

De-colonising the Azerbaijan-Armenian Conflict: Breaking the Knot of Security and Dependence

by Leila Alieva

ABSTRACT

The recent military operation in the Nagorno Karabakh area reflects a broader regional transformation. Its essence is in the second attempt (with the first one in Azerbaijan 30 years ago) of changing the security paradigm, this time in Armenia, leading to de-colonisation of relations in the region. The core of this change is liberation from the dependence on Russia's almost two centuries old patronage, with Nagorno Karabakh conflict evolving as a tool of this dependence. With all the contradictions over the territory between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and difference in current political systems, the countries seem at last to arrive to the same conclusion of Russia and her control of the Karabakh elite being one of the obstacles to the peaceful relations, reforms and integration in the West. The power balance in the region, affected by such factors as Turkey's greater involvement, distraction of the West, Russia's increasing isolation, besides power change in Armenia, has also contributed to the "window of opportunity" for a change of paradigms. The role and influence of the EU and the US in this process, including in deterring potential military developments, will be dependent on the perception of them by the parties as non-partisan brokers, promotion of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan as independent subjects of international relations and consistency in support of democracy.

Nagorno Karabakh | Armenia | Azerbaijan | Russia | Conflict mediation

keywords

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by Leila Alieva*

Introduction

The Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict carries with it the heavy luggage of 200 years of Russian colonial legacies, as well as Russia's special relationship with Armenia and the latter's support for Moscow in submitting Muslim communities.¹ So far three post-colonial factors have prevented the resolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict: reliance on external patronage by the parties of the conflict, selective approach in the application of principles, rights and norms to the parties by the West, and role of Russia, who has used the secessionist conflict to extend its influence in the region.

The recent exodus of Armenians from Nagorno Karabakh area, following Azerbaijan's "local anti-terrorist activities" seems to be the concluding dramatic episode in the series of mutual deportations that started in 1988. For Armenians it was a shocking outcome of three decades of struggle for secession and "re-unification" with Armenia, while for Azerbaijan it was the end of thirty years of occupation and of continuing security threats within its borders. Just before the announced "counter terrorist operation", Azerbaijan reported yet another explosion of the landmines leading to four police officers and two civilian deaths.² The recent operation took place three years after the so called 44-day war in 2020, when the Azerbaijani army re-took control over its lost regions surrounding former Nagorno Karabakh. In 2023 the operation targeted military objects in what used to

¹ Audrey L. Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks. Power and Identity under Russian Rule*, Stanford, Hoover Institution Press, 1992.

² "Azerbaijan Launches Military Operation in Nagorno-Karabakh", in *Le Monde*, 19 September 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/09/19/azerbaijan-says-launching-anti-terror-operations-in-karabakh_6137732_4.html; "Foreign Ministry: Armenian Side Purposefully Continues Military Threats to Azerbaijan", in *Azertac*, 25 October 2022, <https://azertag.az/en/xeber/2349584>. The official sources reported 3,345 persons-landmine victims in the last 30 years, and since the end of 2020, 266 with 45 killed by landmines being produced in Armenia and freshly laid.

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be Nagorno Karabakh proper causing the flight of almost all of the local population to Armenia proper.

1. Military way dominates

The Nagorno Karabakh conflict was one of the “frozen” conflicts, caused by the secessionist movements in the post-Soviet that affected the likes of Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), and Moldova (Transnistria) besides Azerbaijan itself. Against the background of major world security problems – Syria, Afghanistan, relations with China – the periodic “de-freezing” of these conflicts did not attract much attention in the West. Among major warnings were Russian advancement into Georgia in 2008, then Russia’s annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, and the escalation in 2016 in Karabakh conflict zone with the re-taking in 2020 by Azerbaijan’s army of most of the occupied areas surrounding Nagorno Karabakh itself.

