

THE MEDIA FRAMES THE DISCOURSE: DE FACTO STATE DEVELOPMENT,
NAGORNO-KARABAKH, AND THE VARDENIS-MARTAKERT HIGHWAY

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by
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Abstract

THE MEDIA FRAMES THE DISCOURSE: DE FACTO STATE DEVELOPMENT, NAGORNO-KARABAKH, AND THE VARDENIS-MARTAKERT HIGHWAY

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The strategic use of discourse facilitates transboundary connections between states and their diasporas. Discourses are especially important where remittances from diasporas can influence conflicts and unstable geopolitical grey zones, like de facto states. Nagorno-Karabakh is an ethnically Armenian de facto state that has claimed independence from Azerbaijan but is not recognized by the international community. The Vardenis-Martakert infrastructure project is just the second highway connection between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh and has economic and military implications in this volatile region. The media reporting about this project is illustrative of how home state-diaspora communication securitizes fear and (re)imagines geographies in the absence of spatial contiguity. Whereas the study of media discourses has predominately focused on western mainstream news outlets and their representations), this study focuses on Armenian ethnic media and their particular narratives and rhetoric used to describe imagined geographies and ontological insecurities for extra-territorial ethnic communities. Based upon this analysis it can be

concluded that ethnic media sources reimagine the geopolitical landscape, use post-conflict discursive strategies that highlight economic development as a path towards recognition, and avoid well documented aggressive "othering" strategies.

Acknowledgments

It is either a cruel irony or perfectly fitting that in the process of writing this master's thesis about ontological insecurity and existential doubt that I should feel that way so often myself. I have many people to thank for their support while I worked on this thesis. First, thank you to my committee members who helped distill my interests into a viable thesis topic and whose edits and revisions have made this thesis far better than I could have done on my own. Thank you to my parents for their unwavering support and constant encouragement. Last but certainly not least I want to thank my fellow grad students for their help and solidarity as we navigated this thesis adventure together and in particular, Laura Thompson, Zeb Sanders, Burke McDade, Evan Montpellier, Heather Guy, and Lauren Andersen.

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Foreword

Chapter 1 of this thesis will be submitted to the *Journal of Eurasian Geography and Economics*, a peer-reviewed journal published by Taylor and Francis; it has been formatted according to the style guide for that journal.

Introduction

The Caucasus region, situated between the Black and Caspian Seas with Russia to the north and Turkey and Iran to the south, is a complex array of post-Soviet states with continually fluctuating governmentality, sovereignty, and identity. Nationalist movements and identity politics have redefined political space in this region resulting in small autonomous unrecognized de facto states. Nagorno-Karabakh is one of these entities that has declared independence and aligned itself politically with Armenia yet is still spatially within the internationally recognized borders of Azerbaijan. The ongoing dispute over this separatist region raises many questions about identity, sovereignty, and the role of the Westphalian nation-state that our international system adheres to. The complexity of the Nagorno-Karabakh situation is compounded by the significant influence of the wealthy Armenian diaspora (Rieff 1997). This study focuses on elucidating the transnational information networks that maintain economic and existential connections between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh on the one hand and the Armenian diaspora on the other.

Discourse analysis has been used within the larger framework of critical geopolitics to better understand representations of space and events that influence how people understand the world (citation). In particular, the Nagorno-Karabakh war has been studied through the lens of western media sources using discourse analysis (Goltz 2012; Imranli-Lowe 2015). This paper eschews the viewpoints of western media to study how Armenian ethnic media portray Nagorno-Karabakh and influence their main audience, the diaspora. The diaspora are an important contributor to Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, the World Bank estimates that 13% of Armenia's GDP came from remittances in 2016 (World Bank 2018).

The diaspora are also significant fundraisers for infrastructure improvement projects within Nagorno-Karabakh. The project focused on in this study is the Vardenis-Martakert highway which is only the second highway connection between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh making it a significant access point to this volatile region. By analyzing Armenian ethnic media sources reporting about the Vardenis-Martakert highway this research reveals how discursive strategies are used to (re)imagine complex geographies of political space and reinforces cultural ideologies and Armenian identity.

The media frames the discourse: de facto state development, Nagorno-Karabakh, and the Vardenis-Martakert Highway

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The media makes the discourse: de facto state development, Nagorno-Karabakh, and the Vardenis-Martakert Highway

Abstract: The strategic use of discourse facilitates transboundary connections between states and their diasporas. Discourses are especially important where funding from diasporas can influence conflicts and geopolitical grey zones like de facto states. Whereas the study of media discourses relating to conflict zones has taken place using western media sources, this has not been the case with the rhetoric of ethnic media. This paper aims to contribute a discourse analysis of the narratives and rhetoric used in Armenian ethnic media relating to the diaspora funded Vardenis-Martakert highway infrastructure project in Nagorno-Karabakh. Based upon this analysis it can be concluded that ethnic media sources use post-conflict discursive strategies that highlight economic development rather than more aggressive “othering” strategies.

