



## Political rule and violent conflict: Elections as ‘institutional mutation’ in Nagorno-Karabakh

Franziska Smolnik

*German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin, Germany*

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Available online 7 April 2012

#### Keywords:

South Caucasus  
‘de-facto state’  
Persistent violent conflict  
Elections  
Nagorno-Karabakh

### ABSTRACT

The article analyzes political rule in an entity affected by violent conflict. Aiming at contributing to the study of the South Caucasus ‘de-facto states’, it is argued that so far insufficient attention has been paid to the influence the persistent violent conflicts have had on political processes inside these entities. To substantiate the argument three elections in the de-facto state of Nagorno-Karabakh are scrutinized. The analysis reveals that contrary to prevalent classifications the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is not frozen, but that indeed the persistent violent conflict constitutes a significant factor that helps us account for the specific character of political rule in Nagorno-Karabakh.

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### Introduction

The outbreak of the South Caucasus secessionist conflicts is closely linked to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Cease-fire agreements were signed in the early 1990s, but final peace agreements have not yet been reached and the Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia conflicts have been persistent until today. One of the most striking dynamics in regards to the conflicts is the development of three so called de-facto states<sup>1</sup>: the self-proclaimed but internationally not or only partly recognized Republics of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Surprisingly, however, only recently these entities have become an issue for students of the South Caucasus. Arguably, the ascribed ‘frozen’ status of the conflicts’ post-cease-fire periods has facilitated a shift of interest: from focusing on the conflicts as such to engaging in research on the state-building and democratization processes inside the de-facto states that have developed in the conflicts’ contexts (Caspersen, 2008a, b, c, 2009; Matsuzato, 2008; Kolsto and Blakkisrud, 2008; Markedonov, 2006). While shedding light on the largely neglected de-facto states, the ascribed status not only broadened the scope of attention, but it at times entailed an insufficient consideration of the impact the persistent violent conflicts have had on these processes. This article, therefore, explores the impact of the persistent conflicts on political dynamics inside the de-facto states. By focusing on the case of Nagorno-Karabakh and here on the institution of elections, the de-facto states’ internal logics and dynamics are analyzed.<sup>2</sup>

The article argues that the persistent violent conflicts’ influence on the political processes inside the de-facto states, and here in particular on the organization of political rule, need to be acknowledged. The article’s objective is therefore to reconnect the phenomenon of the persistent violent conflicts to the study of internal developments that take place inside these entities.

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the term cf. Lynch, 2004: 15pp.

<sup>2</sup> In the context of the conflicts, many names are highly politicized. Mainly referring to the entity as (de-facto state of) Nagorno-Karabakh, in this article the term ‘Nagorno-Karabakh Republic’ is at times used synonymously in order to highlight the entity’s self-perception. The Armenian ‘Stepanakert’ is used when referring to its ‘capital’, instead of the Azerbaijani name ‘Khankendi’. For better readability, quotation marks which would highlight the de-facto, not de-jure state, for example. ‘president’ – to stress the unrecognized state of the office, are omitted (Broers, 2005).

The impact of the conflict environment on the organization of political rule is examined by drawing upon the empirical reality of one of the South Caucasus unrecognized statelets, namely Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>3</sup> The analysis concentrates on the institution of elections. Given that elections play an important role in Nagorno-Karabakh's state-building efforts and feature prominently in its leadership's (rhetorical) commitment to democracy, they offer a fertile ground to scrutinize the above made argument.

The case-studies (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2006) of three elections – mayoral elections of 2004, parliamentary elections of 2005, and presidential elections of 2007 – are based on qualitative data gathered during field research<sup>4</sup> as well as on relevant documentary and written sources such as local and international media accounts, reports by relevant international organizations and election results.<sup>5</sup> Exploring the driving forces that shape the elections' conduct and outcome, the case-studies substantiate the claim that the ongoing violent conflict indeed constitutes a significant factor that helps us to account for the specific character of political rule in entities like Nagorno-Karabakh.

The article is structured as follows: first an overview of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is given. Emphasis is on the period after the 1994-cease-fire and on showing why in this phase of the conflict, too, the conflict is persistent as violent conflict. At the same time the period after 1994 is characterized by state-building activities on the part of Nagorno-Karabakh that strives to turn its de-facto statehood into a de-jure one. Before offering some conceptual considerations on political rule and the role of elections, these state- and democracy building efforts are put into context. After the case-studies background and its conceptual framework are outlined, the three case-studies are presented. Here three crucial logics of action are revealed that help us understand the political rule in Nagorno-Karabakh and that corroborate the need to include the persistent violent conflicts in analyzing these entities' internal dynamics.

### Conflict on Nagorno-Karabakh

The South Caucasus conflicts in their post-cease-fire periods, among them the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, are often readily dismissed as 'frozen'. Here, the common classification of the conflict's post-cease-fire period shall be challenged by drawing upon a broadened understanding of violent conflict.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict dates back to the beginning of the Soviet period, some argue even earlier. It is persistent to this day, for Armenian populated breakaway region Nagorno-Karabakh still strives for international recognition as an independent state, while Azerbaijan considers Nagorno-Karabakh as a part of its state territory. It is backed in doing so by international law. Both (Karabakh-) Armenians and Azerbaijani regard the region of Nagorno-Karabakh as a core element of their national identities and histories.

