

Interview – Vincenc Kopeček

Written by E-International Relations

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Vincenc Kopeček is an Associate Professor of Political Geography at the Department of Human Geography, University of Ostrava, Czechia, where he also serves as a head of a research unit, the Centre for Political and Cultural Geography. In his research he focuses on ethnic minorities, de facto states, and informal politics in the South Caucasus. He has published in *Europe-Asia Studies*, *Problems of Post-Communism*, and *Caucasus Survey*, and he is also a co-editor (with Tomáš Hoch) of *De Facto States in Eurasia* (Routledge 2020).

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

Recently, I have been focusing on two main research fields – de facto states (or unrecognized states, if you prefer) and ethnic minorities – particularly in the South Caucasus. However, as this interview is mostly about de facto states, I will focus on this particular research field. There has been one leitmotif present at almost every conference, seminar, or workshop on de facto states I have attended in the last few years: the lack of cross-regional comparative studies. I hope that the growing number of scholars who have recently entered this research field and who come from different academic backgrounds will change this, and in the coming years we will have an opportunity to read interesting and useful cross-regional comparisons on selected aspects of de facto statehood.

However, in order to enable such comparisons, it seems inevitable to reconceptualize how we understand de facto states. And this reconceptualization should go beyond the competition between the narrow and broad definitions of a de facto state. In this case, reconceptualization means a focus on the concepts which can enable us to compare de facto states with other similar entities without blurring the concept of de facto states as such, or in Sartorian terms, without conceptual stretching. In this regard, I find very inspiring the concept of small dependent jurisdictions, which was introduced by Giorgio Comai in his 2018 article in *Ethnopolitics*. In particular, this concept enables us to innovatively look at relations between de facto states and their patrons. Quite often, de facto states are seen as puppets of their powerful patrons, but this is a very simplistic view. These relations are much more complex than this and deserve to be investigated without any simplification and prejudice. I also think that the concept of leverages and linkages (as recently used by Laurence Broers and by John Beyer and Stefan Wolff for example), or patronage (as recently used by Eiki Berg and Kristel Vits and by Marcin Kosienkowski for example) is useful in this regard. And I hope that the edited volume *De Facto States in Eurasia* (Routledge 2020), which I co-edited with my colleague Tomáš Hoch, has constructively contributed to this discussion by demonstrating that it is interdependency rather than dependency which describes the relations between de facto states and their patrons – without questioning the fact that it is the patron who is the stronger one in this complex relationship. We also demonstrated that de facto states have their own inner logic and agenda, and that they are polities of their own.

Besides this, I would mention one more example of research which I find really exciting and innovative. This is an anthropological perspective on de facto states as employed by Andrea Peinhopf, who recently successfully defended her dissertation “Conflict and Co-Existence: War, Displacement and the Changing Dynamics of Inter- and Intra-Ethnic Relations in Abkhazia” at the University College London. She spent months conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Abkhazia, and because I had an opportunity to talk with Andrea about her exciting research, I am really looking forward to seeing her dissertation be published. One of Andrea’s articles has already been published online in *Nationalities Papers* in 2020.

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How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I don't think that the way I understand the world has changed over time, because I don't think I have ever understood the world. With P. T. Jackson, I would position myself as a mind-world monist and phenomenalist and I also subscribe to the hermeneutic tradition. So, I just see myself as merely interpreting the world, or rather its segments, to be correct. And I also can't say that it was any academic or philosophical book *sensu stricto* which shaped the way I see and interpret things around me. But I have to say that my "default setting" was set up by a few authors I first read when I was a teenager. Above all, it was Karel Čapek, a Czech writer from the interwar period. He is known to the wider public mostly by his plays, such as the *R.U.R.* (where the word robot comes from), the *White Plague*, or by his science fiction novel the *War with the Newts*. However, he also wrote a number of essays and short philosophical texts in which he argued in favour of the relativity of things. Above all Čapek's works, I really admire his *Apocryphal Tales*, where he deconstructs and then reconstructs biblical, mythical, or historical stories and events from different and unexpected angles. For example, in a fictional dialogue between Pilatus and St. Joseph of Arimathea, Čapek seems to speak via Pilatus' mouth arguing that he ardently believes that there is a "truth out there" and that we are created in order to find it – not as individuals, but as a humankind. That there is a space for more philosophies, more religions, more truths in the meaning of statements referring to a particular moment or situation.

