

Escaping Russia's Death Grip: How Has Putin's Aggression in Ukraine Affected Security in Armenia and Karabakh?

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This memo touches on the geopolitical complexities surrounding Azerbaijan's conflict in Karabakh and Armenia between 2020 and 2023, positing that Russia under Putin's leadership has initiated a proxy war against Armenian democracy akin to its war with Georgia in 2008 and all-out invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In other words, Russia's proxy war in Karabakh beginning in 2020 is just one fragment of an overarching strategy aimed at constructing a USSR 2.0. Putin's Russia has strategically used regional conflicts to assert its influence and undermine democratic movements abroad. With the Karabakh conflict, Russia has leveraged its historical ties and military presence in the region in order to advance its political agenda.

The conflicts in Karabakh (2020–2023) and Armenia (September 2022–present) should be viewed as proxy wars orchestrated by Russia. By arming and supporting Azerbaijan (including by permitting Turkey to gain a foothold in the South Caucasus), Russia has sought to destabilize Armenia, a country that has shown significant signs of democratic progress. This tactic mirrors Russia's approach in Ukraine, where it has backed separatist forces to undermine the country's pro-Western government.

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The Karabakh Conflict and Armenia's Shifting Alliances

Russia's historical ties to the Caucasus region date back to imperial times, and history has played a significant role in its involvement in the Karabakh conflict. Karabakh has served – and continues to serve – as a tool through which Russia can assert its dominance and expand its sphere of influence in the region in line with its imperialist ambitions.

The 2018 Velvet Revolution, like any other revolution, was a nightmare scenario for Putin. It represented a significant shift in Armenia's political landscape by challenging the entrenched regime – the leaders of which all had Karabakh roots – that had been in place since 1998. However, the subsequent flare-up in Armenian-Azerbaijani relations in 2020 exposed underlying tensions and geopolitical maneuvering with serious implications for regional stability and Russian influence.

The 2018 election of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, a non-Karabakhi, initially signaled a thaw in Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. However, the new political opposition – former representatives of the oligarchic authority – soon initiated a campaign [smearing](#) Pashinyan as a traitor who came to hand over Karabakh. These tensions were ignited in July 2020 by Azerbaijan's escalation of the conflict, a move fueled by domestic pressures in Azerbaijan, most notably economic and social strains exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and government crackdowns on dissent.

Russia has historically played a multifaceted role in the conflict, employing economic tools like the Eurasian Union and military-strategic alliances like the CSTO to exert influence in the region. With the 2020 crisis, however, Moscow diverged from its traditional alignment with Armenia, opting instead for the mediator role that it had sought since 1994. This step implies that Azerbaijan had received permission for the attack from Russia, only violating the indefinite truce after having secured the consent of the main player. When paired with Azerbaijan's military support from Turkey, this new dynamic upended the status quo that had existed in the South Caucasus since 1994, along the way diminishing Russia's leverage and altering the regional balance of power.

Despite Moscow's historical ties and security commitments, Russia's intervention in the 2020 conflict failed to effectively uphold its peacekeeping commitment, which included maintaining control over the Lachin corridor, a vital link between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia, as stipulated in the agreement negotiated by the Kremlin to end hostilities. Moreover, Russia vacated its obligation to defend Armenia's security. Indeed, Russia and the CSTO expressed no concern about Azerbaijan's subsequent violation of Armenia's territorial integrity in September 2022. The Kremlin's reluctance to intervene decisively undermined Armenia's trust in its longstanding ally. In a

clear sign of the shifting geopolitical dynamics, Armenia [has frozen](#) its membership in the CSTO and sent an official letter to Moscow asking it to remove its FSB-based border guards from Zvartnotz International Airport in Yerevan.

The Evolution of Russia's Popularity in Armenia: From Savior to Scapegoating

The historical relationship between Armenia and Russia has been complex, shaped by geopolitical realities and shared cultural ties. However, the events surrounding the 2020 war between Azerbaijan and the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) marked a turning point in Armenia's perception of its erstwhile ally. The reasons driving Russia's former popularity in Armenia ultimately lost their rationale, resulting in a decline in support among Armenians starting in 2020.

Russia's historical popularity in Armenia was initially based on pre-modern religious resistance. In the early 19th century, religious identity mattered significantly more than national or ethnic identity. Hence, the fact that Russia was a Christian country proved important for Armenia, since the Persian and Ottoman Empires were predominantly Muslim and exercised severe discrimination towards non-Muslims. Having been situated on the frontier of three empires (Russian, Persian, and Ottoman) for centuries, Armenia has faced existential threats as a Christian enclave amid Islamic neighbors. In this context, Russia emerged as a key ally, a bulwark against external aggression by Azerbaijan and Turkey and a protector of Armenian interests. Historical narratives portrayed Russia as Armenia's savior from "Turkish yataghan" as well as religious, social, and political oppression (in particular from the Ottoman Empire), fostering a sense of gratitude and loyalty among Armenians.

