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The Armenian Dilemma after Azerbaijan's September Attack on Nagorno-Karabakh

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Executive Summary

Armenia finds itself in an extremely vulnerable position. Azerbaijan's military offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh on 19–20 September 2023 completed Baku's unfinished objective from the Second Karabakh War in 2020, effectively ending the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and fully restoring Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. As a result, more than 100,000 Karabakh Armenians – almost the entire Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh – left the region for Armenia.

Armenia suspects that Azerbaijan's military campaign was coordinated with Russia, since the recent deterioration in relations between Armenia and Russia was synchronized with a growing convergence between Russia and Azerbaijan on resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Baku's main goal was to have Nagorno-Karabakh cleared of Armenians, while Moscow sought to weaken the pro-West Armenian government. A common gain for both was the humiliation of the Western-led peace process. Russia's officials and its media blamed Armenia and the West for Azerbaijan's attack, linking Russian peacekeepers' inaction to Armenia's pro-West foreign policy turn.

In the aftermath of the attack, the European Union and individual EU member states declared its support for Armenia's territorial integrity and for humanitarian aid to the Armenians leaving Nagorno-Karabakh. The EU border mission in Armenia, established in February 2023, at least provides a certain level of protection against a larger attack by Azerbaijan on Armenia. However, Armenia is concerned by the EU's commitment to double its imports of energy from Azerbaijan, which is interpreted as a willingness to compromise on the security of Armenia, as well as on the EU's core values with regard to the rule of law and human rights.

Yerevan's efforts to connect with the West are serious but its structural dependence on Russia, combined with the West's low presence in a region marked by the hegemonic claims of authoritarian regional powers, present a very serious dilemma for Armenia.

Introduction

On 19 September 2023 Azerbaijan launched a major offensive in the breakaway region of Nagorno-Karabakh, inhabited mostly by ethnic Armenians. Officially labelled “anti-terrorist activities” with the aim of disarming “Armenian armed forces”, this escalation came after months of deterioration in the security situation around Nagorno-Karabakh. This followed mutual accusations of border skirmishes between Azerbaijan and Armenia, deadlock in peace negotiations and a serious deterioration in the humanitarian situation linked to Azerbaijan's nine-month blockade of the breakaway region. From early September, there had been signs that Azerbaijan was gearing up to use force along the contact line to bring the unresolved conflict to an end. This led to fears on the Armenian side of ethnic cleansing of the Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh.

On 20 September, after just 24 hours of fighting, Baku claimed full control of the region. Local separatist forces in Nagorno-Karabakh agreed to the ceasefire proposed by the Russian peacekeeping forces that had been stationed in the area since 2020. The parties met the

following day in the Azerbaijani town of Yevlakh for the first of several rounds of talks between Baku and the separatists on “issues of reintegration”.¹ On the same day, the United Nations Security Council held its own discussion on the situation, while thousands of protesters gathered in the Armenian capital, Yerevan, to denounce the government’s perceived failure to support Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh.²

Behind this latest escalation of events are three factors, which are addressed in this report: (a) the deterioration in relations between Armenia and Russia; (b) the growing rapprochement between Russia and Azerbaijan; and (c) Armenia’s efforts to internationalize the conflict resolution process. While each of these was apparent before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the invasion and subsequent protracted war in Ukraine accelerated them and constitute the single decisive event disrupting the Kremlin’s influence in the region.

The report draws some conclusions regarding recent events and makes recommendations on what the European Union (EU) can do to increase its support to Armenia. The text is based on information obtained up to and including 3 October 2023.

The Deterioration in Armenia-Russia Relations

The historically close relations between Armenia and Russia dated from the time – from the late 1700s to the early 1900s – when Russia was viewed as a protector of the Christian peoples of the Ottoman Empire, including Armenians. Following the break-up of the Soviet Union and Armenia’s independence, Armenia shared Russia’s vision of strengthened relations between the former Soviet republics. It became a member the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in 1991 and signed the Collective Security Treaty in 1992, which became the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) a decade later. In 2013, Armenia abandoned an already negotiated Association Agreement with the EU and instead joined the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2015, together with Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.

