

## INTERNATIONAL LAW AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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### THE KARABAKH CONFLICT – YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW

The article analyzes history, evolution and the present stage of development of the Karabakh conflict. The author stresses that this ethnopolitical confrontation has deep historical and cultural roots. Currently, the Karabakh conflict zone is one of the most militarized areas in Europe, where two well-armed modern armies face each other with full combat equipment: artillery installations, missile complexes, combat helicopters and fighter planes, unmanned aircraft and other modern weapon components. Peacekeeping forces in Karabakh are not efficient, they conserve the conflict but do not resolve it. The author concludes that negotiations to cease fire and resolve the conflict were vain for many years and the current regime of the ceasefire has been maintained with the balance of forces in Baku and Yerevan, and not on the basis of the already devalued agreements, reached 30 years ago. The nature of the Karabakh conflict is also complicated by Russia's role in it: Moscow is successfully manipulating with this conflict, using it for its own interests in the region and affects the interests of the parties as much as possible.

**Keywords:** Karabakh conflict, Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, conflict zone, peacekeeping, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Russia, post-Soviet space.

The Karabakh conflict is qualified by the conflictologists as one of the most difficult confrontations, due to its sharply expressed ethnopolitical nature. This is a conflict between two neighboring nations that have been going on for more than a century.

If all ethnopolitical conflicts in the post-Soviet space have been inspired by the Kremlin, there is only one exception and truthfully this is the Karabakh conflict. This is a clear Armenian-Azerbaijani ethnopolitical confrontation with long historical and cultural roots. However, Russia, as co-chairman of the OSCE Minsk Group and one of the main responsible subjects (along with the US and France) on the conflict resolution, has not made any effective steps to resolve the conflict for thirty years. Moreover, at the initial stage of the confrontation, when the USSR, which included Armenia and Azerbaijan, officially existed the Kremlin did not take adequate measures to prevent further escalation of the conflict, while it was its direct obligation. It can be said that it has contributed to the progress of the conflict, as a result of which the world has received one of the most difficult ethnic conflicts that lasted for more than three decades and sacrificed lives of tens of thousands of people. Undoubtedly, from the Kremlin it was a political decision with far-reaching plans.

The Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous District was created by the Bolsheviks in 1923 in the Azerbaijan SSR. This decision immediately caused a sharp reaction in neighboring Armenia, as well as between the population of Karabakh, 94% of which were ethnic Armenians. At that time, this step of the Soviet officials was clearly dictated by the political taste. According to historians, the Kremlin decided to win the heart of Kemalist Turkey<sup>1</sup>.

The latest history of the conflict starts at the beginning of the 90s of the 20th century and coincides with the period of the breakdown of the USSR. On September 2, 1991, the Karabakh National Council announced the establishment of an independent Nagorno-Karabakh Republic on the territories of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous District and the Shaumian District of Azerbaijan. In response, the Azerbaijani parliament abolished the Nagorno-Karabakh autonomy on 26 November and divided its

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<sup>1</sup> Востриков, С.В. (1999). Карабахский кризис и политика России на Кавказе. *Общественные науки и современность*, 3.

territory and distributed it to the surrounding areas. The Armenians did not delay the response and the referendum was held on December 8, where 99% of participants voted for independence. Of course, the referendum was boycotted by the Azerbaijani population of Karabakh<sup>1</sup>.

Aggressive political steps taken by the opposing sides led to provoking military confrontation, which eventually turned into large-scale warfare. With unspecified data, more than 20,000 people died and more than 1 million people were displaced because of this conflict. Finally, warfare was suspended on May 5, 1994, on the basis of a protocol signed by the conflict parties in the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek. Agreement on the ceasefire was signed by the heads of the Defense Ministers of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh in Baku on May 9, Yerevan on May 10, and Stepanakert on May 11. Finally, the agreement came into the force from May 12<sup>2</sup>.

From this period, the epoch of peacekeeping formats and negotiations have been started, which is still going on. Agreements reached in 1994 and 1995 are more and more unreliable: There are not peacekeepers in the conflict zone, the ceasefire regime is observed by the OSCE's limited mission, which still has modest rights, and the process of negotiations which, as a rule, is activated after the rising of the conflict, is only a mechanism for conflict monitoring and is not the way of solving it. On the 250-km frontier perimeter, where the opposite sides are facing each other, is constantly a threat of escalation of the situation, which can be turned into large-scale military operations, as it took place in April 2016. Of course, the existing mechanisms of prevention are completely disproportionate to the difficulty of the problem.

