



TOPICAL
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ONE TOPIC - TWO ARTICLES

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TOPIC - POSSIBILITIES AND REALITIES FOR KARABAKH CONFLICT RESOLUTION - 2018

See the comments of the authors on the other article here -
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WILL THE POLITICAL MOMENT FOR THE RESOLUTION OF NAGORNO KARABAKH CONFLICT EVER COME?

<http://www.publicdialogues.info/en/node/791>

In the recent years the pendulum of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been fluctuating between war and peace in an increasingly unhindered, acute and unexpected manner, approaching the highest peak of risk level. In particular, during the four-day April war it had almost approached the scenario of a large-scale war, which, if unfolded, would render all the parties to the conflict and the region unable to come out of the post-conflict rehabilitation stage for decades.

Moreover, the consequences and the wounds of an over four-year war in the zone of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict and the Armenian and Azerbaijani borderline, dating back to the early 90s of the past century, have not been eliminated in either Artsakh or Armenia or

Azerbaijan. The very first aggressive attempt undertaken by the newly independent Azerbaijan to use force in order to suppress the aspirations of the population in Artsakh for self-determination factually showed that the war is the shortest and the best way to deepen and aggravate impasses, increase distrust between the parties and freeze the political regulation of the conflict.

The Red Lines of Military and Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict

We may arrive at significant conclusions if we study both the internal and external factors that led to the lightning attack of the Azerbaijani army against the Armenian side, taken by surprise on April 2, 2016, the invasion into the territory of Artsakh, the following counterattack of the Armenian forces and the almost complete restoration of the baseline positions along the entire stretch of the contact line, and the factors that prevented a full-scale war.

First of all, unlike 2014 and 2015 when Azerbaijan was not avoiding the creation of illusions of a large-scale regional war or a military confrontation with Armenia, the strategy of Blitzkrieg against Artsakh was undertaken in 2016. This shows that Baku was not confident about the possibility of solving such complicated problems as ensuring international legitimacy, counterbalancing the factors of Russia and the CSTO, protecting the exclave of Nakhichevan in case such a scenario unfolds. In fact, the involvement of Armenia, followed by Russia and the CSTO, would entail the inevitable activation of this theater of operations, too. Such a prospect was quite possible when Yerevan made Moscow approach the point of crossing the red line.

Whereas the volume of the military, political and information support Turkey provided Azerbaijan with was the maximum that Baku gained. But in order to win and balance Russia in a large-scale war, it needs much more, i.e. the open involvement of Turkey. Moreover, it should be noted that Aliyev received this maximum in the conditions of profound enmity between Moscow and Ankara in 2016. And it is still a major issue whether Baku will gain as much when Turkey and Russia have started to rapidly restore their strained relations for the sake of meeting their own priority interests in Syria, regarding a number of issues and spheres of vital significance (construction of a NPP in Turkey, the Kurdish Issue, procurement of S-400 anti-missile systems, Turk Stream, etc.).

In the conditions of such a profound interdependence Ankara is not very likely to sacrifice its own interests and go for a confrontation with Moscow within its influence zone for the sake of its junior brother. Moreover, it is very unlikely that in the case of a large-scale war Ankara would take the same Nakhichevan under its direct protection, the “competence” for which was officially declared by the leaders of Turkey before.¹ Whereas a year later in 2011 the President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan that paid an official visit to Moscow and personally handed the original copy of the Moscow Treaty over to the President of the RF

¹ Turkey a 'guarantor' of Azerbaijan's Nakhchivan, 28.04.2010, News.az, <https://news.az/articles/turkey/14341>

on the occasion of the 90th anniversary of its signature, admitted in the course of a joint press conference that the “treaty is a turning point in our history. Our eastern borders were recognized by the Moscow Treaty.”²

Thus, not only the liabilities of Turkey regarding the fate of Nakhichevan, but also the Eastern borders of the same Turkey, including the issue of territories transferred to it at the expense of Armenia, are regulated by a treaty that is prolonged every 25 years and its fate is also in the hands of Moscow. In this manner crossing of red lines for Ankara absolutely stems from its interests and the support provided in the course of the war is at the level of political assistance and is purposeless, as in the best case scenario, it comes in the forms of treatment for wounded soldiers in their hospitals, provision of instructors or even their own military in the Azerbaijani uniform.

Baku could not be satisfied with the non-realization of its own expectations from Russia's behavior. Although Russia did not give any categorical signals to prevent the aggression of Azerbaijan against Artsakh, and in the days of war acted as an arbitrator between its strategic partner Azerbaijan and its ally Armenia, the Kremlin was interested in one thing only: would the parties agree to deploy Russian peace-keeping forces in the conflict zone? Baku had long opposed this and now it was already Yerevan that opposed, seeing a conspiracy in these steps of the Kremlin and considering that Moscow, by its position, had given a carte blanche to Azerbaijan to ensure territorial advancement. Consequently, why shall Baku be awarded in such conditions when there is no agreement on the issue Moscow is interested in; moreover, when its multiple offers of the past about joining the EEU had remained unanswered? On the other hand, how could Baku agree to this, when already two days after the attack it had already lost the vast majority of the territories conquered in Artsakh, failing to gain a foothold on a new line, and from its own perspective, Moscow did not stop the counterattack of the Armenian forces in due time, and there is no and can be no guaranteed promise to return all and everything.

