



---

# NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT: RUSSIA'S ROLE IN SHAPING THE GEOPOLITICS OF SOUTH CAUCASUS

DARINE RAZMADZE

## Abstract

The Caucasus remains one of the most diverse regions in the geopolitical world that can be characterized by ongoing ethnic conflicts. Tensions related to identity formation and defining ethnic boundaries are relevant when discussing conflicts in this region, particularly, in the South Caucasus. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, several countries (Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia) have been involved in intrastate and interstate wars, the results of which still hinder the economic progress of the whole region. This article examines the importance and relevance of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict since the dissolution of the USSR and explores geopolitical factors that determined South Caucasian regional and geopolitical issues. Not only Armenia, but also other South Caucasian nations, including Georgia, have been involved in frozen conflicts that usually are described through a geopolitical lens. Therefore, it is significant for this article to emphasize the role of national identity, irredentism, and state-to-society relations in regard to resolving secessionist conflicts. Thus, the present research focuses on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, its timeline, the relevance of mediation efforts, and the importance of Russia's role in achieving the settlement in 2020.

## Background

The case of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict demonstrates the devastating results of ethnic hatred between Armenians and Azerbaijanis that has persisted for decades. This conflict still remains as

one of the persistent territorial disputes in the post-Soviet space. Regional and international mediation efforts have led to various peace proposals with the goal of halting fighting and ensuring peaceful resolution of the conflict between the two South Caucasian countries.<sup>①</sup>

With an area of 8,322 square kilometers, the mountainous province of Nagorno-Karabakh is slightly larger than inhabited Israel without the Negev Desert, or almost twice the size of South Ossetia. It has a predominantly Armenian population of about 140,000 people, most of which are Apostolic Christians.<sup>②</sup> This enclave became territory of the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan in 1923 as an autonomous region or “oblast.” At various points during the Soviet period, the Armenians asked Moscow to transfer the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) to Armenia, without success. On one such occasion in the 1960s, social and economic tensions in Karabakh escalated into riots.<sup>③</sup>

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, South Caucasian nations started forming independent states. However, their actions resulted in brutal fighting among local ethnic groups in several border areas. Nagorno-Karabakh became one of these hotspots. This conflict broke out due to the struggle of self-determination. The 1991 referendum held in Nagorno-Karabakh resulted in claims that secession from Azerbaijan was not only politically current, but also lawful. The subsequent claim is that the collapse of the Soviet Union allowed the creation of two equal state formations in the territory of Soviet Azerbaijan—the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic.<sup>④</sup>

---

① Ceyhun Mahmudlu and Shamkhal Abilov, “The peace-making process in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: why did Iran fail in its mediation effort?” *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 26, no. 1 (2018): 33.

② Françoise J. Companjen, “Nagorno-Karabakh,” *Atlantisch Perspectief* 34, no. 4 (2010): 9.

③ Andrei A. Kazantsev, Peter Rutland, Svetlana M. Medvedeva, & Ivan A. Safranchuk, “Russia’s policy in the ‘frozen conflicts’ of the post-Soviet space: from ethno-politics to geopolitics,” *Caucasus Survey* 8, no. 2 (2020): 154.

④ Arsen Gasparyan, “Understanding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: domestic politics and twenty-five years of fruitless negotiations 1994–2018,” *Caucasus Survey* 7, no. 3 (2019): 244.

In 1988, the situation significantly deteriorated as Armenia succeeded in occupying the cities around Nagorno-Karabakh. Military tensions continued until 1994 when Armenia and Azerbaijan secured a cease-fire agreement. Nevertheless, it must be mentioned that neither the peace initiatives nor the signed agreements provided enough incentives for the involved nations to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Due to its unresolved status, the conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh remained a daunting security challenge for South Caucasian, Russian, and Turkish decision-makers for several decades.

Although frozen conflicts generally remain inactive and seem to have a minor impact on altering the geopolitical discourse of a region, it is still controversial whether the volatile region deserves full attention from the neighboring countries involved, either in the mediation process or the regional processes. As the region of the Caucasus itself has always been diverse and distinct due to its geographical location and the large number of ethnic minorities, various issues are at play when assessing the significance and relevance of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Its multidimensional character is related to the internal and external factors that influence the political outcome of the involved countries.

