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Final Essay

**Nagorno Karabakh Conflict as a Matter of Ethnicity and
Territoriality**

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Introduction

Nagorno Karabakh is a small territory between Armenia and Azerbaijan, located in the southeast of the Caucasus Minor. Since the emergence of the independent Republic of Azerbaijan in September 1991, NK has formally been part of the country. Not long time after the declaration of the independence, however, the Armenians took control over the territory which was the act that Azerbaijan perceived as an occupation and therefore, it claimed its territorial integrity. Since the ceasefire in 1994, the area has been in a state of “*no peace, no war*”¹ – for the past two decades, there has been very little contact between ordinary people across the conflict divides. The official peace process focuses on high level contacts between Azerbaijan and Armenia – the only officially recognized parties of the conflict.²

This paper offers a description and explanation of some of the key problematic issues connected with the conflict of NK. In the first part of the essay, the short characteristic of the conflict is charted and further, different attitudes of the parties are presented. Both Armenian and Azerbaijani visions have undergone salient transformation during and after the military conflict.³

The conflict is often labelled as “*ethnic*”. The author of this paper, however, do not believe in such a simple labelling. The social reality is a very complex phenomenon and labelling the conflict of NK only as a manifestation of ethnic hatred is quite a shallow stance. In the context of Armenians’ and Azerbaijanis’ long history of peaceful cohabitation, such an elementary explanation is unacceptable. For this reason, another point of view will be presented: Apart from the matter of ethnicity, a matter of territoriality will be discussed.

The Brief Characteristic of Nagorny Karabakh Conflict

Although the relationship of Armenia and Azerbaijan was peaceful for many centuries, it went wrong in a recent history. After the Russian revolution (1917) a new autonomous area of Nagorno-Karabakh was established.⁴ Despite of the fact, that the majority of inhabitants

¹ The conflict flared up again in April 2016.

² In the conflict, there is also the „third side“ – The Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, which, however, has never been internationally recognized.

³ Mutual expulsion of Azeris from Armenia and Armenians from Azerbaijan, the militarization of societies and political cultures (including weakening of democracy as a result of authoritarian governments) and, in case of Azerbaijan, also a significant growth of the economy (due to the natural resources).

⁴ „Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast“: NKAO

were of Armenian origin, the Soviet Union assigned the territory to Azerbaijan.⁵ In this time, no serious problem appeared, but it was to show up in the end of the 1980s.

The conflict started with the failure of the Soviet Union in 1988 and escalated in 1993. It is one of several conflicts between former federal units of the Soviet Union widely framed in terms of a clash between the principles of the self-determination of peoples and the territorial integrity of states: Armenia and the Armenians of NK insist on sovereign self-determination for the latter, previously an autonomous unit within Soviet Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan, on the contrary, insists on territorial integrity within its Soviet-era boundaries.⁶

De Wall describes the key cleavage in the relationship between Azerbaijan and Armenia the following way: *“The misfortune of Karabakh was that it was always caught in the middle. Geographically it was situated on the Azerbaijani side of the mountainous watershed that runs down between the two countries. Demographically it was mixed, as it evidently had been for centuries ... Culturally it had great significance for both sides. For Armenians, the meaning of Karabakh lay in the dozens of Armenian churches ... its tradition of local autonomy through the “melik” princes of the Middle Ages and the martial reputation of Karabakh Armenians. For Azerbaijanis, the associations were primarily with the khanate based around the great eighteenth century city of Shusha ... Karabakh was in short a culturally rich border-zone... fated to be a battlefield.”*⁷

The Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh has considered itself a state – it has all the features that a sovereign state usually disposes: The institutions such as a president, government etc., however it is not recognized by the international community. And because the sovereignty is a term which is connected with either an absolute or none meaning, NK cannot win the conflict with compromises – it has to win absolutely. Also for this reason, there has been very little, if any, progression in a peace process since the beginning of the conflict.

Although until nowadays, the conflict has gone through several stages, included the time when it was considered “frozen”, it is still present. In the beginning of the 2016, the conflict started again in its full power. The Azerbaijani president Il’ham Aliyev stated that

⁵ According to de Wall, Armenian population was of 94 % of the total inhabitants. (de Wall, 2005, p. 14)

⁶ Broers, 2005, p. 8

⁷ De Wall, 2005, p. 14

“*Azerbaijani is in a state of war*”⁸ and as he insists on the resolution which would definitely assign the territory to Azerbaijan, it is not very likely that the conflict will be solved soon.

Theory

Given the nature of the topic of the essay, the author chose two theories to work with and to compare within the topic – the theory of ethnicity and the theory of territoriality. Although they are not self-contained “theories” in the right sense, they present different points of views and are very suitable for the text. The purpose of the paper is to compare them within the context of NK conflict.

