

Russia seals the demise of Nagorno-Karabakh

Katarzyna Chawryło, Miłosz Bartosiewicz

Azerbaijan's military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh (19–20 September), which forced the unrecognised republic to announce that it would dissolve itself on 1 January 2024, was accompanied by an escalation of the already tense relations between Russia and Armenia, countries that are formally linked by a military alliance and an economic union. There is no indication that Russia tried to stop Azerbaijan's so-called anti-terrorist operation, following which the whole of Nagorno-Karabakh came under Azerbaijani control. Russian peacekeepers, who have been stationed in this parastate under the terms of the 2020 ceasefire, came under fire themselves, resulting in the deaths of several soldiers. The Russian contingent confined itself to assisting in the evacuation of the Armenian population, virtually all of whom had left the unrecognised republic by early October for fear of Azerbaijani repression (see *'Exodus of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh'*).

Russia has been openly critical of Armenia, claiming that the collapse of the Nagorno-Karabakh parastate was a consequence of a pro-Western turn in the policy of the Armenian government and its provocative (in Russia's view) behaviour towards Russia and Azerbaijan. For example, Russia was displeased that Armenia had recently held joint military exercises with the US and ratified the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which demands the arrest of Vladimir Putin. The Russian foreign ministry has accused the government in Yerevan of failing to implement the Kremlin-mediated tripartite agreements, engaging instead in talks brokered by the West, especially the EU (as well as the US), while also keeping its troops in the unrecognised republic in contravention of the peace agreements; this echoed the accusations coming from Azerbaijan, which Armenia has denied. Russia's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov warned of the negative consequences of Armenia's reliance on the United States for its security; he also said that Russia's interests in the South Caucasus cannot be ignored. After the government of Nagorno-Karabakh announced its dissolution on 28 September, the Kremlin's spokesman Dmitri Peskov merely stated that Russia was closely monitoring the situation, focusing on its humanitarian aspect.

Russian propaganda outlets have given extensive coverage to the events surrounding the parastate. They have put the blame for Nagorno-Karabakh's surrender to Azerbaijan squarely on the Armenian government, in particular Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, whom they have labelled a traitor. In contrast, Russian propaganda has sought to justify Azerbaijan's actions. The attacks on Pashinyan have been accompanied by fierce anti-Western (especially anti-American) rhetoric, claiming that it was Western interference in the region's affairs that wrecked the 2020 ceasefire, which was beneficial to both warring

parties, and resulted in Armenia's *de facto* relinquishment of its rights to the Armenian exclave.

Commentary

- Azerbaijan's forcible seizure of Nagorno-Karabakh represents a political defeat for Russia and a blow to its image. It has demonstrated that Russia's position has clearly weakened, not only in the South Caucasus but also in the entire post-Soviet area. For more than three decades the Kremlin has been using the conflict around Nagorno-Karabakh to put pressure on both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Without explicitly taking sides, it positioned itself as the main arbiter and guarantor of peace. Russia's passivity in the face of Azerbaijan's destruction of the *status quo* in the region implies that it has now abandoned this policy, and represents a huge concession to both Azerbaijan and Turkey, Baku's main supporter. .
- Russia's passivity towards Azerbaijan's actions in Nagorno-Karabakh stems from its involvement in the war in Ukraine, which has forced the Kremlin to assign priorities to its actions abroad and made it impossible to respond adequately in all the hotspots in its 'near abroad'. In addition, due to the economic sanctions related to the invasion of Ukraine, Russia has had to pursue a more accommodating policy towards Turkey, which has openly supported Azerbaijan. Furthermore, the war in Ukraine has exposed the ineffectiveness of the Russian armed forces. On the one hand, this has undermined the perception of Russia as a guarantor of security among the region's societies and states; on the other, it has emboldened both Azerbaijan and Turkey to strengthen their positions at Russia's expense.
- Russia has been trying to soften the blow to its image through a wide-scale propaganda campaign, which has also enlisted propagandists of Armenian origin (notably Margarita Simonyan). Its primary aim is to debunk the accusations levelled by the Armenian government that Russia failed to fulfil its allied commitments to Armenia and *de facto* gave Turkey-backed Azerbaijan a free hand on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. The Kremlin wants to redirect the disillusionment and anger in Armenian society onto Pashinyan's cabinet, and to stoke anti-government sentiment with a view to exploiting it. Its anti-Western rhetoric is aimed at convincing public opinion in the region and in Russia itself that Moscow remains the sole guarantor of the Armenian people's security and Armenia's survival as a state, and that it has retained its pivotal and indisputable position in the security sphere in the South Caucasus.
- Russia will try to make up for its defeat in Nagorno-Karabakh by bringing Armenia under its total control. Therefore, the Kremlin will seek to replace the current government in Yerevan with a pro-Russian one, while putting pressure on the Armenian elite to abandon its intentions of forging closer relations with the West. In order to achieve its goals, Russia may step up its propaganda campaign to undermine the Armenian government's legitimacy, stir up revanchist attitudes in society (including among the refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh), instigate popular protests against Pashinyan's rule, and also put pressure on the Armenian government with the use of the powerful economic, energy and military tools at its disposal. Russia is Armenia's largest trade partner, accounting for around a third of its turnover, and its main supplier of fuels, providing nearly 90 percent of its natural gas imports and 100 percent of uranium for the country's sole nuclear power

plant. It also controls the country's railways and electricity infrastructure, while the Russian 102nd Military Base is located in the city of Gyumri. However, Russia's ambitions may be hampered by the Armenian public's attitude towards it: successive sociological surveys have shown that the percentage of those who consider Moscow to be Armenia's ally continues to decrease. According to a survey by the International Republican Institute from last spring, only 10 percent of Armenian respondents described relations between the two countries as very good, while 40 percent said they were rather good. At the same time, however, 15% of respondents assessed them as very bad, while 34% said they were rather bad (see '[A serious crisis in Armenian-Russian relations](#)').