International mediating mechanisms proved to be ineffective, especially in case of Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, when the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk group, which included Russia, the United States and France, did not change but rather solidified “status quo”. A few factors contributed to this failure. The composition of the co-chairmen (the US, France and Russia) of the group was not balanced – they were characterised either by powerful presence of the Armenian diaspora in respective states (France, the US) or by the formal defence alliance with Armenia (Russia). Some observers connect ineffectiveness of the process to the contradiction between two principles of OSCE – self-determination and territorial integrity.³ Also, the achieved level of stability during the frozen stage seems to have been sufficient to implement major geopolitical, energy and transportation projects. The reference to both equally legitimate principles of OSCE and balance of military power made the two parties more intransigent.

The political influence of the Armenian diaspora in many Western states, the defence alliance with Russia and the advantageous military position in the status quo contributed to disincentivising Armenia from making concessions. As for Azerbaijan, besides the hope for “energy diplomacy”, the possible compromise achieved under the military pressure was not viewed as leading to greater security. None of the frozen conflicts so far has been resolved diplomatically or peacefully. Moreover, Russia’s aggression against Ukraine is yet another confirmation of the military way as dominating in resolving security issues of the region.

³ Patricia Carley, “Nagorno-Karabakh. Searching for a Solution”, in *USIP Peaceworks*, No. 25 (December 1998), <https://www.usip.org/node/82561>.

During thirty years of unsolved Nagorno Karabakh conflict, “frozen” in the situation of the occupied territories of Azerbaijan, none of the measures were taken by the international organisations, or foreign governments, to make four United Nations Security Council resolutions about the immediate withdrawal of Armenian from Nagorno Karabakh troops implemented.⁴ This sent a message to the parties on the necessity to rely on themselves alone in dealing with individual security issues, including restoration of sovereignty and internationally recognised borders.

After a few decades of failed peaceful attempts to liberate the lands, such as “energy diplomacy”, using distribution of oil shares and direction of pipelines for changing regional power configuration and integration in international relations, Azerbaijan changed tactics. Arms acquisitions from a variety of suppliers (Israel, Turkey and Pakistan) and trainings and consultations with Turkey, all supported by the inflow of the oil revenues, allowed Baku to retake Armenian-controlled areas in 2020 during what is now called the “44-days war”. Politically, for Azerbaijan the resolution of security threats on its territory also means depriving Russian troops of the excuse to be present on the ground.

2. Costly change of paradigms...

Nikol Pashinyan, who was re-elected as Armenia’s prime minister in free and fair elections in 2021, has been implementing an exceedingly complex but important objective – changing the security and foreign policy paradigm of his country from one based on dependence on Russia (to a great degree shaped by the nationalist part of the Armenian diaspora) to one of normalisation of relations with the neighbours. This change of paradigm is full of political risks for the democratically elected leader of Armenia, who has made a crucial statement that Armenia recognises the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan.⁵ This alignment with international norms means – at least in official rhetoric – a desire of liberation from the security paradigm that has made Yerevan dependent on a foreign power (Russia) and the establishment of a new one in which Armenia is a more independent subject of international politics.

The escalation in the Nagorno Karabakh, however, has reinforced the old narrative in Armenia and brought nationalist forces, first of all supporters of the representative of the Karabakhi political elite and former Prime Minister Robert Kocharian and pro-Moscow groups to the square in Yerevan, which led to the few

⁴ The UN Security Council adopted four resolutions in 1993 regarding the Nagorno Karabakh conflict (822, 853, 874 and 884), calling for cessation of hostilities and the withdrawal of all occupying forces from the Azerbaijan areas. See, for instance, UN Security Council Resolution 822 (1993) adopted on 30 April 1993, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/165604>.