The 44-day war in 2020 – orchestrated by Azerbaijan with Turkish support and tacit Russian approval – shattered Armenia's illusions of Russian benevolence. As Russian weaponry and diplomatic maneuvering favored Azerbaijan, Armenia viewed Russia's role with rising suspicion and resentment. The war served as an eye-opener, revealing Russia's pragmatic geopolitical calculations at the expense of Armenian interests.

The conflict exposed the fallacy of Russia's historical narrative as Armenia's savior. The notion of Russia as a protector from Turkish threats crumbled in the face of its alignment with Turkey and Azerbaijan. One instance of graffiti in post-2020 Yerevan captured the sentiment succinctly: "Russians are white Turks." This symbolic rejection of Russia's perceived role as a defender highlighted the disillusionment felt by many Armenian citizens.

Despite the clear shift in Armenia's perception of Russia, academic research on this phenomenon remains limited. Russian think tanks have conducted

sporadic studies on the topic, but there has yet to be a comprehensive analysis of the decline in Russia's popularity among Armenians. Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence and public sentiment point to a significant and enduring shift in Armenians' attitudes toward Russia.

This sharp decline following the 2020 war reflects a broader disillusionment with Russia's perceived role as a protector and an ally. In the face of mounting pressure from Azerbaijan and perceived indifference from Russia, Armenia took proactive steps to mitigate tensions by inviting EU representatives to monitor the Armenian-Azerbaijani border. Since the inception of the European observation mission, Azerbaijan has refrained from further provocations, and not a single Armenian border guard has lost their life in border skirmishes.

However, the presence of the EU monitors on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border has irked both Russia and Azerbaijan, which accuse Armenia of introducing a new actor into the region, and neglecting the fact that, during the 44-day war in 2020, Azerbaijan invited Turkey and Russia to establish a presence in Nagorno-Karabakh. As representatives of Russia, Maria Zakharova and Sergei Lavrov have issued veiled threats to Armenia, expressing discomfort with the prolonged presence of the EU mission. They allege that Armenia reneged on its promise to limit the mission's duration to two months, creating friction amid regional dynamics that were already fragile.

Earlier, Armenia's move to seek a Constitutional Court review of the compatibility of the Rome Statute with its own constitution was intended to leverage the International Criminal Court (ICC) against Azerbaijan, which has not signed the statute. This step, driven by Yerevan's desire to bolster deterrence against Baku, was [facilitated](#) by constitutional changes that have been implemented since 2004. However, the ICC's arrest warrant for Putin complicates Armenia's parliamentary ratification due to potential obligations to arrest Russia's leader. In response to this move, Moscow swiftly criticized Armenia's decision and imposed a ban on dairy imports, reminiscent of its actions against Georgia in 2006. Despite Armenia's limited dairy exports to Russia, the ban harms rural Armenians economically.

This situation underscores the strategic balancing act that Armenia plays between its European aspirations and its historical ties with Russia. As Armenia navigates these complex geopolitical currents, it must tread carefully to safeguard its national interests while maintaining regional stability.

Armenia-Azerbaijan Relations: Western Scrutiny, Russian Alliance, and the Quest for Peace

Efforts to resolve Armenia-Azerbaijan tensions, particularly those concerning the matter of Nagorno-Karabakh, have garnered significant attention on the

international stage in recent years. A series of events – including hearings in the U.S. Senate, decisions by the International Court of Justice, and sessions of the OSCE PA – underscore the heightened level of scrutiny to which Armenia has been subjected.

Yerevan’s proactive official engagement with the European Union signals its readiness to align closer with European integration, prompting increased attention from the West. Western powers perceive an opportunity to bolster their influence – and, in turn, diminish Russia’s presence – in the region by supporting Armenia. The West is troubled by hybrid attacks by the Kremlin against Armenia (e.g., the use of ethnically Armenian envoys from Russia to overthrow legitimate authority in Armenia, the manipulation and instigating of Karabakhi IDPs against the government of Nikol Pashinyan) as well as the slow pace of peace negotiations, prompting efforts to strengthen Armenia’s position and encourage constructive engagement from Azerbaijan.

U.S. Assistant Secretary of State James O’Brien’s remarks during U.S. Senate hearings underscore the US’s critical stance towards Azerbaijan and its commitment to peace negotiations. While the U.S. has refrained from imposing sanctions on Azerbaijan (which has acted as a proxy for the sale of Russian oil and gas), its warnings of consequences for obstructive behavior have exerted significant pressure on Baku. Azerbaijan’s response has been largely in the form of continued disagreements. For example, its reluctance to participate in negotiated meetings on Western platforms (e.g. the five-way meeting in Granada) and its rejection of various proposals point to a sense of discomfort with Western scrutiny. However, Armenia’s submission of peace proposals, and the subsequent positive responses from Baku, are indicative of ongoing efforts to address disagreements and advance negotiations.