The meeting³ held between the chiefs of the General Staffs of the two countries in Moscow on April 5th with the mediation of Russia and on the same day the dissemination of hints in the media that perhaps a new ceasefire agreement might be drafted was already an act of eloquence. This might have given Moscow an opportunity to make Artsakh withdraw from the Bishkek Agreement of 2014 and more concretely assume the role of the guardian of peace in the conflict zone. However, as it was argued above there were not even slightly noticeable prospects for such a development: the parties were against, the Western Co-Chairs of the Minsk Group were against it too⁴, the negotiators did not have such a mandate

² Erdogan Presents Original Moscow Treaty to Medvedev, 16.03.2011, Asbarez.am, <http://asbarez.com/94211/erdogan-presents-original-moscow-treaty-to-medvedev/>

³ Truce in Nagorno Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan Was Achieved in Moscow, 05.04.2016, RT, <https://russian.rt.com/article/157440>

⁴ Newspaper: Minsk Group US co-chair makes noteworthy revelation on Karabakh conflict, News.am, 30.09.2015, <https://news.am/eng/news/288410.html>

The Zhoghovurd, Warlick Revealed Remarkable Details: the Issue of Russian Peacekeepers Was Discussed. News.am, 30.09.2015, (in Armenian) <https://news.am/arm/news/288410.html>

from their capitals. For Yerevan the Bishkek Agreement is a valuable document for actually it is on its basis that Stepanakert becomes a party to the regulations of the conflict and ensuring peace.

The next important factor that prevented the unfolding of a large-scale war was the demands of the international community to stop the military actions and to stabilize the situation: they came from the UNO, the incumbent Chairman of the OSCE before the Co-Chairs and the co-chairing countries of the OSCE Minsk Group,⁵ which before, during and after this period, too, sharply apposed the resolution of the conflict by military means. Another indicator was that the President of Azerbaijan started to justify himself, saying that Azerbaijan counter-attacked the provocations of the Armenian side, and avoided the recognition that he himself was the attacker, which meant that the next red line was the impossibility of an international legitimation of the war, whereas Aliyev would not enjoy that legitimacy even for a local war.

The internal red lines for a forceful or peaceful solution to the problem were no less important. In the recent years the official propaganda in Azerbaijan constantly drew a picture according to which if there was no assistance to Russia, Azerbaijan, with a great speed and success, would return Nagorno-Karabakh and restore its territorial integrity in a week, maximum a month: as the aide to the President of Azerbaijan put it. Another thesis in circulation was that the Armenian society was so unhappy with its authorities that in the case of territorial and human losses in Artsakh a domestic riot would break out, people would refuse to protect Artsakh, would refuse to send their sons to serve in Artsakh; in short, the only obstacle to success and the victory for Azerbaijan is the so-called "Karabakh clan", ruling in Armenia.

The Artsakh war completely put an end to these calculations of the Aliyev regime: despite the large deficit of legitimacy of the Armenian authorities, such an unprecedented and spontaneous mobilization took place since the very first days of the war that Nagorno Karabakh even proved unable to accept and send such a large number of volunteer groups to the border. The repulse that the Armenian armed forces gave the Azerbaijani army invading Artsakh without any Russian support refuted another myth, showing that even the available resource asymmetry did not guarantee a victory for Baku.

Perhaps, only one calculation by Aliev was justified that in case the Armenian side incurred any territorial losses, there would be a rebellion against the authorities. This calculation was materialized in the summer of 2016, when the SasnaTsrer group, led by one of the outstanding leaders of the Artsakh war, Zhirayr Sefilian, attempted an armed uprising, accusing the authorities of surrendering 800 hectares of land to Azerbaijan with the privy of

Warlick Revealed Remarkable Details: The Zhoghovurd, armlur.am, 30.09.2015, (in Armenian)
<https://armlur.am/423472/>

⁵Escalation of Tension in the Zone of the Karabakh Conflict, 02.04.2016, TASS,
<http://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/3172172>
The Fragile Armistice of Karabakh, 05.04.2016, gazeta.ru,
https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2016/04/05_a_8162069.shtml

Russia. They proclaimed the change of power a solution to disrupt the implementation of this plan later by either a new war or peaceful means.

