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FACTORS AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE ARMENIAN-AZERBAIJAN CONFLICT

The article analyzes the main factors and consequences of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. Following the results of the war in the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh in the fall of 2020, Azerbaijan regained part of its territories. The next escalation of the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh ended with a ceasefire agreement. According to the document, Armenia returns to Azerbaijan three regions – Aghdam in the east, and Kelbajar and Lachin in the west. At the same time, the so-called Lachin corridor, five kilometers wide, which connects the Yerevan-backed NKR with Armenia, will not affect the city of Shusha and, under the terms of the agreement, will be guarded by Russian peacekeepers. The Armenian-Azerbaijani military conflict marked the defeat of international law, multilateralism and attempts to resolve conflicts by diplomatic means. The signed ceasefire agreement will have far-reaching consequences not only for Armenia and Azerbaijan, but also for Turkey, including because of the transport corridor between Nakhichevan and Azerbaijan agreed by the parties, which will allow Turkish exporters to send their goods to China in a shorter bypassing Georgia.

It has been proven that the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict flared up with renewed vigor due to a variety of factors. One of the important factors is that Azerbaijan has a military advantage over Armenia: the revenues generated during the 2000s oil boom were invested in the creation of a well-trained and armed army. Azerbaijan decided to take advantage of this possibility in order to change the situation in the conflict region so that, while continuing negotiations with Armenia, it would come out from a stronger position, and not from a weak position of the side that lost the war, as it was in 1994. Direct support for Turkey, which influence in the region has grown sharply after Ankara's successful intervention in the conflicts in Syria and Libya, has given the Azerbaijani leadership confidence in the reach of success. The world's leading powers are preoccupied with the coronavirus crisis. The world economy is heading for a long crisis, and oil prices – the main source of replenishment of Azerbaijan's budget – are unlikely to remain at their current level. This means that financial opportunities to strengthen the country's military potential may be limited.

Keywords: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh, the Armenian-Azerbaijani war, the causes of the war, the consequences of the war.

On September 27, 2020, the war began again in Transcaucasia. Azerbaijani forces attacked the Armenian-populated territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, a disputed region that de facto belonged to Armenia and de jure to Azerbaijan. The newest episode of this conflict lasted for 44 days.

The contemporary history of the conflict begins with Gorbachev's perestroika in the 1980s and the growing popularity of ideas of national identity among the peoples inhabiting the USSR. The Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region was a part of the Azerbaijan SSR, but it was populated mainly by Armenians. In the late 1980s, the Armenians appealed to the leadership of the USSR with a request to transfer them under the jurisdiction of the Armenian SSR. The movement of local Armenians for unification with Armenia caused a surge of emotions in Azerbaijan. Clashes between representatives of the two communities soon resulted in the exodus of the Azerbaijani population from the Armenian SSR and Karabakh, followed by the Armenian disorder in the Azerbaijani city of Sumgait in February 1988. The USSR government tried to resolve the issue by force, but the arrests of representatives of the national movement in Karabakh, Armenia and Azerbaijan only increased their support among the population and the enmity between the two republics. In January 1990, Armenian disorder took place

in Baku, and on January 20, army units entered the capital of Azerbaijan, hundreds of civilians were killed, wounded or missing¹.

In 1991, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the struggle for Karabakh entered a new round: the parties were able to use the weapons left behind by the army. Mostly fierce battles were fought in 1992-1993: both sides suffered heavy losses. The conflict in Karabakh was repeatedly discussed in the UN, and in 1993 the UN Security Council adopted four resolutions, none of which were implemented.

Attempts to bring the parties to the negotiating table were at different levels. But every time the leaders changed in Armenia or Azerbaijan and they had to start the negotiations anew. The OSCE Minsk Group, co-chaired by Russia, the United States and France, was engaged in negotiations: it was created in March 1992 at a conference of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in Minsk. In May 1994, the mediators managed to achieve a ceasefire in Karabakh. By that time, the territory of the autonomous region and seven adjacent regions was under the control of the Armenian forces. The meetings and negotiations that have continued since then have not led to any results².