Both the U.S. and the EU demonstrate a keen interest in facilitating direct negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Despite several failed meetings, the parties have continued to exchange proposals through indirect channels. Still, the potential for peace would be minimal without Western support. Armenia’s proposed "crossroads of peace" (seen in contrast in Russia’s and Turkey’s backed Azerbaijani demand for a Zangezur “corridor”, that is, extraterritorial road links through the Syunik Province in Armenia) have received positive feedback from Western nations, suggesting the potential for economic benefits and regional stability. Moreover, the West views the conclusion of a peace agreement as critical to the weakening of Russia’s influence in the region, signaling its support for a negotiated settlement.

Azerbaijan has long derided Armenia as Russia’s staunch ally at both the international and domestic levels. However, recent developments have challenged this narrative. While Armenia was once stigmatized for its perceived closeness to Moscow, Azerbaijan now agrees that Russia is

obstructing peace efforts in the region. This rhetorical shift highlights a complex interplay of geopolitical interests and strategic maneuvering.

The notion that Nagorno-Karabakh served as a tool for Russia's dominance over Armenia (a dominance that ceased to exist following the September 2023 ethnic cleansing campaign in Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijani military forces with the tacit support of Russia and its "peacekeepers") has given way to a broader understanding of Moscow's leverage in the region. The newly identified problems of demarcation-delimitation, "Azerbaijani exclaves" (with no mention of Armenian exclaves in Azerbaijan), the "salami-slicing" tactic implemented during the seizure – one after another – of bordering Armenian villages in both Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia proper, as well as the concept of "Western Azerbaijan" (which implies the elimination of the Armenian state) all underscore Russia's multifaceted approach to exerting influence in the region. These tactics not only challenge Armenia's territorial integrity but also undermine its sovereignty on the international stage.

Notably, the Azerbaijani maximalist stance has repercussions for Russia's geopolitical strategy. Russian ultra-nationalists have historically opposed Armenia's alignment with the West, viewing it as a threat to Moscow's hegemony in the Caucasus. The coercive tactics employed by Russia – communicated through Azerbaijan – underscore the intersection of their geopolitical interests. The events of 2013, wherein Armenia's efforts to sign the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU faced threats from the Kremlin and possibly by Putin himself, exemplifies this dynamic. Due to pressure from the Kremlin, Armenia became a member of the Eurasian Economic Union overnight. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the subsequent sanctions, three dictatorships – Russia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey – have grown closer, united by ideological and (shadow) economic interests. In light of these developments, the question arises: Who truly is the conveyor and ally of Russia's interests? The shifting dynamics underlying Armenia-Azerbaijan relations raise doubts about Russia's commitment to the Armenian side, especially given the "velvet" revolutionary government in Armenia compared to the familiar Aliyev dictatorship. Azerbaijan's accusation that Armenia seeks peace guarantors beyond the region and the tactics of both Russia and Azerbaijan suggest that a more complex geopolitical calculus is at play.

The evolving alliances and strategic maneuvers in the Caucasus region underscore the fluidity of Russia's geopolitical allegiances. As Armenia navigates this shifting landscape, questions linger regarding Russia's true intentions (its interests in Syria and Libya with regard to Turkey), its hindered oil-gas trade outsourced to Azerbaijan, and the overarching implications for regional stability. Amid this uncertainty, a nuanced understanding of prevailing geopolitical dynamics is essential to chart a path toward lasting peace and security in the South Caucasus.

Conclusion

The conflicts in Karabakh and Armenia must be understood within the context of Russia's broader geopolitical strategy. By instigating proxy wars and exploiting regional tensions, Putin's Russia aims to maintain regional control and externalize the "enemy" by undermining democratic movements in neighboring countries. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for effectively navigating the complexities of the South Caucasus region and promoting stability and democracy in Armenia and beyond.

The Velvet Revolution in Armenia (akin to the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003) and the subsequent flare-up in Armenian-Azerbaijani relations underscore the complex interplay of domestic politics, regional dynamics, and external influences in the South Caucasus. As Armenia navigates these challenges, Russia and other international actors will continue to shape the region's geopolitical landscape with significant implications for security and sustainable stability. Pragmatic geopolitical realities and the collapse of historical narratives have reshaped Armenia's relationship with Russia, signaling a new chapter in their centuries-old alliance. Understanding the reasons behind this shift is necessary to properly assess Armenia's future foreign policy trajectory and regional dynamics.

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