Armenian-Russian relations began to sour in the spring of 2018 when the “Velvet Revolution” swept away the old Russia-aligned kleptocratic political elite and brought to power the pro-European reformer, Nikol Pashinyan, as prime minister. The Kremlin initially tolerated Pashinyan but never fully trusted him. Moscow saw Pashinyan’s rise to power as an example of another Western-sponsored “Colour Revolution” in its perceived sphere of interest, only four years after the EuroMaidan revolution in Ukraine. Moscow finds it easier to get along with fellow authoritarian regimes, such as the one in Baku.

Reasons for the Souring of Relations

The primary reason for the deterioration in relations between Armenia and Russia was the huge disappointment in Yerevan over Moscow’s failure to uphold the 9 November 2020 Trilateral Statement, the Russia-brokered ceasefire agreement that ended the Second

1 BBC (2023) “Azerbaijan halts Karabakh offensive after ceasefire deal with Armenian separatists”, 21 September, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66863702>.

2 Aljazeera (2023) “Armenia protesters demand PM resign after Karabakh ceasefire”, 20 September, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/20/armenia-protesters-demand-pm-resign-after-nagorno-karabakh-ceasefire>.

Karabakh War.³ According to that statement, Russian peacekeeping forces would guarantee free passage through the Lachin Corridor, the only road connecting Armenia with Nagorno-Karabakh. The Russian peacekeeping forces proved powerless to prevent a blockade, however, which began on 12 December 2022, blocking access to the Lachin Corridor, creating shortages of food, medicine and fuel for Karabakh Armenians. In addition, on 23 April 2023, Azerbaijan established a checkpoint at the entrance to the Lachin Corridor close to the Armenian border. This was also a breach of the Trilateral Statement, which allows only Russian peacekeeping forces to control access to the Lachin Corridor.

Furthermore, even after the 9 November Trilateral Statement was signed, Azerbaijan carried out several military attacks on Armenia, some of which resulted in the occupation of at least 150 square kilometres on Armenia's internationally recognized territory along different sections of its border with Azerbaijan.

A bilateral agreement between Russia and Armenia, the 1997 Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, commits Russia to defend its ally if attacked by a foreign country. On no occasion, however, has Russia fulfilled its security obligation to help Armenia when attacked by Azerbaijan. After two of these attacks on 12 May 2021 and 12-14 September 2022, Armenia appealed to the CSTO for military support in accordance with the organization's article 4 on collective security. However, the CSTO refused even to evaluate Azerbaijani aggression let alone provide support for Armenia. Neither Russia nor other CSTO member states, such as Kazakhstan or Belarus, want to endanger their ties with Azerbaijan by intervening on behalf of Armenia. This led to growing anti-Russian sentiment in Armenia, while the Russian media narrative turned sharply against Armenia.⁴

After the September 2022 attack by Azerbaijani, Prime Minister Pashinyan requested an EU monitoring mission for Armenia's border with Azerbaijan. Following the establishment of a temporary two-month EU Monitoring Capacity in Armenia (EUMCAP), which comprised observers drawn from the EU Mission in Georgia, the EU launched the EU Mission to Armenia (EUMA) on 20 February 2023, initially as a two-year civilian border mission with 100 personnel, among them 50 unarmed observers. The objectives of EUMA are to contribute to de-escalation and stability in Armenian's border areas, while also supporting the delimitation and demarcation process and confidence building between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Russia's reaction to the first ever mission under the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in a CSTO member state was predictably negative. Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, accused the EU of "openly abusing its relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan", by "pushing its 'mission' into Armenian territory, raising serious questions about its legitimacy".⁵

3 Kopalyan, N. (2023) "EVN Security Report: April 2023: Frozen Conflict Persistence and Strategic Negligence", *EVN Report*, 28 April, <https://evnreport.com/evn-security-report/evn-security-report-april-2023/>.

4 Horan, J. (2023) "As Azerbaijan takes over Karabakh, Armenian-Russian ties reach new nadir", *Eurasianet*, 21 September, <https://eurasianet.org/as-azerbaijan-takes-over-karabakh-armenian-russian-ties-reach-new-nadir>.