Apparently, the edgy and harsh reaction of the official Moscow to the group and its actions, the reasons for putting forth accusations against the US and EU, and, finally, the former President of Armenia lay not only in the decolonization rhetoric of this group, but also in something the Kremlin knew, yet could not admit, i.e. the domestic political crisis arisen in Armenia would not allow to apply pressure on the official Yerevan for a long time, or even forever to make it agree to the Russian plan. The large public support shown to the group testified that the prospect of implementing the plan peacefully was dangerous, too, and any movement in this direction would simply add fuel to anti-Russian sentiments that broke out in Armenia. Finally, this result of suppressing the Russian plan suited the West and the Armenian authorities. Back then and to this day there is convincing evidence of a connection between the latter and the Sasna Tsrer group.

No less important red lines began to be visible in Azerbaijan, too. First, concealing the real extent of the losses incurred in the April war until today shows that the Azerbaijani authorities also realize the disproportion of the achieved outcomes and the price paid for them. Serious problems of effective interaction between units of the Armed Forces of Azerbaijan during the war were visible even to the Armenian side. Assurances to the Azerbaijani society made by Russian political scientists and Azerbaijani officials over years that Russia, as it promised to Azerbaijan and Ankara, would soon provide a breakthrough in the negotiation process, would put pressure on Yerevan, and the territories would be returned to Azerbaijan turned out to be empty talks. The repeated confirmations of even more support from Turkey turned out to be empty talk, too. An attempt was made to disguise this failure by unfolding propaganda around a few occupied peaks in the course of the war, with an eye to giving Ilham Aliyev at least the image of the winning general and negotiator, but no more than that.

Lessons, Conclusions and Prospects: will the Velvet Revolution in Armenia Change the Situation?

The April war showed that military or peaceful attempts to impose a solution to the conflict settlement are doomed to failure. Moreover, it does not matter whether these attempts are coordinated in the Minsk Group or not, or come as a unilateral violation of the status quo by Azerbaijan.

The war tightened the positions of the parties even more: the President who achieved a small "victory" at a disproportionately high price (according to independent professional assessments, more than 600 dead and large losses of military equipment) continued to toughen his position by making statements about the return of Azerbaijanis not only to Artsakh but down to the "Erivan Khanate".

The leadership of Azerbaijan still cherishes illusions that the Armenian-Russian allied relations or the factor of Russia in the region will deteriorate and weaken so much that they will deprive Armenia of the hope for Russian assistance, and Turkey will be bolder in providing direct assistance. So, earlier in Baku the unsettled relations between the former Armenian authorities and at least part of the Kremlin elite prompted very high hopes, which, however, never came true. They are very unlikely to deteriorate under the new Armenian authorities, which have repeatedly stated that they will raise the Armenian-Russian relations to a new level, remain in the CSTO and the EEU, declaring this to be out of the question.

Apparently, now in Baku, even fewer people believe that Russia will lead to a breakthrough in the negotiation process, put more pressure on Yerevan and fulfill its promise fixed at the level of the Presidents of Azerbaijan and Russia in the "Declaration on Friendship and Strategic Partnership between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation"⁶.

The appointment of Karen Karapetyan, a representative of the Gasprom elite, as Prime Minister on September 8, the seemingly "unquestionable" victory of the Republican Party of Armenia, the 2018 election of the Prime Minister in April were considered by some circles in Russia as an opportunity to continue the interrupted process of the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement after the Russian plan. Being well aware of such expectations, the change of date for Azerbaijani presidential elections from fall to spring was not accidental in Baku, so that at the end of April, after the elections in Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia, all the actors of the settlement process would be ready.

Whereas in Armenia, the unexpectedly successful coercion to the resignation of Serzh Sargsyan on April 23 probably made some entities in Moscow cherish hopes for the transfer of power from Serzh Sargsyan to Karen Karapetyan who was more legitimate, but at the same time more subject to control by Moscow. Not only Moscow's loyalty to the neutrality, non-interference position, but also appeals addressed to Baku, not to try to make use of the domestic political situation in Armenia were unprecedented.

The elites of Russia, through the lips of some of its emissaries, in particular the ex-co-chairman of the OSCE Minsk Group from Russia, ex-head of the Foreign Intelligence Service Vyacheslav Trubnikov, glorified the wisdom of the Azerbaijani president, urging him not to obey the advice of the "hawks" from his entourage to take advantage of this opportunity and unleash a war. On the other hand, he called for launching the settlement of the conflict after the Key-West scenario after the change of power in Armenia, resolving the issues of "unconditional return of territories and establishment of Nakhichevan-Azerbaijan connection through Meghri".⁷ However, the surprises continued, and Nikol Pashinyan himself assumed the post of the Prime Minister. And on the next day, May 9, in Artsakh making his speech on the occasion of the festivities marking the anniversary of the

⁶ Azerbaijan's Incremental Increase On The NagornoKarabagh Frontline

⁷[Declaration on Friendship and Strategic Partnership between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation](#), 3 July 2008, Baku

⁸Former Head of Russian Intelligence: "To open the corridor in Lachin, liberate the occupied territories of Azerbaijan", 24.04.2018, Haqqin.az, <https://haqqin.az/news/127293>

liberation of the city of Shushi that contained rather tough positions regarding the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, he announced the return of Artsakh to the negotiation table, and highlighted that the issue of recognizing Artsakh's right to self-determination was not subject to bargain.