Keywords: ontological security; Caucasus; imagined geographies; transboundary flows

Introduction

As globalization and transboundary flows become more complex, scholars have increasingly questioned identity and ideological moorings. The boundaries of state borders have lost some of their saliency as people evaluate their identities leading to questions of ontological insecurity. Ontological insecurity is the existential anxiety that people feel about their place in the world and confusion about their collective identities. In this fog of doubt certain entrepreneurs of identity can enter the fray and promote myths and narratives that serve as discursive anchors to alleviate uncertainties stemming from existential questioning (Nesbitt-Larking and McAuley 2017). The shaping of state-based narratives or through media (mis)representations can promote political or ideological agendas that influence imagined geographies and the identities of extra-territorial populations.

As I will argue, the transboundary flows between Armenia and its diaspora create an opportunity, devoid of spatial continuity, to promote imagined geographies and narratives of ontological insecurity. In this study, ethnic media sources tap into the resource-rich Armenian diaspora through promotional reporting and calls for cultural solidarity. These groups are fundraising for development in the ethnically Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh de facto state. The most recent major diaspora funded infrastructure project in Nagorno-Karabakh (also known as Artsakh), the Vardenis-Martakert highway (Figure 1), serves as the case study for this research. Media narratives about the highway are analyzed using discourse analysis to determine how geographies and borders in the South Caucasus are being (re)imagined. Reporting on infrastructure projects like the Vardenis-Martakert highway exemplify the discursive arguments which break down international norms and reify the independence of an unrecognized state within stakeholder communities. I present the discourse analysis in three sections: (1) the stabilizing discursive anchors of media representations; (2) the continued (re)imagining of borders and contiguity between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh; and (3) the implicit appeals to historical memory within the ethnic media discourses. [Figure 1 here]

One of the primary points of contention in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh is the ethnic disparity between the de facto state's relationship with Armenia and its de jure status as part of Azerbaijan. Conflicting identities that arise from post-colonial bordering marginalize certain groups and can push them to distinguish themselves from a homogeneous national identity, or what Comaroff and Comaroff (2001) term, a "national fantasy." While the presence of marginalized groups in state societies is well established, globalization and ease of communication across space and time is evolving the avenues by which groups

(re)imagine geographies and express their different identities and ideologies. The post-Soviet de facto States contain notable rejections of post-colonial bordering in favor of more irreducible ethnic identities and norm-defying sovereignty where political realities do not always match internationally recognized borders.

The Nagorno-Karabakh de facto state, inside of the internationally recognized borders of Azerbaijan, has close ethnic ties with Armenia and a tumultuous history since the breakup of the Soviet Union (Rieff 1997). O’Loughlin et al. (2014, 426) write, “Arguably, the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union originated in early 1988 in the autonomous oblast of Nagorny Karabakh (NKAO).” Today, with the aid of the Armenian state and the Armenian diaspora, Nagorno-Karabakh is working towards the explicit goal of international recognition (Caspersen 2009). The normative challenges of state recognition pose moral and existential problems for an international system still largely based on a Westphalian understanding of state sovereignty and territorial integrity (Agnew 1994, 1999; Cash and Kinnvall 2017). The liminal status of Nagorno-Karabakh has forced ethnic Armenians to reimagine political geographies and reconcile ontological insecurities surrounding the perilous position of de facto states.

Armenia and the Armenian diaspora have raised money and supported the development of the Nagorno-Karabakh state. One significant facet of Nagorno-Karabakh’s development and securitization is through diaspora funded infrastructure projects. The 116 km Vardenis-Martakert highway is the most recent of such projects and is only the second highway connection between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. This 33 million dollar project, completed in September 2017, shortens the drive time between Yerevan and the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh, Stepanakert, by two hours (“Vardenis-Martakert Highway”

2017). Kenneth Boulding's loss-of-strength-gradient hypothesis states that the closer a military venue is to the site of state political power the more likely that nation is to be victorious (Boulding 1962). The Vardenis-Martakert thus significantly improves Armenia's loss-of-strength-gradient in the ongoing conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh with Azerbaijan. Linke et al. (2017, 522) write, "Boulding's (1962) loss-of-strength gradient is the key conceptual link between social and physical geography in this line of research." Roughly one third of the cost for the highway was funded by donations from the Armenian diaspora. The funding of a strategic military infrastructure project like the Vardenis-Martakert highway is further evidence of the transnational influence that diaspora groups continue to have on conflict zones around the world (Orjuela 2008).

Nina Caspersen, in reference to, comments about globalization made by a presidential advisor from Nagorno-Karabakh and a minister of extra regional affairs in Kurdistan, writes, "The most important factor that both refer to is their diaspora communities and the informational networks that enable them to closely follow developments in the unrecognized state and provide vital financial support" (Caspersen 2012, 59). Understanding the interaction of diaspora groups with media information networks is critical to the continued study of unrecognized states and their liminal status. Whereas a patron state is still largely beholden to mutually shared international norms of territorial integrity and sovereignty, diaspora groups can wield their economic power without the normative baggage associated with official state policy.

