

The Long Road to Peace in the South Caucasus

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The 44-day Karabakh War reshaped the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus region. Azerbaijan regained its territories and historic justice was restored. What is transpiring in the region at the moment will decide its future for many decades to come. Peace, prosperity, and inclusive development in the long-fragmented South Caucasus region may take shape through normalization of relations and proper communication between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The two nations of the region paid a very high price in the name of the occupational, expansionist, and irredentist policy of Armenia that disregarded international law and attempted to perpetuate the ‘results’ of the illegal occupation of the territories of Azerbaijan. In the context of the new reality, there are several important areas that demand a good deal of work and resource mobilization on the part of Azerbaijan, as well as bona fide cooperation on the part of Armenia. Issues in the political track, i.e., those related to the Armenia–Azerbaijan normalization process and the signing of a peace treaty, demilitarization and demining, reconstruction of the liberated territories, connectivity, and humanitarian issues, are currently the most pressing ones and require cooperation, dedication, and continuity. This piece attempts to highlight current work in these areas and define the challenges remaining ahead.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, Armenia, Karabakh region, Peace, Connectivity



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Introduction

After Azerbaijan liberated its territories from Armenian occupation back in fall 2020 in the aftermath of the 44-day Karabakh War, and for the first time in the region's 30-year independent history, the stakes are high for consolidating the existing, but still fragile, opportunities for peace. For this tenuous peace to take firm hold there are several tracks on which maximum cooperation and coordination of efforts are required of both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Achieving lasting stability in the post-conflict South Caucasus region requires concerted efforts on the part of all stakeholders.

However, the three-decades-long occupation left in shambles not only a large swathe of Azerbaijan's territories, but also the two nations' trust in each other. In that regard, rebuilding mutual trust and confidence is certainly a gargantuan task alongside a no less difficult undertaking such as rebuilding the liberated territories of Azerbaijan.

This article attempts to highlight the processes relating to political, connectivity, and humanitarian issues between Armenia and Azerbaijan; Azerbaijan's efforts towards full demilitarization and demining; as well as the reconstruction of the liberated territories. In so doing, the issues will be grouped under three chapters and six clusters, and existing challenges as well as opportunities for peace will be given due regard.

Political Track

In the political track, things are seemingly moving in the right direction, although not without problems. In order to turn the page of enmity in view of the current new realities in the region, confidence and security building measures (CSBMs) between Azerbaijan and Armenia should be promoted. The implementation of all provisions of the 10 November 2020 Statement will be instrumental in this regard. There are several developments in the political track that are noteworthy both in terms of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan and for the region in general.

Throughout the time that has elapsed since the 44-day Karabakh War, Azerbaijan has been proposing to Armenia the signing of a peace treaty.

Moreover, Azerbaijan also introduced a five-point proposal in March 2022 that would serve as a foundation for such a future peace treaty.¹ The principles of the proposal were:²

- Mutual recognition of and respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity, inviolability of internationally recognized borders, and political independence of each other;
- Mutual confirmation of the absence of territorial claims against each other and acceptance of legally binding obligations not to raise such a claim in future;
- Obligation to refrain, in their inter-state relations, from undermining the security of each other, from threat or use of force both against political independence and territorial integrity, and acting in any other manner inconsistent with the purposes of the UN Charter;
- Delimitation and demarcation of the state border, and the establishment of diplomatic relations;
- Unblocking of transportation and other communications, building other communications as appropriate, and establishment of cooperation in other fields of mutual interest.

Although the abovementioned proposals were met with cold silence on the part of Armenia's leadership, later signals suggested that Armenia in fact accepted Azerbaijan's proposals.³ Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, in his speech in the country's National Assembly on 13 April 2022, made several sensational statements regarding Armenia's handling of its former conflict with Azerbaijan, as well as future perspectives. More specifically, on the latter, Pashinyan noted that: "Today, the international community is again telling us to lower our bar a little bit on the status of Nagorno-

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1 AzerNews, *Azerbaijan sends five-point proposal to Armenia on normalization of relations*, March 12, 2022, available at <https://www.azernews.az/nation/190596.html> (accessed: June 14, 2022)

2 Mfa.gov.az, *Head of the Press Service Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan Leyla Abdullayeva answers the media's question (No: 117/22)*, March 14, 2022, available at: <https://www.mfa.gov.az/en/news/no11722> (accessed: May 18, 2022)

3 TRT World, *Aliyev: Armenia accepts Azerbaijan's proposal*, April 9, 2022, <https://www.trtworld.com/asia/aliyev-armenia-accepts-azerbaijan-s-proposal-56223> (accessed: May 18, 2022)

Karabakh,”⁴ apparently referring to the maximalist claims about the so-called ‘independence of Nagorno-Karabakh’ – a narrative that dominated in Armenia’s position over the entire course of the conflict. The message sent with this statement was a powerful one, as it testified to the growing understanding in Armenia about the necessity of normalizing relations with Azerbaijan.

