FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 21.09.2023 | Benyamin Poghosyan

Perpetuating the cycle of violence

After Azerbaijan's latest offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh, the South Caucasus will likely see further escalations and suffering for decades to come

On 19 September 2023, Azerbaijan launched a large-scale offensive along the line of contact with the self-declared Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. The military operation followed approximately nine months of blockade, which brought the population of Nagorno-Karabakh to the brink of mass starvation. After 24 hours of intensive hostilities, the Nagorno-Karabakh authorities accepted the demands of Azerbaijan, including the disarmament and dissolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh defence army and the start of discussions with Azerbaijan on an 'integration' within the framework of the Azerbaijani constitution.

The humanitarian implications of the latest military offensive are immense. Thousands of civilians are missing, many were probably killed, as villages are cut off from the outside world while surrounded by Azerbaijani troops. Up to 5,000 civilian Armenians found asylum at the headquarters of the Russian peacekeeping mission around the Stepanakert airport. There is a lack of internet and mobile connection in the area, as Azerbaijani troops destroyed mobile towers and other telecommunication equipment during the first hours of the operation.

The future of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh is unclear. The absolute majority would like to leave the region, as there are no guarantees for the protection of their fundamental rights under Azerbaijani rule. But even the evacuation of Armenians from their homeland, which equals ethnic cleansing, is not guaranteed, as thousands of Armenian men are under investigation in Azerbaijan and can be arrested while passing through the Lachin checkpoint. The representatives of the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians met with the Azerbaijani side in the Azerbaijani town of Yevlakh on the morning of 21 September. However, while the meeting was still underway, Azerbaijan resumed the shelling of Stepanakert (the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh), and Azerbaijani troops entered the city, putting the 60,000 residents in direct danger.

Further implications of Azerbaijan's offensive

Besides the tragic humanitarian implications, Azerbaijan's renewed attack against Nagorno-Karabakh will have significant consequences for regional security, appearing like a signal to all regional actors that hard power is the only currency worth anything.

Just five days before this new offensive, Acting Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs Yuri Kim stated during the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee hearing that the United States would not countenance any action or effort – short- or long-term – to ethnically cleanse or commit other atrocities against the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh. And the EU leadership, including President of the European Council Charles Michel, made several calls to end the Lachin corridor blockade and emphasised the necessity to ensure the rights of Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians. Azerbaijan's apparent contempt towards these calls and demonstrative use of force makes it clear that the West has no real leverage to influence the developments in the region. Meanwhile, the Azerbaijani offensive also humiliated Russia, whose peacekeepers were deployed in Nagorno-Karabakh after the 2020 war to protect the civilian Armenian population.

If Azerbaijan can violate previous agreements and defy both the US and Russia, what are the guarantees that any new agreement will not be thrown into the dustbin of history within a few weeks or months?

In recent weeks, the Armenian leadership itself took several steps to irritate Russia and send messages to the West – such as the visit of the first lady to Kyiv, the decision to ratify the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court – probably hoping that the US and the EU would stop the upcoming Azerbaijani offensive. Reality proved them otherwise.

The Azerbaijani offensive and its dissolution of Nagorno-Karabakh both revoke the statement of 10 November 2020, including the agreement to restore communications and establish a connection between Azerbaijan and its exclave Nakhijevan via Armenia. Azerbaijan's actions will make it extremely difficult to successfully finish the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace negotiations. If Azerbaijan can violate previous agreements and defy both the US and Russia, what are the guarantees that any new agreement will not be thrown into the dustbin of history within a few weeks or months?

The upcoming years, if not

The second humiliation of Armenia in three

decades, in the South Caucasus will be marked by additional escalations, wars and human suffering.

years will also destabilise the Armenian domestic political situation. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has already lost a significant part of his support. In the 17 September Yerevan municipal elections (Yerevan is the capital of Armenia, with some 40-45 per cent of the entire population living there), Pashinyan's party received 33 per cent of the votes — in September 2018, it still got around 80 per cent. The voter turnout was extremely low at less than 30 per cent. The *de facto* dissolution of Nagorno-Karabakh, huge losses among the civilian population and the potential influx of some 70-80,000 refugees to Armenia will further weaken Pashinyan's position. The opposition, on the other hand, had already formed a committee to achieve his resignation, and clashes took place between protestors and police in downtown Yerevan during the rallies on 19 and 20 September.

In the long term, Azerbaijan's decision to 'end' the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with brutal force will perpetuate the cycle of violence between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Many people in Armenia and the diaspora will focus on strengthening Armenia and on taking revenge. Given Azerbaijan's actions to cultivate the concept of 'Western Azerbaijan', which declares most of Armenia as Azerbaijani historic lands, and Azerbaijani and Turkish demands to open the so-called 'Zangezur corridor' to connect Azerbaijan with Nakhijevan and Turkey, the upcoming years, if not decades, in the South Caucasus will be marked by additional escalations, wars and human suffering.



Benyamin Poghosyan

Dr Benyamin Poghosyan is Senior Fellow on Foreign Policy at APRI Armenia, as well as Chairman at the Center for Political and Economic

Strategic Studies.