



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი
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After the Karabakh War: Key Issues of Politics and Security

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As a result of the 40-day war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Azerbaijan established control over certain areas of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region and seven adjacent districts. In particular, after this war, the jurisdiction of Azerbaijan fully extends to the districts of Jabrail, Fizuli, Zangilan, Qubadli, Aghdam, and Kalbajar, while control over the Lachin district is only partial, excluding the highway connecting Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, the so called Lachin corridor. Azerbaijan also controls most of the Hadrut and Shusha districts, and a small part of the Martuni and Askeran districts.

According to the ceasefire agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Azerbaijani cargo will be able to enter Nakhchivan through the Armenian territory, while Armenia will be supplied from Russia via Azerbaijan.¹

After the end of hostilities between the parties, the processes in the region continue to develop dynamically. Tensions have been mounting along the Armenian-Azerbaijani state border since May 2021, in particular in the vicinity of the Black Lake.

In the following publication, we review the new political status-quo in the region and the Azerbaijani initiatives in the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Armenia-Azerbaijan relations after the conflict

Despite the ceasefire agreement, relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan remain extremely tense. The situation was aggravated on May 12, 2021, when Azerbaijani border guards occupied the surroundings of the Black Lake, which Armenia considers its own.² Tensions peaked on May 25-27, with one Armenian soldier killed and six detained by Azerbaijani troops during a two-way shootout.³ The problem is exacerbated by the fact that the Armenian-Azerbaijani border is not delimited.

Tension is also mounting at the Kalbajar section of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, where the largest gold mine in the South Caucasus – Sotk - is located. Half of the mine is in the sovereign territory of Azerbaijan; however, mining was carried out by GeoProMining Gold, a Russian company licensed in Armenia.⁴

¹ President of Russia (2020). Statement by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation. see.: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64384>

² Кавказский Узел (2021). На Черном озере: пограничный конфликт Азербайджана и Армении [At the Black Lake: Border Conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan]. see.: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/364062/>

³ <https://www.dw.com/ru/azerbajdzhan-vzjal-v-plen-shest-armjanskih-voennosluzhashhih/a-57681962>

⁴ Кавказский Узел (2021). Сотк: золотой рудник раздора [Sotk: Subject of Conflict – Golden Mine]. see.: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/357072/>

Although the Armenian government is trying to defuse the border conflict with the intervention of the Collective Security Treaty Organization and Russia, only neutral statements of a general nature are being made by Moscow.⁵

Another important aspect of Armenia-Azerbaijan relations is the transport corridor. One of the clauses of the ceasefire agreement between the two countries ensures the uninterrupted transport communication of the Nakhichevan region with the rest of Azerbaijan via the Armenian province of Syunik. Given that the repair of highways in this area has not been carried out since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the railway no longer exists, it will take years to restore and develop the transport corridor. However, the issue of restoring this transport corridor is being treated with caution in Armenia. Armenia fears that the influence of Azerbaijani and Turkish capital in Syunik will increase, and in the future, Azerbaijan will make a territorial claim on this province as well.⁶ Precisely this has led to the deployment of two new strongholds of the Russian 102nd base in Syunik.⁷

Azerbaijani initiatives in the territory of Karabakh

The Azerbaijani government has announced large-scale infrastructure and social projects in the new territories under its control, however, their implementation has several problems. The most important of these is the lack of infrastructure. The vast majority of villages and district centers in this area have been leveled to the ground. The second serious problem is minefields. Armenian units and the de facto government of Nagorno-Karabakh have invested heavily in the development of military-fortification infrastructure in the Aghdam, Fizuli, and Jabrail districts adjacent to the Azerbaijani-controlled territory, which includes thousands of hectares of minefields. Although demining is currently underway, this process may take more than ten years.⁸

Based on the aforementioned, realization of the announced infrastructure projects and the complete restoration of the region's infrastructure will require, besides the time, several billion dollars. The city of Shusha is considered one of the priority locations. Large-scale rehabilitation of the city, the restoration

⁵ Кавказский Узел (2021). На Черном озере: пограничный конфликт Азербайджана и Армении [At the Black Lake: Border Conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan]. see.: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/364062/>

⁶ In the rhetoric intended for Azerbaijan's internal audience, the Armenian province of Syunik is often referred to as Zangezuri, the historic territory of Azerbaijan, which was handed over to Armenia by the Soviet authorities.

⁷ Jam-News (2021). На юге Армении созданы два опорных пункта российской военной базы [Two strongholds of a Russian military base were established in the southern part of Armenia]. see.: <https://jam-news.net/ru/%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%8E%D0%B3%D0%B5-%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B8-%D1%81%D0%BE%D0%B7%D0%B4%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%8B-%D0%B4%D0%B2%D0%B0-%D0%BE%D0%BF%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BD%D1%8B%D1%85-%D0%BF%D1%83%D0%BD/>