5 Russian MFA (2023) "Выступление и ответы на вопросы СМИ Министра иностранных дел Российской Федерации С.В.Лаврова в ходе совместной пресс-конференции с Министром иностранных дел Азербайджанской Республики Д.А.Байрамовым по итогам переговоров, Баку, 28 февраля 2023 года" [Speech and answers to media questions by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation S.V. Lavrov during a joint press conference with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan D.A. Bayramov following the negotiations, Baku, February 28, 2023], 28 February, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1856007/?lang=ru.

Yerevan's disappointment with the lack of reaction from Moscow and the CSTO led to a gradual weakening of Armenia's participation in the organization, as well as a gradual advance of Baku's position in Nagorno-Karabakh, with Russian consent. At the November 2022 CSTO Summit in Yerevan, Pashinyan, who was chairing the session, angrily ended the summit early without signing a key document, leading to the document not being adopted. In early 2023, Armenia refused to hold a CSTO exercise on its territory and later also refused to participate in a CSTO exercise in Belarus.⁶ Pashinyan explained that: "Russia's military presence in Armenia not only does not guarantee Armenia's security but, on the contrary, creates threats to Armenia's security".⁷ In September 2023, Pashinyan removed Armenia's permanent representative to the CSTO and failed to appoint a successor.

Further efforts to diversify its foreign policy included a decision by the Armenian government in September to officially ask parliament to ratify the Rome Statute, the founding treaty of the International Criminal Court (ICC). The official reason was to be able to punish Azerbaijan for war crimes at the ICC, but it would also mean that President of Russia Vladimir Putin would, at least theoretically, be unable to visit Armenia since he would risk arrest in connection with a March 2023 ICC arrest warrant issued in connection with the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia.

On 3 September Pashinyan told the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* that dependence on one partner (i.e. Russia) and linkages in security matters, including on acquiring weapons and ammunition, had been "a strategic mistake".⁸ There followed a visit by Pashinyan's wife, Anna Hakobyan, to a summit in Kyiv and the delivery of a package of humanitarian aid to Ukraine, the first from Armenia to Ukraine since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022.⁹

Finally, on 11–20 September, Armenia carried out a bilateral military drill with the United States, "Eagle Partner 2023".¹⁰ Although small in scale, involving just 85 US and 175 Armenian soldiers, and focused on peacekeeping, a member of the CSTO holding a bilateral military exercise with the US on its own soil was unprecedented. Russia's reaction to the above events was harsh, leading the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to call in the Armenian ambassador to protest.

Russian Leverage in Armenia

Despite all of its attempts to distance itself from Russia, Moscow still has a degree of leverage over Armenia. Russia has a significant military presence in Armenia: the 102nd Military Base in Gyumri, Armenia's second city, as well as the 3624th Russian Airbase in Erebuni outside Yerevan. The presence of these facilities was extended by agreement in

6 Axar.az (2023) "Armenia refused exercises of the CSTO", 26 July, <https://en.axar.az/news/world/768863.html>.

7 The Armenian Weekly (2023) "Pashinyan says Russian military presence 'threatens Armenia's security'", 11 January, <https://armenianweekly.com/2023/01/11/pashinyan-says-russian-military-presence-threatens-armenias-security/>.

8 The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia (2023) "Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's interview to Italian La Repubblica newspaper", 2 September, <https://www.primeminister.am/en/interviews-and-press-conferences/item/2023/09/02/Nikol-Pashinyan-interview-La-Repubblica/>.

9 JAMnews (2023) "Pashinyan's wife's visit to Ukraine: who she met and what she discussed", 7 September, <https://jam-news.net/visit-of-pashinyans-wife-to-ukraine/>.

10 Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Armenia (2023) "Armenian-U.S. joint exercise 'EAGLE PARTNER 2023' will be held in Armenia", 6 September, <https://www.mil.am/en/news/11774>.

