

The State of Play in Nagorno Karabakh & the Scope for Second-Track Diplomatic Initiatives

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Introduction

The main diplomatic effect of the 2020 Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict is the compartmentalisation of the diplomatic agenda: the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh question is no longer a precondition to the "normalisation" of the Azerbaijani-Armenian relationship. Focusing exclusively on Nagorno-Karabakh, the Ukrainian war undermines the viability of the Minsk process because Russia cannot cooperate with the West to resolve a conflict while being involved in a proxy standoff with its diplomatic counterparts. In this context, Armenia's singular economic, diplomatic, and strategic dependence on Russia reduces its ability to set the negotiating agenda and avoid a binding arbitration that can lead to significant concessions. Since the Russian-mediated ceasefire agreement of November 2020, Yerevan is no longer the guarantor of Karabakh's security; Russia is. However, a triumphant stance by Azerbaijan may be self-defeating. By undermining the credibility of its diplomatic counterpart, Baku loses the ability to build a credible and lasting peace settlement.

Methodology: the nature of the study

This report is based on 25 one-to-one structured interviews with Armenian foreign policy analysts, Diaspora lobbyists and political activists. The interviews were conducted between March and May 2022, in parallel to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and negotiations in Brussels between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Although the profile of interviewees is discussed, individual sources are not directly cited.

Strategically, the study aimed to engage with the cultural fountains of the Armenian Diaspora – West, East and the Middle East – and capture perspectives from diplomatically significant European capitals: Paris, London, Brussels, Rome, Stockholm, Athens, Berlin, as well as Yerevan and Stepanakert {Az: Khankendi}. It should be noted that the integration of this layered community into an "Armenian world" appears to be political as much as cultural. The political campaign for the recognition of the 1915 genocide and, thereafter, the recognition of the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh is formative for the Armenian world. Institutions such as the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), the Armenian General Benevolent

Union (AGBU) and various friendship committees are not singularly political but rather broader sociocultural platforms branching out to schools, sports clubs and other community-building activities. All of these institutions have been represented in this core group.

The overarching objective of this study is to explore the scope for second-track initiatives in Karabakh. This question has been systematically pursued through various consultation methodologies, often in the form of expert panels (Links Europe, 2022).¹ Alternatively, through one-to-one interviews, this study seeks to identify political cleavages within Armenian political discourse and point toward possible strategies that would make a peace agreement more viable. The core issue at hand is the question of Karabakh. Following the 2020 Second Karabakh War, there was a profound political rupture across the Armenian world as the conflict posed an existential question that is integral to the experience of being Armenian. For this study, the composition of the interviewee group reflects a political balance between analysts broadly supportive of the government in Yerevan and the opposition.

Beyond the core interviewee group, this study is also indebted to a secondary group of discussants: a pool of eight foreign policy analysts and former diplomats from Washington, the UK, Georgia, Poland and Iran. As in the core group, references to these interviewees are descriptive, avoiding direct quotations; all interviewees had the chance to review this study prior to publication.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in context

Historically, the Armenian-majority Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) was located within the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan. Armenia led a successful military campaign from 1988 to 1994, capturing Karabakh and seven Azeri-majority territories

¹ "The South Caucasus from war to peace: 30 measures between now and 2030," Links Europe, April 2, 2022, https://www.commonspace.eu/sites/default/files/2022-04/JOLIG%20report%20CBMs%202022_1.pdf

Also look at

Policy Recommendations: Study Group Regional Stability in the South Caucasus," PFP Consortium of Defence Academies and Security Studies Institutes, March 24-27, 2022, <https://www.pfp-consortium.org/study-groups/regional-stability-south-caucasus>

west, south and east of the territory (Kucera, 2018).² Following a referendum in 2017, Nagorno-Karabakh and these territories gave rise to the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh, a territory with de facto autonomy since 2006 (Rettman, 2017).³ Armenia never recognised this regime, exercising a form of constructive diplomatic ambiguity, keeping its diplomatic channels with Azerbaijan open, circumventing the question of internally displaced populations and resettlement while remaining engaged in an open-ended Minsk process tasked with determining the status of Karabakh (Alix-Pajot, 2018).⁴ What some Armenian analysts call "maximalist ambitions" prevented Yerevan from advancing an *uti possidetis iuris* argument (have what you had) for the recognition of the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh within the border of the former NKAO.

In Autumn 2020 Azerbaijani forces launched a military campaign that allowed Baku to regain control over the seven adjacent regions and make inroads into the original NKAO, including the towns of Shusha and Hadrut. That Armenian defeat signalled a process of return for over half a million displaced Azerbaijanis (UNCTAD, 2021)⁵ that left their homes in the 1990s; in parallel, by December 2020, over 90,000 Armenians were forced to leave their homes (DTM, 2020).⁶ The loss of life was also traumatic: interviewees referred to 6,500 casualties during the 44-day war (The Economist, 2021),⁷ including just under 4,000 casualties of service personnel (RFE/EL, 2021).⁸ In a small country with just under three million people, no family in Armenia was spared loss.

² Joshua Kucera, "For Armenians, they are not occupied territories, they are homeland," Eurasianet, August 6, 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/for-armenians-theyre-not-occupied-territories-theyre-the-homeland>

³ Pierre Alix-Pajot, "The Republic of Artsakh's Pursuit for International Recognition," Le Journal International, February 10, 2018, <http://www.lejournalinternational.info/en/la-republique-de-lartsakh-en-quete-de-reconnaissance-internationale/>

⁴ Sndrew Rettman, "Referendum to create 'The Republic of Artsakh' on Europe's fringe," February 20, 2017, EU Observer, <https://euobserver.com/world/136961>

⁵ Pierre Alix-Pajot, "The Republic of Artsakh's Pursuit for International Recognition," Le Journal International, February 10, 2018, <http://www.lejournalinternational.info/en/la-republique-de-lartsakh-en-quete-de-reconnaissance-internationale/>

⁶ Country of Origin Information Report – Azerbaijan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Netherlands, September 2021, <file:///Users/administrator/Downloads/country+of+origin+information+report+Azerbaijan+2021-09.pdf>

⁷ Armenia – Displacement Report – December 2020 Round 3, DTM, <https://displacement.iom.int/reports/armenia-%E2%80%94-displacement-report-%E2%80%94-december-2020%E2%80%94-round-3>

⁸ "Armenia's Army turns on its prime minister," The Economist, March 4, 2021, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2021/03/04/armenias-army-turns-on-its-prime-minister>

⁸ "Armenian PM says almost 3,800 Soldiers Killed in Karabakh War," RFE/EL, August 24, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenian-deaths-karabakh-war/31425644.html>

Armenia, Azerbaijan Report Casualties After Renewed Fighting on the Border, RFE/RL, November 17, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-azerbaijan-border-clashes-casualties/31565567.html>

Many of the interviews refer to the Russian nine-point ceasefire agreement as "the capitulation". From a diplomatic perspective, one of the key differences between the 1994 and the 2020 ceasefire agreements is that the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh is not a signatory to the 2020 ceasefire agreement. That means that Karabakh Armenians are no longer represented on the negotiating table as stakeholders in their own right. Because Baku regards the whole region as a liberated sovereign territory (Eurasia Daily, 2020),⁹ the residents of Karabakh are regarded as a minority of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The ceasefire agreement entails no reference to a "right of return" for displaced Armenian populations, and Armenia is no longer the de facto guarantor of their security (Jones et al., 2021).¹⁰ For Armenians, this means that the "first track" diplomatic framework is relegated to an implicit Russian arbitration process.