As for today's condition, it can be said, that the Karabakh conflict zone is one of the most militarized areas in Europe, where two well-armed modern armies face each other with full combat equipment: artillery installations, missile complexes, combat helicopters and fighter planes, unmanned aircraft and other modern weapon components. During these years, Azerbaijan has spent billions of dollars for modern arms, thanks to its oil reserves, similarly, Armenia, although much less but because of a strategic partnership agreement with Russia, it was able to significantly increase its military potential. On the basis of the agreement, it had access to modern Russian armament, with financially profitable conditions. This means, that since 1994 the conflict zone has changed a lot, but not in a good manner.

Another issue is the deployment of peacekeepers in the conflict zone: as the time and experience have shown in the post-Soviet space, the mandate of the peacekeeping forces is a mechanism of conflict conservation rather than its settlement. There is another important moment in the peacekeeping mandate: in particular, its involvement in the process can not be justified, if it is subjective and sympathetic towards one of the sides of the conflict. In this case, the role of the peacekeeping forces in the whole process will be only negative.

In the conflict zone, the absence of a consensus on the placement of international peacekeeping forces, once again, points to the inefficiency of the peace process. Russia, as co-chairman of the OSCE Minsk Group, always had a temptation, but at every turn, its attempts were vain. The reason is very interesting: both, the Azerbaijani and the Armenian sides are categorically contradicting towards this initiative of Russia. This is logical because such a configuration would give Russia an additional leverage to manipulate with the conflict, in order to pursue its strategic interests in the region. Their position was the following: The Armenian side considered it unreasonable to deploy peacekeeping forces without the final resolution of the conflict, where the status of the republic would be defined. While the Azerbaijani side did not see the place of peacekeepers in the conflict zone until the occupying troops of Armenia did not leave the entire conflict zone<sup>3</sup>. In these positions of the parties, it is shaping high standards of distrust towards the peacekeeping initiative obtruded by Russia.

For the first time, it was in 1994 when Russian Defense Minister Pavel Grachev expressed his readiness to deploy Russian peacekeeping forces in the conflict zone, within the framework of the May 12 ceasefire agreement. About this theme, the narrative of Armenian journalist Tatut Akopian is interesting, which he published in his book "Karabakh Diary: Green and Black". He points out that neither the Azerbaijanis nor Armenians trusted the Russians and opposed the return of the Russian soldiers. According to him, Karabakh official Samvel Petrosyan has acknowledged that he had worked intensively with Azerbaijan's representative, Tofik Zuluparov, not to allow the Russian military presence in the conflict

<sup>1</sup> *Коммерсант* (1991, декабрь, 16).

<sup>2</sup> Казимиров, В. (2003, май, 13). Карабах и Гейдар Алиев. *Время МН*.

<sup>3</sup> Мир без миротворцев (2018). Русская планета: интернет-портал. <[rusplt.ru/rubeji/armeniya/mir-bez-mirotvortsev](http://rusplt.ru/rubeji/armeniya/mir-bez-mirotvortsev)> (2018, май, 18).

zone<sup>1</sup>. The Russian strategy in relation to the conflict is "pragmatic" and understandable: to use the existing conflict as an instrument for pursuing its strategic interests in the region.

After V. Putin's presidency, Russia's position towards the conflict became largely conservative<sup>2</sup>. One of his first steps as a president was to normalize relations with Azerbaijan, which was not really desirable during his predecessor's rule. Also, he had a clear vision towards the conflict, which he clearly formed to H. Aliyev and R. Kocharyan at the trilateral meeting in Moscow in 2000: he said that Russia was not going to take responsibility for the ongoing events and would not interfere with the conflict, that could last for many years. He welcomed the solution in a manner that would provide long-term stability in the region, and in the post-conflict period would support the maintenance of a historically justified geopolitical balance and would not let the region to become a hub for various military and political confrontations. Since then, he has not changed his position. V. Putin repeated the same in 2004 and 2010.

Such a position means that Russia welcomes the resolution of the conflict only with the condition, that it will contribute in maintaining or strengthening Russia's influence in the region, at the same time the country will not taking responsibility and will not allow to give away the dominant position in the region. However, it should be noted that neither Paris nor Washington (co-chairmen of the OSCE Minsk Group with Russia) are not distinguished by high standards of responsibility. They, like Russia, prefer this burden to be carried by the parties to the conflict. US and France As co-chairmen of the OSCE Minsk Group are only episodically interfering with the processes, only when there is a chance that the parties may come to an agreement. However, the likelihood of such agreements is always low.