It should be noted that local battles with the participation of sabotage groups, drones, and positional skirmishes constantly took place on the line of separation of the sides. The most serious clashes occurred in April 2016, resulting in the deaths of dozens of soldiers on both sides. They lasted four days and stopped when representatives of the general staffs of the two countries agreed on a ceasefire in Moscow. In July 2020, clashes occurred on the international border of Armenia and Azerbaijan, not in Karabakh. Unlike the escalation of 2016, when the Russian prime minister visited Yerevan and Baku, the July 2016 clashes did not spark a major international effort to reconcile the two sides³.

It should be emphasized that experts and analysts identify several factors that contributed to the resumption of hostilities in the region. Overall, Azerbaijan has a military advantage over Armenia: the revenues generated during the 2000s oil boom were invested in building a well-trained and armed army. Perhaps Azerbaijan decided to take advantage of this benefit in order to change the situation in the conflict region, so that, while continuing negotiations with Armenia, it would come out from a stronger position, and not from a weak position of the side that lost the war, as it was in 1994. Direct support of Turkey, which influence in the region has grown dramatically after Ankara's successful intervention in the conflicts in Syria and Libya, has given the Azerbaijani confidence of leadership on the way to success. It should be also noted that the world's leading powers are preoccupied with the coronavirus crisis. In the United States, in addition to everything else, the presidential election is the main focus of political leadership. The world economy is heading for a long crisis, and oil prices – the main source of replenishment of Azerbaijan's budget – are unlikely to remain at their current level. This means that financial opportunities for strengthening the country's military potential may be limited. Finally, many experts emphasize that Karabakh is a mountainous place, with the arrival of winter it will be more difficult to move military equipment and therefore an operation must be carried out before the roads are covered with snow⁴.

In the context of our research, we state the fact that after the collapse of the USSR, relations between the three neighbouring states – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, significantly deteriorated. All three countries entered 2021 with a completely destroyed security system, when foreign troops rule over their borders. 20 percent of Georgia is occupied by Russia, and the strategically important regions of Azerbaijan and Armenia have now come under the control of the Russians and Turks. For almost 30 years after the collapse of the USSR and gaining independence, the population and political elites of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia did not come to the understanding that the South Caucasus is a single region with common economic, political and social interests, and its stable development is possible only in the case of multilateral dialogue and cooperation between neighbours. Instead of the ideas of friendship, integration and unification, each country is guided by momentary political interests, trying to put them above the interests of others, and not thinking about what consequences this may have for the future⁵.

¹ BBC News. (2020). *Что случилось в Нагорном Карабахе? Отвечаем на главные вопросы* <<https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-54427054>> (2021, May, 27).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Хмаладзе, Д. (2021). Южный Кавказ 2021: дом без хозяина. *Грузия online* <<https://www.apsny.ge/articles/1610483316.php>> (2021, May, 23).

In fact, the generation of young Azerbaijanis and Armenians born after the collapse of the USSR did not even have the opportunity to meet each other and talk directly, to see ordinary people in each other, and not the enemies, that they see every day on television and newspapers. And in this respect this could have been the first step towards real reconciliation. But in fact the political elites are not interested in this either in Azerbaijan or in Armenia. And Georgia, which could act as an arbiter and mediator, has long lost any political initiative and prefers to remain silent on all issues¹.

Of course, in the countries of the South Caucasus there is a layer of young politicians who think globally. They are aware of new realities and are ready to find compromises with their neighbours in the region. Only the voice of these people is still very weak, from all sides it is drowned out by the propaganda of division, enmity and individuality. Today, each of the countries of the South Caucasus is trying to predict what the year 2021 will be, peering in different directions of the world. Azerbaijanis expect deepening integration with Turkey, Armenians still hope for support and assistance from Russia, and Georgians are counting on attention from the new US president. But whatever the result of these expectations, all this is just walking in circles, because no one can put things in order in their own countries but them².

