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AFTERMATH OF THE 2020 KARABAKH WAR: NEW GEOPOLITICAL REALITY IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

Special Editor: Tatia Chikhladze (British Teaching University in Georgia, Tbilisi)

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Aftermath of the 2020 Karabakh War: New Geopolitical Reality in the South Caucasus

Introduction by the Special Editor Tatia Chikhladze
(British Teaching University in Georgia, Tbilisi)

On September 27, 2020, a decades-long conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Karabakh escalated sharply, turning into an open military confrontation that lasted 44 days. As a result, a major reshuffling of the geopolitical reality took place in the South Caucasus. Armenia lost control of not only one-third of the Karabakh territory but also all the seven territories adjacent to the disputed region. On November 10, 2020, the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia signed a ceasefire agreement, which created a positive expectation in terms of improving the security environment in the region. However, some challenging factors that have the potential to upset the fragile environment in the region remain; the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh, a lack of any border demarcation between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and casual exchanges of fire along the contact line are just a few examples of such contentious issues.

Developments during both the 2020 military hostilities and the subsequent diplomatic negotiations have shown that a certain shift in the balance of power in the region has taken place, shifting from the actors who have traditionally worked towards a peaceful resolution of the conflict—the OSCE Minsk Group, EU, and US—to Russia and Turkey. Apart from the fact that Russia mediated the November 10 ceasefire agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Russian peacekeepers are now located in the disputed region. Turkey was not an official signatory of the ceasefire agreement, but through its active assistance to victorious Azerbaijan and the prospects for its improving relations with Armenia, Turkey has certainly improved its positions in the region.

Taking into consideration the broader regional changes in terms of the political and security environment following the second Nagorno-Karabakh War, the first article in this special issue explores the conflicting preferences of the South Caucasian states (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia) and some broader regional actors (Turkey, Russia, Iran) concerning the “3+3” platform, a postwar initiative for regional cooperation. In light of certain opportunities that have been created by the new geopolitical situation in the region, the second article articulates the prospects for the latest attempt at rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia. The third article describes the resettlement potential of internally displaced people (IDPs) in Azerbaijan’s postwar territories based on data from a large-scale national self-administered survey that was conducted by an independent nongovernmental agency.

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The “3+3” Platform for Regional Cooperation: Conflicting Foreign Policy Preferences

By Eka Javakhishvili (Tbilisi, Georgia)

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Abstract

The “3+3” format for regional cooperation is an initiative voiced by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, which intends to strengthen trade and economic ties between Turkey, Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia. Only Georgia from the listed countries is not interested in participation due to Russia’s role in the format. However, the other five countries might continue with the initiative despite a large number of competing interests and frictions among them. Nonetheless, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the prospect of deepening cooperation with Moscow became even more restrained for all participants, so the future of “3+3” became even more contentious. It should be noted that the proposed format is considered as the project that could undermine the West’s role by excluding its presence and influence over the region. Thus, this project poses significant political challenges to the region.

Introduction

In 2020, the war in Nagorno-Karabakh provoked fundamental changes in the South Caucasus region. Barriers erected over the years between neighbouring countries have begun to come down, and a window of new opportunities has emerged for intensification of trade and economic relations between the countries. However, the emerging problem of demarcation-delimitation of the changed borders after the war causes constant tension and periodic military escalation between Armenia and Azerbaijan. At the same time, the Nagorno-Karabakh war drastically changed the security environment in the South Caucasus, which did not become safer. The interests of large regional players seeking to strengthen their influence over small countries intensified, and the level of geopolitical competition increased as well.

After Azerbaijan’s victory in the Nagorno-Karabakh war, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan voiced an initiative to set up a “platform of six” to develop closer cooperation between the six countries in the region on issues related to security, economy and transportation. On December 10, 2020, at a Victory Parade in Baku, the Turkish president announced that he had discussed the “platform of six” with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, which could be formed among Turkey, Azerbaijan, Russia, Iran, Georgia and Armenia. Erdoğan’s initiative was later expanded to include Iran, and the “platform of six” was eventually framed into the “3+3” (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia + Turkey, Russia, Iran) format. From the beginning, Russia’s position on participating in the proposed format of regional cooperation was positive; the same was true for the positions of Azerbaijan and Iran (Daily Sabah, 2021). Armenia has met the proposed cooperation format reluctantly, while Georgia has refused (Interpressnews, 2021a).

