Ukrainian Resistance Threatens Post-Soviet Authoritarianism

written by Shalala Mammadova Şəlalə Məmmədova

The main sources of this article are official speeches and statements of authorities, mass media and social networks, as well as surveys conducted in three South Caucasus countries. The online surveys were conducted between 3-10 March 2022 and included 1100 respondents from Baku and Yerevan (550 respondents from each). The respondents were asked to answer to three questions: (1) Who is the responsible for the Russian-Ukrainian war? (2) What is the Russia's motivation for this war? (3) Who do you want to be winner in this war? The Georgian opinion polls used in this article were obtained from a survey conducted by CRRC Georgia.[1]

Azerbaijan

There is no doubt that retaking control of these seven territories, which Armenia once called a safety belt around Nagorno-Karabakh, has to some extent satisfied the expectations of Azerbaijani society. The victory in the short war led to a rise in Aliyev's popularity and generated a temporary unity between authorities and opposition in the country.[3] The victory transformed Ilham Aliyev into a national hero and logically strengthened the authoritarian leader's grip on power even further. Though Putin had originally supported Armenia in the conflict, the Russian president tolerated Aliyev's victory in the war and the reincorporation of the once lost Azerbaijani territories. In our view, Aliyev, whose daily rhetoric implies that "the government (i.e., him, the president) knows best," signed the Moscow Declaration because Putin did not intervene while Azerbaijan was liberating its once occupied territories.

However, the stipulations of the Moscow Declaration necessitate more serious analyses of both the Trilateral (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia) Statement signed after the 44-day-war and Baku's recent foreign policy. The third article of the Trilateral Statement signed in November 2020 envisages the deployment of Russian peacekeepers on the line of contact between Azerbaijani and Armenian-controlled territories as well as along the so-called Lachin corridor.[4] The number of peacekeepers and size of military equipment deployed to the regions has prompted heated debates in Azerbaijani society. For decades the Azerbaijani public has expressed its pride in its independence from the Soviet Union, and the absence of Russian troops in the country was treated as evidence of national independence.[5] This success was associated with the country's first democratically elected president Abulfaz "Elchibey" Aliyev. Although the Trilateral Statement stopped large-scale military confrontation, the Azerbaijani public was very critical of the Russian military's reentry into Azerbaijan after almost three decades. Ordinary people described this as a surrender of sovereignty in exchange for seven regions and a loss of a symbol of independence. The fact that no breakthrough has been achieved in the resolution of the status of Nagorno-Karabakh exacerbates the public's frustration. Neither the war, nor the Trilateral Statement nor the Moscow Declaration discuss the status of Nagorno-Karabakh. In fact, the Trilateral Statement established de-facto Russian control over the disputed territories i.e., neither Azerbaijan nor Armenia gained from what seemed like a resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute, which has lasted thirty years and cost thousands of lives from both sides, escalating the enmity between two communities to unprecedented levels. The winner of the situation is now Russia. Russia, which has claimed to be the protector of Armenians from the "aggression of hostile Azerbaijan and Turkey," has now positioned itself as a guarantor of the security and safety of Nagorno-Karabakh's Armenian community.

Armenia

There is anti-Ukrainian sentiment in Armenia as well. The responses to survey questions show that the Armenian public thinks that "Ukraine morally supported Azerbaijan" in the recent war against Armenia, that "military equipment for Azerbaijan was transported via Ukrainian skies," and most importantly, that Ukrainian president Zelensky congratulated Aliyev on the occasion of the victory.[7] Still, the Armenian public decisively condemns the Russian invasion of Ukraine (76 percent of respondents). Pro-Russia political elements of Armenian society and the media with experts that represent these elements assume that the West's success in Ukraine will result in the complete loss of Armenian control over Nagorno-Karabakh because the Ukrainian events prove that the US and the West in general will not support Armenia.[8] Pro-Russia Armenian experts interpret the Russian-Ukrainian war as a Russia-NATO conflict and justify Putin's militaristic rhetoric. These experts link Putin's disregard for Ukrainian state sovereignty to the Russian imperial mindset and underline that Russia cannot be an empire without Ukraine. Part of the Armenian public (29 percent of respondents) justifies Putin's claims about artificial states and boundaries and asserts that these claims resonate with the unfair, in their opinion, decision made by the Bolsheviks in the 1920s when the fate of Nagorno-Karabakh was decided.[9] The issues like delimitation of borders with Azerbaijan, opening of transport routes as well as negotiations with Turkey, worry Armenia's nationalist right. On 17 March 2022, the nationalist Dashnaksutyun party held a protest in front of the Foreign Ministry and the Government headquarters in Yerevan and demanded an immediate cessation of negotiations with Turkey and Azerbaijan. It should be noted that these negotiations were backed by Russia as well.[10] Self-identified members of pro-Western groups, which are a minority in Armenia (17% percent of respondents), support Nikol Pashinyan's position and assume that a Russian victory in