⁵ “Pashinyan Confirmed that He Recognizes Nagorno-Karabakh as Part of Azerbaijan”, in *Turan News Agency*, 22 May 2023, https://www.turan.az/ext/news/2023/5/free/politics_news/en/4759.htm.

days of intense protests with thirty people wounded in clashes with the police. The media also reported the detention of former mayor of Yerevan Albert Bazeyan on suspicion of preparing an assassination attempt on the prime minister.⁶

The turmoil in Armenia was reminiscent of the crisis that engulfed neighbouring Azerbaijan in the early years of post-Soviet independence, when the first democratically elected leader, Abulfaz Elchibey, was fatally undermined by the Azerbaijani defeat to Armenia in the Karabakh war. The transfer of arms and participation of troops from Russia and other Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) during the attack on Kelbajar region solidified the perception in Azerbaijan that Russia was using Armenia's military advancement as a way to punish Elchibey,⁷ and then later in 1994 to pressure Heydar Aliyev, Azerbaijan's next leader, for their pro-Western course.⁸ While Elchibey secured full withdrawal of Russian military bases in 1992–1993 and refused CIS membership, Armenia signed a Treaty on the Legal Status of the Russian Armed Forces Stationed in Armenia on 21 August 1992 and became member of the CIS.⁹ Almost thirty years later, history is repeating itself, though with Armenia and Azerbaijan switching places. Today it is the leader of Armenia, who has been trying to shift his country away from Russia, the one who has been weakened by an Azerbaijani victory and is now being undercut by Russia.

However, so far Russia's attempts to undermine the Armenian leadership have failed. Russia is weaker and its power in the Caucasus is diminished due a number of factors. These include the ongoing war in Ukraine, which has drained Moscow's military, economic and political resources; Western sanctions on Russia, which have inflicted further damage on Russia; Turkey's greater involvement in the geopolitics of the region; and, most importantly, the growing maturity of local populations, who are less prone to connect their prosperity with a collection of land claims and are equally more resistant to manipulation based on historical grievances than used to be the case in the past.¹⁰

⁶ "Former Yerevan Mayor Albert Bazeyan Is Arrested", in *News.am*, 24 September 2023, <https://news.am/eng/news/782942.html>.

⁷ The former prime-minister of Azerbaijan Panah Huseynov in his interview to the author (20 October 2023) stressed that, after election of Elchibey and since fall 1992, Russia transferred 1 billion US dollars-worth weapons to Armenia, while the massacre in Khojali (Azerbaijani populated town in Nagorno Karabakh) was conducted with the help of the Russian 366 motorised rifle regiment. In April–May 1993, the coup d'état by the colonel Suret Huseynov which removed Elchibey, was realised with the help of arms left by the Russians military during their withdrawal, as well as special divisions conducting factual management of the operation.

⁸ According to Thomas de Waal, the former advisor to the president Aliyev recalls in early 1994 Russian Ambassador Kazimirov threatening Baku, if it disagrees to locate Russian peacekeepers, that the Armenian troops will occupy more lands in the country. See Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden. Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War*, New York/London, New York University Press, 2003, p. 238, <https://library.asue.am/open/1876.pdf>.

⁹ See Rosoboronexport website: *Cooperation with Armenia*, <http://roe.ru/eng/export/armeniya>.

¹⁰ Our study in 2018 proved that the views on conflict and its resolution are related to what we called "pre- or post-modern mindsets of participants". See Leila Alieva and Bakhtiyar Aslanov, "How Autocracy Impedes De-securitization or Why Democracy Matters? The Case of Karabakh

3. ...and of a military solution

Azerbaijan's retaking of Nagorno Karabakh further cements the record of coercive conflict resolution efforts in the former Soviet space. Seen from Azerbaijan, thirty years of international mediation efforts only led to what effectively amounted to a "unification" of Nagorno Karabakh with Armenia and generations of hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijani refugees from Armenia growing up in the tents and abandoned Soviet buildings of youth camps and dormitories. As for Armenia, international mediation efforts resulted in a faction originating from Karabakh dominating the political scene in Yerevan, which prevented the state from developing more independent from Russia policies.

