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A new hope for peace

The Armenian Prime Minister's statements surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh could bring some movement into the conflict — and a potential peace agreement

On 22 May, the Prime Minister of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, made some unprecedented statements for an Armenian leader. Armenia is ready to recognise Azerbaijan's 86,600 km2 territorial integrity which includes Nagorno Karabakh. But the rights and security of the Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh must be discussed through the Baku-Stepanakert dialogue, Pashinyan added. Already in the Prague quadrilateral meeting and recently in the Armenian parliament. he addressed the issue of territorial integrity, even if not explicitly. Thus, according to Pashinyan, the signing of a peace treaty or an agreement on normalising the relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan is not far away. But this is not the first time for such hope. In 2022, there were similar statements stressing that the peace treaty could be achieved by the end of that year.

Because of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as well as Azerbaijani attacks against Armenia, there have been initiatives by the EU and the US to play a greater role in the region. Both Brussels and Washington have proposed an alternative platform for negotiations between Yerevan and Baku. And even though the EU has made it very clear that this is a facilitation platform which is not competing with Russia and that it has no problem if there are parallel negotiations with Moscow, there is still an assumption in Armenia that these are in fact competing platforms. Meanwhile, Nagorno Karabakh has called for an UN-mandated peacekeeping mission. This is the ultimate security goal now as the Russian peacekeeper mandate will end in two years and needs to be renewed, but it is very unlikely that Baku will agree to this.

The threat of more aggression

Until very recently, no details had been revealed by state officials concerning the proposed peace deals. During the last meeting in Brussels, however, the President of the European Council Charles Michel

announced that 'the leaders confirmed their unequivocal commitment to the 1991 Almaty Declaration and the respective territorial integrity of Armenia (29,800 km2) and Azerbaijan (86,600 km2)'. A four-day intensive negotiation between Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign affairs ministers in Washington preceded the meeting in Brussels. And the press conference of Pashinyan was an attempt to explain the overall logic of the negotiations.

Pashinyan explained the necessity of hard decisions on new concessions, not by an Armenian defeat under his leadership but by a lack of strength in Armenian's legal foundations in the negotiations on the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. This is a populist attempt to hinder even further the possible unity of the Armenian society. Throughout the history of the conflict, there were numerous plans offered by the OSCE Minsk group, as well as by the US and Russia separately. Though none of these plans ensured the independence of Nagorno Karabakh, none of them spoke about Baku's direct control of the territory either. But for the Armenian ruling party, it seems easier to refer to the previous administrations to excuse the current concessions. This tactic is fuelling internal confrontations and is pushing the political debate to focus not on the present and future of Armenia but on the conflict's past.

The key question, thus, is not ifthe transit route comes but under which conditions and with which legal wording.

These statements are being made in a situation where Armenia's main security issue is the possibility of yet another large-scale Azerbaijani aggression — enabling it to reach its strategic goal of opening a corridor in the South of Armenia. This threatening Azerbaijani rhetoric is being accompanied by statements on the so-called 'Zangezur corridor' which would go through Armenia and connect Azerbaijan with its exterritorial exclave Nakhichevan. Russia is also interested in the opening of this corridor as it would create better links for trade and allow the bypassing of sanctions through Turkey. Yet, the statement of 9 November does not mention a corridor of any kind, apart from the Lachin corridor. But they refer to the necessity of opening all regional communications and Armenia has offered three border points to Azerbaijan, which the latter has declined. For Armenia's officials, talks on an exterritorial corridor is a red line. Recent talks under the auspices of the Eurasian Economic Union also showed that there are different assumptions

concerning the word ‘corridor’.

The key question, thus, is not ifthe transit route comes but under which conditions and with which legal wording. Of course, there is a big Russian geopolitical interest to monitor the transit between Azerbaijan and Turkey and the 9 November statement refers to the FSB as the party responsible for the security of the transits. With Russia’s ongoing confrontation with the West, it will be an important transport route for the country to reach its strategic partner Turkey, bypassing Georgia and undermining its role as a transit country.

The splitting role of Russia’s peacekeeping mission

In parallel, Nagorno Karabakh has been under an Azerbaijani blockade for over four months, with Russian peacekeeping troops unable to ensure free movement via the Lachin corridor as was stated in the 9 November trilateral declaration, and with a newly established Azerbaijani checkpoint there.

Given the situation in Ukraine and the West’s priorities concerning the war against Russia, Armenian society fears that both the invasion of Armenia and possible ethnic cleansing in Nagorno Karabakh will remain unnoticed or would only trigger empty political statements. Even though both European and US officials state the importance of addressing the security issues of the people of Nagorno Karabakh, no international and trustworthy security mechanism has been discussed publicly so far. And given Azerbaijan’s record of systemic human rights violations, it’s hard to imagine any security guarantees without international involvement — especially since Aliyev openly speaks about his intentions of ethnic cleansing.

With the atmosphere of direct security threats, there is an extreme dynamic within Armenian society; one of pure ‘expectation management’ concerning the West on the one hand and, on the other hand also towards Russia, in Karabakh among the opposition parties and groups of Armenia. With the new window of hope brought by the deployment of an EU monitoring mission on the Armenian side of the border, there is an assumption among some political groups and the society overall that the recognition of each other’s territorial integrity under Western facilitations will at least ensure Armenia’s security.

There is an assumption that Armenia-Azerbaijan

Likewise, in opposition circles and also in Nagorno Karabakh, there still is an illusion that

negotiations on Western platforms would hinder Russia's possible steps in the region and could create alibies for Russia to not hold its obligations as a peacekeeping force.

Russia will help the unrecognised country to gain recognition or at least to postpone the issue of its status. With this illusion in mind, there is an assumption that Armenia-Azerbaijan negotiations on Western platforms would hinder Russia's possible steps in the region and could create alibies for Russia to not hold its obligations as a peacekeeping force. These extreme expectations could hinder the negotiation process, increasing the risk of military escalation.

But there is also an extreme assumption and misperception among experts in the West that – with the recognition of Nagorno Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan and with the withdrawal of the Russian peacekeeping mission – the conflict would be resolved, and Russia's role would decline in the region. But the lack of proper international insurance for the security of the people of Nagorno Karabakh would enable Azerbaijan to implement a policy of ethnic cleansing of the region. With this, the conflict will not end but simply change its geography. Possible bloody massacres or forced deportations would increase Russia's role in the region even more, both militarily and politically. Russia would remain the only power with 'boots on the ground' to engage in the new phase of the conflict and it would also damage the image of the West as it would be unable to protect the rights of Nagorno Karabakh's citizens

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