



NURLAN ALIYEV

University of Economics and Human Sciences in Warsaw

ORCID: 0000-0002-0522-4658

aliyevnurlan13@gmail.com

Russia's approaches towards Armenia and Azerbaijan: evolution of the policy or interests come first?

Postawa Rosji wobec Armenii i Azerbejdżanu: ewolucja polityki czy przede wszystkim interesy?

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Russia's approaches towards Armenia and Azerbaijan: evolution of the policy or interests come first?

This paper aims to analyse Russia's policy towards the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan during the second Karabakh war and its aftermath. The aim is to explain Russia's behaviour's maxims during and after the second Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Analysing reasons and causes of Moscow's approaches in relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan, this paper argues that developments in the Russian policy could be mainly explained by Russia's current and prospective economic and strategic interests in the region and, they are based on Russia's slowly departs from the legacies and responsibilities are most important thinking towards purely pragmatic and highly manoeuvrable approaches.

Postawa Moskwy w stosunku do Armenii i Azerbejdżanu: ewolucja polityki czy interesy?

Celem artykułu jest analiza polityki Rosji wobec konfliktu Armenii z Azerbejdżanem podczas II wojny o Górski Karabach i jej następstw. Autor podejmuje próbę wyjaśnienia zasad zachowania Rosji podczas wojny i po jej zakończeniu. Analizując przyczyny postawy Moskwy w stosunkach z Armenią i Azerbejdżanem, w artykule stwierdza się, że ewolucję polityki rosyjskiej można tłumaczyć przede wszystkim aktualnymi i perspektywicznymi interesami gospodarczymi i strategicznymi Rosji w regionie. Nastąpiły zmiany w sposobie myślenia polegające na stopniowym odchodzeniu od traktowania umów i zobowiązań jako najważniejszych w kierunku czysto pragmatycznych i wysoce elastycznych podejść.

Introduction

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the region, which escalated into the second war among parties in September 2020 is one of the complicated ethno-territorial conflict in the post-Soviet space. The negotiations that began in 1992 under the auspices of the Minsk Group, the OSCE's mediating body, has not reached the main result, a final peace agreement among sides up today. However, in 1994 sides achieved the truce with the mediation of Russia but it was broken several times with small and relatively large clashes until September 2020. It should be noted that since the beginning of the conflict Russia has been a main outside actor in the developments¹.

During and after the 44 days of war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Russia's relatively cold-blooded behaviour raised questions, suspicions and in some cases even such thoughts that Russia decided to give up South Caucasus, Russia is leaving the region, or Turkey so strong that Moscow did not want to face with such an adversary. But a question is how such thoughts can reflect reality. *In this respect, this paper aims to respond to this question: what are behind Russia's contemporary approaches towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan?*

Russia has entertained close political, economic and cultural relations with both republics, Armenia and Azerbaijan, since their independence and has played an influential role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan were parts of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Russia was one of the mediators in the peace negotiations; it is a security guarantor of Armenia and has a strategic partnership with Azerbaijan. Russia has military bases in Armenia and since November 2020 in the Nagorno-Karabakh, internationally recognized Azerbaijan's territory. Russia was also the main arms exporter to both countries till recently. Between 2013 and 2016, its share was 65 per cent of Azerbaijan's total foreign weapons imports². In 2016–20 a total of 94 per cent of Armenian arms

- 1 Th. De Waal : *Black Garden-Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War*, New York University Press, New York 2013.
- 2 P. D. Wezeman, A. Fleurant, *Trends in international arms transfers*, SIPRI 2017, (Fact Sheets, March, 2018): <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-03/fssi-pri_at2017_0.pdf> [accessed: 15 V 2021].

imports came from Russia. Israel accounted for 69 per cent and Russia for 17 per cent of Azerbaijan's arms imports in the same period, according to the SIRPI report³.

