

TERRITORIAL AUTONOMY AND SECESSION AS STRATEGIES OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT: CASE OF NAGORNO KARABAKH

Abstract: The article identifies and examines territorial autonomy and secession as conflict management strategies applied in Nagorno Karabakh. It demonstrates that neither of these strategies provided sustainable peace and indicates some of the underlying causes of this failure. Through the case of the NKAO, the article challenges the role of institutional autonomies as an encouraging factor of secession *per se*. In our case, the autonomous period indeed prepared the groundwork for mobilization, albeit for the opposite reason – it did not guarantee the ethno-territorial rights of the minority. In fact, it caused an increase in cultural, economic and political discrimination against the local Armenians. Secession put an end to intercommunal violence, but failed to establish peace. The secession of Karabakh and the factors leading up to it provide grounds for qualifying it as a resort to the remedial right, which has been instrumentalised by present and previous leaders of Armenia.

Keywords: *Nagorno Karabakh, peace and conflict, territorial autonomy, secession, conflict management*

Introduction

The region of South Caucasus has been a place of wars, confrontations and ethnic struggles for most of its known history. Even in modern history, the region did not manage to avoid armed conflicts, with every country in the region witnessing intra- or inter-state wars. The article sheds light on one of those conflicts, namely the war over Nagorno Karabakh, particularly examining the results of two conflict management strategies applied therein – territorial autonomy and secession. First, the article will briefly revisit those aspects of the conflict's historical origins that are immediately relevant to our objective. In the following sections, the article will discuss how territorial autonomy and secession have been applied to the Nagorno Karabakh conflict and to what extent these applications were successful in terms of managing the political cleavages of the Azerbaijani and Armenian people residing in Karabakh.

Historical roots

The roots of the conflict can be traced to the beginning of the 19th century, when the Treaty of Gulistan between Imperial Russia and Persia brought most of the contemporary South Caucasus under Russian jurisdiction.¹ The significance of this event can be seen in the demographic shifts that came thereafter.² In the beginning of 20th century, West of the Caucasus, around a million and a half Armenians were killed in the Ottoman Empire and hundreds of thousands were displaced.³ The implications of the 1915 Armenian Genocide are of paramount importance not only for its political and humanitarian impact but also for their influence on the formation of Armenian identity, later nation and state building and demographic shifts in the region. These imprints were yet to surface in national struggles that broke out during the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which will be elaborated upon in detail in later sections.

In 1918, the Caucasus was politically consolidated around the short-lived Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic, which in the same year fell apart into the independent states of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. This period was marked with an armed revolt of the Armenians in Karabakh against the Turkish and British-backed Azeri authorities in 1918 and 1919.⁴ After the extension of Communist rule to the Caucasus, on July 3, 1921 the Soviet Azerbaijani government ceded the disputed Karabakh along with Nakhichevan and Zangezur (regions to the west of Karabakh) to the Soviet Republic of Armenia.⁵ Two days later, upon the decision of the Caucasian Bureau of Soviet Russia's Communist Party Central Committee, Karabakh was reattached to the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic⁶, received the status of autonomous region⁷, and became the Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO). The committee justified this self-contradicting move as a matter of the "necessity of national harmony between Muslims and Armenians, [considering] the economic linkage between upper and lower Karabakh, and its permanent ties to Azerbaijan".⁸

¹ Suzanne Goldenberg, *Pride of Small Nations: The Caucasus and Post-Soviet Disorder* (Chicago: Zed Books, 1994), 157.

² *Ibid*, 157-58.

³ Christopher Walker ed., *Armenia and Karabakh: The Struggle for Unity* (London: Minority Rights Publications, 1991), 24.

⁴ *Ibid*, 91.

⁵ Gerard J. Libaridian ed., *The Karabakh File* (Cambridge: Zoryan Institute, 1988), 34.

⁶ Hrand Avetisyan, "The Communist Youth League of Transcaucasia under the Flag of Proletarian Internationalism" in *The Karabakh File* ed. (Cambridge: Zoryan Institute, 1988), 36.

⁷ Gerard J. Libaridian ed., "Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan finalizing the incorporation of Karabakh into Azerbaijan" in *The Karabakh File*, (Cambridge: Zoryan Institute, 1988), 37.

⁸ Avetisyan, "The Communist Youth League of Transcaucasia under the Flag of Proletarian Internationalism", 36.

In the next section, the article will examine the realisation of the institutional territorial autonomy of the NKAO and its role in the management of inter-ethnic relations and mobilization.