As other conflicts in the post-Soviet space, the conflict between the Armenian population of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region (NKAO) and the Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) of Azerbaijan, of which the NKAO had been a part throughout Soviet history, massively resurfaced at the end of the Soviet Union: The (Karabakh)-Armenian's movement for unification with its ethnic kin in Armenia, which later turned into the struggle for independence was confronted by equally (re-)awakening aspirations for independence on the part of the Azerbaijan SSR. The confrontation between the two "nation-state projects" (Roeder, 2007) grew violent, starting with guerilla activities in the end of the 1980s, turning into a large-scale war in 1991. On December 12, 1991, in a referendum disputed by the Azerbaijani side and not recognized by the international community, the Armenian population of the NKAO as well as of adjacent Shaumyan district of the Azerbaijan SSR, equally predominantly ethnic Armenian populated, voted for independence. On January 6, 1992 the independent 'Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh' was declared. The period of large-scale fighting until the cease-fire agreement of 1994 cost the lives of about 22,000–25,000 people and uprooted approximately over 700,000 ethnic Azerbaijani and over 400,000 ethnic Armenians.<sup>6</sup> The now virtually exclusively ethnic Armenian populated de-facto state of Nagorno-Karabakh occupies about 13.4% of the territory that – although controlled by the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh – remains part of the Republic of Azerbaijan according to international law.<sup>7</sup> While the signing of a cease-fire agreement in the spring of 1994 ended large-scale hostilities, no final peace agreement has been signed between the conflict parties. Mediation efforts on different levels have shown little result so far.

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that albeit obvious similarities, each of the South Caucasus conflicts is characterized by distinct conflict developments. Nonetheless, it is argued that the necessity to re-integrate the conflict environment when analyzing the entities' internal dynamics applies to the Abkhazia and South Ossetia cases as well. Additional research, however, is necessary to substantiate this claim.

<sup>4</sup> Field research was carried out in the fall of 2010. More than 40 interviews were conducted with representatives of various social and professional spheres, including governmental representatives, politicians, NGO-activists, journalists, veterans, international and regional experts.

<sup>5</sup> Quantitative data on the region is scarce and its quality highly debatable. Even official election results, therefore, are to be viewed with caution.

<sup>6</sup> Most numeric evidence is highly politicized and disputed by the opposite side. Consequently, accounts differ greatly, in particular concerning numbers on casualties, refugees and IDPs. The numbers on IDPs/refugees cited here are taken from International Crisis Group (2007); Johansson (2010) gives somewhat higher numbers on Azerbaijani IDPs/refugees. For numbers on casualties cf. International Crisis Group, 2005, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> The de-facto Nagorno-Karabakh Republic includes 92.5% of the territory of the former NKAO, the territory of 5 adjacent districts of the former Azerbaijan SSR and parts of two further districts (International Crisis Group, 2005). Nagorno-Karabakh's currently only about 125,000 strong population (Rowland, 2008: 104pp.) is supported in defending its de-facto independence by its ethnic kin in the Republic of Armenia, receiving military, economic and financial assistance.

The absence of a final settlement and yet the existence of a cease-fire agreement are usually regarded as the conflict's two main reference points in its post-1994 period. Moreover, drawing upon conventional understandings of violence, the post-cease-fire period is usually (dis-) regarded. Possibly re-informed by quantitative definitions of violent conflict,<sup>8</sup> violent conflict is equated with a sufficiently high level of direct physical violence, usually determined by counting the number of deaths. Such degree of severity is regarded as missing in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. However, while the cease-fire has indeed prevented new large-scale fighting, the conflict persists as violent conflict with several dimensions. The classification as 'frozen conflict' still being pervasive, firm opposition to such a judgment has been voiced by practitioners 'from the field' (Morar, 2010; Radio Free Europe, 2006), backed by qualitative approaches to the understanding of violent conflict as found in the fields of sociology and ethnography (Lubkemann, 2008; Richards, 2005).

Following the latter line of argumentation, one can roughly distinguish between two aspects of violence that define the conflict: On the one hand it is characterized by the volatile condition at the 'line of contact' – the official name of the border between Azerbaijan and the de-facto state of Nagorno-Karabakh. The 'line of contact' is fortified with trenches and soldiers of the Azerbaijani, respectively Nagorno-Karabakh/Armenian army facing each other ready for combat. Here, the violent mode of the conflict is evident: Breaches of the cease-fire in the form of exchange of sniper-fire occur on an almost daily basis; the cross-fire leads, drawing upon conservative estimations, to about 25–30 deaths a year and an equal number of wounded.<sup>9</sup> The second aspect is the mediate dimension of violence, where violence shapes a society's "social condition" (Lubkemann, 2008: 1), that is, the backdrop against which social processes unfold. In the case of the de-facto state of Nagorno-Karabakh this implicates an extensive militarization: A substantial amount of the entity's inhabitants is under arms and martial law, in force since 1992, has given Nagorno-Karabakh's leadership legal ground to suspend civil rights whenever necessary. Furthermore, media and public discourses contributed to a militarized social consciousness. Public media has often strengthened the siege-like mentality by broadcasting patriotic programs and undertaking self-censure on the part of journalists is still a common practice in order not to threaten 'national' security (Shahnazarian, 2010). Fear of resuming large-scale hostilities, as well as dividing in 'friend' and 'foe', is not only persistent, but has possibly even increased. Correspondingly, security is still one of the top priorities on the society's agenda. As one interview partner pointed out: "In a certain way, people from Karabakh are today exactly at the same point they were 15 years ago. What is most important is survival, is security."<sup>10</sup> A recent opinion poll (European Friends of Armenia, 2010: 9) supports such statements: Here people cite the fact that "there is no peace" as the "most pressing problem facing Nagorno-Karabakh".

