



BULLETIN

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Perspectives for Solving the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Regional and European Consequences

by Tomasz Sikorski

There is growing understanding among the countries engaged in the Karabakh conflict resolution that stabilisation in the region is needed. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan are bearing the mounting costs of present tensions, while Russia and Turkey are more inclined to accept a change of the status quo. Under the circumstances, the European Union should pursue a more active policy, especially steps aimed at enhancing security and the level of trust near the armistice line, but without addressing the controversial question of the status of Karabakh.

The conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh between Azerbaijan and Armenia-backed separatists has been going on since 1988. In 1992–1994 it escalated into a full-scale war, which resulted in the secession of the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh (RNK)—populated by Armenians—from Azerbaijan. This was accompanied by forced resettlements, with RNK forces also seizing control over the zone between Nagorno-Karabakh proper and Armenia. The Russia-negotiated armistice of May 1994 has preserved the status quo, with the RNK in fact independent, but not recognised internationally.

In October 2009 the threat that the conflict might be rekindled increased following attempts to establish diplomatic relations and open the border between Armenia and Turkey, which supports Azerbaijan. Azeri-Turkish relations deteriorated after respective protocols had been signed, provisionally undermining Azerbaijan's strategic position. The process of Armenia-Turkey normalisation was put on hold in April 2010 as a result of public protests in both countries, but this has not decreased tensions over Nagorno-Karabakh. The parliamentary elections organised in the RNK in May 2010 provoked Azerbaijan's aggressive rhetoric, with Azeri military commanders threatening to resolve the conflict by force and sporadic exchanges of fire noted over the past few months.

On the other hand, it seems that both sides understand the need for stabilisation. In 2009 the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan had talks six times and on 26 April 2010 the religious leaders of the two states met in Baku for the first time. Third parties increased their interest in the conflict as well, with both countries visited on 14–16 February by OSCE Chairperson-in-Office Kanat Saudabayev, followed on 20 May by a European Parliament resolution on the need for an EU strategy for the South Caucasus; the document called for stronger UE engagement in solving frozen conflicts in the region.

The negotiations held since 1992 under the OSCE Minsk Group, co-chaired by France, Russia and the USA, have been focussed on preventing an escalation of the conflict and keeping the war frozen. For a long time the status quo was beneficial for all: the RNK took advantage of the armistice to consolidate state structures, the president of Azerbaijan was able to strengthen his position within the country after the political turmoil of the early 1990s, Armenia saw the truce as good for its image, while Russia was able to use the armistice to exert pressure on the post-Soviet states of the South Caucasus. France and the U.S. were not demonstrating a strong engagement in solving the conflict, as they had joined the Minsk Group solely in order to be present in the region and to prevent Russia from calling the shots.

Armenian Perspective. The Armenian authorities perceive Russia as their most important ally and safeguard against unfriendly Azerbaijan and Turkey. Nonetheless, in 2009–2010 Armenia launched an attempt to normalise relations with Turkey on its own, also in order to enhance its

position on the Karabakh question. Failure to achieve a rapprochement could mean that the Armenians might be more inclined to make concessions during future negotiations. While in the first years of the armistice the preservation of the status quo was beneficial for Armenia, the costs of the unstable situation in the region have since been rising considerably. At present, the frozen conflict multiplies the economic problems of landlocked Armenia, which is left out when planning regional infrastructural projects and which is struggling for foreign investments. Leaving the problem as it is might also impede the talks—started in July—on an association agreement with the European Union.

Azerbaijani Perspective. The process of normalising relations between Turkey and Armenia was viewed in Azerbaijan with distrust and suspicion, with the proposal to open the Armeno-Turkish border seen as Turkish treason. Azeri fears were deepened by the policy pursued by Turkey, which took advantage of its strategic transit location in an Azerbaijan-Turkey dispute over the price of energy resources. Azerbaijan's response was swift, embracing an ostentatious improvement in relations with Russia and a search for new routes of oil and gas exports, e.g. via the Black Sea.

The prospect of improving Armenian-Turkish relations is likely to make the Azerbaijani authorities more flexible in peace talks. Another argument in favour of settling the conflict is the presence of 590,000 displaced persons, mostly from the area between Karabakh and Armenia. This group is strongly revisionist, unintegrated with society and frustrated with lack of progress in talks, so the young generation of refugees' children might provide a natural ground for recruiters from radical or fundamentalist organisations.

The scenario of Azerbaijan regaining control over RNK by force is highly unlikely, as the quantitative and qualitative potential of the joint armies of Armenia and the RNK is similar to that of Azerbaijan. Hence it is impossible for Baku to execute a blitzkrieg-type war. At the same time, the Georgian war of August 2008 demonstrated the futility of unilateral efforts to solve a conflict by force, in addition to undermining seriously the image of the parties to the conflict.

External Actors' Perspective. The Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has been in power since 2002, is pursuing a „no problems with neighbours” policy. Hence it is trying to normalise relations with Armenia while maintaining its partnership with Azerbaijan. The Karabakh conflict curbs Turkey's freedom of action and room for maneuver in the South Caucasus, so Turkey is likely to intensify efforts aimed at reaching a settlement on the Karabakh question.

Meanwhile, Russia's policy targetted at maintaining good relations with Armenia while keeping it isolated is no longer effective due to Armenian efforts to cooperate with Georgia, Iran and the European Union. If Turkey and the EU were to enhance their engagement in the region, Russia, with its credibility as mediator undermined after the 2008 war in Georgia, might be more willing to accept new peace initiatives and even pressure Armenia to accept them as well.

The American role in solving the conflict has been marginal from the very outset as a result of balancing between the pro-Armenian and pro-Azeri stance, with the former taking into account the position of the influential Armenian diaspora and the latter stemming from geopolitical interests badly in need of energy cooperation with Azerbaijan. As the U.S. is now focussed on the war in Afghanistan, non-proliferation of WMD and the Middle East conflict, its involvement in solving the Karabakh conflict is expected to diminish.

Recommendations for EU and NATO. The unresolved conflict results in instability in the South Caucasian states embraced by the Eastern Neighbourhood Policy and—within the ENP—the Eastern Partnership program. Failure to settle the conflict is not only detrimental for security reasons, but also corroborates the weakness of EU's foreign policy and undermines the efficiency of EU projects aimed at economic growth, good governance and regional cooperation in the South Caucasus.

It would be worthwhile for the EU to boost its engagement in the peace process as Armenia and Azerbaijan are now more willing to accept small mutual concessions, the significance of Turkey is on the rise, Russia's approach is more constructive and the U.S. is less active. This engagement should concentrate first of all on confidence-building initiatives improving security in the RNK-controlled zone between Nagorno-Karabakh proper and Armenia. The most feasible proposal is to introduce a joint Russia-NATO security contingent there while guaranteeing the security of Armenians and right of way from Karabakh to Armenia and back. Raising the issue of RNK's status seems premature in turn, because under the circumstances the position of the two sides can by no means be reconciled.

Poland's policy towards the Karabakh conflict should be pursued through the European Union and OSCE. Constant pressure should be put on EU institutions to increase their interest in the region, the post of EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus should be retained and stabilising initiatives should be promoted. In bilateral relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan, the policy of equal distance should be emphasised and Poland should remain impartial in the conflict.