

The root causes of the Armenian-Azerbaijani war. International community's position on Nagorny Karabakh

Kristina Niparishvili

Assistant-researcher of Institute
of Political Sciences of Ilia State University

Abstract

The war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which started in September 2020 is a result of the conflict originating from a previous century. The territory of Nagorny Karabakh for a long time remains the stumbling block between two countries. The reasons that led to the war in September 2020 are set in history of Nagorny Karabakh and in various factors which influenced the development of the conflict.

Key words: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Nagorny Karabakh, Armenian-Azerbaijani war

Introduction

The Karabakh war, which started in September 2020, is a result of the conflict originating from a previous century. The history of Nagorno Karabakh goes back to the time of ancient Greece and, during this time, the region was inhabited by various peoples. Despite the fact that from the early Middle Ages Nagorno Karabakh was occupied mostly by the Armenian people, the region for a long time was under the authority of Persia. During this period there was a significant loss of Armenian population and the resettlement of Turkic peoples - the majority of Azerbaijani inhabitants of Nagorno Karabakh today can trace their ancestry back to those peoples. By the early 20th century, the situation in the region was particularly complex – the Armenians made up the majority of the population in the region while territorially it was surrounded by Azerbaijani territories. After the Soviets came into power Nagorno Karabakh had been officially transferred to Azerbaijan. This decision provoked widespread discontent among Armenian people. Tension in the region heightened significantly, reaching a peak by the end of the '80s. That is when a first major clash occurred not only between Armenian and Azerbaijani population of Nagorno Karabakh but between Armenia and Azerbaijan as well. As a result of the war Nagorno Karabakh had declared independence while de facto it remained an Armenian Protectorate. In addition, Azerbaijan lost some of its territories, which separated the region from Armenia.

Despite the fact that at that time a cease-fire agreement was finally signed it was obvious that the outcome was not sought by either party. The conflict smoldered during the last thirty years with occasional military clashes of different scale. The reasons that led to the war in September 2020 are set in history of Nagorno Karabakh and in various factors which influenced the development of the conflict.

The origin of the conflict in Nagorno Karabakh

The territories of Nagorno-Karabakh are located in the Transcaucasian region, in the eastern part of Armenian highland. At the time of antiquity Nagorno-Karabakh was inhabited by various tribes, predominantly of Indo-European origin. Nagorno-Karabakh was a part of the ancient state Urartu, located in the area of present-day Armenia, Turkey, North-East Iran and Azerbaijan. The State's population was ethnically diverse and at present the origin of the tribes, which inhabited Urartu remains uncertain. The question of the role of these tribes in the origin of the Armenians is of great interest to Armenian researchers. In Armenia autochthonous version of ethnogenesis of the Armenians has gained the most popularity. According to this version the Armenian people inhabited the Armenian Highland long before the antiquity. At the same time the world science mostly adheres to mixed migratory hypotheses, which claims that the protoarmenians, that had migrated from the West, merged with the indigenous tribes already living in the area and this „melting pot“ resulted in the emergence of the Armenian people in II-IV century.

After the disintegration of Urartu, Nagorno-Karabakh was inhabited by fragmented tribes of various origins. In the early II century, this territory was a part of Greater Armenia. How exactly Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) became a part of Armenia remains uncertain. Modern historians have put forward various hypotheses, but the original sources state that until 387 this territory belonged to Armenia. The Artsakh sovereignty has been extensively discussed when Azerbaijani researches came out with the theory that Nagorno-Karabakh had not been a permanent part of Armenia but changed hands between Armenia and Caucasian Albania.

At the same time Armenian researchers claimed that Nagorno-Karabakh was always inhabited by ethnic Armenians, and moreover, all Caucasian Albania was an Armenian region in all aspects. Both theories have attracted criticism of the global scientific community.

It is still largely unknown when the happened the arenization of the region. Anthropological studies show that modern Armenians of Karabakh are the direct descendants of the autochthonous population

of the region.

After the dissolution of Greater Armenia Nagorno-Karabakh for a long period of time was incorporated into various States, but mostly remained a part of Caucasian Albania.

In 822 on the territory of historical Artsakh was formed the Armenian Principality of Khachen, and in 884 the Bagratid Kingdom of Armenia was established.

After the loss of centralized Armenian statehood in 1045 Principality of Khachen remained one of few areas with the Armenian rule. The Principality, according to the notorious Russian and western researches, was for a long time Armenian political center.