The complex nature of this particular conflict has consistently directed the domestic political discourse of Armenia and Azerbaijan and affected their foreign policy strategies. According to official statements, Azerbaijani leaders have always regarded Armenian actions in Nagorno-Karabakh and its adjacent areas as violations of their country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. As a result, the Azerbaijani government declared several times that Nagorno-Karabakh is allowed to have cultural and economic autonomy, but it cannot be an independent nation. In addition, the position of Azerbaijani side can be analyzed through a political lens; it is more

focused on the foreign policy issues of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict than on solving domestic problems, such as corruption and injustice.

As a land-locked country, Armenia mostly depended on Georgian and Russian support to oppose its foes on both sides—Turkey to the west and Azerbaijan to the east. Fighting in 2016 and the continued risk of a new war with Azerbaijan has reduced contemporary political life to the ongoing struggle for the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh as well as the attainment of political and economic independence for Armenia, which still heavily depends on Russian support.<sup>①</sup> As for Azerbaijan, its supporter has been Turkey for many years, as they share common values and heritage.

This case study will investigate how political, economic, and foreign policy issues related to Nagorno-Karabakh have influenced its status as a de facto state and how geopolitical processes have affected the peace process. First, it will describe the historical timeline of the conflict. It will then emphasize the importance of the 2020 partial peace agreement, assessing third-party involvement as a relevant conflict resolution strategy.

### Conflict Chronology

1988 – The conflict begins in the USSR with the demand for the transfer of the Nagorno-Karabakh

Autonomous Oblast from Azerbaijan to Armenia.<sup>②</sup>

1992 – A full-scale war breaks out between Armenia and Azerbaijan following the collapse of the USSR.

1994 – Armenia and Azerbaijan reach a ceasefire agreement and begin the peace negotiation process.

---

<sup>①</sup> John O’Loughlin & Vladimir Kolosov, “Building identities in post- Soviet ‘de facto states’: cultural and political icons in Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Transdnistria, and Abkhazia,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 58, no. 6 (2017): 703.

<sup>②</sup> Gasparyan, 236.

- 1997 – Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan reject OSCE Minsk Group peace plans.
- 1998 – Ter Petrossian is forced to resign in February 1998 after advocating for a settlement to the conflict that was opposed by then-Prime Minister Robert Kocharyan and key ministers.<sup>①</sup>
- 1999-2001/2003-2004 – Armenian president Robert Kocharyan and Azerbaijani president Heydar Aliyev engage in direct dialogue without the participation of Nagorno-Karabakh authorities.
- 2005 – The EU considers the deployment of peacekeeping forces in anticipation of Armenia and Azerbaijan reaching an agreement over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.<sup>②</sup>
- 2006 – Negotiations and subsequent elections in Armenia and Azerbaijan result in maintaining the status quo.
- 2006-2016 – Minor skirmishes occur near the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, escalating in 2016. Russia again plays a major role in achieving a ceasefire after four days of fighting.<sup>③</sup>
- 2016 – The Kremlin and OSCE reach an agreement: Attempting to maintain parity between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Russia provides weaponry (for free or at discounted rates) to the former and sells it to the latter.<sup>④</sup>

---

① Ibid., 237-238.

② "Russia and Eurasia," *Strategic Survey* 106, no. 1 (2006): 191.

③ Gasparyan, 238.

④ Alena Vieira and Syuzanna Vasilyan, "Armenia and Belarus: caught between the EU's and Russia's conditionalities?" *European Politics and Society* 19, no. 4 (2018): 479.

2020 – The Nagorno-Karabakh peace deal is signed by three states: the two adversaries, Azerbaijan and Armenia, and the mediator, Russia.