It comes as no surprise then that, officially, Baku has pointed to the failure of almost three decades of peaceful mediation as the reason for military solution. While the militarisation of conflict management also stems from Azerbaijan's becoming both wealthy (thanks to energy exports) and more autocratic, the absence of progress in mediation efforts has indeed been crucial for the eventual decision to resort to the military option. But the solution did not come without a cost for Baku, which had to agree to the deployment of Russian peacekeepers.

This was a major deviation from the course of Azerbaijani modern nation-state. Azerbaijan was after all the first among post-Soviet states to get rid of all Soviet troops (having done it even before Eastern Germany) and later it strenuously resisted further pressures to host Russian troops which it viewed as the main pillar of its own independence.

The human costs were also considerable. The 44-day war in 2020 was conducted with the highly precise weapons and witnessed first application of drones, yet it took the lives of more than seven thousand troops and civilians on both sides,¹¹ 2,881 (with 28 missing) of whom Azerbaijani.¹² Moreover, internationally, the re-taking of lands by force (even if within sovereign borders) raised concerns and condemnation in Europe and the United States, although that did not prevent Azerbaijan from carrying out the "anti-terrorist operation" in Nagorno Karabakh three years later.

Conflict in the Eyes of Azerbaijanis", in *Caucasus Survey*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (October 2018), p. 183-202, DOI 10.1080/23761199.2018.1449376.

¹¹ Center for Preventive Action, "Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict", in *Global Conflict Tracker*, last updated on 26 October 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/nagorno-karabakh-conflict>.

¹² Jeyhun Aliyev, "Azerbaijan Lost 2,881 Soldiers in Nagorno-Karabakh War", in *Anadolu Agency*, 3 March 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/2162582>.

4. Stark contrast in reactions

Many analysts tend to agree that Azerbaijan took advantage of the distraction of the international community with Covid and then with the war in Ukraine. Yet, the military actions in 2020 and in 2023 ordered by President Ilham Aliyev to restore Azerbaijani sovereignty over the occupied territories and then Nagorno Karabakh were met with dismay in the West. The EU and US came out with the statements defending Armenia and Karabakh's Armenian population.¹³ The EU also agreed to send a group of observers on the state border of Armenia with Azerbaijan,¹⁴ showing solidarity with Armenia in this renewal of conflict.

This was in stark contrast with the much more muted reaction by the West during the first phase of the war in 1992–1994 when Armenia's troops, supported by forces from countries of the CIS (the organisation that succeeded the Soviet Union), seized seven administrative regions beyond Nagorno Karabakh. The reaction of the European Parliament at the time was reflected in a resolution adopted on the 16 September 1993, which called on "the Armenian authorities to stop their attacks on Azerbaijani towns and villages and to withdraw from the Azerbaijani territory which they occupy" and "on the Azerbaijanis to refrain from renewing their attacks against Nagorno-Karabakh".¹⁵ Yet, very little if anything followed that.

In fact, in spite of four resolutions by the United Nations Security Council condemning the occupation of Azerbaijani territory, the US Congress adopted sanctions against Azerbaijan in October 1992,¹⁶ while Armenia received the highest aid per capita among the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union by the United States.¹⁷ This occurred while Azerbaijani leader Elchibey was implementing democratic reforms, adopting a policy of integration with the West, getting rid of all Soviet troops, and not much later than the Khojali massacre in February 1992.¹⁸

¹³ European External Action Service, *Azerbaijan: Statement by the High Representative on Development in Nagorno-Karabakh*, 21 September 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/433567_en. On the US reaction see: US Department of State, *Call for End of Hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh*, 19 September 2023, <https://www.state.gov/call-for-end-of-hostilities-in-nagorno-karabakh>.

¹⁴ Council of the European Union, *Armenia: EU Launches a Civilian Mission to Contribute to Stability in Border Areas*, 20 February 2023, <https://europa.eu/!VBPjtm>.