When the impact of the persistent conflict on the organization of political rule in Nagorno-Karabakh is explored, these two dimensions of the conflict need to be taken into account. Hardly frozen at all, the conflict is characterized by directly exerted and experienced physical violence at the line of contact as well as by violence's mediate manifestation. At the same time, however, the post-cease-fire period has also been marked by state-building activities on the part of Nagorno-Karabakh.

### **Elections: a vital part of Nagorno-Karabakh's State-building efforts**

Despite the eagerness of Nagorno-Karabakh's elite to gain international recognition, today no country, not even Armenia, recognized the de-facto state. Pursuing state-building activities has been the leadership's main strategy to achieve its goal; more recently this lobbying is strengthened by pointing to democratization efforts. A central role in this regard has been attributed to the conduct of elections. This is argued to be "a rational response where Western policy makers have framed the issue of recognition in terms of 'standards before status', as they have done in Kosovo" (Broers, 2005: 70; Gardner, 2008; Caspersen, 2008a).

In interviews Karabakh-Armenian political and civic actors stress the importance placed on the building of state institutions. It is a common theme that even during the most violent phase of conflict, virtually in parallel with the fighting, state structures had been introduced and developed – opposed to expected lawlessness and anarchy. Despite such efforts and the fact that the 1994-cease-fire was not only signed by representatives of Azerbaijan and Armenia but also by Karabakh(-Armenian) representatives – something Karabakh-Armenians readily point out –, the self-proclaimed 'Nagorno-Karabakh Republic' did not achieve its goal of international recognition. Nagorno-Karabakh has remained an area de-facto uncontrolled by Azerbaijan but formally under Azerbaijani jurisdiction.

To further back its claim and drawing upon the Kosovo example, Nagorno-Karabakh's leadership developed an additional line of reasoning connected to the issue of state-building<sup>11</sup>: it argues that by consistently pursuing efforts of democratization,

<sup>8</sup> See for example the definitions given by the *Uppsala Conflict Data Program* (2011). For a critical assessment of how analytical concepts and simplification for establishing classificatory categories result in a limited analytical lens and understanding of empirical reality cf. Cramer, 2006: 49pp.; Schlichte, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> There are no official or uncontested numbers available for casualties in the period after 1994. The *International Crisis Group* (2011, 2007) states, at least 25 soldiers died in 2010. However, it also provides expert assessment that gives a much higher number: since 1994 about 3000 casualties on the Azerbaijani side and over 870 on the Nagorno-Karabakh/Armenian side.

<sup>10</sup> Interview by the author with NGO representative, fall of 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Another central and long-time theme when lobbying for recognition is the right of national self-determination coupled with pointing to experienced discrimination and fear of extinction (Caspersen, 2008a).

Nagorno-Karabakh will eventually be granted recognized independence. In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, such (rhetorical) commitment to establishing a democratic state is therefore not linked to satisfying demands upheld by Western donors and development agencies, common in other non-OECD countries, but tied to a supposed possibility of earning recognition and sovereignty. The international – or rather Western – approach to Kosovo, captured in the slogan of ‘standards before status’, has provided a notable impetus in this regard. The three recent partial recognitions of Kosovo, South Ossetia and Abkhazia let Caspersen put under scrutiny the impact of the ‘standards before status’ approach, indicating that external supporters might now be regarded as more important, respectively that even recognition as such has faded into the background (Caspersen, 2009). Yet, while the three recognitions certainly influenced Nagorno-Karabakh’s policies, at least on a rhetorical level aiming at receiving international recognition through democratic conduct still features prominently, as recent statements by president Saakian as well as party programs presented during Nagorno-Karabakh’s latest elections show (Buntman, 2011; Khrustaleva, 2010; Bagdasarian, 2010).

In Nagorno-Karabakh’s attempt to earn recognition elections assume a central role. As they constitute a vital building block in Western-type democracies, elections are often used as a benchmark by Western policy makers to measure the level of democracy (Boogards, 2007). Consequently, Nagorno-Karabakh’s officials frequently point to their experience in holding elections and stress the compliance with Western democratic standards.<sup>12</sup>

A deeper look at the three elections that took place in Nagorno-Karabakh, one each on local, parliamentary, and presidential level, however, demonstrate that despite democratic achievements all three elections showed shortcomings if compared to the ideal-type of elections in a Western-liberal democratic setting. The analysis reveals that ‘logic of democratization’ is certainly the driving force that accounts for the holdings of elections in the de-facto state of Nagorno-Karabakh. However, it is just one of three distinct logics that shape their conduct and outcome. A ‘logic of security and defense’ as well as a ‘logic of retaining power’ turnout to be equally relevant to the understanding of political rule in Nagorno-Karabakh. As is presented in more detail in the following, these three logics go by different and at times contradictory trajectories. This results in an outcome that can best be captured by what Von Trotha (2006: 287) once coined “*institutional mutations*”. The analysis moreover substantiates the claim that the persistent violent conflict is a significant factor that helps us to account for the specific character of political rule in entities like that of Nagorno-Karabakh: Notably the first two logics, the ‘logic of democratization’ and the ‘logic of security and defense’ are conditioned or fostered by the persistent conflict environment the de-facto state is situated in as well as a part of.

### Political rule – the role of elections

Elections are commonly regarded as one, respectively *the* most important characteristic of Western-liberal democracies (Schumpeter, 2010). Political representatives are (ideal-typically) legitimized by the legal-rational procedures they are elected by; likewise the institution of election is itself adding to the legitimacy of the political authority as such. Emphasis is given to the fact that the representatives are dependent on the voters’, the people’s will; the relationship between voters and representatives is contractual. Elections thus play a decisive part in the context of establishing internal legitimacy, that is, acknowledging the legality of the political regime in question.