The transnational flows of information that create the imagined geographies that influence how the Armenian diaspora act in relation to their home-state is not well understood. Smolnik and Weiss (2017, 475) write, "Empirically grounded research on the

Caucasus that targets practices across scales is still much needed. The same is true for transnational aspects of political space.” The Armenian diaspora make up an important part of political space in the South Caucasus and the focus of this research is to better explain the transboundary flows of information that return funding and support for the continued existence of the Nagorno-Karabakh de facto state.

Literature Review

Research into the media narratives surrounding the Vardenis-Martakert highway contribute to the understanding of post-colonial bordering and trans-national ontological security. Van Dijk (1995, 11) writes, “Controlling the means of mass communication is one of the crucial conditions of social power in contemporary information societies.” Some studies have analyzed western media discourses about Nagorno-Karabakh (Goltz 2012; Imranli-Lowe 2015) but none have critically analyzed Armenian ethnic media sources. While securitization and discourse analysis have been used to study conflict zones, such as Chechnya (Tarin Sanz 2017) and Sri Lanka (Hyndman 2009), this study investigates how discourses are used to influence the ontological securitization of Armenian extra-territorial populations in the ongoing reprisal of international norms relating to the recognition of territorial sovereignty in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The globalization of markets and new methods of communication have facilitated a shift towards neoliberal policies in which states encourage the incorporation of transnational citizenship into the social and political milieu of the state (Greig 2002; Kaplan and Herb 2011; Ho 2011). An official Ministry of Diaspora was established in Armenia in 2008 with the express purpose of further encouraging the participation of the diaspora with their home-state (Gamlen 2014). The World Bank estimates that in 2016 13% of Armenia’s GDP came

from personal remittances (World Bank and OECD estimates). Research into how diasporas influence conflict and post-conflict states seeks to understand how these groups use their transnational linkages to shape politics and actions in their home-states (Koinova 2017). Power dynamics between home-states and diasporas can be complex and sometimes lopsided in favor of the diaspora. In the case of Armenia, Caspersen (2008) describes how powerful diaspora influence helped push out President Levon Ter-Petrosian and replace him with a hardline former military commander Robert Kocharian.

Research on diaspora-state relations is part of a broader movement in political geography to study power within and beyond the state. John Agnew (1994) calls the focus on discrete state level analysis the “territorial trap” and increasingly geographers are researching the ways in which state sovereignty is being separated from territorial boundaries (Smolnik and Weiss 2017; Koinova 2017). Specifically, within the Caucasus, Smolnik and Weiss (2017, 470) write, “We believe that the Caucasus provides fertile empirical ground for shedding light on and offering nuances to the theoretical discussion of configurations of power that transgress the territorial trap.” As power transgresses territory, states maintain connections with their diasporas to create a continuity of identity and ideology that no longer is defined by spatial proximity. Media, and the transmission of information, becomes the key link between the home-state and the diaspora. In fragile states that depend on remittances, media is used to communicate and address ontological insecurities among diaspora groups.

Ontological security, developed by Giddens (1991), refers to the natural human inclination towards a security of “being in the world.” Ontological insecurities are perceived existential threats to what a person or group of people defines as integral to their identity. As an important part of an imagined Armenian geography, Nagorno-Karabakh’s unrecognized

status creates existential doubt about its future among Armenians and their diaspora. Media can inform an audience of ontological insecurities and also provide an avenue to assuage those fears in what Hyndman (2007) calls, “the securitization of fear.” Understanding how fear is developed and disseminated to a wider audience to influence geographies, both real and imagined, holds significant implications for research in political geography and falls within the growing body of literature on ontological security (Cash and Kinnvall 2017). Memory and history also help to define identity. In areas of conflict the justification for violence can take the form of historical precedence which is used to legitimize war and incriminate the opposition. In this way, historical memory becomes politicized and used to promote particular agendas (Malksoo 2015). The historicization of conflicts can securitize identities and beliefs among people in contested regions and become an important facet in the broader context of ontological security.

In Nagorno-Karabakh, the geopolitical instability of the unrecognized state creates anxieties over the future of this space which is intimately tied into Armenian ethnic identity. When anxieties and descriptions of space are written down, such as in newspaper articles, they can be analyzed and studied. Discourses become a medium by which feelings surrounding identity and space can be studied. In this theoretical framework, existential security is malleable and in constant motion which can be tracked through written language. In political geography, terms such as “geographic imaginaries” (Silvey and Rankin 2011) and “mindscapes” (Meredith 1999) have been used to refer to the various ways that people frame their subjective beliefs about space and place. Discourse analysis can then be used to study written narratives which hold the power to disseminate fear and also the paths towards securitizing those fears.

