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The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the shadow of the Russian invasion of Ukraine

By Nazrin Gadimova-Akbulut

Abstract

This article aims to analyze the role of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its repercussions on the recent developments in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, including the September 2023 military operation, the subsequent exodus of Karabakh Armenians and the withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers from the region in April 2024. The research is based on the comparative analysis of three main factors that have shaped the new reality in the post-2020 conflict. It examines the effects of the Second Karabakh War and the significant shift in the regional balance of power before the Russian invasion of 2022. It also discusses the immediate consequences of the war in Ukraine on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, focusing on the analysis of Russia's changing calculations and new challenges in the South Caucasus, the growing influence of Azerbaijan and Turkey in the region, and the intensified cooperation between Armenia, the EU and the United States. Finally, it analyzes Azerbaijan's "salami tactics" during December 2022-April 2024 in the light of several months of blockade, the lack of confidence-building measures to reconstruct trust between communities, and the unwillingness of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic to negotiate with official Baku. The analysis of interconnection between the war in Ukraine and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the context of these three factors is crucial for understanding the evolving power balances and strategic calculations in the South Caucasus, as well as the broader implications for peace and stability in the post-Soviet space.

Introduction

The Second Karabakh War of 2020 between Armenia and Azerbaijan significantly reshaped the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus. The war restored Azerbaijani control over the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh and concluded with a Russia-brokered ceasefire, yet it left lingering tensions and unresolved issues, such as the status of Nagorno-Karabakh and the unrecognized government of Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. Two years later, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 had far-reaching effects beyond the immediate conflict zone, changing regional dynamics in the South Caucasus and influencing developments in Nagorno-Karabakh. One of the most notable consequences of this shifting regional balance of power was the September 2023 Azerbaijani military operation, which led to the dissolution of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic and caused the mass exodus of Karabakh Armenians from the region. The analysis of interconnection between the war in Ukraine and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is crucial for understanding the evolving power balances and strategic calculations in the South Caucasus, as well as the broader implications for peace and stability in the post-Soviet space.

This article aims to analyze the role of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its repercussions on the recent developments in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, including the September 2023 military operation and the withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers from the region in April 2024. The research is based on the comparative analysis of three main factors that have shaped the new reality in the post-2020 conflict. The first section examines the effects of the Second Karabakh War and the significant shift in the regional balance of power during the period preceding the Russian invasion of 2022. The second section discusses the immediate consequences of the war in Ukraine on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, focusing on the analysis of Russia's changing calculations and new challenges in the South Caucasus, the growing influence of Azerbaijan and Turkey in the region, and the intensified cooperation between Armenia, the EU and the United States. Finally, the third section analyzes Azerbaijan's "salami tactics" in light of several months of blockade, the lack of confidence-building measures to reconstruct trust between communities, and the intransigence of the authorities of unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic in negotiating with official Baku, which ultimately led to the events of September 2023 and the subsequent exodus of Karabakh Armenians. The research necessitates a comprehensive analysis to evaluate each of these factors within a broader context and define the current geopolitical configuration in the region as of May 2024.

The role of Russia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict before the Russian-Ukrainian war

Historically, Russia played a pivotal role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow exerted significant influence over the development and outcome of the First Karabakh war. Russian military assistance from August 1992 to June 1994 and the Yeltsin government's decision to maintain the balance of power by providing military equipment to the Armenian side led to the failure of the Azerbaijani counter-offensive during the crucial months of the war.¹In the aftermath of the First Karabakh War, Russia played the role of an independent facilitator in the peace process and became one of the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group (alongside the United States and France), which emerged as the primary international mediation mechanism during the interwar period of 1994-2020.²

¹ De Waal, Thomas. *Black garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through peace and war*. New York University Press, 2003, S. 199.