However, in particular scholars of political sociology have called for caution in applying Western conceptions of representation and legitimacy to non-OECD contexts (Von Trotha, 2006). They put forward the claim to analyze processes of representation and legitimation in these contexts not as mere deviations from the Western democratic ideal-type that emphasizes participatory competition for political offices. They argue that, instead, these processes have to be acknowledged as inventive responses where specific local conditions of power-relations have been adapted to the globally spread normative ideal of democratically legitimated political rule.<sup>13</sup>

Creative adaptations of elections are also stressed in the debate facilitated by those regimes that challenge the ‘transition paradigm’. With concepts such as that of ‘electoral authoritarianism’ (Schedler, 2006) scholars try to move beyond formal democratic structures. Accordingly, respective studies distinguish between elections in a setting which features an overall democratic political culture or is characterized by the absence thereof.<sup>14</sup> While potentially this research expands or even changes the focus, the vocabulary and concepts employed are often still derived from the Western democratic model.

I argue that operating with ready-made Euro-centric concepts limits a thorough understanding of the institution of elections – in the case at hand not only held in a non-OECD context but what is more in an environment of persistent violent conflict. In the subsequent analysis therefore elections in Nagorno-Karabakh are scrutinized by paying special attention to the environment they are embedded in – thus following Von Trotha’s advice. Challenging those accounts that approach political rule in Nagorno-Karabakh through either a strictly democracy- or autocracy-focused analytical lens, here in particular the impact of the persistent violent conflict on the organization of political rule is explored.

<sup>12</sup> To substantiate their claims, they refer to reports of local and international election observers.

<sup>13</sup> While it is more common to challenge a simple nexus between elections and democracy for non-Western countries (Boogards, 2007; who nonetheless asserts that a plethora of democracy indexes have elections as their key indicator) Schedler (2002) reminds us that historically, elections have as much been part of the narrative of democracy as well as of autocracy.

<sup>14</sup> However, with a substantial part of the debate grouped around concepts on diminished types of democracies, the focus here, too, is often on aberration not adaptation – concentrating on what is missing instead of what actually happens.

## Between democratic image and institutional mutation

The following case-studies cover three important elections<sup>15</sup>: Stepanakert's mayoral elections of 2004, parliamentary elections of 2005, and presidential elections of 2007. Why elections in general lend themselves to the proposed analysis is argued above. Focusing on these particular elections moreover is fruitful for two main reasons: Firstly, all took place in a fairly short period of time. Thus, while all the three elections are covered separately, the elections' sequence also allows for making more general statements on developments that have taken place or evolved over time. Furthermore, as the elections address three different levels – local elections, national elections for parliament, national elections for president – commonalities across all elections and specificities linked to a particular type of elections can be captured.

As I have mentioned, all three elections are classified in this study along three different logics: 'logic of democratization', 'logic of security and defense', and 'logic of retaining power'. In view of the logics' complex interaction, it is regarded as reasonable to first give brief separate descriptions of each of the elections as more or less circumscribed episodes, in order to then draw upon these descriptive accounts in the following analytical part. Such an approach enables one to both: offer sufficient context and thus sufficiently thick description to back subsequent findings (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2006) while still providing analytical strength, respectively bringing about analytical value.

### *Stepanakert mayoral elections of 2004*

In contrast to what is common practice in many other countries of the post-Soviet space, the heads of Nagorno-Karabakh's local self-governing bodies, the communities, are not appointed but elected. This includes the mayor of the capital Stepanakert. The law on self-government was adopted in 1998 and presented as a "declarative" (Airumian, 2006) gesture directed towards Europe.

Municipal elections were held on August 8, 2004. Five candidates vied for the post of mayor but only three of them were testified chances for victory: incumbent mayor Amik Avanesian, former mayor Pavel Nadzharian, and Eduard Agabekian, independent deputy as well as head of the national assembly's commission on social issues.<sup>16</sup> Since only a short time prior to the elections, Agabekian furthermore acted as co-chairman of the newly founded civic organization Movement-88. Evidently, all three most promising candidates possessed prior political experience.<sup>17</sup>

While acting mayor Avanesian had been supported by the ruling and pro-presidential Union of Democratic Artsakh in the mayoral elections of 2001, the party of then-president Gukasian switched horses in 2004 and supported the candidature of Nadzharian (Aleksanian, 2001; Airumian, 2004a). Nadzharian was thus regarded as 'Gukasian's candidate' whose campaign was backed by the state officials and allegedly by the employment of administrative resources (Petrosian, 2006). Competitor Agabekian, on the other hand, was supported by the organization he co-chaired, Movement-88, as well as by the traditional Armenian party Armenian Revolutionary Federation Dashnaksutiun (ARFD).