Principality of Khachen existed until XVI—XVII century and has broken up into five small princedoms, named melikdoms. Despite the fact that these melikdoms were under the direct control of Iranian Shah, at that time Nagorno-Karabakh was practically the only territory where remnants of Armenian polity were preserved.

In 1474 was the Karabakh Khanate established on the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenian melikdoms lost their independence and accepted suzerainty of Panakh khan. That marked the beginning of mass exodus of Armenian population from the region and resettlement of Turkic people in Nagorno-Karabakh. Initially the Khanate was under Persian sovereignty, but after the Russo-Persian War in the khanate was abolished and Karabakh province was created in its place, administered by Russian officials. Some years later the area became part of the Elisabethpol Governorate within the Russian Empire.

This period in a history of Nagorno-Karabakh is characterized with outflow considerable of muslim population from the region. By the end of XIX century the Armenian population accounted for 42% (De Waal, 2003) of the overall population of Karabakh. However, it should be noted that these figures relate to the Karabakh khanate, which included territories of modern-day Azerbaijan. The population of Armenian on modern-day Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Republic constituted an absolute majority of the population - 94% (De Waal, 2003).

After the October Revolution and collapse of the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic, Azerbaijan announced his claim to the former Elisabethpol Governorate's territories, including Karabakh. Armenian population refused to accept the authority of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan. The first war between Azerbaijan and Armenia for Nagorno-Karabakh has started. During this war Turkey supported the claims of Azerbaijan on the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. With the Turkey surrender after the war, Nagorno-Karabakh was occupied by British troops. However Armenian hopes for British support were dashed. The British Command affirmed Khosrov bey Sultanov (appointed by the Azerbaijani government) as the governor-general of Karabakh. This statesman was widely known as "Azerbaijan's Armenophobe" and was responsible for the massacres of Armenians. Despite the fact, that the Karabakh National Council refused to recognize Sultanov's appointment, Baku's economic arguments, that the Armenian population in the region is surrounded by Turkic peoples and is historically and economically isolated from other centers of Armenian population, were recognized by Erevan.

the Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs later outlined their position:" The majority of the population of Nagorno-Karabakh is Armenians and, of course, they are sympathetic to the Armenia. On the other hand, from economic viewpoint Karabakh Armenians are connected with Azerbaijan, and Turkic peoples of the valley area of Karabakh are in need of Karabakh's mountains for grazing. Under those conditions, it is complicated to include this area into either Armenia or Azerbaijan, so it is necessary to find some other solution to the Nagorno Karabakh issue.

At the end of March 1920 anti-Azerbaijani rebellion was started in Nagorno Karabakh. Armenian armed forces, led by Armenian officers launched a simultaneous attack on Azerbaijani outposts in Shusha, Khankandi and in a number of other places. The rebellion resulted in failure: Azerbaijani

army was able to recover control over Shusha and its vicinity, but clashes in the rural areas continued until the Sovietization of Azerbaijan. After establishment of Soviet rule in Azerbaijan, Karabakh was occupied by the units of the Eleventh Army RKKA. That brings us to the next stage in Nagorno-Karabakh's history - Soviet era.

Nagorno-Karabakh under the Soviet domination and in modern time

After the establishment of the Soviet regime in Armenia on November 29, 1920 Azerbaijan signed a declaration that granted Nagorno-Karabakh's population the right of self-determination. On 5 July 1921, a plenary session of the Caucasus Bureau adopted, without discussion and a vote, a resolution under which Nagorny Karabakh was included in Azerbaijan. The decision was justified by being "in conformity with the needs of national understanding between Armenian and Muslim population and economic ties between Mountainous and valley part of Nagorny Karabakh, its permanent link with Azerbaijan. In 1923 the autonomous region of Nagorny Karabakh was formed from Armenian-populated part of Nagorny Karabakh within the Azerbaijan SSR. This status of Nagorny Karabakh was stipulated in the USSR Constitutions of 1936 and 1977.

the leadership of the Armenian SSR repeatedly endeavored to raise an issue of the accession of Nagorny Karabakh to Armenia, but none of these attempts succeeded. It should also be noted, that during the years of Soviet power the ethnic composition of the population of Nagorny Karabakh has changed considerably: by 1989 the number of Armenians had diminished from 94% to 76,9% (Vostrikov V.S. 1999), while the number of Azerbaijanis had increased 5 times (from 5% to 23%) (Vostrikov V.S. 1999).