In 2016, Armenia obtained Russian Iskander (SS-26 Stone) short-range, mobile ballistic missile systems, which increased Azerbaijani society and its political establishments' dissatisfactions with Moscow⁴. Moreover, according to Azerbaijani officials, Iskander M missiles were used during the recent war and Baku raised questions on this issue⁵.

Russia sells arms to Azerbaijan, but it also supplies weaponry to Armenia on long-term credit. By selling weapons to Azerbaijan while simultaneously providing defence guarantees to Armenia, the Kremlin retained the ability to influence the continued escalation/de-escalation cycles in the conflict. However, this is questioned Russia's reliability by Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Analysing developments in Russia's policy towards the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan during the second Karabakh war and developments after that, *this paper aims to explain Moscow's assumptions. The paper aims to examine this hypothesis: Moscow's approaches during the second Karabakh war signified the start of Russia's departure from the South Caucasus.*

In methodical terms, the paper employs qualitative methods. The research uses content analysis regarding official documents, political and military elite speeches and interviews to explain Russia's official position and foreign and security policy on the developments between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Relations between two republics and Russia are comparatively analysed.

Primary and secondary sources are used for analysing developments during and after the second Karabakh war. When describing developments

3 P. D. Wezeman, A. Kuimova, S. T. Wezeman, *Trends in international arms transfers*, SIRPI 2020, (Fact Sheets, March, 2021): <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/fs_2103_at_2020_v2.pdf> [accessed: 15 V 2021].

4 N. Aliyev, *Russia's Arms sales: A foreign policy tool in relations with Azerbaijan and Armenia*, "Eurasia Daily Monitor", vol. 15, issue 47, 28 III 2018 [accessed: 15 V 2021]: <<https://jamestown.org/program/russias-arms-sales-foreign-policy-tool-relations-azerbaijan-armenia/>>.

5 *Baku podtverzhdayet: Po Shushe strelyali raketoy «Iskander M»*, "Turan" Information Agency [online], 2 IV 2021 [accessed: 15 V 2021]: <https://www.turan.az/ext/news/2021/4/free/politics_news/ru/2731.htm>.

during the war and aftermath, interviews and reports on Russian, Armenian, Azerbaijani, Turkish and Western media are used.

In previous years, *significant works* have emphasized the Nagorno-Karabakh problem, its security and social aspects⁶, including Russia's policy regarding the region⁷. Although there are no published academic works on the developments during the Second Karabakh War and its aftermath yet, several analyses and reports are available⁸.

Russia and the military conflict

During military clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan in recent years, the sides have agreed to ceasefires after Moscow's involvement, usually within several days. It was the case in 2016, and in 2020 during the July clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan⁹. In July 2020, Russian President Putin termed the situation very sensitive for Russia and also discussed

- 6 For instance, works of Thomas De Waal : *Black Garden-Armenia and Azerbaijan through peace and war*, New York University Press, New York 2013; *A broken region: The persistent failure of integration projects in the South Caucasus*, "Europe-Asia Studies" 2012, vol. 64, no. 9, pp. 1709-1723; an article of Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud, *De facto states and democracy: The case of Nagorno-Karabakh*, "Communist and Post-Communist Studies" 2012, vol. 45, no.1-2, pp. 141-151; works of Laurence Broers, *Recognising politics in unrecognised states: 20 years of enquiry into the defacto states of the South Caucasus*, "Caucasus Survey" 2013, vol. 1, no.1, pp. 59-74; *Armenia and Azerbaijan: Anatomy of a rivalry*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2019; Tracey German, *The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia: Security issues in the Caucasus*, "Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs" 2012, vol. 32, issue 2, pp. 216-229.
- 7 For instance, a research of Andrey Sushentsov and Nikita Neklyudov, *The Caucasus in Russian foreign policy strategy*, "Caucasus Survey" 2020, vol. 8, issue 2, pp. 127-141; an article of Kavus Abushov *Russian foreign policy towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: prudent geopolitics, incapacity or identity?*, "East European Politics" 2012, vol. 35, issue 1, pp.72-92. S. Markedonov, *Rossiya v protsesse nagorno-karabakhskogo uregulirovaniya*, MGIMO, 2019: <<https://mgimo.ru/upload/iblock/ebb/rossiya-v-processe-nagorno-karabahskogo-uregulirovaniya.pdf>> [accessed: 15 X 2021].
- 8 For instance, a collective work, *Burya na Kavkaze*, ed. R. Pukhov, CAST, Moscow 2021; T. Bordachov, *Rossiya pobedila v Karabakhe siloy i empatiye*, "Vzglyad" [online], 27 IX 2021 [accessed: 17 X 2021]: <<https://vz.ru/opinions/2021/9/27/1121127.html>>.
- 9 *Russian, Azerbaijani defense ministers discuss situation in South Caucasus*, TASS [online], 18 VII 2020 [accessed: 31 III 2021]: <<https://tass.com/world/1180045>>.