² P. Terrence Hopmann: *Negotiating the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: power, interest, and identity*, in: American Political Science Association 2013 Annual Meeting, 27. August 2013

Until recently, Russia was Armenia's principal ally, with extensive cooperation in political, economic and military spheres. Armenia remains significantly dependent on Russian gas and energy, and the Armenian economy relies on remittances from Armenian guest workers of Armenian origin in Russia, while the railroads are controlled by Russian companies and state border with Turkey is guarded by Russian military forces. The Russian military base in Gyumri, established under a 1998 bilateral agreement, is set to remain operational until 2044.³ Additionally, Armenia is the only country in the South Caucasus that is a member of the Russia-backed Collective Security Treaty Organization, which obligates member states, including Russia, to support each other in the event of a military threat.⁴

The 2016 war, which resulted in Azerbaijan's regained control over two villages in the Aghdam district, marked the first significant shift in the established regional security architecture. The defeat on the frontline raised concerns about the one-sided nature of Armenian foreign policy, highlighting Yerevan's deep dependence on Moscow and leading to public protests that questioned the intentions of Russian foreign policy in the region.⁵ The process continued with the 2018 Armenian revolution and the subsequent increase in Yerevan's interest in cooperation with the West. Additionally, Turkey's rapprochement with Moscow in the latter half of the 2010s aligned Azerbaijani national interests more closely with those of Russia.⁶ Furthermore, the Russian-Georgian War of 2008 compelled the South Caucasus neighbors to reevaluate their regional priorities.⁷ Azerbaijan adopted a strategy of balancing between international actors, fostering Azerbaijani-Russian economic cooperation and the purchase of Russian weaponry, which caused growing discontent in Armenia. Notably, during the period preceding the Second Karabakh War in 2011-2020, Russia accounted for 94% of Armenia's major weapon imports and 60% of Azerbaijan's.⁸ According to Laurence Broers, Russia had a vested interest in sustaining a "no war,

³ Philip Remler: Russia's stony path in the South Caucasus, in: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 20. October 2020. URL: <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2020/10/russias-stony-path-in-the-south-caucasus?lang=en>

⁴ Charter of the Collective Security Treaty Organization. 7. October 2002. URL: https://en.odkb-csto.org/documents/documents/ustav_organizatsii_dogovora_o_kollektivnoy_bezopasnosti_/#loaded

⁵ Paul Stronski: Armenia at twenty-five: a rough ride, in: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016.

⁶ Murad Ismayilov: Azerbaijan's Russia conundrum: towards the rise of an unlikely alliance, in: Russian Politics, 4 (2), 2019, S. 250.

⁷ Jeffrey Mankoff: The big Caucasus: between fragmentation and integration, in: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2012. S. 8.

⁸ Alexandra Kuimova, Jordan Smith und Pieter D. Wezeman: Arms transfers to conflict zones: The case of Nagorno-Karabakh, in: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 30. April 2021.

no peace” situation in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as the intractability of the conflict provided Russia with significant leverage, not only over both countries, but also over the South Caucasus as a whole.⁹

The Second Karabakh War of 2020 established a new reality in the regional power balance. As a result of swift military actions, Azerbaijan reclaimed significant portions of the Nagorno-Karabakh region and the surrounding districts from Armenian control,¹⁰ altering the territorial status quo that had persisted since the ceasefire in 1994. As the Azerbaijani army approached Khankendi/Stepanakert, the capital of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, the process was halted by the the Russian-negotiated ceasefire agreement, or the Trilateral Statement, signed by the leaders of Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan on 10 November 2020.¹¹ The agreement mandated the return of all occupied territories around Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan, and the deployment of a 2000-strong Russian peacekeeping force in the region. The peacekeepers were tasked with ensuring the security of the Armenian population of the unrecognized republic, and securing the transit and supply route from Armenia through Azerbaijani territories to Nagorno-Karabakh, known as the Lachin Corridor. According to the Statement, the Russian peacekeeping mission was to remain in the region until 2025, with the possibility of extension for next five-year terms in the future.

Although Azerbaijan achieved a decisive victory in the Second Karabakh war, not all of its political objectives were realized, as the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic continued to exist, while the deployment of Russian peacekeepers was met with reservations in the Azerbaijani society. Some experts interpreted the presence of the Russian peacekeeping mission in Nagorno-Karabakh as a factor that would perpetuate Russian influence in the region, drawing comparisons with South Ossetia and Abkhazia.¹² Indeed, the deployment of Russian peacekeepers significantly

⁹ Laurence Broers: Diffusion and default: a linkage and leverage perspective on the Nagorny Karabakh conflict, in: East European Politics, 32(3), 2016, 394.

¹⁰ European Court of Human Rights: Case of Chiragov and Others v. Armenia, in: European Court of Human Rights, 16. June 2015. URL: <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre#%7B%22itemid%22:%5B%22001-155353%22%5D%7D>

¹¹ Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation, in: President of Russia, 10. November 2020. URL: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64384>

¹² Anar Valiyev: Karabakh after the 44-day war: Russian peacekeepers and patterns, in: PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo, 705, August 2021.

strengthened Moscow's positions on the ground and granted it the role of a leading mediator in the peace negotiations.

