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The Participation of the Russian Federation In Nagorno-Karabakh Resolution

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This article explores the causes of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict while analyzing the possible solutions along with the possible role of the Russian Federation in the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. The author believes that the Russian Federation has all the necessary instrumentalities of power – military and political, economic and diplomatic – to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which for a quarter of a century has been a threat to the regional security in the Caucasus and in the entire Middle East.

Among all the ethnic conflicts in the South Caucasus, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is the one with the most strategic and region-wide significance. This rift is the only one on the territory of the former Soviet Union, whose direct participants were two independent states – Azerbaijan and Armenia. Since the start of the conflict escalation, Nagorno-Karabakh has been a source of a growing threat to regional security in the Caucasus and in the entire Middle East.

Despite the fact that the Armenian-Azerbaijani dispute to obtain Nagorno-Karabakh has been ongoing for over 100 years, and for the last 20 years it has been in a state of “cold confrontation”, in our opinion, comprehensive research on the dispute is lacking. Although, in general, a considerable amount of academic literature and journalism is devoted to the Nagorno-Karabakh issue (see: Zdravomyslov, 1999, p. 286; Zolyan, 2001, p. 435; Cornell, 2001; Kazimirov, 2009, p. 45.) there are practically no studies that contain a comprehensive analysis of the contribution of the participants in the negotiations upon the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict from the OSCE Minsk Group, in particular from the Russian Federation. In this article the author aims to find out the causes of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, to examine the possible solutions and to determine the opportunities and the role of the Russian Federation in the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue.

To understand the causes of the conflict, we turn to its history, as both the Armenian and Azerbaijani sides, when trying to prove their rights to Nagorno-Karabakh, have resorted to historical arguments. It is commonly known that in the II century B.C. the territory of modern Nagorno-Karabakh was joined to Greater Armenia and for centuries it was a part of the province of Artsakh. In the second half of the XVIII century, Nagorno-Karabakh with the prevalent Armenian population joined the Karabakh khanate, and in 1813, as a part of the Karabakh khanate, in accordance with Gulistan Peace Treaty, it was transferred to the Russian Empire. At the beginning of the XX century Nagorno-Karabakh became the scene of bloody Armenian-Azerbaijani clashes twice (in 1905-1907 and 1918-1920).

After the proclamation of the Soviet government in the Transcaucasia, in Nagorno-Karabakh in 1924, the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region

(Nagorno-Karabakh) was created and it became a member of the Azerbaijan SSR in 1936 in accordance with the USSR Constitution. In the following years, the Armenian elite (and the ordinary Armenians living in Karabakh) repeatedly sought to compel the political leadership of the Soviet Union to transfer Nagorno-Karabakh, which was predominantly inhabited by the Armenian, to the Armenian SSR, but the Kremlin ignored these requests. In August 1987, the Academy of Sciences of the Armenian SSR sent a petition to Moscow with the request to transfer Nagorno-Karabakh to the Armenian SSR. The non-response from Moscow contributed to proliferation of rumors in Yerevan regarding the imminent transfer of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia and the amplification of separatist sentiments in Nagorno-Karabakh. On February 11, 1988, a protest demonstration was held in Nagorno-Karabakh against the cultural and economic policy of official Baku, and on February 20 the Council of People's Deputies of Nagorno-Karabakh adopted a resolution on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue statement regarding the transfer of the region from Azerbaijan to Armenia in front of the Supreme Soviets of the Armenian SSR, Azerbaijan SSR and the USSR.

This step led to the escalation of the conflict in and around Nagorno-Karabakh as well as to the beginning of the armed phase of confrontation. Both sides began formation of combat units, acquisition of weapons and military equipment. Azerbaijan attempted an economic embargo towards Nagorno-Karabakh. In response, on December 1, 1990 the Supreme Council of the Armenian SSR decided to establish the Republic of Armenia, which unilaterally included Nagorno-Karabakh.

