Is the Political Status of Nagorno-Karabakh That Important?

written by Vicken Cheterian Viken Çeteryan

The question of the political status Nagorno-Karabakh has been at the centre of the conflict since it emerged in 1988. Yet, as the conflict enters a new phase the contours of which remain unclear, the risk is not only to approach current developments with concepts of the past, but also to analyse the past as if it was a linear development without rich possibilities and alternatives until we reach the present. Nothing of the sort; this conflict has gone through major shifts in nature and context that should be kept in mind if we seek to understand the new environment that the 2020 Karabakh war produced.

Why is the status of Nagorno-Karabakh important? Maybe it is not important; at least this is what the President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev is saying. He has repeated on several occasions in recent months not only that the question of the status is "resolved," but also that the conflict in itself has ended. Moreover, the Azerbaijani leader has cautioned that any attempt to raise the question of status is tantamount to disturbing the peace.

Two other actors directly involved in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict do not share this position. Neither the Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, nor the Russian leadership share this view. For them, neither is the conflict resolved, nor is the status of Nagorno-Karabakh irrelevant. A week after the signing of the November 9 agreement, in a long interview Russian President Vladimir Putin answered a question on Nagorno-Karabakh's status saying: "Yes, there is this problem, since [Nagorno-Karabakh's] final status has not been settled.

We have agreed to maintain the status quo." In the same answer he recalled the case of the 2008 war in Georgia with a warning: "[after] the attacks against our peacekeepers in South Ossetia, Russia recognised the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia."[i]

If we agree that the status of Nagorno-Karabakh remains unresolved, and that it is an important part of the conflict's resolution, we should also note that its importance varies from one actor to the other.

In a recent article penned by Samir Isayev,[ii] this delicate question is posed through a long flashback to contradict the positions of the Azerbaijani president and conclude: "The war is not over and will not end until the status issue is resolved." The author goes further to suggest: "But there is no solution to the status issue without compromise. What could this compromise be? There is only one way: Armenians' renunciation of the idea of independence for Nagorno-Karabakh and the solution of the problem within the framework of Azerbaijan's formal territorial integrity. Azerbaijan, meanwhile, must put the highest autonomy status it ever promised back on the table. Obviously, the public on both sides will categorically reject my suggestion, but it seems to be the only option for resolving the status issue. If that is not accepted, only the possibility of war remains."

While I share the concern of Isayev that a political agreement is still needed to end the conflict, and that the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh remains to be determined in this future agreement, I have some questions that deserve further discussion. I remain unconvinced with the conclusion, that the "only option" is the highest form of autonomy within Azerbaijan, and what it could mean in practical terms. But before the final status, I am also uncomfortable with the linear thinking of the past that leads to the "only" possible conclusion. My thinking is that the November 9 agreement

radically changed the environment in which the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict evolved during the period of 1994-2020. To understand this change, and evaluate the new rules of the game, any reading of the past – and the present – should be context-sensitive. Before coming to the new and unfolding situation, I will argue that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict changed context already several times, during which the status issue was approached differently by Armenia and by Azerbaijan. To appreciate those changes, we should abandon linear thinking and introduce elements of change, accident and unintended consequences in our reading of the rich texture of the historic past.

At the heart of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict there is the problem of its status.[iii] This in itself is the reflection of the double identity of that territory since the 1920's: for the Soviets, Nagorno-Karabakh was both Armenian and Azerbaijani. Armenian, because the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) – with a degree of local autonomy as understood by the Soviets – was granted precisely for the Armenian ethnic character of its population.[iv] Azerbaijani, because it was placed within the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, itself part of once mighty Soviet Union. For whatever reason (outside the scope of this article), the population but also the local Armenian party elite in NKAO were unhappy with this arrangement and felt discriminated against. They thought the solution for their problem was to be detached from Soviet Azerbaijan and attached to neighbouring Soviet Armenia. They raised the question of changing the status of Nagorno-Karabakh within the Soviet institutional logic. Now, with hindsight, we know that this triggered an enormous conflict, which resulted in thousands dead, hundreds of thousands displaced, entire communities destroyed, and the conflict remains unresolved until today. With all that happened in between, it is difficult to imagine today the environment in which the Nagorno-Karabakh problem was initially posed back in 1988. Karabakh Armenians not only did not imagine what the

consequences of their act could be, but also thought that reformist leadership in Moscow could easily resolve the problem in their favour.