The main issue when considering the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia is its consequences. One of the technical details of the ceasefire reached after the 44-day war on Karabakh (although this is not written in the provisions of the agreement) is how the mineral deposits in the region will be used and how the illegal proceeds received from them in the past will be assessed. This is primarily a question of the sovereignty of the Azerbaijani state. This topic was also on the agenda of Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, when he visited Shushi. He told how the underground resources of Zangilan, Kelbajar and other territories were exploited. And he mentioned that an expert group would be created to assess the damage in the areas liberated from the occupation. On January 6, 2021, Aliyev announced that if the relevant Armenian companies do not pay compensation, Azerbaijan will appeal to the international court³.

Deposits were one of the largest sources of income for Nagorno-Karabakh. According to available estimates, in 2019, the income received from these resources reached about 13-14% of the GDP of Nagorno-Karabakh. In addition, tax revenues have come from here for years. On the territory of Karabakh, primarily in Kelbajar returned during the war, there are deposits of gold, copper, zinc and other minerals. Some of them are proven reserves. Experts believe that the annual tax losses of the Khankendi administration will exceed 80 million of dollars. The Azerbaijani Defense Ministry has released images of the abandoned Soyudlu (Zod) field in Kelbajar after the November 2020 agreement. Armenia, however, claimed that some of the deposits are located on its territory. In this regard, it comes about companies that have received serious incomes for years on the lands returned by Azerbaijan, and taxes collected from them in the amount of billions of dollars. In addition, upon deeper examination, it becomes clear that these companies have indirect ties not only with Armenia, but also with Russia, France and even with Cyprus⁴.

While prices for gold and copper continue to rise in the world, Azerbaijan's use of these deposits will affect not only the Azerbaijani economy, but also related industries in other countries. It is said that the estimated value of Karabakh's gold reserves alone is over 8 billion of dollars. Therefore, Azerbaijan's demand for compensation is entirely appropriate. In addition to the fact that the deposits, which are now again taken under control.

Located 360 km from Baku, Aghdam has become a real symbol of the 30-year confrontation, which ended on November, 10 2020 with the signing of an armistice agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Since 1993, that is, after the first Karabakh conflict, this city, like many other settlements in the region, came under the control of the pro-Armenian government and army, which sought to make the dream of a great Armenia come true. 800,000 Azerbaijanis living there fled or were expelled. The occupation of Aghdam entailed not its further development with the formation of the Armenian population, but the gradual decline of all life that existed here under the Azerbaijanis. During the Soviet era, Azerbaijanis

¹ Хмаладзе, Д. (2021). Южный Кавказ 2021: дом без хозяина. *Грузия online* <<https://www.apsny.ge/articles/1610483316.php>> (2021, May, 23).

² Ibid.

³ Kürşad, Z. (2021). Karabağ'da bir başka mücadele daha başlıyor. *Haberturk* <<https://www.haberturk.com/yazarlar/prof-dr-kursad-zorlu/2953141-karabag-da-bir-baska-mucadele-daha-basliyor>> (2021, May, 22) – 3 турецкої: Карабахе починається друга боротьба.

⁴ Ibid.

and Armenians lived in harmony with each other for decades, but the collapse of the Soviet empire awakened new nationalist appetites. Like Stepanakert, Aghdam was one of the traditionally multicultural cities of the region that were gradually erased from the map of history¹.

So, the war in Nagorno-Karabakh lasted for a month and a half, and the analysis of its geopolitical consequences could, it seems, take months, if not years.

