Middle East is that they are both expanding their positions, not together, but in a pseudo-competition that basically amounts to reciprocity. In the process, they are pushing the West, the EU and the U.S. alike, out of the conflicts and their resolution, and geopolitically out of the region. Turkey has increased its control over Azerbaijan. Putin never wanted bad relations with Aliyev. In Armenia, Pashinyan had blinked toward the West during his ‘velvet revolution.’ In this respect, his and Armenia’s defeat in 2020 came just at the right time: Russia now has a stronger, treaty-based presence in the region with peacekeeping troops, and a new Mайдan became a distant prospect. Thanks to Putin, Armenia did not lose all of Karabakh, and Erdogan ensured that Azerbaijan did not win all of it. The Western blink is just answered by Biden with the recognition of the genocide of Armenians in the First World War. But this seems to me a rather helpless symbolic gesture. Incidentally, all the analysts are skirting an interesting geopolitical issue: by letting the currently unemployed IS fighters go to Libya, Chad or the Caucasus to die as religious fighters, Erdogan is reducing their numbers in Idlib. That means Russia and Assad won’t have to do much bombing there before the area is one day returned to the government in Damascus, whoever is president there then.

Possible solutions

Three main building blocks can be considered for solutions and perspectives – although all three remain ambiguous in terms of strategic manageability and concrete implementation on the ground: a) the latest ceasefire agreement of 10 November 2020; b) the Madrid Principles of 2007; c) the South Tyrol model.

a) The ceasefire agreement of 10 November 2020 called for, among other things,

the cessation of hostilities, the return to Azerbaijan of all districts in the vicinity of Nagorno-Karabakh previously controlled by Armenian forces, the deployment of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh, and the return of refugees under the supervision of the UN Refugee Agency.

b) The Madrid Principles were presented by the OSCE in 2007 and reaffirmed by the Minsk diplomatic group in 2009. They were not intended as a solution, but as a mechanism for détente and at the same time a freeze, which – in a sometimes deliberately imprecise manner – was to initiate a path towards the preparation of a longer-lasting solution. As Uwe Halbach (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik Berlin) summarised it:

Since 1992, the Minsk Group of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has been

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mediating in the conflict, of which Germany is a member. Since 1997, it has been led by three co-chairs: USA, Russia and France... Since 2007, the '6 Madrid Principles' have been on the negotiating table. They provide for six central principles ('basic rules') for conflict resolution: 1. the return of five of the seven provinces surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani sovereignty; 2. an interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh (pending a final settlement) that guarantees security and self-determination for its population; 3. a corridor between the Republic of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh (the so-called Lachin Corridor, note by R.B.); 4. the future settlement of Nagorno-Karabakh's status through a legally binding expression of will by the parties to the conflict; 5. the right of all displaced persons and refugees to return to their homes; and 6. international security guarantees and peacekeeping.

Point 1 was settled with the outcome of the war on 10 November 2020, as all seven districts were recaptured from Azerbaijan and awarded to Azerbaijan in the temporary ceasefire. The remaining points are open, although point 5 seems relatively consensual, at least rhetorically.

c) The South Tyrol model would be a durable and constitutionally anchored territorial autonomous self-administration of Nagorno-Karabakh including ethnic proportionalities (proportional representation model in the government and public administration) and international safeguards for stabilisation despite possibly further micro- and meso-conflicts. Following this model, the thrust towards lasting pacification could be, in addition to the six Madrid Principles, which in themselves remain only transitional orientations for containment: a regional, far-reaching autonomy for Nagorno-Karabakh with primary and secondary legislative rights within Azerbaijan, possibly in partial aspects also for the seven districts now (again) under Azerbaijani administration, in order to promote regional unity and reconciliation. The South Tyrol model was publicly brought up by Azerbaijani President Ilhan Aliyev as a possible conflict resolution strategy in October 2020, which led to both parties to the conflict temporarily calling on Italy as a mediating power. Yet in Nagorno-Karabakh, as in the South Tyrol conflict, the attitude of the protecting power is also decisive: in the case of South Tyrol, it was Austria. In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, the situation is complicated by the fact that there are two protecting powers: Russia and Turkey. In addition, the role of Iran remains unclear.

Perspectives

Territorial self-government based on autonomy while belonging to one of the conflict states may be a viable path for Nagorno-Karabakh that promises success. The South Tyrol model is a good template for this. It is also a pluri-ethnic mountain area and offers both sides the narrative of a success story, so that it can lend some legitimacy to the proponents of territorial autonomy from the outset.

On the other hand, there are the differences in the historical, political, cultural and religious backgrounds. As ideal-typical as the South Tyrol model seems to "fit" at first glance, in times of "re-globalisation" much depends on contextualisation and "glocalisation", if they are not even decisive. Any success of implementation depends crucially on the will of all sides as well as the surrounding historical situation. This will to implement the South Tyrol model of territorial autonomy is currently lacking, especially among the winners, while among the losers trauma-favoured "revenge" fantasies prevail. From this perspective, the South Tyrol model will not be directly applicable, but the discussion about it can contribute to stabilising the situation as a process and developmental perspective. In the coming years, this could lead to a declaration of principles as well as tentative work on the adaptation of various clauses and mechanisms.

