

Speech by Dr Laurence Broers at an event hosted by Angus Robertson MP at the Palace of Westminster to launch Accord 17.

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February 1, 2006

I would like to begin my comments by observing that this publication is being launched at a moment of renewed optimism in the Nagorny Karabakh peace process.

On 10-11 February the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan will meet in Paris and expectations have been raised regarding the prospect of an initial peace agreement being reached. This is paradoxical given that current predictions come at a time when the legitimacy of the peace process among the societies involved appears to be at an all-time low, the perceived incompatibility between peace and justice is at an all time high and claims of legitimacy for 'military solutions' to the conflict in Azerbaijan are on the increase.

What I would like to do in this presentation is to first examine why the Karabakh conflict is still relevant to the international community. Second, I will look at some of the lessons emerging from the past decade of the Karabakh peace process, and third, suggest ways in which the international community can support the peace process.

As most of you will be aware the Karabakh peace process has languished for a decade without any tangible results. So the first question that arises is whether this conflict is still relevant beyond its intrinsic significance for those living in the region. There are at least three reasons for refocusing our attention on this conflict and its resolution.

Firstly, we are all aware of the strategic significance of the South Caucasus as a source and transit route for oil and gas. The opening of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline signifies a major new relationship with the region for Western energy markets. The Karabakh conflict is a major source of risk in the region, providing strategic reasons why we should be interested in seeing it resolved.

Secondly, Armenia and Georgia may in the foreseeable future border the easternmost frontiers of the European Union. This raises the issue of what kind of European periphery we want to see, what kind of neighbours we would like to have in this region and specifically what we can do today to contribute to stability and democratic governance in the region tomorrow.

Thirdly, the prospect of an imminent initial agreement raises the issue of what kind of conditions for implementation currently obtain in the region. As I will briefly outline, conditions within Armenian and Azerbaijani societies do not at present offer grounds for optimism in this regard. It is thus a matter of urgency to reconsider strategies for peacemaking in the region and how they can be better adapted to prepare for implementing a peace settlement.

Public Participation

The first key lesson that has emerged from the previous decade of peace making in the Karabakh conflict is the limitations of an elite-focussed peace process. It is only the highest levels of Armenian and Azerbaijani political establishments (presidents, their aides and foreign ministers) which have been engaged in the peace process. Experience from other peace processes suggests that peace agreements between leaders without significant support from wider society are likely to fail. This experience is confirmed by experiences of 1998 and 2001 in the Karabakh peace process, when resistance from societies and wider political elites caused peace proposals on which presidents had reached a high margin of agreement to fail.

There can be no peace without popular support, and no popular support without participation. The monopolization of the peace process by a narrow elite has not only restricted any sense of public ownership over the peace process, but has restricted civil society development and marginalized the two constituencies with the most to gain or lose from a settlement – the Karabakh Armenians and the displaced Azeri population.

Civil society is one appropriate forum for such issues to be debated. Yet peacebuilding work has remained marginal to the remits embraced by civil societies in the region. Too often leaders have seen civil society groups only as mitigators of criticism directed at government, rather than an active player in the peace process. There is therefore urgent need for efforts to build civil societies' peacebuilding capacity and to include previously marginalized stakeholders into this process.

International actors can play a key role in supporting civil society capacity to engage in peacebuilding, but these efforts need to be comprehensive and inclusive of all stakeholders. Disparities in civil society development mean disparities in peacebuilding capacity. It is crucial to reach out to marginalized communities, especially displaced Azerbaijani populations, and to broach taboo themes. There is also urgent need for greater cooperation between international state and non-state actors in civil society and development work; this is a shortfall acknowledged in the work of the UK government funded Consortium Initiative, though significant scope for further work remains.

Engaging the *de facto* state in Nagorny Karabakh

Extending the theme of participation, I would like to make a few comments about the ways in which the *de facto* state in Nagorny Karabakh has been engaged in the peace process. Azerbaijani fears regarding an *a priori* legitimization of secession by including Nagorny Karabakh in the peace process are understandable. Yet the exclusion of Nagorny Karabakh has institutionalised the interests and fears of the states party to the conflict in ways that narrow the field of stakeholders. In its current structure, the peace process has 'frozen' a framework of state-to-state relationships preserving the asymmetries that are a source of conflict. This structure has both shielded Azerbaijan from necessary engagement with the *de facto* state in Nagorny Karabakh and advanced the latter's integration with Armenia. Preferences for state-to-state relationships have likewise offered no point of entry into the peace process for displaced Azerbaijani populations.

This context lends new meaning to the well-worn phrase, 'frozen conflict'. While the conflict demonstrates constantly evolving and shifting dynamics, it is the peace process that has remained frozen. Both state parties to the conflict and international

mediators have elected to remain within a state-to-state framework, rather than engage with the more difficult task of engaging with non-state actors.

There are options for unofficial or semi-official forms of engagement, which could serve to begin to establish the necessary relationships of trust and mutual confidence between the Armenians of Nagorny Karabakh and Azerbaijanis. In this context the announcement by the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry in June calling for community-level engagement is to be welcomed. Such contacts must, however, be matched by a corresponding rethinking in Azerbaijan of current strategies to isolate, blockade and demonize the Armenian population of Karabakh. In turn, serious debate is needed in Karabakh and Armenia regarding the strategic costs and benefits of continued occupation and withdrawal from the occupied territories.