### Current Situation

On September 27, 2020, Azerbaijan, with the support of Turkey, launched a major attack on Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijan had avoided a full-scale conflict there for 20 years. Its reasons for launching the attack at that time are obscure. Turkey's desire for a successful resolution to the conflict likely derives from economic problems, coupled with reversals in its Mediterranean policy and its inability to impose its will in Syria. It needed a victory somewhere, so aiding its ally in taking Nagorno-Karabakh made sense.<sup>①</sup>

In 2020, another war broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan. According to war analysts, Azerbaijan's decision to attack Armenia derived from its priority of strengthening its reputation on an international level. Even if Armenia did not agree to signing a peace deal and conceding territories to Azerbaijan, it would still have been an achievement for the latter as it demonstrated high military readiness for war.

It must be noted that despite Azerbaijani foreign policy strategy, the possibility of a devastating result for the whole region was likely to happen. Even though Russia does not possess any part of the territory in the South Caucasus, it still has a military agreement with Armenia and provides weaponry to Azerbaijan. Due to such relations, escalation to a regional war would have been possible if another party—Turkey in particular—had joined the Azerbaijani army near the border of Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Russian General Staff still updates plans for such worst-case scenarios, as a new escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh

---

<sup>①</sup> George Friedman, "Russia's Search for Strategic Depth," *Geopolitical Futures*, November 17, 2020, <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/russias-search-for-strategic-depth/>.

conflict might bring Russian forces in Armenia into a direct confrontation with Turkish troops, but the probability of such scenarios is estimated as very low.<sup>①</sup>

Armenia is one of the weakest participants of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict due to its multidimensional foreign policy strategy. On the one hand, it has to agree on terms with Russia as they have created a military alliance and signed a bilateral agreement in 2015 on a Joint Air Defense System in the Caucasus. Additionally, Yerevan is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). On the other hand, after the 2018 elections, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's government tried to maintain good political and economic relations with the EU. As for Azerbaijan, it tried to develop relations with both Russia and the West (especially by participating in various projects related to the transport of oil and gas to Europe as an alternative to Russia).

Some analysts suggest that the recent hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh are both born of and further fueling Russia-Turkey competition. Turkey sees the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as a low-cost opportunity to solidify its foothold in the Caucasus and challenge growing bilateral ties between Baku and Moscow while profiting from arms sales to Azerbaijan. The Kremlin seeks rapid de-escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh with minimum Russian investment. The Kremlin may attempt to reach a resolution by force in response to Turkey's growing military role and the United States' growing diplomatic role in the conflict, reasserting Russia's role as the sole power broker in the Caucasus.<sup>②</sup>

---

① Pavel K. Baev, "Russia's policies in the Southern Caucasus and the Caspian area," *European Security* 10, no. 2 (2001): 104.

② Isabel Ivanescu and Ezgi Yazici, "Russia-Turkey Competition Escalates across Theaters," *Institute for the Study of War*, October 27, 2020, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russia-turkey-competition-escalates-across-theaters>.



## Debates Analysis

When discussing the possible solutions to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, it is of utmost importance to analyze the existing academic discourse and theoretical suggestions toward a peaceful settlement.

Through thorough analysis of current academic debates, it has become obvious that peacemakers' major concerns are strongly connected to the domestic politics of Armenia and Azerbaijan. One of the possible explanations includes the hypothesis that the parties are rationally holding out for a solution very close to their maximal aspirations.<sup>①</sup> On the one hand, the conflict relates to the status of the province in the context of self determination. On the other hand, without first defining the status of Nagorno-Karabakh, it is extremely unlikely that the provincial representatives will come to the negotiation table in an effort to achieve long-lasting peace.

Scholarly literature also suggests that due to the nature and the actors of the border clashes (i.e. former Soviet republics), the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is horizontal in nature. At the same time, it needs to be emphasized that any temporary resolution could strengthen Azerbaijan while making Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh more vulnerable to external threats.

In the case of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the situation was quite harsh from the very beginning due to difficult economic conditions, increasing corruption, ongoing migration, unemployment, poverty, and blockades. Despite the suffering and costs imposed on the populations of all involved parties for more than two decades, political leaders of the parties did not pay the costs.<sup>②</sup>

As political scientist Jack Snyder emphasizes, for those elites, nationalism is a convenient doctrine that justifies a partial form of

---

<sup>①</sup> Gasparyan, 235.