The Territorial Autonomy of the NKAO within the Azerbaijani SSR

The constitutional arrangement that set up the legal structures and functions in Nagorno Karabakh⁹ foresaw a range of ethnicity-specific configurations.¹⁰ The document mandated the use of a non-specified “native language” for procedural purposes, including the organization of education in schools. Moreover, it allowed the use of the national tongue or any other language of the USSR without any restrictions.¹¹ Nagorno Karabakh was to be represented in all republican organs, according to the principle of proportional representation. These arrangements were made as a follow up to the Azerbaijani Communist Party Committee’s request “to form, as part of the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic, an autonomous Armenian region in Karabakh with Khankend as its centre”¹²[emphasis added]. Additionally, Articles 7 and 8 of the law on NKAO guaranteed the economic, political, cultural and social equality of all citizens regardless of their background.

Scholarly work on institutional and territorial autonomy contends with the implications of such solutions as either secession inducing or secession preventing.¹³ Erk and Anderson bring up a vast amount of literature that argues for the efficiency of federalism in keeping states together, thanks to the democratic governance, “skilful division” and negotiated autonomy, notwithstanding the difficulties that come with it.¹⁴ On the other hand, there is a bulk of scholarly work criticizing federal solutions as exacerbating secessionism. In this line of thought, even though autonomy may decrease the chances of secessionism, in the long run, they create fertile ground for

⁹ Here, we refer to the “Project of Constitution of the Autonomous Oblast” discussed and adopted at the session of the Central Committee of the Azerbaijan Communist Party on 3 July 1924, as discussed in Volodya Hovsepyan ‘Навязанная “конституция,” [Imposed ‘Constitution’] Yerkramas, June 30, 2011, <http://www.yerkramas.org/article/?id=17420/>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Shahan Avagyan, Nagorno Karabagh: Legal Aspects, Second Edition, (Yerevan: Tigran Mets, 2010), 24.

¹² Libaridian ed., “Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan finalizing the incorporation of Karabakh into Azerbaijan”, 37.

¹³ Jan Erk and Lawrence Anderson, “The Paradox of Federalism: Does Self-Rule Accommodate

or

Exacerbate Ethnic Divisions?” *Regional & Federal Studies* 19: 2, (2009): 191 – 202.

¹⁴ See N. Bermeo, “The Import of Institutions”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.13, No.2, (2002): 96–110.; D. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).; T.R. Gurr, *Peoples versus States: Minorities at Risk in the New Century*, (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2000).

mobilization along ethnic lines.¹⁵ Furthermore, “ethnofederal arrangements institutionalize competing national projects, increasing chances that secessionist conflict will develop”¹⁶, reducing the costs of secessionism and augmenting it.¹⁷ This school of thought also argues that institutions consolidate autonomy.¹⁸ Pessimistic views of institutional autonomous solutions are particularly shared among the case studies from the Eastern Bloc societies.¹⁹ A special issue of *Regional and Federal Studies* summarizes that federalism in itself is neither panacea, nor a path to conflict.²⁰

In our approach, we are inclined to a “third way”. We agree with Hechter’s approach of studying each case in its own right, since we believe that in federal institutional arrangements, context matters and they usually vary in form and essence and across determining factors. We believe that for proper evaluation of territorial autonomy as a strategy of managing multi-ethnic societies, considerations of institutional design only fall short of yielding substantial explanatory value. Those that argue for federal autonomy as an arrangement leading towards secession and violence, especially those who rely on big data, usually favour their design at the expense of the actual content of those arrangements. Considering the above, we will examine the on-the-ground manifestations of the autonomous design of the NKAO in order to evaluate its efficiency (or the lack of it) for the management of ethnic relations.

The early years of Soviet Karabakh were marked by corrupt management of the region accompanied by oppression and violence. In the 1920’s, these acts triggered the migration of some Armenians from Karabakh to Iran²¹. Many Armenian communists of Karabakh, who had been supporting the reattachment of Karabakh to Armenia, were imprisoned. The discontent of the Armenian population with the situation was expressed by “Karabakh to Armenia” movement, which included members from the entire spectrum of traditional Armenian parties, as well as Bolsheviks, Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. In 1927, the movement realised a campaign of

¹⁵ I. S. Lustick, D. Miodownik and R.J. Eidelson, “Secessionism in Multicultural States: Does Sharing Power Prevent or Encourage It?” *American Political Science Review*, Vol.98, No.2, (2004): 209–229.

¹⁶ Erk and Anderson, “The Paradox of Federalism”, 199.

¹⁷ Lawrence Anderson, “The Institutional Basis of Secessionist Politics: Federalism and Secession in the United States.” *Publius* 34, no. 2 (2004): 8, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3331204>.

¹⁸ Elena Pokalova, “Conflict Resolution in Frozen Conflicts: Timing in Nagorno-Karabakh”, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 17:1, (2015): 68-85, DOI:10.1080/19448953.2014.986378.

¹⁹ Erk and Anderson, “The Paradox of Federalism: Does Self-Rule Accommodate or Exacerbate Ethnic Divisions?”, 195.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 199.