2010 until 2044. Russian border guards under the command of the Federal Security Service (FSB) also protect Armenia's borders with Türkiye and Iran.¹¹

Moscow also has considerable economic leverage over Yerevan, as demonstrated by Russia's near monopoly on exports of gas, oil and nuclear fuel to Armenia, as well as its control over Armenia's critical infrastructure such as mines and railways.¹² In fact, Armenia's economic dependence on Russia has increased since the invasion of Ukraine.¹³ In 2022, the level of remittances from Armenian workers abroad more than doubled to US\$ 5.2 billion, about 75 percent of which came from Russia.¹⁴ Armenia has also used the current situation to extract economic benefits from the deepening Russia-West confrontation. In 2022, trade between Armenia and Russia increased by 92 percent, amounting to more than US\$ 5 billion. Armenia's exports to Russia increased by 2.4 times compared to the previous year. Since Armenia has neither the industrial capacity nor the resources to boost exports to Russia to this extent in one year, Ukrainian and Western experts have accused Armenia of circumventing sanctions against Russia.¹⁵

The Growing Coincidence of Interests Between Russia and Azerbaijan

A major factor that facilitated the recent Azerbaijani attack on Nagorno-Karabakh was Russia's increased support for Azerbaijan in the conflict with Armenia, based on the assumption that Armenia has little room to end its dependence on Russia.

Russia has been using Azerbaijan as a tool of military blackmail to prevent Yerevan from leaving Russia's sphere of interest. For many years, Russia exported weapons to both countries, seeking to balance the two sides. The focus on the war with Ukraine, however, has led Moscow to make further compromises with Azerbaijan and its ally in the region, Türkiye, at the cost of Armenia. Russia has not sold any weapons to Armenia since the invasion and has not delivered the ones it had already sold. Armenia claims that it has paid millions of dollars for arms that have not been delivered.¹⁶

For many years, Azerbaijan had tried to stigmatize Armenia as a "Russian proxy", due to its connections with Russia. In February 2022, however, just two days before Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, President Putin and President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev

11 Nazaretyan, H. (2021) "Russia's Increasing Military Presence in Armenia", EVN Report, 4 March, <https://evnreport.com/politics/russia-s-increasing-military-presence-in-armenia/>.

12 Nazaretyan, H (2023) "Armenia's Economic Dependence on Russia: How Deep Does It Go?", EVN Report, 7 July, <https://evnreport.com/economy/armenias-economic-dependence-on-russia-how-deep-does-it-go/>.

13 Mgdesyan, A. (2023) "As Armenia seeks allies in the West, its economic dependence on Russia grows", Eurasianet, 28 April, <https://eurasianet.org/as-armenia-seeks-allies-in-the-west-its-economic-dependence-on-russia-grows>.

14 Hergnyan, S. (2023) "2022 Saw Record \$ 5.2 Billion in Remittances to Armenia", Hetq, 1 February, <https://hetq.am/en/article/152720>.

15 Srbnovski, A. (2023) "Armenia: Russia's backdoor to circumvent sanctions", New Eastern Europe, 26 March, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2023/05/26/armenia-russias-backdoor-to-circumvent-sanctions/>.

16 JAMnews (2023) "'Property or money for weapons not supplied for Armenia'. About Russia's debt", 8 June, <https://jam-news.net/russias-debt-for-the-supply-of-weapons-to-armenia/>.

signed a Joint Declaration on Allied Interaction, which discussed military cooperation and the possibility of “providing each other with military assistance”.¹⁷

Nonetheless, Azerbaijan has continued to raise its geopolitical profile by manoeuvring between Russia and the West, playing the role of “reliable” EU partner, as described by the President of the European Commission, Ursula van der Leyen, and committing to supply gas to Europe as an alternative source to Russia. Some analysts have suggested that Azerbaijan has neither the supplies of gas that it has committed to deliver nor the capacity to deliver such volumes to Europe. Experts have also pointed out that the critical infrastructure needed by Azerbaijan to extract and transport gas from the Caspian Sea to Europe is co-owned by a Russian oil and gas company, Lukoil, which signed a gas deal with Gazprom in November 2022 to import Russian gas in order to meet its obligations to Europe.¹⁸ This could indicate that Azerbaijan is “laundering” Russian gas for Europe.

Another more recent example of the growing congruity between Russia and Azerbaijan is the consensus on the EU’s border mission in Armenia. Unlike the EUMCAP, which was agreed with the cryptic consent of Azerbaijan to cooperate with this mission “as far as it is concerned”,¹⁹ the EUMA went ahead without Azerbaijan’s approval. Baku refused the EU’s offer to deploy a similar mission on its side of the border.

