

## **Karabakh's Big Wedding Day**

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Hundreds of couples tie the knot in extraordinary spectacle aimed at reversing entity's demographic decline.

On October 16, there was only one colour for a young woman to wear in Nagorny Karabakh – white.

No fewer than 700 couples got married that day in a staged event designed to boost the small territory's birth rate.

With live television coverage and mass events throughout Karabakh, it was the biggest public event for years and had been meticulously planned in advance thanks to the sponsor of the idea, Levon Hairapetian, a well-known Karabakh-born businessman now living in Russia.

Hairapetian is from the village of Vank, next to Karabakh's most famous medieval church, Gandzasar, which has been restored thanks to his investments. He says that the idea of a mass wedding came to him after he visited his home village and overheard a father talking to his son who wanted to marry.

"The father said they should wait until their calf was big enough and then hold the wedding," said Hairapetian. "It was then that I began to think how I could help people, who had no money to get married."

He saw the project, with an initial plan to fund 300 weddings, as a way of boosting the demography of Armenians, which he describes as the nation's "weakest link". Officially, the current population of Nagorny Karabakh is 139,500.

"I want to see 300,000 people living in Karabakh in three or five years' time, instead of the current 150,000," he said.

The government warmly supported the project, which eventually attracted more than double the number of expected participants. Social Security Minister Narine Azatian told IWPR that since the beginning of 2008, the government had been giving every new married couple a grant of 300,000 drams (1,000 US dollars) – as a result of which the number of marriages has soared.

"If we saw an average of 800-900 marriages registered in previous year, this year the figure has already hit 3,000," she said.

Hairapetian enlisted around 15 sponsors, mainly based in Russia and America, to help both with the funding and serve as guardians for the young couples.

At the church ceremonies, each couple said their wedding vows with a crucifix held above their heads by a benefactor, who thereby committed himself to supporting the family throughout their lives.

Every couple who took part in the collective wedding was given a strong financial incentive to do so. On the wedding day, they were given a “gold card” worth two thousand dollars in credit as well as their 300,000 dram government grant. Every couple was also given 200 dollars to buy wedding rings and a cow, a symbol of prosperity in Karabakh villages.

In the future, the couples will be awarded one-off gifts of 2,000 dollars for the birth of a first child, 3,000 dollars for a second, 5,000 dollars for the third, 10,000 dollars for the fourth, 20,000 dollars for the fifth, 50,000 dollars for the sixth and 100,000 dollars for the seventh.

“Around 90 per cent of Karabakh is villages,” said Hairapetian. “Our villages should be in a good condition, so that young people don’t wish to leave them for the towns.” Four hundred of the couples who married at the mass wedding came from the countryside.

Nagorny Karabakh’s president Bako Sahakian’s gave a speech at the collective ceremony, saying, “By [holding] this great festival, we are demonstrate our support for universal values and principles and showing our respect to the role of family in our life.”

On the evening of October 16, Stepanakert was witness to a parade of brides and bridegrooms strolling through the streets and celebrating in cafes and bars. Seven hundred brides in white dresses thrilled a city which not so long ago experienced a full-blown war.

Preparation for the big day took months. A special commission was set up to plan all the details and the day itself was a public holiday.

The whole of Karabakh was geared up for the ceremony with hairdressers, owners of wedding salons, photographers and video-cameramen, cooks and waiters, as well as registry office employees all being kept frantically busy.

The couples were married in the churches of Gandzasar and Kazanchetsots in Shushi. They danced a waltz together on Revival Square before walking down the steps to the central stadium of Stepanakert, where they celebrated together at a mass wedding feast at long tables.

More than 20,000 people gathered near the churches to see the wedding, others watched a live television broadcast of the event.

“This is an unforgettable sight,” said one of the brides, Susanna Khachatrian. “Not just because it’s my wedding day, but because I can feel how many people are enjoying this holiday. I guess I will remember the day for as long as I live!”

As Hairapetian had hoped, the mass wedding had attracted couples who had no immediate marriage plans.

“We were going to get married next year, but when we heard that couples were being registered to take part in the collective wedding, we decided that we should take part too,” said Gayane Harutiunian. “At first my boyfriend did not want [to apply], but I talked him into doing it. Isn’t it interesting – a town full of brides? Besides, two thousand dollars isn’t a small amount. You can spend it on a honeymoon trip.”

But Artur and Lusine Khachatrian decided not to wait for the joint wedding day and got married on September 20.

“We didn’t like the idea of a collective wedding idea at all,” said Artur. “We didn’t want to become just one of 700 couples, as a wedding is a personal event with just one couple the centre of attention. But, of course, the idea had some good sides to it as well. For instance, our neighbour, a man named Tigran, at last married a girl he’d been dating for five years. He couldn’t get married up until now because of financial problems”

However, economist Samvel Avakian wondered if Nagorny Karabakh’s infrastructure would be able to cope with a baby boom about to start in nine months’ time. “How can they hold a ceremony like this before they have built new maternity hospitals?” he said.

Levon Hairepetian, who seemed to be everywhere on October 16 and was the sponsor of most of the 700 couples, now dreams of repeating his experiment elsewhere.

“I’d like this big mass wedding ceremony to become a tradition,” he said. “We will hold not just in Karabakh but in the provinces of Armenia. Money’s not a problem – we’ll find as much money as there are willing couples. The main thing is that children are born and live happily in their motherland and for the good of their native land.”

Karine Ohanian is a reporter with Demo newspaper in Nagorny Karabakh.

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