The state of play of the Minsk process

Before November 2020, the primary forum for the negotiation of the Karabakh conflict was the Minsk Group, set up in 1992 by the Conference on Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to facilitate talks.ⁱ There are reasons to doubt that the Minsk process can outlive the Ukrainian conflict, even if it nominally survived the 2020 war. As explained by an American diplomat, as long as Moscow, Washington and Paris are embroiled in a proxy conflict in Ukraine, no diplomatic cooperation can be expected. This diplomatic reality is not limited to the Karabakh conflict but extends wherever cooperation with Russia is required, such as the Iran nuclear deal, also known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). In the words of one Armenian interviewee in contact with the co-chairs, "there is no Minsk process".

The value of the Minsk process has, for some time, been an issue of a process rather than substance. As noted by Thomas de Waal (de Waal, 2022)¹¹ the Russian mediated ceasefire agreement of November 2020 gained international legitimacy through the

⁹ "Armenians of Karabakh will have to get Azerbaijani passports – Interview " Eurasia Daily, November 21, 2020, <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2020/11/21/armyane-karabaha-dolzny-budut-poluchit-pasporta-azerbaydzhana-intervyu>

¹⁰ Robert Aydabirian, Jirair Libaridian, Taline Papazian, "White Paper: The Karabakh War of 2020 and Armenia's Future Foreign and Security Policies," July 2021, https://www.armeniapeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Armenia_Foreign_and_Security_Policies.pdf

¹¹ Thomas de Waal, "Brussels Takes the initiative in Armenia-Azerbaijan negotiations," Analuticon, May 2022, <https://theanalyticon.com/en/may-2022-en/brussels-takes-the-initiative-in-armenia-azerbaijan-negotiations/>

OSCE Tirana statement rather than a UN Resolution (OSCE, 2020).¹² However, the situation in Ukraine appears to make diplomatic protocol less significant, and Russia is not entirely dependent on the international legitimation of its actions in the 'near abroad'.

Indeed, developments on the ground leave little room for optimism on the viability of the OSCE Minsk framework. Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov accused France and the United States of disrupting cooperation over Karabakh, warning that Russia was moving on to facilitate bilateral negotiations on border delimitation between Armenia and Azerbaijan (Turan, 2022).¹³ Significantly, Russia has been entertaining the idea of a transition to the self-proclaimed three plus three framework: Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan plus Russia, Turkey and Iran. This framing replaces France with Turkey and seals off the West from the Caucasus (News.am, 2022)¹⁴ That may be unacceptable to Armenia and Georgia, but the discussion indicates Moscow's intended direction of travel.

For Armenia, the Minsk process ensures that the Karabakh question remains open. It is no surprise that the Armenian foreign minister Ararat Mirzoyan has been contradicting Lavrov, pledging Armenia's continued support for the Minsk process, while hailing the cooperation of all the parties involved (Arka News Agency, 2022).¹⁵ Crucially, however, none of the Minsk process co-chairs challenge Azerbaijan over the question of sovereignty. As noted by a French-Armenian interviewee, no co-ambassador from the Minsk Group has visited Stepanakert since 2020 {Az: Khankendi}. Significantly, members of the Armenian government have also avoided similar visits, except for the Armenian Minister of Defence Arshak Karabetyan in

¹² <https://www.osce.org/minsk-group/472419>

¹³ "Washington and Paris refused to communicate with Moscow on the Karabakh settlement-Lavrov," Turan, April 8, 2022, https://www.turan.az/ext/news/2022/4/free/politics_news/en/3506.htm/001

¹⁴ Lavrov says US, France annulled OSCE membership: what'll happen to Karabakh?", News.am, April 8, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T-V4kwd6zGw&ab_channel=NEWSAM

¹⁵ "Armenia sees Karabakh conflict settlement in OSCE Minsk Group co-chairmanship format," Arka News Agency, April 13, 2022, http://arka.am/en/news/politics/armenia_sees_karabakh_conflict_settlement_in_osce_minsk_group_co_chairmanship_format_mirzoyan/

November 2021, whose presence in Karabakh was condemned by Baku as a violation of the ceasefire agreement (Massis Post, 2021).¹⁶

Only the Russians are present on the ground and, for all practical purposes, are Azerbaijan's relevant diplomatic counterpart on the question of Karabakh's security (The USC Institute of Armenian Studies 2021).¹⁷ The 2020 ceasefire agreement provides Russia with the mandate to deploy 1960 Russian peacekeeping troops. These troops man over 27 checkpoints along the Lachin corridor linking Armenia to Karabakh and accompany crews tasked with repairing crucial infrastructure in the Armenian-controlled enclave, including water and natural gas (International Crisis Group, 2022).¹⁸ But security is the overarching concern. The Russian peacekeeping mandate ends in 2025 and what happens next is contentious.

There are several possibilities: the Russian mandate could be simply renewed; the force could be internationalised; or Russian troops could withdraw. Most interviewees in Yerevan and across Europe speculate or hope that Russian troops will remain indefinitely. However, this may very well be wishful thinking. According to an interviewee with direct knowledge of national security discourse both in Yerevan and in Stepanakert {Az: Khankendi}, the Russian message behind the scenes and on the record is consistent, namely that the end game for Karabakh is "reintegration". What Moscow has not been arguing is that the Minsk group will decide the future of Karabakh in cooperation with the United States and France.

Understandably, the Armenian world is unwilling to relinquish its seat at the table where the future of Karabakh is discussed. In that respect, the Minsk process remains invaluable not only for its substance but also for its composition. Above all, Yerevan

¹⁶ "Baku angered by Armenian Defence Minister's Visit to Karabakh," Massis Post, November 9, 2021, <https://massispost.com/2021/11/baku-angered-by-armenian-defense-ministers-visit-to-karabakh/>

¹⁷ "Russian Deputy Defence Minister Visits Artsakh," USC Dornsife, Institute of Armenian Studies, March 31, 2021, <https://armenian.usc.edu/russian-deputy-defense-minister-visits-artsakh/>

¹⁸ "Nagorno-Karabakh: Seeking a Path to Peace in the Ukraine War's Shadow," International Crisis Group, April 22, 2022, https://d2071andvip0wi.cloudfront.net/b093-seeking-a-path-to-peace_0.pdf

wants it on the record that there is a Karabakh issue, even if that is no longer a question of sovereignty (de Waal, 2022).¹⁹

Balancing East and West

Armenia needs Russian security guarantees for Karabakh but fears Russian arbitration. Keeping the West engaged remains substantially significant amid the Ukraine-induced diplomatic polarisation (NAASR Armenian Studies, 2022).²⁰ Indeed, Armenia has been treading a fine line since Russia's Crimean annexation. Diplomatically savvy Armenian analysts have built experience in balancing pro-Russian diplomacy alongside appearances in the West. Armenian interviewees in Brussels, London and Paris will habitually note that Armenia is pursuing an overall "decent" foreign policy over the question of Ukraine. Armenia abstained from the UN General Assembly vote in March condemning the invasion of Ukraine (RFL, 2022)²¹ and the vote in May suspending Russia's membership of the UN Human Rights Council (Nalbadian, 2022).²² At the same time, Armenians will vehemently deny any allegation of facilitating Russia's invasion as Ukrainian disinformation at best or, at worst, Azerbaijani-Turkish propaganda (Lorusso, 2022).²³

The question of 'how supportive Armenia is to Moscow' is a polarising political debate and drives a wedge between the government and the opposition, Yerevan and the Diaspora, and Yerevan and Stepanakert {Az: Khankendi}. The dilemma is simple: does one double down on support for Moscow, or should Armenia be looking to hedge its diplomatic risk by seeking additional security guarantors.