On December 10, 2021, exactly one year after Erdoğan’s announcement, the first working meeting of the “3+3” was held in Moscow at the level of Deputy Foreign Ministers. The meeting was held without Georgia; however, the host country (Russia) presented the Georgian flag at the meeting and indicated that “the door remains open for Georgia” (Interpressnews, 2021b). The next meeting was scheduled in February 2022 in Turkey, but after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the meetings scheduled within this format were delayed. However, the talks on the “3+3” project are still ongoing. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov regularly discusses this issue with his Turkish counterpart Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and repeatedly calls on Tbilisi to become involved in the project (Ria Novosti, 2022).

Major Interests and Contradictions of the Participating Countries

The name of the “3+3” format already indicates that, on the one hand, there are 3 regional major powers in the form of Russia, Turkey and Iran, and on the other hand, there are small regional states in the form of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Consequently, this format of collaboration in no way can be symmetrical, and it primarily serves advancing the interests of dominant regional actors and to redistributing spheres of influence among them. These three major states consider the South Caucasus region to be within their exclusive sphere of influence. All three are driven by a more or less common interest—to expel the West from the region. Although Turkey is a member of NATO, it does not want to see other players in its “backyard”.

At the same time, there is fierce competition between Russia, Turkey and Iran for the distribution of spheres of influence in the South Caucasus. Despite the declared

stable and partnership relations, Russia and Turkey remain the main competitors in the region. Russia considers the post-Soviet space to be its area of unconditional influence and wants hegemony in the South Caucasus. Moscow has already occupied two regions in Georgia and has leverage over Armenia and Azerbaijan through “a peace mandate”. In addition, Russia sees the South Caucasus region as a kind of corridor to the Middle East.

Turkey is no less interested in leading the region, and through an alliance with Azerbaijan (“One Nation, Two Countries”), wants to demonstrate its strength and superiority. At the same time, for Turkey, the South Caucasus is a corridor to the Caspian states.

For Iran, it is less visible on the political scene in the South Caucasus. Its room for manoeuvre is also restricted by Western sanctions, but to some extent, Tehran retains its leverage over Armenia, as that country has to work closely with Iran due to the long-time blockade by Azerbaijan and Turkey. Meanwhile, Tehran also has close ties with Azerbaijan. Iran has several major strengths and advantages over Turkey and Russia: it is geographically the only country bordering Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the Nakhichevan region. Consequently, Iran has been the only communication route for decades between Nakhichevan and Azerbaijan. Iran’s participation is also crucial for the restoration of the Soviet-era railway on the southern edge of the South Caucasus region. In addition, Iran is the only country that has maintained regular diplomatic relations with all three countries of the South Caucasus. Tehran is interested in achieving economic de-isolation and opening all routes connecting it to Russia (Kaleji, 2021).

For Azerbaijan, Baku aims to receive maximum benefits from a “new regional reality” following its victory in the Nagorno-Karabakh war. Azerbaijan will continue to use any international format to legitimize the control of the territories it gained as a result of the war. At the same time, joining the cooperation format proposed by Turkish president Erdoğan will be the gesture of gratitude to him as he helped Baku greatly to win the war.

As for Armenia’s interests in the “3+3” format, the country government does not seem completely sure about the benefits of the proposed cooperation format, but it does not want to miss a chance to escape from the long-time isolation. Armenian leadership voiced certain scepticism about the project but did not refuse to take a seat at the table. According to the Armenian side, Yerevan may be interested in the “3+3” format if the agenda does not include issues already discussed in other formats, including talks on Karabakh within the OSCE Minsk Group, as well as trilateral talks on unblocking transport hubs between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia. Some Armenian experts reckon that Armenia will

be a small player at the negotiating table and will not be able to develop its own agenda within the “3+3” format (Khachatryan, 2021). The Nagorno-Karabakh war is over, but territorial and legal issues still exist, which may hamper cooperation between Armenia and Azerbaijan within any given format.

Ties between Armenia and Turkey have been severed since 1993. Recently, the negotiations on the restoration of ties between Armenia and Turkey resumed after the first meeting of the “3+3” format in Moscow. On December 13, 2021, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu announced that Ankara and Yerevan would appoint special envoys to normalize their relations. A number of meetings have already taken place between the special representatives of the two countries, and both sides are ready for subsequent negotiations. (News.am, 2021).

At the same time, there are also issues between Iran and Azerbaijan, as well as between Turkey and Iran for numerous reasons, including prominent ethnic and territorial issues.

Why Does Georgia Refuse to Participate?