The separation of territorial boundaries and identity problematizes traditional notions of place-identity relationships. The separation of place and identity has been facilitated by mass communication. Media allows diaspora groups to maintain their emotional and ideological connections with their home state (Greig 2002). The narratives and discourses used by ethnic media to preserve ties with their identity groups creates another opportunity for discourse analysis. Geopolitical representations in the media have been studied in western media sources such as in the case of the Balkans and the Nagorno-Karabakh War (O'Tuathail 2002; Imranli-Lowe 2015). This research contributes to the study of state-diaspora relations by analyzing ethnic media discourses and their relation to imagined geographies and ontological security. Analyzing reporting on the Vardenis-Martakert highway through ethnic media, offers a different perspective than most available research that predominantly focuses on geopolitical representations through western media sources. This research contributes to ongoing discussions of Agnew's (1994) "territorial trap" in which states should no longer be viewed as the main focus of study. States are no longer trapped by their territorial sovereignty, yet empirical evidence of transboundary political relations is limited. The Vardenis-Martakert highway provides the context through which the redefinition of political spaces and the fluidity of borders can be examined. The incorporation of diasporas into relations with home states involves lines of communication and often include appeals to emotional connections between the two that can be analyzed through discourse analysis.

Methods

The data for this meso-level study comes from systematic discourse analysis of online published news articles relating to the Vardenis-Martakert highway. The internet has become an important resource for diaspora groups and the advancement of their political goals

(Brinkerhoff 2009). The Vardenis-Martakert highway is not widely reported on outside of Armenian ethnic media outlets. To better understand the media discourses reporting on the Vardenis-Martakert highway, three news outlets were chosen, *ArtsakhPress* (Stepanakert, Nagorno-Karabakh), *Asbarez* (Los Angeles, USA) and *ArmenPress* (Yerevan, Armenia). The use of three news agencies, from the contested territory, the home state, and one of the most significant Armenian enclaves, allowed for a comparative analysis between the discursive representations of the Vardenis-Martakert highway. The primary focus of this study is to understand how the diaspora interacts with and supports Nagorno-Karabakh. English language articles were chosen for analysis for two reasons, a large majority of the Armenian diaspora lives in the United States and speak English, and secondly, news articles published on the internet can be considered public discourse also meant to influence English-speaking international audiences. The increasing relevance of political speech in social media and other online sources will be an important source for future discourse analysis.

All articles for this study were obtained using the LexisNexis news database and searches on the websites of each media outlet using search terms “Vardenis-Martakert highway” and other related spellings and variations. Each news organization was contacted for this study and a request for all articles published about the Vardenis-Martakert highway was made. 59 unique articles were used in this study that range from 2012 through to the completion of the highway project in 2017. Coding was completed in Atlas.ti qualitative research software. Codes and code groups were established based on the narratives present in the set of articles [Insert Table 1 here]. After each article was coded patterns within the discourses were analyzed.

Through the use of discourse analysis, the goals of this research were to understand the imagined geographies, project justifications, and ontological insecurities relating to this infrastructure project and to compare the portrayals of the project between media outlets. Beyond what is explicitly said in each article, the intimation of historical legacies of violence and the implicit dismissal of internationally recognized borders are also considered. While social media and web 2.0 may provoke new discussions surrounding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Geybullayeva 2012), traditional media is used in this study to capture the sentiments of major ethnic news outlets that mirror more closely the views of the Armenian government and the broader diaspora.

The underlying principle in discourse analysis is that knowledge is produced and thoughts are acquired. Thoughts are assembled and categorized to form coherent storylines that explain reality. From this position, it is assumed that the views and storylines created are malleable and subject to change. Values and social positions can be manipulated by new information and discursive arguments. Politicians and policy advocates construct arguments from contexts and identities to persuade people to take a particular position. This pattern requires assembling knowledge into narratives that are repeatedly presented to audiences that guide thoughts and beliefs. (O'Tuathail 2002)

The south Caucasus is one of the most volatile regions of the world and is still reconciling with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The application of discourse analysis gives this research the ability to dissect and interpret the promoted narratives that are affecting this region. O'Tuathail (2002, 608) writes that by studying geopolitical discourse, "It organizes strangeness and chaos into familiar classes and understandings of phenomena." The liminal status of unrecognized states is certainly chaotic, the disruption of international norms,

increased transboundary flows, and ethnic conflicts that have arisen from post-colonial bordering make this part of the world ripe for geopolitical discourse analysis.