the developments with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, stressing the importance of a peaceful resolution¹⁰.

In the second Karabakh war, Moscow was unable to achieve a ceasefire until November 9. Moscow simultaneously wanted to avoid direct involvement, particularly in the form of military deployments on the ground. Russia's previous attempts to achieve a ceasefire through negotiations between the sides in Moscow were unsuccessful, and the Kremlin seemed reluctant to apply overt pressure on the parties in the form of direct military involvement¹¹.

The second war and Russia's balanced position

During the first days of the second Karabakh war, it was obvious to Moscow that the situation had changed. As Andrey Kortunov put it, the only way to stop the war was by giving Azerbaijan convincing guarantees that the problem of resolution will not be postponed for another thirty years¹².

Alexandr Baumov notes that while Russia may have reasons to help Armenia, it has no reason to punish Azerbaijan¹³.

In this regard, not only Russian experts have known as liberals but some prominence statisticians urged not Russia's direct intervention in the military operations in Azerbaijani internationally recognized territories. Sergey Karaganov strongly opposed sending Russian peacekeepers to Azerbaijani territory but that Russia should intervene if the territorial integrity of its CSTO ally comes under threat¹⁴.

- 10 *Putin nazval ochen' chuvstvitel'noy dlya Rossii situatsiyu na granitse Armenii i Azerbaydzhana*, TASS [online], 24 VII 2020 [accessed: 31 III 2021]: <<https://tass.ru/politika/9047997>>; *Putin obsudil s Erdoganom armyano-azerbaydzhanskiy konflikt*, "Kommersant" [online], 27 VII 2020 [accessed: 31 III 2021]: <<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4433504>>.
- 11 *Zayavleniye MID Rossii otnositel'no obostreniya situatsii v zone nagorno-karabakhskogo konflikta*, Mid.ru , 27 IX 2020 [accessed: 31 III 2021]: <https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4350914>.
- 12 A. Kortunov, *Shest' urokov konflikta v Karabakhe*, "Global Brief" [online], 4 X 2020 [accessed: 15 V 2021]: <<https://globalbrief.ca//2020/10/шесть-уроков-конфликта-в-карабахе/>>.
- 13 A. Baumov, *Why Russia Is Biding Its Time on Nagorno-Karabakh*, the Carnegie Moscow Center, 9 X 2020 [accessed: 31 V 2021]: <<https://carnegie.ru/commentary/82933>>.
- 14 S. Karaganov, *Mirovoy shtorm i russkiy kurazh*, "Rossiya v Globalnoi Politike" [online], 28 X 2020 [accessed: 15 V 2021]: <<https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/mirovoj-shtorm-i-russkiy-kurazh/>>.

Although Moscow had continually provided Armenia with arms, Moscow rejected several appeals from Yerevan to send Russian troops. However, Russia set up a small military outpost on Armenia's border¹⁵. This deployment was the strategic communication initiative aimed at deterring Azerbaijan from further military activities.

