FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 19.08.2022 | Eldar Mamedov

Why Nagorno-Karabakh shouldn't be forgotten

With Russia's war on Ukraine keeping the West's attention, willingness, and resources, a fragile peace in Nagorno-Karabakh is at stake

The ripple effects of the Russia's war on Ukraine continue reverberating in other conflict areas. After a brief interlude when the EU-facilitated diplomacy, if ever so hesitatingly, seemed to be gaining some traction, tensions between the old foes, Armenia and Azerbaijan, are again on the rise. The realities on the ground, however, particularly the power disparity between the two main antagonists and limited leverage international players have in the region, leave ample space for more escalations in the coming period.

The 44-day war in 2020 saw Azerbaijan recover the territories around Nagorno-Karabakh previously held by the Armenian forces and chunks of Nagorno-Karabakh itself. The 'Nagorno-Karabakh Republic' administered by local de-facto Armenian authorities fell under the protection of Russian peacekeepers which were deployed in the area in compliance with the Russian-brokered trilateral ceasefire deal.

In early August 2022, new deadly clashes erupted in the area of responsibility of the Russian peacekeepers around the Lachin corridor connecting Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia. Russia blamed Azerbaijan for the breach of the ceasefire agreement, and so did the European Parliament's delegation for relations with the South Caucasus – noteworthy given that Moscow and Brussels don't agree on much these days.

The unmovable Azerbaijan

Out of the two sides, Azerbaijan has both the incentives and the power to challenge the post-war status-quo. Although the war ended in Azerbaijan's favour, Baku did not manage to assert its control over the entirety of Nagorno-Karabakh. The Russian peacekeepers and the de-facto Armenian authorities of the NKR, however diminished, stand in

Baku's way.

The ceasefire deal did not touch upon the status of Nagorno-Karabakh – the core issue that triggered the conflict three decades ago in the first place. The Armenian side, much weakened after the war, hinted that it might 'lower the bar' on its demands, implying that the status question won't stand in the way of peace negotiations with Azerbaijan. Yerevan rather insists only on the general principle that the security and rights of the Karabakh Armenians should be safeguarded – a major political concession.

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Baku doesn't seem to be interested in reciprocating this gesture. In a recent interview to Azerbaijani TV , President Ilham Aliyev once again completely ruled out a possibility of any special status for the region, or its Armenian inhabitants. He claimed instead that the Karabakh Armenians will enjoy equal rights as Azerbaijani citizens. Some Azerbaijanis noted sarcastically that such promises only meant that Armenians would be as deprived of their political and civil rights as Azerbaijanis already are under Aliyev's rule.

Authoritarianism aside, hostile policies targeting specifically Armenians may be an even bigger problem. Following the 2020 war, bodies like the European Parliament condemned Baku's policies of systematically erasing Armenian cultural heritage on the territories under its control. In March 2022, an Azerbaijan-operated gas pipeline supplying Nagorno-Karabakh was damaged and remained broken for a week, condemning the local inhabitants to suffer freezing temperatures. Meanwhile, in an apparent attempt to apply psychological pressure, Azerbaijani army's loudspeakers were calling on them to leave the area. And Aliyev's constant talk of capitulation and territorial claims against Armenia proper do not suggest a willingness to build a common future of peace and reconciliation.

It is in this context that the breaches of the ceasefire need to be evaluated. Azerbaijan fears that any significant Armenian presence within its borders would engender a rebirth of Armenian separatism down the road, if and when the geopolitical winds will shift again. Thus, Aliyev appears to be willing to maximize Azerbaijan's current advantage in power to get as many Armenians as possible – including civilians – to withdraw from Karabakh.

A limited Russian involvement

Russian peacekeepers remain a hurdle on his path. However, Baku has mastered pressure tactics that allows it to progressively slice away the territory theoretically under their responsibility in its favour. The recent clashes around Lachin corridor have led to a deal between Baku and Moscow (from which Yerevan was pointedly excluded) that will see the area handed back to Azerbaijan as soon as 25 August. Although it is part of Azerbaijan's internationally-recognised territory, the absence of security guarantees for local Armenians left the de-facto NKR authorities with no other choice than to instruct them to evacuate the area, thus contributing to fulfilling Baku's objectives.

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At the same time, Baku appeals to the provision of the trilateral ceasefire statement that obliges Armenian forces to withdraw from Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia, as a guarantor of the deal, prevents any Armenian reinforcements to be deployed to protect the local Armenians. But its own peacekeeping force has neither a clear mandate nor rules of engagement, which mostly reduces it to registering the ceasefire violations without any real power to prevent them or reverse the facts on the ground that those violations create.

Moreover, Russia's invasion of Ukraine created a massive distraction for Moscow that Baku is keen to exploit to advance its agenda. It's not only about stretching Russia's armed forces, but also its new dependence on Turkey, Azerbaijan's main ally, to break its diplomatic and economic isolation from the West. As Turkey aggressively seeks its own power projection in the Caucasus, via Azerbaijan, Russia could easily trade away few remaining Armenian outposts in Karabakh as bargaining chips in exchange for what it sees much bigger gains in its bilateral relationship with Turkey. It is, thus, no surprise that the Putin-Erdogan meeting in Sochi failed to make any reference to the need to stabilise the situation in the Caucasus.

Limiting security realities

The West, meanwhile, is consumed with the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine. One of its consequences is the need to secure alternative energy supplies to replace the Russian gas. This has led the European Commission's president Ursula von der Leyen to sign a 'memorandum of understanding' on increasing Azerbaijani supplies. Although the signed

document doesn't commit Azerbaijan to deliver even the small amount of gas it could offer, it was a diplomatic gain for Aliyev as the EU elevated him to the position of a key partner in the emerging energy geopolitics, with no strings attached on human rights or Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Other than that, the EU is mostly reduced to issuing periodic exhortations on 'both sides' to show restraint. Some member states, like France, would like to play a more prominent role in the Caucasus, but without a hard power presence on the ground it is exceedingly difficult. A possible way forward could be an OSCE-mandated force in Karabakh, but that would require the Western states and Russia to cooperate, and Europeans to be willing to send their peacekeepers to the region – currently there is no evidence whatsoever that any of these could be on the cards.

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That leaves reducing the power disparity between Armenia and Azerbaijan as the only realistic way to achieving sustainable peace. For that, Armenia would need to dramatically upgrade its deterrence capabilities – a prospect that needs time and investment, as well as a less fractious polity united around the national purpose.

It will also take a compromising attitude from Azerbaijan. There are signs of emerging war fatigue within the society, with the euphoria from the 2020 victory subsiding and giving way to prevalence of socio-economic concerns. A spate of suicides among the war veterans punctures the official Baku's triumphalist narratives. In the short term, however, the prospects for peace are bleak as Aliyev, with geopolitical winds in his sails, will continue leveraging his power at the expense of any real diplomacy.

This article reflects the personal views of the author and not necessarily the opinions of the S&D Group or the European Parliament.



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