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A looming catastrophe in Nagorno-Karabakh

Azerbaijan has been blocking the vital Lachin Corridor, leaving the inhabitants of Karabakh's shelves empty, supplies cut and hospitals on standby

After the Second Karabakh War in 2020, the Armenians of Karabakh – 120,000 people – are now connected to the outer world only by a single narrow road – the Lachin Corridor. This vital lifeline has been blocked since 12 December 2022 by a group of Azerbaijanis who claim to be eco-activists and demand monitoring of the mining sights in Karabakh. For a month already, supplies are cut, shelves are empty, medicine is scarce and planned surgeries are postponed indefinitely as UNICEF warns about the humanitarian situation. The status of Karabakh has been a central matter of negotiation mediated by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-chairs of Russia, France and the US.

Freedom House ranks political rights in Azerbaijan at 2 out of 40 and freedom of assembly at 0 out of 4. In 2021 it was ranked 167/180 by a Reporters Without Borders index. Furthermore, since 2009, draconian laws and strict punishments made any free agency for civil society impossible. Any genuine protest of any scale or scope is pursued in Lukashenko-style.

Azerbaijani eco-activists and other imaginary creatures

So, what explains the 'renascence' of the Azerbaijani civil society on the Lachin corridor, especially keeping in mind that Azerbaijan punishes even its own citizens for visiting those areas without special permits? Investigative journalists have revealed that most of the participants of the blockade are indeed affiliated with or lead NGOs – all on Ilham Aliyev's government's payroll or his party members'. It has also been revealed that their transportation to the area and their stay at hotels are neatly organised by state authorities. Their presence there also paved the way for the Azerbaijani military and police to be stationed in the area of the

bottleneck lifeline road of local Armenians.

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The slogans of the 'activists' have now turned into warmongering chants. Actual eco-activists from Azerbaijan slam those who participate in the blockade as 'showmen by order' who had not spoken on pressing ecological issues before. As Azerbaijani eco-activist Cavid Qara writes 'we did not see these people when the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources put forests, national parks and nature reserves up for sale, when all the ministry's property was put up for sale, when bulldozers ran through the forests.' The fur coats and leather purses of the self-proclaimed eco-activists speak for themselves.

Other so-called 'protestors' are actual government employees – up to the ranks of a deputy minister – and people associated with the military. During their 'protests', the participants demonstrate the sign of the 'Grey wolves' – a radical far-right terrorist organisation, affiliated with Turkish nationalist parties and banned in European states.

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Why is Azerbaijan doing this?

If this is not a genuine reincarnation of activism in a dictatorial state, then what is it?

Azerbaijan has been creating propagandistic grounds for provocations to close the lifeline of Karabakh Armenians for months leading to the crisis. Through military attacks on the area in August and incursions into and occupation of Armenia's sovereign territory in September 2022, Azerbaijan intended to force Armenia to concede part of its Southern regions to Baku's exterritorial sovereignty – practically cutting Armenia in half. According to the trilateral ceasefire agreement Azerbaijan should guarantee the security of passage through the Lachin corridor which it has blocked for already a month.

Aliyev demonstrates to the indigenous Armenians that leaving Karabakh

As the September military aggression was met by (unexpected) international criticism and (also unexpected) Armenian military resistance, Azerbaijan has shifted its tactics from winning a corridor to 'civilized' ways which are acceptable

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to the West. By blackmailing a humanitarian catastrophe for the Armenians of Karabakh, Aliyev demonstrates what harm he is ready to cause to achieve this goal. Additionally, if not the long-term strategic intention of this operation, Aliyev demonstrates to the indigenous Armenians that leaving Karabakh voluntarily is their only safe option – ethnic cleansing in practice. The hope of that population is that the world sees it too.

What are the international actions beyond reactions?

Russia has been trying to keep a rather low profile about the crises, despite officially being in charge of Karabakh's and the corridor's security. A few statements did come out of Russia's ministries of foreign affairs and defence, calling for the restoration of traffic, while bargaining seems to have moved backstage. The relative silence, however, is exactly conditioned by the ambiguous role of Russia after the 2020 war, which has made the country lose its monopoly in the region to Turkey and Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan has been refusing to sign the mandate of the Russian peacekeepers. Hence, there is no clear guideline on what Russia should or could do in the current situation of the blocked corridor or in case of any other provocations from Azerbaijan. In the lack of such provisions, the matter passes into the realm of political choices – an impossible dilemma for Moscow, which is unwilling to compromise its abilities with its ambitions.

Taking a hard stance against Azerbaijan's imposed blockade would further jeopardise the presence of Russia's peacekeepers on the ground. But also, not intervening decisively would erode its already declining status in Armenia. This current deadlock will motivate Baku to further provocations of this nature, posing more complicated dilemmas to the Kremlin, which still believes that it could appease Baku. The blockade is accompanied by the mocking and humiliating provocations of the peacekeepers by state-funded journalists – a wild scene unimaginable in the Russian context. As one Russian expert put it 'we do tolerate, but we also keep it all in mind'.

The EU has called 'on the Azerbaijani authorities to ensure freedom and security of movement along the corridor, in line with the trilateral statement of 9 November 2020', raising its concerns over looming humanitarian issues. France, in line with the announcement from

Brussels, also refers to Baku's obligations in the framework of the 9 November announcement. The US has also called on Baku 'to restore free movement through the corridor', warning of the 'severe humanitarian implications' and criticising it for setting 'back the peace process', which Washington aspires to lead.

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Notably, during the UN Security Council discussion on the crisis, all parties called to respect the Russia-brokered ceasefire, which in times of countless disagreements shows that the unacceptability of the situation has even managed to find common ground between Russia and the West. However, even more notably, the Council failed to adopt a statement, and none of the members, nor any other international actor, has done more to prevent the humanitarian catastrophe of the Karabakh Armenians.

The reactions show that Baku failed to sell the staged sabotage as a grass roots movement. The West knows what genuine protest looks like under Aliyev's dictatorship. But 30 days into the siege, only naming the problem without actually doing anything to resolve it is grossly inadequate. The West has all the means to bring Aliyev to peace before he escalates into another attack. But what it is actually doing is empowering the petro-dictator by calling him a 'trustworthy partner' for delivering gas (which it now buys from Russia and re-exports to Europe), rewarding Aliyev with 2 bn Euros for diversifying Azerbaijan's oil-rich economy and calling his regime 'reliable' with no mention of its actions in Karabakh. Isn't this criminally compliant?

Before sanctions are introduced (or at least the rewards stop), the unilateral aggressions will not end. Facing no consequences, Azerbaijan has gotten used to the taste of generous rewards gained by the coercive diplomacy of attacking Armenia and Karabakh whenever it fails to achieve its maximalist demands. Meanwhile, the children's hospital in Stepanakert is running out of medicine.



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