In the end of October Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan appealed for immediate consultations with Putin in order to determine the type and amount of assistance that Russia can provide to Armenia to ensure its security¹⁶. Russia's Foreign Ministry in response to Pashinyan's letter, not Putin himself, stated that in accordance with its obligations as an ally, Russia will provide Armenia with all necessary assistance if the clashes are transferred directly to Armenia's territory¹⁷. Armenia's former President Levon Ter-Petrosyan commented Pashinyan's appeal letter and the Russian Foreign Ministry's response saying that Putin, just said that he is obligated and ready to ensure the security of Armenia, but he cannot solve the Karabakh issue for Armenia¹⁸. Jirair Libaridian, Ter-Petrosyan's former adviser, stressed that one important reason for the current situation is that Armenia has ignored what the international community, including the Minsk Group Co-Chairs¹⁹ "especially Russia have been telling us clearly and for so long regarding what they think the solution to the problem should be and we should be doing"²⁰: "We acted that they

15 A. Mejlumyan, *Small outpost is Russia's first visible aid to Armenia*, Eurasianet, 28 X 2020 [accessed: 15 V 2021]: <<https://eurasianet.org/small-outpost-is-russias-first-visible-aid-to-armenia>>.

16 The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, *Prem'yer-ministr RA Nikol Pashinyan napravil pis'mo prezidentu RF Vladimiru Putinu*, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, 31 X 2020 [accessed: 25 V 2021]: <<https://www.mfa.am/ru/press-releases/2020/10/31/let/10617>>.

17 *Zayavleniye MID Rossii v svyazi s obrashcheniyem Prem'yer-ministra Respubliki Armeniya N. V. Pashinyana k Prezidentu Rossiyskoy Federatsii V. V. Putinu*, Mid.ru, 31 X 2020 [accessed: 25 V 2021]: <https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJEO2Bw/content/id/4411939?fbclid=IwAR17iwOEOQ8rIt51BOXfo30a7rZNY_s4hGJgtojEcfEcsQH5C1598vx0>.

18 *Levon Ter-Petrosyan prokomentiroval otvet MID RF na pis'mo Pashinyana Putinu*, Radio Azatutyun [online], 31 X 2020 [accessed: 25 V 2021]: <<https://rus.azatutyun.am/a/30922898.html>>.

19 France, the Russian Federation and the United States.

20 J. Libaridian, *Why negotiations failed*, "The Armenian Mirror-Spectator" [online], 2 XI 2020 [accessed: 25 V 2021]: <<https://mirrorspectator.com/2020/11/02/why->

do not matter. And yet now we are appealing to them to save us, and to so on our own term”²¹.

Russia's such a balanced position might also be a part of the process of optimizing ambitions in the post-Soviet space and taking stock of real needs. In this respect, Moscow reflects on what Russia needs²². According to Vladimir Frolov, the cost of Russia's dominance in the post-Soviet space is too high and can only be realized in the most desperate scenarios when the existential interests of the state are affected²³. In most cases, especially where there is no common border with Russia, post-Soviet domination is a luxury, not a “vehicle” to national development goals²⁴.

Explanations by the Kremlin

According to President Putin, the question of returning five and then two regions that were under Armenia's control to Azerbaijan had been raised for a long time:

“In 2013, within the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group, Russia formulated conditions that, in our opinion, could initiate the peace process. And with this, by the way, all the participants in this Minsk process, the OSCE Minsk Group, including the co-chairs and this, let me remind you, Russia, France and the United States of America, all agreed and supported this”²⁵.

Statements of Russian officials emphasized that military operations are conducted within Azerbaijan's borders and hinted that Russia does not want to become directly involved in the conflict on Armenia's

negotiations-failed/?fbclid=IwAR00Zi2OKW3GJkvRWh3kkrhxesJqBLLCJcP4haYBQJNdKuwcsQW84tjuG4>.

21 Ibid.

22 F. Lukyanov, *Pochemu vokrug granits Rossii vznikla duga besporjadka*, “Rossiya v Globalnoi Politike” [online], 23 X 2020 [accessed: 15 V 2021]: <<https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/vokrug-granicz-rossii/>>.