Moreover, on June 22 in the summer of 2016, during the domestic political crisis in Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan openly opposed the so-called "Lavrov's plan", calling it a plan that forced Artsakh and Armenia to surrender, and accused the first president of Armenia Levon Ter-Petrosyan of "entering into an alliance with Serzh Sargsyan for the sake of its implementation."⁸ In addition, regarding a compromise-based settlement, back then and during the presentation of the program of the Government in the National Assembly, he spoke about ensuring an atmosphere of mutual compromise and trust. Earlier, on April 9, 2016, in his speech at the National Assembly he spoke about version for the April war, summed up all the theses of the Russian-Azerbaijani conspiracy against Artsakh⁹, stating that "if the version is correct, the Armenian-Russian relations need an all-round and fundamental revision. In any case, our strategic partner, Russia, needs to dispel the existing doubts of the Armenian public. I myself am ready to assist Russia in dispelling doubts. I hope there is an opportunity to disperse them in practice. "

It is not accidental that Pashinyan mentioned the sovereignty of Armenia and the need to form Armenian-Russian relations on this basis at all his meetings with the Russian President, already in the post of the Prime Minister of Armenia. On the other hand, it is obvious that the president of the Russian Federation does not touch upon the Karabakh issue at any of these meetings, not because the Kremlin does not know who – the President or the Prime Minister – will be negotiating on behalf of Armenia, as some Russian experts say. The main reason is that Moscow does not know how to deal with the new Armenian authorities in order to continue pursuing its previous goals. The maximum that could be and was done at this stage was to acquaint the newly-elected Prime Minister of Armenia with the Azerbaijani president, to convey the message that the settlement issue remains on the agenda of the Russian Foreign Ministry and to hint that the steps will be accelerated when the Armenian power will be formed conclusively as a result of the early elections.

⁹"Russia should convince Baku and Yerevan to make painful compromise", Izvestia, 18.04.2016, <https://iz.ru/news/610417>

¹⁰Nikol Pashinyan. "Levon Ter-Petrosyan Entered into an Alliance with Serzh Sargsyan for Implementing Lavrov's Plan", The Aravot, 22.07.2016 (in Armenian) <https://www.aravot.am/2016/07/22/718825/>
Nikol Pashinyan announced about the launch of daily protests: "This Issue Shall be Solved by the People", The Aravot, 22.07.2016, <https://www.aravot-ru.am/2016/07/23/216569/>
Shameful announcement. Nikol Pashinyan about Levon Ter-Petrosyan's statement. Yerevan Today.am, 22.07.2016 (in Armenian) <http://yerevan.today/all/politics/8914/amotali-haytararutyun-nikol-pashinyany-levon-ter-petrosyani-haytararutyun-masin>

¹¹If this version is correct, the Armenian armed forces saved not only the NKR, but also Armenia: Pashinyan, 1in.am, 09.04.2016, (in Armenian) <https://www.1in.am/1887072.html>

¹²"Azerbaijan is getting ready for war, and in such situation, Mnatsakanyan's statement can be called capitulation": Kolerov, 12.07.2018, 168 Hour (in Armenian) <https://168.am/2018/07/12/981048.html>

The formation of power in Armenia with huge domestic legitimacy and public support and a stiffer position on the Artsakh issue has put Moscow in a very difficult position: any pressure to be directed at forcing Yerevan to unilateral concessions on the determination of the status of Artsakh is fraught with the threat of setting up the entire society of Armenia and Armenian nation against Russia. As a result of the Velvet Revolution, the Kremlin also lost channels of exerting pressure on the authorities from within the government and through other domestic political actors.

Conscious of these difficulties, Baku again demonstrates signs that its patience is on the wane, acting not only on the border of Artsakh-Azerbaijan, but also Armenia-Azerbaijan, in particular, in the Nakhichevan direction. After the April war, the installment of video-optical devices on the borders in Artsakh and Armenia deprived him of the possibility of a local war and blitzkrieg.

In conditions, when there are no opportunities for a victorious breakthrough in the negotiations and in case of unleashing military actions, the President of Azerbaijan has to create small victories, or rather invent the creation of new strong points at the expense of reducing the inter-position space, just as it was in Nakhichevan, and inflating it all again by means of propaganda to present it all as the continuation of the victory won in the April war.

