

# Another War Over Nagorno-Karabakh

Monday 12 October 2020, by [LANGNER Heiko](#) (Date first published: 2 October 2020).

## **On the current escalation of the conflict, its background, and the potential for peace**

Since last weekend, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh has escalated to open warfare. As a result, this conflict, which is otherwise often disregarded, is now garnering attention in Germany. This was reason enough for us to speak with Heiko Langner—who has been dealing with the conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh region for a number of years—about the current escalation of the situation, as well as the background to the conflict, and potential plans for achieving peace.

### **Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung: Heiko, can you start off by describing how the conflict began?**

Heiko Langner: The historical origins of the conflict can be traced back 115 years to the time of the civil war in tsarist Russia. At that time, the social class contradictions between the Azerbaijani farm workers, who had migrated en masse from the country that was then the largest oil-producing region around Baku in search of work, and the emergent local Armenian merchant bourgeoisie erupted in violent confrontations for the first time. What was essentially a social conflict was later quickly ethnicized as a result of the Soviet nationality policy, because the state system was structured according to national territories, so “nationalist in form, socialist in content”. This led to the development of a distinct “matryoshka nationalism”, in which the separate nationalities competed with one another over the reach and political status of their respective local authorities. Incidentally, in her text *The Russian Revolution*, Rosa Luxemburg keenly observed that an ethnicist understanding of self-determination cannot be reconciled with an internationalist class politics. And indeed, the conflict in the late 1980s between the Soviet Socialist Republics Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian autonomous region belonging to Azerbaijan, heralded the collapse of the Soviet multinational state. The newly independent republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan subsequently waged an open, bloody war from 1992 to 1994, the outcome of which was that Azerbaijan lost control of the region, as well as seven neighbouring districts, to Armenia. A de facto political regime was installed in these areas, which to date has not been recognized by any other nation. Numerous resolutions adopted by the United Nations Security Council and General Assembly acknowledge that, according to international law, the entire region still belongs to Azerbaijan and is therefore being unlawfully occupied by Armenia, or rather by the de facto regime.

### **What plans are there for resolving the conflict? Which steps are intended, and what has thus far impeded their implementation?**

Since the ceasefire in 1994, the peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan have been conducted by the OSCE Minsk Group. The OSCE Minsk Group is an informal union of 13 participating countries, which includes Germany and Turkey and is co-chaired by Russia, the USA, and France. It took 13 years before the Madrid Principles were finally formulated in 2007 as the basis of a peace settlement—principles which both Armenia and Azerbaijan also agreed to.

The document stipulates that Armenia withdraw its armed forces from the occupied regions of Azerbaijan outside of Nagorno-Karabakh, that all communication, transportation, and trade embargoes be lifted, that an interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh be established, as well as a right of return for all internally displaced persons and refugees to their former places of residence, and that Nagorno-Karabakh's political fate be decided by way of a binding referendum conducted under international supervision and with the participation of both sections of the population. It is an open secret that the process of returning the Armenian-occupied areas around Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan did not fail because Azerbaijan did not want them back, but rather because the occupying forces did not want to give them back. Conversely, Azerbaijan has consistently refused to provide the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh with binding guarantees of safety and to agree to an effective OSCE ceasefire regime on the military line of contact unless Armenia withdraws its troops from the area. Although the negotiation format suits the international nature of the conflict, and although the three co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group manage to work together with an unusual degree of harmony, the situation has given rise to an ongoing blockade.

**For a long time, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was considered a “frozen conflict”, albeit one continually marked by exchanges of fire—sometimes with casualties, as was most recently the case in July of this year. Why is the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan escalating now?**

The term “frozen conflict” has long ceased to apply to this situation; it would make more sense to refer to it as an unresolved conflict. The previous terminology used to describe the conflict has long been worn out and has become untenable. This is demonstrated by recurring ceasefire violations along the line of contact. Their intensity is increasing, and trivial occurrences or minor provocations are often deemed sufficient grounds for initiating them, whereby it is often difficult to say who started a particular exchange. The Azerbaijani side clearly has a greater interest in changing the status quo, which is why it is also able to be more flexible and pragmatic in the negotiations, because any suggested compromises change the situation to its advantage. On the other hand, it is virtually inevitable that the Armenian side will perceive any progress made in negotiations as an insidious rescission of its military victory in the war, which is why it for the most part clings to its unattainable maximum demands. However, the negotiations will not lead to a settlement unless both sides are willing to make difficult compromises. Most recently, an entire series of escalatory steps was set in motion, which in July led to grave disputes on the internationally recognized border between the two countries. It is possible that military clashes could occur far away from the actual conflict region at any time, since the majority of the military forces occupying Nagorno-Karabakh are comprised of regular soldiers and young conscripts from Armenia's regular armed forces.