Theory of ethnicity

The term “*ethnicity*” has quite a wide meaning and there is a lot of definitions in an academic sphere. There are two known ways of how to explain the nature of ethnicity: **primordialism and instrumentalism**.

Whilst primordialism views ethnicity as an inherent feature, gained by a common historical experience, instrumentalism, on the other hand, sees it as a way of classification and categorization of “self” and “others”, while it is important to note, that these classifications are socially constructed. One can see the basic difference here: Primordialists believe that our ethnicity is rooted in our origin, in our “blood”, inherited from our ancestors and therefore it is impossible to change it.⁹

Reality, however, is obviously different. As we all dispose of several characteristics and identities which have emerged through our evolution, through different crisis, historical, geopolitical and cultural changes, primordialism is quite a weak school.

Therefore, the instrumentalist school exists. As mentioned above, the instrumentalists see the ethnicity as a way, “an instrument” of social stratification and they state that by identifying ourselves within a certain group we recognize who we really are. Such a process one can perceive as a socially constructed and thus changeable.¹⁰

What is more important, however, is the fact, that ethnicity is believed to be something that is connected with personal feelings, the sense of belonging somewhere or to a group of

⁸ German 2012, p. 217

⁹ Šmíd, Vaňura, 2007, p. 12-13

¹⁰ Košťálová, 2012, p. 28

people and as such, it is a term connected with a lot of emotions.¹¹ Whilst one tends to perceive himself or his own group in a positive way, one also perceives others in a negative way. Here, we can see the features of an instrumentalism which works with the classification of “self” and “others”.

As it is not the aim of the essay to decide, which conception is better, the term of ethnicity will be understood as “*an aspect of relationships between groups ... which consider themselves, and are regarded by others as being culturally distinctive*”.¹² Also, the text deals with a topic that is often claimed to be an “ethnic conflict”. Of course, every ethnic conflict is based either on cultural, religious or racial disputes. Brown (1993), defines as “*a dispute about important political, economic, social, cultural, territorial issues between two or more ethnic communities*.”¹³ Furthermore, in order to label a conflict as “ethnic”, at least one of the parties has to be ethnic as well. According to Koinova (2013), “*ethnic conflict is a struggle in which the aim of the opposing agents is to gain objectives and simultaneously to neutralize, injure, or eliminate rivals*”.¹⁴

Theory of territoriality

The territoriality perspective suggests that what states fight over are primarily territorial issues. One can go into more detailed perceptions and differ between the primacy of either geography as an aspect through which states can reach each other militarily (**the proximity perspective**) or the aspect of frequency with which they interact with each other (**the interaction perspective**).¹⁵

According to Hensel (2000), territory is often seen as highly salient cause of conflicts for three reasons: Its tangible contents or attributes, its intangible or psychological value, and its effects on a state’s reputation.¹⁶

It is well known fact that many territories have been the subject of dispute because they contained valuable commodities or resources, or they are an access to another important area, such as sea. In the case of NK, the territory is seen as important because of its population (from the Armeni and NK’s point of view) and because its cultural heritage (Azerbaijani point of view).

¹¹ Šmid, Vaďura, 2007, p. 4

¹² Eriksen, 2002, p. 4

¹³ Brown, 1993, p. 5

¹⁴ Koinova, 2013, p. 9

¹⁵ Hensel, 2000, p. 2

¹⁶ Ibid

The academics also discuss about the role of territory as a reason for hostile behavior as about something that makes states more powerful and secure. Beyond that, territory can also be important when seen as an aspect of national identity and cohesion.¹⁷

Ethnicity and Territoriality in NK Conflict

From the beginning of the dispute Armenia has been rejecting the possibility of NK as a part of Azerbaijan and has been striving for its independence because the independence is seen as the only solution in a situation of hostility between Azeri and Armeni people.

A lot of authors are opposing this argument of “ethnic hatred”, however, it is important to note that not only recent war in NK has stigmatized the relationship between the actors but also a deeper history has its influence. Armenians often mention the Genocide in 1915 for example, in which case Armenians associate Azeri with Turks (while Azerbaijani sources project the problem of refugees and displacement as a solely Azerbaijani problem).¹⁸

One can see the example of a hostility feeling within the society also when reading The Declaration on Proclamation of NK Republic (1991)¹⁹ which states that “*the policy of apartheid and discrimination in Azerbaijan created atmosphere of hatred and intolerance in the Republic towards the Armenian people*”²⁰ and in a more general manner, one can also notice the frequency of such terms as “xenophobia, hatred, national intolerance, anti-Armenian, anti-Karabach” etc. in official political speeches as well as in Armenian medias.