¹⁹ Thomas de Waal, "Nagorno-Karabakh in the Shadow of Ukraine," *Foreign Affairs*, May 30, 2022,

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/armenia/2022-05-30/nagorno-karabakh-shadow-ukraine>

²⁰ The Ukraine War and Armenia(ns): Immediate Impacts and Repercussions, NAASR Armenian Studies, March 31, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ppfu5eQgtGM>

²¹ "Armenia Abstains from UN Vote on Ukraine," RFL, March 3, 2022, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/31734729.html>

²² Naira Nalbadian, "Russia Again not Backed by Armenia on UN Vote on Ukraine," April 08, 2022

<https://www.azatutyun.am/a/31793297.html>

²³ Marilisa Lorusso, "War in Ukraine: reactions from the South Caucasus," *Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso*, February 24, 2022,

<https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Ukraine/War-in-Ukraine-reactions-from-the-South-Caucasus-216133>

Also see: Stephen Badalyan Riegg, "Don't Blame Armenia for its ties to Russia," *Eurasianet*, April 5, 2022,

<https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-dont-blame-armenia-for-its-ties-to-russia>

The referendum organised by Russia to justify the 2014 Annexation of Crimea was hailed in Yerevan as "a useful precedent" (de Waal, 2014),²⁴ although Yerevan did not formally recognise the annexation. Stepanakert {Az: Khankendi} is quite another story. To quote an experienced French-Armenian analyst, Karabakh is now "a de facto Russian protectorate". When the leader of the Armenian community in Stepanakert {Az: Khankendi}, Arayik Harutyunyan, calls for the recognition of Luhansk and Donetsk, he essentially falls in line with Moscow to the degree that is not consistent with Armenian foreign policy. Although this position may carry some favour in certain diaspora circles linked to the Armenian opposition (ARF, AGBU), Yerevan will resist jeopardising its credibility in Paris and Washington for no tangible benefit. In sum, there is an emerging wedge between Armenia, Karabakh Armenians, and most diaspora institutions.

Public opinion in Yerevan is divided on the question of the war in Ukraine (Civilnet, 2022).²⁵ Armenian community activists in Europe understand and stand ready to defend Yerevan's diplomatic ambiguity, contrasting the solidarity extended to the Ukrainian people with the underreported Armenian tragedy of the 2020 war. More assertively, Armenian interviewees will echo social media posts pointing to Kyiv's perceived "profiteering" from the Second Karabakh War, reiterating accusations that Ukraine supplied Azerbaijan with White Phosphorus (News Front, 2020),²⁶ which Ukraine has repeatedly denied (Zelensky, 2020).²⁷

Naturally, Armenian interviewees will resist delving into the paradox of Russia being the leading arms supplier to both sides of the conflict (Wezeman et al, 2021)²⁸

²⁴ Thomas de Waal, "Naghorno-Karabakh: Crimea's Doppelgänger," Open Democracy: June 13, 2014,

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/naghorno-karabakh-crimea-doppelganger-azerbaijan-armenia/>

²⁵ "Rival rallies take place in Yerevan in support of and in opposition to Russia's invasion of Ukraine," Civilnet, March 21, 2022,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNfuLdRNq70&ab_channel=CIVILNET

²⁶ White Phosphorus Allegations Social Media: <https://twitter.com/HovhanNaz/status/1497341533695135746>

White Phosphorus Allegations, publication: "The Ukrainian government had sold and transferred phosphorus bombs to Azerbaijan to support the Azerbaijani army against Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict" (in Hungarian), News Front, December 12, 2020, <https://hu.news-front.info/2020/12/29/ukrainai-ormenyek-zelenszkij-es-tarsai-felelni-fognak-a-hegyi-karabahba-szallitott-fegyverekert/>

²⁷ President Zelensky: Information on Supply of Phosphorus bombs to Azerbaijan – Russian Fake," November 3, 2020,

<https://www.promoteukraine.org/president-zelensky-information-on-supply-of-phosphorus-bombs-to-ukraine-to-russia-%E2%80%92-russian-fake/>

²⁸ Peter D. Wezeman, Alexandra Kuimonova, Jordan Smith, "Arms Transfers to conflict zones: the case of Nagorno-Karabakh," Sipri, April 30, 2021, <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-backgrounder/2021/arms-transfers-conflict-zones-case-naghorno-karabakh>

Yerevan's singular dependence on Russia – on arms, grain, and energy supplies, foreign currency reserves, remittance flows and the peacekeeping force in Karabakh – is a fact that defies moral evaluation. It is what it is. Nonetheless, this dependence does not necessarily tally with diplomatic objectives in Moscow and Yerevan.

There are concerns that the war in Ukraine will cause Russia to divest from non-states financially (Civil, 2022)²⁹ and militarily (The Kyiv Independent, 2022).³⁰ Of course, these are inferences rather than facts. However, the latest Crisis report (22/04) refers to 1600 Russian soldiers on the ground, which is 360 soldiers fewer than Russia's original mandate specifies (Crisis Group Europe, 1993).³¹ Armenian activists may downplay or condemn such reports as little more than fake news. However, at least three interviewees with knowledge of developments on the ground suggest that Russians are extending citizenship to Armenian applicants from Karabakh liberally (Babayan, 2021).³² There are two ways to interpret this development: first, the Russians are facilitating the immigration of Armenians from Karabakh. The second reading is that Russia could be entertaining the idea of a more "formal" relationship between Russia and the area where Russian peacekeepers are deployed, consistent with the fact that Russian is now the official language of the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh (Hetq, 2021).³³

The latter interpretation would suggest that Moscow is readying for a major confrontation with Baku. That could be wishful thinking. Sceptical Armenian foreign policy analysts frequently recall that the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, visited Moscow two days before Russia invaded Ukraine, upgrading the status of bilateral relations with Moscow while the rest of the world was moving toward sanctions (Isayev

²⁹ "Moscow says Abkhazia, S. Ossetia Shall be less dependent on Russia," Civil, March 10, 2022, <https://civil.ge/archives/478378>

³⁰ "Ukrainian Armed Forces: Russia plans transfer of troops from Armenia," The Kyiv Independent, March 18, 2022, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-ato/3433670-rosia-planue-perekinuti-v-ukrainu-svoi-pidrozhdili-z-virmenii-genstab.html>