However, in a broader perspective, the period was characterized with the growing regional influence of Azerbaijan, along with its main political and military ally, Turkey. The 10 November Statement declared the establishment of the Russian-Turkish monitoring center in Aghdam, while the Azerbaijani-Turkish cooperation intensified following the 2020 war. Several visits of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan signalled Turkey's commitment to its ally, while high-level engagement solidified Ankara's position as a key regional player. After the war Turkey has been involved in several projects, including the restoration of highways, buildings, and other infrastructure that had been destroyed in the Karabakh region during the period of occupation. The signing of the Shusha Declaration in June 2021 underscored cooperation between two countries in the defense industry, mutual military assistance, energy security and other fields.¹³

In contrast, Western influence in the South Caucasus diminished after the Second Karabakh War amid the intensification of Russian and Turkish presence in the region. While the EU and the United States welcomed the deployment of the Russian peacekeeping force as a measure that prevented the Azerbaijani attack on Khankendi/Stepanakert, they sought alternative ways to regain influence in the peace process and the future normalization of the Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. In this context, the OSCE Minsk Group continued to function as the main negotiation platform after the 2020 war. In the months preceding the Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022, both Western countries and Russia expressed interest in cooperating within the existing diplomatic framework. However, the December 2020 cold welcome of the Minsk Group co-chairs by the Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev who pointed to the failure of the group to resolve the conflict diplomatically,¹⁴ prompted the parties to search for alternative platforms. While, Russia leveraging its monopoly in the peacekeeping mission, became more active in promoting its mediation, Western counterparts developed platforms in Brussels and Washington to counteract Russia's monopolization of the peace process. The meeting of President of the European Council Charles Michel with Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders, along with the joint discussion between US

¹³ Mitat Çelikpala: Toward a bright or bleak future in the South Caucasus, in: Geopolitics, 6, May 2024. S. 1-6.

¹⁴ Ilham Aliyev received OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs from France and U.S, in: President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 12. December 2020. URL: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/48908>

Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and the Armenian and Azerbaijani Foreign Ministers, both held in December 2021, symbolized the beginning of a new phase in Western-led independent platforms for the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process. Finally, the onset of the war in Ukraine effectively terminated the activity of the OSCE Minsk Group.¹⁵

The immediate effect of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

The geopolitical ramifications of the Ukrainian war introduced new dynamics to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the broader region. As Russia's initial plan for a short-term military operation in Ukraine devolved into a protracted war with extensive casualties, its political and military capacity in the wider region was significantly strained. Most notably, following its assault on Ukraine, Russia encountered unprecedented international isolation and sanctions, which severely impaired its economic potential. Under these circumstances, Russia's strategies and immediate goals in the South Caucasus had to adapt to the new realities. Politically, this adaptation involved seeking alliances and cooperation with the region's authoritarian governments, notably Azerbaijan and Turkey, to deter their alignment with the Western bloc. The shift was also evident in the growing estrangement from the Armenian government of Nikol Pashinyan elected after the 2018 Velvet Revolution.

In terms of military configuration, Russia had to consolidate its forces on the Ukrainian frontline, rendering the South Caucasus a less significant theater for Moscow and making it open for a compromise. According to experts, Russia was willing to sacrifice its traditional allies in order to secure victory in Ukraine, thus diminishing its capacity to exert control elsewhere in its neighborhood.¹⁶ Indeed, while Russia aimed to maintain its influence in Nagorno-Karabakh and uphold the presence of local Armenians to legitimize the presence of Russian peacekeeping operation as a leverage against both Azerbaijan and Armenia, the developments on the Ukrainian front compelled Moscow to reassess its strategy and geopolitical priorities, gradually accepting its

¹⁵ Siri Neset, Mustafa Aydın, Ayça Ergun, Richard Giragosian, Kornely Kakachia, Arne Strand: Changing geopolitics of the South Caucasus after the Second Karabakh War. Prospect for regional cooperation and/or rivalry”, in: Chr. Michelsen Institute Report, 4, 2023. S. 56.