In the first round of elections none of the candidates was able to receive the minimum 50% of the votes. While the average voter turnout at the municipal elections was 61%, in Stepanakert voters' participation was recorded at a low 41% (Petrosian, 2006: 206). In the second round of elections where first placed Nadzharian, and second placed Agabekian competed, the outcome was mirrored: Agabekian defeated the presidential candidate, despite the fact that many had seen Nadzharian as pre-scheduled for victory. It is conveyed that, correspondingly, the election results enraged then-president Gukasian.<sup>18</sup>

Whereas in retrospect the result has been often depicted as a victory of the opposition over the political establishment by both external observers and pro-governmental representatives (Matsuzato, 2008; Markedonov, 2006), those critical of the Nagorno-Karabakh government and formerly close to the team of Agabekian have framed the outcome differently. Rather than portraying it as a breakthrough of pro-opposition sentiments, they admit that due to his professional experience and personal traits, Nadzharian had been equally acceptable as Stepanakert mayor. They thus stress two alternative reasons for Agabekian's success that contradict the official one: First – and in particular – Agabekian won because the use of administrative resources had backfired. Vexed by the fact that the mayor was all but already determined, voters opted for a protest vote. One Stepanakert civic activist states: "This was no vote in favor of someone or something. This was most of all a vote against someone and something – against the fact that one was trying to steal the right to vote, that the mayor was appointed by the president."<sup>19</sup> Secondly, even though administrative resources had been employed, they might not have been as tightly orchestrated, respectively implemented. Without any such precedent in the past, no one, including the authorities, had seriously doubted the presidential candidate's victory.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup> It shall be stressed that the elections covered here take place under the condition of unresolved conflict. Therefore, not only Azerbaijani but also international commentators regularly dismiss elections in the de-facto state as per se illegitimate since the regions former Azerbaijani population was driven out by conflict and thus has been deprived of participation.

<sup>16</sup> The other two candidates, considered as outsiders with no chances of victory, were lawyer Vazgen Ayrapetyan and businessmen Iosif Adamyan (Regnum, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> Until 2001, Agabekian had been a member of the political platform of then Nagorno-Karabakh president Gukasian, the Union of Democratic Artsakh (Artsakh being the historical Armenian name for Nagorno-Karabakh). He had also served as deputy minister for social affairs from 1998 to 2000, while incumbent Avanesian had already headed Stepanakert's city council in the 1970s (PanArmenian.net, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> Stated in several interviews.

<sup>19</sup> Interview by the author with NGO activist, September 2010, and confirmed in further interviews in Nagorno-Karabakh and Yerevan.

<sup>20</sup> This claim is further substantiated by pointing to the low voter turnout. Arguably, many people doubted their vote would actually have an impact and thus they thought it pointless to cast a ballot.

Agabekian's success in the elections, however, did not extend to his tenure of office. It is reported that in his one term as Stepanakert mayor Agabekian had to cope with being obstructed in fulfilling his duties and in implementing his programs. Alleged threats of the Gukasian team to not cooperate with Agabekian in case he gets elected seem to have been put into practice (Arutunian, 2007). In the end, Agabekian joined the team he in retrospective is presented as having heavily challenged: After other positions in the governmental administration, he was appointed advisor to the prime minister in October 2010.

#### *Parliamentary elections of 2005*

The 2004 municipal elections were succeeded by elections to the national assembly which took place on 19 June 2005, less than one year later. Although these elections were the fourth elections to the legislative body since 1991, they were the first ones organized according to a new electoral law, adopted in late 2004, that introduced proportional representation to parliamentary elections. Until then, all seats had been divided according to the results of majority vote; now one-third of the 33-seats national assembly – 11 mandates – was allotted on the basis of proportional representation. The remaining 22 seats were still competed for by majority vote (Airumian, 2004b). Thus, while the majority system was still prevailing, the new law nonetheless increased the significance of parties in Nagorno-Karabakh's political life. Furthermore, the law 'On political parties' was adopted in the fall of 2004. As a prerequisite to the upcoming parliamentary elections, all civic-political organizations had to re-structure and re-register as political parties. This resulted in the emergence of a couple of new parties which gave reason to speak of a "political parties boom" (Beglarian, 2005a) in Nagorno-Karabakh (Beglarian, 2005b; Airumian, 2004c).

In the 2005 parliamentary elections six parties and one party block, made up of Movement-88 and ARFD, competed for 11 mandates. 107 candidates competed for 22 seats allotted by majority vote (Petrosian, 2007: 38). Formerly second strongest parliamentary force of the ruling coalition, ARFD had gone into opposition in December 2004.<sup>21</sup> Owing to ARFD's partnering with Movement-88, whose leader had defeated the pro-presidential candidate in the elections for Stepanakert's mayor a year earlier, the election race was regarded as fairly contested. Members of ARFD and Movement-88 likewise had high expectations. Movement-88 leader Agabekian is quoted that, making a cautious statement, he would be content with winning about 12 mandates – which would have been roughly one-third of the seats (Amelina, 2005). To back their contest image, representatives of the election block stressed their campaign's critical stance toward the ruling powers in Nagorno-Karabakh. What is more, though, they also criticized Nagorno-Karabakh's kin-state Armenia, stating dissatisfaction with the fact that Armenia represented Nagorno-Karabakh in the peace negotiations. En gros, however, all parties' external policy priorities were the same, their campaigns stressing adherence to Nagorno-Karabakh's independence and security (Babaian, 2005).

Against its hopes, block ARFD/Movement-88 suffered utter defeat in the elections: they won only 3 mandates. Losing 6 mandates, ARFD was degraded from second strongest force to a minor player in parliament. The overall winner was the Democratic Party of Artsakh which secured 12 mandates. Second, winning 10 seats, finished newly founded Free Motherland Party which was considered equally pro-government even though in its campaign it had voiced soft criticism in direction of the government (Peuch, 2005).

