

No special status, no Armenians? The prospects for Nagorno-Karabakh in a unitary Azerbaijan

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In recent weeks, the Azerbaijani blockade of the Lachin corridor connecting the Armenian-controlled portion of Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia, which has been in place since mid-December 2022, has intensified, and its consequences are becoming increasingly painful: the parastate has been hit by a profound humanitarian crisis. Baku's main goals are to dismantle the separatist Armenian structures and to fully integrate Nagorno-Karabakh into the Azerbaijani state. If this scenario came to pass, it would most likely prompt a major portion of the Karabakh Armenians to leave, which may effectively be an additional unrevealed goal for Baku. The exodus of this population could pose a serious threat to Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan's rule. Russian peacekeeping forces, which are responsible for maintaining the corridor's passability, do not intend to start a conflict with Baku, and have maintained a passive attitude towards the blockade. It should be assumed that they would also not object to Azerbaijan taking over Nagorno-Karabakh, although they could attempt to slow down this process.

Since the Second Karabakh War in autumn 2020, the status of Nagorno-Karabakh has not been discussed in the peace talks. The leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan have recognised the territorial integrity of both states within the borders of the respective former Soviet republics, which equates to them approving of Baku's jurisdiction over Nagorno-Karabakh. However, under pressure from Armenians living in Armenia, in Nagorno-Karabakh and the Armenian diaspora, Pashinyan has raised the issue of the Karabakh Armenians' rights in international forums (effectively demanding that the Lachin corridor should be unblocked). Thus far, the reaction of the international community has been limited to condemning the blockade.

Is the end of the parastate imminent?

As a result of the Second Karabakh War, Baku regained control of the entire area of the 'occupied territories' which surround Nagorno-Karabakh, including those located between that region and Armenia, and of around a third of Nagorno-Karabakh itself. As a consequence, the separatist 'Nagorno-Karabakh Republic', which continues to exist on the remaining portion of this territory and forms a separate body politic (although it depends on Armenia in its military, economic and financial aspects), has lost a permanent land connection with Armenia which is independent of any third parties. In line with



the declaration signed by the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia (on 9/10 November 2020), which ended the war, the Lachin corridor should remain open to the movement of people and goods between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijan for its part is responsible for ensuring the corridor's traffic security (which *de facto* equates to controlling it) and Russian peacekeepers deployed in the conflict zone are responsible for supervising the road (their mandate will expire in autumn 2025, but it can be extended by another five years if Baku and Yerevan do not object to this).

When the hostilities ended, peace talks were launched, at first under Moscow's auspices, and increasingly frequently under the EU's auspices since the end of 2021.

” **Considering Baku's consistent policy and intentions, as well as the profound crisis in the unrecognised Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, the speedy demise of this parastate seems highly likely.**

However, the main subject of these talks is no longer Nagorno-Karabakh but the bilateral relationship between the two states. This is because Yerevan has already recognised Nagorno-Karabakh as a part of Azerbaijan, first implicitly and then openly (in numerous statements issued by Pashinyan on this subject, most recently on 22 May 2023). The purpose of these talks is to achieve a normalisation of bilateral relations and to sign a peace treaty.¹

The parastate was weakened as a result of its defeat in the war; it has lost its ability to guarantee its citizens social security, and has plunged into collapse. In addition, Yerevan's support for Stepanakert (Azerbaijani Khankendi, Xankəndi) has greatly diminished. Although Armenia, which had represented Nagorno-Karabakh in the peace process until the 2020 war, continues to fund the parastate from its own budget, it has announced that it has withdrawn its military units from the parastate (Baku insists that 10,000 Armenian soldiers are still there, although this report cannot be verified in any way). On the one hand, the parastate's weakened independence was welcomed by Armenia: Prime Minister Pashinyan's statements suggest that he views the Karabakh issue as a burden to his country and a barrier to its development. Moreover, he had come to power having sidelined several politicians from the so-called Karabakh clan, who had ruled Armenia for long periods since independence and continue to rule Nagorno-Karabakh. On the other hand, Armenia now has no or very limited influence on the situation in the parastate, which has reduced the importance of Yerevan in its relations with Azerbaijan, Russia and Turkey; it may also undermine the position of Pashinyan himself, who, according to numerous Armenians, should 'ex officio' be taking care of Armenians living outside Armenia.