²¹ Libaridian ed., “An eyewitness account of events in 1920’s by a refugee from Mountainous Karabakh to Iran”, 40.

distributing propaganda leaflets, promoting the idea of unification with the Armenian SSR. The authorities continued to threaten and silence the voices bringing up the issues of discrimination against Armenians or proposing de-annexation of Karabakh from Azerbaijani SSR. Many of these people were deported in the 1930's for allegations of "nationalism".²²

Aside from political oppression, Armenians were discriminated against in other spheres of public life. The economic and labour opportunities of Karabakh Armenians were reduced, due to administrative transformations.²³ Enterprises and industries were put under the jurisdiction of regions outside the NKAO, which resulted in a shortage of jobs and deindustrialization of the oblast. Industrial projects envisaged by five and seven-year economic plans in the sectors of energy resources, provision of electricity, and the food industry were not implemented. Some of the economic activity realised in Karabakh was put under the jurisdiction of bodies from Azerbaijan proper, in places like Aghdam, Barda, Kirovabad, etc., 40-60km from Karabakh.²⁴ The oblast was constantly deprived of its industrial infrastructure and was lacking in new projects. In agriculture, the main industry of the region, progress was hindered by the authorities. Water reservoirs were being designed to disproportionally benefit the Azerbaijani populated villages.²⁵ As a result of these policies, the letter demanding the reunification of Karabakh with the Armenian SSR or making it part of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) concludes that "the managerial-administrative functions of the region have all but disintegrated" and resulted in the stagnation in the demographic growth of Karabakh Armenians.²⁶ In the 1950's, per capita capital investments in the NKAO scored around ten times less than the average of the rest of the republic. In the 1980's, this gap decreased to 2-2.7% thanks to an increase in Azerbaijani settlements.²⁷ However, there are also reports stating the opposite, i.e. that NKAO scored higher in almost all economic activities.²⁸ We believe that when it comes to the perceptions of local Armenians regarding their

²² Suren Zolyan, *Нагорный Карабах: проблема и конфликт* [Nagorno Karabagh: the Problem and the Conflict], (Yerevan: Lingva, 2001), chap. 3, <http://armenianhouse.org/zolyan/nf-ru/karabakh/3.html>.

²³ *Izvestia*, March 15, 1988, tr. in CDSP vol. 40, no 13 8.

²⁴ For example, the Sarsang reservoir was managed by Mirbashir. An experimental station in Martunashen was managed from Baku. An automobile repair plant planned to be built in Stepanakert was actually constructed in Kirovabad. The *sojuzpetchat* of Mars was moved to Aghdam. The management of Mars silk industry was transferred to a much smaller enterprise in Nuchi etc.

²⁵ Libaridian ed., *The Karabakh File*, 43-46.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 45.

²⁷ Zolyan, *Нагорный Карабах: проблема и конфликт* [Nagorno Karabagh: the Problem and the Conflict], chap. 3, <http://armenianhouse.org/zolyan/nf-ru/karabakh/3.html>.

²⁸ Anatoly N. Yamskov, "Ethnic Conflict in the Transcaucasus: The Case of Nagorno-Karabakh" *Theory and Society: Special Issue on Ethnic Conflict in the Soviet Union*, Vol. 20, No. 5, (1991): 658.

economic status²⁹, the difference in standards of living in Armenia and Azerbaijan matter more. In this regard, the living standards in Armenia were much more desirable than those of Azerbaijan.³⁰

In 1965, there were also calls by Karabakh Armenians warning about small scale violence that was perceived to bear ethnic motivations.³¹ The discontent regarding these incidents also contributed to the rise of ethnic tensions. Armenians did not feel appropriate measures had been taken by the authorities in order to address violence against Armenians.

The autonomous status of the region provided Karabakh Armenians the right to develop and use their own language and learn it in school. However, structural obstacles were created that impeded the exercising of this right. Teachers were not allowed to receive certification in Yerevan. Instead, they had to take courses in Baku, where interpretations of many events in history textbooks contradicted those of Armenian academia. “The History of the Armenian People” class was not permitted in Armenian schools in Azerbaijan.³² Moreover, the history books traced the settlement of local Armenians to 1828 and presented the Christian cultural heritage of the region as having a Caucasian Albanian-Azerbaijani origin.³³ Students from NKAO scored lower in admission tests in institutions of higher education in the Armenian SSR.