³¹ "Naghorno-Karabakh: Seeking a Path to Peace in the Ukraine's War Shadow," Crisis Group Europe Briefing No. 93, April 22, 1993, https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/b093-seeking-a-path-to-peace_0.pdf

³² Aza Babayan, "More Armenians get Russian Citizenship," Azatutyun, November 26, 2021, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/31530758.html>

And Joshua Kucera, "Visitors to Karabakh require Russian Permission," Eurasianet, February 10, 2021, <https://eurasianet.org/visitors-to-karabakh-to-require-russian-permission>

³³ "Artsakh Parliament Recognises Russian as 'Official Language,'" hetq, March 21, 2021, <https://hetq.am/en/article/128983>

and Joshua Kucera, 2022);³⁴ in fact, this Azerbaijani policy line resonates with Turkish foreign policy, as Ankara has resisted pressure to join Western sanctions citing strategic cooperation with Moscow (Tass, 2011).³⁵

There is little evidence to suggest that Karabakh is a proxy conflict between East and West comparable to Ukraine. Armenians lobbying for Stepanakert {Az: Khankendi} in Europe will often make the case that the Russian peacekeeping force – now in the third military rotation – is leaning more favourably towards the Armenian side as the Azerbaijani siege scales up. Early in March 2022 and amid sub-zero temperatures, the gas pipeline from Armenia to Karabakh was apparently sabotaged. Azerbaijani forces did not assume responsibility, but Russian peacekeepers were not allowed to accompany Armenian repair crews either. Reports of Azerbaijani loudspeakers blasting a call to prayer along the point of contact are frequently cited by interviewees as indicative of a "siege-like" atmosphere.

As Azerbaijani forces moved to capture the strategic Parukh (Az:Farukh} village in April, the Russians decried the violation of the ceasefire agreement (AFP, 2022);³⁶ subsequently, Armenians hoped that to balance the situation on the ground, the Russians would lean on the side of the weak. However, Russian troops are peacekeepers rather than peacemakers. Several interviewees in Germany, France and London would like Armenia to gain time for Stepanakert {Az: Khankendi} until Moscow is ready to be more assertive vis-a-vis Azerbaijan. In the words of a French-Armenian interviewee, the Parukh {Az. Farukh} village event attests that "their presence is necessary but not sufficient to maintaining peace." Gaining time may not be Yerevan's first inclination because of the military pressure on the ground. In the words of an interviewee in Germany, "the idea that Armenia can play for time is wishful thinking."

³⁴ Heydar Isayev, Joshua Kucera, "Ahead of Ukraine Invasion, Azerbaijan and Russia cement 'alliance,'" Eurasianet, February 24, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/ahead-of-ukraine-invasion-azerbaijan-and-russia-cement-alliance>

³⁵ "Turkey will not join sanctions against Russia – Erdogan," Tass: March 25, 2011, https://tass.com/politics/1427365?utm_source=google.com&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=google.com&utm_referrer=google.com

³⁶ "Russia accuses Azerbaijan of violating ceasefire agreement in Karabakh region," AFP, March 26, 2022, <https://twitter.com/AFP/status/1507765871556665351>

Azerbaijan has many levers to press Yerevan to conclude a peace agreement sooner rather than later. For instance, the last point of the 2020 ceasefire agreement envisions the reinstatement of transport connections between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic under Russian security guarantees. That means restoring the road and railway routes closed since the early 1990s. Taken at face value, this provision appears to be a positive vision that Armenia and Azerbaijan can share. As noted by Thomas de Waal, this provision may allow the South Caucasus to play its historical role as a land bridge between Europe and Asia (de Waal, 2021).³⁷ Alas, this provision has become an additional point of tension.

Armenian interviewees with knowledge of the security situation on the ground suggest the Azerbaijani Army is increasingly more assertive on the point of contact, making inroads into South Armenia (ENV, 2021).³⁸ According to an interviewee with a clear picture of the evolving security situation on the ground, the displacement of people from Karabakh is now compounded by refugee waves from the country's south. While many in the Armenian opposition feel that Karabakh is deserving of another armed confrontation, especially in the diaspora, the government in Yerevan prefers to see Armenia live to fight another day. The cleavage is not between appeasers and hawks but between those who see war as impossible to avoid and those who see war as impossible to win.

Less Russia means more Turkey

Ukraine drains Russian energy and resources, leaving behind a precarious vacuum of power in the South Caucasus. "Less Russia means more Turkey" is the old and frequently cited diplomatic adage. Turkey has been gaining ground in the Caucasus for decades. Armenian interviewees in Europe – and less so in Yerevan – will often reflect with bitterness that Tbilisi prohibited the overflight of Russian planes to Armenia during the 2020 war. Of course, Georgia is respectful of its Armenian minority and

³⁷ Thomas de Waal, "In the Southern Caucasus, Can New Trade Routes Help Overcome a History of Conflict," Carnegie Europe, November 8, 2021, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/11/08/in-south-caucasus-can-new-trade-routes-help-overcome-history-of-conflict-pub-85729>

³⁸ "Azerbaijan launches Large Scale Offensive Against Armenia Proper," ENV Report, November 16, 2021, <https://envreport.com/politics/azerbaijan-launches-large-scale-offensive-against-armenia-proper/>

provides access to the Black Sea. However, to quote a foreign policy analyst with considerable experience in the Armenian government, "Azerbaijan is a rule-maker and Armenia, a rule-taker." Georgia will prioritise ties with Turkey and Azerbaijan. It shares an enduring trilateral cooperation framework that boasts strategic partnerships in oil and gas distribution, electricity production, logistics, trade and industry.

The bottom line is that Armenia has mainly been excluded from every major regionalisation project in the South Caucasus, be it Anglo-American sponsored energy connectivity or China's Belt and Road Initiative and is only marginally benefitting from EU investment in transborder road networks. Russia can point to no positive regionalisation initiative in the region, and Yerevan has been pursuing a singularly pro-Moscow trajectory. Contrary to Yerevan's singular investment in Russia, Azerbaijan has balanced Moscow's security pre-eminence in the near abroad by forging a strategic partnership with Turkey.

Armenian interviewees across Europe point the finger at Ankara for the alleged transfer of Syrian mercenaries during the 2020 war (Butler, 2020),³⁹ which has been denied (Valiyev, 2020).⁴⁰ However, what is not contested is the role of Turkish military advisors (Sassunian, 2020)⁴¹ and arms systems supplies. The significance of the Bayraktar (Witt, 2022)⁴² drone system cannot be overstated and proved decisive in Syria, Libya, Karabakh and Ukraine. Israel has similarly filled niche capabilities, tilting the balance of power irreversibly. According to an Armenian defence specialist, even if Yerevan did have the financial resources to engage in an arms race, there would be a technical obstacle to supply diversification: Armenia would be unable to resist any Russian demands for access to strategic technology and data. Therefore, diversification is technically impossible. The war in Ukraine makes matters worse as Russia exhausts its stock of ammunition, diminishing Armenia's ability to replenish its

³⁹ Ed Butler, "Syrians used as 'canon fodder' in Nagorno-Karabakh," BBC, December 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/stories-55238803>