Trade and Transit Routes

Another reason behind the increasing congruence of interests between Russia and Azerbaijan is the development of trade and transit routes in the South Caucasus. Russia needs Azerbaijan in order to develop the International North-South Transport Corridor to improve trade between Russia and Iran (via Azerbaijan), and then on to India. Azerbaijan’s main interests are in developing the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, or “Middle Corridor”, as a regional economic zone comprising Central Asia, the Caucasus and Türkiye, as well as an increasingly attractive transport route between Europe and China.²⁰ One significant geopolitical consequence of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is the reinvigoration of this Middle Corridor at the expense of the Northern Corridor through heavily sanctioned Russia and Belarus. Since the end of the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan has been heavily promoting one route through the southern Armenian region of Syunik, a project Baku calls the “Zangezur Corridor”, which connects mainland Azerbaijan with the exclave of Nakhchivan and on to Türkiye.

Moscow sees the “Zangezur Corridor” as a chance to limit the negative effects of the Middle Corridor, but also as a way to help Russia circumvent Western sanctions. Yerevan fears that the common interests of Russia and Azerbaijan might also force Armenia to concede an extra-territorial corridor controlled by the Russian FSB border guards already in place along

17 President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev (2022) “Declaration on allied interaction between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation”, 22 February, <https://president.az/en/articles/view/55498>.

18 Tatikyan, S. (2023) “The Imperative for Security and Rights in Nagorno-Karabakh”, EVN Report, 9 March, <https://evnreport.com/politics/international-guarantees-for-security-and-rights-the-case-of-nagorno-karabakh/>.

19 European Council (2023) “Armenia: EU establishes a civilian mission to contribute to stability in the border areas”, 23 January, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/01/23/armenia-eu-sets-up-a-civilian-mission-to-ensure-security-in-conflict-affected-and-border-areas/>.

20 Eldem, T (2022) “Russia’s War on Ukraine and the Rise of the Middle Corridor as the Third Vector of Eurasian Connectivity”, SWP Comment/C64, 28 October, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2022C64/>.

its border with Iran.²¹ These suspicions were reinforced on 25 May 2023 when Aliyev, at the EAEU summit, participating as a guest of honour since Azerbaijan is not a member of the organization, admitted that Russia and Azerbaijan had agreed to implement the “Zangezur Corridor”. This prompted a clearly surprised Pashinyan to admit he was hearing this “for the first time”.²²

Armenia instead prefers other routes through Armenia, which would be controlled by Armenia and not risk blocking the country's trade with Iran. Baku's impatience with Yerevan on this issue has occasionally led Azerbaijani senior officials to publicly criticize Armenia for sabotaging the process of opening up regional transport routes. Aliyev has even claimed that Zangezur (Syunik Province) as well as Yerevan and Sevan are all historically Azerbaijani land, “Western Azerbaijan”, and hinted that Baku might use force to establish the “Zangezur Corridor”.²³ Azerbaijan's recent military successes, as well as support from Türkiye and Russia, combined with the rather weak reaction from the West, are likely encourage such language.

The Internationalization of Conflict Resolution

A third trend is the internationalization of the conflict and of conflict resolution. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 shook the power balance in the South Caucasus region, creating a dangerous security vacuum and prompting the need for renewed international mediation. To avert a third outright war, experts highlighted the urgent need to reach a comprehensive political settlement covering the main issues at stake: (a) the status, rights and protection of the residents of Nagorno-Karabakh; (b) border demarcation; and (c) development of a transport corridor between Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic.

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Moscow's role as the primary international mediator on Nagorno-Karabakh was gradually supplanted by the EU, supported by the United States, to avoid a security vacuum in the region. An important achievement of the EU's negotiating efforts came in the margins of the first European Political Community (EPC) meeting in Prague on 6 October 2022. The President of the European Council, Charles Michel, and President of France Emmanuel Macron persuaded Pashinyan and Aliyev to confirm their commitment to the UN Charter and the 1991 Alma Ata Declaration, through which each recognized the other's territorial integrity and sovereignty as the basis for the work of the border delimitation commission.²⁴

Already in April 2022, Pashinyan spoke of a change in Yerevan's priorities from Karabakh's status to “security and rights guarantees” for the Karabakh Armenians.²⁵ Some analysts

21 Tatikyan, S. (2023) “Why Is the EU Deploying a Mission in Armenia and What to Expect”, EVN Report, 20 February, <https://evnreport.com/politics/why-is-the-eu-deploying-a-mission-in-armenia-and-what-to-expect/>.

