

Karabakh Is Again Put On Ice: The Parties Are Focused On Domestic Problems

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“I think that after a long time, we have reached a mutual understanding with my Armenian colleague at the Milan meeting.”

“Unfortunately, since the last ministerial meeting in Milan, I cannot note any concrete progress towards the settlement of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict.”

The first statement was made by Elmar Mammadyarov, Azerbaijani Foreign Minister, after he met with Zohrab Mnatsakanyan, Armenian Foreign Minister, during a meeting of the OSCE Council of Foreign Ministers in Milan, Italy in December, 2018. The second statement was made by Mammadyarov just one year later – in December, 2019, at the meeting of the same organization in Bratislava, Slovakia. After some optimistic statements made at the Milan meeting, I wrote [an article](#) for Baku Research Institute titled: “Nagorno-Karabakh Peace: Real Luck or Next Illusion?”

At the end of the year, Mammadyarov himself gave a predictable answer to the question.

Uncompromising Positions

Prior to the meeting of the Foreign Ministers in Bratislava on December 3, the Azerbaijani side presented its [official position](#) on the peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to the OSCE Council of Ministers. It states that the settlement of the conflict is possible only within the internationally recognized borders of Azerbaijan, respecting its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Azerbaijan is

committed to a step-by-step approach to resolving the conflict based on the UN Security Council resolutions, the OSCE resolutions, and especially the 1994 Budapest Summit. The Azerbaijani government believes that the first step of the resolution process is to eliminate the consequences of the conflict: the Armenian armed forces must immediately, fully and unconditionally withdraw from Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding regions. The next step in the resolution process is to determine the status of self-government for the population of the Nagorno-Karabakh region within Azerbaijan, in accordance with the Constitution and legislation of Azerbaijan. The statement makes it clear that Azerbaijan will not consider any political settlement of the conflict outside of this framework. In his [speech](#) at the Council meeting, Mammadyarov said that progress had not been made towards a resolution of the problem due to the consistent attempts of the Armenian leadership to disrupt the peace process for over a year. As an example, Mammadyarov cited a statement – “Karabakh is Armenia, period!” – made by the Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov [arrived in](#) Azerbaijan on the eve of the OSCE meeting of Foreign Ministers and Mammadyarov-Mnatsakanyan meeting. Lavrov’s visit to Armenia in November and especially his statement that “no agreement is possible without the consent of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh” was met with resentment in Baku. (I commented on this issue in [my previous article](#) at Baku Research Institute.) Mammadyarov also responded indirectly to Lavrov in his speech in Bratislava. He said that attempts to present the Armenian community as the people of Nagorno-Karabakh deny the existence of the local Azeri community and question its right to take part in deciding the future of the region. Such a position, Mammadyarov continued, aims to legitimize the consequences of ethnic cleansing and is not in line with international human rights.

The Armenian Foreign Minister, in response to Azerbaijan,

presented the official position of his country on the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in seven points. When we look at these [points](#), we see how far apart the positions of the parties are. Suffice it to look at the second point, which states that Azerbaijan should recognize the right of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh to self-determination outside the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. It is impossible for the Azerbaijani government to accept this condition. Also, Azerbaijan's requirement that Armenian troops should be withdrawn from all occupied territories, including Nagorno-Karabakh, as the first step in the conflict resolution, is unacceptable for the Armenian side. It seems that it is very difficult, even impossible, to reconcile such radically different positions.

It is no coincidence that the only outcome of the meeting between Mammadyarov and Mnatsakanyan in Bratislava was that they agreed to meet again. No statement was issued by the conflicting parties about the outcome of the 3.5-hour talks; [a joint statement](#) was issued only on behalf of the heads of delegations of the Co-Chair countries. According to the statement, "the Co-Chair Heads of Delegation reiterate that a fair and lasting settlement must be based, in particular, upon the principles of the Helsinki Final Act of non-use of force or threat of force, territorial integrity, and the equal rights and self-determination of peoples, recalling the joint statement of the Co-Chair country Heads of Delegation and the Azerbaijani and Armenian Foreign Ministers at the OSCE Ministerial Council meeting in Athens in 2009, which was subsequently endorsed by the OSCE Ministerial Council. It should also embrace additional elements proposed by the Presidents of the Co-Chair countries in 2009-2012." In the [Athens statement](#), the Co-Chair countries promised to support the parties in developing a final version of the basic principles proposed in Madrid in November 2007, while the Foreign Ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia confirmed their readiness by signing the document.