Aside from the decline in education, the Karabakh Armenians also felt cultural discrimination.³⁴ In the 1930’s, 118 Armenian churches were closed in the oblast. A local Azerbaijani author stated that Talaat Pasha, one of the main responsible figures of the Armenian Genocide, was just an “unpleasant personality”.³⁵ The cadre policy in NKAO was also perceived by the Armenians to be unfair, which pushed local elites to seek employment outside of the oblast. The lack of employment opportunities was also an issue for unskilled labourers, causing young people to enrol at technical colleges outside of the NKAO. Later finding work at industrial enterprises within Azerbaijan starting from the eighth grade.³⁶ Aside from rising ethnic tensions, the discriminatory policies also resulted in demographic stagnation and the decline of the Armenians in the NKAO. On the other hand, as we can see from Table 1.0, the percentage of the Azerbaijani population had

²⁹ Philip G. Roeder “Soviet Federalism and Ethnic Mobilization”, *World Politics*, Vol. 43, No. 2, (1991): 221

³⁰ Yamskov, “Ethnic Conflict in the Transcaucasus”, 640.

³¹ Libaridian ed., *The Karabakh File*, 47-48.

³² Yamskov, “Ethnic Conflict in the Transcaucasus”, 640.

³³ “Nagorno Karabakh: 1921-1988”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Artsakh, accessed February 01, 2019, <http://www.nkr.am/hy/karabakh-in-soviet-period>.

³⁴ Libaridian ed., *The Karabakh File*, 45.

³⁵ Ibid, 49.

³⁶ Philip G. Roeder, “Soviet Federalism and Ethnic Mobilization”, *World Politics*, Vol. 43, No. 2, (1991): 199.; Zolyan, *Нагорный Карабах: проблема и конфликт* [Nagorno Karabagh: the Problem and the Conflict], chap. 3, <http://armenianhouse.org/zolyan/nf-ru/karabakh/3.html>.

been steadily growing since Karabakh's integration into the Azerbaijani SSR. This tendency may have led to the loss of demographic lead of the titular ethnicity within the institutional design established out of ethnic considerations. In the perceptions of the Karabakh Armenians, the fear of such a scenario was particularly sensitive due to the Nakhichevan experience, where in the 1980's Armenians had become almost extinct. The demographic change can be explained as a combination of several factors, including emigration of the Armenians due to discriminatory policies, the high birth rate of Azerbaijani population, and the replacement of those Armenians in rural areas with Azerbaijani newcomers.³⁷ This demographic threat contributed to the rise of tensions between the two polities and increased the demands of the Armenian elites to unite the region with the Armenian SSR. On the other hand, some analysts argue that the policies did not have discriminatory intentions.³⁸ Nevertheless, regardless of their real motives, the outcomes of the economic, political and cultural policies of the NKAO exacerbated the perceptions of discrimination among Karabakh Armenians.

Considering the above-mentioned conditions, we can deduce that the autonomous status of Nagorno Karabakh did not serve the objectives for which such autonomies are granted. Moreover, it is hard to see substantial advantages granted to the local ethnicity provided by the region's status. Instead, its people were subjected to discriminatory policies. Such federal institutions usually require special group-specific rights in order to accommodate the local population. In the NKAO, the institutionalization of the region to a large extent served the opposite goal. In this regard, the specific rights of NKAO Armenians can be termed as negative group rights – a condition provided by formal administrative separation based on arbitrary group criteria that creates ground for informally allocating those minorities a disadvantageous socio-political role than the notion of equal citizenship should guarantee. All in all, considering the institutional design of the NKAO as a self-ruling entity and tracing the roots of secessionism (see next section) to its formal setting would be misleading. While we agree that the structure and bodies of the USSR and Soviet Azerbaijan may have played out during mobilization, we argue that the content and the day-to-day realizations of negative group rights played a more important role in causing secessionism rather than the autonomous design of the entity per se. In sum, the application of half-hearted territorial autonomy as a strategy to resolve the inter-ethnic conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis of Nagorno Karabakh ultimately did not bring about sustained peace or provide the means of political, economic and cultural autonomy to the local Armenians. Even though the strategy as a whole failed, policies of this period intensified the inter-ethnic strife in the late 1980's, it is important to note that during the

³⁷ Yamskov, "Ethnic Conflict in the Transcaucasus", 646-647.

³⁸ Ibid, 641.

existence of the NKAO, major inter-ethnic clashes did not occur, arguably due to the authoritative character of Soviet rule. At least from the humanitarian point of view, this relative peace can be considered the biggest achievement in terms of relations between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, albeit not thanks to this strategy. Further attempts to address the conflict by granting the de facto independent Karabakh autonomous status within Azerbaijan have not been accepted.³⁹

Secession

Secession is the process where a part of a state pursues the establishment of its own sovereignty. It “severs and recasts the link between the seceding unit (the people and the territory) and the host state, and it reduces the population and territorial scope of the old state while establishing a new state”.⁴⁰ The goal of independent statehood can be reached either through peaceful agreement or by violent mobilization and even civil war. According to Gurr, the potential of collective violence correlates to a group’s relative deprivation, which is the gap between what a particular group perceives it is entitled to in welfare, power or other terms (value aspiration) and what it actually possesses (value position).⁴¹ In a discussion of secession as a right, Buchanan draws an analogy of secession and revolution – “[w]hen the people suffer prolonged and serious injustices, the people will rise”.⁴² Alternatively, to put it in Gurr’s terms, when relative deprivation increases, the people will rise. Wood suggests preconditions in five spheres of public life that engender secessionist struggle: a) geographical – a defined territory of the potential secessionists, b) social – group solidarity, c) economic – falling short of economic expectations, d) political – decline (or perception) of legitimacy, e) psychological – emotionally motivated struggle.⁴³ When the disagreement between the conflicting groups and elites grows and the stakeholders do not believe in the