¹⁶ Dan Sabbagh: Azerbaijan's Nagorno-Karabakh victory highlights limits of Russia's power, in: The Guardian, 25. September 2023, URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/25/azerbajjans-nagorno-karabakh-victory-highlights-limits-of-russias-power>

declining influence in the region. Reports of ceasefire violations in Nagorno-Karabakh in March 2022 raised public concerns about the full implementation of the Russian mission's responsibilities in the region.¹⁷

The global isolation of Russia and the series of sanctions imposed by the West necessitated the search for alternative markets and new models of economic cooperation. Turkey emerged as one of Russia's leading economic partners, with trade exchanges gaining particular significance as Moscow sought to diversify its international trade relations. At the same time, Russia reassessed the importance of cooperation with Azerbaijan within the framework of the "North-South" transport corridor, which aims to connect the Russian market with Iran, India and South Asia. In September 2022, a declaration on the development of the "North-South" corridor was signed by the representatives of Russia, Azerbaijan and Iran,¹⁸ thereby strengthening Russia's ties with its southern partners and increasing its interest for cooperation with Baku. Notably, a few days after the agreement was signed, the Azerbaijani military operation in Armenia had Moscow's tacit approval while gaining several heights on the Armenian territory. Similarly, Russia supported the so-called "Zangezur Corridor," a project advocated by Azerbaijani authorities to establish a road link between western part of Azerbaijan and its exclave Nakhchivan, potentially facilitating a direct connection to Turkey.

Azerbaijan, with its significant demographic, economic, and military capacity, and valuable strategic location connecting Russia, Iran and Turkey, has adeptly utilized its attractiveness to both Western and Russian partners to maneuver between the conflicting actors and advance its political and strategic goals. Although the Azerbaijani-Russian agreement on partnership and alliance was signed in February 2022, just days before the onset of the Russian war in Ukraine,¹⁹ the agreement was not ratified by the Azerbaijani parliament. Instead, Azerbaijan continued its policy of balancing interests and supporting the global Non-Alignment Movement. Notably, Azerbaijan

¹⁷ Joshua Kucera: War in Ukraine spills over into rising Karabakh unrest, in: Eurasianet, 11. März 2022, URL: <https://eurasianet.org/war-in-ukraine-spills-over-into-rising-karabakh-unrest>.

¹⁸ Mizuki Chuman: International North-South Transportation Corridor and Russia-NIS: Growing interest in and importance of war and sanctions. In: Middle East Institute of Japan (MEIJ) Commentary, 3, 22. November 2023. URL: <https://www.meij.or.jp/english/research/2023/9.html>

¹⁹ Joshua Kucera und Heydar Isayev: Ahead of Ukraine invasion, Azerbaijan and Russia cement "alliance", in: Eurasianet, 24. Februar 2022, URL: <https://eurasianet.org/ahead-of-ukraine-invasion-azerbaijan-and-russia-cement-alliance>.

maintained a low foreign policy profile, while not voting during the adoption of three UN General Assembly resolutions that condemned Russian actions in Ukraine.

Azerbaijan has been a vocal supporter of Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty, upholding this principle of international law. From the earliest days of the Russian invasion, Azerbaijan provided humanitarian aid to war-affected Ukraine, while the Azerbaijani State Oil Company SOCAR delivered free gas and petroleum for Ukrainian vehicles used for humanitarian missions, internally displaced people, ambulances, and fire trucks.²⁰ In August 2023, Azerbaijan escalated its support by offering military assistance in demining operations, with Azerbaijani demining experts training Ukrainian sappers on the Azerbaijani territory.²¹

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent sanctions on the Russian economy and its oil and gas exports elevated Azerbaijan's importance as an alternative energy source. The war in Ukraine highlighted the European need for alternative energy supplies, drawing attention to Azerbaijani exports. The visit of President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen to Baku in July 2022 underscored the necessity of diversification for the European markets and highlighted Azerbaijan's strategic importance. This situation enabled Azerbaijan to maximize political dividends by balancing between Western partners and Moscow, while reinforcing its position through the support of Turkey, which shares its geopolitical interests in the South Caucasus.