Ukraine will mark the demise of democracy in the Caucasus. It is interesting that the tandem of Turkey and Azerbaijan seriously worry Armenia's pro-Western electorate, and they think that democracy cannot thrive when sovereignty is in jeopardy, that sovereignty is more important than democracy. It is a difficult period for Pashinyan. As a political leader he enjoys the support of the public in domestic affairs; however, due to a lack of space for maneuvers in foreign policy, he frequently faces difficult dilemmas. Armenia's government can neither openly support the West, which backs Ukraine, nor defy Russia, which invaded Ukraine. In early March, Armenian authorities seized the Russian airline S7's leased aircraft in Yerevan in compliance with Western-imposed sanctions on Russia. After this incident, a jet leased by Russian Ural airlines refused to land in Yerevan's Zvartnots airport due to threat of seizure and changed course for the airport in the Russian city Mineralnye Vody instead. The incidents prove that Russia now fears Armenian authorities are willing to comply with sanctions imposed by the West on Russia. Also, on 4 March 2022, the Armenian delegation abstained from a vote on the Ukrainian resolution presented to the UN Human Rights Council to establish a commission to investigate violations committed during Russia's military attack on Ukraine. Russian, on the other hand, voted against, a position which Armenia did not join.

Georgia

Western nations have turned a blind eye to gross violations of international law committed by Putin, among them his intrusion into Georgia in 2008 and his annexation of Crimea in 2014. The lack of Western reaction to these events encouraged him to invade Ukraine. The policies of pro-Western Georgian president Saakashvili, who came to power after the 2003 Rose Revolution, had been directed toward NATO and EU integration for Georgia and resulted in the deterioration of relations between Georgia and Russia. Saakashvili's attempt to end separatism in the breakaway republic of South Ossetia by military means in

2008 prompted a large-scale Russian military invasion into Georgia. The invasion which eventually ended with the Russian recognition of Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence turned Georgia into Russia's antagonist in the region. Surveys conducted in Georgia after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 proved that Georgian society evaluates Russia as its most prominent threat.[11] That is why unlike the Azerbaijani and Armenian publics, the Georgian public is not divided in its evaluation of the current Ukrainian crisis. It should be reminded that days before the invasion of Ukraine, Russia recognized the independence of two breakaway regions of Ukraine as well. Georgian society unitedly condemns Russia's so-called special operation. Surveys show that a plurality of the Georgian public holds Russia – 43% blame Russian state in general and 37% hold Putin responsible for this Ukrainian war. Georgian society evaluates this conflict as a fight between authoritarianism and democracy and not as a Russia-NATO rivalry, and believes that this war is an attempt to restore the Russian Empire. More than 60% of Georgian citizens think that the country should support Ukraine. However, the political leadership of the country has expressed differing views on the Ukrainian crisis. The Prime Minister Irakli Garibshavili has stated that Georgia will likely not join sanctions imposed on Russia due to the economic interests of the country. President Salome Zurabishvili, in her statements during her trip to Europe, stressed that Georgia supports Ukraine.[12] Georgia was the only South Caucasian country that, on 2 March 2022, voted for the resolution of the UN General Assembly condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine; Armenia abstained and Azerbaijan was absent for the vote. On 3 March 2022, while the Ukrainian crisis was developing, the Georgian government made another move in the direction of integration into the EU by formally applying for membership.

Conclusion

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, regardless of its outcome, will significantly impact the situation in post-Soviet space.

If Putin wins, he will not be satisfied with stationing his troops in Ukraine. Putin's potential victory will be the end of a truly independent Ukrainian state, a puppet political regime will be established. Since the fall of the USSR, there have been seven presidential elections in both Russia and Ukraine. Russia has had three presidents (de-facto two if we take into account the fact that Medvedev's presidency was a mere formality and real power remained in the hands of Putin), while Zelensky is the 6th president of Ukraine. Putin believes that free and fair elections in Ukraine (and in general) are a threat to his personal power. A change in political leadership in Ukraine every five years in free and democratic elections, the fact that citizens have an opportunity to express their will, the ability of the population to change the government which does not fulfill their expectations, on one hand, all irritate the authoritarian Putin, on the other hand make it difficult for him to assert his control over Ukraine; that is why he does not want to accept Ukraine's chosen democratic path that might bring the country closer to the West.

This too poses a threat for the path Putin has chosen in the long run. He clearly understands that if Ukraine integrates with the West as a democracy and that if that brings tangible life improvements, a day may come when he or his successors will have to explain to their own people why the Ukrainian people, who share a similar culture and history with Russia and who emerged after the collapse of the same political system, have achieved standards of living that Russia could not.

Putin believes he must stop such a success story. Therefore, the reason Putin launched this war is to divert Ukraine from that democratic path, which Putin evaluates as a threat to his political system and personal power. Now if he loses the war, supporters of his regime may turn against him. If he wins, he may try to proceed with the transformation of the majority of post-Soviet space into Russian protectorates. Yet, this war has already shown how incompetent the Russian military is, and

it seems that his plans in Ukraine are not succeeding as he has hoped.

Notes and references:

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