As Georgia is the only country refusing to participate in the given project, its final decision will be crucial for the future of the format.

Since the Russo–Georgia August war of 2008, diplomatic relations between Georgia and Russia have been broken. Currently, there is only one official format left between Georgia and Russia for discussing security and humanitarian issues—the Geneva International Discussion. In addition, the informal format of the Georgian–Russian dialogue initiative has been functioning since late 2012 between Zurab Abashidze, the Georgian Prime Minister’s Special Representative for Russia, and Grigory Karasin, Chairman of the Federation Council Committee on Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, where the parties exchange views on economic and humanitarian issues.

The most important factor hindering Georgia’s participation in the “3+3” platform is the occupation of Georgian territories. Russian military forces occupy 20% of the Georgian territory, and the creeping occupation continues to this day. According to statements of the Georgian government, until the problem of occupation in Georgia is resolved, a barrier to cooperation with Russia at the official level will exist (Interpressnews, 2021c). As Russia does not consider the possibility of restoration of Georgia’s territorial unity yet, implementation of a “3+3” format looks doubtful. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the prospect of tighter cooperation with Moscow has become even less attractive amid Western sanctions on Russia and in light of its deepening international isolation.

In summary, the “3+3” platform of regional cooperation is mainly considered an anti-Western coalition in Georgia, the main purpose of which is to redistribute the balance of power and expel the West from the region. However, Georgia aspires to integrate into Western institutions, seeks to strengthen ties with the European Union and NATO and looks at becoming more involved in European institutions. Georgia’s pro-western political vector is determined by Georgia’s Constitution. According to Article 78, the constitutional bodies shall take all measures within the scope of their competences to ensure the full integration of Georgia into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Consequently, joining a format that implies access restriction to the West contradicts the Georgian foreign policy vector set out in the country’s constitution. At the same time, deepening economic or other ties between Tbilisi and Tehran also faces a risk, especially in light of the Western sanctions imposed on Iran.

Under the guise of strengthening regional economic cooperation, the emphasis of the “3+3” platform on opening transport corridors suggests that pressure may be mounted on Georgia to open the Abkhazian railway, which would pose an additional threat to Georgia’s state sovereignty. The railway route along the Black Sea coast through Abkhazia connecting Moscow to Tehran has been closed since 1992. The idea of reopening railways is controversial in Georgia, as it is seen as giving concessions to Russia and the breakaway region of Abkhazia, which has an ambition for independence. Moreover, it seems that Georgian internally displaced persons from Abkhazia would not receive benefits from the deal. Based on Georgia’s perspective, it will be difficult to define the legal frame of the project: there are several disputable questions related to customs and border checkpoint security (e.g., who will obtain the right of inspection on the border between Russia and Abkhazia at the Psou River).

Generally, reopening the rail link would increase Russia’s economic activities in the South Caucasus.

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Resumption of the railway is of great interest not only to Russia but also to Armenia, Iran, Turkey and other countries that could use the line for their exports. Before 2020, Azerbaijan was against reopening the railway because Baku was afraid that this would noticeably weaken the effect of the Turkish–Azeri blockade and would offer the possibility of transporting military cargo to the Armenian army. Following the 2020 ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh, it is likely that Baku will no longer veto the resumption of this rail link, while Azerbaijan’s exclave of Nakhichevan could benefit from becoming part of a North–South rail route.

However, from an economic point of view, the “3+3” format does not offer clear additional economic benefits to Georgia. Georgia already has stable trade and economic relations with all neighbouring countries, including Russia. However, despite the barriers mentioned above, Moscow officially does not lose hope that Georgia will abandon its requirements and finally become involved in the proposed project “without preconditions” (TASS, 2022).

Conclusion

The proposed format of cooperation could be pragmatically attractive to regional states; however, there is no substantial basis to hope that it will facilitate tighter cooperation and dialogue between the states involved due to the various contesting interests. Russia, as well as Turkey, are striving to help break down the barriers hindering implementation of the “3+3” project as it was initially planned. It is expected that the authors of the project will consider different configurations of the format in case any of the proposed parties refuse to participate in it. At this given moment, the “3+2” format of cooperation is on the table. Simultaneously, the war in Ukraine has drastically changed the political situation and attitudes towards Russia. The ongoing war will largely affect the future of the project, the viability of which is highly questionable.