In its turn, for Armenia, both the Second Karabakh war of 2020 and the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2022 prompted a reassessment of its geopolitical alignment. Historically allied with Russia, Armenia shifted its geopolitical stance in search for greater strategic flexibility amid changing regional dynamics, while this recalibration has added complexity to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as well. Like Azerbaijan, Armenia kept a low profile following the onset of the war in Ukraine, abstaining from two UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Russian assault on Ukraine and not voting on the third in March 2022.²² Additionally, since Russia's

²⁰ Vasif Huseynov: The Russia-Ukraine war: perspective of Azerbaijan, in: *Caucasus Strategic Perspectives*, 3 (1), 2022, S. 98.

²¹ Togrul Ali: Elevating Azerbaijan-Ukraine strategic partnership: mine clearing unveils new dimensions, in: *Caspian Policy Center*, 24 August 2023.

²² Hovhannes Nazaretyan: What Armenia's UN votes tell us about its foreign policy, in: *EVN Report*, 23. März 2023. URL: <https://evnreport.com/politics/what-armenias-un-votes-tell-us-about-its-foreign-policy/>

invasion, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has attempted to pivot Armenia towards the West, providing humanitarian aid to Kyiv and participating in planned military exercises with the United States. The Azerbaijani attack on the Armenian territory in September 2022 and the consequent inaction of the CSTO to protect its member exposed Russia's motives to destabilize Armenia, which in its turn fostered greater cooperation between Yerevan and Western countries.²³

Finally, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the growing Russian-Western confrontation, Brussels and Washington sought alternative channels of mediation in areas traditionally influenced by Moscow. The EU turned into one of the leading mediators in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, by facilitating the establishment of a border delimitation commission in April 2022.²⁴ Similarly, Washington organized a series of meetings between the Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers and national security advisers in 2022 and 2023, achieving progress in several areas of the peace process. In response to the September 2022 escalation, the EU deployed a short-term civilian European Union Monitoring Capacity mission to Armenia, which was later replaced by the European Union Mission in Armenia having no fixed limit on its duration. The mission aims to contribute to stability in border areas by "building confidence on the ground" and "ensuring an environment conducive to normalization efforts".²⁵ Experts recognize that the decision to launch this mission would have been unimaginable before the onset of the war in Ukraine.²⁶ In a wider perspective, its establishment became the outcome of the activity of the European Political Community (EPC), a new initiative uniting European countries except Russia, first convened in Prague in October 2022. Initiated by the President of France Emmanuel Macron, the EPC provided a platform for direct dialogue between the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders, led by European Council President Charles Michel alongside French and German policymakers.

²³ Jakob Hedenskog: The Armenian dilemma after Azerbaijan's September attack on Nagorno-Karabakh, in: Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SEEUS) Report, 14, 2023.

²⁴ Alexa Fults und Paul Stronski: The Ukraine war is reshaping the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. In: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 25. April 2022.

²⁵ Council of the European Union: Armenia: EU establishes a civilian mission to contribute to stability in border areas, in: Council of the European Union, 23. January 2023. URL: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/01/23/armenia-eu-sets-up-a-civilian-mission-to-ensure-security-in-conflict-affected-and-border-areas/>

²⁶ Tigran Grigoryan: War in Ukraine and Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict: the West needs to re-evaluate its approach, in Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 31. Januar 2023. URL: <https://www.boell.de/en/2023/01/27/war-ukraine-and-armenian-azerbaijani-conflict-west-needs-re-evaluate-its-approach>.

Despite the short-term success of the European and American diplomacy in the Armenian-Azerbaijani negotiations, the September 2023 military operation by the Azerbaijani army and the subsequent mass exodus of Karabakh Armenians marked a significant turning point, undermining Western efforts in the peace process. This transformation was primarily driven by the reshaped security architecture and Russia's diminishing influence in the region, coupled with its search for alliance with Turkey and Azerbaijan. Additionally, Baku's new role and its implementation of "slice-by-slice" tactics necessitate a detailed analysis to understand the new geopolitical configuration. Furthermore, the geopolitical miscalculation of the Karabakh Armenians adds another dimension to the analysis of the region's complex situation.

Azerbaijan's "salami tactics" and the new reality in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

Following the Russian attack on Ukraine and the subsequent dissolution of the OSCE Minsk Group, Azerbaijan leveraged the geopolitical shifts to gain a strategic advantage in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process. In March 2022, the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry unveiled a package, comprising five principles, with the two key principles emphasizing mutual recognition of each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, and the absence of territorial claims against one another.²⁷ Official Baku also advocated for direct, bilateral negotiations with Yerevan, excluding mediators. However, given the power imbalance between Armenia and Azerbaijan, direct peace talks inherently favored Baku, enabling it to potentially coerce Yerevan.