The fact that the Soviet Union authorities had a deliberate policy to to change the ethnic balance in the region in favor of Azerbaijanis reaffirmed Heydar Aliyev, the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan and later a president of Azerbaijan. He, personally, has taken following measures in that direction: the opening of the institute with branch, the opening of shoe factory where the workers were mainly Azerbaijani and etc. "By these and other measures I tried to increase Azerbaijani population and decrease the number of Armenians" – stressed Aliyev.

Such changes in Ethno-national composition of the population (along with a number of other factors) played a considerable role in exacerbation of contradictions between Armenians and Azerbaijani. These sharp contradictions reached their culmination towards the end of the Soviet era and led to the Nagorny Karabakh conflict, that later exploded as the Karabakh war.

Glasnost gave way to numerous public discussions, publications and protests, including the question of Nagorny Karabakh. From 1987 Kremlin received many letters from Armenian people, demanding to return Nagorny Karabakh to Armenia. Many Armenian delegations visited Moscow to raise the issue of the Nagorny Karabakh and tried to lobby this issue abroad.

What started as a peaceful demonstrations, soon escalated into clashes between Armenian and Azerbaijani population of Moscow. Numerous protests of Armenian in Moscow and Erevan only fueled the conflict. The outcome of numerous clashes, looting and rioting was the mass exodus of Armenian population from Azerbaijan and Azerbaijani population from Armenia. In January 1989 Moscow partly pulled the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast from under Azerbaijani rule. A state of emergency was declared in the region and Special Management Committee was established, but the situation did not improve. Armenian self-government authorities were not subject to Azerbaijani authorities and in the summer of 1989 the authorities in the region declared the withdrawal of the Nagorny Karabakh Autonomous Region from the Azerbaijani SSR and then proclaimed the joining of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia. At the same time, in November 1989 Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast was returned to the jurisdiction of Azerbaijan by order from Moscow. Clashes became more violent, on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border fighting was ongoing. Many Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Karabakh began arms build-up in order to defend themselves,

Soviet forces acting in conjunction with the local Azerbaijani OMON launched a joint military operation in order to disarm Armenian militants in the region.

The operation (named Operation Ring) was perceived by both Soviet and Armenian government officials as a method of intimidating the Armenian populace to giving up their demands for unification.

On 2 September 1991, the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh adopted a "Declaration of Independence of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic". In response, the parliament of the Azerbaijan SSR abolished the autonomous status of the oblast. By referendum in December 1991 the majority Armenian population of the oblast declared their independence as the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the withdrawal of internal troops from Nagorno-Karabakh, the situation in the conflict zone became uncontrollable - the first Karabakh war started and later escalated into the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

On January 25, 1992 Armenian forces went on the offensive and took over the facility of Azerbaijani OMON as well as numerous Azerbaijani villages in Nagorno-Karabakh. Khojaly and Shusha remained Azerbaijani' most important military strongpoint. In February 1992 Armenian militaries managed to capture Khojaly. That occasion was accompanied by mass killings of peaceful Azerbaijani inhabitant , which the organization организация Human Rights Watch called "the greatest massacre in the history of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict".

On 9 May Armenian forces captured Shusha, and later, amid profound political crisis in Azerbaijan, sealed Lachin, which provided Armenian forces with the road that linked the region to Armenia.

However, the division of Soviet Army property ensured Azerbaijani superiority in weaponry and allowed the Azerbaijani military to take control of one third of the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh within two months. After that the fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh continued for three years and none of the parties was able to change the balance of power in the region. When it became clear that neither Azerbaijani nor Armenian had recourses to go on the offensive, parties sat at the negotiating table. On 6 May 1994 all parties agreed to cease hostilities and signed the Bishkek Protocol.

By this Protocol the status of Nagorny Karabakh remained uncertain. The Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh was established in the territory of Nagorny Karabakh but remained unrecognized by the world. According to the regional administrative subdivision of the Republic of Azerbaijan the territory of the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh is a part of Azerbaijan. Such status is supported by the UN Security Council, the UN General Assembly and a number of other international organizations, which documents state that the territory of the Republic of Nagorny-Karabakh is an occupied territory. Elections in the region are counted illegitimate by a number of other international organizations, including the United Nations, NATO, the Council of Europe and OSCE.

However, it should be noted that the Republic of Nagorny-Karabakh is ethnically homogenous – in 2017 the number of Armenians within the general population of the region constituted 99,74% (Regnum, 2017).