³⁹ Pokalova, “Conflict Resolution in Frozen Conflicts”, 74.;

Ի՞նչ է նշանակում բարձր աստիճանի ինքնավարություն. ԼՂ ժողովուրդն իր դիրքը՝ լոշումը հստակ արտահայտել է. Փաշինյան [What does a high level of autonomy mean? The people of Nagorno Karabakh have expressed their position clearly: Pashinyan], Shantnews, March 06, 2019,

<https://www.shantnews.am/news/view/306668.html>; Vartan Oskanian, “Old states and new shifting paradigms and the complex road to peace in Nagorny Karabakh”, *The Limits of Leadership: Elites and Societies in the Nagorny Karabakh Peace Process*. Accord 17 ed. Laurence Broers (London: Conciliation Resources, 2005): 21.

⁴⁰ Anderson, “The Institutional Basis of Secessionist Politics”, 2.

⁴¹ Ted Robert Gurr, *Why men rebel*, (Princeton, N.J.: Published for the Center of International Studies, Princeton University Princeton University Press, 1970), 24-29.

⁴² Allen Buchanan, “Theories of Secession,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 26 (1) (1997): 31-61.

⁴³ John R. Wood, “Secession: A Comparative Analytical Framework,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 14 (1981): 112-120.

possibility of solving their problems, the conflict gains the potential to radicalize and turn into a secessionist war⁴⁴. In a similar vein, Gokcek argues that when the host state seeks to maintain its territorial integrity, it raises the stakes, resulting in hostility and, in case of irredentism, potentially an interstate war.⁴⁵ If such processes unfold along ethnic lines, then “the number of alternatives for conflict resolution becomes even more limited”.⁴⁶

John Coakley identifies four categories of progressively intensifying demands of ethnic minorities addressed to the host state – equality of citizenship, cultural rights, institutional political recognition and, ultimately, secession.⁴⁷ Formally, the NKAO has delivered on the first three demands, falling short of secession. However, as has been demonstrated in the previous section, the realization of the formally assumed obligations left much to be desired. In this regard, having artificial territorial autonomy, Armenians in the NKAO and in the Armenian SSR simultaneously had demanded genuine autonomy and recognition during the Soviet era, even though Karabakh formally had them.

Armenian-Azerbaijani relations regarding the NKAO, particularly the Armenian demands to Azerbaijani and Soviet central authorities, resemble Coakley’s pattern of escalation into secessionist demands⁴⁸ as an end goal based on the principle of self-determination that would have “allow[ed] the minority to be incorporated in a neighbouring state”.⁴⁹ This trend is demonstrated in the demands to the Armenian SSR leadership (1926-1927)⁵⁰, in the demands from Yerevan to unite the NKAO with the Armenian SSR (1945, 1949), several petitions for unification (mid-1960s) and other appeals (1967, 1977).⁵¹ The repeated failure of Soviet authorities to address these demands⁵² contributed to the toxification of the conflict, leading to the clashes in the late 1980s’. The appeals intensified with the introduction of Gorbachev’s glasnost and perestroika that gave the nationalities wider grounds to articulate their demands that had already started to surface in the Khrushchev era. Relative tolerance for exercising

⁴⁴ Anderson, “The Institutional Basis of Secessionist Politics”. 3.

⁴⁵ Gigi Gokcek, “Irredentism versus Secessionism: The Potential for International Conflict”, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 17:3, (2011): 280.

⁴⁶ Pokalova, “Conflict Resolution in Frozen Conflicts: Timing in Nagorno-Karabakh”.

⁴⁷ John Coakley, “The Territorial Management of Ethnic Conflict”, *Special Issue of Regional Politics and Policy* Vol. 3, No. 1, (1993): 4-7.

⁴⁸ Coakley assigns demands for irredentism to the spectrum of degrees of secessionism. Our preference for term “secession” instead of “irredentism” derives from this logic, and does not attempt to underestimate the role of Armenian SSR and its successor.

⁴⁹ Coakley, “The Territorial Management of Ethnic Conflict”, 7.

⁵⁰ Libaridian ed., “An eyewitness account of events in 1920’s by a refugee from Mountainous Karabakh to Iran” in *The Karabakh File*, 40.

⁵¹ Libaridian ed., *The Karabakh File*, 42-48.