Representatives of ARFD and Movement-88 declared the vote as neither free nor fair and consequently rejected its results. Yet, "[c]iting the need to 'maintain stability'" (Khachatrian and Aleksanian, 2005), they abstained from taking their protest to the streets. Part of the local population was equally unsatisfied in regards of election fairness and pointed to the employment of administrative resources. Almost all of the 130 international observers, however, did not notice grave violations (Kavkazkii Uzel, 2005). From 25 countries they had been invited to monitor the elections' conduct and thus to evaluate Nagorno-Karabakh's state of democracy. Correspondingly, analysts and local NGO representatives early on admitted that to a lesser extent gross violations but rather the government's tactical move to establish pseudo-opposition Free Motherland Party that split the votes otherwise designated for ARFD/Movement-88 had cost the block's predicted victory.<sup>22</sup>

#### *Presidential elections of 2007*

In Nagorno-Karabakh, presidential elections have enjoyed special importance due to the far-reaching powers of the president. After changing from a parliamentary to a presidential system in 1994, the office of president formally became the highest position in the entity. Amongst other rights, the president, who is at once head of army and coordinates the state organs in the field of defense and security, has the right to appoint crucial government and administrative positions.<sup>23</sup>

Presidential elections were scheduled for 19 July 2007, but the pre-election campaign started already a year earlier. The public discussion was dominated by the question whether incumbent President Gukasian could (and should) run for the third

<sup>21</sup> Until then, ARFD had held 9 mandates, while ruling Union of Democratic Artsakh had held 19 seats.

<sup>22</sup> That Free Motherland Party was implemented 'from above', aimed at dividing the votes potentially given to ARFD/Movement-88, was stated in various interviews and also by Khachatrian and Aleksanian (2005).

<sup>23</sup> According to Nagorno-Karabakh's constitution, the president is eligible to appoint the Prime minister and – upon recommendation – further cabinet members. He may under specific circumstances dissolve the parliament as well as dismiss the Prime minister. He has the right to recommend nominees for the presidency of the Supreme Court, to appoint other courts' presidents, to terminate judges' powers. Further appointment or at least nomination powers include those for the posts of prosecutor general, the president of the oversight chamber, members of the Judicial Council, diplomatic representatives, the supreme command of the armed and other forces (Constitution of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic).

term. The debate was closely linked to the adoption of Nagorno-Karabakh's constitution of 2006 which was suspected by some to pave the way for Gukasian to stay in power. This impression was fueled by the ambiguous statements of Gukasian himself as well as by influential civil society and political actors who spoke in favor of Gukasian and his running for a third term.<sup>24</sup> With local sentiment not unitarily supportive of such a step, however, Gukasian in the end revoked running for president. He framed his decision as a considerate step aimed at avoiding negative consequences for Nagorno-Karabakh's international image as a European state that upholds European values (Gukasian, 2007).

After Gukasian's public denial to run for president the debate about potential alternatives gained speed. Nonetheless the prospective contenders were reluctant for a long-time to openly declare their candidatures. They tried to evade both: presenting themselves or being regarded by others as in opposition to incumbent Gukasian early on (Airumian, 2007; Karabakh Open, 2007). Eventually, five candidates were running for president, though only two of them were given real chances for victory: Bako Saakian, head of Nagorno-Karabakh's Security Council, and Masis Mailian, Nagorno-Karabakh vice foreign-minister. While officially denied by Gukasian, Saakian was deemed Gukasian's hand-picked successor. Moreover, he was portrayed as the 'united candidate' of virtually Nagorno-Karabakh's entire political field: to back this point a letter of support was published, signed not only by representatives of the two pro-government parties, Democratic Party of Artsakh and Free Motherland Party, but also by the former 'opposition', ARFD and Movement-88 (Regnum, 2007a).<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, Saakian did not present himself as pro-government but as running on a united civic ticket. Mailian, on his part, stressed his position as a reformer who advocates rule of law and the fight of corruption – but rejected to call himself oppositionist.

Saakian, finally, won the elections clear-cut, gaining 85,12% of the votes against 12,53% for Mailian, who finished second (Petrosian, 2009: 53). International observers again did not register serious violations but local participants and observers saw Saakian's victory as heavily influenced by informal support from kin-state Armenia's political establishment. With Saakian being inaugurated as the new president, his campaign idea of being the 'united candidate' transformed into the idea of 'national unity' that calls for all political structures to work in unison (Israeliian, 2007; Ghazinian, 2007).

### *Three different logics: interplay and influences*

All three election accounts demonstrate that despite overall palpable democratic achievements they were equally marked by serious shortcomings. The analysis substantiates the argument that elections in Nagorno-Karabakh follow mentioned above three different logics. Each logic molds different aspects of political rule in Nagorno-Karabakh. While at times the logics reinforce each other, following the same trajectory, they every so often contradict each other. Such incoherent interplay leads to an outcome of 'institutional mutations'. While the logics in part can be attributed to lingering legacies of the Soviet past, in particular the "logic of democratization" and the 'logic of security and defense' is conditioned by the environment of the persistent Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

The 'logic of democratization' is interrelated with Nagorno-Karabakh's striving to be recognized by the international community. As outlined above, Nagorno-Karabakh's political elite considers a (rhetorical) commitment to democracy as crucial in lobbying for recognition as an independent, sovereign state: The de-facto state holds elections on various levels, including direct popular vote of the head of its capital. Several political parties or civic-political organizations compete for mandates; international observers are regularly invited to monitor the election-day, the correct procedures of which are stressed on part of Nagorno-Karabakh's authorities. All this is in line with 'logic of democratization'. While recognition is the ultimate objective, in the face of a – real or perceived – external threat democratic achievements are also more generally seen as a guarantee of not being (de-facto) pushed back under Azerbaijani jurisdiction. "A country with more democracy cannot be subordinated to a country with less democracy"<sup>26</sup> is something frequently expressed in Nagorno-Karabakh. As such, the 'logic of democratization' is an immediate reaction to the insecure situation brought forth by the persistent conflict.