The first meeting between the Foreign Affairs Ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan with the participation of the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group on June 12 in Brussels within the framework of the NATO Summit was merely a step to initiate official communication between the parties. In the conditions that put Russia's separate initiatives in a deadlock, perhaps this was the best time for the resuscitation of the negotiation process, which will not be easy given the positions already voiced by the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan.

However, it should be recalled that both forceful and political attempts to resolve the conflict in the past have demonstrated that, in the current geopolitical and regional realities, the goals and principles set forth in the statements repeatedly made by the leaders of the Minsk Group co-chair countries are not solvable by fragmented or step by step approaches. The maximum that can and should be done is to contain the war, restrain actors striving for war and form an environment for the settlement of the conflict. In this case, the implementation of the Vienna agreements and the more unanimous, coordinated functioning of the Minsk Group have no alternative. We must also avoid repeating the omissions of the past, when a parallel track of Russian initiatives was allowed and even legitimized under the auspices of the Minsk Group. Finally, it's time to realize that along with such omissions the main factor fueling military risks is the uncertainty of the status of Artsakh as a justification on the part of Azerbaijan for legitimizing its actions.

First, all windows of opportunity for the war must be closed, before it is too late. In this case, the political time for the settlement of the conflict will come.



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THE PRICE TO BE PAID FOR KARABAKH IS INDEPENDENCE. BUT LET US KEEP CALM FOR NOW

<http://www.publicdialogues.info/en/node/789>

If we consider 1988 our reference point, our conflict is almost 30 years old. Only a few months short. Until 1992, that is, before the official collapse of the USSR, the Karabakh conflict developed "in an autonomous mode." Immediately after the collapse of the USSR, this conflict became another nuisance for the international community.

Are we really "what we look like" or are we pretending?

This thirty-year period may be conventionally divided into three stages. The first one is that of "flying hats." Rather, this is the stage from 1988 to 1994. Both Armenians and Azerbaijanis were confident of a swift victory. Armenia counted on the people's clear understanding of the national idea, organization, the powerful and rich diaspora, primarily in the Western countries, especially in the US and France, the sympathy of the international community for the "long-suffering people"; Armenia speculated on the Christian-Muslim confrontation, but at the same time was in friendly relations with Iran, and referred to the tragic events of the First World War. In a word, they thought that they will very quickly achieve the recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Armenia as compensation for their "age-long suffering".

The Azerbaijanis counted on their power. We have a larger population. We will march down to Yerevan. Turkey is supporting us. You will benefit from being friends with us. We have oil and gas.

Both failed to achieve the goal. Yes, Armenia has occupied and still controls part of the Azerbaijani territories. However, no one is going to recognize Nagorno-Karabakh part of Armenia, moreover an "independent" state.

We crushed with our power, especially after 2005, when petrodollars flowed in like a river. But they could not make us achieve the liberation of the occupied territories. However, they deprived Armenia of the prospects for economic prosperity. And this was a major impact. Armenia was left outside of all communication and energy projects (pipelines, transport corridors and so on).

After 1994, the conflicting parties adopted the tactics of a "long siege". The most popular slogan of this period is "time is in our favor".

The author of these lines was one of the few who consistently opposed the approach "time is in our favor." By the way, I said this regarding both Azerbaijan and Armenia. I at least tried to prove that time is exclusively in favor of external players with geopolitical interests in the region. More than once I wrote that the more time elapsed, the more the Karabakh conflict became just an element in the global confrontation between the West and Russia. As a result, Azerbaijan and Armenia are deprived of even minimal influence on the settlement of the conflict. Moreover, time is depriving them of influence more and more. In a word, I tried to convince everyone that time is not in favor of Azerbaijan or Armenia. Unfortunately, I did not succeed.

Honestly, sometimes it seems to me that we are believed to be complete idiots. Or maybe we are so cleverly pretending to be idiots that our partners, in the person of international intermediaries, regard us as such. Over the last 20 years we have been convinced that the international community, represented by the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs – Russia, the United States and France, has a fully consolidated position on the Karabakh conflict settlement. In simpler terms, there are no contradictions between the West and Russia regarding the settlement of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, unlike the cases of other similar international problems. The problem is with the parties to the conflict. It's us, the parties to the conflict, are so "underdeveloped." Well, we are the ones both unable and unwilling to arrive at an agreement. The international community shall not "force us to peace," shall it?

It shall be noted that we are talking about three permanent members of the UN Security Council. Of the remaining two, Britain is usually in solidarity with the United States, at least when it comes to resolving such conflicts. This leaves us with China. The official Beijing never opposes commonly made decisions agreed by the permanent members of the Security Council, unless, of course, the problem directly concerns the national-state interests of China itself. And this conflict does not directly affect the national-state interests of China.