These statements contain references to other official statements made throughout the history of the peace process. Like Russian matryoshka dolls, when you open all of these documents one by one, they all go to the Madrid principles. Each time the parties are informed that the peace treaty must be based on these principles and there is no turning back. Let us recall those principles:

- *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.*

Both parties interpret some of these provisions in their favor. Azerbaijan wants these provisions to be implemented step-by-step, that is, it first demands the complete withdrawal of the Armenian army from the occupied territories, and only after that it agrees to fulfill other provisions. Armenia, on the other hand, is in favor of the package solution and believes that all issues should be reflected in the same document and that the parties should take synchronous steps. A brief summary of Armenia's position is this: We leave the surrounding areas (with a broad corridor preserved) on the condition that Azerbaijan recognizes the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh.

The statement released by the Co-Chair countries in Bratislava

made it clear that the OSCE Minsk Group format is the only and unchanging platform for the resolution process. We can understand this statement as a response to Azerbaijan's constant reference to the UN resolutions. The reason why Azerbaijan relies on the UN Security Council resolutions and requires them to be taken into account in resolving the conflict is that the resolutions explicitly require the withdrawal of the occupying forces from their occupied territories. In this respect, UN Security Council resolutions [822](#), [853](#), [874](#), and [884](#) are successes of Azerbaijani diplomacy, but the OSCE-supported process is not based on these resolutions, and Armenia strongly opposes them.

In addition, the Co-Chair countries' final statement also calls for renewal of discussions on expanding the OSCE mission's monitoring mission, agreed after the April 2016 clashes between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The purpose is to ensure that the ceasefire is respected. This issue is one of the problems that Azerbaijan is not enthusiastic about. For the Azerbaijani government believes that the main issue is not the ceasefire but the solution to the conflict.

It Is Not Time for Karabakh

In fact, this year, as agreed at the 2018 Milan meeting, the parties decided to prepare their nations for peace and at the Aliyev-Pashinyan [meeting](#) in Vienna in March 2019, they agreed to take steps in the humanitarian sphere. For example, in June, the parties [exchanged](#) prisoners of war. Mutual visits of [journalists](#) from Azerbaijan and Armenia took place in November. However, the government of Azerbaijan considers that without similar progress in the political process, such steps will have no effect.

At this stage, neither side is willing or able to make decisions on a very risky issue such as a solution to the Karabakh conflict. Both the Azerbaijani and Armenian governments are focused on domestic politics. After years of

political stagnation in Azerbaijan, at the end of 2019, there is rising political activity. There is a process of transformation within the Azerbaijani government: old officials are gradually being replaced by their younger counterparts who are close to the first vice president. This process, which began in the executive branch, also affected the legislature: the Parliament, or *Milli Majlis*, was [dissolved](#) and a snap election was scheduled for 9 February, 2020. In Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan is trying, on the one hand, to consolidate his support and dismantle the revanchist forces, and on the other hand, to bring real results in the socio-economic sphere. After former President Robert Kocharyan was arrested for his involvement in the events of March 1, 2008, another former leader of the Karabakh clan and former President [Serzh Sargsyan](#) was also charged with corruption. Even though Sargsyan is not in prison, his freedom has been restricted and he has been sentenced to a disciplinary measure which prevents him from traveling.

At such an important political stage, the Karabakh issue can only be a headache for both governments. When we look at the situation through their interests, we can say that this is not an appropriate time and place for the Karabakh issue.