

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	221
Land:	Aserbajdsjan
Kilde:	Freedom House
Titel:	Freedom in the World 2017 – Nagorno-Karabakh
Udgivet:	1. september 2017
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	16. marts 2018



Freedom in the World 2017 - Nagorno-Karabakh

Publisher [Freedom House](#)

Publication Date 1 September 2017

Cite as Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2017 - Nagorno-Karabakh*, 1 September 2017, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/59c102eb10.html> [accessed 15 March 2018]

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Freedom Status: Partly Free

Aggregate Score: 33 (0 = Least Free, 100 = Most Free)

Freedom Rating: 5.0 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Political Rights: 5 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Civil Liberties: 5 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Quick Facts

Population: 150,000

OVERVIEW

Nagorno-Karabakh is a breakaway territory that has enjoyed de facto independence from Azerbaijan since 1994, when it reached a ceasefire with Azerbaijani forces following a war for independence. The territory's population is majority Armenian, and Nagorno-Karabakh retains close political, economic, and military ties with Armenia. The security situation, exacerbated by regular violations of the ceasefire and the threat of renewed war, have a deeply negative impact on political rights and civil liberties.

Key Developments in 2016:

- Heavy clashes erupted in April along the line of contact with Azerbaijan; although estimates of casualties varied wildly, most international sources agreed that the incident represented the worst violence since the 1994 ceasefire.
- In June, a group of men in military uniforms attacked and kidnapped a National Revival Party legislator; after his release, he claimed that the attack was politically motivated intimidation.
- In November, a constitutional commission – formed earlier in the year by request of the territory's president – published a new draft constitution that, among other things, would shift Nagorno-Karabakh's government from a semipresidential to a fully presidential system.

- The presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan met to discuss the conflict on a few occasions during the year; negotiations led by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), launched in 1992, also continued.

Executive Summary:

In April, four days of heavy violence broke out along the line of contact between Azerbaijani forces and Karabakh troops, who are backed by the Armenian military. The fighting, which came to be known as the "Four Day War" among the local population, represented the worst episode of violence since the two sides reached a ceasefire in 1994. Although casualty estimates by the two sides varied wildly, the U.S. State Department noted that approximately 350 people died in the fighting, including civilians on both sides of the frontline. Azerbaijani forces gained small areas of land along the line of contact. The clashes heightened overall security concerns and led to significant social and political tensions in the territory.

In March, a special commission formed at the initiative of President Bako Sahakyan began to review Nagorno-Karabakh's constitution. The commission noted the need to thoroughly reform the territory's basic law, and unveiled a draft constitution to the public in November. Among other things, the draft envisions a fully presidential system of government, as opposed to the current semipresidential system in which power is shared by the executive and legislative branches. Analysts noted that the territory's heightened security concerns figured prominently into the proposed legislation, which will likely be put to a referendum in 2017.

Relations between the country's main parties and the small opposition were tense in 2016. Given the territory's delicate geopolitical status, internal dissent and opposition have often been regarded as signs of disloyalty and even a security risk. In June, a group of men attacked and kidnapped Hayk Khanumyan, a legislator and member of the National Revival Party, one of the two opposition groups represented in the parliament. After his release, Khanumyan claimed that he recognized the perpetrators and that the attack – which took place in broad daylight in the territory's capital – was likely meant to intimidate him to leave Nagorno-Karabakh.

Explanatory Note:

This territory report has been abridged for *Freedom in the World 2017*. For background information on political rights and civil liberties in Nagorno-Karabakh, see [Freedom in the World 2016](#).

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