As a precondition for this, a joint invitation of delegations from all three territories involved could be issued: Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan and Armenia could visit South Tyrol to have a direct look at the autonomy model in practice, its achievements, opportunities and limits, preferably in cooperation and exchange with the governments in Rome and Vienna. Representatives of Eurac Research and the South Tyrolean provincial administration could advise the conflict parties and the powers behind them. For such consultations, Eurac Research founded its own specialized centre in February 2019, the "Eurac Center for Autonomy Experience", which at the same time represents a bridge between science and the provincial administration. Within the framework of this centre, representatives of the conflict parties could be invited to South Tyrol with sustainability-oriented preparation and follow-up. If helpful, this process could also involve the South Tyrolean EU parliamentarian Herbert Dorfmann, who is President of the European Parliamentary Society as well as a board member of the European People's Party (EPP).

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However, previous experiences of autonomy in Nagorno-Karabakh have been rather changeable to negative. Autonomies have been promised, granted in part and taken away again. For any durable autonomy solution, much depends on the concrete territorial distribution of the ethnic groups – do they live mixed into each other or separated according to groups? Since today 99% of the Nagorno-Karabakh population is Armenians, and given that in the surrounding districts live mainly Azerbaijanis, principles of the South Tyrol autonomy such as the so-called “ethnic proportional representation” are hardly applicable. This principle provides for the distribution of income and posts in the state administration according to ethnic criteria. With only 1% Azerbaijanis, however, this is hardly relevant in Nagorno-Karabakh, but could nevertheless be a sign of goodwill. Despite these restrictions, however, self-administration is feasible in principle, including territorial fiscal sovereignty if suitable.

A major obstacle is, unlike in South Tyrol where all conflict sides were Catholic, the non-identical religion of both sides involved, with an Islam that is in crisis internationally (Fareed Zakaria) and a more militant interpretation of Christianity on the other side. Then, while in settling the South Tyrol dispute all sides involved were democracies, there is the non- or semi-democracy on both sides and in both background powers Russia and Turkey. This makes the situation different from the one that led to the foundations of today’s South Tyrol model between 1972 and 1992. At that time, autonomy was negotiated between Austria and Italy – i.e. between two states that were both Catholic, both democracies and where there was a will to reach consensus after the experience of war. As Erhard Crome has aptly pointed out, in the case of South Tyrol:

there was no religious charge to the conflict – everyone was Catholic. And: today there is the EU as an umbrella over the whole thing (as over Alsace-Lorraine): all are citizens of the Union, pay with the same euro and the borders are open. All of that is missing in the Caucasus region and this is a way contributes to the conflict charge.

Other differences are the South Tyrol concept of “dynamic autonomy”, i.e. its constant and conscious evolution explicitly inbuilt in its founding strategy, which runs counter to the partial interests of both sides. Another hurdle is that in South Tyrol the police and military are reserved for the state of Italy. This may appear to many in post-war Nagorno-Karabakh as a usurpation and could make the acceptance of an autonomy arrangement without its own police power questionable. Basically, however, this is actually a misunderstanding of what autonomy is: a compromise solution. Autonomy in the sense of the South Tyrol arrangement means, for all its opportunities, to parts of its population to be part of a nation with a different cultural identity and history. A final problem is the lack of involvement of civil society in the pacification process. Or as Uwe Halbach put it:

The OSCE mediation in the conflict is taking place at a high diplomatic level. Civil society forces are insufficiently involved in the process. In an authoritarian state like Azerbaijan, non-governmental organisations have a hard time, and this applies all the more to actors who advocate dialogue with the conflict opponent. But on the Armenian side, too, peace activists encounter considerable reservations. There is a high degree of mistrust on both sides and an extremely low degree of willingness to compromise. These mental barriers were further hardened by the ‘April War’ of 2016. After the change of power through the ‘Velvet Revolution’ in Armenia, there was a brief period of détente in 2018, with signals of willingness to compromise in [the two capitals] Yerevan and Baku. But already at the beginning of 2019, the tone became harsher again and the fronts hardened again.

Overall, one question still begs: is there room for political initiative? From the current perspective, the question can only be answered inadequately. The complicated situation requires further negotiations and clarifications. In the medium to long term, however, it is likely that without a tailor-made autonomy solution for Nagorno-Karabakh, the conflict will continue to smoulder, regardless of the willingness or unwillingness of those in power. The international community should not wait for new revanchisms to ignite. The domestic political escalation of the situation in Armenia after the lost war of 2020, with an “attempted military coup” in February 2021 denounced by the head of government Nikol Pashinyan after the Armenian military sided with the political opposition and demanded Pashinyan’s resignation, was a serious warning sign. How US President Joe Biden’s announcement in April 2021 that the mass murders of Armenians in the 20th century would be classified as genocide will affect Turkey’s behaviour in the region also remains to be seen. Similarly, French president Emmanuel Macron’s response in the same month that “Armenia and France will be forever tied together” could have effects on the further development of the dispute.

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The perspective is limited. The EU can mainly become active and score points with the trump card of the South Tyrol model. For lasting success, diplomatic or intergovernmental reconciliation gestures are not enough. Painstaking detailed work on the ground is necessary. One thing for sure will continue to hold true in Nagorno-Karabakh: History is a superhuman process made by human beings. Any conflict resolution strategy on the ground will have to move consciously in the paradoxical field of tension between what is possible and what cannot be influenced.

About the author:

Dr. Roland Benedikter is Co-Head of the Center for Advanced Studies of Eurac Research Bozen-Bolzano, Autonomous Province of South Tyrol, Italy, and Research Professor for Multidisciplinary Policy Analysis in residence at the Willy Brandt Center of the University of Wroclaw-Breslau, Poland.