The peace plan, developed within the framework of the OSCE, includes the release of the occupied territories by the Armenian side (in addition to the Lachin corridor, connecting Karabakh with Armenia), to grant guarantees of self-government for Karabakh Armenians in return to recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh independence. But after the famous events of April 2016, the positions of both sides have become more rigid, so their thoughts and resources are not directed to compromises but are directed to additional militarization.

Dual intence armaments are accompanied by heavy war rhetoric and rigid propaganda. In this regard, especially the Azerbaijani side is distinguished. President Aliyev has repeatedly mentioned Armenia negatively. He calls it guilty, criminal regime and accuses of the genocide of the Azerbaijani people. According to Aliyev, modern Armenia was created historically in Azeri aims, including Yerevan and its return considers as a strategic goal of Azerbaijan<sup>3</sup>. Armenia, as the winner of the war, largely refrains from such rigid statements, but reinforces control over the occupied territories and increases military representation.

Consequently, we can conclude that in the Karabakh conflict zone, since 1994, the current regime of the ceasefire has been maintained with the balance of forces in Baku and Yerevan, and not on the basis of the already devalued agreements, reached 30 years ago.

The series of negotiations around the conflict settlement has been going on in vain for many years. After the Ceasefire Agreement came into force from May 1994, the opposite sides were offered several projects, starting from the plan of "Transition of Territories" between Armenia and Azerbaijan to the idea of "United State" between Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh. Nevertheless, none of these projects have caused great interest between the parties<sup>4</sup>.

At the negotiating table, there are two main issues – the status of Nagorno Karabakh, and the other – the de-occupation of the seven regions, which are directly bordering the self-declared republic. There is no compromise on these two fundamental issues between the opposing parties. The Azerbaijani side considers dialogue on status only in terms of achieving full de-occupation. In parallel, the Armenian side also puts its position on principle. The formula: "Concession on status, in exchange for the concession on the territory", is the cornerstone of Armenian diplomacy<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Waal, T. (2016). Кавказские пленники: как разрешить дилемму безопасности в Карабахе. *Московский Центр Карнеги* <<https://carnegie.ru/2016/07/12/ru-pub-64054>> (2018, август, 16).

<sup>2</sup> Waal, T. (2016). Карабах-2017: будет ли война. *Московский Центр Карнеги* <<https://carnegie.ru/2017/02/06/ru-pub-67915>> (2018, август, 16).

<sup>3</sup> РИА Новости (2018). Алиев назвал "возвращение" в Ереван целью Азербайджана <<https://ria.ru/world/20180209/1514274051.html>> (2018, август, 16).

<sup>4</sup> Маркедонов, С. (2017). Постсоветский эксклюзив. Как Карабах может сблизить Россию и Запад. *Московский Центр Карнеги* <<https://carnegie.ru/commentary/73263>> (2018, август, 16).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

In April 2016, the Karabakh conflict, which, in the international political agenda, has been under the shadow of such dominant issues like Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Ukraine, North Korea, once again has reminded itself to the international community. Since 1994, it was the largest military confrontation, that lasted for four days and killed more than two hundred people. The Azerbaijani army, as a result of the offensive operation, rebuilt the control over two highlands, including Lele-Teppe, that is a few miles away from the border of Iran and thus gain strategic importance<sup>1</sup>. However, the psychological effect, that accompanied this little military success is more important. It has radically changed the attitude of the Azerbaijani community towards the conflict. There has been a belief that the state has the ability to restore territorial integrity, and in the future, the government will have full support for implementing militaristic policy.

The ceasefire was reached on the basis of a bilateral agreement, on April 5 at the meeting of the heads of the General mil Staff of Armenia and Azerbaijan in Moscow. That same evening, President Putin expressed his deep concern over the escalation of the situation in the conflict zone during the phone call with Azerbaijani and Armenian colleagues and called out the sides to maintain the ceasefire regime<sup>2</sup>.