Thus, it turns out that all the members of the UN Security Council have a completely coordinated position on the settlement of the Karabakh conflict. However, they have been "nursing" Armenia and Azerbaijan for more than 20 years, and yet, they fail to "persuade" these two "babies" to sign a peace agreement. At the same time, it is necessary to take into account that the general parameters of the peaceful settlement of the Karabakh conflict seem to have long been determined by the relevant resolutions of the UN Security Council, which were adopted unanimously, i.e. upon consensus. Who in their right mind will believe that the five leading powers of the world, the permanent members of the UN Security Council, are powerless against Azerbaijan and Armenia?

There is no agreement, at least, on the settlement of the conflict. It simply cannot exist. Throughout the world, especially in the territory of the post-Soviet space, we are witnessing a tough confrontation between Russia and the collective West. At the same time, especially Russia makes an active use of existing and emerging territorial and ethnic conflicts to realize its own geopolitical interests in the post-Soviet space (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, Crimea, and Eastern Ukraine). Then why should the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict be an exception? Especially considering that this region is seen as an energy corridor bypassing Russia and is neighboring with Iran.

Russia and the United States periodically make distinct attempts to resolve the conflict, which are successfully torpedoed, let's say, as a "potential adversary." Sometimes they even have to resort to radical measures with tragic consequences. Suffice it to recall the terrorist attack in the Armenian parliament in 1999. What can we do? You can't make an omelet without breaking the eggs. And we are the eggs, of course.

The Mirage Is Gone

Probably, since August 2008 both Yerevan and Armenia have begun to realize the whole erroneousness of the "time is in our favor" tactics. But in 2014, when Russia annexed the Crimea and occupied part of Eastern Ukraine, Baku and Yerevan, most likely, were horrified. Although, at first glance, Yerevan should have been pleased. After all, within six years, Russia twice gave preference to the supremacy of the so-called "the right of people to self-determination", by the way, in the post-Soviet space.

However, neither Baku, nor Yerevan demonstrated any special joy. Both here and there they realized that Russia ultimately does not intend to play up to one of the conflicting sides, it uses the existing territorial and ethnic conflicts in the post-Soviet space exclusively for its own geopolitical interests, or, more precisely, for restoring its "territorial integrity" within the boundaries of the Soviet empire.

Consequently, in the recent years there have been major changes in the perception of reality by the warring parties, primarily at the level of political elites. This is good. It is time for these societies to get rid of illusions. This is a kind of preparation for these societies for peace. After all, eventually illusions will be dispelled in confrontation with harsh reality, to be perceived as another tragedy, which may entail a catastrophe.

Each party is trying to solve this problem differently. Armenians are fatalists by nature. Consequently, the nation is waiting and will wait for a fatal outcome, by the way, as a result of another "betrayal". And this time it will come from Russia. Such an emotional approach to the geopolitical processes taking place in the region can be advantageous from the historical perspective, as it creates a sense of guilt for the future generations of politicians in foreign policy partner countries, but it hardly makes it possible to make the "right bets" in the present reality.

Yerevan seriously believes that Russia is ready to "throw Armenia under the bus" in order to appease Azerbaijan and Turkey. That is why in the recent years it has been selling to Azerbaijan quite modern arms, if I may use the word 'modern' here. But on a larger scale, at the expense of Azerbaijan Russia "compensates" for the losses it incurs for arming

Armenia, and with no less modern weapons, that are either donated or sold at domestic prices, as a matter of fact, with "non-refundable" Russian loans.

At the same time, it is necessary to take into account that such high-tech machinery that is stuffed with electronics cannot be used without the "master's" consent.

But in any case, Armenia cannot turn its back to Russia, at least, not having regulated its relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey.

Everything is much simpler in Azerbaijan. They try to remind the society of the harsh realities that are packaged accordingly, of course.

We went along the beaten track, especially because we had experience. Immediately after the 2001 negotiations in the American Key West Heydar Aliyev gathered the entire political elite, including the opposition. Aliyev Senior honestly stated that Azerbaijan was not allowed and would not be allowed, at least in the foreseeable future, to resolve the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict by force. Therefore, we had to wait. After all, "time was in our favour."

So, something similar is happening today.

"Azerbaijan has the most combat-capable army in the region, perfectly enhanced with military technology. Azerbaijan annually spends 3-4 billion dollars to ensure its security. And our state proved its might during the April war. If we are not prevented, we can liberate all the occupied territories within a week or a month the longest," said Ali Hasanov, the aide to the President of Azerbaijan said at the European Congress of Azerbaijanis, according to haqqin.az report.

A.Hasanov also noted that Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijanis in Europe were opposed by a powerful Armenian diaspora with an extensive network and centers in Brussels, London, and Paris: "They are very strong, they have very strong and close ties with the European elite. And this is a rather unequal battle." (<https://haqqin.az/comics/123645>)

I agree with Mr. Hasanov, at least with the first part of his statement. Yes, in fact, we have the strongest army in the region, unless we consider Russia and Iran. Unfortunately, Iran and Russia are not just related to the South Caucasus, they also dictate the "rules of the game" in our region.

