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Nagorno-Karabakh's tragedy has echoes of Europe's dark past. But a remedy lies in Europe too

Tuesday 3 October 2023, by [TOCCI Nathalie](#) (Date first published: 2 October 2023).

As more than 100,000 people flee to avoid rule by Azerbaijan, it's time for the EU to consider the prospect of membership for Armenia

The president of the self-declared "Republic of Artsakh", Samvel Shahramanyan, has [dissolved all institutions of the breakaway region of Nagorno-Karabakh](#) and [almost all](#) Karabakh Armenians are now thought to fled the enclave being reintegrated into Azerbaijan. What lessons can be drawn from the tragic epilogue of this three decades-long secessionist conflict in Europe?

The images of [long queues of cars](#) escaping mountainous Karabakh to neighbouring Armenia bring back dark memories of ethnic cleansing that Europe thought had been relegated to its past. Just as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with its imperial follies, trenches and wanton destruction, catapulted Europe back into the harrowing days of the world wars, the flight of ethnic Armenians reminds us to the Balkans of the 1990s - or even further back, to the end of the Ottoman empire during the first world war.

To be clear: there is no question that Nagorno-Karabakh lies within the officially recognised borders of Azerbaijan. Europe and the international community have never questioned this, and the war in Ukraine has highlighted once again the significance of sovereignty and territorial integrity as the linchpins of international law. As such, there are no legally sound reasons to oppose the reintegration of Karabakh into Azerbaijan. It is also important to underline that the Azerbaijani president, [Ilham Aliyev](#), has not ordered the 120,000 local Armenians to leave, let alone pointed a gun at their heads. Baku has offered to [extend citizenship](#) to all Karabakh Armenians who lay down their weapons and the political struggle for independence.

Yet beyond form there's content, which points dramatically towards yet another case of ethnic cleansing in Europe. Aliyev may be willing to reintegrate Karabakh Armenians, but [Azerbaijan is not a democracy](#). Being reintegrated into a country in which individual human rights and fundamental freedoms are not protected - let alone group rights, which are highly unlikely to be granted to Armenians - is hardly an attractive proposition.

Furthermore, hatred between Armenians and Azerbaijanis runs deep, far deeper than that between Georgians and [Abkhazians](#) or [Ossetians](#), or Moldovans and [Transnistrians](#). While distinct from their relationship with Azerbaijan, this hatred is tied to the even deeper wounds surrounding the [1915 Armenian genocide](#), unrecognised by Turkey, which has [welcomed Azerbaijan's move](#) in the enclave. While incomparable in violence and magnitude, the exodus of Karabakh Armenians from Turkic-Azerbaijan will probably end up being woven into a larger and older story of Armenian victimhood and dispossession. Far from healing, Armenian wounds are bleeding again.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has seen a dramatic reversal of the tide. The [1988-94 war with Azerbaijan](#) was squarely won by Armenia, with Russia's support. This led not only to the establishment of the breakaway statelet of Nagorno-Karabakh, but also to the Armenian occupation of [seven further regions](#) of Azerbaijan, surrounding Karabakh, and the [displacement of 1 million Azeris](#) from their homes. For 30 years, Karabakh Armenians were intransigent, unwilling to move an inch on their demands for self-determination through independence. Armenia proper, up until [the election of Nikol Pashinyan in 2018](#), was ruled by a Karabakh clan, in what appeared to be a clear case of the tail wagging the dog.

I recall during my first visit to Nagorno-Karabakh in 2001 being surprised to learn how little, if any, room for peace negotiations there was. Even then, before Azerbaijan's oil boom, [the profits of which were heavily invested in its defence industry](#), it seemed clear that Karabakh would never become an independent state. But rather than facing reality and using their temporary leverage to secure a victor's peace, Armenians assumed they would enjoy the upper hand for ever. For decades, they didn't budge on their demands for independence, and now tragically end up displaced and dispossessed.

It is a lesson that other conflict parties elsewhere should take note of. Even in conflicts where power is heavily skewed to one side, no one can know what the future holds. In the Middle East, Israelis have entrenched their land grab of the occupied Palestinian territories, exploiting their military might and unconditional US and European support. They now feel even stronger as Arab countries normalise relations with Israel, [with the big prize of Saudi Arabia finally within reach](#). Yet global power balances are changing in ways that will profoundly affect the Middle East. This could further strengthen Israel, but it could weaken it too. Israelis would do well to learn the lessons of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict.

Back to Nagorno-Karabakh, alongside Azerbaijan's rearmament leading to the [2020 war](#) - in which Baku retook control of the occupied regions around Karabakh - the 2023 epilogue has been triggered also by Russia's abandonment of Armenia. Here too, Yerevan and [Stepanakert](#), the breakaway capital, thought Moscow would never give up on Christian Armenians in favour of Muslim Azerbaijanis. They were wrong. Russia, whose "peacekeepers" were present in the region, did nothing over the 10 months of [Baku's blockade of the Lachin corridor](#) connecting Karabakh with Armenia, depriving Karabakh residents of food and medicine. It simply turned the other way as Azerbaijan made its final military move to retake total control of the enclave.

Vladimir Putin abandoned Karabakh Armenians to their fate partly because he has bigger fish to fry in his failing invasion of Ukraine, and partly out of spite towards Pashinyan, who has sought to [move his country](#) towards Europe and the west. In a well-rehearsed playbook, Moscow hopes to regain control over Armenia by triggering Pashinyan's fall from power, paving the way to a more congenial government in Yerevan. What easier way to do this than stand back, allowing Armenia to be defeated, and hope this will trigger regime change there? Indeed, the last weeks have seen crowds of angry Armenians [calling on Pashinyan to resign](#).

Yet at the same time, Armenians are clear-eyed and well aware that without Russia's abandonment, things would not have turned out this way. Their sense of betrayal by Moscow is deep. Both Washington and Brussels are seeking to fill that void and show solidarity towards Armenians, with USAid chief [Samantha Power's](#) recent trip to Yerevan being testimony to this. It will take more than words and cash to consolidate Armenia's path to democracy. It will require a sustained commitment over the years, first and foremost by Europeans. As the EU reopens its enlargement file through the accession process towards Ukraine, Moldova and potentially Georgia, there's no better way to do so - were Yerevan to signal its interest - than to offer the prospect of EU membership to Armenia as well.

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