However, while (formal) democratic features have certainly been established, other events or processes have only in retrospect been rhetorically subsumed under the democratization logic. This happened with the 2004 mayoral elections as well as with Gukasian's rejection in the context of the presidential elections of 2007 to run for a third term: While Agabekian's victory in the elections of Stepanakert's mayor was rather the unintended result of a miscalculation or inattentiveness on the part of the incumbent powers – and swiftly corrected in the following parliamentary elections – it is in retrospect presented as one of the great achievements of Nagorno-Karabakh's democracy: Precisely the 2004 elections in Stepanakert, where the 'opposition' defeated the pro-government candidate, have been showcased as a rare exception in the wider region and as proof of Nagorno-Karabakh's distinct level of democracy. The same applies to then-president Gukasian's decision to abstain

<sup>24</sup> As to whether a third term would have violated Karabakh's constitution is contested. Petrosian (2009: 54) argues that Western and Russian observers wrongly assumed that Karabakh's constitution would have limited Gukasian's terms to two. While the constitutional project had been rather intensely debated until summer/fall 2006, it was adopted in a referendum in December that year. Gukasian's public statement about his abstaining from running for a third term in October 2006 thus fell into a period when both the constitution to be adopted and the upcoming presidential elections were discussed.

<sup>25</sup> ARFD's and Movement-88's backing of Saakian as united candidate was not uncontested from within their own ranks. Both parties experienced severe disruptions in the context of giving support to Saakian: ARFD's higher party structure in Nagorno-Karabakh was pressured to sideline with Saakian by fellow party members in Armenia, but the directive could not be pushed through to local ARFD members. While the split in the ARFD thus occurred on a vertical line, Movement-88 witnessed a rather horizontal divide between their co-chairmen, one giving support, the other rejecting such a step (Regnum, 2007b).

<sup>26</sup> Interviews by the author, fall 2010.

running for re-election. While Gukasian cited farseeing concern for Nagorno-Karabakh's democratic image as reason to renounce a third term as president, evidence suggests that the decision was triggered by a more complex set of factors, as is outlined below. Thus, while the democratization logic helps to explain the establishment or implementation of certain democratic elements and procedures, it has also been used rhetorically to disguise developments which are actually closer to 'logic of retaining power'.

The second logic present is the 'logic of security and defense'. Just as the 'logic of democratization', the 'logic of security and defense' is tightly related to the persistent conflict environment. However, while both logics can be traced back to the persistent violent conflict, their consequences are largely contradicting. Where the 'logic of democratization' implies an at least declarative commitment to democracy and to efforts aimed at democratization, the 'logic of security and defense' in contrast values national security above all. The logic signifies that given the persistent violent conflict and a possibility, perceived as very real, of renewed large-scale war, all that could further increase this state of insecurity is to be avoided. A siege-mentality among Nagorno-Karabakh's inhabitants bears witness of this. It is a common theme among Nagorno-Karabakh's society that internal polarization or even conflict can potentially be exploited by the external enemy. Therefore, internal stability is to be maintained. "Everybody feels we have to stick to the main tasks which are defense, security and political stability" and "if behind the mountain is the enemy, democracy and freedom of press are less important" are statements that reflect such logic.<sup>27</sup>

The 'logic of security and defense' receives impetus from different aspects, the volatile situation at the 'line of contact' arguably the most evident one. While exertion and experience of direct physical violence is manifest in fallen or wounded soldiers, the severity of the situation is underpinned by steadily rising military spending that nurture an arms race between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia on the one hand and Azerbaijan on the other ([International Crisis Group, 2011](#)). Furthermore, militaristic threats used by leading politicians on either side of the conflict reproduce the conflict discursively, cultivating the siege-mentality on the part of the population (Konaev and Moghaddam in [Moghaddam and Harré, 2010](#); [Coser, 1964](#)). [Schröder and Schmidt \(2001\)](#) also stress the reproduction of violent conflict through performance of such acts as military or victory parades or other forms of commemoration, also found in Nagorno-Karabakh. That 'war is not over' was also illustrated by the fact that both local elections in 2004 as well as presidential elections in 2007 coincided with encompassing military trainings. For 2004, the military exercise's objective was to provide a maximum proximity to real combat conditions, as then Nagorno-Karabakh defense minister Seiran Ohanian is quoted ([Petrosian, 2006](#): 243; for 2007 [Petrosian, 2009](#): 75). Whether deliberate or not, such a coincidence serves as a vivid reminder to Nagorno-Karabakh's electorate of their precarious situation.

Concerning Nagorno-Karabakh's elections the 'logic of security and defense', too, accounts for its particular nature. One such influence is the negative connotation of the term 'opposition'. At least partially this answers for candidates' hesitation to publicly declare their candidatures after acting president Gukasian officially abstained from again running for president in 2007. To begin with the term's discredit is linked to it having mostly signified (Soviet) Azerbaijan. Yet, more important is its being equated with the idea of 'dissenter', someone who deviates from the official red line and thus puts at risk national stability, needed to withstand the enemy. Being in the opposition or being regarded as 'the opposition' is therefore not conducive to winning popular support.