<sup>②</sup> Gasparyan, 240.

democracy: the elites rule in the name of the nation but are not fully accountable to its people.<sup>①</sup> This idea thoroughly explains the political situation in Armenia before 2018. In addition to this, after assessing Snyder's analysis, it can be added that the possibility of continuing the status quo of the conflict promised more peaceful processes than reaching a solution.

According to political scientist Robert Powell, uneven rates of economic growth and development eventually manifest in changes to the distribution of power, and these shifts may lead to disparities between the distribution of power and benefits. It is possible that Azerbaijan could use force to alter the status quo in its favour. Not only Azerbaijani government supported this discourse, but also Azerbaijan's military readiness.

### Russian Influence

The dissolution of the Soviet Union fundamentally altered the political map of Eurasia. At the same time, the USSR legacy did not disappear, as the Russian Federation became a new superpower, retaining its historical image while promoting Eurasian integration. However, Russia's political strategy for implementing its regional policy is viewed as a method of reconstructing its former empire in the post-Soviet space. It remains controversial whether Russian influence and its role as a region builder is a part of a neo-imperialist plan.

Even though Moscow and the West could not possibly agree on terms regarding the future of former Soviet republics, the international community was able to find common ground in the area of conflict resolution. For instance, in the 1990's case of the Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE) Minsk Group's attempt to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, friction developed between Russia and

---

<sup>①</sup> Gasparyan, 240.

Sweden over venue choice and differing initiatives.<sup>①</sup> The conflict resulted in mediation efforts by Iran, Turkey, Russia, and other European nations (such as France and Sweden) through the channel of the OSCE Minsk Group. However, it remained devastating for both parties as it could easily transform into a full-scale war and result in hundreds of casualties.

Russia's role as a major mediator was nevertheless reinstated in the aftermath of the April 2016 war launched by Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. It remains a controversial issue whether Russia is prone to unfreezing South Caucasian conflicts as it usually supports the self-declared and unrecognized states (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh). Russia has not taken a single significant step in finding solutions for the 'frozen' conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh, maintaining its status quo military and peacekeeping presence but refraining from any political initiatives that could be interpreted as support for secessionism.<sup>②</sup>

In spite of Russia's role as a mediator, it is extremely interesting that Russia did not intervene in the conflict militarily, which was both due to the lack of Russian military assets and of a significant Russian-speaking population in the immediate area.<sup>③</sup> It only proposed solutions and participated in peaceful negotiations in Moscow. However, Russian policy in Karabakh retains elements of ambiguity. Russia supplies arms to both Armenia and Azerbaijan within the framework of the CSTO, and Azerbaijan is unhappy that Russia delivers weapons to Armenia at lower prices, or free of charge altogether. Russia also has a strong energy relationship with Azerbaijan, which exports oil through a pipeline to the Russian port of Novorossiysk.

---

① Vieira and Vasilyan, 474.

② Baev, 95-110 and 103.

③ Sergey V. Kostelyanets, "Russia's Peace Initiatives in the MENA Region: Evaluation and Prospects," *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 13, no. 4 (2019): 534-555 and 542.

An incendiary situation of "neither war nor peace" still exists in the conflict zones. Russia firmly supports direct dialogue between the presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia, and is taking active measures to assist the search for a solution to the Karabakh problem that would satisfy all involved parties.<sup>①</sup> Russia has declined to defend Armenia outright and wants to see an end to the fighting, but Turkey is the driving force. Ankara's support has encouraged Azerbaijan to continue pushing until it reclaims the Nagorno-Karabakh region by force.<sup>②</sup> Finally, Russia managed to remain a nonparticipant in the recent full-scale war, but recognized the weakening of Armenia and therefore signed the peace deal with both parties.

### Conclusion

Soviet legacy hinders the integration of foreign policy in post-Soviet countries. The case of Nagorno-Karabakh is the most prominent in the recent history of the South Caucasus. The ideological dogma of "fraternal republics" is no longer popular with pro-Western countries in Russia's neighborhood, but integration trajectories are a central theme in the geopolitics of Eurasia. Armenia's decision to maintain good relations with both the EU and Russia resulted in an Azerbaijani victory.