¹⁵ European Parliament, *Resolution on Armenia and Azerbaijan*, OJ C 268, 4.10.1993, p. 136, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=OJ:C:1993:268:TOC>.

¹⁶ See Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act: US Congress, *Public Law 102-511*, 24 October 1992, <https://www.congress.gov/102/statute/STATUTE-106/STATUTE-106-Pg3320.pdf>.

¹⁷ The Congressional Research Service reported that Armenia received 31 dollars per capita, while Azerbaijan only 4 dollars. See Congressional Research Service, "The Former Soviet Union and US Foreign Aid: Implementing the Assistance Program, 1992-1994", in *CRS Reports*, 18 January 1995, p. 9, <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/95-170.html>.

¹⁸ Section 907, prohibiting aid to Azerbaijan, was attached to the 1992 Freedom Support Act by the US Congress "heavily lobbied by Armenian diaspora organisations". Laurence Broers, *Armenia and Azerbaijan. Anatomy of a Rivalry*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2019, p. 217.

Most importantly, while the culprits of anti-Armenian pogroms in Baku and Sumgait were tried and sentenced in the late years of the Soviet Union, the military actions by Armenia in violation of the recognised Azerbaijani state borders with scorched earth technique, when the countries became independent, were never named, tried or punished by any court – either national or international, or sanctioned by any government. The mass exodus of refugees from both states did not find its redress or recognition either by national politicians or international institutions.¹⁹

There were also differences as compared to the other cases of secessionist conflicts. One was the voting patterns by the US and EU countries in UN voting. The US and EU governments showed a lesser degree of support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, compared to the one given to Georgia or Ukraine, as they abstained or even voted against, for instance, the draft resolution in support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity in 2008.²⁰ Another difference concerns the terminology: Nagorno Karabakh was referred to as a "disputed" territory²¹ rather than a legal part, or a secessionist region, of a sovereign country.

This different reaction of Western governments to the violation of state borders and displacement in case of Azerbaijan (in 1992–1994), on the one hand, and restoration of Azerbaijan's sovereignty over the seven Armenian-controlled regions in 2020, accompanied by the displacement of Armenians from Nagorno Karabakh in 2023, on the other, was noticed but rarely explained to the public in Azerbaijan, who was left to make its own conclusions, usually in civilisational or cultural deterministic terms.

A well-known Azerbaijani journalist summarised the feeling on a Facebook post: "We, Azerbaijanis, are human beings like the Armenians".²² The West's reaction, which was perceived as unequal treatment, thus undermined its credibility. In turn, Prime Minister Pashinyan had to deal with an Armenian public increasingly desperate and disappointed with Russia changing its traditional role of protector of Armenians, when Russian peacekeepers refrained from acting on the escalation of conflict.

¹⁹ Center for Preventive Action, "Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict", cit.

²⁰ United Nations, *General Assembly Adopts Resolution Reaffirming the Territorial Integrity of Azerbaijan, Demanding Withdrawal of All Armenian Forces*, 14 March 2008, <https://press.un.org/en/2008/ga10693.doc.htm>. In this voting France and the US voted against it, while the rest of European states abstained. Compare for instance to voting of UN General Assembly Moldova's resolution on withdrawal of "foreign military forces" from its territory, where European states and the US voted in favour of the resolution. See United Nations, *General Assembly Adopts Texts Urging Troop Withdrawal from Republic of Moldova, Strengthening Cooperation in Central Asia*, 22 June 2018, <https://press.un.org/en/2018/ga12030.doc.htm>; Cristi Vlas, "UN General Assembly Adopts Moldova's Resolution on Withdrawal of "Foreign Military Forces" from Its Territory", in *Moldova.org*, 22 June 2018, <https://www.moldova.org/en/?p=445596>.

²¹ See, for instance, Gabriel Gavin, "Armenia Vows to Recognize Disputed Nagorno-Karabakh as Azerbaijan Amid Rising Tensions", in *Politico.EU*, 18 April 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=2926218>.