**Azerbaijan is a close ally of Turkey; Armenia is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union, as well as the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and is thus a close ally of Russia. Russia maintains military bases in Armenia, but supplies weapons to both sides. How are Turkey and Russia currently responding to the conflict? In your opinion, are other conflicts between the two countries influencing the current escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh?**

That is the common perception among the German public. It's not wrong, but it doesn't do justice to the complex and contradictory realities in the patterns of political interaction exhibited by the state actors in the South Caucasus. The conflict defies a binary definition. As the prominent hegemonic power in the South Caucasus, Russia has thus essentially positioned itself as a neutral force between the two sides for some time now, despite its military alliance with Armenia. In this role, Russia simultaneously acts as both the most important peace broker within the OSCE Minsk Group and the main supplier of weapons to both parties to the conflict, which is precisely why it is so difficult to reconcile the interests of both sides: thus far, neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan has taken the view that its interests have been sufficiently catered to. Armenia has not been able to legalize its military

occupation of the Azerbaijani territories, nor has Azerbaijan been able to reclaim even one of its lost territories. The “Erdoğan” factor is currently causing a serious problem for Russia. A long-term Turkish military presence in Azerbaijan on Russia’s vulnerable south flank would be the worst possible scenario for Vladimir Putin. But he does not have the power to prevent Azerbaijan from authorizing Turkish military bases in its region, because in practice, the South Caucasus republic has far more sovereignty than its neighbours in the region. The relationship between Turkey and Azerbaijan is likewise not one of one-sided dependence, unlike the relationship that exists between Russia and Armenia. Within the context of the current war in and around Nagorno-Karabakh, Erdoğan functions as a mere means to an end, and not as Azerbaijan’s undisputed senior partner; that would be consistent neither with the sovereignty asserted on behalf of Azerbaijan by its president İlham Aliyev, nor with the excellent state of relations between Russia and Azerbaijan. One remaining power-political option would be for the Kremlin to allow Azerbaijan to remain in Nagorno-Karabakh—but only to a limited extent—in order to prevent a Turkish military presence in Azerbaijan. It was only a few days prior to the war that Moscow once again affirmed its support for the Madrid Principles and stipulated that five of the seven districts surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh be handed back to Azerbaijan. To this day, the Russian state media has rarely expressed criticism of Azerbaijan, but Russia is nevertheless contractually obliged to provide military support only to Armenia, not Nagorno-Karabakh. In addition to this, the pro-Western policies of the new Armenian government that has been in power since the 2018 “Velvet Revolution” have given rise to a growing sense of estrangement in Russian-Armenian relations. Another possibility would be to make the Karabakh issue into part of a larger geopolitical negotiation package; for example, requesting the return of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan in return for Turkey’s retreat from the Idlib region in Syria, in order to bring the area back under the control of Russia’s minion, Bashar al-Assad. The flip-side of this kind of imperial geopolitics by military means will likely be a human tragedy and humanitarian catastrophe of tremendous proportions. More people in and around Nagorno-Karabakh are assumed to have been killed in the first days of the war than had been killed in the region since the ceasefire in 1994, because from the beginning the two sides have been attacking one another relentlessly, with heavy use of weaponry. The number of civilian casualties will increase rapidly unless the war is soon brought to an end.

**The changeover of power in Armenia in 2018 heralded a period of detente on both sides, but this ended again in 2019. Why was this detente not permanent, and what conclusions can be drawn from it for resolving the current conflict?**

When the changeover of power occurred in Armenia in 2018, the Azerbaijani side initially had great expectations for progress in the ongoing negotiations, because Nikol Pashinyan was the first Armenian head of state in 20 years who did not come from Nagorno-Karabakh, and it was generally hoped that he would be more willing to compromise than his predecessors. In the period that followed, significant internal progress was made within Armenia towards achieving democracy, for example, in terms of freedom of the press and freedom of assembly. And for the first time, free elections were conducted that genuinely deserved to be labelled as such. However, the precarious social situation of the country’s population, which had long endured widespread poverty, did not improve. In terms of foreign policy, the new Armenian government formally maintained its alliance with Russia, but was in increasingly close contact with the West—a fact that Moscow took immediate and severely disapproving note of. Following the initial easing of tensions, policy on the conflict with Azerbaijan became increasingly extreme, because the Armenian leadership felt the need to prove that it did not intend to compromise the national consensus on the Karabakh issue by way of a policy of surrendering its claims. A number of provocative political steps followed: the official announcement that the illegal settlement of ethnic Armenians from Lebanon and Syria in Nagorno-Karabakh and the occupied Azerbaijani territories—which had been occurring unofficially and to a limited extent for a number of years—would now be extended, which undeniably constitutes a

blatant violation of international law; then the plan to relocate the seat of the region's de facto "parliament", which is not internationally recognized, from the region's capital, Stepanakert, to Shusha, the former Azerbaijani stronghold in Nagorno-Karabakh. The defence minister of Armenia even went as far as to suggest that the conflict's existing slogan, "peace for land", be replaced by "a new war for new territories". The military confrontations increased, and Azerbaijan's president Ilham Aliyev came under considerable pressure from nationalist forces who mobilized in spontaneous mass protests in the capital city of Baku during the July conflicts and ultimately attempted to storm Azerbaijan's national parliament. This chain of escalation ultimately led to the current state of war.

