

Yerevan's radical turn in its Nagorno-Karabakh policy

Wojciech Górecki

On 13 April, Armenia's prime minister Nikol Pashinyan said during his speech at the National Assembly (parliament) that his government was planning to sign a peace agreement with Azerbaijan soon, as "the peace agenda has no alternative for us". He also stated that the main goal of the negotiations for Yerevan would no longer be agreeing on the future status of Nagorno-Karabakh (within Azerbaijan), but to ensure all rights and security guarantees for Karabakh Armenians: the territory's status would remain a means to an end. As regards the Karabakh peace process, he stressed the need for direct, bilateral talks with Baku (with the support of intermediaries), as well as for a revival in regional policy, including contacts with Ankara. He mentioned Russia as being an very important actor in this process, although he did not particularly emphasise its role. At the same time, his speech included a veiled criticism of the Russian peacekeeping forces and, more openly, of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, which he accused of inaction. The public reaction in Armenia to this speech has for the time being remained moderate, but it caused outrage in the unrecognised Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR), and led to accusations that he was intending to cross the 'red lines'. In a statement adopted on 14 April, the NKR's parliament called on Pashinyan to withdraw from the political line he had just announced

Commentary

- The theses of the prime minister's speech indicate a radical shift in Yerevan's policy and a complete change in its negotiation philosophy. Pashinyan has *expressis verbis* recognised the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and stated that the 'Karabakh issue' refers not to the territory itself (wherein the status of Nagorno-Karabakh was of key importance), but to guaranteeing the rights of the ethnic Armenian people who live there. This undermines the policy Armenia has pursued over the last three decades, including by Pashinyan himself before the outbreak of the Second Karabakh War (which the prime minister criticised deeply and on many levels). It seems that the new approach results from a more realistic assessment of the situation in the region and beyond (Armenia undeniably lost the war in 2020; Russia's involvement in Ukraine and the fact it doesn't offer Armenia any real security guarantees; global opinion favours Azerbaijan's territorial integrity), as well as in Armenia itself (the prime minister enjoys a strong domestic political position since his victory in last year's parliamentary elections).
- PM Pashinyan has effectively called into question the existing regional security architecture, in which Russia plays a dominant role. Moscow guaranteed Armenia's security – unsuccessfully, as the 2020 war showed – and acted as the main mediator in the Karabakh peace process. Pashinyan did emphasise the role played by his contact

with President Vladimir Putin and the tripartite working group (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia) at deputy prime minister level, which dealt with the opening of communication routes (although its activity of more than a year has not had any visible effects); however, he devoted more attention to the efforts made by the EU and the president of the European Council Charles Michel, who arranged two meetings between Pashinyan and the president of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev. Pashinyan confirmed that Yerevan would meet the deadline set at the last meeting (6 April) to set up a bilateral commission for border delimitation and border security (by the end of the month). The prime minister also indirectly criticised the Russian peacekeeping forces, stating that the incident on March 24 (when Azerbaijani forces entered an Armenian village in Nagorno-Karabakh) took place within the sphere of their responsibility (see more in [Tension escalates in Nagorno-Karabakh](#)). He was more open in this criticism of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, which did not even decide to send a monitoring mission during the local escalation of the conflict in May 2021. It seems that Pashinyan will try to build up a broader, more informal international coalition around the Karabakh issue, in which Western states and structures, including the US, France and the EU, will be the dominant players. In this situation, Yerevan emphasising goodwill and a desire to make concessions would encourage these actors to put pressure on Baku to formally guarantee the full rights of Karabakh's Armenians.

- It is possible that Moscow, which does not want to lose its privileged position in the peace process or its influence in Armenia, will try to call Yerevan to heel. This is indicated by the Russian MFA's *ad hoc* appointment of a special representative for the normalisation of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. On 14 April it was announced that Igor Khovaev, who was also Russia's representative in the OSCE Minsk Group – the structure formally responsible for the Karabakh peace process, co-chaired by Russia, France and the US – had been nominated to this position.
- It is difficult to predict how Pashinyan's speech will be further met by the general public and the opposition in Armenia. On the one hand, the people are aware of the scale of Armenia's defeat in the Karabakh war and the failure of the current policy (as well as 'fatigue' at the issue that has dominated Armenian public life in recent decades, making the country's normal economic development impossible in practice); on the other hand, however, they may conclude that the prime minister has 'betrayed' the nation's interests, which in an extreme case may provoke attempts to assassinate him. It should be expected that the Armenian opposition, including the former presidents Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan, will try to motivate Armenians both inside and outside the country to protest against the new Karabakh policy and activate Pashinyan's opponents in the power structures. The prime minister tried to minimise the above-mentioned threats by delivering the speech in the run-up to Easter, when interest in politics naturally falls off. In addition, he replaced the commanding staff in the army (officers of the General Staff demanded his resignation in February 2021). Moreover, a month ago Vahagn Khachaturian became the new president of Armenia; he was put forward for the post by Pashinyan's party (unconfirmed but likely reports say his predecessor resigned because he did not want to sign the expected future peace agreements with Azerbaijan and Turkey). The parliament of the unrecognised Nagorno-Karabakh Republic has reacted sharply to the new policy initiative. At an extraordinary

meeting on 14 April, it adopted a resolution condemning what it saw as plans for “the forcible incorporation of Artsakh [Nagorno-Karabakh] into Azerbaijan in the name of peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan”, and called upon the Armenian government to withdraw from its “pernicious posture”.