In the situation of the lack of support from Yerevan, the Karabakh authorities decided to rely on Russian peacekeepers (which had been absent from the region prior to 2020), which was facilitated by the close links between the Karabakh clan and Moscow. As a consequence, the parastate has been *de facto* transformed into a Russian protectorate. In March 2021, the Russian language was recognised as the parastate's second official language, and some of its residents (no estimates are available as to their number) have been issued Russian passports. However, it turned out that Moscow does not intend to resist pressure from Baku – or is unable to resist it. One Russian attempt to impose its agenda involved having Ruben Vardanyan, a Russian oligarch of Armenian origin, appointed as the head of the Karabakh government in autumn 2022. Following Baku's protests he was forced to resign after several months, although he remained in Nagorno-Karabakh, and in the future the Kremlin may try to use him in political manoeuvres inside Armenia. Moreover, there have been reports recently that various members of the Karabakh elite have made attempts to engage in individual contacts with the Azerbaijani authorities. Although these reports cannot be verified, their emergence in the public sphere indicates that the structures of the parastate have largely disintegrated and are being

¹ W. Górecki, K. Strachota, 'The undeclared war. A new phase of the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict', *OSW Commentary*, no. 496, 6 March 2023, osw.waw.pl.

affected by a profound crisis; it is known that a situation of open conflict between Vardanyan and the president of the 'Nagorno-Karabakh Republic' Arayik Harutyunyan has arisen. In this situation – and in the context of Baku's consistent policy and intention – the speedy demise of the Karabakh project may be highly likely. In theory, the only chance for the parastate to survive would involve freezing the conflict and returning to the 'unstable stability' of 1994–2020 (with a considerably reduced territory, population and potential). However, it is almost certain that this scenario will not materialise.

A blockade for as long as it takes?

The blockade of the Lachin corridor began on 12 December 2022 and has continued with varying intensity and in various forms. Although it was set up by Azerbaijani 'environmental activists', it is certain that it must have had the support of the authorities and was surely inspired by them; moreover, access to the former 'occupied territories' is strictly controlled.² Only vehicles belonging to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Russian peacekeepers were allowed to pass through the corridor. The blockade remained in place in this form until 28 April 2023. Five days prior to its end, Azerbaijan set up a checkpoint in the corridor in the vicinity of the Armenian border, which *de facto* became a border checkpoint. Initially, its officers only checked drivers' documents. However, since 15 June the checkpoint has effectively blocked all cargo traffic, including the transport of medicines and food, while passenger traffic is limited to ICRC vehicles transporting seriously ill patients to Armenia (two persons were not allowed to pass, and were detained by the Azerbaijani authorities on charges of perpetrating crimes during the First Karabakh War back in the 1990s). Recently, several dozen individuals holding Russian passports have left the region alongside the peacekeepers. Baku argues that the restrictions were imposed as a result of instances of arms being smuggled via the corridor; the claim is that these were bound for separatist units, allegedly in cooperation with Russian peacekeepers.

As a consequence, Nagorno-Karabakh has experienced shortages of basic foodstuffs and medicines as well as fuels (this is why the

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parastate's public transport has not been working for several weeks). What is certain is that the region has been hit by a profound humanitarian crisis, although the available reports do not contain any indications that famine may be spreading there. However, Stepanakert has declined Baku's proposal to transport supplies to Nagorno-Karabakh from the Azerbaijani side via the town of Agdam (Az. Ağdam; the President of the European Council Charles Michel argues that both routes could be used). On 18 July, local Armenian residents closed the road leading to Agdam in order to stop potential transports from that direction. Too little information is available to assess whether this was a grassroots initiative and what level of support it enjoys. Although the blockade of the Lachin corridor has been repeatedly discussed in various international forums, the only result of these discussions involved calling on Baku to lift it (for example the International Court of Justice in the Hague issued a statement to that effect, following a complaint filed by Armenia).

The blockade and the threat of the crisis escalating (should further *faits accomplis* happen, for example the establishment of a checkpoint in the Lachin corridor) are intended to force Armenians (both in Nagorno-Karabakh and in Armenia) to finally dismantle the parastate and to end the conflict on Azerbaijan's conditions. This message has been targeted at both the elites and the publics which are directly affected by the consequences of the blockade (in particular in the parastate). There are no indications suggesting that Baku intends to stop this pressure. Quite the opposite: we should expect it to be intensified. One likely decision may be to limit and then completely shut down Nagorno-Karabakh's

² W. Górecki, K. Chawryło, 'Blockade of the Lachin corridor. Nagorno-Karabakh introduces ration coupons', OSW, 17 January 2023, osw.waw.pl.

telephone communication, which may be followed by depriving the region of access to the internet. In the longer term, over the coming winter, its gas supplies could be permanently cut off (this measure was already tried in the 2021/2 and 2022/3 heating seasons).

