



**Discussion
Paper**

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A final status vote for Nagorny Karabakh: Choosing politics?



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Nagorny Karabakh © Conciliation Resources

A vote to decide the final political status of Nagorny Karabakh (NK), the territory at the heart of Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, would mark the culmination of the Minsk Process, mandated by the Organisation of Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). A final status vote would, in theory, supersede NK's preceding interim status, legitimate its final political identity and bring the 30-year old Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict to an end.

The idea of a final status vote is one of several principles comprising the current peace proposal developed by the Minsk Group Co-Chairs for more than a decade, known as the Madrid Principles. It is the most vulnerable single principle as it is envisaged as being chronologically the last to be enacted. Implementation of a final status vote is usually taken to assume prior, and politically extremely challenging, changes in territorial control, security arrangements, displaced community return and political institutions in and around NK. This is a significant source of concern to Karabakh Armenians, the population whose political status is the original source of conflict.

This concern is central to the clash between “step-by-step” (phased) or “package” (simultaneous) approaches to implementing a peace agreement that has complicated Armenian-Azerbaijani negotiations from the outset.

In the current climate of militarisation, escalation and the possible threat of all-out war, a NK final status vote appears not only an unlikely prospect but even an inflammatory one. The idea of an open-ended vote on the status of NK strikes at the heart of the Armenian and Azerbaijani narratives that focus on exclusively retaining or reclaiming control of the territory respectively. But a final status vote also offers the only route to a popular mandate and locally generated solution to the conflict, even if this looks a distant prospect today.

This discussion paper is based on Armenian-Azerbaijani civil society discussions on a NK final status vote held within the framework of Conciliation Resources' Karabakh Contact Group (KCG) dialogue platform in Tbilisi in the spring of 2016 (and before the escalation that took place in April of that year). It is the last in a series of five papers based on KCG discussions on the Madrid Principles.

Questions of definition

Ambiguity surrounds many aspects of a NK final status vote. This applies first to the terminology used in the Madrid Principles. They refer to a 'legally-binding expression of popular will', a formulation that avoids both the terms 'plebiscite' and 'referendum'. Plebiscites have historically been held to confirm decisions previously taken by political leaders, while referendums have generally been more participatory and open-ended. Negotiators across the world often frame vagueness in the detail of peace agreements as "constructive ambiguity". But under current political conditions in the Armenian-Azerbaijani context, ambiguity can feed consistent worst-case scenario-building on each side. This has embedded an atmosphere deeply hostile to the holding of any final status vote.

These points underscore that intensive public awareness work on the meaning of all the Madrid Principles, and especially a final status vote, needs to be carried out across the conflict to ensure that mediators, leaders and societies have a similar understanding of the form and purpose of a final status vote. Otherwise, there is a danger that the peace process could unravel just as it reaches its culmination.

What kind of vote?

Ambiguity extends to the most basic questions. The only firm element in the formulation of a 'legally binding expression of popular will' is that it would be legally binding. It leaves open the form that the expression of popular will would take.

If the final status vote is held to be a plebiscite, the purpose of the vote is framed as endorsing a peace deal previously agreed by political leaders from both sides. This approach assumes that leaders come to agreement on the final political status of NK, which is then endorsed by plebiscite. The risk with this approach is that a rejection of the agreement by voters would derail the whole peace process and could threaten a return to fighting. It leaves unclear the role of the population actually living in and displaced from NK in the determination of the territory's final status. This approach also ignores the previous experience of the Armenian-Azerbaijani peace process. Elite deals behind closed doors have failed in the past because of contrary societal reactions and are likely to do so again.

If the final status vote is held to be a referendum, the purpose of the vote is to form one component of a wider package of indivisible principles. Other principles may be enacted earlier, but the format,

mechanism and timeframe of a referendum are agreed simultaneously to other principles and are an inseparable part of the overall deal. The risk with this approach is that the terms by which the referendum is to be held are so contested that progress on all other issues is held hostage to agreement on this issue. This is, in effect, the situation that obtains today.

Where would the vote take place?

A second ambiguity surrounds the boundaries of the territory in which a final status vote would take place. The territory originally disputed between Armenians and Azerbaijanis was the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast' (NKAO). Placed under direct rule from Moscow in 1988-1989, the province was formally abolished in November 1991 by the Azerbaijani Supreme Soviet (parliament). Azerbaijan subsequently drew new administrative boundaries which cut across the boundaries of the NKAO.