22 ARMENPRESS (2023) “PM Pashinyan responds to ‘corridor’ wording of the President of Azerbaijan during the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council”, 25 May, <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1111824/>.

23 Konarsewska, N (2022) “What's behind the new round of clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan”, New Eastern Europe, 2 September, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2022/09/20/armenia-azerbaijan-pelosi-russia-ukraine/>.

24 Caprile, A. and Przetacznik, J. (2023) “Armenia and Azerbaijan: Between war and peace”, European Parliament Briefing, June, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2023\)747919](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2023)747919).

25 Krivosheev, K. (2023) “Armenia is ready or relinquish Nagorno-Karabakh: What next?”, Carnegie politika, 28 April, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89635>.

believe that this shift in Armenia's negotiating position represented a breakthrough in the negotiations and opened the way for a sustainable political settlement of the conflict. Other experts warned, however, that this would come at a heavy price for the inhabitants of Nagorno-Karabakh, and with a potentially high political cost for Pashinyan, who could easily be accused of selling out the national interests of Armenia.²⁶

Russia reacted to this change on the diplomatic scene with open criticism. It effectively ended the work of the so-called Minsk Group, co-chaired by Russia, France and the United States, under the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which unsuccessfully had led the negotiations starting from 1992. The Kremlin instead started taking forward its own mediation process, increasingly calling for trilateral meetings with Russia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia in an attempt to retain Russia's role in the region.

During the trilateral meeting within the EU-led process, held in Brussels on 14 May 2023, the leaders of Yerevan and Baku confirmed their unequivocal commitment to "the respective territorial integrity of Armenia (29 800 km²) and Azerbaijan (86 600 km²)".²⁷ The parties met again in Chisinau on 1 June, on the margins of the second EPC Summit, and later also in Washington, DC and in Brussels, but without any significant breakthrough. Russia continued to call for trilateral negotiations in its parallel process. By the summer of 2023, however, it was clear that the negotiations had stalled over issues linked to the blockade of the Lachin Corridor. The US, European states and others urged Azerbaijan to end the blockade, based on decisions of the International Court of Justice of February and July 2023, but without result.²⁸ Azerbaijan, in turn, denied blockading Nagorno-Karabakh and offered an alternative route for supplies through the town of Aghdam, to the east of the Karabakh region. The Armenian separatist authorities rejected that offer, calling the blockade a violation of the 9 November ceasefire.²⁹ They also considered Baku's offer to use the Aghdam Road to be a Trojan Horse, acceptance of which would pave the way for Azerbaijani rule.³⁰

Consequences for Armenia and the South Caucasus

After the end of the fighting, Azerbaijan opened up the Lachin Corridor to facilitate Armenians' departure, finally ending the nine-month blockade of the region. After disarming the Karabakh Armenian armed forces, Azerbaijan arrested several separatist leaders, including the former "president" (until 1 September 2023), Arayik Harutyunyan, and former "state minister", the Russian-Armenian oligarch, Ruben Vardanyan. Following discussions between Baku and the

26 Caprile and Przetacznik (2023).

27 European Council (2023) "Press remarks by president Charles Michel following trilateral meeting with president Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Prime Minister Pashinyan of Armenia", 15 July, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/sv/press/press-releases/2023/07/15/press-remarks-by-president-charles-michel-following-trilateral-meeting-with-president-aliyev-of-azerbaijan-and-prime-minister-pashinyan-of-armenia/>.

28 Balian, H. (2023) "Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Negotiations: Mediators Have Responsibility to Protect", Civilnet, 16 August, <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/747366/armenia-azerbaijan-peace-negotiations-mediators-have-responsibility-to-protect/>.

29 RFE/RL (2023) "UN Security Council Holds Emergency Meeting on Nagorno-Karabakh", 16 August, <https://www.rferl.org/a/karabakh-blockade-un-emergency-meeting-armenia-azerbaijan/32550909.html>.

