

Nagorno-Karabakh: a fragile ceasefire

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Following talks in Moscow lasting ten hours between the foreign ministers of Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, overnight on the 9-10 October, the head of Russian diplomacy, Sergei Lavrov, announced that the parties had reached an agreement on a ceasefire. It was agreed that it would come into force on 10 October at twelve noon (local time) and would make possible the exchange of prisoners of war and the bodies of the deceased. Furthermore, it was agreed that the parties would enter into separate talks with the aim of settling the conflict as quickly as possible, while maintaining the format of talks which had been used to date, that is with the OSCE Minsk Group (co-chaired by Russia, France and the US) as an intermediary.

Official statements from Armenia, Azerbaijan and the internationally non-recognised 'Nagorno-Karabakh Republic' indicated that the ceasefire was breached repeatedly during the previous weekend (10-11 October). However, it is difficult to determine how events actually unfolded. The parties have been presenting contradictory information and refuting each other's versions. For example Baku reported that Armenian forces had fired upon the town of Ganja, leaving nine civilians dead. Even though related photographic and film documentation was presented, both Yerevan and Stepanakert denied that they were responsible for the shooting. On 12 October at the previously planned meeting with his Armenian counterpart the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov confirmed the fact that the ceasefire had been 'not fully' observed and the military operations were still underway. Meanwhile, the parties to the conflict have declared their willingness to respect the ceasefire.

Commentary

- The ceasefire can be interpreted as a success for Armenia and a limited success for Russia. Moscow has succeeded in holding the talks on its territory, acting as the sole intermediary, taking the initiative away from France and limiting the importance of the OSCE Minsk Group. The fact that the talks took place was presented as an outcome of Putin's direct intervention, while Russia was presented as the only impartial intermediary and superpower able to ensure balance in the region. Armenia, in turn, since the beginning of the conflict's escalation, facing the threat of an Azerbaijani offensive, has actively sought for Moscow's involvement in settling the conflict. Proof that sentiments in Armenia have been appeased is found above all in a statement made by Nikol Pashinyan who has reiterated his speculations about the value of Armenia recognizing

the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic as an independent state.

- To date, Russia has succeeded in maintaining the position it has adopted since the beginning of the escalation of the fighting. The Kremlin's response is officially confined to diplomatic activity. It is seeking to maintain impartiality in its contacts with Armenia and Azerbaijan, pointing to good relations with both partners and focusing on preserving its role as a mediator, not as a party to the conflict. The most important motivation for Russia's reserved and reactive stance, so untypical of the Kremlin in the face of another development of fighting in the Nagorno-Karabakh appears to be Russia's unfavorable international situation. This has been preventing Russia from becoming an active party in the conflict. In the background there is the Kremlin's confrontation with the West, due to the poisoning of Alexei Navalny, its support given to Lukashenka in Belarus, the conflict with Ukraine, and recently the unrest following the election in Kyrgyzstan, which Moscow interprets as a destabilising factor in the region seen as its sphere of influence. Furthermore, Russia's limited impact on Armenia and in particular on Azerbaijan, should also be taken into account in the situation, since Azerbaijan, with the firm support of Turkey, has practically achieved a change in the *status quo*.
- Trying to maintain its neutrality towards the warring parties despite Armenia's desperate diplomatic attempts, the Kremlin did not pledge or even announce military support for its ally, citing the formal conditions of cooperation within the Collective Security Treaty Organization. It is likely that Russia is seeking to discipline the Armenian prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan in what is a critical situation for him, and to force him to make concessions in bilateral relations. This could be seen as retaliation for the way Pashinyan came to power following a grassroots revolution and for the policy he is pursuing, aimed at weakening Russia's influence in Armenia. On the other hand, an excessive strengthening of Azerbaijan as a result of the conflict may be dangerous for Moscow since it will in turn lead to the consolidation of the position of Turkey and will embolden it. Turkey has been openly supporting Azerbaijan in this development of the conflict, thus contesting Russia's position in the region and challenging its monopoly on deciding the boundaries of spheres of influence. Russia's position to date on the situation in the Nagorno-Karabakh (mostly reactive and dependent on the determination of Azerbaijan and, in fact, also Turkey) indicates that, although Russia remains a significant actor in the Caucasus region, it is gradually losing the initiative to other players.
- From the point of view of Azerbaijan, the minimum objectives at this stage have been already achieved: the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh has been placed on the international agenda again, and Baku has demonstrated that it is determined to settle the conflict by military means if the talks stall. President Ilham Aliyev has announced that the *status quo* does not exist, nor does the so-called contact line which separated the positions of both sides before 27 September. This may be a sign of further operations aimed at regaining other areas. The territorial gains however already enabled Aliyev to present the current operation as a success. The captured towns and locations seized in the northern part of the conflict zone are particularly important since they make it possible to control particular sections of the northern (shorter) route linking Yerevan and Stepanakert. At the same time Baku will seek to involve Ankara in possible talks (Turkey is a member of the OSCE Minsk Group but is not part of the decision-making group of its co-chairs).

- From Yerevan's perspective, diminishing the threat to Nagorno-Karabakh itself is of key importance (the majority of the areas taken over by Azerbaijani forces lie outside Nagorno-Karabakh, in the so-called 'occupied territories'). The incurred losses and the defeat cannot yet be seen as a calamity. They do, however, affect the position of Prime Minister Pashinyan. He has been criticised by circles linked to the Republican Party of Armenia (which ruled the country until 2018) and represented by former presidents coming from Nagorno-Karabakh – Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan – and also by groups who previously supported Pashinyan but have now become disappointed with the lack of genuine reforms. Pashinyan's position has also been faltering in relation to the Kremlin since, before the meeting in Moscow, he had to have several phone calls with Vladimir Putin on his own initiative (President Aliyev has spoken to Putin only once since the escalation of the conflict).
- It is difficult to recognise the agreements reached in Moscow as a solid ceasefire since they do not include further-reaching declarations or guarantees. It is rather a tactical halt or, in practice, the only limitation to the fighting. At this stage it remains a challenge to see whether and to what extent the ceasefire will hold. In the immediate future (up to one week), the most likely scenario seems to be the limited continuation of fighting (artillery and rocket fire) with the avoidance of clashes on the ground. This situation may last longer, however, even in such a case the ceasefire would not be formally terminated. In that perspective – of several weeks – it seems equally likely that the fighting will be resumed. What makes this scenario probable is the limited will on both sides to reach an agreement and Azerbaijan's wish to use its advantage to take control of other towns. On the other hand, this scenario may be affected by the approaching winter, dwindling stocks of ammunition and the growing costs of the military operations being led by both countries. The resumption of the talks to settle the conflict will only be possible if Russia and other international actors apply consistent pressure on both parties to the conflict (in the case of Azerbaijan, the position the Turkish government will also be important since Turkey may sabotage the talks if it is not allowed to join them in some format).