Within the framework of discourse analysis that O'Tuathail (2002) proposes, the media and their narratives are separated from foreign policy processes. In this model, public policy and narratives in the media are not always consistent. A more gradual process takes place where media narratives are formed and normalized in their portrayal of events, such as the reporting on the Bosnian War (O'Tuathail 2002), or reporting on the Nagorno-Karabakh War in western media (Goltz 2012; Imranli-Lowe 2015). In this study, the reporting by *Armenpress* and *Artsakhpress* are more closely aligned with state-based policy initiatives. *Armenpress* was first established as a state-run news agency and is currently a Closed Joint-Stock Company with all shares owned by the Republic of Armenia ("About US ARMENPRESS" 2018). *Artsakhpress* is similarly aligned with state-based media through a partnership with *Armenpress* ("About US ARMENPRESS" 2018). As with much ethnic media, these two news agencies are not expected by the author to be purely objective, one of the stated goals of *Armenpress* is the following,

The agency has actively covered, mainstreamed and presented in leading international media outlets all the developments of key importance for the Republic of Armenia, taken counter measures against Azerbaijani propaganda and has been and remains the forerunner in the mission of the international recognition of the Armenian Genocide and exposure of Turkish denialism. Display quotations of over 40 words, or as needed.
("About US ARMENPRESS" 2018)

Asbarez also makes no claims to objectivity and instead deliberately points out its intent to promote the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh and to push for other Armenian ethnic causes, like the recognition of the Armenian genocide ("About" 2018). Within this model,

the ethnic media analyzed are expected to more closely align with official foreign policy and to take a particular stance on the construction of Vardenis-Martakert highway.

Results and discussion

Reporting on the construction of the Vardenis-Martakert Highway took place in Armenian news sources and was not widely reported on outside of the Armenian cultural sphere. The analysis of articles relating to the Vardenis-Martakert highway displayed remarkably consistent narratives and discursive elements promoting a particular vision for the project. *Armenpress* and *Artsakhpress* showed few deviations from a scripted discursive strategy in reporting on the project. Broadly speaking, *Asbarez*, the Los Angeles based Armenian news source, maintained a consistent approach with the other two sources but with some significant discursive deviations. *Asbarez* reporting was, in some cases, more provocative and overtly emotional. This disparity in reporting is reflective of the willingness of diaspora groups to be more radical in their beliefs and their freedom to disregard international norms (Gunter 2007; Zarafian 2014) where state-based newsgroups show a measure of restraint. The reporting on the Vardenis-Martakert highway project is indicative of discourse construction promoting a remittance-based project that appeals to ontological insecurities and the creation of imagined geographies. The following analysis is split into three parts: (1) evidence of discursive anchoring; (2) the (re)imagining of the borderscapes between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh; and, (3) the implied, rather than explicit, appeal to historical memory within the articles.

Stability and discursive anchors

Evidence of a peacetime discursive strategy within reporting on the Vardenis-Martakert highway serves a number of purposes. By developing a narrative devoid of aggressive ‘us vs. them’ rhetoric, a new stage in the discourse development of this contested region is evident. Stability is projected to the readership along with the growing importance of post-conflict rehabilitation. Instead of the need for weapons and military support the focus is now on building the economy and strengthening ties with the patron state. Along with building democratic institutions, developing the economy is part of a distinctly Armenian narrative with the end goal of international recognition for Nagorno-Karabakh. This strategy is clearly stated through carefully constructed discursive anchors that appear repeatedly throughout the articles about the Vardenis-Martakert highway project.

Nesbitt-Larking and McAuley (2017) describe “discursive anchors” as a strategic use of myths and narratives promoted by state actors that create a certain image of reality. Of the 57 articles chosen for this study, nine of them, present in all three news sources, display explicit evidence of recurring language used to “anchor” the description of the Vardenis-Martakert highway for their readers. Beyond the mere restatement or paraphrasing of similar narratives, these articles recite verbatim certain sentences that serve as a discursive lynchpin for the project. The following three excerpts were used nine times in total, seven by the *ArmenPress* News Agency, once by *Asbarez* News, and once by *Artsakh* Press.

By functioning as a direct road link, the highway will become a second lifeline between northern Armenia and northern Artsakh, significantly cutting down travel times, boosting the economies of scores of Artsakh communities along its path, stimulating inter-community ties, and vastly improving geographic access for implementing local development initiatives.” (“Armenia-Karabakh Highway Construction Launches” 2014)

The Vardenis-Martakert Highway likewise will be of key economic and humanitarian importance. (“Armenia-Karabakh Highway Construction Launches” 2014)

The Vardenis-Martakert Highway will bring economic benefits to communities located within up to 20 kilometers on either side of the route. (“Armenia-Karabakh Highway Construction Launches” 2014)

By consistently repeating these discourses, the rhetorical arguments for the highway project are made clear. This routinized argument is meant to resonate with the popular ideology of the target social group. In reference to the creation of knowledge, Gerard O’Tuathail (2002, 607) writes, “As it is assembled into regularized and routinized storylines, it gains greater coherence, clarity and consistency.” Economic development, access and improving the link between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh are some of the routinized arguments for the promotion of the project. The one constant between the three excerpts neatly aligns with Caspersen’s (2012) description of evolving remittances for unrecognized states, which comments that economic independence and future financial stability appeals to diaspora groups as a productive path towards recognition and independence from future financial assistance. Since the end of the Nagorno-Karabakh War, rebuilding and infrastructure development has taken place with the aid of Armenia and the diaspora. Economic independence has been a mainstay of Nagorno-Karabakh’s policy both discursively and functionally. The Nagorno-Karabakh government accepts loans from the Armenian state, and remittances from the diaspora, but has also privatized businesses and transitioned to a liberal market economy. The development of the Vardenis-Martakert highway is seen as a successor to the successful diaspora funded rebuilding of the Goris-Stepanakert highway which strengthened ties between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia (Kolsto and Blakkisrud 2008).