Azerbaijan's political and military advantages, coupled with Russia's diminished capacity in the South Caucasus and increased dependence on Azerbaijan and Turkey, created a new regional configuration in the region. This shift facilitated the implementation of Azerbaijani strategic interests in Nagorno-Karabakh, introducing a new reality to the conflict. Baku's main strategy aimed to capitalize on Russia's weakening position due to the Ukrainian conflict, seeking to formally resolve the conflict before 2025 and eliminate the rationale for the presence of the Russian peacekeeping mission in the region. For that purpose, Baku employed a "salami" or "slice-by-slice" tactic, progressively pushing for new concessions from Armenia and testing Russia's red

²⁷ Azernews: Azerbaijan makes public basic principles to normalize ties with Armenia, 14. März 2022. URL: <https://www.azernews.az/nation/190719.html>

lines in the region.²⁸ Consequently, the shifting regional dynamics and Russia's focus on its western frontlines transformed the post-2020 balance of power, altering the regional security architecture and the positions of the parties involved.

The first indications of the transformation emerged in August 2022, when the Azerbaijani army regained control over three settlements along the Lachin corridor, which connected Karabakh with Armenia. A few weeks later, Azerbaijani attack on Armenia resulted with the capture of several strategically important heights at the border. This offensive prompted strong international reactions, including a visit by US Congress Speaker Nancy Pelosi and her subsequent condemnation of Azerbaijan's incursion on Armenian "security and democracy".²⁹ However, as the international reaction was limited to statements without substantial sanctions, Baku continued the implementation of its slice-by-slice tactic.

In December 2022, protests by Azerbaijani ecological activists at the Lachin corridor marked another stage in the post-2020 regional transformation. Formally, the protestors demanded an end to the Armenian exploitation of gold and copper-molybdenum deposits located in Nagorno-Karabakh. At the same time, the Azerbaijani government accused Yerevan of transferring military hardware, including over two thousand landmines through the Lachin corridor, posing a threat to Azerbaijani districts surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh. Additionally, Baku alleged that several Iranian "saboteurs" had entered Nagorno-Karabakh via the corridor before the blockade began in early December.³⁰ The closure of the Lachin Corridor, the sole artery connecting the breakaway region with Armenia, obstructed the supply of essential goods from Yerevan, which was partially alleviated by inconsistent deliveries from the International Red Cross. Consequently, the region's 120,000 inhabitants experienced acute shortages of basic food, medicines, water and electricity.³¹

²⁸ Mikayel Zolyan: Armenia: light in the dark? In: Eurozine, 2 Mai 2023. URL: <https://www.eurozine.com/armenia-light-in-the-dark/>

²⁹ Mathieu Droin, Tina Dolbaia und Abigail Edwards: A renewed Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: reading between the front lines, in: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 22. September 2023.

³⁰ Daily Sabah: Azerbaijan asks Iran to clarify reports of illegal crossings, in: Daily Sabah, 4. December 2022. URL: <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/azerbaijan-asks-iran-to-clarify-reports-of-illegal-crossings>

³¹ Azerbaijan/Armenia: sides must reach "humanitarian consensus" to ease suffering, in: International Committee of the Red Cross, 25. July 2023. URL: <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/azerbaijan-armenia-sides-must-reach-humanitarian-consensus-to-ease-suffering>

From the Azerbaijani perspective, the uncontrolled flow of goods and people through the Lachin corridor posed a security threat to the population of Azerbaijani districts around Nagorno-Karabakh. In 1993, a year after Armenian forces took Lachin and expelled the local Azerbaijani population, they launched attacks on Kalbajar from both Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, seizing the control over extensive area around the breakaway region.³² While the implementation of the 1992-1994 scenario by Armenia was unlikely in 2022, Azerbaijan sought to prevent any future shifts in the balance of power by controlling the corridor and preventing military deployments and arms transfers.

The establishment of an Azerbaijani checkpoint on the Lachin road in April 2023 contravened the 2020 Tripartite Statement, which mandated the protection of this supply route by Russian peacekeeping forces. Azerbaijan countered that Armenia had initially violated the Statement by resisting the implementation of Article 9, ensuring the “unimpeded movement” of citizens and goods between mainland Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan.³³ Azerbaijan argued that the free flow over the Syunik road, referred to as the “Zangezur corridor” in the Azerbaijani rhetoric, should reciprocate similar procedures at the Lachin corridor. Also, Azerbaijan justified the establishment of a checkpoint with the recognition of the Azerbaijani territorial integrity and Nagorno-Karabakh as a part of its territory both by Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan and international community.