If I then come back to social science, there is plenty of space for different epistemologies, methodologies, and theories, which are contributing to our understanding or interpretation of the world, or as Čapek has it, the truth. At the same time, however, I am far from stating that everything is truth. I am deeply concerned by what is called the "post-truth world", strategies used by various actors to undermine public trust in our political institutions. In this regard, I have to refer to the work of another Czech author, Václav Havel. In his essay "Politics and Conscience", he writes about a seemingly powerless human, who can change things by insisting on his truth. Havel is far from claiming that there is just one truth; he just says that despite the plurality of truth, not all statements are truths, and that besides more truths, there are also lies.

What have been the central issues at the core of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict since the fall of the Soviet Union? What key factors have contributed to the ongoing hostilities in the region?

This is a very complex question, but I will try to be as concise as possible. Although the conflict has always had several dimensions, including conflicting historical legacies, ethnic resentments, and involvement of external actors, for both parties, the status of Nagorno-Karabakh has always been the central issue. For both parties, Nagorno-Karabakh, or Artsakh, has been perceived as a kind of sacred land which must be protected at almost any cost. This has made the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict one of the most tangled, protracted, and almost insolvable conflicts in the present-day world.

Recently, mainly after the Second Karabakh War, the issue of historical legacies has seemed to gain in importance vis-à-vis the massive campaign launched by the Azerbaijani side in which it has presented almost all Armenian sites in Nagorno-Karabakh as not belonging to the Armenian cultural heritage, but of Caucasian Albania, an ancient state which existed in the Eastern Transcaucasia and which Azerbaijanis often see as one of their predecessors. However, the history of the Caucasus is a complex issue, and such historical shortcuts are far from accurate. Both sides of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict typically (mis-)use history in order to legitimate their claims on this region, and in most cases I am far from siding with one or the other. But I have to clearly say that although the Caucasian Albanian heritage is indeed part of the history of Nagorno-Karabakh as well as of Azerbaijan proper, the claims raised by the Azerbaijani authorities that, for example, the Dadivank monastery, which is situated in one of those districts of Artsakh that were returned to Azerbaijan according to the ceasefire agreement of November 2020, is an Albanian monastery and thus also an Azerbaijani monastery, are shining examples of completely unacceptable historical shortcuts which, if I employ Václav Havel's terminology, can be referred to by just one word: a lie.

Concerning the factors which have contributed to the ongoing hostilities – I see the most important of them as follows:

First, for the last quarter of century, Azerbaijan has massively invested into its army, and its political representatives

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have been stating very clearly that if peace talks fail, they are determined to take Nagorno-Karabakh by the use of force. From this point of view, the escalation of hostilities was just a matter of time. Azerbaijan seems to have been ready for the military solution from 2015, if not earlier, and they did not miss any opportunity, any internal instability in Armenia or Nagorno-Karabakh, to test the readiness of the Armenian side. The April war of 2016 is just the most visible example.

Second, it seems that Azerbaijani authorities had some expectations that the new Pashinyan administration in Yerevan would be a better partner for negotiations than the previous Sargsyan and Kocharyan administrations had been. But this was a miscalculation. On the one hand, Pashinyan is a liberal politician implementing anti-corruption and democratic reforms, on the other hand, he proved to be a staunch Armenian nationalist and explicitly told the media that Nagorno-Karabakh *is* part of Armenia. Inevitably, such a statement was completely unacceptable for Azerbaijan, and also unexpected, because both Kocharyan and Sargsyan, who were originally from Nagorno-Karabakh, were pragmatic politicians who avoided any strong and provocative statements about the status of Nagorno-Karabakh. I believe that the Azerbaijani side was waiting to see if Pashinyan would be more inclined towards some concessions and when they concluded that he was not, their readiness to go to war grew further.

