

Nagorno Karabakh: A New Leader, Old Conflict

By Hratch Tchilingirian *

SIGNIFICANCE: Despite Azerbaijan's efforts to assert international pressure, Karabakh remains determined to steer its own political course and defend its "right for self-determination".

ANALYSIS: On September 1, early presidential elections were held in Nagorno Karabakh, a 4,400 sq. km disputed enclave between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Arkady Ghukasian, 40, became the new president with overwhelming majority of the votes (89.3 per cent). Ghukasian succeeded Robert Kocharian who was appointed Prime Minister of Armenia in March of this year. The other candidates in the race, Boris Aroushanian and Arthur Tovmassian received 5.33 per cent and 5.35 per cent of the votes respectively; 84.4 per cent of the 90,285 eligible voters participated in the elections.



Arkady Ghukasian, casts his vote during the Presidential elections of Nagorno Karabakh.

Some 40 foreign observers from Russia, France, Switzerland, Armenia and Crimea monitored the elections. Among them were French MP Rene Rouquet and Russia's former ambassador to Armenia Vladimir Stupishin. The elections were considered fair and free. A sizeable contingent of international reporters were also in Karabakh to cover the elections.

The election of Ghukasian--a popular figure and former foreign minister who has represented Karabakh in the OSCE negotiations--affirms Karabakh Armenians' determination to defend their independence from Azerbaijan. The election took

place despite Azerbaijan's criticism, echoed by the United States, Germany, Russia and Turkey. Commentators in Baku observed that the presidential polls in Karabakh was another confirmation of the fact that Baku does not have any influence on the enclave. The Armenians are in full control of their affairs.

In the background of this election, last week Armenia and Russia signed a major treaty which would greatly boost Ghukasian's mandate. In the treaty, for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow commits itself to defend an ally militarily in the event that the ally is attacked by a third country.

The implications of this treaty has worried the Azeri leadership. After the final election results were announced in Karabakh, President Heydar Aliyev on September 3 issued a decree instructing his cabinet and government agencies to intensify dialogue and cooperation with the United States. The Foreign Ministry was ordered to maintain closer contacts with France and Russia, the co-chairmen, together with the United States, of the OSCE Minsk Group. Aliyev also

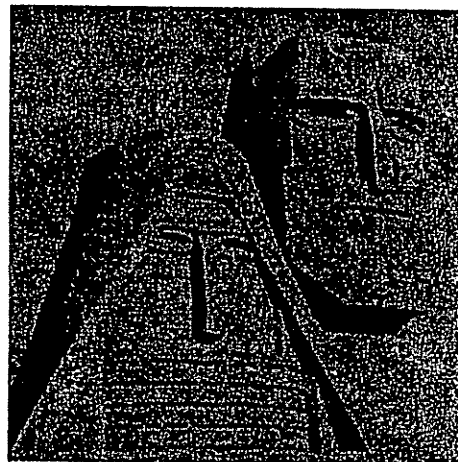
charged his Foreign and Defence ministers to expand military cooperation with the U.S. under the aegis of NATO's Partnership for Peace program and the North Atlantic Cooperation Council and to work more closely in the fields of security and arms control. It remains to be seen as to how Azerbaijan's extreme "pro-West" orientation would hurt its relations with Russia, a major, albeit unfriendly, player in the Transcaucasus. Already, the new Russian-Armenian treaty undermines Azerbaijan's protracted efforts to pressure and isolate Armenia.

At least in the near future, the Russian-Armenian treaty will serve as a preventive device against any unilateral Azerbaijani attack on Karabakh or Armenia. Azeri foreign policy adviser Vafa Guluzade admitted that if Azerbaijan tries to re-conquer the territories occupied by Armenians, "it will be drawn into a war with Russia".

The treaty could also have an impact on the negotiations. While the OSCE overall lacks power to resolve the conflict, the involvement of Russia as a regional player, the US as an international player, and France, representing European interests, had given new impetus to the negotiations. However, it is early to tell how, on the one hand, the agreements signed recently during Heydar Aliyev's first state visit to the United States and the Clinton administration's eagerness to deepen US-Azeri relations, and on the other hand, the provisions of the new Russian-Armenian treaty, will effect the role of the Minsk Group mediators. The US-Russian "competition" for regional influence could end up providing their clients more political levers and options to manoeuvre than they bargained for.