As the 'logic of democratization', the 'logic of security and defense' is likewise instrumentalized by political actors, used either to defame internal opponents or to legitimate certain of their own actions which actually follow the 'logic of retaining power'. The decision to unify around one candidate in the 2007 presidential elections is an example of the latter. While judged by observers as a way to guarantee a smooth succession where the 'old system' of Gukasian stays intact (or more generally as a 'behind-the-scene' division of power), it has been presented to the public as a necessary move in the face of the external threat. Saakian's victory is, however, linked to the 'logic of security and defense' in a less rhetorical way, too: Since Saakian was not only supported by Nagorno-Karabakh's political establishment but also by Yerevan, voters were afraid of driving a wedge between the 'kin-states', thus becoming vulnerable in case of a resurgence of large-scale fighting. Consequently, the electorate opposed to vote for someone less endorsed by 'Mother Armenia'.

Elections as a means to regulate access to power are by its very concept harmful to existing power balances. The 'logic of democratization' thus not only conflicts with the 'logic of security and defense'. Even more categorically it contradicts the 'logic of retaining power' – constituting a significant driving force behind the political elite's actions. To speak of contradiction or harm, however, makes sense only if the institution of elections is consolidated to such an extent, that political power is indeed contested for in pluralistic, free and fair elections. Even international observers' approval of the conduct of the vote on election-day says little about election campaigns or the workings of the elected representatives and political bodies they staff in-between elections. The mayoral elections of 2004 in contrast show that the "oppositionist's" victory did not change the functioning of the political system as such. It didn't take long that victorious Agabekian was co-opted by the political establishment. The discrepancy between mediated picture and de-facto state of affairs is reflected by the political apathy of Nagorno-Karabakh's population, as "the electorate is not fooled by the political game, [but] it is by no means bothered by it" ([Chauffour, 2004](#)) either.

## Conclusion

As shown, elections in Nagorno-Karabakh do not unambiguously fulfill the same functions ideal-typically ascribed to them. Neither is access to political rule exclusively regulated via fair elections, nor did the elections lead to unambiguous

<sup>27</sup> Interviews with political and civic activists, fall of 2010.



internal legitimacy. Instead, the setting in which the elections take place fosters their specific transformation, respectively adaptation: while the conflict environment in certain ways channels and restricts local actors' room for maneuver, local actors also willfully resort to the unstable condition as a means to legitimize their actions. It was shown that the persistent conflict environment plays a significant role in understanding political rule in Nagorno-Karabakh in that it nourishes both 'logic of democratization' and 'logic of security and defense'. To arrive at this point it is necessary to approach the conflict by adopting a broadened understanding of violent conflict. Instances of direct physical violence as exerted and experienced at the line of contact are certainly a central constituent of Nagorno-Karabakh's social condition that gives rise to the two logics. What is more though is that these violent incidents are transmitted beyond the immediate line of contact via a symbolic dimension of violence. Furthermore, the violent conflict as social condition and thus point of reference is reproduced in discursive and symbolic acts. This mediate dimension is equally important when accounting for the persistent conflict's impact on political rule.

As demonstrated by the case-studies, both the 'logic of democratization' and the 'logic of security and defense' have an influence on the institution of elections. On the one hand, the 'logic of democratization' operates as a stimulus for conducting elections that conform to the Western-liberal model. The 'logic of security and defense' on the other hand, rather serves as stimulus for curtailing certain Western-liberal democratic freedoms and rights. The latter consequence is moreover reinforced by 'logic of retaining power'. Itself less linked to the conflict environment, this logic is likely connected to Soviet legacies of political rule, with similar tendencies observable in other countries of the post-Soviet space. The 'logic of retaining power' at times outplays the other two: the 'logic of democratization' as well as the 'logic of security and defense' can be exploited in its favor. In this regard the 'logic of retaining power' is in line with those authors who warn of an 'over-interpretation' of group cohesion induced by an external threat as argued by Coser (1964) and picked up by a multitude of conflict researchers. Putting that argument into perspective, Schröder and Schmidt (2001: 10) stress that,

even among the conflict parties [there are] wide variations in the degree of people's actual physical and emotional involvement in the conflict and of their acceptance of the hegemonic message. Neither a group's violent imaginary nor its interests must be considered as monolithic. They correspond with one another on a general level, but in practice each conflict party is made up of numerous subgroups pursuing their own agenda.

In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, at times instrumental use of the conflict and the rhetorical employment of 'logic of democratization' and 'security and defense' to legitimate individual aspirations for power bear witness of this.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, such finding should not give way to yet another 'over-interpretation' in reverse: Not only but in particular the phenomenon of violent conflict is too complex as to reduce all the actors' actions in the de-facto states to the self-interested pursuit of maximizing individual (material) profits, an (underlying) understanding among those authors who dismiss the South Caucasus de-facto states as safe haven or stronghold of reckless profiteers (King, 2001; Cornell, 2002; Kemp, 2004).<sup>29</sup> A caveat needs moreover be stated in relation to the very argument presented in this article. While it is necessary to pay attention to the violent conflict environment in order to better understand political rule in places like Nagorno-Karabakh, this is not the only factor that accounts for institutional mutations in the de-facto state. In particular Soviet legacies play an equally important part. In this regard, by dissolving three different logics as driving forces that shape political rule in Nagorno-Karabakh the article tried to steer clear of simplifications: neither should the South Caucasus de-facto states be presented as straight forward democratizing statelets nor should they be readily dismissed as enclaves of criminal separatists.

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<sup>28</sup> Caspersen (2008c) puts under scrutiny the concept of inner-ethnic group cohesion.

<sup>29</sup> For a profound critique of the prevalent rational explanation for war, in particular in political science, cf. Smith, 2005.

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