Third is the assertive Turkish policy. I believe that Azerbaijan would not have started the offensive without Turkish support, without having obtained Turkish drones, and most likely without Turkish specialists on the ground and without Syrian mercenaries in the first line playing the role of cannon fodder.

Does the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic fit the definition of a de facto state? How does Nagorno-Karabakh fit into your wider work on de facto states?

Yes, it does. It has been for decades a very clear example of a de facto state, fulfilling all criteria of the narrow definition. Even the Second Karabakh War from October and November 2020 did not change this. Nagorno-Karabakh, or the Republic of Artsakh, as is the official name of this entity, lost most of its pre-war territory, but still controls most of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region including its capital Stepanakert. The power of local authorities was apparently reduced, and it is the Russian forces on the ground and the Armenian government in Yerevan who gained more power and influence in Artsakh; but this only made Artsakh more similar to other post-Soviet cases of de facto states, such as South Ossetia as the best example. Before the Second Karabakh War, the Artsakh Republic was a relatively self-confident actor interdependent with the Armenian Republic, now its ability to act as a self-confident actor with its own political agenda has been substantially diminished.

Nagorno-Karabakh was the first de facto state I began to study. It was the topic of my Master thesis, and since that time I have always closely followed developments in the Republic of Artsakh in particular, as well as in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in general. From an academic point of view, the Republic of Artsakh has been a laboratory for research on democratization in de facto states and on the development of political institutions.

How does Nagorno-Karabakh compare to and interact with other post-Soviet de facto states and other regional actors?

I have partially addressed this in my answer to the previous question. Before the Second Karabakh War the Republic of Artsakh was comparable with Abkhazia and these two entities perceived themselves as the best pupils in the class of post-Soviet de facto states. Additionally, in my interviews with Karabakhi representatives they often stressed that they are not as dependent on Russia as Abkhazia, Transnistria, and South Ossetia are, and many of them perceived Russia's role in the conflict very critically. However, the situation has changed now.

Interestingly, Nagorno-Karabakh's relations with other post-Soviet de facto states have always been relatively limited. Unlike Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh did not engage in the game of "de facto diplomacy" and did not open its representations or "embassies" in other de facto states. Its political representatives were instead focused on states with significant Armenian diaspora, such as France, the USA, Russia, Italy, and Lebanon and were quite successful in gaining recognitions from sub-state actors, such as a few US states, the Basque Autonomy, and several French and Italian cities, which became sister cities of several

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Artsakhi towns. Of course, it is relations with Armenia that have always had a top priority, and I analyzed them in detail in one chapter of *De Facto States in Eurasia*.

What is the role of civil society in the Nagorno-Karabakh region? Which are the primary internal actors at work?

If you ask this question, you have most likely come across my co-authored article from *Europe-Asia Studies* (2016). We were interested in track-II-diplomacy (i.e. relations between civil society organizations – CSOs), and its impact on trust building between the two sides of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and conflict transformation in general. We had a unique opportunity to conduct fieldwork among Artsakhi CSOs, and before the start of the research we supposed that there must be some cooperation between the two sides of the conflict on the track-II-diplomacy level. And indeed, we learned there were some contacts between Artsakhi and Armenian CSOs on one side, and the Azerbaijani on the other, which were realized by a few brave people, but at the same time we learned that there were a number of obstacles hindering the conflict transformation. First, it seems that Azerbaijani activists involved in this limited dialogue were harassed by Azerbaijani authorities. But because we were not able to conduct the research in Azerbaijan, we cannot confirm this using our own data. Second, because the Artsakhi activists realized that their attempts at track-II-diplomacy were futile, they soon turned to another issue which they then saw as more important: support for internal democratization. And third, it turned out that the theory of conflict transformation, and the model of track-II-diplomacy in particular, were based on misleading assumptions for which there is not sufficient evidence in the observed reality. These assumptions were that CSOs from various fields actively participate in conflict transformation and track-II-diplomacy; however, what we saw on the ground was a different reality. Besides a handful of dedicated pacifists and liberals, there were a majority of CSOs and individual civil society leaders which either did not engage in conflict transformation and track-II-diplomacy, or who were hindering it by their activities – consciously or unconsciously. Therefore, instead of the widespread notion of civil society as a rational actor which makes a positive contribution to the transformation of the conflict, we offered a rather different concept of civil society—as a set of distinct and often divergent interests which can not only help to transform the conflict, but which may also oppose its peaceful solution.