The continued promotion of narratives describing the economic benefit of the highway project supports an imagined future of Nagorno-Karabakh as economically independent with

closer infrastructure ties to the Armenian patron state that will open up markets for Nagorno-Karabakh businesses. An article from *Artsakhpress* is titled “Vardenis-Martakert highway reconstruction boosts social/economic life of nearby communities” (“Vardenis-Martakert Highway Re-Construction” 2016). In another *Asbarez* article the mayor of a village along the proposed Vardenis-Martakert highway is quoted, “everything grows here but we are unable to sell it anywhere since there is no road. Now that there will be a road, we’ll be able to reach markets in Vardenis and beyond” (“Armenia Fund: Security, Trade, and Jobs” 2014). Based on the coding method used in this study, economic benefits of the highway were mentioned 84 times, 46 more than the next most used code. These articles consistently use discursive anchors that go beyond emotional attachment and instead promise a future of economic stability in which Nagorno-Karabakh will not require the perennial support of diaspora giving.

Re-imagining geography and erasing borders

While improving the economy of Nagorno-Karabakh is a significant step in the path towards stability, a major hurdle still exists for the region, international recognition. Within the articles studied, the topic of recognition is mostly avoided, to acknowledge the precarious position of Nagorno-Karabakh would undermine the preferred narrative of stability and territorial unification with Armenia. As the diaspora continues to support recognition, the subject of Nagorno-Karabakh’s liminal status is hard to avoid. In an *Armenpress* interview with the Hayastan All-Armenia-Fund, an Armenian government institution established to maintain ties with the diaspora, the group is quoted, “The road, as repeatedly stated, is an alternative and strategically significant road in the geopolitical conditions of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh” (“Some Parts of New Road” 2014). By euphemistically referring to

Nagorno-Karabakh's precarious position as an unrecognized state, the focus is redirected towards the benefits of the highway project which will help ameliorate the geopolitical status of Nagorno-Karabakh. The same article then immediately goes on to promote the economic growth that the new highway will contribute. The tacit dismissal of Nagorno-Karabakh's unrecognized status promotes an imagined geopolitical reality where Nagorno-Karabakh is no longer associated with Azerbaijan.

Another way that the articles allude to Nagorno-Karabakh's liminal status is through mentioning the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). In an *Armenpress* interview with the Director of the Hayastan Fund, Ara Vardanyan, he says, "Foreign media stated that by this program Armenia strengthens its positions in the negotiating process" ("Hayastan Fund's Director" 2013). The "negotiating process" that the article refers to is the OSCE Minsk group, established in 1992 to aid in peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the ongoing disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. At least one expert on the region acknowledges the efforts of the Minsk Group but is skeptical of whether it will be successful in the long run (de Waal 2010). The co-chairs of the Minsk group are France, Russia and the United States, all significant nations that could support the future international recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh. By building democratic institutions and liberalizing its economy, Nagorno-Karabakh hopes to align with the western European model which is seen as a path towards state recognition. The Vardenis-Martakert highway is further discursively connected to the OSCE Minsk group when *Armenpress* write, "The OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs have already had the chance to travel on the highway. They returned from Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia via that highway" ("Vardenis-Martakert Highway Re-Construction" 2016). The subtle allusions to the ongoing negotiations

surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh's future reveal a hopeful acceptance for the prospect of recognition. However, the relative lack of recognition-narratives could also be emblematic of Caspersen's (2009) belief that there is an understood acceptance in Nagorno-Karabakh of its unrecognized status after the limited successes of Kosovo, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia in their quests for independence. The decades old push for recognition remains a component of the discursive narratives about the highway project, although other more salient storylines are promoted to address the ontological insecurities of the diaspora.

The imagined geographies of Nagorno-Karabakh and its relationship with Armenia are also presented through the use of metaphorical "body language." Benedict Anderson's discussion of "imagined communities" describes how solidarity is developed in nationalist movements among citizens that will likely never know one another (Anderson 1991). The use of somatic language symbolically binds together members of a group and draws them into a common world view that defines their homeland (Ramaswamy 1998). The repeated use of somatic language in news articles about the Vardenis-Martakert project equate supporting the project with protecting the metaphorical "Armenian body." Building on this theme, rhetorical narratives describing past diaspora funded highway projects have associated particular somatic phrases with each road. The rebuilding of the Goris-Stepanakert highway through the Lachin Corridor is referred to as the "lifeline" between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