23 V. Frolov, *Pust' polykhayet. Kak izmenilas' politika Rossii na postsovetском prostranstve*, “Republic” [online], 29 X 2020 [accessed: 15 V 2021]: <<https://republic.ru/posts/98310>>.

24 Ibid.

25 *Otveti na voprosy SMI po situatsii v Nagornom Karabakhe*, Kremlin, 17 X 2020 [accessed: 15 V 2021]: <<http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64431>>.

side²⁶. The Russian officials called for an immediate ceasefire and a start of negotiations²⁷.

Interestingly, both sides critically perceived Russia's position. While Azerbaijan mainly criticizes Moscow for supplying Armenia with arms, Armenia's main reason for disappointment is Russia's reluctance to become directly involved in military operations in Nagorno-Karabakh.²⁸ However, later President Putin said that Russia, within the framework of multilateral and bilateral agreements in military-technical cooperation, fully fulfilled all its obligations and Armenia did not feel abandoned, :“But this is how the situation developed on the battlefield, exactly the way it developed”²⁹.

Turkey as a complicated partner

Another issue is Turkey's involvement in the South Caucasus. Although Moscow seeks to maintain a dominant position in the region, Russia may manage to coexist with Turkey there, similarly to its relations with China in Central Asia. Dmitry Trenin suggested that the Astana format ³⁰ can

26 *Putin ukazal na osobyye svyazi Rossii s Armeniyey i Azerbaydzhanom*, RIA Novosti [online], 22 X 2020 [accessed: 25 V 2021]: <<https://ria.ru/20201022/karabakh-1581069489.html>>.

27 *Putin nazval usloviye uregulirovaniya situatsii v Karabakhe*, RIA Novosti [online], 29 X 2020 [accessed: 25 V 2021]: <<https://ria.ru/20201029/karabakh-158213199.html>>.

28 N. Aliyev, *War in Nagorno-Karabakh requires a Russian Balancing Act*, The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, 10 X 2020 [accessed: 25 V 2021]: <<http://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13646-war-in-nagorno-karabakh-requires-a-russian-balancing-act.html>>.

29 *Otvety na voprosy SMI po situatsii v Nagornom Karabakhe...*

30 Led by Russia, Turkey and Iran, the Astana format serves as a forum for negotiation among opposing factions involved in Syria's civil war. Though originally established as a complementary track to UN-backed peace building efforts, the Astana talks currently function as an alternative to UN discussions. For more information see also: M. Franklin, *Astana format meets to discuss Syrian peace process*, “Foreign Brief” [online], 16 II 2021 [accessed: 14 XI 2021]: <<https://www.foreignbrief.com/daily-news/astana-format-meets-amid-slim-chance-of-reconciliation/>>; K.Truevsev, *Astana format. What has been done and what needs to be done*, Valdai Discussion Club, 11 VII 2019 [accessed: 14 XI 2021]: <<https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/astana-format-what-has-been-done-and-what-needs-to/>>.

become a platform for coordinating interests in a fairly wide geopolitical space³¹. Moreover, during the war President Putin did not rule out a change in the format of the OSCE Minsk Group on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict³². Despite their complicated relations in Syria and Libya and Moscow's grievances on Turkey's active involvement in the South Caucasus, Central Asia and relations with Ukraine, Russia considers Turkey as one of the key actors in the Middle East. And problems between Turkey and the West also add to Moscow's intentions to cooperate with Turkey as much as possible but at the same time, not let it strengthen, especially in the former Soviet republics. Moreover, given the limited attention paid to the region by the U.S. and the EU, Russia deals more with the regional powers Turkey and Iran. In recent years, Russia's preferences for regionalization of some regional conflicts, especially close to its borders, are obvious. In this regard, the main issue for Russia in the South Caucasus is to challenge, if not block, the West involvement.