There are, nevertheless, opposite opinions within Armenian society as well. For example, the former Armenian president Ter Petrosyan believes that self-determination of NK is the only solution, not because Armenians and Azerbaijanis would be incompatible, but because of Azerbaijan being incapable of providing security, freedom and welfare for NK people.²¹ Such voices are noticeable not only in Armenia but also in NK. The NK Foreign Ministry Affairs speaker in 2011 stated that attempts to introduce the conflict as an inter-ethnic issue are only Azerbaijan tricks and that the real origins lie in the Azerbaijan’s discriminatory policy towards Karabakh Armenians.²² Both these statements are evidence of not so clear ethnical nature of the conflict – rather it refers to the issue of security, the lack of

¹⁷ Murphy, 1990, s. 531

¹⁸ Broers, 2005, s. 11

¹⁹ A basis for the Declaration of Independence (1992)

²⁰ Declaration on Proclamation of the Nagorno Karabakh Republic 1991

²¹ Ter-Petrosyan, 2007. Online

²² NKR MFA Press Service 2011. Online

trust into Azerbaijan and ultimately to the concept of territoriality. This is an interesting fact, considering that the argument of territoriality is mostly used by Azerbaijani's government.

Azerbaijan never stressed a dimension of ethnicity – especially not during the war in the beginning of 1990's. If Azerbaijani government ever mentions the ethnicity, it is only in reaction to statements of Armenia and Nagorno Karabkh.

Instead, the main supporting argument of Azerbaijan is its territorial claim. According to Fearon (1995), many territorial disputes can be solved out in a peaceful compromise between the fighting sides.²³ However, some issues may be unsolvable due to the mechanisms such as domestic politics. Azerbaijan is now an authoritarian country. According to the newest report of Freedom House (2016), Azerbaijan was rated 6.86 out of 7 on a “democratic scale” while the number 7 states for the worst situation.²⁴ The rise of nationalism has been patterned in Azerbaijan and it may be one of the reasons why the possibility of a peace resolution seems unachievable.

Toft (1997) who writes about ethnic conflict within states, argues that the nations can develop an attachment to territory that becomes indivisible from their conception of self which therefore prevents any compromise over what is perceived as a vital part of the national identity. In other words, territory is believed to have “*a psychological importance for nations that is quite out of proportion to its intrinsic value, strategic or economic*” and territorial disputes are thus seen as arousing sentiments of pride.²⁵

According to Broers (2005), the conflict of NK is fundamentally a territorial dispute and “*a decisive Armenian military victory resulting in Armenian control of Nagorny Karabakh and the further occupation of seven districts surrounding it*” is a consequence of the 1991-94 war and continued occupation or release of these territories “*forms a key asset to the Armenian side in its attempts to prioritize the determination of Nagorny Karabkh's future status as a precondition for dialogue on other issues.*”²⁶

Conclusion

The main aim of the paper was to examine two theoretical approaches often mentioned in relation with the conflict of NK – the theory of ethnicity and the theory of territoriality.

²³ Fearon, 1995, p. 390

²⁴ Freedom House, 2016. Online

²⁵ Toft, 1997, p. 21-23

²⁶ Broers, 2005, p. 8

Such an examination was possible only in a very short version, due to the limited range of the paper.

The conflict of NK has been lasting for circa 25 years now. Many peace proposals were rejected by all the sides. The Armenians have been rejecting the peace opportunities mainly due to their aversion to Azeris caused by historical events (the Armenian Genocide in 1915 especially). These reasons, certainly, are a matter of ethnicity. However, as one may notice, between 1915 and 1988 there was no serious tension between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the two countries lived next to each other in quite a peace. Before the conflict, Armenians and Azerbaijanis had a good trading relationship; rates of intermarriage were high, Soviet Karabakhis from both communities were bilingual and their relationship was generally good.

It is a mistake, therefore, to see the NK conflict as a clash of “ancient hatreds”. Although ethnicity plays a significant role, it is more due to the official political statements and political propaganda which started mainly after the ceasefire in 1994. The origins of conflict therefore can be found more in the territorial claims and obscurities, caused by unfortunate division of the territory during the times of Soviet Unions, respectively in 1920’s.

All in all, one can certainly state that ethnicity plays a huge role in the conflict as it is the main supporting argument of two out of the three parties of the conflict (Armenia and NK) and also the third side sometimes uses it as well. However, the conflict has a political and especially territorial dimension as well.

Azerbaijan is not willing to guarantee the rights and security to the Azeri Armenians. While this is a political matter, it helps to feed the ethnical hatred. The importance of ethnicity, quite low in the beginning of the conflict, has been growing since then. Therefore, we can say that although the conflict started more for the territorial/historical reasons, and ethnicity was more of a political propaganda’s tool, it is more than real nowadays and it has become a serious problem. Both discussed theories thus merged and as such, it is not really possible to perceive them separately.

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