This "lifeline" narrative was made more potent when the Stepanakert airport was closed in 1990 and the only access point between the patron and de facto state was through the Lachin Corridor (Kolsto and Blakkisrud 2008). The second significant highway project associated with the diaspora was the North-South highway connecting the two ends of

Nagorno-Karabakh and was labelled the “backbone” highway. As only the second highway connection between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, the Vardenis-Martakert highway is continually referenced as a “second lifeline” between the two. The use of somatic language goes further, such as in this *Armenpress* article about the opening of the new highway, “The strategically important Vardenis-Martakert highway, one of the major **arteries** connecting Artsakh to **Mother** Armenia and the outer world, was put into operation after the solemn opening ceremony” (“We Will Continue” 2017). Somatic language imbues the highway with cultural significance. An implicit expediency for the project is intimated through the use of somatic language because of the perilous position of the unrecognized state and the urgency implied by associating its continued survival with being part of the heart of ‘Mother’ Armenia.

Implied historical memory

In contrast to much of the academic literature detailing the importance of rhetoric promoting a particular view of history (Malksoo 2015; Imranli-Lowe 2015), the news articles reporting on the Vardenis-Martakert highway largely refrain from depictions of historical Armenian precedence in Nagorno-Karabakh and human rights abuses committed against Armenians. One would possibly expect the evocation of the Armenian genocide to be present in many of the articles, but this is not the case. Only two articles describe commemorations of the 30th anniversary of the Armenian genocide. The absence of historical memory within the vast majority of articles concerning the Vardenis-Martakert highway falls more closely in line with the idea of strategic control of knowledge put forward by Van Dijk (1995) wherein, some fundamental knowledge about an event does not need to be repeated but is assumed to be a part of the dominant discourse. In this sense, discourses of the “strategic” and

“humanitarian” importance of the Vardenis-Martakert highway are purposefully oblique references to the historical memory of past human rights abuses committed against Armenians. The rhetorical decision to refrain from overt appeals to historical memory may be emblematic of an evolution in communication with the diaspora where ‘us vs. them’ arguments and ‘othering’ is rendered too emotionally charged and aggressive. Historical memory of atrocities committed against Armenians is a significant part of Armenian diaspora identity but the prevailing imagined geographic narrative of Nagorno-Karabakh, within the articles studied, is one of stability and preservation with the goal of independence and international recognition by way of economic stability and post-conflict peace, not one of retribution for past atrocities.

Conclusion

Nagorno-Karabakh’s liminal geopolitical status has created lingering ontological insecurity among Armenians and the Armenian diaspora. Globalization, transboundary flows and neoliberal state policies are bringing states and extra-territorial stakeholders closer together. The ability for states to maintain ties with their diasporas is deterritorializing state sovereignty and limiting the influence of political boundaries. Without geographic proximity, states and diasporas are using technologies like the internet to maintain information flows and news reporting about the home-state. With no spatial contiguity, news discourses become more important for the creation of imagined geographies and the subjective beliefs of extra-territorial readership. The financial incentives of remittances and the complexity of an ethnicity-linked contested de facto state, make understanding transboundary media discourses an important source of geopolitical power. Reporting on the Vardenis-Martakert highway highlights discursive strategies that build particular narratives and distill the salient

arguments which rhetorically connect the diaspora to Nagorno-Karabakh and the Armenian home-state. Discursive anchors are used across the three media sources examined to form a consistent argument for supporting the highway project. Re-imagining borders and the geography of the South Caucasus brings Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh rhetorically closer and dispels international norms and the de jure claims of Azerbaijan.

Implicit references to historical memory serve as a subtext to the reporting about the Vardenis-Martakert highway which tacitly connects the safety and preservation of Karabakhi Armenians with the Vardenis-Martakert highway project. Explicit references to historic memory are not necessary in this context because the audience shares a common social cognition and the same ideology. The articles about the Vardenis-Martakert highway prove that there is “little need for the specific conspicuous manipulation of knowledge” because the media source’s power is hegemonic and the preferred outcome of the news reporting (supporting the highway project) is self-evident (Van Dijk 1995). Latent references to historical memory exhibit a discursive strategy that is more accommodating of the status-quo and pursues the goal of recognition for Nagorno-Karabakh through western ideologies of democratic governmentality and economic stability.

This research has shown that there is an evolving way in which fragile and unrecognized states are reported about to diaspora audiences in ethnic media sources. Othering and aggressive rhetoric used to galvanize the support of diasporas has, in the case of Armenian ethnic media concerning Nagorno-Karabakh, developed into the routinization of an imagined geography of stability and the need for economic assistance which may bear fruit in the recognition process. There is no simple formula for de facto state recognition, the fates of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which have been drawn further into Russia’s influence

and farther from international recognition (Caspersen 2009), has likely prompted the course of Nagorno-Karabakh's strategy that favors a (albeit apprehensive) western ideological approach towards future recognition. The ontological insecurities of the diaspora remain as Nagorno-Karabakh is an unrecognized state but the overarching narrative is one of acceptance of the status quo with the hope that economic assistance and infrastructure projects will continue to stabilize Nagorno-Karabakh and improve the chances of future international recognition.