⁵² Elizabeth Fuller, “Moscow Rejects Armenian Demands for Return of Nagorno Karabakh,” *Radio Liberty Research Bulletin*, 91/88 (February 29, 1988): 2. apud Stuart J. Kaufman, *Ethnic Fears and Ethnic War in Karabakh*, (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1998), 21.

free and democratic tools coupled with the unforeseen effects of korenizatsiia⁵³ provided fertile ground for ethnic mobilization.

On February 20, 1988, the Regional Soviet of Nagorno Karabakh adopted a resolution to transfer the Autonomous Region of Nagorno Karabakh from the Azerbaijan SSR to the Armenian SSR.⁵⁴ The first case of violence occurred in the village of Chardakhlu, as “a punitive raid” against Armenians by the local Azerbaijani party leader.⁵⁵ The events resonated in Armenia and led to the emigration of ethnic Azerbaijanis from Armenia, most of whom later ended up in Sumgait, Azerbaijan. Later, the chain of events led to small-scale outbreaks in Aghdam and Askeran, resembling hooligan clashes. Reports of deaths in Aghdam reached Azerbaijan and sparked the pogroms against Armenians in Sumgait. The death toll is estimated to be from 26 to the hundreds.⁵⁶ Brutal murders were committed starting from the evening of February 27, 1988.⁵⁷ It seems that the pogroms were in part organized and coordinated by the authorities and in part by local mobs and Azerbaijani refugees from Karabakh, who had been suffering social hardships after their displacement. The conflict escalated, intensifying the refugee flows from both sides⁵⁸, “cleaning” the sides from the opposite ethnic groups over the course of several months. Cases of virtual siege were reported in Nagorno Karabakh, with Azerbaijanis attacking convoys of supplies to Stepanakert, which later transformed into a practical blockade. There are reports of refugees brutally “escorted” from both sides.⁵⁹ On January 12, massive attacks on Armenians of Baku began with proof of government involvement.⁶⁰

As in other ethnic mobilization cases of this nature, as predicted by Horowitz, the conflict quickly escalated into a large-scale military

⁵³ These Soviet policies disproportionately favoured the rule of titular ethnic groups in order to attain and maintain control of the resources of mobilization. For more on the effects of Soviet ethno-federal policies on secessionist struggles, see Philip Roeder, “Soviet Federalism and Ethnic Mobilization,” in *World Politics* 43, no. 2 (1991): 196-232. doi:10.2307/2010471.

⁵⁴ Christopher J. Walker, *Armenia: The Survival of a Nation*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 399.

⁵⁵ Claire Mouradian, “The Mountainous Karabakh Question: Inter-Ethnic Conflict or Decolonization Crisis?”, *Armenian Review*, vol. 43, no. 2-3/170–171 (Summer/Autumn 1990): 15.

⁵⁶ Elizabeth Fuller, “Nagorno-Karabakh: The Death and Casualty Toll to Date”, RL 531/88, (December 14, 1988): 1 –2. apud Stuart J. Kaufman, *Ethnic Fears and Ethnic War in Karabakh*, (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1998), 23.

⁵⁷ Samvel Shahmuratian, “The Sumgait Tragedy: Pogroms against Armenians in Soviet Azerbaijan”, (New York, Zoryan Institute, 1990), 56-60.; Thomas De Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 34.

⁵⁸ Stuart J. Kaufman, *Ethnic Fears and Ethnic War in Karabakh*, (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1998), 26.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 28-30.; De Waal, *Black Garden. Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War*.

⁶⁰ Graham Smith, “Armenia and the Armenians” ed. in *The Nationalities Question in the Post-Soviet States* (London; New York: Longman, 1995), 281.

confrontation, “since the central government will not recognize the right to secede, those who wish to pursue such a course will need to resort to arms”.⁶¹ The stakes were raised to the point of a large-scale military confrontation and consolidated the diametrically opposed objectives, thus paving way for an enduring rivalry⁶² for decades to come. Thereafter, the sides have been contesting the rights of self-determination and territorial integrity, thus gradually transforming the initially intercommunal conflict to an intra-state and inter-state one.⁶³

We will now analyse these developments to evaluate their outcomes as solution-oriented strategies of conflict management. We treat solutions in terms of the right to secede and their outcome. Thereby, we seek to define whether negative or positive peace was reached, where negative peace is understood as the absence of violence and positive peace is the integration of human society.⁶⁴ By the right to secede we are interested in the institutional perspective on the matter, rather than legalistic. In this regard, Buchanan rightly asks, “Under what conditions should a group be recognized as having a right to secede as a matter of international institutional morality, including a morally defensible system of international law?”⁶⁵ Buchanan categorizes two approaches of this right: remedial right only theory and primary right theory.⁶⁶ Considering the former one superior, the author proposes two preconditions for a just cause of remedial secession: when the host state threatens the physical survival of the minority or violates its basic human rights, or when the minority was unjustly deprived of its sovereign territory.⁶⁷ Some oppose secession, arguing that it does not provide the newly established entity with a homogeneous population and does not reduce violence and minority oppression⁶⁸. This argument does not apply in our case, since (due to migration and displacement) Nagorno Karabakh became a highly homogeneous entity by the early 1990’s, with virtually no minorities. In this regard, positive peace has been achieved within the territory of Nagorno Karabakh. This homogeneity also excludes the criticism of Wilsonian self-determination, contending that because of ethnocentric secessionist claims, state boundaries will continuously subdivide. Nevertheless, the politicization of grievances and enduring inter-state rivalry