The trilateral ceasefire declaration

In early November 2020 President Putin conducted telephone conversations with the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan and thoroughly discussed the settlement of the conflict³³. Later Putin stated that he had a series of telephone conversations with President Aliyev and Prime Minister Pashinyan on October 19–20³⁴.

Finally, on November 9 Azerbaijan and Armenia reached a Russian-brokered ceasefire. They have signed a joint statement on the ending war³⁵.

31 D. Trenin, *Tri krizisa na granitse Rossii. Chto oni oznachayut dlya otnosheniy Moskvy s soyuznikami*, Moscow Carnegie Center, 28 X 2020 [accessed: 31 V 2021]: <<https://carnegie.ru/commentary/83061>>.

32 Y. Bratskiy, *Putin dopustil izmeneniye formata Minskoy gruppy OBSE po Karabakhu*, *Tv Zvezda* [online], 22 X 2020 [accessed: 31 V 2021]: <<https://tvzvezda.ru/news/202010221948-qgCHn.html>>.

33 *Telefonnyye razgovory s Nikolom Pashinyanom i Il'khamom Aliyevym*, Kremlin, 2 XI 2020 [accessed: 15 V 2021]: <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64315>>.

34 *Otvety na voprosy SMI po situatsii v Nagornom Karabakhe...*

35 *Zayavleniye Prezidenta Azerbaydzhanskoj Respubliki, Prem'yer-ministra Respubliki Armeniya i Prezidenta Rossijskoj Federatsii*, Kremlin, 10 XI 2020 [accessed: 15 V 2021]: <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64384>>.

According to the document, Armenian military had to left Azerbaijani borders and Azerbaijan stooped military operations, and Russia's about 2000 peacekeepers were deployed to the region³⁶.

The peacekeeping contingent of the Russian Federation was deployed. The duration of the stay of the peacekeepers is five years, with automatic extension for the next 5-year periods, if none of the parties declares six months before the expiration of the period of intention to terminate the application of this provision, said the statement. However, the Russian peacekeeping troops in Nagorno-Karabakh has not international mandate until now.

Later Turkey agreed with Russia to take part in monitoring the observance of the ceasefire, and a joint centre that would use unmanned aerial vehicles to monitor the situation along the contact line was established³⁷.

According to the declaration, all economic and transport routes in the region are unblocked. Yerevan guarantees the safety of transport communication between the western regions of Azerbaijan and the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic, Baku does same regarding transport connections between Armenia and Russia³⁸. Transport communication would be controlled by the Border Service of the FSB of Russia³⁹.

According to Putin, the fact that hostilities have stopped and "have agreed to unblock all transport communications and restore economic ties is extremely important, and this creates a good basis for normalizing relations in the long term"⁴⁰. Regarding the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh, Putin stated that it had not been settled and it was agreed to maintain the status quo: "What will happen next is to be decided in the future or by future leaders, future participants in this process," said Putin⁴¹.

36 *Rossiya napravila v Nagornyy Karabakh pochti 2 tys. Mirotvortsev*, TASS [online], 10 XI 2020 [accessed: 15 V 2021]: <<https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/9956043>>.

37 The Turkish Defense Ministry, *Milli Savunma Bakanı Hulusi Akar: Ortak Merkezin Oluşturulmasına Yönelik Çalışmalar Tamamlandı*, The Turkish Defense Ministry, 29 I 2021 [accessed: 15 V 2021]: <<https://msb.gov.tr/SlaytHaber/2912021-77164>>.

38 *Zayavleniye Prezidenta Azerbaydzhanskoy Respubliki, Prem'yer-ministra Respubliki Armeniya i Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii...*

39 Ibid.

40 *Otvety na voprosy SMI po situatsii v Nagornom Karabakhe...*

41 Ibid.

Developments after the second war

It seems currently sides far from a peaceful existence, and such a situation strength Russia's role in the region for the upcoming decade.