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Prospects for the Latest Rapprochement Attempt between Turkey and Armenia

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Abstract

Turkey and Armenia have had no diplomatic or commercial ties with each other since the 1990s. The key reasons for this have been disagreements over historic issues, particularly Turkey's refusal to recognise the mass killings of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire as a genocide, as well as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, during which Turkey has traditionally been the closest ally of Baku. By the end of 2020, certain signals were sent from Ankara and Yerevan, hinting that the sides were ready to consider the normalisation of relations. Taking into consideration that this is not the first attempt to normalise the relationship and that certain steps in this direction have been taken earlier, although they led to no tangible results, this article explores whether the factors previously blocking the process are still present and the general prospects for this latest attempt at a rapprochement.

Introduction

After the second Karabakh War in 2020, certain positive statements were made by the leaders of Turkey and Armenia, and some promising steps were taken in the direction of normalising the relations between the two countries. In October 2021, Armenia opened its airspace to Turkish and Azeri flights. In December 2021, Turkey issued a licence for charter flights between Turkey and Armenia. Also in December 2021, Turkey and Armenia appointed special envoys—a Turkish diplomat, Serdar Kilic, and the Deputy Speaker of the Armenian Parliament, Ruben Rubinyan—to lead the process of the normalisation of relations. Armenia lifted a ban on the import of Turkish goods that was imposed over Ankara's backing of Azerbaijan in the 2020 war with Armenia. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and his Armenian counterpart, Ararat Mirzoyan, met during the Antalya Diplomacy Forum on 12 March 2022 in Turkey and not only stressed their support for the continuation of the normalisation process but also emphasised the need for “normalisation without preconditions” (Chanadiri 2022).

This is not the first time in the past 30 years that the two sides have made some moves aimed at normalising relations. In 2009, Turkey and Armenia signed protocols to open the border and establish diplomatic relations. This process was facilitated by Swiss mediation and was backed by both the European Union and the United States. However, the process was suspended six months later, and the deal was never ratified. There were several factors that led to the failure of this attempt; key among them was Baku's opposition to any normalisation efforts until Armenia withdrew from Nagorno Karabakh. Baku's key concern was that if the border were to open, they would lose major leverage over Yerevan, since

Azerbaijan's strategy was weakening Armenia's economy through the blockade, thereby giving them an incentive to compromise over the issue of Karabakh. Taking into consideration Azerbaijan's close relations with Turkey, its stance had quite an important impact on the overall position of Turkey (Tol 2022). Another factor was the nationalist backlash against the protocols in Turkey. Similarly, a significant part of Armenian society and even a larger part of its diaspora regarded such protocols as the “betrayal of national interests” (Iskandaryan 2010). Therefore, analysts believe that the reason for the failure of the 2008–2009 normalisation attempts was reliance only on diplomatic efforts and not preparing the involved societies for the process of normalisation (Chanadiri 2022).

What Is Different This Time?

There are several features that make the latest normalisation efforts different from previous ones. This process has been unexpectedly fast paced, much more open, and based on face-to-face meetings, in contrast to the many months of secret diplomacy that was the case in 2008–2009. As stated, during previous attempts to normalise relations, Azerbaijan was one of the key factors blocking the process. However, the second Karabakh War in 2020 resulted in Azerbaijan gaining control over all seven territories adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh that it had lost to Armenian forces in the early 1990s; therefore, many think that the position of Azerbaijan regarding the potential rapprochement between Armenia and Turkey has changed significantly.

On December 27, 2021, Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov stated that Azerbaijan “fully supports” Armenia and Turkey's renewed attempt to settle relations (Vartanyan et al. 2022). Another important fac-

tor is that in parallel to the start of the Turkey–Armenian process of normalisation, diplomatic talks started between Armenia and Azerbaijan, focusing on the restoration of trade, transport routes, and delineation of the border, thereby making it easier for Turkey to move ahead (Aydıntaşbaş and Giragosian 2022).

Interests of Key Parties—Armenia and Turkey

Armenia's interests are driven by economic and political considerations. In terms of economic interests, it should be stressed that Armenia is a landlocked country that borders Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iran and Turkey; therefore, closing its borders to two out of these four states led to Armenia's economic, political and social isolation. Opening its border with Turkey can give Armenia access to alternative routes for its exports (e.g., the port of Trabzon, the Kars–Gyumri railway) and lower its transportation costs, since Yerevan currently has to rely on lengthier, costlier trade routes through Georgia and Iran to reach world markets (Shangoyan 2022). Taking these factors into consideration, it is a direct interest of Armenia to open the border with Turkey, which would end Armenia's isolation by offering a direct route to Black Sea ports and provide a new market for its products and businesses that would extend even beyond the Turkish market, reaching European and Middle Eastern markets as well.