In September 1991, Nagorno-Karabakh proclaimed independence, according to the results of a referendum, which was held under the laws of the Soviet Union that still existed at the time. However, this decision was not recognized both by the government of Azerbaijan and, after collapse of the USSR in December 1991, by the international community guided in this matter by "The criteria for the recognition of new states in Eastern Europe and on the territory of "the Soviet Union", adopted by the ministers of foreign affairs of the European Community on December 16, 1991 (Hannum, 1993, pp. 84-85). To understand the reasons for the non-recognition of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic by the Western countries,

it is necessary to pay attention to a statement made by the member countries of the European Community on December 23, 1991, that no states established as a result of armed rebellion would be recognized. (Hannum, 1993)

Shortly after collapse of the Soviet Union, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict entered into an armed phase. In May 1994, the conflicting parties signed a ceasefire agreement. The military defeat suffered by Azerbaijan led to the loss of its control over Nagorno-Karabakh and, partially or completely, over the seven surrounding areas, which the Armenian forces considered as “a safety zone” between the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) and Armenia.

From that moment on, negotiations for a peaceful settlement of the conflict have been held. Azerbaijan seeks to restore its territorial integrity, while Armenia protects the interests of Nagorno-Karabakh. Complementary to these countries, there are also other players who participate in the conflict settlement, and the main ones are the Russian Federation and the United States of America. However, the conflict is still not resolved due to the diametrically opposed views on the solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue and the difference in the interests of the international mediators.

In 1997, as a result of intensive consultations, the OSCE Chairman appointed France, Russia and the United States as co-chairs of Minsk Conference upon the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, which began its activity in 1992. In summer of 1997, the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs offered to take a package reconciliation as a basis for further negotiations, which provided for withdrawal of the Nagorno-Karabakh armed forces to the territorial boundaries of the autonomy and return of the Nagorno-Karabakh administrative status in Azerbaijan.

This proposal, which the first President of Armenia Levon Ter-Petrosyan tended to support, was clearly rejected by Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic for the reason of the lacking, in their point of view, legal guarantees for the ethnic Armenians, who were reverting to being under the jurisdiction of Azerbaijan. The NKR radical political forces, Armenia and the influential Armenian diaspora launched a campaign of harsh criticism of this resolution option, whereby the President of

Armenia Levon Ter-Petrosyan resigned and the former President of the NKR R. Kocharyan came to power. The latter was an active supporter of Nagorno-Karabakh separation from Azerbaijan.

Yerevan as well categorically pitched against the "Gobble's Plan"¹, proposed by American politician Paul Gobble in 1988, which was based on the principle of territorial exchange, as officially stated by the Armenian President Robert Kocharyan and the leaders of all parliamentary groups and factions of the Armenian Parliament, considering it an unacceptable violation of the territorial integrity of the Republic. Since then, the negotiations have reached an impasse, as none of the parties wishes to make any concessions.

Standing for preserving the territorial integrity of the country within the borders of 1988, Azerbaijan gives its consent to grant Nagorno-Karabakh broad autonomous rights. However, the anti-Armenian policy pursued by official Baku has created a situation under which Nagorno-Karabakh is not psychologically ready to make any concessions. As for the "Gobble's Plan", official Baku is considering the prospect of sharing "the geographical corridors" between Armenia and Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh and Nakhchivan) as a possible resolution option.

Russia plays the most active role in the negotiations upon the peaceful settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. On the one hand, it is a strategic partner of Armenia, according to the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance of 1997. In addition, being the members of the CSTO, both countries are military allies: thousands servicemen of the 4th RF army have been accommodated in the Armenian city of Gyumri. On the other hand, Russia is actively cooperating with official Baku in terms of rearmament of the Azerbaijani Armed Forces while selling the weapons and military equipment to the latter. This

¹The basis of the "Goble plan" to resolve the Karabakh conflict through the exchange of territories is establishing a direct geographical connection between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, on the one hand, and Azerbaijan and Nahichevan - on the other. For the US, a version of the exchange of territories is the most appropriate as regional rapprochement in line Azerbaijan-Nakhichevan-Turkey means the elimination of the land border between Armenia and Iran. Baku considers the prospect of exchanging "geographic corridors" between Armenia and Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh and a Nahichevan) as an opportunity to achieve the greatest success. Moscow also supports Armenia, which seeks to preserve the existing official border.

policy is aimed at enhancing the Russian influence in the Caucasus. After all, Russia has its specific interests in the Transcaucasia region, which are to maintain political, economic and military dominance in the Transcaucasia, to harmonize most of the foreign policy of the Transcaucasian states with Russia's interests as well as to prevent emerging of the role of third-party countries in the region (particularly Turkey, the USA and Western states).