Yes, theoretically speaking Azerbaijan can liberate all occupied territories within a few weeks. Even the sober politicians in Armenia recognize that after 2005, using the huge available resources, Azerbaijan was able to create the military potential, necessary for the military settlement of the conflict. But we are not talking about a shoot-out between the leaders of two street gangs, in which "laws of honor" do not allow anyone to interfere. Hasanov himself admits that influential external players do not allow, and most likely will not allow Azerbaijan to implement the force scenario of the conflict settlement.

But further Mr. Hasanov acts disingenuously. Most probably, he cannot afford to give a clear indication of these external forces, so as not to anger the northern neighbor.

It should be noted right away that the so-called "collective West" as a whole cannot in any way hinder the settlement of this conflict after the military scenario, especially if it happens within a limited time frame. The "Collective West" is the NATO, and such leading states as the US in particular have no military presence in our region; as a result, they do not have

the tools of "coercion to peace" to be applied against the parties to the conflict. On the one hand, this is an extremely negative factor, for the simple reason that the region lacks a military-political balance between the leading global players, primarily between Russia and the United States. However, the absence of a military and political presence removes any responsibility from the West as a whole, and the US in particular, for the possible development of events after the by-force scenario. Therefore, the West could "turn a blind eye" to the attempts at a forceful settlement of the conflict, if they are of short duration and are not accompanied by criminal actions against civilians. Many diplomats, representing the leading Western states in Baku, have openly stated this in private conversations with the author of these lines.

So, from among the leading geopolitical players only Russia has a military and political presence in the region, and as a result, "instruments of coercion to peace" to be applied against the parties to the conflict. Thus, only Russia can contribute to or prevent a settlement of the conflict by the force scenario.

In principle, Moscow does not conceal this fact. Recently, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov openly said that if the West took into account Russia's interests, many conflicts in the post-Soviet space would never have arisen, while others, including the Karabakh conflict, would have been settled long ago. Lavrov, in fact, admitted that it is Moscow that does not allow us to resolve the Karabakh conflict, since the proposed options do not meet the geopolitical interests of Russia. To put it simply, Moscow demands to be recognized as the only "master" of the post-Soviet space.

Baku Is Ready, Yerevan Is not

In case domestic political problems arose in Armenia or Azerbaijan, the opposite party as a rule, tried to take advantage of the moment and "get some benefits" in Karabakh. And they achieved the opposite outcome. Domestic contradictions receded into the background in the face of "external threats". This time Azerbaijan retained its "neutrality". I completely agree with Mehman Aliyev, the head of the Turan Agency, that the official Baku did not even stir a finger to "save" Serzh Sargsyan.

It can be assumed that for some reason the former president of Armenia no longer suited the official Baku as a partner in the negotiations for the settlement of the Karabakh conflict. However, we cannot exclude the fact that we were asked about this. Most likely, this was a combination of both.

After all, it was immediately after Sargsyan's resignation that the Director of the Foreign Intelligence Service of Russia Sergei Narishkin arrived in Baku and held talks with the President of Azerbaijan

It is unlikely that Mr. Narishkin would arrive in Baku so urgently to personally congratulate Ilham Aliyev on his victory in the election and discuss the domestic political situation in Azerbaijan. There is nothing to discuss in Baku. Everything is under control. Ilham Aliyev stands strong. No one has even minimal resources to challenge him. The opposition is completely destroyed.

He has the opportunity to impose any compromise-based peace agreement on the society. He can even present this peace as a great "victory", which in principle is impossible. The authoritarian power can allow itself to act contrary to the will of the society, as long as it is strong. Regardless of how provocative this may sound, it is a huge positive resource for achieving a real result in peace negotiations. Suffice it to recall that the peace treaties with Israel were signed by the President of Egypt and the King of Jordan. Neither one nor the other could even be suspected of any commitment to democracy.

A diametrically opposite situation exists in Armenia, moreover it has been there permanently. For more than twenty years the society has been in an "excited" state. Armenia's leaders, even the new "people's prime minister" cannot be particularly suspected of sympathizing with democracy either. The power has chronically been weak, primarily because of the lack of financial and economic resources: this leaves room for manipulating public sentiments. The socio-political life has been in constant fever. There has been no stability, and there will not be any in the future either. At least in the mid-term future.

Therefore, at this particular stage in Baku the head of the Russian intelligence could discuss exclusively the possibility of Azerbaijan's influence on the domestic political situation in Armenia through the Karabakh conflict. There were no other real problems requiring urgent discussion. Most likely, Narishkin asked I. Aliyev to be patient. The permission to "take advantage" is not given so publicly.