No less important are Armenia's political considerations. To balance threats stemming from Azerbaijan, Armenia has been trying to achieve an external balance by aligning with Russia, subsequently becoming over-reliant on Moscow. Thus, Armenia may use the normalisation of relations with Turkey as an important new leverage to counter its overdependence on Russia and eventually diminish its dependence on Russia (Giragosian 2009).

Turkey also has numerous interests in terms of the normalisation of relations with Armenia. First, a positive outcome in terms of the restoration of diplomatic relations with Armenia could be presented as a diplomatic victory for Ankara, thereby giving it an opportunity to win international approval in times when the country is under scrutiny for its democratic backsliding. It would also contribute to the improvement of relations with the US, which would welcome rebuilding ties between Turkey and Armenia, with the hope that doing so may reduce Russia's influence in the region and decrease Armenia's dependence on Iran (Tol 2022).

Another significant factor for Turkey is that improving regional links would give it an opportunity to strengthen its positions in the South Caucasus by playing a more active role in regional initiatives to restore trade and transportation routes in the region. This

explains why Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is so actively advocating the idea of the 3+3 format (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia + Russia, Turkey and Iran) with the aim of promoting presence and importance in the region (Evstratov 2022). Increasing Turkey's regional stance through greater transport and trade links would benefit its economy and, at the same time, automatically decrease Russian influence in the South Caucasus. New railways and roads, operating with the active participation of Turkey, would naturally diminish the Russian geopolitical leverage over the South Caucasus, since in times of closed borders, most roads and railways have a northwards direction, thereby crossing Russian territory (Avdaliani 2021).

By opening the closed border with Armenia, Ankara would also increase economic activities in the impoverished Kurdish-dominated eastern regions of Turkey and contribute to the economic stabilisation of these regions. In terms of logistics, even though Turkey has promoted alternative routes bypassing Armenia in recent decades (e.g., the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway line and the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan and Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum pipelines), it can still complement those projects with more efficient connections, i.e., the Baku–Julfa–Yersakh railway line, which is connected to Gyumri and can also lead to Kars (Shangoyan 2022). Turkey is particularly interested in transportation projects that seek to connect Azerbaijan to its exclave, Nakhchivan, on the Turkish border. Such a corridor would significantly contribute to establishing closer ties to Azerbaijan and Central Asian states, thus connecting Turkey to the rest of the Turkic world (Huseynov and Scotti 2021).

Key Challenges for Normalisation Attempts

Even though there is a promising dynamic in terms of a prospective rapprochement, there still exist some contested issues, which may potentially slow down the process. The two sides have been stressing the need for normalisation with “no preconditions”; however, at the same time, both of them have been emphasising specific terms, which they see as important for their national interests. For instance, such issues include the historical interpretation of events, which according to the Armenian side should be recognised as a genocide, the status of the Nagorno–Karabakh region, and the mutual recognition of territorial integrity. Another contested issue is who should control the restored road and rail links that connect western Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan. Apart from these issues, the Armenian side advocates for the separation of the Armenian–Turkish rapprochement from Armenian–Azerbaijani relations; however, Ankara makes it clear that they are planning to coordinate all their efforts with Azerbaijan (Shangoyan 2022).

Another challenge to the process is the deep mistrust of the population of these two countries towards each

other, in combination with nationalist groups that are active both in Armenia and Turkey. As demonstrated by the International Republican Institute's 2021 Public Opinion Survey, Armenians still view Turkey as a key political (90% of respondents) economic (68%) and security (88%) threat to their country, surpassing even Azerbaijan in terms of all three factors. According to the same survey, more than 70% of respondents stressed that Armenia should start a dialogue on the normalisation of relations with Turkey by putting forward its own preconditions (i.e., recognition of the Armenian genocide; Turkey's nonhindrance in Nagorno-Karabakh peace efforts) (International Republican Institute 2021).

Ongoing military clashes between Azerbaijan and Armenia and a fragile peace in the Nagorno-Karabakh region also pose a serious challenge to the normalisation attempts. In November 2021, heavy fighting took place on the Armenia–Azerbaijani border, resulting in casualties. A new threat of military escalation was also present in March 2022, when Russian and Armenian sides stated that Azerbaijani armed forces had entered a zone controlled by Russian peacekeepers and attacked a village known as Farukh (Chanadiri 2022). The intensification of incidents such as these may change Azerbaijan's position towards Turkey–Armenia normalisation attempts, which would be expressed by pressuring Ankara against the continuation of the process. Furthermore, such a development would also have a negative impact on Armenia's willingness to pursue the process of normalisation with the key ally of Azerbaijan.