Differentiating original and subsequent causes

Talk of imminent solutions to the Karabakh conflict appear to ignore the fact that over a decade of stalemate has generated its own self-sustaining dynamics quite separate from the original sources of the conflict. The resulting 'conflict system' presents a number of important obstacles to implementation of a peace agreement, and which consequently need to be urgently addressed.

I will consider only three. Consider first the militarization of political cultures. Throughout the region, lack of oversight of military structures, militant rhetoric and rising military expenditures curtail the space available for civic politics. Militarization reduces the space available for civic politics and establishes key taboos, for instance on public discussion on what kind of compromises could be made to the other side – taboos which are then institutionalised in state-controlled media. Consider also the role of informal trade networks circumventing the formal blockades between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Criminality and racketeering thrive in such networks, creating a set of interests actively opposed to the free movement of goods and people that any peace agreement would imply.

Finally, consider the mythologies of the Karabakh conflict constructed since the ceasefire. If identity is mistakenly seen as a source of the conflict, mutually exclusive identities constructed *since* the war pose serious obstacles to dialogue, even if they mirror one another closely in the narratives they tell. These identities are reproduced daily in state-controlled media, flowing into nationalist conceptions of justice and its incompatibility with peace. With such mutually incompatible narratives still dominant in each society, it seems wildly optimistic to suggest that these societies will recognise any imminent peace agreement as just or fair.

International Involvement

What can the international community do to unravel these dynamics? One of the underlying sources of governments' promotion of militarization in the region is the absence of political legitimacy on other issues. This lack of capacity to generate consensus on other issues has encouraged regimes to seek legitimacy in hardline stances on Karabakh. This reflects the fact that only governments with robust democratic mandates will have the legitimacy to make the necessary – and painful – compromises required for peace. The international community should therefore make more consistent and credible commitments to democratisation in the region.

Lenience in the face of authoritarian government in return for access to strategic resources has proved a short-sighted policy elsewhere in the world. The international

community therefore needs to increase efforts supporting constituencies for democratic reform in the region.

For instance, greater interest in and support of non-state media outlets in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Karabakh is required to secure the necessary autonomy for the media to promote sufficient public awareness of the issues at stake and instigate meaningful debates on the peace process. Policymakers may also be more stringent in utilizing leverage deriving from Azerbaijan's and Armenia's international commitments to fundamental rights and freedoms in combating the impact of negative stereotyping of the 'other'.

Another area where current policy orientations need to be reconsidered is the ongoing incorporation of faultlines deriving from the conflict into regional development initiatives. The solidification of alliances excluding important local actors once again reduces the field of stakeholders in ways threatening regional stability. Peacebuilding NGOs have an important role to play in supporting outward looking business communities to engage with one another across conflict divides. Economic cooperation and development in the longer term will benefit from regional approaches taking in the regions *de jure* and *de facto* states, as well as Russia, Turkey and Iran. Excluding antagonists from economic development initiatives may serve tactical goals, but in the long-term will incur costs for all parties.

The international community can also challenge more consistently corruption within local economies and thereby contribute to a more equitable distribution of revenues. This is particularly relevant for Azerbaijan, which faces a stark choice between the development of a skewed and corrupt oil economy, risking widespread social discontent among those not cocooned by the oil industry, and the development of a more balanced and socially inclusive economy. International actors must increase efforts to secure transparency and accountability in the distribution of Azerbaijan's oil revenues, thereby ensuring that more sectors of society have a stake in prosperity and therefore peace. In so doing the international community may also work towards restoring confidence in its motives among societies in the region.

Finally, Western practitioners and observers must reject the simplification of the region's politics suggested by the discourse of the so-called 'war on terror'. This highly reductive discourse distorts perceptions of our long-term interests in the Caucasus and is also music to the ears of authoritarian yet fragile regimes in the region. In the current context of political conflict with Iran, we must also be mindful of the fact that a substantial part of Iran's population is ethnically Azeri. Approaches to Iran must therefore be carefully calibrated with likely impacts on Azerbaijan and our interests in seeing the Karabakh conflict resolved.

In sum, practitioners and policy makers should prioritise the internal coherence of the South Caucasian states over their roles as conduits for resources. There is no doubt that resolution of the Karabakh conflict requires the support of outside powers – but any sustainable resolution must serve the interests of local stakeholders and not external rivals for hegemony in the region.

Conclusion

I would like to finish with a word of caution over what could be called 'short-termism' in talking about the Karabakh peace process. The prospects for peace need to be measured in terms of medium and longer-term processes, rather than the political

gains to be made by short-term prognoses and tactics. As I have outlined positive assessments of current trends in the negotiations have yet to be matched by strategic initiatives to create a political and social terrain receptive to peace. Much hard work will be needed for any framework agreement to fall on fertile ground. Only a shift away from short-term visions can engender a sustainable and genuine peacebuilding process in the Nagorny Karabakh conflict.