⁶¹ Donald L. Horowitz, “The Cracked Foundations of The Right to Secede”, *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 14, Issue 2, (April 2003), 11.

⁶² Zeev Maoz, and Ben D. Mor, *Bound by Struggle. The Strategic Evolution of Enduring International Rivalries*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 4.

⁶³ Laurence Broers, “From “frozen conflict” to enduring rivalry: reassessing the Nagorny Karabakh conflict”, *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, 43:4, (2015): 559-560, DOI: 10.1080/00905992.2015.1042852.

⁶⁴ “An Editorial.” *Journal of Peace Research* 1, no. 1 (1964): 2.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/422802>.

⁶⁵ Allen Buchanan, *Theories of Secession. Philosophy and Public Affairs* 26 (1) (1997): 32.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁶⁸ Horowitz, “The Cracked Foundations of The Right to Secede”, 6.

hamper the possibility of achieving positive peace between Armenians and Azerbaijanis “changing the minds of men”. Since 1988, around 25,000 casualties have been reported⁶⁹, even though the number varies in various sources. In May 1994, a ceasefire was established between Armenia, Nagorno Karabakh and Azerbaijan⁷⁰ through Russian mediation. Nevertheless, the conflict remains unsettled. To the present day, Nagorno Karabakh is a *de facto* state with functioning institutions, lacking any international recognition (even from Armenia). This leads us to conclude that the strategy did not succeed in bringing about peace between the societies. In fact, it was “the beginning of new bitterness”⁷¹ that has become “an incentive to ethnic polarization”.⁷² Next, when it comes to the institutional morality of the right to secede as a mode of settling interethnic conflict, the Karabakh case seems to fit the remedial right category. Armenians of Karabakh (and beyond) consider the territory’s incorporation into the Azerbaijani SSR as an historic injustice. The accumulated perceptions of further injustices within the NKAO culminated when acts threatening their physical survival were committed. The peculiarities of Armenian historical interpretations and narratives played a key role in this regard⁷³. Particularly,

“The terms “massacre,” “pogrom,” and even “genocide” became current, and immediate, spontaneous associations with 1915 were made everywhere. The Azerbaijanis, related by race, language, and culture to the Turks, became in Armenian minds the same heartless people who had participated in the genocide of 1915”.⁷⁴

Even though Horowitz is highly critical of secession as a strategy for conflict management or resolution, he agrees that, ‘remedial right’ to secede is a more cautious case, as a “last-ditch response to discrimination or oppression by a central government”⁷⁵ – which seems to be the case in Nagorno Karabakh. The pogroms of Sumgait and Baku, the reported attempts of siege against the NKAO and the numerous occurrences of violence against civilians mentioned above may serve as justification for Armenians to claim the right for remedial secession.

The first president of Armenia, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, explains that “Under that [remedial secession] doctrine, if a state systematically violates

⁶⁹ В Азербайджане подсчитали погибших в Карабахской войне [The number of deaths in the Karabagh war was counted in Azerbaijan], Lenta.ru, January 13, 2014, <https://lenta.ru/news/2014/01/13/list/>.

⁷⁰ The Bishkek Protocol, Bishkek, 5 May 1994.

⁷¹ Horowitz, “The Cracked Foundations of The Right to Secede”, 9.

⁷² Ibid, 12.

⁷³ Kaufman, *Ethnic Fears and Ethnic War in Karabakh*, 32.

⁷⁴ Richard G. Hovannisian, “Historical Memory and Foreign Relations: The Armenian Perspective” in *The Legacy of History in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, ed. Frederick Starr (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1994): 241.

⁷⁵ Horowitz, “The Cracked Foundations of The Right to Secede”, 18.

the civil rights of its ethno-territorial minority citizens on the governmental level and on racial, national, religious and xenophobia grounds, committing violence and threatening to eliminate them or deport, the international community is obliged to secede the territory occupied by that minority from the state, for the sake of the minority's survival".⁷⁶ In this vein, PM Nikol Pashinyan, addressing the UN General Assembly in 2018, made explicit references to the probabilities of physical extinction, by arguing that "[...] to be a part of Azerbaijan for Karabakh means to be totally exterminated. Hence Karabakh must not be a part of Azerbaijan, unless one wants to trigger a new genocide of Armenian people".⁷⁷ In the same year, he also referred to the nature of the conflict as a breach of human rights at the Paris Peace Conference.