Another significant regional actor that has both interests and influence over ongoing events is Russia. To date, Russia has expressed support for a Turkey–Armenian rapprochement. The first meeting between envoys representing the two states took place in Moscow in January 2022. Russia's support for the process so far has been determined by its interest in supervising the process and ensuring that the possible normalisation of relations between Armenia and Turkey respects Russia's interests in the region. However, it is not clear whether Russian leadership will provide long-term support for increased connectivity between the two countries since this would allow Yerevan to diversify its foreign policy and thus decrease its dependence on the Russian economy (Avdaliani 2021).

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Apart from this factor, there is a certain probability that Moscow's calculations in terms of positioning with regard to a Turkey–Armenia rapprochement may change after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Turkey has been supplying Ukraine with armed drones that have proven effective against the Russian army, and the leadership of the country has been openly supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity (Aydıntaşbaş and Giragosian 2022). Taking into consideration these new realities in the region, it cannot be excluded that Moscow might view the potential normalisation of Turkey–Armenian relations in a new light and perceive such normalisation as possibly damaging to its interests in South Caucasus.

Conclusion

Throughout the last months, promising statements have been made by representatives of Turkey and Armenia, and important steps have been taken in terms of a rapprochement, including the start of face-to-face diplomatic talks and the resumption of direct flights. This positive dynamic has been fostered by the new reality in the region following the second Karabakh War and changes in the position of Azerbaijan. Keeping this significant progress in mind, there is a reason to maintain cautious optimism, but it should be stressed that some potentially contesting issues are still on the table. Whether these issues will contribute to slowing down the process or blocking it altogether depends on the readiness of the Armenian and Turkish sides to reconcile them or put them aside for the time being. Apart from the problematic issues in bilateral relations outlined above, both countries face certain internal and external challenges. In regard to domestic politics, the general scepticism of the population and the criticism of radical nationalist groups need to be addressed. The positioning of key regional actors who have a strong influence on Turkey and Armenia—Azerbaijan and Russia, respectively—is also important. Particularly, a lot depends on whether the rapidly changing political and security environment that has emerged due to the fragile peace that has been established in Karabakh and the war in Ukraine will alter the calculations of these actors in terms of a Turkey–Armenian rapprochement.

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Postwar Karabakh: What Is the Resettlement Potential?

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Abstract

The aftermath of the 44-day Second Karabakh War resulted in the significant superiority and final victory of Azerbaijan, and the liberation of occupied territories revealed a nationwide plan for socioeconomic development. Currently, the rising actuality of the resettlement of internally displaced people (IDPs) in their freed homeland is the primary focus of both governmental and societal discourse. This article highlights the resettlement potential in Azerbaijan’s postwar territories. A survey unveils a high rate of repatriation intention among IDPs and substantial resettlement potential among non-IDPs.

Introduction

Towards the collapse of the Soviet Union, the first ethnic identity-based crises within the Union after World War II emerged in the Nagorno-Karabakh region (Askerov, 2020). The conflict left approximately 1 million ref-

ugees and internally displaced people (IDP) related to Azerbaijan, while the country lost 20% of its internationally recognized territory as well. During the war, residents of the occupied settlements witnessed ethnic cleansing and the massive violation of human rights by the

Armenian military forces (Cornell, 1997). The number of people living in the occupied districts in 1990 is represented by the following figures: Khankendi—56.9 thousand; Khojaly—21.2 thousand; Khojavend—41.7 thousand; Shusha—21.3 thousand; Agdam—145.5 thousand; Fuzuli—96 thousand; Jabrayil—49.4 thousand; Kalbadjar—56.6 thousand; Gubadli—28.7 thousand; Lachin—52.7 thousand; and Zangilan—31.4 thousand (SSCAR, 2022). While the population of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) was primarily ethnic Armenian (77% out of 189 thousand people), only 5–6% of them were located in Lachin (European Court of Human Rights, 2015). Ethnic Azerbaijanis were dominant in Lachin and the surrounding districts.

This conflict has been “unfreezing” since 2011 and culminated with the Four-Day War in April 2016 (Shirinyan, 2016). The next critical clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan military forces emerged in July 2020—less than 3 months before the 44-day war.