⁴⁰ Anar Valiyev, "The Myth of the Syrian Mercenaries in Karabakh Debunked in Eight Parts," PONARS Eurasia, November 6, 2020, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/the-myth-of-syrian-mercenaries-in-karabakh-debunked-in-eight-parts/>

⁴¹ Haru Sassunian, "Turkish Generals led the War on Artsakh. This was Turkish, not Azeri Victory." The Armenian Weekly, December 28, 2020, <https://armenianweekly.com/2020/12/28/turkish-generals-led-war-on-artsakh-this-was-a-turkish-not-azeri-victory/>

⁴² Stephen Witt, "The Turkish Drone that changed the nature of warfare," The New Yorker Magazine, The Annals of War, May 9 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/05/16/the-turkish-drone-that-changed-the-nature-of-warfare>

arsenal. In this context, one has to question whether the ambition to rebuild the Armenian Army at the time required to make a difference in negotiations is feasible. Clearly, there are tangible steps taken towards rebuilding credible deterrence, including the development of an indigenous drone prototype (Bisht, 2021).⁴³ However, no one would argue that Armenia today is anywhere near the objective of credible deterrence.

Politically, the hope articulated by the Armenian opposition is that Yerevan can raise the stakes of its strategic partnership with Russia, developing a new strategic instrumentality. As the war in Ukraine continues, tens of thousands of Russians are fleeing Moscow;⁴⁴ according to several sources interviewed, many of the Russians making their way to Yerevan work in the IT sector, bolstering Armenia's ambition to become a digital services hub. The implicit hope is that Armenia may come to play a facilitating role for Russia's online connectivity and, in time, financial services. Others suggest that now is the time for Armenia to hedge its strategic bets.

Yerevan and the West

The West is not necessarily willing or able to fill the Russian security vacuum in the Caucasus. As a rule, Armenians in the diaspora are confident in their ability to carry public opinion and legislators but are sceptical about their influence over foreign policy.

In March 2022, the European Parliament condemned the destruction of monuments in Karabakh (European Parliament, 2022),⁴⁵ which the formal Armenian lobby in Brussels would present as proof that the Diaspora can carry a majority on a legislative level. However, the war in Ukraine is making legislators and public opinion less receptive to Armenian lobbying. Many of the interviewees bitterly note that Euro-Atlantic partners talk passionately about the need to disrupt energy ties with Moscow

⁴³ Inder Singh Bisht, "Armenian-Made Kamikaze Drones Undergoing Tests," The Defence Post, February 12, 2021, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2021/02/12/armenia-tests-kamikaze-drone/>

⁴⁴ "Сколько людей уехало из России из-за войны? Они уже никогда не вернуться? Можно ли это считать очередной волной эмиграции?", March 7, 2022, <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/05/07/skolko-lyudey-uehalo-iz-rossii-iz-za-voyny-oni-uzhe-nikogda-ne-vernutsya-mozhno-li-eto-schitat-ocherednoy-volnoy-emigratsii>

⁴⁵ European Parliament, "European Parliament resolution on the destruction of cultural heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh," 9 March, 2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2022-0146_EN.html

(Dalton and Hornet, 2022)⁴⁶ while bolstering their energy ties with Baku (European Union, 2022).⁴⁷ The Armenian lobby in Brussels is dominated by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), as are many national Armenian federations. Institutionally speaking, they will stand behind every Armenian government. In practice, they do not share the same "realistic calculations" on the future of Karabakh that the Pashinyan government harbours.

Almost everyone representing a diaspora institution – media platform, friendship committee, educational institution, political party – will resist a peace agreement that is perceived to be "selling out" the security of Karabakh Armenians. Therefore, this opposition is apparently sceptical of the Brussels process, fearing that the bilateral talks facilitated by the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, lock Armenia in a dialogue in which Karabakh is essentially a non-issue.

Many of these activists would prefer a Russian arbitration, however unlikely. It should be recalled that Armenia signed onto a five-point negotiating agenda in March, including the recognition of Azerbaijan's "inviolability of international borders" and the rebuke of any territorial claim (Turan, 2022).⁴⁸ The die was cast. On April 6, 2022, the Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan and the Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev met in Brussels and subsequently tasked their respective foreign ministers to "begin preparatory work for peace talks" (Reuters, 2022).⁴⁹ Prime Minister Pashinyan and Foreign Minister Mirzoyan have stated that the Karabakh conflict is not a territorial issue but "a matter of rights" (Kubera, 2022).⁵⁰

In Brussels, the EU acts more as a facilitator than a mediator or arbiter, which means Yerevan is locked into an asymmetrical process. However, as an interviewee with direct knowledge of the diplomatic agenda noted, the bilateral framing of this process

⁴⁶ Matthew Dalton and Will Hornet, "Russian Oil Output Shrinks Under Western Pressure," Wall Street Journal, May 12, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/eu-oil-embargo-would-push-russian-crude-output-to-18-year-low-iea-says-11652349785>

⁴⁷ Senior officials meet to reinforce energy cooperation, May 13th https://ec.europa.eu/info/news/eu-azerbaijan-senior-officials-meet-reinforce-energy-cooperation-2022-may-13_en

⁴⁸ "Pashinyan on readiness to engage in peace talks with Azerbaijan," Turan, March 31, 2022, https://www.turan.az/ext/news/2022/3/free/politics_news/en/3171.htm/001

⁴⁹ Armenia says it agrees Karabakh peace talks with Azerbaijan, will discuss borders." Reuters, April 7, 2022 <https://www.reuters.com/world/armenia-says-it-has-agreed-peace-talks-with-azerbaijan-over-karabakh-2022-04-06/>

⁵⁰ Joshua Kubera, "Armenia signals willingness to cede control over Karabakh," Eurasianet, April 1, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-signals-willingness-to-cede-control-over-karabakh>

was decided in the trilateral meeting with President Putin in November 2021 (Nikuradze, 2021).⁵¹ The idea that the Brussels process is a departure from the Sochi principles or that Moscow is not regularly debriefed on the Brussels proceedings is fanciful (Zacharova, 2022).⁵² In fact, a former British diplomat interviewed for this study confirms a meeting in London with the Armenian government liaison tasked with regularly debriefing Moscow. In sum, while the Minsk process is unworkable, Russia remains indirectly engaged in the Brussels format with an agenda-setting role. Without boots on the ground, Brussels accepts that its role is no substitute for Russia's involvement in the conflict.

Looking beyond Brussels, one of the ideas discussed in the diaspora is the addition of French peacekeepers in Karabakh. At least two sources in France suggest the idea stems from the President's cabinet, although there has been pushback from the French foreign ministry. However, this would not work without coordination with Moscow, which is less likely as long as the war in Ukraine continues.