⁸ Оху.az (2021). Brayza: "Ermənistan minalanmış ərazilərin xəritəsini təqdim etməyərək mülki əhalinin ölməsini istəyir" [Bryza: "Armenia Wants to Inflict Casualty in the Civilian Population of Azerbaijan by Failure to Provide Maps of the Mined Territories"]. see.: <https://oxu.az/politics/487930>

of its original appearance, and construction of a highway connecting it with the rest of the Azerbaijani provinces is envisaged. The building of the Fizuli International Airport is also planned, designed to accommodate the flow of tourists.⁹ Prominent tourist attractions in the region include the Khudaferin Bridge, the Agdam Mosque, and the Istisu Thermal Spa Resort.¹⁰ The resumption of mining activities in the territory of Karabakh is also actively considered in Azerbaijan. Experts predict the existence of significant reserves of minerals there.¹¹

An important component of the social project planned to be implemented in the region is the issue of returning IDPs. During the First Karabakh War (1992-1994), some 500,000 Azerbaijanis fled the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region and seven surrounding districts.¹² First of all, it will be difficult to return the refugees who have been living in the big cities of Azerbaijan and Baku for 30 years. Mass returns are also problematic in Kalbajar and partly in Lachin districts, where communication with the outside world is difficult, namely, there is still no asphalt on the Murovdag Pass, which connects settlements with the rest of Azerbaijan, and it is difficult to travel through this road in winter, during heavy snowfall, while, when using the Lachin corridor, the population will have to interact with the Russian peacekeepers. More favorable conditions for the return of IDPs are in Agdam, Fizuli, Shusha, and Jabrail districts. Azerbaijan already set a precedent for the return of IDPs after the armed conflict of 2016, when several hundred IDPs were settled in the liberated village of Chojuk-Merjanli in houses built specifically for them.¹³

The International Relations Factor

During the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan relied on the principle of inviolability of borders recognized by the international community. Therefore, it did not face serious opposition in the international arena. Most likely, Azerbaijan will receive solid financial support for the resettlement of refugees in the territory of Karabakh, and one of the main donors is expected to be the Republic of

⁹ Кавказский Узел (2021). Алиев анонсировал постройку аэропорта близ Шуши [Aliyev announced the construction of an airport near Shusha]. see.: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/358321/>

¹⁰ Trend Az (2021). Карабах можно превратить в крупнейшее туристическое направление на Кавказе [Karabakh may become one of the largest tourist destinations in the Caucasus]. see.: <https://www.trend.az/business/tourism/3376498.html>

¹¹ Sputnik Az (2020). Названа стоимость полезных ископаемых Нагорного Карабаха до оккупации [The pre-occupation price of Nagorno-Karabakh minerals has been named]. see.: <https://az.sputniknews.ru/science/20201105/425384717/jekologija-mestorozhdenija-jekspluatacija.html>

¹² BBC (2021). Сможет ли Азербайджан вернуть своих беженцев в Карабах [Will Azerbaijan be able to return its refugees to Karabakh?]. see.: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-56660532>

¹³ Кавказский Узел (2017). Власти Азербайджана начали заселение Чоджук Марджанлы [The Azerbaijani government has started a settlement process in Chojuk Marjanli]. see.: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/305561/>

Turkey. However, Azerbaijan may face some international problems with regard the rights of the Armenian population.

The Armenian population before the Second Karabakh War can be divided into two categories: 1. The population settled intentionally by the de facto government in Kalbajar, Qubatli, and Zangilan districts after the First Karabakh War; and 2. The Armenian population living in the Hadrut region and several villages occupied by Azerbaijan before the first war, numbering up to 10,000. Today, this population is entirely resettled in Armenia. If Azerbaijan fails to secure property rights for them, then the Armenian side may find itself in a more favorable position in the international arena.

On the other hand, the role of the de facto Nagorno-Karabakh government in the region is steadily diminishing, to be completely controlled by the Russian peacekeeping forces, and meaning Official Yerevan will have less and less leverage to control the Armenian political elite of Karabakh. In addition to formal relations with the Russian side, the deepening of informal relations is also expected, which includes training and equipping armed groups, undeclared financial support, and the distribution of Russian passports to locals.

Despite Azerbaijan's efforts, the de facto government-controlled territories will not be included in the area of control of the Turkish peacekeeping forces, and the Turks will be stationed only in the territories controlled by Azerbaijan.

Iran-Azerbaijan relations in the context of the Karabakh War should be mentioned separately. The main technical issue for both sides is the demarcation of the entire border perimeter and the opening of new checkpoints. In addition, it is important that the parties agree on an equal distribution of electricity generated by the Aras River hydropower plants. It is known that when these territories were controlled by Armenian forces, Iran de facto controlled all the hydropower plants and utilized even the electricity owned by Azerbaijan. Now, half of the hydropower plants are in the sovereign territory of Azerbaijan and it is necessary to conclude a new agreement in terms of electricity.¹⁴

Conclusion

With the end of the Karabakh War, a new balance of power and a new geopolitical reality have been established in the region. Despite the end of hostilities, tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan remain a serious problem. Russia's role in the South Caucasus has increased significantly, as its armed forces have been positioned on new territories. At the same time, the Azerbaijani authorities are actively

¹⁴ Коммерсантъ (2020). ГЭС, которая ждала конца войны [The HPP that waited for the war to end]. see.: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4605407#id1986974>

involved in the development of the newly acquired territories. So far, this process is in its infancy. Georgia is closely monitoring and studying the ongoing reintegration processes in Karabakh, as our country also strives to restore its territorial integrity.