²² Chingiz Sultansoy, FB post, 25 September 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=7236827583050467>.

5. Outlook for the future

The ongoing fighting in Ukraine and the recent escalation in Karabakh prove that the international community underestimated the threat posed by the frozen conflicts in the former Soviet space, leaving their solution mainly to the states themselves.

International relations studies have established a connection between autocracy and coercive conflict resolution, whereby the recent escalation in Nagorno Karabakh is viewed as a "conspiracy" of autocracies against democracy.²³ They speak of an "illiberal peace process" as a continuation of imperial²⁴ or "authoritarian" conflict resolution.²⁵ These studies have some merits, yet one should not overlook the underlying process of states' coping with the consequences of and the liberation from Russia's colonialism in the attempts by Azerbaijan and Armenia to revise the security paradigm dominating South Caucasus' geopolitics.

The old paradigm pointed to the necessity of Russia's patronage due to "inherent threat" coming from the neighbourhood. In this regard, there is no direct dependence of the mode of conflict resolution and the type of the political regime (democratic or autocratic). In fact, the worst records of human rights and international law violations during the war took place when both states had democratically elected leaders in the early 1990s, confirming Mansfield and Snyder's idea that it is democratising states who often fight each other.²⁶ Besides, "liberal" conflict resolution, if selectively applied to minorities defined by ethnic or religious identity, can hardly be viewed as such.

In spite of renewed military actions and the difference in the political regimes, there is now an issue uniting Baku and Yerevan: the recognition that Russia has used Nagorno Karabakh – especially its pro-Russian political elites – as a tool of manipulation and influence in the South Caucasus, which has prevented them from pursuing peaceful relations, reforms and integration in the West. The change of the security paradigm will affect the future of reforms in both states. In Armenia – due to the liberation from Russia's influence and of the fading of the supposedly structural necessity of the centralisation of power justified by the "imminent" threat from the neighbourhood.²⁷ In Azerbaijan – due to the removal of the security

²³ See, for instance, Gabriel Gavin, "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Explained", in *Politico.EU*, 19 September 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=3585876>.

²⁴ Anna Ohanyan, "Illiberal Peace': Oxymoron, Political Necessity or Old Wine in the New Bottle", in *International Negotiation*, 23 November 2022, DOI 10.1163/15718069-bja10081.

²⁵ Stefan Meister "Nagorno-Karabakh: The Rise of Authoritarian Conflict Resolution", in *DGAP Memos*, 2 October 2023, <https://dgap.org/en/node/39307>.

²⁶ Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, "Democratization and the Danger of War", in *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Summer 1995), p. 5-38, https://canvas.harvard.edu/files/3411125/download?download_frd=1.

²⁷ Leila Alieva, "Test Case for the South Caucasus: Is Armenia's Consolidation of Achievements of the 'Velvet Revolution' Possible without Revising the Nagorno-Karabakh Issue?", in *CNIS Working*

threat of a secessionist region that was used as an excuse for the centralisation of power, which was further reinforced by the adverse effect of the availability of massive energy revenues.

It is clear for both parties that Russian peacekeepers have failed in their mission. They did not fulfil Azerbaijan's expectation, based on the 2020 trilateral agreement, of disarming Nagorno Karabakh, nor did they protect the Armenians during the escalations in 2020 and 2023. Armenia's attempt at shifting the security paradigm is not just about changing allies, (which is a consequence, rather than the cause) but about transforming Armenian-Azerbaijani relations so that both historical enemy images and dependence on foreign powers are superseded by a framework of intra-regional cooperation in the South Caucasus.

The prominence of this historical moment is also in Russia losing its perceived traditional role of "defending" Western civilisation from the Muslim invaders of the East. Thus, the mere replacement of Russia by Western actors without changes of the security paradigm and of the selective application of norms on the parties depending on their ethnic or confessional background will only sustain the colonial/civilisational logic underlying conflicts in the region.