At the same time, despite Baku’s initial success in establishing contacts with Armenian counterparts regarding the use of the Sarsang reservoir in summer 2022,³⁴ direct negotiations between Baku and the breakaway region were suspended until the first half of 2023. The arrival of Ruben Vardanyan, a Russian businessman of Armenian origin, to Nagorno-Karabakh in August 2022 and his subsequent appointment as State Minister raised concerns about the prospect for the Armenian-Azerbaijani peace process due to Vardanyan’s rhetoric and refusal to engage in negotiations with the Azerbaijani side. Vardanyan represented the sentiment prevailing among the absolute majority of the population in Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia, which was predominantly

³² Markar Melkonian: *My brother's road: an American faithful journey to Armenia*. I. B. Tauris, 2007.

³³ Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation, in: President of Russia, 10. November 2020. URL: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64384>

³⁴ Armenpress: Representatives of Artsakh and Azerbaijan discuss issue of use of Sarsang reservoir on mutually beneficial terms. 24. August 2022. URL: <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1090952.html>

negative towards negotiations between the breakaway republic's authorities and Azerbaijani officials. In contrast, the idea of a South Ossetian scenario for the unification of Nagorno-Karabakh with Russia was supported by one third of the population of the de facto republic.³⁵ Both the population and the government of the unrecognized republic held high expectations for the security provided by Russian peacekeepers. In December 2022, shortly before the onset of protests on the Lachin road, representatives of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic met with the French state officials in Paris, where they advocated for granting international mandate to the Russian peacekeepers.³⁶ Their belief in Russia's support contributed to a miscalculation regarding Moscow's future actions, which, as they expected, would guarantee the security of the Karabakh Armenians and prevent an Azerbaijani attack. The failure of the sides to reach a compromise, the lack of confidence-building measures, along with the existing power imbalance between the parties and Russia's unwillingness to secure the Nagorno-Karabakh population, led to the tragic consequences in the following months.

On September 19, 2023, Baku launched a one-day military operation employing forceful methods aimed at dissolving the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, resulting in the deaths of at least two hundred people and the mass exodus of the local population. The Karabakh authorities surrendered and agreed to a Russia-brokered ceasefire, stipulating that the remaining illegal weapon from Armenia would be removed from the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, and the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic would cease to exist starting as of 1 January 2024. While Russia was obliged to protect the population according to the 10 November 2020 Statement, its passive reaction to the Azerbaijani military offensive significantly damaged Moscow's reputation. Russian analyst Alexander Baunov noted that "the dramatic photos of many frightened people at Stepanakert airport are an obvious visual rhyme with the photos of crowds at Kabul airport in 2021" referring to the American withdrawal from Afghanistan.³⁷ This passivity created an impression that Russia was preoccupied with the Ukrainian front, neglecting its security

³⁵ Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRRC): Public is speaking: telephone survey results on the present and the future of Artsakh conflict, in: CRRRC-Armenia, 2022, URL: https://www.crrc.am/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Public-is-Speaking_Research-Report_CRRC-Armenia_ENG_04.01.2023.pdf

³⁶Ruzanna Stepanian: Karabakh seeks UN mandate for Russian peacekeepers, in: Radio Azatutyun, 8. December 2022, URL: <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32167611.html>

³⁷ Andrew Osborn: Questions about Russia's clout in ex-USSR grow after Karabakh crisis, in: Reuters. 22. September 2023. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/questions-about-russias-clout-ex-ussr-grow-after-karabakh-crisis-2023-09-22/>

guarantees to the Karabakh population and thus betraying its allies in the region. In its turn, official Moscow blamed Armenia for giving up on Nagorno-Karabakh following Pashinyan's statement on the recognition of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. In that regard, while Russia's inability to retain the post-2020 status reflected its singular focus on the war in Ukraine, the Russian policy of turning a blind eye to Azerbaijan's attack could be explained with Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan's growing alignment with the West.