On September 27, 2020, the conflict erupted into a war that lasted 44 days. Azerbaijan declared the liberation of Jabrayil (October 4), Fuzuli (October 17), Zangilan (October 20), Gubadli (October 25) and Shusha city (November 8) during the war. On November 9, 2020, a trilateral agreement signed by Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia ended the hostilities. As per the conditions of the agreement, Armenia returned the remainder of the occupied territories to the Azerbaijan districts of Agdam (November 20), Kalbadjar (November 25) and Lachin (December 1) within the same year.

Now, the primary issue for Azerbaijan is whether the government will be able to resettle the liberated regions and allow to the return of IDPs. Will IDPs return? What is the resettlement potential in Karabakh?

Postwar Challenges: What Comes Next?

The war ended, yet a new challenge began. Liberated districts were found to be destroyed, with no infrastructure remaining for the resettlement of IDPs. However, the more crucial challenge consists of the landmines planted by the Armenian military forces, which threaten the lives of civilians. The magnitude of the problem is clear in the context of the provision of landmine maps presented by Armenia (Wolkov, 2021; Mehdiyev, 2021). The number of landmines in the region is still unknown. The presence of massive landmines and unexploded ordnance in liberated areas make resettlement difficult, and the removal process will take several years to conclude.

Despite these hurdles, transformation is happening at a breathtaking speed (Troianovski, 2021). In 2021, Azerbaijan allocated 1.5 billion USD for the reconstruction of liberated territories, followed by 1.2 billion USD (2.2 billion AZN) in 2022 to be used to restore infra-

structure (including electricity, gas, water, communications, roads, education, health), as well as cultural and historical monuments (Azernews, 2022). Repatriation to liberated areas is one of five key national priorities up to 2030. The construction and inauguration of the Fuzuli International Airport within less than a year, as well as the building of airports in Lachin and Zangilan, the opening of a new road (“Zəfər Yolu”) to Shusha, and the confirmation of master plans of development for liberated territories (for example, Agdam city), are some of the works that have been conducted in Karabakh. The frequent visits of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, İlham Aliyev, to the region also reconfirms that the rebuilding and resettlement of Karabakh is a strategic issue.

However, the repatriation of IDPs depends on many factors. After 28 years of occupation, IDP families have new realities that will affect their decision about a return, considering that the threat of landmines and unexploded ordnance could undermine their resettlement intentions. On the other hand, the majority of Azerbaijani IDPs lived in the most deplorable conditions and experienced psychological trauma over the course of decades, which might be a driving factor for their willingness to return (Guliyev, 2020).

Data and Methodology

The examination of a large-scale national self-administered survey conducted by a nongovernmental independent agency (ASERC, 2021) allows some predictions about resettlement intentions among IDPs and non-IDPs. The survey does not specifically focus on the repatriation issue; rather, it aims to study welfare in society and public opinion about selected issues. There are three related questions about the subject. The primary question is “*Would you like to settle and permanently live in Karabakh?*” with the following response options:

1. Yes, as soon as possible upon being allowed.
2. Yes, but I must be sure that my life standards will be better there.
3. I have never thought about this.
4. No.

Pragmatically, the respondents who choose option 1 or 2 can be considered returnees and are much more likely to be potential repatriants. In particular, the “more valuable” category is those who choose the first answer option.

Another question asks whether the respondent is an IDP or non-IDP (originally from Karabakh or other regions). The third related question identifies whether the respondent would like to assist with the rebuilding and development of Karabakh as an employee. This question aims to check the reliability of responses. Logically, potential repatriants should be interested in

engagement in the rebuilding process, which would bring them earlier prospective employment guarantees.

It must be noted that the survey used a self-administered questionnaire conducted online from September 10 to November 6, 2021. Among 2208 respondents (mean age is 34.6), 44.7% are males, 54.2% are females, 7.7% (169 persons) are IDPs and 4.3% are non-IDPs but originate from the Karabakh region.

The Big Question: Will IDPs Return?

According to the survey, repatriation intentions among IDPs are quite high, while a substantial portion of non-IDP respondents are also interested in settling in Karabakh and permanently living there (Table 1). Among the surveyed IDPs, 46.2% want to settle in Karabakh as soon as possible. Among the others, 40.2% intend to settle on the condition of having better life standards. Overall, the repatriation potential among the IDPs is approximately 87.3%. Regarding the non-IDPs, the rate is higher among those who have origination ties with Karabakh compared with those who do not (89.3% and 72.1%, respectively). Slightly less than 1/3 of the remaining respondents are interested in settling and permanently living in Karabakh.

