

Opinion – The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Russia’s Exit Cue from South Caucasus?

Written by Vahagn Avedian

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2023/01/22/opinion-the-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-russias-exit-cue-from-south-caucasus/>

VAHAGN AVEDIAN, JAN 22 2023

Since the 2020 war and its trilateral ceasefire agreement on November 9th, Russia’s future in South Caucasus seems to be intertwined with the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict. The way Moscow demonstratively chose not to aid its military ally Armenia in the face of the joint Azerbaijani-Turkish assault on Nagorno-Karabakh or to put a stop to it as it had done previously, aggravated an already existing public distrust and bitterness among Armenians towards Russia. The recent developments, with Nagorno-Karabakh left isolated and practically under siege by Azerbaijan while the Russian peacekeepers seem to be incapable of resolving the situation, have further fomented that criticism.

The developments in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict are perhaps the most pivotal in recent times regarding Russia’s presence in the South Caucasus (consisting of the three republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia), often labelled as the “backyard of Russia.” Since long ago, Georgia has been on bad terms with Russia. This was accentuated by a brief war in August 2008, and by Tbilisi’s recent move to officially apply for EU membership in the wake of the Ukraine War.

As for Azerbaijan, there is no secret that ever since the dissolution of the Romanov Empire in 1917, the Muslim population of Caucasus (Azerbaijan did not exist until May 1918) yearned to be “liberated” by their Turkish “brothers,” at the time at war with the Russian Empire. This was overtly visible when the Muslims, in the wake of the Russian Army’s abandonment of the Caucasian front in the midst of the ongoing WWI due to the Bolshevik Revolution, not only refused to continue to fight against the advancing Ottoman Army, but even started sabotaging and attacking the Armenian armed forces who were left on their own to defend the front (Georgia had by May 1918 signed a friendship treaty with Germany and changed side).

Fast forward to November 2020 and the aftermath of the war was seen as a clear strategic victory for Turkey who, for the first time since WWI, gained a foothold in Southern Caucasus, potentially paving the way eastward towards Central Asia and the Turkic speaking world. At the same time, Azerbaijan was and continues to be frustrated with the presence of Russian troops in the region, especially in Nagorno-Karabakh. Many criticized Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev for not seizing the momentum and having pushed for capturing the entire Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, thus allowing Russia to deploy troops on its territory. This annoyance and reluctance can, other than through the historical background, be viewed in the light of the closure of the Gabala Radar Station back in 2012 when Russia was forced out of Azerbaijan.

This brings us to Armenia, the “definite ally” of Russia, to use President Vladimir Putin’s wording. How Russia demonstratively stayed passive back in 2020 has been viewed by many as a clear warning against Yerevan for its approach towards EU but also as an opportunity to strengthen Moscow’s grip on both Armenia and Azerbaijan. After all, the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict has long been viewed as a significant factor in keeping both Yerevan and Baku on a short leash. However, the emergence of the Ukraine War has evidently attracted Russia’s full focus, an opportunity which Azerbaijan did not waste time to capitalize on. When Azerbaijan invaded Armenia on September 12, 2022, Yerevan called for an intervention by its fellow CSTO Defense Pact members. The refusal by CSTO to aid its member only damaged Armenia-Russia relations even further, as many saw the decision mainly lying in the hands of Moscow. This even triggered public protests that demanded for Armenia to leave CSTO. Yerevan’s discontent

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with CSTO reached its peak when Armenia’s Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan refused to sign a CSTO declaration due to the block’s failure to condemn Azerbaijan’s invasion.

The discontent with Moscow has increased due to the recent developments in Nagorno-Karabakh when Azerbaijani citizens have effectively blocked the only highway between Goris and Stepanakert, connecting Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia. The highway is not only providing free movement for the Nagorno-Karabakh population, but also acts as the only route for supplying the population with food, medicines and other necessities. When the UN Security Council convened an emergency meeting on December 20 2022 to discuss the blockade, almost every representative (with the exception for the Azerbaijani delegate) demanded an immediate opening of the road to avoid a humanitarian crisis while Russia’s timid statement yet again drew Yerevan’s open criticism.