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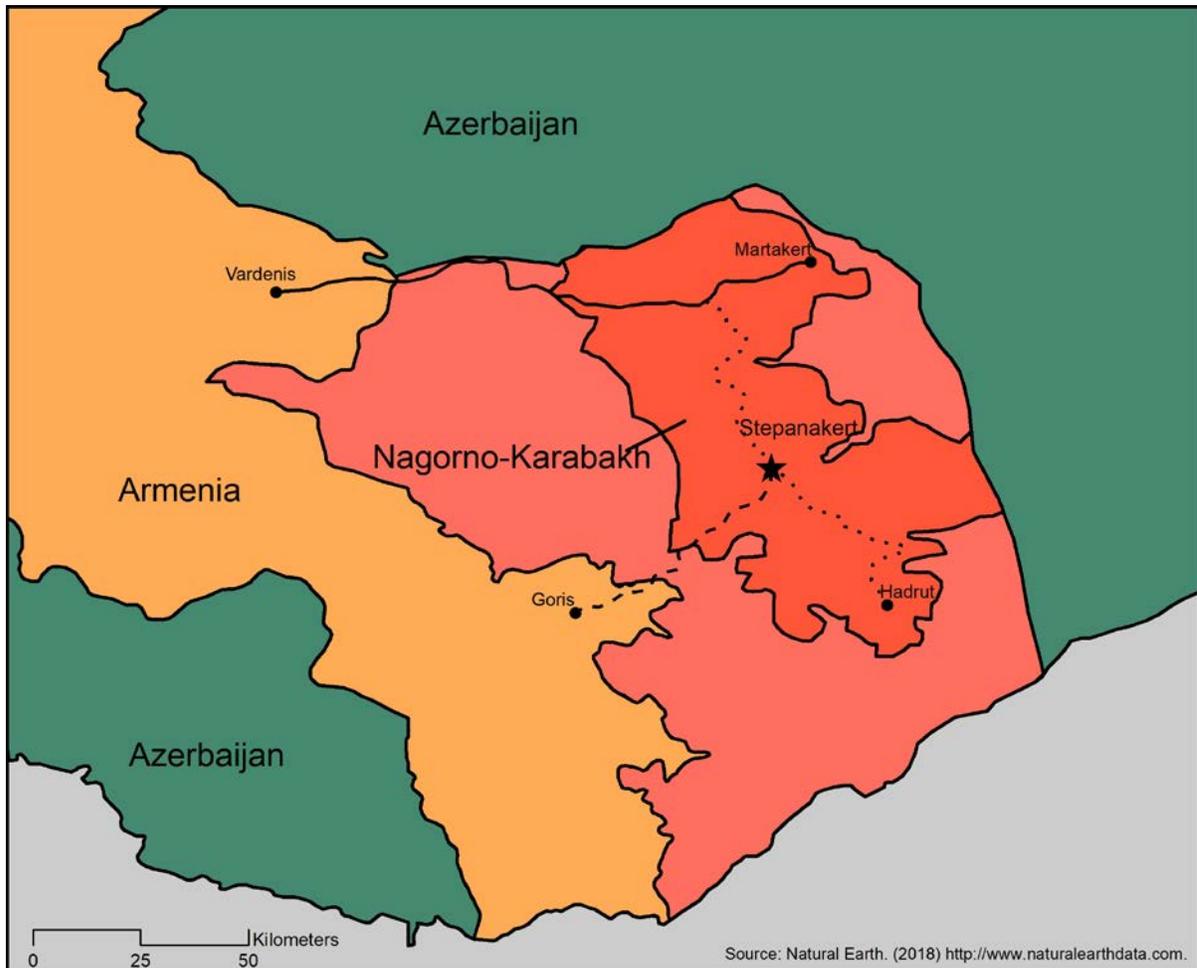
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Figures

Figure 1. Nagorno-Karabakh and the three diaspora funded highways.



Tables

Table 1.

Body Language	Economic	Ethnic identity	Geography	Humanitarian	Othering	Repopulating NK	Security
Artery	Economic	Armenian Genocide	Access	Human Rights	Hostilities	Moved back	Military
Backbone	Infrastructure	Ethnic identity	Geography	Humanitarian	Occupied	Resettled	Security
Lifeline	Transportation				Othering		Strategic
Motherland							

Vita

David Vines was born in Pasadena, California, but grew up in Boone, North Carolina, among the Appalachian Mountains. David's parents, Mike and Alice, raised him to pursue his intellectual curiosity and adventurous spirit wherever it may take him. After completing his B.A. in Anthropology from North Carolina State University (Raleigh), he followed his innate interest in geography to Appalachian State University where he completed a thesis on the Nagorno-Karabakh de facto state and an M.A. in Geography.