However, despite our scepticism towards a positive role of local CSOs in conflict transformation, I have to say that there are a number of wonderful and brave people in Artsakh, who despite their clear and uncompromising stances on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh (which are completely understandable but which at the same time inevitably limit their capacities in conflict transformation) engage in the democratization process as civil society leaders or journalists, and some of them eventually engaged in politics. It was always great to talk to these people, even if we disagreed about many things; so, if I may, I would express my thanks and support at least to some of them: Karen Ohandjanyan, Saro Saryan, Masis Mayilyan, Hayk Khanumyan, Naira Hayrumyan, and Gegham Baghdasaryan. And I would also mention the Stepanakert Press Club and their monthly *Analyticon*, which has always belonged among the best analytical media in the whole South Caucasus.

What are your predictions for the future of Nagorno-Karabakh? Are there any other cases in the post-Soviet sphere that can be used as a point of comparison?

I'm not good in predictions, so there is a good chance that events could unfold in a completely different way than I predict. At least I hope so, because the prediction I will make after the following deliberation is quite pessimistic. In the second question of this interview, you asked me about my understanding of the world and my answer brought us to Karel Čapek and his plurality of truths. And I think this is a good starting point for scholars involved in peace and conflict research. We are not here to judge where the truth is, even if our informants often expect this and even try to convince us about their truth. In the case of Karabakh, I have friends on both sides. I have an Azerbaijani friend who had to flee from Fizuli when he was a child and spent most of his life in refugee camps in Azerbaijan. And I have an Armenian friend who had to flee from Baku and then again from his beloved second home, Shushi. But I am sure that these two would definitely understand and respect each other despite their opposite views of the conflict if only they had a chance to meet and talk. However, right now I don't see many chances that the Armenian/Karabakhi and Azerbaijani civil societies would engage in some constructive dialogue, the only path to positive peace. Politicians and militaries can only impose some temporary solution to the conflict, but unless there is a peace between civil

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societies, there is no peace on the ground, just a truce.

After 15 years researching de facto states, I have witnessed too many individual tragedies, and I have heard too many sad stories full of suffering, death, mistrust, and anger. But I have frequently also heard something different, mostly from the mouths of elderly women who have lost their husbands, brothers, sons, and grandsons in various wars: “*Chto by nebylo voiny*” – “So that there is no war”. Unfortunately, in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh – I am quite sceptical. The Armenian side is calling for revenge, and the Azerbaijani side for disbanding the remains of the Nagorno-Karabakh de facto statehood. I can’t even see any external actor systematically playing a positive role in the conflict (the recent joint US-Georgian diplomatic activity concerning the exchange of Armenian prisoners of war for maps of landmine fields is one of the few positive exceptions). I am afraid that a new war will come; I don’t know when exactly, but it will.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

I still consider myself a young scholar, but if there are some even younger scholars who would like to hear some “pearls of wisdom” from their slightly older colleague, I will tell you this: If you decide to do field work, always respect your gatekeepers and informants. It’s great to collect new data, but your safety and the safety of your local contacts have an absolute priority. And one more thing. When I was conducting field research in various places in the South Caucasus, I always had a feeling that I was just taking something from the communities without repaying them. I was the one who published articles and books, who earned some academic credit, but I didn’t feel that my research was also for the benefit of the communities. It is difficult to engage in community-based participatory research when researching conflicts, but I was able to do this when researching ethnic minorities in Georgia where it was a pleasure for me to assist the local community in Pankisi with their development agenda. If you see an opportunity to reconnect academic interests with community development, consider taking it. It will make your research more meaningful and perhaps also your life happier.