Russia is trying to treat the Karabakh conflict resolution within a broader geopolitical context, associating it with the general processes, which take place in the North Caucasus and the CIS. Thus, according to the analysts of the Russian Institute of Europe, the objective of Russia is oil itself (opponent to the Russian one) as an independent financing source for Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan rather than the routing of oil export pipelines. For this reason, Moscow has actively supported the position of Armenia in the deviation from the "Gobble's Plan", providing for territorial exchange, since the transition of the southern part of Armenia under the Azerbaijani jurisdiction or under the control of international peacekeeping forces will eventually close Russia's entries to the regions of the South Caucasus and the Middle East.

In order to increase its role as the main mediator in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Russia has been actively using both its status as the co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group and the possibility to influence the parties of the conflict during the trilateral meetings with the Presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan, which have been held during the CIS summits. For instance, on October 8, 2009, Chisinau hosted the fifth meeting of the Presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan with participation of the OSCE Minsk Group. The next day during the CIS summit, a trilateral meeting between the Presidents of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia was held in the same place, during which the President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev confirmed the fundamental approaches of Russia in terms of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, as set out during the trilateral meeting of the Presidents of Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan on November 2, 2008 (Prezidenty Armenii, Azerbajdzhana i Rossii podpisali deklaraciju ob uregulirovanii karabahskoj problemy, 2008). Their essence reduces to the following: "Russia is opposed to imposition of any recipes from outside to the conflict parties and judges by the fact that the

primary responsibility for the final choice shall be born by the Azerbaijanis and Armenians; Russia is ready to support such a solution to the problem that will satisfy all the parties involved, and if a compromise is reached, it will act as a guarantor of the settlement; a solution will be viable only if it allows to regain stability and peace in the Transcaucasia as well as helps to maintain the historically formed geopolitical power equation there during the post-conflict period without turning the region into an arena of international political and military rivalry.” (Ivanov & Zhuravel, 2009)

Concerning the practical proposals from Russia, they focus on introducing peacekeeping forces into the areas occupied by the Armenian forces of the so-called “security zone” and on being a State-Guarantor of a conflict resolution, thereby strengthening its military and political presence in the South Caucasus. The Russian experts do not exclude the fact that the settlement of the Karabakh conflict is also possible in case of implementation of the Russian-Turkish agreements on the division of spheres of influence in terms of the Karabakh issue. Its essence lies in the fact that Ankara affects Baku in order the latter agreed to define the status of the NKR through a new referendum in the self-proclaimed republic, while Moscow shall convince Yerevan of the need to withdraw the Armenian forces out of the seven districts. (Yuzhny, 2012)

Thus, implementation of the Russian plan provides for separation of the conflicting parties, start of the withdrawal process and restitution of the territories and refugees from the three sides. The main point is that Azerbaijan shall recognize the right to self-determination of Nagorno-Karabakh. However, the main drawback is contained just in the last paragraph, as until now official Baku rejected the principle of national self-determination, offering an internationally-recognized principle of the state territorial integrity as a legal basis for the conflict settlement. Nevertheless, the Russian supporters of the Karabakh reconciliation plan believe that the compelling stand of Azerbaijan can change when the latter enters the Eurasian Union. As they believe, there will also be a place for “self-proclaimed” republics like the NKR. (Yuzhny, 2012)

For instance, Russian researcher A. Podberyozkin believes in the possibility of such a way of settling the conflict. He thinks, “implement-

tation of the Eurasian Union will open the way to a real and rapid settlement of the Karabakh conflict under the terms, mutually acceptable by the hostile parties” (Yuzhny, 2012). He also believes that the Eurasian Union “is the best solution to all international conflicts and territorial disputes in the post-Soviet space, as there will be no customs barriers, borders, visas among the countries of the Eurasian Union, as well as there will be a single economic area. In such a format all the grounds for the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia will vanish.” (Yuzhny, 2012)