Were they naïve? Definitely! But they lived in the Soviet Union where politics outside the narrow ruling circle was forbidden. The only sovereign, the only decision-making structure was the Politburo. Karabakh Armenians believed that the *Centre,* in the spirit of Perestroika, could easily decide in their favour. At the time they did not take into consideration what reaction would emerge in Baku. But by popular mobilization, the first of its kind in the Soviet Union, they did not realize that they were becoming a second *sovereign* and undermining the authority of the Politburo. They also could not imagine that their mobilization was going to trigger a symmetrical mobilization in Azerbaijan, and that the problem of Nagorno-Karabakh was going to evolve to become the cornerstone of modern Azerbaijani national identity. Soon, not only reaction came in Azerbaijan in the form of the Sumgait pogroms, but also a third *sovereign* appeared, this time the Azerbaijani popular mobilization. What was imagined by Karabakh Armenians as a bilateral political issue, in a mater of weeks was transformed into a triangular struggle.

The period of 1988-1991 is important because it has many parallels with the current situation. What concerns us here is that the issue of the status changed many times: initially, Karabakh Armenians, but also in Armenia the *Karabakh Committee* mobilized under the slogan of *unification* between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Soon, this changed; already in 1991 the position of Yerevan was more nuanced, arguing for the *self-determination* of Nagorno-Karabakh rather than unification with Armenia. NKAO organized a referendum in September 1991 in favour of *independence* rather than insisting on *unity*. The context was changing, so did the political positioning: in 1988 the Armenian demand for change did not cross limits of sovereignty, as the change of the NKAO’s status was to be an administrative change within Soviet borders. The collapse of

the Soviet Union changed the context of the conflict. In 1991 the same demand could question what had become the borders of a sovereign state – independent Azerbaijan. The position of Yerevan on the conflict, by dropping its earlier demands for unification, was not only adapting to the new realities emerging form the collapse of the USSR, but also an expression of readiness to seek compromise with Baku.

Azerbaijan also changed its positions on more than one occasion, as the context changed. During the interwar period (1994-2020) the Azerbaijani position was to grant Karabakh Armenians "the highest possible autonomy existing in the world."[v] This former position of Ilham Aliyev changed to "cultural autonomy" promised during the war,[vi] becoming no status after the war.[vii] It is widely believed, although no official documents have been released yet, that at the Key West negotiations (April 2001) the then Azerbaijani leader Heydar Aliyev was ready to accept letting Nagorno-Karabakh go through organizing a local referendum on status, as part of a comprehensive peace deal with Armenia. Ultimately, no peace deal was reached following a long cycle of negotiations between Aliyev and Kocharyan. In other words, both Baku and Yerevan shifted their positions regarding the political status of Nagorno-Karabakh based on the changing context.

Autonomy and Democracy

The other problem of the solution suggested by Isayev – the *highest possible level of autonomy* – is that it is too close to the model discussed for 26 years between the sides. If this model failed to satisfy the conflicting parties in the past, then what are the arguments that it is the ideal – and only possible – solution now? Moreover, the question of the *highest possible level of autonomy* suggested by Baku remains suspicious in its lack of detail. The argument made elsewhere, saying: "How governments deal with political dissidents is different than how they treat minorities"[viii] is not convincing

unless one thinks about *minorities* as politically passive, and as second class subjects who are allowed only to agree with the official line. In other words, the process of solving issues related to ethnic, religious, linguistic, tribal, and other *minority* questions are intrinsically related to the degree to which lawyers, journalists, NGOs, political parties, dissident intellectuals, trade-unions, and other such social groups enjoy political rights in a given political system. And the question remains: how can Azerbaijan's political system tolerate *the highest level of autonomy* in a region where Baku fought two harsh ethno-territorial wars, when Azerbaijani citizens in Baku, Ganja, Lankaran, etc. do not enjoy basic levels of constitutional rights?

On the eve of November 9, when the unfavourable deal was signed by Armenia, many among us thought that Pashinyan's administration was going to fall in the next days, and that his political career had reached an end. Now four months later Pashinyan is still the prime minister of Armenia. While the post-war political crisis in Armenia continues, one can say that the war and the Armenian defeat did not overturn the internal political dynamics that emerged after the 2018 popular mobilization. During the war, the Armenian public was excited by nationalism, but post-war public opinion seems to return to concerns of internal reform, economic progress and social justice. A recent opinion poll released by the International Republican Institute in Armenia (February 2021) shows that the major concern of the public is the economic situation, while the question of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict came in at fourth place.[ix] Is Armenia entering a post-nationalism era? It might be early to confirm, but the continuous stereotype that public opinion in Armenia is *hard-line* hindering any compromise solution on Nagorno-Karabakh lacks factual support.