For its part, the unrecognised Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) set out in its 2006 constitution *de facto* external and internal boundaries, which cut across the boundaries of the former NKAO and do not correspond to the *de jure* boundaries used by Azerbaijan and the international community. The 2006 NKR constitution contains wording that leaves some room for discussion about final boundaries. Nonetheless, the common public Armenian understanding of NK is that it includes extensive territories outside the NKAO under Armenian military control since the 1991-1994 war. It also includes adjacent districts which previously had substantial ethnic Armenian populations but which remained under Azerbaijani military control at the end of the war and from which all Armenians had been forcibly displaced.

The Madrid Principles stipulate, as an early step, the withdrawal of Armenian forces from the territories under their control surrounding the NKAO (with separate modalities applying to the Lachin corridor with Armenia, and possibly also to the region of Kelbajar). This would effectively re-establish the boundaries of the NKAO. For the Armenians, withdrawal would mean a dramatic contraction (as much as half) in the territory under their control and in the security they take this control to represent.

Given the Armenians held a demographic majority in the NKAO before the conflict and now almost exclusively populate its territory, however, its reconstitution would mean that they would certainly win a simple majority in a final status vote. For Azerbaijanis, the return of the occupied territories

surrounding the NKAO would be a major step forward in the peace process. Yet the concomitant return to numerical minority status within the NKAO, and likely defeat in a simple majoritarian vote, makes the prospect of a final status vote deeply ambivalent.

Defining the electorate

If the perceived boundaries of NK have changed since work on drafting the principles for a peace agreement began, so has the population. Four vectors of demographic change can be identified:

- First, the entire Azerbaijani population of NK and the surrounding occupied territories has been forcibly displaced. Many, although not all, Karabakh Azerbaijanis remain formally registered at their former homes in their identity documents. However, over 20 years after the end of the conflict many first-generation displaced people have died and, in many cases, it is their descendants who would have a right to return.
- Second, the population of NK now includes significant numbers of Armenians who were forcibly displaced from Baku, Ganja and other locations in Azerbaijan in 1988-1990 and who subsequently moved to NK.
- Third, there have been flows, exaggerated in the media on both sides, of Armenians from Armenia proper, and from the diaspora, into NK and the surrounding territories since 1994.
- Fourth, there has also been an outflow of Armenians from NK to Armenia, especially Yerevan, and to Russia creating a specifically NK Armenian diaspora.

Reconciling the disparate claims and rights of these demographic categories is a significant political challenge for the perceived legitimacy of any final status vote. This challenge highlights the importance of an agreement on the boundaries and demographic geography of NK being struck during the preceding interim status of the

territory. Meeting this challenge is complicated by the fact that the concept of interim status remains vague. There is little (and contested) public understanding of what rights and representation it would confer on populations living in, and displaced from, NK.

Is a new vote necessary?

A fourth ambiguity concerns the referendum carried out on 10 December 1991 by the NKR to ratify its self-proclamation as a separate republic in September the same year. The referendum recorded overwhelming support (99.9% with a turnout of 82.2%) for independence among the territory's Armenian population (Karabakh Azerbaijanis did not participate). Armenians argue for its legality according to Soviet legislation, that Karabakh Azerbaijanis were able to participate, even if they decided not to, and that no further vote is needed other than as a face-saving device for Baku. Furthermore, they highlight that the NKR's referendum took place before mass forced population movements took place – unlike in either Armenia or Azerbaijan, which held majoritarian referendums on independence after substantial expulsions of communities belonging to the other's nationality. Conversely, Azerbaijanis argue that the 1991 referendum was illegal, Karabakh Azerbaijanis could not freely participate and that it has not resulted in international recognition of the NKR's independence.

This is a debate without end. Yet the December 1991 referendum, together with the last Soviet census of 1989, have left an indelible imprint in terms of their documented proportions of NK's ethnic demography. The census recorded a 76.9% Armenian and 21.5% Azerbaijani population in NK before the onset of large-scale hostilities and forced population movements. For Armenians the retention of these proportions, as stipulated in the original Madrid Principles document of 2007, are central to any discussion of another vote.

A final status vote: Points of disagreement

The KCG discussions highlighted the following key areas of disagreement in Armenian-Azerbaijani thinking about a final status vote.