In May of this year, the Minsk Group co-chairmen, including US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, director of political and security affairs at the French Foreign Minister Jacques Blot, and head of the Russian delegation Valentin Lozinsky, visited Yerevan, Baku and Stepanakert and presented new proposals to the conflict parties. The contents of the proposal were not made public, however, details were leaked to the press. Under this new proposal,

- Karabakh would receive autonomous status within Azerbaijan, with its own constitution;
- security guarantees will be given by the international community;
- Karabakh would reduce its own armed forces;
- and withdraw from five regions in Azerbaijan, including Shusha and Lachin, which will be leased and policed by



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the OSCE.

While Azerbaijan and Armenia disagreed with some of the terms, Karabakh rejected the entire proposal, particularly the prospect of remaining within Azerbaijan.

Karabakh Armenians have clearly stated that their independence is not negotiable. They would only agree to a "horizontal" relationship with Azerbaijan. Like Ghukasian, recently the commander of the Karabakh army Samvel Babayan reiterated Karabakh's readiness to defend its independence at any political or military cost. Babayan affirmed that even if "politicians" sign an agreement that puts Karabakh under Azerbaijani jurisdiction, such an agreement "shall not be implemented". The current qualitative difference between the Karabakh and Azeri armies and the professional superiority of the Karabakh army give credence to Babayan's confidence.



Commander of the Karabakh army Samvel Babayan

Baku and Stepanakert are as far apart from each other on key issues as they were five years ago. As such, the "neither war, nor peace" status is likely to continue for an extended period of time. The over two dozen OSCE sponsored negotiations since 1992 have failed to resolve the oldest conflict in the former Soviet Union. There are no new breakthroughs indicating that the upcoming rounds of negotiations would be otherwise.

The prospects for direct talks between Baku and Stepanakert has been discussed among the Minsk Group co-chairmen; Armenia has advocated for direct talks since the beginning of the conflict; and the new Karabakh leadership sees it as the only way for progress in the talks. However, Azerbaijan has consistently refused to recognize Karabakh Armenians as negotiating partners and has portrayed the conflict in purely bilateral terms between Baku and Yerevan.

Azerbaijan's refusal for direct talks stems from several key elements of its Karabakh policy:

- direct talks with Karabakh Armenians would make the conflict a domestic issue rather than an inter-state issue. This would weaken Baku's "territorial integrity" argument and strengthen Stepanakert's "right for self determination" argument.
- Baku has invested too much political and diplomatic energy in making "territorial integrity" the sole basis of resolution of the Karabakh conflict. Especially since the

OSCE's Lisbon Summit in December, this has been Baku's most valued diplomatic success.

- direct talks with Karabakh Armenians could also serve as a pretext for other ethnic groups in Azerbaijan to demand for their rights.

While the international community is more inclined to uphold the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, Karabakh Armenians have persistently argued that just as Azerbaijan had the legal right to self-determination through secession from the Soviet Union in 1991, they also had the right to secede from Azerbaijan based on the laws of the time.

Rather than compromise, Azerbaijan seems to be willing to postpone the resolution of the conflict. Baku hopes that in the interim it would press Armenia and Karabakh economically. As affirmed by Guluzade, Baku will use its oil politics "as skilfully as possible". In the meantime, it would have a chance to improve its military-political structures and train a more mobile and professional army.

Despite the possibility of more occasional military tensions in the boarder areas, a return to open hostilities remains unlikely for now. The incentives to keep the cease-fire outnumber the benefits of war:

1. The fragile cease-fire since May 1994 has provided a cooling-off period and has afforded time to strengthen governmental infrastructure in Azerbaijan, Armenia and Karabakh. In addition to the war, these new republics have had to embark on the transition from state-controlled to free market economies, and, since independence, the state-building process.
2. All the sides have used the cease-fire to re-arm and replenish their military stocks and better prepare their armies for future eventualities.
3. The cease-fire has particularly helped Azerbaijan's economy, which registered record growth in the last two years. Foreign investment rose five-fold in 1996 to \$342 million, mostly in the oil sector. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development estimated that after five years of decline, Azerbaijan's economy grew 1.2 per cent in 1996, rising toward 5 per cent in 1997. This pace of expansion could accelerate in 1998 and 1999 to between 7 and 8 per cent.
4. Renewed military hostilities would seriously jeopardize Armenia's fragile economy and the oil-based boom in Azerbaijan.
5. There is a military balance in the region. Each side knows that any offensive attack would entail heavy losses and very few gains.

CONCLUSION: The Karabakh conflict is most likely to remain unresolved for the foreseeable future. The OSCE will continue to serve as the primary forum for the negotiations. But Russian and US influence, exercised through the triumvirate chairmanship, will provide the likely means to bring the conflicting sides to compromise positions. In the meantime, it would be "business as usual" in Azerbaijan, Armenia and Karabakh.

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