How post-war Azerbaijani public opinion will develop is a more complex question. It is true that in the past, and especially

in the context of military confrontations, a mobilized public emerged in Azerbaijan calling for war. This was the case during the April 2016 fighting,[x] but especially after the summer 2020 clashes when spontaneous protests throughout Azerbaijan called for war to regain territories lost in the First Karabakh War.[xi] Speculation about the future is always difficult, as history tends to surprise us. Yet, one essential element will change in the medium term: between 1994 and 2020 Azerbaijani group identification was largely based on the negative image of the perfect other, the "Armenian enemy."[xii] Defeat in the 1991-94 war, territorial losses, hundreds of thousands of internally displaced, created a victimhood narrative, which contributed to the emergence of centralized and authoritarian rule. After the 2020 war and Azerbaijani military victory, this mobilizing appeal of the Armenian enemy will lose its functionality. What factors will influence Azerbaijani collective identity after the war is a key and open question. Again, it will depend on context, which the war of 2020 has evidently changed. Many observers think that Azerbaijan has entered a long-term authoritarian period as the war reinforced the Aliyev regime, and that traditional Azerbaijani opposition has nearly disappeared for their pro-war positions.[xiii] Yet, the events of 2020 introduced a new dimension to the Azerbaijani political scene, something that had been absent since the 1990's: mobilized public opinion.

Between the first and the second Karabakh wars, the question of the future status of Nagorno-Karabakh was the major obstacle on the path of normalization of Armenia-Azerbaijan relations. The question of the status of Nagorno-Karabakh is outside the scope of Yerevan's influence today. It is a question which will largely be settled by the remaining three actors: Azerbaijan obviously, Russia which has replaced Yerevan as the guarantor of Karabakh-Armenian security, and of course the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. The status will continue to be of extreme importance for Karabakh

Armenians, who feel threatened in their existence by Azerbaijani policies. Now, Baku has a choice to make: either to continue exerting pressure on Stepanakert, in which case Karabakh Armenians will seek closer integration with Russia, as the recent language law suggests,[xiv] or try to diminish pressure, try to normalize relations with Karabakh Armenians on a day-to-day basis, and develop soft-power instruments. A few months after the war, it is still unclear what policy Baku wants to follow.

What Comes Next?

Since 2008, I was increasingly convinced that we were going to avoid a second Karabakh war. Not because Baku and Yerevan were finally making progress in conflict resolution, but because the price of a renewed war was becoming too high to bear for the two belligerents. In 2008 another war erupted in the Caucasus – the war between Georgia and Russia. This marked not only Russian advances in the South Caucasus, but also its forceful return into the international arena. When Russian tanks rolled downhill from Roki tunnel, American armed forces did not intervene to defend their Georgian ally. The 2015 Lavrov Plan, and the 2016 April clashes made it even more clear: a new Armenia-Azerbaijan war was going to end with the introduction of Russian troops into the Karabakh conflict theatre. Both Baku and Yerevan had a common interest not to sacrifice parts of their sovereignty. But for that it was imperative to diminish pressure over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, start introducing a new public discourse, and seek ways to finally solve this long-lasting conflict. Instead, leaders in both Baku and Yerevan escalated provocative acts and declarations until the start of war on September 27.[xv] When two small states quarrel non-stop, they need a life-size *Deus ex-machina* to intervene and sort things out. This is how empires were built and survived throughout history.

Today, the question of the future status of Nagorno-Karabakh

is no more an issue on which Yerevan can exercise its direct influence. Even for an official from Yerevan to travel to Stepanakert, he or she has to pass through a Russian military checkpoint. This is the price of the Armenian military defeat in the 2020 war. Azerbaijan, on the other hand, paid a different price for its military victory: the return of the Russian military on the Karabakh scene. This reminds me of yet another version of the political status of the NKAO, that of direct administration from Moscow under Arkady Volsky, which lasted a year until January 1990. Today's de facto status of Nagorno-Karabakh looks similar, but instead of having Volsky as the representative of Soviet Politburo, we have Rustam Muradov as the representative of the Russian military. If between May 1994 and September 2020 Baku had to talk to Yerevan for its unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh problem, now it has to negotiate with the Kremlin.

I remember how Azerbaijani political leaders such as Vafa Guluzade insisted that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was indeed between Azerbaijan trying to gain its independence, and the old Russian imperial design to keep it under its hegemony.[xvi] In this mental map Armenia and Karabakh Armenians did not exist, they had no agency apart from being tools for imperial design. With the Second Karabakh War, this idea turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Post-Velvet Armenia now is definitely back in Russia's sphere of influence, and the margin of manoeuvre for any ruler in Yerevan is clearly reduced. What about Azerbaijan? How will Baku strategists manage the growing Turkish influence within the Azerbaijani army, evident Israeli influence, Russian military presence and growing Iranian fear? The geopolitical context in the post-November 9 Caucasus cannot be understood through the same frame as it was in the pre-September 27 period.

The status of Nagorno-Karabakh is certainly unresolved. Yet its importance in the post-war geopolitics may not be as important as before.

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