It is difficult to deny that the unrecognized republic, having Armenian currency, banking and custom system is, de facto, one of the Armenian regions. It is also beyond doubt that Armenian authorities are under the constant pressure of internal forces, calling for the annexation of Nagorny Karabakh republic. However, since the Bishkek Protocol was signed, no such attempts were made, probably out of fear to receive a sharp negative reaction from the international community. In general, despite the number of clashes during the 1994 to 2020 period the situation remained stable although tense.

On the morning of 27 September 2020, new clashes resumed along the Nagorno-Karabakh Line of Contact.

The Nagorno-Karabakh Line of Contact, more than 180 kilometers long was formed in the aftermath of the May 1994 ceasefire. It is essentially a border between the two forces: the self-defence forces of

Nagorny Karabakh and the armed forces of Azerbaijan. Both sides accused each other of carrying out the initial attack. International researchers mostly believe that responsibility for the outbreak of conflict lays on the Azerbaijani side. Immediately, martial law was imposed, national mobilization was declared in Nagorno-Karabakh Republic and Armenia. In turn, Azerbaijan declared martial law, curfew and partial mobilization. Turkey, a longstanding ally of the Azerbaijan on Nagorno-Karabakh issue, supported Azerbaijan militarily. Vested interest for Turkey concerning this conflict is quite clear: assistance to Azerbaijan provided Turkey with opportunity to expand its influence in the region. Furthermore, it is relevant to bear in mind the religious component: Muslim Azerbaijan was supported not only by Turkey but by a most part of the Islamic world. According to some sources, in addition to military equipment and arms, Turkey sent to Nagorny Karabakh more than 2,000 Syrian mercenaries. It should be noted that first groups of Syrians started to arrive in Azerbaijan by 25th September, a few days before the beginning of the conflict.

The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and a response from the international community

Battles were conducted in two fronts: in the north and the south of Karabakh, fighting continued for more than two months. Azerbaijan has taken control of 9 towns and more than 250 villages. Following the capture of Shusha, the second-largest settlement in Nagorno-Karabakh, a ceasefire agreement was signed between Armenia, Russia and Azerbaijan. Under the agreement, Azerbaijan made significant territorial gains: the Kelbadjar district, the Agdam district and the Lachin district, except the Lachin corridor, meant for land communications between NKR and Armenia.

Since the conflict began, most States including the members of NATO, UN and OSCE strongly condemned the fighting. The world response was mostly unanimous and called on those involved in the conflict to cease fighting, deescalate tensions and return to meaningful negotiations.

It should be noted that internal political situation in the countries had governed their approach to the conflict.

Thus, although the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine appealed for a de-escalation of the situation, it was nonetheless emphasized that Ukraine “stand for a political settlement on the basis of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Azerbaijan”. Such a response is not unexpected now, when the question of territorial integrity is acute in Ukraine, and it would be imprudent for its authorities to call for an alternative.

A similar view was expressed by the representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, comparing the situation to that of the 1992-1995 Bosnian War.

Also noteworthy is Hungary's reaction to the conflict. Hungary stated that it backed Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. This statement met with some criticism from the countries of the European Union, which, mostly, either called for a cease-fire, or supported Armenia's position. Despite extremely tense relations between European Union and Turkey, Hungary, Turkey and Azerbaijan have a long and fruitful history of collaboration. In particular, now Hungary has been working closely with Turkey and Azerbaijan on Southern Gas Corridor initiative to supply gas from the Caspian and Middle Eastern regions to Europe.

The unrecognized or partially recognized countries of Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia recognized the independence of the Republic of Artsakh and have expressed support for it.

Greece also expressed support for Armenia and harshly condemned Turkey government for its role in Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, warning that Turkey's intervention was raising serious international concerns. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad also blamed Turkey for the escalation of the conflict and the use of Syrian terrorists in Nagorno Karabakh conflict.

French President Emmanuel Macron harshly criticized Turkey's "warlike" rhetoric on

Nagorno-Karabakh. Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan said that Azerbaijan “had to take matters into its own hands” and that “Turkey will continue to stand with...Azerbaijan with all its resources and heart.” In turn, Macron claimed that he “...France will remain faithful to its role and we will be vigilant, respecting families, people, sovereignty. We will not tolerate any attempt at aggravation” (Reuters, 2020).

Moreover, on 25 November the French Senate adopted resolution calling on the French government to recognize the independence of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic.