However, the 20-year history of the negotiation process regarding Nagorno-Karabakh does not give any grounds for optimism. As a matter of fact, they increasingly state in Baku that if negotiations fail, Azerbaijan is ready to return the occupied territories by military means. In response to the statements by the Azerbaijani side, Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan stated that in the event of military aggression from the side of Azerbaijan, Armenia would recognize the independence of the NKR. Contrary to these claims, it is necessary to take a note that in general the parties to the conflict are going to coordinate their actions in accordance with the Declaration on the Karabakh conflict settlement of November 2, 2008 signed by the Presidents of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia. (Prezidenty Armenii, Azerbajdzhana i Rossii podpisali deklaraciju ob uregulirovanii karabahskoj problemy, 2008)

Overall, preserving the status quo in the Nagorno-Karabakh issue can be evidenced, in particular, by the events of 2010, when Armenia and Russia prolonged the agreement on the Russian military base in Gyumri city, the presence of which, in the opinion of Yerevan, is a safeguard against Azerbaijani invasion. In the same 2010 Azerbaijan signed a strategic partnership agreement with Turkey providing for military assistance to Azerbaijan in case of war. In response to this, at the OSCE summit in Astana on December 2, 2010, the Armenian President announced that if Azerbaijan started a war, Armenia would have no choice but to recognize the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh and ensure its security. (Mailyan & Sarkisyan, 2011)

In this situation, Russia is trying to establish a new equilibrium of relations in the triangle of Russia-Armenia-Azerbaijan, as evidenced by

the conclusion of the military agreement with Armenia in 2010, and growing energy ties and military sales of the Kremlin with official Baku.

Successful foreign policy of Russia in the South Caucasus, in our opinion, was the first result of the failure of such international players as the United States and the EU or at least of the systematic weakening of their position. Although, at the same time, in March-April 2001, the US took the lead in bringing the Armenian and Azerbaijani sides to the negotiations at Key West (Florida) and reportedly both sides were closer to the deal than ever before or after. France has organized several summits between the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents with the French president as an intermediary, the most recent one in October 2014. Thus, the point at issue is that Russia virtually retains the monopoly in the peace settlement process between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Meanwhile, the mediation mission of Moscow raises a question whether Russia wants a quick solution to the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. "It is highly unlikely," Azerbaijani researcher Elkhan Nuriyev writes, "that the Russian peace negotiations led to the effective solution to the crisis in the near future. To move this region more into its orbit of influence, Russia only needs to keep the existing situation in the South Caucasus. Given these circumstances, Russia is simply interested in preserving "the managed instability" in the region." (Nuriyev, 2011)

All in all, according to E. Nuriyev, "Russia's role in finding the final solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis is extremely important. There is no doubt that it is the Kremlin that holds the key to the Armenian-Azerbaijani problem. Russia holds golden cards to put an end to this protracted territorial conflict and to help the two nations to achieve reconciliation. Moscow, however, seems to be waiting for the moment when a new, politically advantageous situation, corresponding to the strategic interests of Russia, will establish in the post-Soviet "Southern Tier". "Until it does not happen," E. Nuriyev believes, "the game will continue and there will be no end to it."

The Western democracies are certainly not entirely helpless in changing the behavior of Russia in the backyard of Europe. The United States and the EU need to understand that their willingness to make sacrifices will

not remain without consequences in this strategically important area. Moreover, if the Western players continue their policy of letting Russia pass forward and calmly watch as the Russian economic, military and political influence is growing in Nagorno-Karabakh in the pursuit of the peaceful settlement, they risk to lose a big geopolitical game.” (Nuriyev, 2011)

So, for more than 20 years from the time of signing of the agreement on cessation of hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh, with the assistance of international mediators (OSCE Minsk Group), the process of finding a compromise between the conflicting parties and affordable option for them of conflict resolution is taking place. The leading role in regulation seeks to play Russia - a country that has the status of co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group. The Kremlin, that has the capacity to end this prolonged territorial conflict and help two nations to achieve reconciliation currently took wait and see position, hoping for weakening of interest of the West to the South Caucasus region, which, respectively, will force parties to the conflict to take into account Russia's interests in the region, most of which is full control over the processes on the territory of the South Caucasus. For now Moscow intensively arming Azerbaijan and Armenia - main participants in the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

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