1. A vote to ratify or create reality?

The KCG discussions highlighted conflicting views over whether the purpose of a final status vote should be to ratify core aspects of the status quo or to create the space for a new one to emerge. Power balances lie at the heart of these different views: should a final status vote legitimise the power relations that currently prevail in NK, or take place only after a renewed negotiation of power?

The predominant Armenian view is that a final status vote is the moment when NK's secession from Azerbaijan is legitimised and when official Azerbaijani recognition of its independence is secured. It should follow a viable interim status, allowing for the participation of elected NK representatives in the peace process. While a vote on final status is seen by Armenians as an indispensable part of a comprehensive peace settlement, the extent and legitimacy of other aspects of that settlement, such as Armenian withdrawal from territories surrounding NKAO and the right of Karabakh Azerbaijanis to return to NK, are contested. This is especially the case in NK, where the absence of the territory's representatives from the negotiating table has resulted in limited popular engagement with negotiation outcomes.

“If there is no agreement on a referendum there is no agreement on any of the other Principles. Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.”

Azerbaijani views on a final status vote are more diverse. A common position is that a final status vote should be postponed until conditions are more favourable for Azerbaijan, which could mean indefinitely. Some Azerbaijanis even suggest that a final status vote could be dispensed with altogether. At the KCG meeting, one Azerbaijani participant expressed the view that the final status vote should be removed from the Madrid Principles, since it effectively nullifies the purpose of the interim status phase. An alternative approach, this argument goes, could be to mould interim status to secure Karabakh Armenian needs and interests. In this scenario interim status should be given the chance to function without the pressure of an overhanging final status vote. Armenian participants rejected

outright such an approach, which they see as effectively ignoring the underlying cause of the conflict – the need to establish the legal status of NK on the basis of the self-determination of its population.

“Interim status gives NK 90% of what it wants: security, borders, trade, everything but a flag at the United Nations. The referendum ruins all of that.”

2. The timing of a final status vote

Armenian and Azerbaijani participants envisaged different timetables for holding a final status vote. The prevailing Armenian view was that since the status quo to be legitimised has existed for more than 25 years the vote should take place as soon as possible. Armenian anxieties about an extended timetable are exacerbated by growing insecurity on the Line of Contact (LOC) between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces, and the shifting interests, interactions and levels of engagement of the international mediators and states potentially providing peacekeepers.

A common view among Azerbaijani participants, if the idea of a final status vote was accepted, was that a vote should be postponed into the long term, perhaps by up to several decades. A core Azerbaijani concern about a shorter time frame is that Azerbaijan currently has no access to the territory on which a final status vote would be held. A longer time frame would allow the return of displaced people to become large-scale and more established. In the words of one Azerbaijani participant, “we need 10, 20, 30 years to live together; a long-term co-habitation”.

3. The right to vote

KCG participants expressed widely divergent views on who would have the right to participate in a final status vote. The Azerbaijani view was that all those displaced from NK and their descendants should have the right to vote on the final status of the territory. Therefore, even if displaced people or their descendants did not exercise their right of return, and if second or third generation descendants felt a diminishing connection to ancestral homes in NK, their participation in a final status vote would still be crucial to its legitimacy.



Nagorny Karabakh © Conciliation Resources

Armenian views linked the right to vote to two more limited frames of reference. First, they see the proportions of the 1989 census, which established an Armenian majority in NK, as a gold standard from which no final status vote can legitimately diverge. Second, Armenian arguments centre on actual residency in the territory as a condition for the right to vote. In this view, Azerbaijanis (and Armenians) who did not return to permanently reside in NK during the interim status phase would not enjoy the right to vote on its final status.

Underlying debates about who has the right to vote is the question of whether participating in a final status vote implies a responsibility to live with the result. According to one international KCG participant: “How can a final status vote protect people from consequences they have not voted for, and how can it ensure that people don’t vote for consequences they won’t have to live with?” Armenian KCG participants feared that a final status vote could include large numbers of Azerbaijanis who had no intention of living in NK exercising a right to vote on its status. They also feared that majoritarian, winner-takes-all, reasoning might encourage coerced returns

of Azerbaijanis to NK, in order to inflate the number of Azerbaijani voters. Azerbaijanis feared that a restricted electorate would legitimise ethnic cleansing and a settler demography. This discussion crystallizes a dilemma. A short timeframe limits the scope for a secure return of displaced Azerbaijanis, required to legitimate the vote. But a long timeframe diminishes the probability that a final status vote will be held at all, or on terms that secure an Armenian majority.