What game is Azerbaijan playing?

Azerbaijan's goals are to restore its control of Nagorno-Karabakh as a whole and to incorporate this area into its state structures. The authorities in Baku intend to achieve this in a peaceful manner, although they have not ruled out the use of military methods. This was explicitly stated by President Ilham Aliyev, who in late May called on Stepanakert to dissolve the parastate's structures and suggested that high-ranking officials who were working in these structures could be granted an amnesty (the US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller expressed support for the proposed amnesty). At the same time, Aliyev announced that Azerbaijan is capable of carrying out "all sorts of operations" in Nagorno-Karabakh.

One likely scenario spells the elimination of the political independence of the authorities of Nagorno-Karabakh (first they will be weakened by disrupting their external ties, and then they will be deprived of public support, a likely consequence of the humanitarian crisis) and the region's re-integration into Azerbaijan (the first step in this direction would involve delivering humanitarian aid via Agdam, which will be followed by enabling access to the region from the Azerbaijani side alone). Regardless of this, another important issue would involve the situation of the Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh. At stake is the future of the Armenian community, in an area which has a long history of their settlement there spanning many centuries. Baku intends to avoid a situation in which the region would be the home base of any individuals who may want to launch hostile activities targeting Azerbaijan. On 21 August, the deputy head of the committee for defence, security and the fight against corruption in the Azerbaijani Mejlis (parliament) said that Armenians holding Russian passports and individuals who had settled there in the last three decades or who had broken Azerbaijani law (which *de facto* includes anyone who had taken part in the First and the Second Karabakh Wars) should leave Nagorno-Karabakh. This may indicate that Baku will force the majority of the population to leave the region or face criminal charges.