The border tensions compounded previously existing grievances between the two sides, in particular, Yerevan demands to free of Armenia's militaries who were captured after November 10, as well as Baku's demand that Armenia hand over maps of the land mines that it appears to have laid in last year's fighting and which regularly kill Azerbaijanis visiting the region⁴². Most recently, two Azerbaijani journalists and a local official were killed on June 4 after their vehicle hit a mine in the Kelbajar region.⁴³ The EU Commissioner for Human Rights stressed the urgent need to demine the areas affected by the conflict, including through international cooperation⁴⁴.

In May the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov emphasized "the importance of resolving all these sorts of incidents by exclusively political-diplomatic methods" during his visits to Yerevan and Baku⁴⁵. In early June, trilateral consultations of representatives of Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia were held in Moscow, and the parties discussed de-escalation in certain areas of the Azerbaijani-Armenian border⁴⁶.

The reopening of railroads between two states, adds to counterclaims between Baku and Yerevan. Azerbaijani complaint had been that Armenia

42 J. Kucera, *Armenia and Azerbaijan in new border crisis*, Eurasianet, 14 V 2021 [accessed: 5 VI 2021]: <<https://eurasianet.org/armenia-and-azerbaijan-in-new-border-crisis>>.

43 The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, No: 202/21, Information of the Press Service Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan on the death of civilians as a result of a mine explosion in Kalbajar, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 4 VI 2021 [accessed: 15 V 2021]: <<https://mfa.gov.az/en/news/7381/view>>.

44 The EU Commissioner's official account status, Twitter, 4 VI 2021 [accessed: 5 VI 2021]: <<https://twitter.com/CommissionerHR/status/1400809475804745734?s=20>>.

45 *Lavrov obsudil s glavoy MID Azerbaydzhana obostreniye na granitse respubliki s Armeniyey*, TASS [online], 13 V 2021 [accessed: 15 V I 2021]: <<https://tass.ru/politika/11368095>>.

46 *V Moskve proshli konsultatsii predstaviteley Rossii, Azerbaydzhana i Armenii*, TASS [online], 2 VI 2021 [accessed: 15 V I 2021], <<https://tass.ru/politika/11544383>>.

was dragging its feet on moving forward with the Nakhchivan route⁴⁷. Despite tensions between sides, the Armenia-Azerbaijan-Russia trilateral working group on transportation continues its work. In October 2021, the Armenian Prime Minister stated that the trilateral working group works on opening transport communications, and he hoped to achieve concrete results soon⁴⁸.

The working group was set up on January 9, 2021, when the Russian President hosted Azerbaijan President and Armenian Prime Minister in Moscow, and they signed an agreement on unblocking transportation communications⁴⁹. The main issues between Baku and Yerevan are a railway and a highway from the main part of Azerbaijan to the enclave – Nakhichevan, which must pass through the Syunik region of Armenia and the railway from Yerevan to the same Syunik region, which is laid through Nakhichevan. Both routes were actively used during the Soviet Union, but they ceased to exist with the beginning of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Both sides interpret unblocking the routes differently. Azerbaijan uses the term ‘Zangezur corridor’, but Armenia sees this as an indication of some form of extra-territoriality and insists on using it as a terminology ‘route’. Yerevan also seeks to enlist the support of Iran, India, and Russia to create a North-South corridor, an alternative to Baku’s Zangezur project⁵⁰.

Due to the closure of these transport routes, Russia also suffered at that period. Moreover, as a result of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, the movement of trains from Russia to Georgia became impossible. Therefore, Armenia lost the most reliable route to its main ally, and Russia – the connection

47 J. Kucera, *Armenia and Azerbaijan suspend “corridor” talks*, Eurasianet, 4 VI 2021 [accessed: 5 VI 2021]: <<https://eurasianet.org/armenia-and-azerbaijan-suspend-corridor-talks?fbclid=IwAR06wvcgxyJDnt5iB8JyNPcKJWq7MUGAXGeBbBDXf7r uXP4xfRSRplUPqA>>.

