

Karabakh's Second Siege

Wednesday 1 February 2023, by [CHETERIAN Vicken](#) (Date first published: 9 January 2023).

Azerbaijan, the economy of which is completely based on hydrocarbon production and exportation, and a contributor to global warming which is devastating our planet, a country where the slightest protest movement is repressed by police, is suffocating Karabakh Armenians by organizing a siege under slogans such as “stop ecocide”, “save nature”. When Orwell wrote 1984 and coined the term “doublespeak”, he had exactly this into consideration: totalitarianism deforming language and thought: the independent activities of civil society are replaced by soldiers of an authoritarian state.

I took the flight from Yerevan to Stepanakert. The civilian airplane had no seats, they were all taken away to make maximum space for cargo. We were sitting on bags of flour. No one called us to put on the security belts. The Yak-40 civilian plane took off and gained height very fast and kept its altitude until it reached the airport of Karabakh, where it went descended in spiral turns. This unusual manoeuvre was to avoid Azeri anti-aircraft fire which did not distinguish between civilians and military and opened fire on anything considered as Armenian. At Stepanakert Airport (situated in the village of Khojaly, now Ivanyan), there was only one car waiting for us, the foreign guests. The other passengers had to walk on foot to Stepanakert or their villages, as there was no gasoline for civilian cars. When we reached Stepanakert, we saw numerous buildings destroyed because of the heavy bombardment from Azeri artillery. In the centre of the city, public parks were planted potatoes or carrots, for survival.

That was in April 1992, at the height of the First Karabakh War, when the Armenian population was under total siege from the side of Azerbaijani military. Although different leadership came and went – first the Soviet-era apparatchik Ayaz Mütəllibov, then the Arabic literature professor turned pan-Turkist politician Abulfaz Elçibey – the policy did not change: a total war of annihilation against the Armenian population of Mountainous Karabakh – or Artsakh in Armenian. This was before the Armenian forces gained the initiative and went to the attack and took control of Lachin corridor in June 1992, to free themselves from a suffocating siege. The war that followed in the next two years led to mutual massacres and ethnic cleansing, the death of thousands of young soldiers, eventually with an Armenian military victory and the cease-fire of May 1994.

Since December 12, 2022, Karabakh Armenians suffer the same fate. Azerbaijani officials have closed Lachin road which is the only link from Karabakh to Armenia and the rest of the world. The road is blocked by people who pretend to be “ecological activists” pretending to oppose mining activities in Karabakh, yet there is no doubt that they are [agents of the Azerbaijani government](#), organized and controlled by the central authorities. The aim of the siege is to take control of the lifeline of the 120'000 population that continue to live on their ancestral land.

After the Second Karabakh War of 2020, when Azerbaijan launched a massive attack for 44 days and marked a military victory, Azerbaijani aggression against Karabakh and against Armenia did not stop. Since, the Azerbaijani president İlham Aliyev refers to Armenia as [“Western Azerbaijan”](#), preparing the ground for continuous conflict. This continuous aggression reveals that the aims of the 2020 war was not restoring Azerbaijan's “territorial integrity” according to “international law”, but a

primordial ethnic conflict that continues since the early 1990's. Ilham Aliyev could choose another policy after his victory in 2020, for example negotiations with the Armenian side to end a three-decade-old conflict, but instead he decided to continue the logic of threats and violence.

It should be reminded that not only Karabakh is under siege, but so is Armenia: both Azerbaijan and Turkey continue to impose a blockade against Armenia since the country accessed its independence, for over three decades now.

Russian Peacekeepers and the Lost Empire

The Lachin corridor that links Karabakh with Armenia is under the security control of Russian peacekeeping forces, deployed in the region according to the November 9, 2020 trilateral agreement (Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia) that put an end to the second Karabakh War. Strangely, since December 12 of last year, the Russian military tolerate that a few dozen demonstrators block a main road in their area of responsibility. Their passivity raises many questions about the role Russia is playing in this conflict, and whether Russia can fulfil its peacekeeping mandate. It is also unclear how far the political cooperation and coordination between Moscow and Baku goes. In the context of the Russian war in Ukraine, Azerbaijan has become important in helping Russia break Western sanctions and [export Russian gas to European markets](#).

Putin today lost the support of the Armenian public opinion. In the aftermath of the 2020 war, part of the Armenian public, and very much so the Karabakh Armenians, saw in Putin's Russia the guarantor of their security. Not anymore, as Russia remains idle while Azerbaijani attacks continue. This is very similar to the shift in the Armenian public opinion in 1988: the Karabakh movement had started in the spirit of Gorbachev's reforms, and in the initial demonstrations they carried posters of Lenin and slogans of Perestroika. But when Gorbachev failed to respond to their demands, and Soviet forces failed even to guarantee the physical safety of Armenians following the pogroms in [Sumgait](#) (February 1988), Armenian public opinion radicalized into anti-Soviet positions and demanded independence.

Empires are built and decline if they have a function to fulfil: to play the arbiter and bring stability where local actors fail. Putin has revealed that he wants to regain a lost empire, but he simply does not know how to.

"Civil Society" is different from "Military Society"

Azerbaijan, the economy of which is completely based on hydrocarbon production and exportation, and a contributor to global warming which is devastating our planet, a country where the slightest protest movement is repressed by police, is suffocating Karabakh Armenians by organizing a siege under slogans such as "stop ecocide", "save nature". When Orwell wrote 1984 and coined the term "doublespeak", he had exactly this into consideration: totalitarianism deforming language and thought: the independent activities of civil society are replaced by soldiers of an authoritarian state.

Yet, this deformation of meaning is not the result of only authoritarianism. In the last days I tried to find whether there were authentic environmentalists in Azerbaijan, in neighbouring countries including Turkey, who protested Aliyev's regime confiscating ecological discourse and turning it into a weapon of ethnic cleansing. Yet, I did not find any. Numerous environmental NGOs in Georgia, Armenia, Turkey and elsewhere received grants for "regional projects" to enhance environmental cooperation. Yet, they feel that the events in Lachin do not concern them. Before the emergence of authoritarian regimes, the guardians of "civil society" have already eroded language and its meaning through their behaviour.

We know that authoritarian regimes are not equipped to solve such complex issues as ethno-territorial conflicts. Nor that they strive to. More often authoritarian regimes use such conflicts to legitimize their confiscation of the public sphere. Ethno-territorial conflicts have a chance to be resolved through the establishment of rule of law – where individual citizens and social groups have rights protected by the state, and where ethnic, linguistic, religious, racial, and other differences become less important. But does Azerbaijan, with its economic structure dependent on oil and gas exports, and political values where concepts like “civil society” or slogans like “save nature” are hijacked to enflame nationalism and conflict, does such a country have any chance to establish rule of law?

Vicken Cheterian

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

Agos

<https://www.agos.com.tr/en/article/27996/karabakhs-second-siege>