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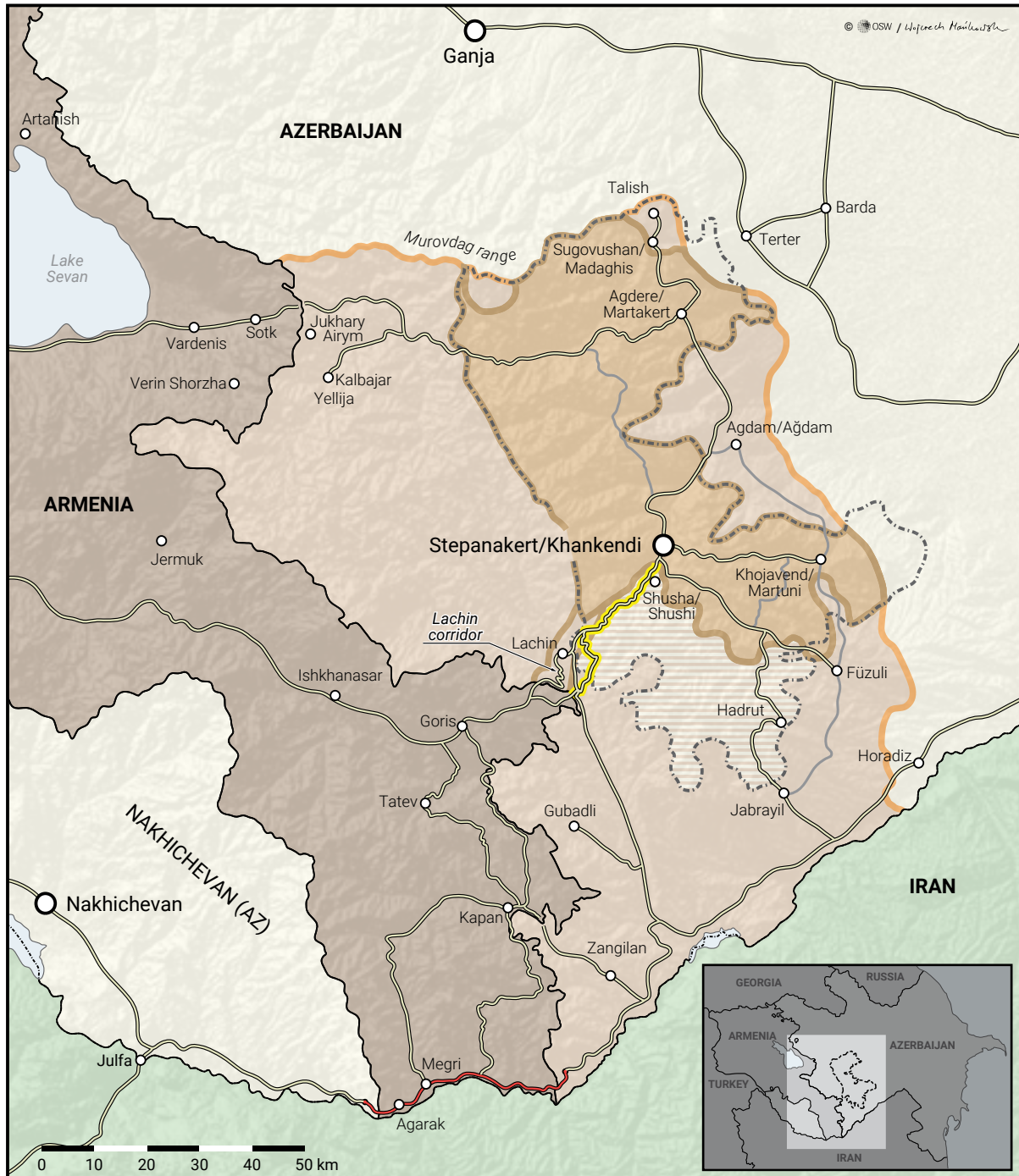
It remains unclear whether the Azerbaijani government has devised a plan for how to integrate the Armenian minority into the rest of society and whether such integration is possible at all, taking into account the degree of mutual hatred. According to Yerevan, the parastate's population is around 120,000 individuals, although the actual number of inhabitants on the spot is surely smaller, perhaps by as much as 50% (some people did not return following the Second Karabakh War), although no precise estimates are available. Baku has categorically ruled out the possibility of granting special rights or guarantees to Armenians, or of granting a special status to Nagorno-Karabakh. In Azerbaijan the name 'Nagorno-Karabakh' is no longer used in official statements in an attempt to avoid emphasising the region's autonomy; instead it is referred to as 'Karabakh' as a whole, a term which also covers the region's lowland area which has never been the subject of conflict. Should Nagorno-Karabakh be incorporated into Azerbaijan in this form, it would lose the minimal degree of independence it had in the Soviet era (in the form of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast). This incorporation would be a step towards the creation of a unitary Azerbaijani state. Similarly, the autonomy of the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic, which is a component of Azerbaijan, would be increasingly illusory. President Aliyev has appointed his own representative there, and a debate has been ongoing in Azerbaijan for several months over whether the republic should be stripped of its current status.







An attempt at a forecast

Everything indicates that Baku will continue its blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh, and the local population will be increasingly affected by the consequences of this blockade. Alongside this, the erosion of the parastate will be exacerbated. If nothing else occurs, over time this will result in a complete dissolution of Nagorno-Karabakh's para-statehood, which will most likely be accompanied by local clashes. A mass-scale exodus of Armenians and their influx to Armenia may trigger a crisis there and undermine the position of Prime Minister Pashinyan. For Armenians living in Armenia and the Armenian diaspora worldwide, the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh would bring about a deep and long-lasting trauma.

Russia's reaction is an open question. On the one hand, Moscow will likely intend to avoid escalating tension and launching a conflict with Azerbaijan (and Turkey). On the other hand, however, it may use delaying tactics in order to retain some form of control of Armenia. It cannot be ruled out that using the opportunity the Kremlin will intend to provoke Pashinyan's resignation, as it has no confidence in him.

Map. The Nagorno-Karabakh region, showing the Lachin corridor



-  Areas reconquered by Azerbaijan during the 2020 war
-  Areas controlled by Armenian forces
-  Border of former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (as part of the USSR)
-  Main roads
-  The road running through the Lachin corridor (blocked by Azerbaijan)
-  The Zangezur 'corridor' – extraterritorial communication route to Nakhchivan postulated by Azerbaijan (under declared control of Russian border troops)

Source: the author's own research.