Among the IDPs, repatriation intention represents the highest rate among those aged 50–64, of whom 89.5% want to settle in Karabakh as soon as possible. The underlying factor is that these individuals witnessed the Karabakh region before its occupation. The repatriation intention slightly decreases to 90.2% among those aged 35–49. Among young adults, the repatriation intention is comparatively lower. Although the respondents aged 17–34 have mostly never seen Karabakh before, 38.7% of them emphasize their desire to settle in the region as soon as possible.

Simultaneously, respondents show a high level of intention for engagement in the rebuilding of postconflict areas (Table 2). A total of 13.8% of all respondents intend to take a role in the rebuilding process if they receive any job offer, while 28.2% expect an appropriate

(related) job offer. In contrast, the overall engagement intention among IDPs is 79.8%. A total of 26.6% are open to any job offer, while 40.8% expect to have a relevant job offer.

Conclusion

Effective repatriation to postwar Karabakh is a strategic goal for Azerbaijan in the current decade. Despite the fact that the war has ended and active military operations have ceased, the presence of massive landmines and unexploded ordnance and the destruction of infrastructure in the liberated areas make immediate repatriation challenging. The changes in the lifestyle of IDPs over the past 2.5 decades or more also negatively affect repatriation intention.

Nevertheless, a recent social survey conducted among people in Azerbaijan (including IDPs) presents evidence of high repatriation intention (over 80%) in all age groups. Simultaneously, many respondents who represent non-IDPs also report an intention to permanently settle in Karabakh. Current observations show that a large portion of potential repatriants are waiting for the government's decision regarding the details and start of the general movement process. Table 3 tabulates the basic sociodemographic profile of potential repatriants, which represents a total sample ratio for each category.

To efficiently manage repatriation and promote permanent settlement, it would be preferable if the Azerbaijani government could sustain prospective repatriants' involvement in the rebuilding activities of freed lands (as shown in Table 2). Overall, the preferences of potential repatriants will be unveiled during the massive resettlement period. An online platform that brings employers and potential repatriants together would further enhance the permanent settling probability of individuals. Without such measures in place, the enormous numbers of repatriants could cause serious failures and management gaps during resettlement in postwar Karabakh.

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Tables

Table 1: Repatriation Intentions to Karabakh

Would you like to settle and permanently live in Karabakh?	IDPs	Non-IDPs		
		Registered but has no IDP status	Originally from Karabakh	All others
Yes, as soon as possible upon being allowed.	46.2%	42.9%	25.0%	6.7%
Yes, but I must be sure that my life standards will be better there.	40.2%	46.4%	47.1%	23.8%
I have never thought about this.	5.3%	0.0%	17.6%	30.3%
No.	8.3%	10.7%	10.3%	39.2%
Total by column	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 2: Intention of Permanently Settling and Being Involved in the Rebuilding Process in Karabakh

<i>Would you like to be involved (on a paid basis) in the rebuilding of Karabakh?</i>	<i>Yes, as soon as possible upon allowed</i>	<i>Yes, but might be sure that my life standards will be better over there</i>	<i>I have never thought about this</i>	No	All respondents
<i>Yes, I am ready for any job engagement.</i>	42.3%	14.7%	0.0%	14.3%	26.6%
<i>Yes, but only for employment opportunities relevant to my area of specialization.</i>	47.4%	42.6%	22.2%	7.1%	40.8%
<i>Yes, but this is impossible now (family reasons, etc.).</i>	3.8%	22.1%	22.2%	7.1%	12.4%
<i>I have never thought about it.</i>	2.7%	11.8%	55.6%	7.1%	9.5%
<i>No.</i>	3.8%	8.8%	0.0%	64.4%	10.7%
Total by column	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 3: Sociodemographic Profile of Potential Repatriants

	Potential repatriants		Ratio of the whole sample
	IDPs	Non-IDPs	
By gender identity			
Male	45.8%	50.1%	45.2%
Female	54.2%	49.9%	54.8%
By marital status			
Married	56%	49.5%	51.2%
Unmarried	44%	50.5%	48.8%
By highest educational attainment			
Prebachelor	35.6%	25.1%	28.7%
Bachelor	42.5%	47.2%	46.1%
Post-bachelor	21.9%	27.7%	25.2%
By employment status			
Employed	60.3%	64.2%	61.2%
Unemployed	19.2%	18.4%	18.1%
Not in labour force	20.5%	17.4%	20.7%

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