Moscow was relieved, in the shortest possible time it could defuse the tension, but it cost him a certain political price. Azerbaijan, once again, was convinced about Russia's pro-Armenian position. In particular, it has become clear that the current status quo, which is so unacceptable for its national interests, is precious for Russia, which, apart from the strengthening of its positions in the region, also generates millions by selling weapons to the opposing sides. The dissatisfaction also increases at the Armenian side. There is an increasingly popular view, that Russia betrayed Armenia in April 2016 when it did not provide direct military assistance. According to official Yerevan, Russia's arms supply to Azerbaijan is fundamentally contradicting the principles of strategic partnership between Russia and Armenia. And most importantly, Russia has lost its most significant supporter in the South Caucasus and the most loyal regime in the post-Soviet space – the Armenian "Karabakhian clan". Two years after the events of April 2016, as a result of massive protests in Yerevan and in whole Armenia, the existing officials were forced to retreat, which caused removing of Serge Sargsyan from the Prime Minister post. Despite the political changes, Armenia's foreign policy course remained the same, which has been repeatedly confirmed by the new Prime Minister, Nicolas Pashhinyan, although there are still some cracks in bilateral relations.

Of course, the Karabakh conflict is very difficult due to its specificity, which makes its settlement obscure. During the thirty years of the ongoing peace process, the ice was not able to move on. It is clear that the parties are not still ready to engage in serious peace talks. Neither Minsk Group has justified expectations, it is like an arbitrator, who missed the match reins. Nevertheless, the differences, tensions, and distrust of the existing opinions, the sides of the conflict, moderate states and the entire international community agree on one of the fundamental truths: Without settlement of the Karabakh conflict and the normalization of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, there is no mention of establishing peace and stability in the Caucasus region.

### Conclusion

The Karabakh conflict, as a phenomenon, as a strategic standpoint is far more important for Russia, rather than a separate Armenia or Azerbaijan. This is a kind of political tool in the hands of the Kremlin political experts, who have successfully worked with and used it over three decades. The specificity of the conflict is, that Moscow is successfully manipulating with this conflict, using it for its own interests in the region and affects the interests of the parties as much as possible. It can be said, that the current status quo serves more of its interests than Armenia's and Azerbaijan's. The conflict allows Moscow to maintain influence on the former colonies and dictate the game rules to them. The result did not delay: Nowadays Armenia is a country that is absolutely linked with Russia as an economic as a military-political point of view. And in the case of Azerbaijan, Russia has been able to stop for an indefinite period of time its not so clear but still noticeable pro-Western course. Also, Russia has been able to neutralize Turkey's role. Although Turkey remains the number one strategic partner for Azerbaijan, its impact has been sharply reduced in recent years. The reason for this is that Turkey has recently been significantly burdened by problems as within (terrorism, separatism, economic crisis) as outside of the country (the Syrian crisis;

<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia.org (2016). *Вооружённые столкновения в Нагорном Карабахе* <[https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Вооружённые\\_столкновения\\_в\\_Нагорном\\_Карабахе\\_\(2016\)](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Вооружённые_столкновения_в_Нагорном_Карабахе_(2016))> (2018, август, 16).

<sup>2</sup> Фохт, Е. (2016). Договоренность о прекращении огня в Карабахе была достигнута в Москве. *RBC.RU* <<https://www.rbc.ru/politics/06/04/2016/5704cb8f9a79470eb2af58fb>> (2018, август, 16).



Recently complicated relations with the West, mainly with the new administration of US). Turkey was not able to become a guarantee of Azerbaijan's sovereignty, but the expectations always were in Baku. However, Ankara does not intend to surrender to this fact. After an impressive victory in the presidential election on June 24, 2018, President Erdogan planned the first official visit in Baku.

The events of April 2016 made clear that Azerbaijan will not refuse "mini wars" in the future, aiming primarily to eliminate as much territory as possible and thus strengthening pressure on the Armenian side as well as on the OSCE Minsk Group, in order moderate countries to strengthen the pressure, because of fear of the "Great War" and force the Armenian side to make significant compromises. As for beginning of the "Great War": I think in the near future the chances of it are small because Azerbaijan just will not risk it, until it does not have a guarantee of Russia's non-interference. That's why the aim of the development of cooperation with Russia in the military field is to provide at least neutral position from Russia in case of the renewed military confrontation with Armenia. I hope, Baku is well aware of the reliability of Russia's guarantees. The guarantee was received by Ukraine in Budapest memorandum in 1994, but it did not prevent the Kremlin from annexing Crimea. I think Baku should take into consideration this factor.

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