When assessing the significance of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, one must consider not only the historical background, but also the future implications of recent developments. The recent clashes emphasized that the 21st century is an era of globalization and that modern weaponry can totally alter the outcome of a conflict. In this regard, another important factor related to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is the relevance of drone warfare. Since the Cold War, most European armies have phased out self-propelled air defense systems.

---

<sup>①</sup> Stanislav Cherniavskii, "Russian Diplomacy in Transcaucasia," *Russian Politics & Law* 39, no. 3 (2001) 7-8.

<sup>②</sup> "Trouble in Putin's Neighborhood," *Wall Street Journal*, October 19, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trouble-in-putins-neighborhood-11603149025>.

Most of the EU's armies— especially those of small and medium-sized member states—would fare just as miserably as the Armenian army in a modern kinetic war.<sup>①</sup> In sum, Azerbaijan and Armenia have long fought, at varying levels of intensity, over Nagorno-Karabakh. However, this case study has shown that identifying the real winners and losers of this particular conflict remains a controversial issue.

---

<sup>①</sup> Gustav Gressel, "Military lessons from Nagorno-Karabakh: Reason for Europe to worry," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, November 24, 2020, <https://ecfr.eu/article/military-lessons-from-nagorno-karabakh-reason-for-europe-to-worry/>.

## References

- [1] Baev, Pavel K. "Russia's policies in the Southern Caucasus and the Caspian area." *European Security* 10, no. 2 (2001): 95-110.
- [2] Cherniavskii, Stanislav. "Russian Diplomacy in Transcaucasia." *Russian Politics & Law* 39, no. 3 (2001): 5-19.
- [3] Friedman, George. "Russia's Search for Strategic Depth." *Geopolitical Futures*. Last modified November, 2020. <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/russias-search-for-strategic-depth/>.
- [4] Gasparyan, Arsen. "Understanding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: Domestic politics and twenty-five years of fruitless negotiations 1994-2018." *Caucasus Survey* 7, no. 3 (2019): 235-250.
- [5] Gressel, Gustav. "Military lessons from Nagorno-Karabakh: Reason for Europe to worry." *European Council on Foreign Relations*. Last modified November 24, 2020. <https://ecfr.eu/article/military-lessons-from-nagorno-karabakh-reason-for-europe-to-worry/>.
- [6] Ivanescu, Isabel and Ezgi Yazici. "Russia-Turkey Competition Escalates across Theaters." *Institute for the Study of War*, October 27, 2020.
- [7] Kazantsev, Andrei A. and Peter Rutland, Svetlana M. Medvedeva, and Ivan A. Safranchuk. "Russia's policy in the 'frozen conflicts' of the post-Soviet space: from ethno-politics to geopolitics." *Caucasus Survey* 8, no.2 (2020): 142-162.
- [8] Kostelyanets, Sergey V. "Russia's Peace Initiatives in the MENA Region: Evaluation and Prospects." *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 13, no. 4 (2019): 534-555.
- [9] Mahmudlu, Ceyhun and Shamkhal Abilov, "The peace-making process in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: why did Iran fail in its mediation effort?" *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 26, no. 1 (2018) 33-49.
- [10] O'Loughlin, John and Vladimir Kolosov. "Building identities in post-Soviet 'de facto states': cultural and political icons in Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Transdnistria, and Abkhazia." *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 58, no. 6 (2017): 691-715.
- [11] Pokalova, Elena. "Conflict Resolution in Frozen Conflicts: Timing in Nagorno-Karabakh." *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 17, no. 1 (2015): 68-85.
- [12] "Russia and Eurasia." *Strategic Survey* 106, no. 1 (2006): 177-196.
- [13] Vieira, Alena and Syuzanna Vasilyan. "Armenia and Belarus: caught between the EU's and Russia's conditionalities?" *European Politics and Society* 19, no. 4 (2018): 471-489.
- [14] *Wall Street Journal*. "Trouble in Putin's Neighborhood." Last modified October 19, 2020