Thus, according to Gunter Bechler, a Swiss diplomat and former OSCE special representative for the South Caucasus, the Armenian-Azerbaijani military conflict marked the defeat of international law, multilateralism and attempts to resolve conflicts by diplomatic means. The Russian leadership, in turn, as Bechler put it, “fantastically” used the opportunity presented to strengthen their positions in the region, and as a result, both sides of the conflict got what they least wanted – Russian peacekeeping troops. In turn, the EU, in the opinion of the Swiss diplomat, risks once again “losing” the South Caucasus. In Armenia, he pointed out, after the defeat in the war for Karabakh, a “democratic experiment” came under attack – the Pashinyan government, which came to power as a result of peaceful protests in 2018².

The former OSCE Special Representative in the region believes that, unlike Russia, neither the EU nor the United States is ready to play a more prominent role in the region. Bechler admitted that during his work as OSCE Special Envoy in 2016-2018, “I could not even imagine” that it would come to hostilities. He is confident that this “completely unnecessary war” could have been avoided if the negotiation process remained within the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group. An agreement with far-reaching consequences not only for Yerevan and Baku Gunther Behler noted the extreme importance of a ceasefire and the deployment of Russian peacekeepers along the line of contact in Karabakh. And at the same time, he drew attention to the fact that the issue of legitimizing the deployment of Russian peacekeepers in the region from the point of view of international law is open – it is unclear, for example, whether a UN Security Council resolution or an OSCE resolution will be adopted on sending a Russian peacekeeping contingent to the conflict zone³.

The question is also open whether the work on the discussion of the future status of Nagorno-Karabakh within the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group will continue. As the diplomat put it, the fighting stopped, but there are more open questions than there were before the war began. From the outset, Behler viewed the restrained reaction of the Russian authorities to the fighting in Karabakh as part of an intent aimed at aggravating the situation to such an extent that would allow the “strong neighbour” to intervene in the conflict and impose his will on both sides. The Swiss diplomat has no doubts that the ceasefire agreement signed on the night of November, 10 2020 will have far-reaching consequences not only for Armenia and Azerbaijan, but also for Turkey, including because of the transport corridor between Nakhichevan and Azerbaijan, agreed upon by the parties, which will allow Turkish exporters to send their goods to China by a shorter route, bypassing Georgia⁴.

Richard Giragosian, an analyst and founder of the Centre for Regional Studies in Yerevan, drew attention to the danger hanging over Nikol Pashinyan’s government. “The democratic spring is under threat”, Giragosian noted, adding that “this is not surprising”. After all, Pashinyan’s government came to power in Armenia during massive street protests in 2018. “In Russia, such a democracy is viewed as a threat to Putin’s model of government”, the expert explained. The military defeat in Karabakh, Giragosian believes, led to the fact that reforms and democracy in Armenia were in question, and the Kremlin had additional leverage over the government in Yerevan. The Armenian political scientist, among other things, is concerned about the long-term consequences of the presence of Russian troops in the country: “Usually, if they come somewhere, they try not to leave”. According to him, Russia has

¹ Boussois, S. (2021). Aghdam, village fantôme du Karabakh, attend la résurrection. *Atlantico*.

<<https://www.atlantico.fr/article/decryptage/aghdam-village-fantome-du-karabakh-attend-la-resurrection-bakou-azerbaidjan-sebastien-boussois>> (2021, May, 21) – 3 французької: Atlantico (Франція): карабахський город-призрак Агдам ожидает возрождения.

² Есипов, В. (2020) Эксперты о ситуации в Карабахе: мир с далеко идущими последствиями. *Deutsche Welle*. <<https://www.dw.com/ru/jeksperty-o-situacii-v-karabahe-mir-s-daleko-idushimi-posledstvijami/a-55678239>> (2021, May, 27).

³ Есипов, В. (2020) Эксперты о ситуации в Карабахе: мир с далеко идущими последствиями. *Deutsche Welle*. <<https://www.dw.com/ru/jeksperty-o-situacii-v-karabahe-mir-s-daleko-idushimi-posledstvijami/a-55678239>> (2021, May, 27).