The former head of Russia's foreign intelligence openly spoke of the need to have patience. Former intelligence officers of such a high rank are unlikely to voice a personal opinion. "The political situation created in Armenia should not serve as an excuse for launching military operations in Karabakh. Ilham Aliyev is quite an experienced and wise politician, not to listen to the advice of some Azerbaijani "hawks" asking to take advantage of the situation," the former co-chairman of the OSCE Minsk Group, former head of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Vyacheslav Trubnikov told haqqin.az.

As Trubnikov believes, the OSCE Minsk Group should immediately undertake intensive activities, regardless of the currently complicated relations between Russia and the West.

"Generally speaking, I will stick to my opinion that the parties should come to a compromise-based solution of the Karabakh conflict, making use of the achievements made in Key West in 2001. This means opening the corridor between Meghri and Nakhchivan and the Lachin corridor, and most importantly - unconditional release of all the occupied territories. In my opinion, this is the best option for the settlement of the Karabakh conflict," the expert noted (<https://haqqin.az/news/127293>).

In addition, the "taking advantage and benefiting" in these circumstances was in the interests of Azerbaijan. Before our eyes, the political and legal system for regulating international relations is collapsing. The international law is not enforced. The system is paralyzed. In these conditions, we observe the leading states act separately, in these or other parts of the world, in order to assert their own geopolitical domination, and most frequently, contrary to international law.

The attempt to "take advantage and benefit" could turn into a tragedy. We, most likely, "would be forced to peace." And it must be taken into account that Russia will be the only one to make sure this coercion happens.

We must also realize that with any scenarios of power change, it is hardly reasonable to expect any serious changes in the foreign policy course of Armenia, in general, and in the settlement of the Karabakh issue, in particular. Without the settlement of the Karabakh conflict and normalization of relations with Turkey, Armenia cannot do away with the Russian security umbrella.

In the opinion of the same Trubnikov, all conversations about the withdrawal of Armenia from the CSTO and the EEU, as well as the withdrawal of Russian bases from Armenia's territories, make no sense.

The fact that the leader of the protest actions actually came to power in Armenia shall not make us happy. His position regarding the Karabakh settlement is likely to be even tougher than that of S. Sargsyan, at least in the early stages. Pashinyan has already spoken out for the participation of Karabakh separatists' leaders in the negotiations for this territory. He said that in order not to witness a repetition of the April events, the Republic of Azerbaijan should be caused serious damage to ensure guarantees on the inability of the Azerbaijani authorities, namely Aliyev himself, to overcome the state of shock for at least a year.

In any case, the parties will take a time-out in the negotiations on the Karabakh settlement. First, they will have to wait for, at least, early parliamentary elections and the formation of a new government in Armenia, which will yet have to get into the swim of things regarding the negotiations process.

Secondly, it is necessary to bring down the intensity of public activity. After the illusion of "victory over corrupt power", the Armenian society is extremely "aroused". Such an "aroused" society cannot be offered a compromise. The people who "won" the power of the Sargsyans, the Karapetyans, will "demand everything". People always hold much more populist sentiments than the political elite. And today, Armenia has a populist leader who, at least for the time being and temporarily remains dependent on an extremely "aroused" society. It is necessary to give time to the society to "cool down".

In a word, the parties would be very happy to arrive at an agreement. But they do not know how.

However, already at this point it is not difficult to predict the next "autumn exacerbation" in international politics, which may have a very negative impact on our region. We should hardly expect a breakthrough improvement in the relations between Russia and the collective West in general, and with the US, in particular; moreover, it is hard to imagine on Putin's terms. It is impossible by default. These relations will most probably aggravate even more after the World Cup in Russia and the midterm elections in the US.

There will be an aggravation of the domestic political situation in Russia, too. Even according to surveys of engaged sociological centers from Russia, there is already a sharp drop in Putin's rating because of his plans to reform the pension system. In fact, it is about raising the retirement age. In addition, the hopes for economic growth also failed to materialize. A serious crisis, by the way, not only an economic, but also a socio-political one is brewing in Russia.

In such conditions, the only means of maintaining Putin's rating at a consistently high level which has proved successful already many times is another "piece" of the post-Soviet space

voluntarily "joining" or "uniting" with Russia. The Russian everymen are ready to forgive Putin for everything if such a thing happens. At least it worked before. The Russians, if I'm not mistaken, have "forgiven" Putin already twice for squandering their own pension savings. The restoration of the "great Russia" is the only unifying idea for the majority of Russians.

The only hope is that Putin has a lot to look at in the post-Soviet space even without us being there, namely Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine. We may get spared this time. But sooner or later, it will be our turn. Putin is going to remain in power for a long time. He is not going to hand over anything to anyone. All will be Russian, just like Zhirinovskiy puts it - Bakinski, Yelizavetpolski and Erivanski provinces. Neither the Armenian lobby, nor our billions will help here.

In the meantime, we will keep calm ...