“How can a final status vote protect people from consequences they have not voted for, and how can it ensure that people don’t vote for consequences they won’t have to live with?”

4. One referendum or several?

A key point of disagreement surrounds the question of whether there should be one or more votes. KCG discussion put forward different arguments regarding the prospect of multiple votes.

Some Azerbaijani participants proposed that a comprehensive peace agreement should be ratified by a vote at the very beginning of the peace process. They also argued that a final status vote in NK alone would be insufficient. Azerbaijan has sought to protect itself from the possibility of an NK independence vote by arguing that any changes to its borders must be ratified by a second referendum across all of Azerbaijan. The result of any such vote in rejecting border changes would be a foregone conclusion. One Azerbaijani participant at the KCG proposed ratificatory referendums in both Armenia and Azerbaijan to insure against any subsequent attempts to revise the peace settlement. Armenian participants saw this as a trick to impose an Azerbaijani majoritarian denial of the Karabakh Armenians' own majoritarian claim to NK.

These discussions highlighted the danger of a 'referendum war' reprising the 1990-1991 'war of laws', and stem from negative features of the regional political environment. They reflect the prevailing assumption that today's political elites do not have a sufficiently strong mandate to implement controversial decisions to bring about a settlement.

A reliance on referendums assumes an insufficient institutionalisation of political norms to stably mandate a negotiated outcome. A collective lack of trust in electoral institutions to deliver legitimate processes across all political entities leads in turn to an excessive reliance on majoritarian voting as the decisive factor in 'winning'.

This leads to a competitive dynamic seeking to overcome a vote seen as demographically "unwinnable" at one level by the holding of another vote at another level where the demographic balance is more favourable. The impact of competitive majoritarianism is the collapsing of different scales of rights and claims, diluting and ultimately countering the capacity of the referendum mechanism to address specifically local issues. This debate crystallizes another dilemma. A wide electorate compromises the legitimacy of the vote by allowing voters far from the disputed border to vote on its status and role in the lives of those living inside it. But a narrow electorate compromises the legitimacy of the vote by institutionalizing the results of wartime forced population movements.

Other aspects of discussion

1. The cost of infinite deferral

Armenians and Azerbaijanis in the KCG discussions shared urgent concerns at rapid changes in the regional and international contexts. Shifts in Russian-Western relations, encroaching Middle Eastern conflict and global economic trends were but some of the factors submerging the templates offered by the Madrid Principles ever deeper beneath new geopolitical, security and demographic realities. At a certain point in time, defining meaningful parameters for a final status vote relative to the pre-conflict situation becomes impossible.

An emphasis on either resolution-through-status or transformation-through-process emerged in the KCG discussions. This highlighted a dichotomy between the results-orientated and process-orientated potentials of a final status vote. Some Azerbaijani participants at the KCG discussions questioned the assumption that the result of a final status vote would lead to a resolution of the conflict. Azerbaijani arguments focused more on revising the process getting to a vote, to the point where, as noted, one Azerbaijani participant suggested a final status vote would be obsolete. By contrast, Armenian participants were almost uniformly convinced of the opposite position, seeing the vote as an indispensable and inevitable component in the wider package of principles.

The global experience of final status votes shows that without robust political processes capable of institutionalising and mediating plural and contradictory interests, political issues can remain unresolved and drive new violence after the vote. The failure of South Sudan's interim status period in 2005-2011 and final status vote to institutionalise real power-sharing, and the new state's descent into civil war since then, offers a salutary example.

The Armenian-Azerbaijani peace process has proven increasingly resistant to including actors outside the very highest echelons of the political elites in each state. There are no back channels, working groups or even consistent track-two initiatives to structure or sustain negotiations between the intermittent summits of Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents or foreign ministers.

This dynamic works against the institutionalisation of an infrastructure for peace, and the development of effective brokers between and across elites and societies. It is these forms of interaction – of practicing non-violent politics – that would be the guarantee of a sustainable Armenian-Azerbaijani

peace. The real challenge of a final status vote therefore lies not in getting a result as such but in its capacity to catalyse a new kind of politics between Armenians and Azerbaijanis.

“There is an inverse relationship between the number of issues on the table and the size of the table, inevitably creating a dysfunctional emphasis on result because there is no process.”

In the KCG meeting this point was fervently expressed in terms of the profound disjuncture between a detailed discussion of a final status vote and the almost total absence of confidence-building measures and people-to-people contacts on the ground. This disjuncture is a critical deficit jeopardising the legitimacy of the Madrid Principles and the Minsk Process as a whole.