The USA also expressed solidarity with Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh and discontent with the actions of Turkey. Thus, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated that “the resolution of that conflict ought to be done through negotiation and peaceful discussions, not through armed conflict, and certainly not with third party countries coming in to lend their firepower to what is already a powder keg of a situation”. He also expressed hope that “the Armenians will be able to defend against what the Azerbaijanis are doing” (Erikson E., 2020). However apart from this controversial statement the USA have hardly shown interest in the conflict. Moreover, the USA’s first called of ceasefire came only 48 hours after the beginning of the conflict. The Office of the President claimed that they strive to maintain a position of neutrality so the both parties won't have any advantage.

Russia has taken a similar stance. Russian authorities have not made any statements that could be interpreted as being in favor of either of the parties. The focus of diplomatic efforts by Russia was to secure a truce between the parties concerned.

Generally, one can note rather limited response of the world community to the conflict in Nagorny Karabakh. Most States refrained to support or disapprove either party, calling for an end to the fighting and the killing. At the same time, the position of Turkey was evident, Turkey’s government not only promising but providing Azerbaijan with military support. Against the background of global silence, Erdogan’s belligerent statements seemed quite disturbing.

Moreover, despite the signing of a ceasefire agreement and the presence of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh, tension in the region is still extremely high. Turkey’s desire to establish independent surveillance outpost only escalate the situation and affects not only Armenian, but also Russian interests.

Of course, a position of non-interference and global silence is justified by a combination of factors, such as the spread and impact of the pandemic, US election and the terrorist threat in France. However, despite the weight of these factors, such situation set a dangerous precedent. Unprecedented challenges materialized in 2020, but we should remember that while lead countries are addressing domestic problems, the situation in hotspots can get out of control.

Undoubtedly, Turkey contributed significantly to the victory of Azerbaijan. However, the scale of Turkey’s support is the result of a policy of *laissez faire*, followed by most leading world Powers. Despite the fact that the participation of Syrian and Lebanese terrorists in military operations in the region had not been proved, the mere possibility of such participation, more importantly initiated by the third party, is a source of serious concern. Now it is difficult to predict the development of the situation in conflict in Nagorny Karabakh, but one thing is clear – the lack of attention to the conflict can only exacerbate the deteriorating situation.

Conclusions

The Ceasefire Agreement, signed in November 2020 between Armenia and Azerbaijan, is essential for peace, security and prosperity of Armenian and Azerbaijani population in Nagorny Karabakh and

vital to the stability in the Caucasus. However, it would be wrong to assume that by signing this agreement, the dispute was finally resolved. A number of factors have varying degrees of impact on the particularly disturbing situation that dated from the beginning of the last century.

On the one hand, Armenia claims historic ownership of Nagorny Karabakh and refer to the fact that the overwhelming majority of the population in the region are Armenians. On the other hand, the disputed territory is completely surrounded by Azerbaijani territories, which makes the transfer of the region to Armenia politically and economically impossible.

Furthermore, we should not forget that people's right to self-determination cannot take precedence over the right of countries to defend their unity and territorial integrity. Kosovo, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Crimea are striking enough examples of the disregard for the principle of territorial integrity. This issue is becoming particularly acute in our time, when the process of globalization accelerates and the majority population in some territories is not presented by a titular nation.

An uneasy truce, that was reached in November this year, left the issue unresolved. The status of the Armenian community of the Nagorny Karabakh remains uncertain. Moreover, Nagorny Karabakh Republic, which benefited from Armenia's financial and military support, is not likely to fully benefit from it now, when the only land communications between NKR and Armenia is the Lachin corridor, controlled, de facto, by Azerbaijan. The time-frame for Russian peacekeepers presence in the region is unclear, while to date they remain an only guarantor of security for the Armenian population in the region.

In this regard, mention must be made of the incredibly limited reaction from the international community to Nagorno Karabakh conflict. While Turkey supported Azerbaijan in both the military and non-military spheres, the major Powers chose to turn a blind eye to the situation, that presuppose a risk of repetition not only in the Caucasus but also in other regions.

The outcome of the war between two small States, one of which receives a substantial support from the militarily and economically superior ally, is clearly foreseeable. The absence of countervailing forces in form of the reaction from the international community can only aggravate the situation. Such way of resolving conflicts will likely recur in hotspots around the world. In this respect, the Nagorny Karabakh conflict cannot be considered as a local conflict. It can be addressed only through coordinated efforts by the entire international community in order to stop it from becoming a very dangerous precedent

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