⁴ Ibid.

got a chance for an “unprecedented” military presence in the region. “We had no other choice but to accept the ceasefire agreement imposed by Russia”, Richard Giragosian is convinced. He is even more worried about the precedent created by Azerbaijan: after what happened, one might get the impression that such conflicts can be resolved not through diplomacy, but by military means. Giragosian criticized the EU’s role in the Karabakh conflict and lamented the “deafening silence on the part of the world community” instead of supporting Armenia in the confrontation with Azerbaijan. “But this does not mean at all that we will turn our backs on democracy and the European model”, assured Richard Giragosian. “Because the Russian values of corruption and authoritarianism have more in common with Azerbaijan, and not with Armenia”¹.

The calls of the UN and the leaders of world powers to stop hostilities and return to the negotiating table did not go unheeded, but at the same time, Armenian and Azerbaijani politicians put forward conditions for international mediation. The past Armenian-Azerbaijani wars have proved that the existing differences cannot be resolved by military means. However, the rapid development of the military conflict indicates that politicians of both countries, in addition to external intervention, are making attempts to evade domestic commitments and crises².

Every time the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict escalates, all eyes turn to the international players: how is the confrontation developing between them and what does it lead to. The fact is that the development of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict is determined by a number of factors related to interests and the struggle for influence on transit lines for oil and natural gas supplies. It is also influenced by various regional factors, in particular, developments in the Eastern Mediterranean, Libya and Syria. The role and interests of Russia in the conflict are as follows: it seeks to maintain its influence in the Caucasus region, therefore it always strives to be the main player during hostilities and negotiations on a peaceful settlement. For their part, Turkish politicians consider Azerbaijanis as the center of their geopolitical and economic interests. As for France, for the first time it showed interest in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict – in order to “put a hairpin” in Turkey because of the differences in the Eastern Mediterranean³.

It should be noted that the Turks consider Azerbaijan a fraternal country because of the identity of religion and language, the similarity of cultures and traditions. Moreover, Turkey and Azerbaijan are bound by a number of important economic and trade agreements. As for the role of France, it was the first time it showed interest in the South Caucasus due to growing tensions with Turkey. However, the countries of the European Union are divided on this issue. They view the conflict in the South Caucasus solely from the standpoint of the likelihood and magnitude of possible damage due to instability in the region. If we talk about Iran, it maintains close relations with Armenia, as opposed to relations between Azerbaijan and Israel, especially in the military sphere. In addition, Azerbaijan seeks to strengthen relations with the United States⁴.

So, having studied the issue we can come to the conclusion that the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan has geopolitical and regional aspects related to other factors in the Caucasus region and the Middle East. The Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict is fuelled not only by the rhetoric about national and ethnic intolerance, but also by geopolitical differences in the Caucasus region, where there are many regional and international players. It looks like international and regional concern about the transformation of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict into a full-scale war was not caused by concern for two peoples, but by geopolitical and economic interests that are associated with oil and natural gas fields in the Caspian Sea. In addition, we must not forget that the South Caucasus is considered as an important transit corridor for the delivery of goods between Asia and Europe. Azerbaijan also has two oil and gas pipelines designed to reduce Europe’s dependence on Russian gas. And in this respect it should be noted, that both of them are close to the disputed territory. Despite expectations of the clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan to escalate into a serious international crisis, there were no signs of international mediation that could have helped to end hostilities, fuelled by a long history of disputes and conflicts related to national and religious

¹ Есипов, В. (2020) Эксперты о ситуации в Карабахе: мир с далеко идущими последствиями. *Deutsche Welle*. <<https://www.dw.com/ru/jeksperty-o-situacii-v-karabahe-mir-s-daleko-idushimi-posledstvijami/a-55678239>> (2021, May, 27).

² Куш, О. (2020) Аспекты армяно-азербайджанского конфликта: вмешательство государств, коллизия интересов и оружия. *Al Araby* <<https://inosmi.ru/politic/20201011/248290812.html>> (2021, May, 27).

³ Ibid.

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aspects and international interests.

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