2. The problem of majoritarian reasoning

The KCG discussions exposed the divisive effect of majoritarian reasoning. Azerbaijani participants expressed fears that majoritarian reasoning assumes ethnic bloc voting and an ethnic winner-takes-all outcome, in which a larger community imposes its will on a smaller one. As one Azerbaijani participant stressed, majoritarian reasoning effectively makes discussion of a final status vote meaningless and imperils the implementation of all of the Madrid Principles – especially territorial withdrawals and the return of displaced communities – by prioritising numbers of people over their choices and rights.

Armenian participants took the opposite view. Some of them refused to discuss alternatives to a majoritarian format, highlighting that this format is mentioned in the original Madrid Principles document. They also argued that referendums in Armenia and Azerbaijan had been carried out under this principle, and that there should be no doubt or intrigue about the result of a referendum in NK. Moreover, they argued that the final status vote is the sole Madrid Principle that in their view addresses the core Karabakh Armenian demand for political self-determination. If this would be diluted or questioned by non-majoritarian logic, they argued, then Armenian commitments to all of the Madrid Principles would be similarly open to question.

“Majoritarian reasoning imperils all of the Madrid Principles by prioritising numbers of people over their choices and rights.”

International practice is ambivalent in regard to majoritarian referendums. It used to be generally accepted that majoritarian victories were sufficient to legitimise final status votes, but this is increasingly subject to debate. Majoritarian reasoning has been challenged by requirements for cross-ethnic campaigning, second-preference or alternative voting, ‘supermajority’ win thresholds, parallel votes in which various communities must vote consensually for an outcome to be valid and the necessity of winning over the second preferences of the other community. Such requirements have been implemented in a number of contexts, such as Northern Ireland, Nigeria and Lebanon, and international understanding of how they work and where they can be most effective has grown.

Yet majoritarian referendums are still regularly used to settle contentious political issues, such as those on Scottish independence in September 2014, the United Kingdom’s membership of the European Union in June 2016, and Turkey’s transformation into a presidential republic in April 2017. One difference between these referendums and a final status vote in NK, however, is that there was considerable uncertainty about the likely result. The perception that the result of a majoritarian vote in NK is a foregone conclusion in favour of independence is a major motivation for Azerbaijan to either prevent it from happening or alter its modalities.

“The final status vote is the only Madrid Principle that confirms a Karabakh Armenian right to self-determination. Without it, there are no other Madrid Principles.”

The competitive majoritarian dynamic is reinforced by the lack of visible alternatives to complete victory. There has been no sensible discussion of what rights and guarantees Karabakh Armenians would gain if they did not secure de jure secession from Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani leadership rhetoric of a “high level of autonomy” has to date never proceeded to proposals on paper. According to one Armenian participant: “Why should we vote when we have no guarantees from Azerbaijan or the international community? We need to see a different face to Azerbaijan. We have seen no vision as to why we should be part of it.”

Neither has there been any sensible discussion of what rights and guarantees Karabakh Azerbaijanis would gain if they did return and live in a sovereign NK separate from Azerbaijan. In over 20 years neither Baku nor Stepanakert has elaborated these options, preferring instead to craft public expectations around majoritarian and exclusive presumptions of victory. This omission is a major pillar of the status quo, making Armenian-Azerbaijani co-habitation a taboo and entrenching today’s total ethnic segregation.

“Why should we vote when we have no guarantees, from Azerbaijan or the international community? We need to see a different face to Azerbaijan, we have seen no vision as to why we should be part of it.”

3. A return to politics

Though they attributed responsibility differently, all KCG participants agreed that the current political climate is diametrically opposed to the viability and even constructive discussion of not only a final status vote, but of all the Madrid Principles. Consequently, stated commitments to the Madrid Principles package, and to negotiations as a whole, lack credibility.

The escalation in violence on the LOC, particularly since 2014, and the outbreak of serious fighting in early April 2016, combined with belligerent rhetoric on both sides, has left trust at an all-time low. Standards of democracy across the region also offer little prospect for the institutions and mechanisms of the Madrid Principles, especially a final status vote, to be implemented legitimately. Electoral malpractice, involuntary returns of displaced communities, the use of political violence (including by spoiler factions) and information war are all real concerns in the current climate.

“If one side says to the other ‘we’ll keep what we’ve won’, then the other side will see its only option as to win its own war.”