Moreover, there is a question of credibility, given that the tendency to instrumentalise the Karabakh conflict for electoral gains is not unheard of in France (Yegavian, 2022).⁵³ The Armenian Diaspora in France boasts a 600,000 strong Armenian community with political muscle. In the countdown to the French Presidential elections, the far-right candidate Eric Zemmour made his way to Yerevan in December 2021, pitching his support for Karabakh within the context of a broader civilisational clash between Islam and the West (Meljumyan, 2021).⁵⁴ Marine Le Pen has been waving the flag of her support for Armenia in these elections (Marine Le Pen, 2017),⁵⁵ as she did in the previous electoral cycle (Public Radio of Armenia, 2017).⁵⁶ The centre-right Valerie Pécresse followed (Azatutyun, 2021),⁵⁷ promising more resolute action on conflict mediation, while also doubling down on political competition by visiting

⁵¹ Mariam Nikuradze, "Armenia and Azerbaijan agree to bilateral commission in Sochi," OC Media, November 27, 2021, <https://oc-media.org/armenia-and-azerbaijan-agree-to-bilateral-commission-in-sochi-summit/>

⁵² Maria Zacharova, April 28, 2022, <https://news.am/rus/news/699005.html>

⁵³ Tigran Yegavian, "The French Presidential Election and the Armenian Question," EVN Report, April 15, 2022, <https://evnreport.com/politics/the-french-presidential-election-and-the-armenian-question/>

⁵⁴ Ani Meljumyan, "French far-right candidate seeks votes in Armenia," Eurasianet, December 13, 2021, <https://eurasianet.org/french-far-right-figure-seeks-votes-in-armenia>

⁵⁵ Marine Le Pen, May 14, 2021, https://twitter.com/mlp_officiel/status/1393135243780055041

⁵⁶ "Marine Le Pen says Artsakh Reunion with Armenia Desirable," Public Radio of Armenia, April 17, 2017

⁵⁷ "Another French Presidential Candidate visits Armenia," Azatutyun, December 21, 2021, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/31620016.html>

Stepanakert {Az: Khankendi} (Asbarez, 2021).⁵⁸ Nonetheless, there is little to suggest that Armenia can expect resolute action now that the French elections are over and the military stalemate in Ukraine is prolonged.

Despite scepticism, Baku and Yerevan are digging on two opposite ends of tunnel, possibly meeting in Brussels. If Russia loses the war, Armenia is left without its main ally and no security guarantees in Karabakh. Meanwhile, Azerbaijani military pressure is relentless. Yerevan needs to proceed towards the demilitarisation and normalisation of diplomatic relations. However, the clock is also ticking for Azerbaijan. The 2020 victory is an opportunity to close the Karabakh chapter from a position of power (Broers, 2022).⁵⁹ Power is a volatile commodity. A Geneva-based Armenian analyst notes that the 2020 Azerbaijani victory is mortgaged to Turkish, Israeli and Russian assistance. It is now assumed that the three powers have a military presence in Azerbaijan, although Baku has always denied that Israel has a military presence on its soil (Middle East Eye, 2021).⁶⁰ There is no guarantee that these powers will act in the best interests of Baku, the Armenian analyst argues.

Furthermore, Ukraine will test the resilience of a relatively amicable relationship between Russia and Turkey. In sum, while the relationship between Yerevan and Baku is asymmetrical, there is a common interest in expediting a peace agreement to mitigate political risks. Time certainly works against Yerevan but does necessarily favour Baku.

Looking beyond Europe

Beyond Europe, Armenia is looking to Iran for support. On this front, there are realistic calculations in the spirit of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend". Armenians recall the multimillion Azerbaijani minority in Iran and talk of Turanic irridentism as the common enemy. Armenian analysts point to the presence of an Israeli base in

⁵⁸ "French Presidential Candidate Visits Artsakh; Baku adds her on Black List," Asbarez, December 23, 2021, <https://asbarez.com/french-presidential-candidate-visits-artsakh-baku-places-her-onblack-list/>

⁵⁹ Laurence Broers, "Beyond Minsk? The Remaking of the Armenian-Azerbaijani peace process," Eurasianet, April 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-beyond-minsk-the-remaking-of-the-armenian-azerbaijani-peace-process>

⁶⁰ "Azerbaijan rejects Iran's claim it is hosting a secret Israeli military base," Middle East Eye, October 4, 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/azerbaijan-rejects-iran-claims-hosting-israeli-troops>

Azerbaijan and the fact that Baku is potentially a springboard for spying over Tehran. Iran now shares a 700-kilometre border with Azerbaijan, which should impact strategic thinking in Tehran.

Armenians will argue that Iran opposes the realisation of the "Zangezur corridor" linking Azerbaijan to its exclave and thereon to Turkey, thereby completing a process of Turanic regionalisation. The reasons they cite include the perceived presence of Syrian Sunni militias during the 2020 war, which probably gave Tehran pause for thought; another inference relates to Iran's military exercises in October 2021, when Iran explicitly referenced a perceived "Zionist threat" stemming from Azerbaijan (Esfandiari, 2021).⁶¹

Both Armenian and Western analysts will often rely on inferences rather than direct testimony regarding Iran. The perceived benefit of a trade corridor cutting across Russia, Armenia and Iran is an alternative route to India. Sources close to the government in Yerevan note that both Russia and Turkey are eager to see the development of an overland Southern Corridor, particularly after the Suez crisis. The focus is on trains and the 340km Yaraksh-Julfa-Ordubad-Megri-Horadiz network.

There are two caveats in this theoretical calculation. The first is that Iranians have not articulated their positioning on this master plan. According to an Iranian expert in trade relations with Russia, the country's delapidated infrastructure means that a train connection from the port of Chabahar to Isfahan and thereon to Russia via Armenia would take years to develop, and there is no available capital to do so. Upgrades to existent infrastructure may be possible but would probably not suffice. Foreign investment could be acceptable, but Russia and Turkey have seen better days financially, and the West would not commit. Although Indians have spent over \$200 million to develop this Iranian port (Ramachadran, 2019),⁶² they now appear to be

⁶¹ Golnaz Esfandiari, "What's behind French Tensions on the Iran-Azerbaijan Border?," RFE/RL, October 1, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-azerbaijan-military-drills-border/31488035.html>

⁶² Sudha Ramachadran, "India Doubles Down on Chabajar Gambit," The Diplomat, January 14, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/india-doubles-down-on-chabajar-gambit/>

diverting trade to the Gulf. Their position was confirmed by an Indian analyst with knowledge of Indian policy on the ground.

Although the Trump administration exempted the port from secondary sanctions, a "Southern Corridor" would eventually require the ability of Iranian companies to sign contracts with logistics companies across Europe. According to an American diplomat that served in the region, no one should hold their breath. Theoretically, President Biden has a path to bypassing the Senate and restarting the JCPOA. However, these negotiations presuppose Russian cooperation. Moscow is not likely to welcome the addition of Iranian energy to the market at least as long as the Ukrainian conflict continues. Finally, a former Iranian intelligence analyst warns that Iran is embroiled in the process of power succession, and one should not expect giant steps toward cooperation with the West for the foreseeable future.