Thus, at least from the Armenian perspective, leaving Karabakh under Azerbaijani jurisdiction would have led to the extinction of Armenians there as well, especially when such claims have been voiced by high Azerbaijani authorities.⁷⁸ Due to these contradictions in perceptions and mutual fears, the application of secession as a strategy of managing the conflict has led to shaky or even explosive management of the conflict rather than providing a long-term sustainable solution. To summarise, secession as a strategy of conflict management in Nagorno Karabakh managed to end the intercommunal and intra-state conflict solely by virtue of physically separating the two sides (negative peace). However, the cleavage evolved into an inter-state one, failing to deliver sustainable and peaceful management of the conflict. Coupled with inherent mutual perceptions, mistrust, and a sense of incompatibility of political objectives, the conflict remains a security dilemma up to this day with implications for inter-state and regional stability.

Conclusion

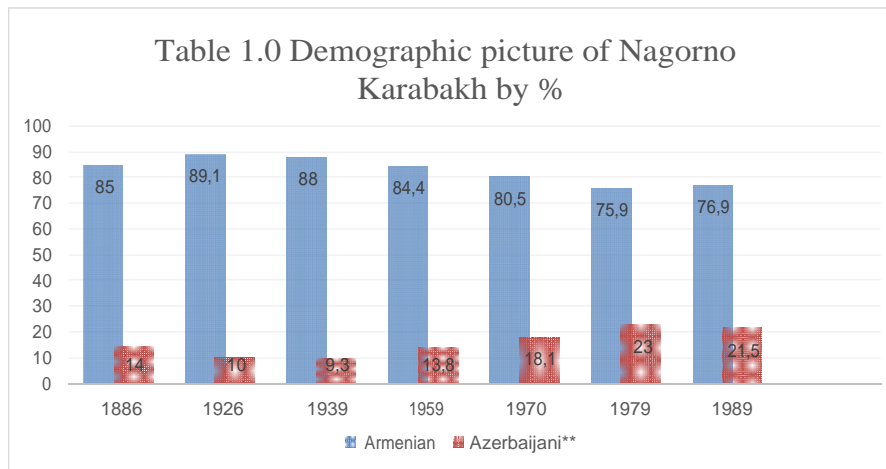
During the course of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict's history, a set of tactics and strategies have been pursued to manage the societal divide. None of them have yielded propitious results. This article has identified and examined two of them – territorial integrity and secession. The territorial autonomy of Nagorno Karabakh within the Azerbaijani SSR as an institutional design to address group specific peculiarities was (to a large extent) executed artificially. Instead of enjoying group-specific ethno-territorial rights, the Armenians of Karabakh were discriminated against

⁷⁶ "Armenia ex-president: We should make use of remedial secession doctrine in Karabakh issue", News.am, May, 6, 2016, <https://news.am/eng/news/326010.html>.

⁷⁷ "Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan delivers speech at UN General Assembly", The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, September 26, 2018, <http://www.primeminister.am/en/press-release/item/2018/09/26/Nikol-Pashinyan-speech/>.

⁷⁸ Walker ed., *Armenia and Karabakh: The Struggle for Unity*, 130.

socially, economically and politically (negative group rights). Moreover, these practices helped fuel division throughout the NKAO era and escalated into a large-scale conflict in the turmoil of the Soviet collapse. Secession also did not achieve sustainable peace in Nagorno Karabakh. Even though it was successful in fulfilling one of the sides' demands, this by no means ended the territorial strife nor neutralized the mutually hostile perceptions leading to the binary polarization of the societies (negative peace). From the perspective of the institutional morality of the right to secede, some events from the NKAO period, as well as incidents immediately preceding the large-scale violence also during the war provide the Armenians with grounds to push for the remedial right to secede. Some elite discourse indicates the presence of this vision among Armenian political leadership. For further research on the efficiency or success of conflict management strategies, the framework proposed by Goertz and Regan that examines the average rate of rivalry, the frequency of severe militarized conflicts and the variation of conflict levels can be applied. This framework can be revealing not only for its methodological usefulness but also for the prominence that the framework of Enduring Rivalries has gained as an appropriate lens to study the Nagorno Karabakh conflict.⁷⁹



⁷⁹ Gary Goertz and Patrick M. Regan, "Conflict management in enduring rivalries", *International Interactions*, 22:4, (1997): 321-340, DOI: 0.1080/03050629708434896. For the study of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict from Enduring Rivalry perspective, see Laurence Broers "From "frozen conflict" to enduring rivalry: reassessing the Nagorny Karabakh conflict" *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, 43:4, (2015): 559-560, DOI: 10.1080/00905992.2015.1042852.