30 Kucera, J (2023) "With Tightening of Blockade, Azerbaijan Presents Karabakh Armenians With a Choice: Surrender or Starve", RFE/RL, 31 July, <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-nagorno-karabakh-armenia-blockade-humanitarian-situation/32527892.html>.

separatist leaders, the de facto authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh announced that they would dissolve no later than 1 January 2024, formally ending more than 30 years of separatist rule.

Russia's betrayal of Nagorno-Karabakh has convinced Armenia even further of the hopelessness of relying on Russian security guarantees. Russian politicians and media representatives, such as former President Dmitrii Medvedev and state propagandist Margarita Simonyan, explicitly blamed Armenia for the Azerbaijani attack. Simonyan sarcastically suggested that while Pashinyan was "demanding" that Russian peacekeepers protect Nagorno-Karabakh, after Armenia's flirtation with the West, he should expect NATO to do so instead.³¹ In an indication that Russia's objective is to weaken and hopefully replace the current government or even to destroy Armenia's independence, Simonyan and her propagandist colleague, Vladimir Solovyev, posted identical messages on social media calling on Armenians to join an opposition rally in Yerevan's Republic Square.³² The Kremlin is probably hoping that disillusioned Karabakh Armenians in Armenia will increase dissatisfaction with the current government to the advantage of the opposition. However, the anti-government protests in Yerevan immediately after the Azerbaijani attack on Nagorno-Karabakh subsided after a few days. Furthermore, on 3 October, despite Russia's pressure and threats, the Armenian Parliament voted by an overwhelming majority to ratify the Rome Statute, in yet another confirmation of Armenia's pro-Western choice.

On 19 September, the EU's initial reaction to Azerbaijan's attack was to call for an immediate cessation of hostilities and for Azerbaijan to cease all current military activities.³³ At the same time, the EU voiced concern about the displacement of Karabakh Armenians. Brussels also offered its services as a mediator, but Baku ultimately opted for the Russian peacekeepers instead.

Subsequently, the EU took a more assertive and principled stand against Azerbaijan's actions. Just two days later, Brussels issued a warning to Baku that if the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh were forcibly displaced, a serious response would follow. The EU explicitly held Baku responsible for the security and rights of the Karabakh Armenian population.³⁴ This represented the strongest statement made by the EU concerning Azerbaijan's actions in relation to Nagorno-Karabakh, finally bringing the crisis to the EU's geopolitical focus.³⁵ The mass exodus of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia led the EU to boost its humanitarian funding by €5 million, complementing the humanitarian aid sent from the United States (US\$ 11.5 million), France (€7 million), Germany (€5 million), Sweden (€1.4 million) and Canada (CDN 2.5 million) among others.³⁶

31 Cenus, D. (2023) "Opinion: The EU should step up its support for Armenia", OC Media, 30 September, <https://oc-media.org/azerbaijan-demands-complete-surrender-of-nagorno-karabakh-as-it-launches-massive-offensive/>.

32 Robert Ananyan on X (formerly Twitter), 23 September, <https://twitter.com/robananyan/status/1705540685531656320>.

33 EU Mission in Armenia (2023) "Azerbaijan: Statement by the High Representative on the military escalation", 19 September, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/euma/azerbaijan-statement-high-representative-military-escalation_en?s=410283.

34 EU Mission in Armenia (2023) "Azerbaijan: Statement by the High Representative on the military escalation", 21 September, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/euma/azerbaijan-statement-high-representative-developments-nagorno-karabakh_en?s=410283.

35 Cenus, D. (2023)

36 Civilnet (2023) "Western aid for Karabakh Armenians", 29 September, <https://www.civilnet.am/en/>

Armenia's dilemma is that it is so structurally dependent on Russia, both economically – particularly for energy supplies – and politically. Armenia is not strong enough to be able to go completely against Russia's interests. Furthermore, Armenia's geopolitical choice has come in an extremely hostile environment. Its major enemy, Azerbaijan, is backed by Türkiye, Armenia's neighbour to the West, which closed its borders to Armenia in 1993 in support of Azerbaijan in the war over Nagorno-Karabakh. A normalization of relations with Türkiye would mean a lot to Armenia and provide an alternative to economic dependence on Russia, but this is unlikely in the short to medium term. Armenia's neighbours to the north and south – Georgia and Iran – are politically and economically important for Yerevan, but also highly problematic. Georgia remains deeply traumatized by internal conflicts and polarised over the current government's pro-Russia policy, which has intensified since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In addition, using the heavily sanctioned Iran as a counterweight to Türkiye and Azerbaijan would be difficult without jeopardizing relations with the West.