On a smaller scale, Iran is indeed engaged in road-and-rail diplomacy. During the course of 2021, Iran financed a highway connection running from Nordooz to Yerevan to create a North-South corridor bypassing Azerbaijan, partly as a reaction to the introduction of tolls in the Azerbaijani section of the Kapan–Shikahogh–Meghri motorway (Rogers, 2021).⁶³

On March 11, 2022, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev received Iranian Minister of Urban Development and Roads Rostam Ghosemi in Baku (Nikuradze, 2022).⁶⁴ The two men signed a memorandum establishing a rail and road corridor linking Azerbaijan to the Nakhchivan exclave and, thereon, Turkey, bypassing Armenia. The project opened the possibility of easing military pressure in Armenia's southern Syunik region. Several Armenian interviewees commented that this is more "rebranding and refurbishing" rather than a new state of play. In any event, Iran acts as an enabler of regionalisation and, implicitly, as a necessary stakeholder for any regional development. Conversely,

⁶³ David Rogers, "Iran offers to built transit motorway through Armenia to avoid Azerbaijani tolls," Global Construction Review, October 6, 2021, <https://www.globalconstructionreview.com/iran-offers-to-help-build-transit-motorway-through-armenia-to-avoid-azerbaijani-tolls/>

⁶⁴ Mariam Nikuradze, "Baku Secures a Corridor through Iran," OC Media, March 16, 2022, <https://oc-media.org/baku-secures-a-corridor-through-iran/>

no regionalisation initiative can advance without its cooperation. Nonetheless, there is no evidence to suggest that Iran is sprinting to fill the Russian power vacuum or compete with Turkey. Tehran is happy to hold its ground in the Caucasus.

The Armenian politics of conflict management

The Pashinyan government faces criticism on all fronts: its lack of pro-Russian credentials, the perceived lack of political imagination to look beyond Moscow for security guarantees, diplomatic incompetence, defeatism and the failure to prepare the army. Balancing expectations is challenging in any crisis, let alone the management of a monumental post-war trauma amid threats of further military incursion. This perceived weakness does not bode well for the viability of a future peace agreement.

"It's all about Russia," says a globally respectable intellectual in Yerevan, explaining that political discourse revolves around various assessments of how supportive or not Yerevan should be to Moscow. It is well known that the government of Nikol Pashinyan came to office following a "colour revolution" in 2018, unseating Serzh Sargsyan (Sarsyan, n.d),⁶⁵ a towering figure in Armenian politics who played a key role in Karabakh politics before coming to office in Armenia. Initially, Pashinyan's promise had significant appeal, at least initially. One of the most potent political forces in the Western diaspora – the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) – was part of the first coalition. However, he was accused of revanchism, alienating the ARF and other political forces. Pashinyan's "Saakashvili lite" pitch to the electorate remains popular, and the prime minister managed to secure his re-election convincingly, barely a year after a crushing military defeat (BBC News, 2021).⁶⁶

In the past, many in the West saw in Pashinyan the prospect of regime change rather than merely succession (Oliphant, 2018).⁶⁷ That perception became a liability. Critics

⁶⁵ Serzh Sargsyan, "The Third President of the Republic of Armenia," <https://www.president.am/en/serzhsargsyan>

⁶⁶ "Armenia election: PM Nikol Pashinyan wins post-war poll," BBC News, June 21, 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-57549208>

⁶⁷ Graig Oliphant, "Armenia – Further Changes and Challenges Ahead in 2018," The Foreign Policy Centre, August 7, 2018, <https://fpc.org.uk/armenia-further-changes-and-challenges-ahead-in-2018/>

will either suggest that reforms are superficial or that messing with the oligarchic balance of power was catastrophic for Armenian influence in Moscow. At the same time, the opposition will unfavourably compare Kocharyan – the leader of Karabakh Armenians during a victorious Karabakh campaign (1992-1994) – to the signatory of the 2020 "capitulation". This image taints negotiators in Brussels, even if Pashinyan critics are not necessarily nostalgic for Kocharyan.

When it comes to Pashinyan's management of the war, the prime minister faces criticism on every front. Interviewees will make the case that Armenia should have been better prepared militarily (Amirkhanyan, 2022)⁶⁸ and that a Russian-mediated ceasefire agreement was not concluded soon enough to limit territorial losses (Remler et al, 2020).⁶⁹ In sum, the government is accused of prolonging the war and not fighting it. While the blame game in the global Armenian community is vitriolic, it is fair to say that the political debate is more about perceived competence than substantially diverging visions.

To suggest that Armenia pays the price for straying away from the path laid by Moscow is probably inaccurate. Under Pashinyan, Armenia remained committed to EEU and CSTO, Armenian medics and demining experts were sent to Syria (AP, 2019),⁷⁰ and Yerevan justified Russian intervention in Kazakhstan (Bedevian, 2022).⁷¹ Pashinyan has been visiting Moscow regularly and the West sparingly. At the same time, he is faced with the expectation to hold on to Karabakh and the necessity to avoid armed confrontation. He sees friction between the two objectives. More to the point, Moscow has effectively been in charge of negotiations on Karabakh since the November 2020 ceasefire agreement.

⁶⁸ Zhirayr Amirkhanyan, "A Failure to Innovate: The Second Nagorno Karabakh Conflict," *The US Army War College Quarterly Parameters*, Article 10, Spring 2022, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3133&context=parameters>

⁶⁹ Philip Remler, Richard Girakosian, Marina Lonrenzini, Sergei Rastolchev, "OSCE Minsk Group: Lessons From the Past and Lessons for the Future," *OSCE Insights* 2020, <https://www.nomos-elibrary.de/10.5771/9783748922339-06/osce-minsk-group-lessons-from-the-past-and-tasks-for-the-future?page=1>

⁷⁰ "Armenia sends demining experts, doctors to Syria," AP, February 9, 2019, https://uk.news.yahoo.com/armenia-sends-mine-clearing-experts-doctors-syria-122916498.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAALowGYjYzwHpx3UTinOhPSIawjQB0uu7TII5r5j1MWqgTJ5xNRzmpnE2QG3sByi7Wcdg8f1mxYSsXSWbVcAbpaaz3LPSTfqf4i1loKpy2kiG111_PKmQozR5b6-VVd4V0tbdWsQnSyHc8B1amAFkwqwlLgMgKqObcFJ_pAVkoj

⁷¹ Astgik Bedevian, "Yerevan Silent on Armenian Troop Deployment to Kazakhstan," *Azatutyun*, January 6, 2022, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/31723058.html>

Yerevan's options seem desperately limited. While the 2020 ceasefire agreement envisaged the exchange of prisoners, sporadic fighting continued, and some fighters found themselves cut off into Azerbaijani-held territory. Some of them are now facing terrorism charges. Since 2020 the Armenian government did engage in the exchange of mine maps for POWs until, in the words of an Armenian interviewee, "Yerevan was out of maps to exchange."

The resolve of the Armenian government to reverse the spiral of military escalation with Baku through diplomatic normalisation talks with Turkey is another particularly emotive issue. The stated objective of the Pashinyan government is to reopen the Turkish-Armenian border, shift gear in regional ties and accelerate bonds of interdependence through diplomatic representation in both countries. Some analysts make the case that the economic opportunity cost of keeping borders closed is overwhelming. Armenia is excluded from any regional initiative and loses out in terms of trade and investment. A Swiss-Armenian interviewee notes more enthusiastically that "a diaspora nation has little to fear from open borders."

