

Azerbaijan is Offered a “Bitter Pill” for Peace in Karabakh

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Comments made by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov during his official visit to Armenia on November 10-11 were met with [resentment](#) in Azerbaijan. Lavrov did not say anything that fundamentally differed from Russia's position on the issue, or contrary to the fundamental principles for the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. He simply stated the unvarnished truth with his particular arrogance, while for many years, Azerbaijanis have been accustomed to negotiators using dry diplomatic rhetoric and making politically correct statements.

In this article, I will try to explain the statements made by Lavrov in the Armenian capital. From the beginning, I would like to emphasize that the fragile hopes that began to revive at the end of 2018 concerning a possible solution to this 30-year-old problem have again been replaced by hopelessness and uncertainty. The statements of the Russian Foreign Minister once again reminded us of the fact that the proposed contours and contents of the peace agreement are a bitter pill that is hard for Azerbaijan to swallow.

Lavrov [stated](#) that no agreement could be reached without the consent of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh. His statement that “Armenia simply will not sign such a document” also reflect the nature of Russian-Armenian relations. Even if the sentence reflects the truth, the fact that an official representative of one country so clearly speaks on behalf of another country is not a common occurrence in interstate relations. The Russian minister [added](#) that the status of Nagorno-Karabakh should be determined based on self-determination (meaning a

nationwide vote), which creates a legal obligation. Both ideas – the importance of the opinion of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh in the resolution of the conflict and the determination of the final status based on the will of the people – are a logical continuation of each other. The basis of the peace negotiations was the renewed Madrid principles. Now let us recall those principles contained in the Joint Statement of the Nagorno-Karabakh OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair countries – the United States, France, and Russia – during the G8 summit in July 2009 in L'Aquila, Italy:

- **Return of the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani control;**
- **An interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh providing guarantees for security and self-governance;**
- **A corridor linking Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh;**
- **Future determination of the final legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh through a legally binding expression of will;**
- **The right of all internally displaced persons and refugees to return to their former places of residence; and**
- **International security guarantees that would include a peacekeeping operation.**

This framework was reiterated in the statement of the presidents of the co-chair countries at the G8 summit in Muskoka, Canada in June 2010. At the OSCE summit in Astana on December 1 of the same year, the co-chair presidents as well as the presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia signed a joint statement. The statement outlines the resolution of the conflict based on the norms and principles of international law, the UN Charter, and the OSCE Helsinki Final Act, as well as the statements by the Presidents of the United States, Russia and France in L'Aquila and Muskoka. At the G8 meeting in France in May 2011, the co-chairs made a similar statement

for the third time.

There is no doubt that when Lavrov says “the people of Nagorno-Karabakh,” he is referring to the people now living in Nagorno-Karabakh. Even if the pre-war demographic situation of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region in Azerbaijan was restored, it is clear that the balance would be in favor of Armenians. This means that the results of any referendum or national poll will result in accordance with the will and wishes of the Armenian population. But what do the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh want? They want independence. It is no secret that the next phase will be unification with Armenia. This problem began in 1988 under the motto of *miatsum* (unification).

In short, it was a strategic mistake for Azerbaijan to agree to the renewed Madrid principles. It is too late and impossible to give up on this framework that is already the basis for a peace treaty.

Unrealistic Expectations

After the Armenian Revolution in 2018 and the coming to power of Nikol Pashinyan, who is not a “Russian man,” the Azerbaijani public expected that, by taking advantage of the cold relationship between the Russian government and the new Armenian leadership, it might be possible to return the occupied lands either by military or peaceful means. This idea was expressed by pro-government commentators, journalists, and politicians, and the public was optimistic about the successful diplomacy of Azerbaijan. (My [article](#) on this issue was published by Baku Research Institute.) But we see again that the long-term interests of a great power such as Russia, in particular its Caucasus policy and the Armenian issue, cannot be radically altered by current political events, including a change of power.

Lavrov’s [latest visit](#) demonstrates that the misunderstandings between Russia and Armenia following the arrival of Pashinyan

have been resolved, and that the Russian government has begun to trust the new head of Armenia, although Putin's personal friend, former President Robert Kocharyan, still remains in prison. Prior to the Russian Foreign Minister, the Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu visited Armenia, met with Russian military personnel there, and called Russian military base #102 a [guarantor of stability](#) in the Caucasus region. It can be assumed that Shoygu means that the Russian military base is a force that prevents Azerbaijan from carrying out military operations and thus prevents war in the region. Russia also plays an important role in the consensus of the OSCE Minsk Group, which has conflicting positions on many international issues, on the Karabakh issue: the governments of the United States and France understand that Russia, which has real influence over Armenia and Azerbaijan, is the main factor preventing war in the region. (At this point, it would be appropriate to [recall](#) Lavrov's statement: the minister said at the Valdai conference in early October that Russia would not allow war in Nagorno-Karabakh.)

Another unrealistic expectation that still exists in Azerbaijan is the claim that the rapprochement between Turkey and Russia and the intensified dialogue between Putin and Erdogan will contribute to the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the interests of Azerbaijan. However, it is important to understand that Russia does not negotiate on dividing the spheres of influence with Turkey and Russia does not give up any of its interests; The Karabakh issue is not even the main focus of this dialogue. The dominant issue among these countries is Syria. In exchange for Turkey's support for the Russian government's interests on some issues (energy, arms procurement, etc.), Russia occasionally opens a window of limited opportunities for Turkey in Syria.

The "Rain" of Diplomatic Notes

Another trend which shows that things are not going well for Azerbaijan is that the Azerbaijani government has had to

submit notes of protest to the three co-chairs several times over the past few months. The representative of the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians (Foreign Minister of the Unrecognized Administration) Masis Mailyan visited both the United States and Russia. The Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry summoned the [US ambassador](#) on November 1 and the [Russian ambassador](#) on November 6 to issue official protests. In addition, a note of protest was issued in September in connection with the visits of French parliamentarians to Nagorno-Karabakh, and in October, the French ambassador to Azerbaijan was summoned to the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry and given a [note of protest](#) because an official representative of a regional council in France met with Mailyan during a visit to Armenia. Also, in October, the participation of [Konstantin Zatulin](#), the first deputy chairman of the Russian State Duma's Committee on CIS Affairs, Eurasian Integration and Relations with Citizens, in an event organized by the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh and his statements at that event also caused dissatisfaction in Azerbaijan and a note of protest was sent to the Russian Foreign Ministry.

The attention that the co-chair countries have been paying to Mailyan stems from the possibility that he could be elected the new leader of the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians in next year's elections. It is reported that the Armenian government supports him. In general, the co-chairs have long recognized the de facto government of Nagorno-Karabakh as the representative of the local Armenians.