48 *Pashinyan otmetil reshayushchuyu rol' Putina v prekrashchenii 44-dnevnoy voyny v Karabakhe*, 15 X 2021 [accessed: 18 X 2021]: <<https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/12673089>>.

49 K. Krivosheyev, A. Khalatyan, *Armeniya i Azerbaydzhan ochertili granitsy otnosheniy*, “Kommersant” [online], 13 I 2021 [accessed: 5 VI 2021]: <<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4640957>>.

50 K. Krivosheyev, A. Mgdesyan, *Armeniya pereshla v diplomaticheskoye kontrnastupleniye*, “Kommersant” [online], 14 X 2021 [accessed: 18 X 2021]: <<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5030447>>.

with the railways of Turkey⁵¹. More recently Armenia is proposing its own variant: restoring another Soviet-era railroad further north that would offer it an alternate route to Russia, connecting Yerevan via Ijevan in northern Armenia with Gazakh, across the Azerbaijani border, to Baku where it could then connect to a line heading to Russia⁵².

Russia's benefits in unblocking transport communications may be to open up access to the Middle East and leverage to exert influence on the Belt and Road's project South Caucasus' roots. China's talks with Azerbaijan on a southern railway that would bypass Russia because Russian capacity is no longer enough might be a concern for Moscow.

Conclusion

In the result of the second Karabakh war, Moscow had already achieved one of its priorities regarding the conflict settlement- the only presence of Russia's peacekeepers in the conflicts zone. However, both sides differently perceive the possibility of extending Russia's peacekeeping mission for the next periods. While Yerevan openly states its wish to extend the Russian peacekeepers presence, Baku is silent about it and, in several cases, expressed its disappointments on the peacekeepers⁵³.

After the second Karabakh war, the developments show that relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan are not conducive to long-term peace. This situation strengthens Russia's role as a peacekeeper and a broker, at least for the upcoming years. And this may deepen both sides' dependencies on Moscow. As a result, probably Armenia's dependency on Russia will even increase. Although Moscow's positions in Azerbaijan have strengthened and further, it will have the leverage and offer prospects in Nagorno-Karabakh and relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Baku will try to balance between Russia and Turkey. It seems the West's involvement in the region would decrease in the coming years. However, in this

51 Ibid.

52 A. Mejlumyan, *Armenia proposing restoration of rail route through Azerbaijan to Russia*, 4 V 2021 [accessed: 5 VI 2021]: <<https://eurasianet.org/armenia-proposing-restoration-of-rail-route-through-azerbaijan-to-russia>>.

53 *Minoborony Azerbaydzhana vyrazilo nedovol'stvo Minoborony RF*, Turan, 12 IX 2021 [accessed: 18 X 2021]: <https://www.turan.az/ext/news/2021/9/free/politics_news/ru/7633.htm?utm_source=pocket_mylist>.

respect, Turkey may be the West's partner in the region though it is complicated to have its interests and agenda, which do not always converge with the West's approaches. However, the West still has possibilities to influence the developments between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Recently, 15 Armenian militaries captured by Azerbaijan were exchanged with the maps of the land mines. Georgia had brokered the negotiation with the support of the West. The Azerbaijani MFA appreciated the brokering activities of the Georgian government, the U. S., the EU and the OSCE⁵⁴. U.S. welcomed the negotiation⁵⁵. This case shows that the U.S. and other western institutions may broker between sides in the issues such as the demarcation of the borders and the peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Despite Moscow's concerns regarding the West, especially U.S. involvement in the former Soviet space, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is one of the few issues with no huge contradictions between Russia and the West. However, Russia may challenge the West's activities, such as deploying western peacekeepers to the region..

Considering the above analysis, it is possible to argue that developments in the Russian policy towards the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan could be mainly explained by Russia's current and prospective economic and strategic interests in the region. That policy is based on Russia's slowly departure from historical legacies and responsibilities towards purely pragmatic and agile, highly manoeuvrable approaches. Anything but Russia has not started to depart from the region.

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