However, the majority of the interviewees in the Diaspora remain unconvinced. Both Armenians that have lived in Armenia and members of the self-proclaimed "classical diaspora" are not impressed by the prospect of economic and diplomatic normalisation of relations with Turkey. Critics focus on the asymmetrical nature of the two economies and the potential of Turkish products to "flood the market" to the detriment of smaller Armenian businesses. Given that Turkish products already make their way to Armenia via Georgia, economic benefits will be marginal. Other opposition members fear that Turkey will pursue an aggressive foreign investment policy, buy up strategic assets, and further curtail Armenian sovereignty. In substance, Azerbaijan presents Armenia with the dilemma of "prosperity without Karabakh or poverty with Karabakh" (Avedian, 2022).⁷²

⁷² Vahagn Avedian, "Exploring the Normalisation of Relations Between Armenia and Turkey," E-International Relations, February 8, 2022, <https://www.e-ir.info/2022/02/08/exploring-the-normalization-of-relations-between-armenia-and-turkey/>

For the Armenian opposition, the crux of the response to this dilemma is moral. Ankara and Baku identify as "one nation in two states", and the Armenians who take this statement at face value will often conclude that "the Turks cannot be trusted." Demands to recognise the Armenian genocide and calls for economic reparations will often accompany this line of thinking.⁷³ Frequently, both supporters and opponents of the normalisation of relations with Turkey have concerns over the lack of transparency when talks "without preconditions" take place behind closed doors. The historical precedent of 2002-2004 and 2009 left a lot to be desired. In sum, the Pashinyan government is taking a leap of faith against pressure from the opposition, not in a political vacuum.

Political considerations may seem of little diplomatic consequence, except both the government and the opposition in Yerevan tacitly agree that only a Pashinyan government is ready to sign a peace agreement with Baku and normalise relations with Turkey. A different government could take a different path. The threat is clear: if the Pashinyan government does not have "a golden bridge" and he is seen as a subdued leader signing a humiliating and illegitimate agreement, its value will be of limited instrumentality to Azerbaijan and Turkey.

No Armenian in Karabakh, Yerevan or the diaspora will trust the Azerbaijani rule of law to protect the rights of an Armenian minority in Azerbaijan. Armenians in Karabakh see themselves abandoned by Yerevan, albeit not the diaspora and face the choice of either leaving or lobbying Moscow for annexation, following a Crimean trajectory. Even if Armenian foreign policy was wholly aligned with Russia's, that seems unlikely.

According to an academic expert in Sweden, the Minsk process failed Karabakh by mediating rather than arbitrating. The parties to the conflict were not prepared or forced to submit to a binding road map. There is little to suggest that this situation will change anytime soon. The tension between France, Washington and Moscow is not likely to subside, and one cannot count on the resilience of a diplomatic format

⁷³ Note: It should be noted that not all supporters of an economic opening to Turkey subscribe to liberal-peace theorems, whereby business changes the dynamic of conflict. There is also a school of thought that points to the fact that Armenia borders a region of Turkey that is economically underdeveloped, and it is populated by a Kurdish population that is hostile to Ankara.

that requires East-West cooperation. Moving to a more limited format regarding stakeholder engagement requires transparency of interests on behalf of Western stakeholders.

The Scope for Second-track Initiatives

Therefore, Western second-track initiatives could follow at least two trajectories. The first is to focus on developing financial instruments designed to assist the development of a Southern and Middle transit corridor from Europe to China and India, giving parties a joint project that requires stability for foreign investors. Reports from the latest meeting between President Aliyev and Prime Minister Pashinyan suggest that negotiations along these lines are advancing (European Council, 2022).⁷⁴ The overall vision broadly resonates with civic stakeholders (PfPC, 2022),⁷⁵ even if mistrust gets in the way. Clearly, there is plenty of scope for second-track initiatives that will support this agenda.

The West has concrete geopolitical interests in being involved in the debate over the future of connectivity in Eurasia. From the Polish Three Seas initiative to the Anglo-American Pacific policy of competing for global pre-eminence with China, the Black Sea will be more rather than less significant in the years to come. For the moment, a vision that enables regionalisation without victors remains primarily theoretical, uncoded, and cannot substantially contribute to a political "buy-in" by local stakeholders. It is difficult for countries like Armenia to invest limited state resources in infrastructure not embedded in a credible overall vision for the region. Consultations with diplomats in Washington, London and Warsaw suggest that Western engagement in the region remains mainly reactive to ongoing developments without a long-term narrative of what is at stake.

⁷⁴ European Council, Press Statement by President Michel of the European Council following a Trilateral Meeting with President Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Prime Minister Pashinyan of Armenia, May 23, 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/05/23/press-statement-by-president-michel-of-the-european-council-following-a-trilateral-meeting-with-president-aliyev-of-azerbaijan-and-prime-minister-pashinyan-of-armenia/>

⁷⁵ "Policy Recommendations: Study Group Regional Stability in the South Caucasus," PfPC, March 24-27, 2022, <https://www.pfp-consortium.org/study-groups/regional-stability-south-caucasus>

The second trajectory is to create safe spaces for negotiations between Armenian stakeholders to facilitate a political "buy-in" to a future peace agreement, particularly regarding the future of Karabakh Armenians. This discussion will require the engagement of Armenia as a state and elements of the Armenian diaspora, which is polycentric and multicultural. Clearly, the White Paper published in July 2021 is an attempt by the Armenian world to consult and collectively reflect on the future of Armenia while also processing the effect of the war.⁷⁶ However, this discussion needs to go beyond the engagement of experts to recognise that many of the institutions of the diaspora were galvanised by campaigns of existential significance, not least the call for the recognition of the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh.

The danger to be addressed is the emergence of competing security and political visions that will continue to antagonise the Armenian state. Addressing such concerns is also significant for Ankara and Baku, as a linear historical narrative of Armenian victimisation from 1915 to 2020 undermines the prospect of substantial regionalisation and could be accompanied by new security threats.

ⁱ Minks Process Review

In 1996, the OSCE member states laid out three principles as a legal basis for the peaceful settlement process:

- 1) territorial integrity of Armenia and Azerbaijan;
- 2) legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh to be based on self-determination, which confers on Nagorno-Karabakh the highest degree of self-rule within Azerbaijan;
- 3) guaranteed security for Nagorno-Karabakh and its population.

In November 1998, the Minsk Group proposed that the use of the Lachin Corridor by Karabakh for unimpeded communication between Karabakh and Armenia be the subject of a separate agreement. The Lachin district must remain a permanentl and fully demilitarized zone.

The basis of the negotiated settlement plan is based on the principles introduced by OSCE Minsk Group in Madrid (November 2007):

- 1) the return of territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani control;
- 2) an interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh providing guarantees for security and self-governance;
- 3) a corridor linking Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh;
- 4) the future determination of the final legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh through a legally binding expression of will;
- 5) the right of all internally displaced persons and refugees to return to their former places of residence; 6) international security guarantees that would include a peacekeeping operation.

These principles are supported by other intergovernmental organizations, which have accepted the exclusive role of the OSCE. Neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan rejected them but they interpret them differently.

⁷⁶ Robert Aydabirian, Jirair Libaridian, Taline Papazian, "White Paper: The Karabakh War of 2020 and Armenia's Future Foreign and Security Policies," July 2021, https://www.armeniaceace.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Armenia_Foreign_and_Security_Policies.pdf