“Talking about a referendum is a fantasy. If we do not start talking about confidence-building measures, we will never get to referendum day +1.”

Discussion of a final status vote underscores the necessity for a reconstituted politics between the Armenians and Azerbaijanis of Karabakh to emerge. Karabakh Armenians and Karabakh Azerbaijanis need to develop their own relationship free from politicising frameworks imposed from outside. Without these steps, the prospect of a final status vote will remain mired in strongman politics and ethnic majoritarian outbidding.

Precedents exist. When in December 1991 the NKR held parliamentary elections, a number of mandates were reserved for Azerbaijani-populated districts. As Azerbaijanis did not participate, results were recorded in only 75 of 81 districts; the NK parliament also held open a vacant seat for an Azerbaijani deputy speaker. Overcoming the impact of the changes in demography, boundaries and the hardening of political attitudes since 1991 will require the *de facto* NK institutions to develop

their governing capacity. The isolation of NK has accelerated its integration with Armenia, reduced its capacity to participate in the peace process and reinforced an environment hostile to the return of displaced Azerbaijanis.

The Karabakh Azerbaijani community should also develop institutions that can ensure its effective participation in the peace process. For the Karabakh Azerbaijanis to become real partners in the discussions about the future of NK and, specifically in the discussions about a final status vote, they will have to develop legitimate institutions and have an elected leader who has a mandate to speak on their behalf. Unless and until such developments take place, it will remain difficult to counter prevailing Karabakh Armenian perceptions that the Karabakh Azerbaijani community is a co-opted body without a voice of its own.

Conciliation Resources is an independent international organisation working with people in conflict to prevent violence, resolve conflicts and promote peaceful societies. We believe that building sustainable peace takes time. We provide practical support to help people affected by violent conflict achieve lasting peace. We draw on our shared experiences to improve peacebuilding policies and practice worldwide.

This publication is based on a meeting of the Karabakh Contact Group (KCG), an initiative established by Conciliation Resources in 2010 aimed at generating policy-relevant thinking about the Nagorny Karabakh conflict. Held over three days in Tbilisi in early 2016 this meeting brought together civil society activists and policymakers from Armenia, Azerbaijan and NK, and international experts. This is the fifth KCG meeting in a series discussing each of the Madrid Principles in turn.

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Policy points for further discussion

Reinstating people-to-people contacts

Discussion of an NK final status vote, or indeed the Madrid Principles as a whole, in the absence of thick webs of contacts between Armenians and Azerbaijanis is a purely theoretical exercise. Conducting peace talks when people-to-people contacts have been increasingly perceived on the ground as representing a threat to national security undermines the legitimacy of the Minsk Process. This KCG discussion underscored more than any before the urgency of reinstating diverse, multi-issue and multi-level people-to-people contacts. Without them, conflict resolution mechanisms, such as a final status vote, can lose their constructive potential and can become destructive instruments in the ongoing propaganda war.

Overcoming majoritarian thinking

Majoritarian thinking is a major factor in generating insecurity around the idea of a final status vote. International best practice has devised multiple approaches to securing the representation of vulnerable populations in referendums. Research and study visits by governmental and non-governmental specialists could enable learning from international best practice in the design and conduct of referendums encouraging consensual politics over winner-takes-all outcomes.

The fact that majoritarian thinking is embedded in the Madrid Principles themselves is also a problem. As the mediators elaborate them further with the parties, they should consider ways in which this can be overcome.

Investing in governance and leadership capital

The lack of advance access to NK by international and other governmental and non-governmental organisations which will play a vital role in the successful implementation of a final status vote has to be addressed. In the case of the *de facto* institutions in NK, engagement without recognition remains an under-utilised framework capable of addressing the governance deficit in the territory. In the case of the Karabakh Azerbaijani population, young leadership programmes could contribute to the development of a new generation able to communicate on behalf of and ultimately represent the community as elected leaders.

Committing to local politics

A key theme emerging from the KCG discussion on a final status vote is whether people who do not intend to live in a territory should have the right to vote on its political status. How should their claims be reconciled with those actually living in the territory, and those who do exercise a right of return? The idea that people should exercise rights in the place to which they are committed to living may help to dilute the current practice of up-scaling local politics. This underscores the need for freely-exercised choices, and their endangering by the current state of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. Only a different form of politics that rejects militarism and invests in institutions can make that possibility, and a viable final status vote, real.

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