Furthermore, the three regional powers – Russia, Türkiye, and Iran – despite their obvious differences in security affiliation, such as Türkiye's membership of NATO, also have converging interests. They are all united behind an authoritarian "conflict resolution" in the South Caucasus, which undermines the legitimacy of the liberal peace-making efforts of the West.³⁷ Of the three external powers, Türkiye has strengthened its influence even more at Russia's expense. The Russian peacekeeping contingent may be removed from Azerbaijan's territory before the formal end of its initial five-year mandate (until 2025). However, Russia's continued demotion as a military power due to the war in Ukraine does not immediately end its hybrid threat capabilities or appetite for aggression in other regions – regardless of the outcome in Ukraine.

The immediate threats for Armenia are both internal (a Russian attempt for regime change) and external (an Azerbaijani intervention with the consent of Türkiye and Russia). The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict will be "resolved" after more than 30 years in its post-Soviet form, but the South Caucasus is likely to remain a highly vulnerable region.

What More Can the EU Do?

The EU's involvement has been more than welcome for Yerevan in its bid to diversify its foreign policy options. The EUMA border mission, although limited, is positive as it at least provides some threshold for Azerbaijani aggression towards Armenia. However, the EU's engagement is also frustrating for Armenia. Yerevan has played the "democracy card" but believes that it has not been rewarded, and that Azerbaijan's energy resources are more important to the EU than Armenian democracy. Armenia is concerned about the EU's willingness to compromise Armenia's security, the rule of law and human rights in the interests of buying more energy from Azerbaijan and the Caspian Sea region.

Despite the currently unfavourable geopolitical circumstances, and the EU's limited presence in Armenia and the South Caucasus more generally, Brussels and the EU member states

[news/752768/western-aid-for-karabakh-armenians/](https://www.dgap.org/de/news/752768/western-aid-for-karabakh-armenians/).

37 Meister, S. (2023) "Nagorno-Karabakh: The Rise of the Authoritarian 'Conflict Resolution'", DGAP Memo, 2 October, <https://dgap.org/de/forschung/publikationen/nagorno-karabakh-rise-authoritarian-conflict-resolution>.

could do more to strengthen Armenia's resilience and democracy, and to de-escalate the situation around Armenia.

‣ **Increase de-conflicting and humanitarian support:**

- Continue the peace negotiations efforts within the trilateral format (EU-Armenian-Azerbaijan) with the objective of achieving a final peace agreement, including border agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia;
- Increase humanitarian support for the Karabakh Armenians who decide to stay in Armenia and keep close monitoring of the human rights situation for the Armenians who eventually remain in Nagorno-Karabakh as Azerbaijani citizens.

‣ **Strengthen Armenia's own resilience:**

- Improve Armenia's capability to counter Russian disinformation, propaganda, cyberattacks and other hybrid threats;
- Include Armenia in the scope of the European Peace Facility, which would open up financing for non-lethal equipment to the Armenian armed forces, as well as for capacity building measures, from which both Ukraine and Moldova have already benefited.

‣ **Increase the presence of the EU in Armenia:**

- Increase the resources to the EUMA with the goal of expanding and extending the mission beyond its current deadline of 2025;
- Open new embassies and consulates of the EU member states in Armenia, following France's decision to open a consulate in Syunik Province;
- Increase knowledge of the EU's support to Armenia among the Armenian population and civil society, and especially among the youth and outside major cities.

‣ **Enhance the contractual relationship with Armenia**

- Deepen the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between the EU and Armenia, which was signed in 2017 and entered into force in 2021, with simplified visa rules for Armenians to visit Schengen countries/EU member states.

‣ **Establish conditionality on EU's cooperation with Azerbaijan:**

- Make cooperation between the EU and Azerbaijan conditional. If Azerbaijan follows through on its threats of aggression against Armenia by, for instance, occupying southern Armenia, tough EU sanctions coordinated with the US should follow.



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