**Which steps will need to be taken as soon as possible in order to put an end to the fighting and ensure the safety of the population living in the area?**

An immediate ceasefire is urgently needed, which would require a corresponding level of willingness on both sides, which is currently lacking. Unfortunately, the Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan has already officially rejected such a proposal from the Russian co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group and in doing so has publicly undermined Russia in its role as peace broker. However, Azerbaijan also currently has no real interest in a ceasefire; it has already achieved significant initial successes in terms of military strategy, which has whet its appetite for more. The war has increased momentum, which means that there is now a need for international pressure to be exerted on the warring parties. The 15 members of the UN Security Council have called for an immediate end to the fighting: this is an important first step that must be quickly followed by subsequent actions. Conflict negotiations must be kicked into gear in order to achieve a ceasefire and enable the supply of humanitarian aid to the civilian population.

**In your view, what might a long-term, left-wing, peace-oriented solution to the conflict look like?**

Those who are themselves not direct parties to the conflict should neither behave nor speak as if they are. Left-wing peace policy must consistently centre human populations and take into consideration the human rights of *both* population groups and those of their interests that are justifiable according to international law. Countries' geopolitical interests, or rather those of national governments, have no place in left-wing peace policy. This means formulating exclusively non-violent solutions, ensuring humanitarian aid for civilian populations in conflict-affected regions, resuming peace talks, and complying with, or rather restoring international law. Both the Armenian and the Azerbaijani populations have the same right to live in freedom, dignity, and safety in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Competing standards of international law, such as the right of self-determination and territorial integrity of states, are by no means fundamentally irreconcilable opposites, as long as all those involved agree to mutual compromises. Left-wing policies also need to impede the business of war and condemn the supplying of weaponry by all nations to both warring sides, and not just condemn Turkey's supplying of arms to Azerbaijan; Turkey is not even the biggest arms supplier in the situation anyway. Furthermore, a realistic conflict analysis should always form the foundation of left-wing peace policy. Ideological narcissism inevitably leads to misjudgements. Instead of concocting clever solutions from a distance for the two parties involved in the conflict, the left should open up spaces for dialogue, as well as express its solidarity by supporting existing grass-roots democratic processes for the self-empowerment of the civilian populations who are affected by conflict, in order to improve their chances of being involved in renewed peace negotiations. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan need to return to the Madrid Principles—which the two countries have in fact consented to as the basis of a potential peace settlement—and finally implement the steps laid out in the settlement. The majority of the current build-up of conflict could be resolved if numerous steps were implemented simultaneously. This would mean enforcing the withdrawal of Armenian troops from the five occupied territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh, something the co-chairs of

the OSCE Minsk Group have repeatedly called for; Azerbaijan, on the other hand, would have to agree to an OSCE peacekeeping operation on a new, yet-to-be-determined line of contact, as well as provide the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh with contractually binding security guarantees. This is the only way to ensure that the more than 750,000 internally displaced Azerbaijanis will be able to safely return to their former homes, which will also have to be entirely rebuilt. Those who are forced to foot the bill of billions in reconstruction costs will likely be inclined to reconsider any further military adventures in future. The other remaining points, such as determining the ultimate political status of Nagorno-Karabakh, could then be implemented at a later date. This is what a peaceful alternative to war might look like. War does not generate solutions, it only leads to more suffering.

### **What conclusions can be drawn from other armed conflicts in the post-Soviet region with regard to Nagorno-Karabakh?**

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict constitutes a special historical case, as indicated by its long history. With this in mind, it is not really possible to draw any generalized conclusions for other unresolved long-term conflicts in the post-Soviet region. In general, however, the conflict resolution capacities of the OSCE need to be urgently expanded. As long as the OSCE continues to have much less than one tenth of NATO's budget at its disposal—the defence spending of NATO members is many times higher than this, mind you—it can hardly come as a surprise that attempts at resolving present conflicts by way of non-violent means are becoming increasingly unsuccessful.

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**Heiko Langner** is a political scientist whose work has long dealt with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. He works as a research associate for member of the German Bundestag Helin Evrim Sommer.

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