The developments around Nagorno-Karabakh justify the question of whether it hints to Russia’s exit from South Caucasus due to the loss of its grip over the region. It is of course an intricate process which will not likely happen overnight. However, given the volatility of the entire global situation and Russia’s protraction of the Ukraine war, things can escalate quite fast. Azerbaijan is keen on swiftly resolving the Karabakh issue, which if implemented in accordance with Baku’s wishes will most certainly end up with a total ethnic cleansing of its Armenian population. The alternative would be to either follow through with the only existing viable peaceful solution based on OSCE’s own Charter, The Helsinki Final Act, and respecting People’s Right for Self-determination, or drag out the conflict indefinitely in its present form, justifying the presence of Russian troops on the ground. The question is what the major players (EU, USA and Russia) will choose to implement: sheer realpolitik or at least some adherence to promoting democracy and human rights?

The question of international support for a peaceful resolution of the Karabakh conflict is also about how these actors will relate to the involved parties. In the choice between a democratic solution and a “carrot and stick” policy, Russia still seems to prefer the latter while the Western powers have gradually moved towards the former. That said, EU and USA still fall short from fulfilling their policies of choice, especially when they pledge to abstract notions such as democratic values and human rights, often sacrificing them due to self-interests. This perceived hypocrisy has been lauded by many when EU signed a gas deal with Azerbaijan, asserting that it was meant to be a measure to decrease EU’s dependency on an autocratic Russia. The EU Commission has been virtually deaf to all criticism pointing to the obvious pitfalls of partnering with a notoriously authoritarian and corrupt regime in Baku, implicating EU’s tacit approval of a potential ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh.

In the meanwhile, and for the first time in many years in regard to South Caucasus, the USA moved towards a more affirmative direction by way of two conspicuous actions. The first was the appointment of Philip T. Reeker, a full ambassador (his predecessors were often of lower diplomatic ranks, by some viewed as a token of deference to the de facto Russian leadership in the matter) as a co-chair to the OSCE Minsk Group. The appointment demonstrably angered Azerbaijan who has consistently attempted to dismantle the Minsk Group and argues that the conflict has been resolved. The second action came in the aftermath of Azerbaijan’s invasion of Armenia, when the Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi paid a surprise visit to Armenia in a clear support for the emerging democracy in Armenia against the outspoken autocratic rule in Azerbaijan. Nonetheless, the long-term commitment in that regard remains to be seen while some warn about how choosing realpolitik interests would undermine the fragile young democracies in both Armenia and Georgia. Too often have Western democracies enticed popular movements against domestic or regional autocracies, only to abandon them in the hour of need. This is also prevalent in the Armenian-Azerbaijani case and the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, especially in the light of the outpouring international support for Ukraine.

Thus, the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict and its outcome, even though it dwarves in comparison with the scale of destruction, human losses and the perceived threat to mainland Europe, is still pivotal in deciding a number of significant factors: Russia’s future in South Caucasus and its intertwined relation with Turkey, the development of democracy and its values heralded by the EU and the USA, and last but not least the sheer existential right of the Nagorno-Karabakh population, living under an ongoing blockade and war of attrition by an unwavering autocratic regime in Baku. The question is what Russia, the EU and the USA, already interlocked in an ongoing war at the heart of Europe, will decide to do with the lives of 120,000 Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh and how the inevitable impact

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on both Armenia and Azerbaijan will play out.

About the author:

Vahagn Avedian, PhD, is a peace and conflict researcher with focus on democracy and human rights. His book, *Knowledge and Acknowledgment in the Politics of Memory of the Armenian Genocide* (Routledge, 2019) includes a discussion about the Karabakh conflict within the context of the Armenian Genocide and its impact and legacy on the region. His forthcoming book, entitled *The Theory of Collective Reconciliation: A Trinity of Recognition, Responsibility and Reparation* (Routledge) explores the process of reconciliation through its components and their mutual dependencies and impacts.