This risk has been highlighted by a variety of observers. The opposition politician in Azerbaijan Ilgar Mammadov has noted in his Twitter (X) account: "The US and EU should refrain from reflexively reciting the very intelligent propaganda narratives of anti-Pashinyan forces",²⁸ while the journalist Onnik Krikorian has commented: "Seems like there's many people out there eager to encourage a mass exodus from Karabakh", pointing to the "scare stories and 'analysis' timed to cause panic."²⁹ This points to the perception of Western discourse and actions sometimes contributing to the confrontation and securitisation of the situation in the region, rather than suggesting reconciling perspectives and helping destroy the historical enemy images. Obviously, this does not remove responsibility of the Azerbaijani government for the exodus due to the sense of insecurity, caused by attacks on the military targets in Nagorno Karabakh.

The most tragic consequence of the conflict is the cost for the people themselves: the current exodus of ethnic Armenians from Nagorno Karabakh (by now the sources report departure of a hundred thousand people from Karabakh) although unlike in the past, in a peaceful manner, is the last and most heart-breaking episode in an endless story of the struggle and mutual displacement.³⁰ The people who

Papers, No. 14 (2018), <https://cnis-baku.org/eng/9485-2>.

²⁸ Ilgar Mammadov, Twitter post, 23 September 2023, <https://twitter.com/ilgarmammadov/status/1705490171578237160>.

²⁹ Onnik J. Krikorian, Twitter post, 25 September 2023, <https://twitter.com/onewmphoto/status/1706272494989070757>.

³⁰ The first stage of conflict (1988–1994) has led to the violent exodus of Azerbaijanis from Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh, as well as from the occupied territories reaching more than 800,000, and by Armenians from Azerbaijan.

were supposed to be the purpose and agents of politics, appeared to be its hostages and victims, as their struggle was captured by the corrupt elites and discredited by their post-colonial patrons such as Russia, adding to the “legitimacy” of the forceful “conflict resolution” and making them vulnerable to the Azerbaijani government’s policies.

Azerbaijan has come out with a plan of reintegration of Karabakh Armenians that includes a lot of rational proposals. The plan pledges an impressive social package, tax exemptions, an amnesty for former fighters, municipal government, the respect for cultural rights, and other sensible measures. To be sure, there is much scepticism about the plan’s actual implementation, with local observers, pointing to Azerbaijan’s poor human rights record.³¹ However, there are also some positive news, such as the launch of bilateral Armenian-Azerbaijani meetings in Tbilisi, Georgia’s capital, as well as the prospects of establishing transportation routes across the region.

Alternatives to the patronage policies and long-term solutions may come from the West’s support for both parties to the conflict acting as independent subjects of international relations. As such, the US and EU should encourage Armenia and Azerbaijan to pursue a mutually beneficial solution with equal responsibilities before international law with regard to each other’s minorities, lines of communications and state borders. Instead of military or hostile rhetoric and pressure on each other via foreign powers and international organisations, the parties should open the political space for the civil society, give freedom to media, support alternative voices and promote intense inter-communal communication.

Thus, the contribution of the international community to South Caucasus’ security issues could take place under the following conditions: promote regional countries’ behaviour as independent subjects of international relations, deter former colonial powers (especially Russia), and adopt non-selective approaches to the application of norms and justice.

The change of paradigms leading to greater independence of states and start of democratisation processes is only the first step in resolving the ethno-territorial conflicts. The decolonisation and opening of mindsets, liberalisation of attitude to the others, recognition of equal rights of all people regardless of their ethnic, religious or racial identity, is of no less importance for the long term and liberal resolution of conflicts.

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³¹ See, for instance, Shahin Rzayev, Reintegration of Karabakh Armenians: This Is Fantastic!, in *JAMNews*, 23 September 2023, <https://jam-news.net/?p=165849>.

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