

Karabakh: First Independent Paper

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The first non-government publication in the Armenian-controlled province aims to cover themes which previously went unreported.

Setting up an independent newspaper for Nagorny Karabakh has long been a dream of Gegam Bagdasarian, head of the Stepanakert Press Club. Now it's happened, and Bagdasarian is editor-in-chief of a twice-monthly paper called Demo.

The idea behind it was to create a newspaper that is not beholden to the authorities or any opposition movement, but is a voice for the public at large - hence the title Demo, as in "democracy". The paper's 16 pages are in Armenian and Russian.

"Every citizen should have the chance to know what is actually happening in his motherland and not just from one source but from several," explained Bagdasarian. "We intend to become a really independent source."

Founding an independent newspaper is a very delicate project in a society which emerged from a devastating conflict ten years ago. Until now there has only been one main newspaper, the government publication Azat Artsakh.

Bagdasarian says he is well aware of the sensitivities. "We understand what a responsible mission we are undertaking, as there is virtually no precedent in the Armenian information space," he said. "Demo is trying to become a free publication in the classic sense, meaning it depends only on the reader. We are not forcing our views on anyone. When we have a free market, the reader himself can choose what reason and conscience dictate."

Karabakh president Arkady Gukasian, himself a former journalist, told IWPR last month that he welcomed the project. "A free press is a sign of the formation of civil society," Gukasian said. "We are now facing the biggest challenge - helping democracy to take root here."

But the new paper will undoubtedly create controversy. The first issue touched on sensitive issues such as the resignation of Karabakh deputy prime minister Yury Gazarian and a property dispute over a collective farm in the town of Stepanakert. A column by Boris Navadasardian expressed concern about Armenian reactions to the recent murder in Budapest of Gurchen Markarian, an Armenian army officer, by Azerbaijani officer Ramil Safarov.

Demo is supported by the British-based non-government organisation Conciliation Resources, as part of a wider consortium which is beginning a series of projects in both Armenia and Azerbaijan to engage with the Nagorny Karabakh dispute, with funding from the British government's Conflict Prevention Pool.

In this spirit, the paper has also set itself the goal of building bridges across the ceasefire line with Azerbaijan. It is covering events in the Caucasus as a whole, and is publishing a page of IWPR's Caucasus articles in each issue.

"We will be publishing articles about events in Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia, trying to fill the information gap that has formed," said Bagdasarian. "I hope this will help us find common points of agreement."

So far, readers have responded positively to Demo. "The articles published in the newspaper are not only interesting but relevant," said Armen Sarkisian, a civil servant. "The whole spectrum of socio-political life in Nagorny Karabakh is reflected there."

Albert Voskanian, a well-known local activist who heads Stepanakert's Centre for Civic Initiatives, said, "It is a lively newspaper which touches on and investigates topics which are not only interesting but also painful, and which worry people. I have no doubt it has a future."

Ashot Beglarian is a regular IWPR contributor from Nagorny Karabakh. Demo is online at <http://demo.ktsurf.net>

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