The implementation of "salami" tactics transformed the balance of power in the region, largely due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the following shift in Russian strategic interests and priorities in the South Caucasus. However, the miscalculations and the failure of the unrecognized NKR government to adapt to the new reality and reach an agreement with the Azerbaijani government was one of the reasons of the following mass exodus of the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh. In April 2024 Moscow announced the withdrawal of its peacekeeping mission from Karabakh. Following its departure, Russia also agreed to remove its border guards from the Yerevan Zvartnots Airport and the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, which had been stationed there since the Second Karabakh war in 2020.

Conclusion

The Russian attack on Ukraine has had substantial reverberations beyond its immediate geographic confines, profoundly impacting the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The geopolitical dynamics of the region have shifted, underscoring the interconnectedness of security concerns across post-Soviet spaces. Russia's preoccupation with Ukraine has altered its strategic priorities and resource allocations, influencing its role as a mediator in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This shift created a power vacuum that Baku exploited, thereby altering the balance of power and introducing new complexities into the conflict.

While the 2022 assault on Ukraine significantly affected developments in the South Caucasus, the regional changes started with the 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh strengthening Azerbaijan's positions regain over extensive territory and demonstrating the military superiority of its army in the region. At the same time, traditional mechanisms of mediation, such as the OSCE Minsk Group lost their efficacy as Moscow asserted its dominance through the deployment of its peacekeeping

mission in Nagorno-Karabakh, gaining a political advantage over its Western partners. In contrast, Washington and Brussels made efforts to develop alternative platforms for the Armenian-Azerbaijani peace process, circumventing Russian mediation. The meetings of European and American diplomats with the Armenian and Azerbaijani representatives in December 2021 highlighted a post-2020 tendency of establishing new channels for negotiations, which significantly assisted in creating mechanism for delimitation, exchange of the prisoners of war, and other issues.

The war in Ukraine and the subsequent Western sanctions introduced new challenges to Russia, affecting its relations with traditional regional allies in the South Caucasus and compelling Moscow to seek new platforms of cooperation with Azerbaijan and Turkey. Given its strategic location connecting Russia with Iran and southern markets, Azerbaijan gained its value in the implementation of the Russian “North-South Corridor” project. Azerbaijan maintained stable relations with Russia while being supported by its traditional ally, Turkey. Additionally, the European need for Azerbaijani energy exports, spotlighted by the war in Ukraine, elevated Baku’s geopolitical importance for both Russia and the West, enabling it to extract “slice-by-slice” concessions from Armenia while Western pressure on Azerbaijan remained limited.

Following the 2022 Russian assault and the shifting balance of power in the South Caucasus, the Azerbaijani policy aimed at the gradual restoration of control over the breakaway region. However, this policy was also influenced by the miscalculations of the authorities in the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic who held a strong belief in Russia’s protection and support of the local population. The appeal of Khankendi/Stepanakert for granting international mandate to the Russian peacekeepers in the advent of the Azerbaijani actions and the closure of the Lachin corridor, along with the rejection of building any dialogue with the Azerbaijani authorities significantly contributed to the subsequent trajectory of developments in Nagorno-Karabakh. The December 2022 protests by alleged ecological activists, followed by the establishment of a checkpoint at the Lachin corridor in April 2023 and the total blockade of goods in June 2023, were driven by several factors. These included Azerbaijani political and military superiority over Armenia and the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, Moscow’s reluctance to fulfill its obligations under the Tripartite Statement of November 2020 to protect local population, the failure of the West to exert pressure on Baku to choose diplomatic measures of conflict resolution,

and the uncompromising stance of the Karabakh authorities, who believed in Russian assistance as the main balancing power that could prevent the mass exodus of the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians. Following the developments of September 2023, Russia announced the withdrawal of its peacekeeping contingent in April 2024, leading to Azerbaijan's total restoration of territorial integrity and control over the breakaway region, making Baku the main benefactor of the post-2022 transformation of the regional security architecture.

The Russian attack on Ukraine has reshaped the immediate security environment in Eastern Europe and impacted the situation in the South Caucasus, underscoring the intricate web of regional and international relations that influenced the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The withdrawal of the Russian peacekeeping mission from Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as the following intensification of negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan raise the hope for the signing of the peace treaty. While recent developments were deeply affected by the war in Ukraine, the future of the Armenian-Azerbaijani peace process will depend on the positions of the governments and their readiness and goodwill to initiate the reconciliation of societies. In that regard, the international community must remain proactive in addressing these interconnected challenges to foster stability and peace in the region.

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