However, when Armenia later initiated its own six-point proposals as a basis for the normalization of relations with Azerbaijan, it certainly caused a degree of confusion because of the persistent fluctuations in Armenia’s position. The first point of this document simply states that it is responding to Azerbaijan’s five-point proposal. Second point of the document underscores that Armenia has never had any territorial claims towards Azerbaijan and has recognized the latter’s territorial integrity by the agreement on the establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) of 8 December 1991, when both states joined the organization. Moreover, fourth point says that Armenia believes that implementation of the existing agreements, specifically those of the 10 November 2020 agreement that ended the war, and the 11 January 2021 (Moscow) and 26 November 2021 (Sochi) agreements, is important.⁵

Fifth point expresses Armenia’s readiness to start negotiations on a peace treaty with Azerbaijan based on the UN Charter, International Covenant on Civil and Political rights, and Helsinki Final Act.⁶ While Armenia’s proposals thus far were regarded as ‘constructive’ by Azerbaijan, third and sixth points of the same document are deemed ‘unacceptable’ by the latter. Although third point three touches upon the questions of ‘security’, ‘rights’ and ‘status’ for the ethnic Armenian population living in Karabakh region (a.k.a. Azerbaijani citizens of Armenia origin) and Azerbaijan is ready to provide both – security and rights – to ethnic Armenians residing in Karabakh region,⁷ the parties

4 Arka News Agency, *Pashinyan: international community urges Armenia to lower the bar on Karabakh status*, April 13, 2022, available at: https://arka.am/en/news/politics/pashinyan_international_community_urges_armenia_to_lower_the_bar_on_karabakh_status/ (accessed: May 18, 2022)

5 Asbarez.com, *Yerevan Reveals Six-Point Proposal it Sent to Azerbaijan for Peace Talks*, May 18, 2022, available at: <https://asbarez.com/yerevan-reveals-six-point-proposal-it-sent-to-azerbaijan-for-peace-talks/> (accessed: May 18, 2022)

6 *Ibid.*

7 President.az, *Ilham Aliyev attended the international conference themed “South Caucasus: Development and Cooperation at ADA University*, April 29, 2022, available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/55909> (accessed: May 30, 2022)

have different interpretations as to the implications of ‘rights’ and ‘provision of security’ to ethnic Armenians living in this region. As also highlighted in third point of Armenia’s proposals, the latter insists on defining a ‘final status’ for Karabakh Armenians, whereas Azerbaijan has repeatedly declared that there will not be any discussion on legal status for Armenians residing in the Karabakh region. In addition, sixth point of Armenia’s proposals is also unacceptable for Azerbaijan, because it represents an attempt to revive the OSCE Minsk Group as a chief mediator, while Azerbaijan considers that the OSCE Minsk Group is already irrelevant.⁸

To make matters worse, Nikol Pashinyan, in an interview that he gave to Al-Jazeera on 14 June 2022, once again digressed from his previous statements on the issue. He specifically underscored that the conflict is still not resolved, stating that, “We hope that in the near future we will be able to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.” Once again, he faltered when it came to the issue of opening all communications, saying that “according to the trilateral statement, we have one corridor – the Lachin corridor, which links Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia.”⁹

Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev, during his statement at the Baku Global Forum on 16 June 2022, noted: “If Armenia will demand status for Armenians in Karabakh, why shouldn’t Azerbaijanis demand status for Azerbaijanis in Western Zangezur? Because it was fully inhabited by Azerbaijanis.

In a speech delivered at the country’s National Assembly, Nikol Pashinyan once again made an attempt to focus on the issue of ‘status’, stating that “any status that truly guarantees the security, rights and freedoms of the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh must be considered a solution for us.”¹⁰ In a nutshell, he demonstrated that Armenia is still pushing the ‘status’ of Armenians living in Karabakh region, despite Azerbaijan repeatedly making clear its aversion to the idea. Following Pashinyan’s incendiary comments on the ‘status’ issue,

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Primeminister.am, *Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s interview to Al Jazeera*, June 14, 2022, available at: <https://www.primeminister.am/en/interviews-and-press-conferences/item/2022/06/14/Nikol-Pashinyan-interview-Al-Jazeera/> (accessed: June 19, 2022)

¹⁰ Primeminister.am, *Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s final speech at the National Assembly on the discussion of the annual report on the 2021 state budget execution of the Republic of Armenia*, June 15, 2022, available at: <https://www.primeminister.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2022/06/15/Nikol-Pashinyan-Speech/> (accessed: June 18, 2022)

Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev, during his statement at the Baku Global Forum on 16 June 2022, noted: "*If Armenia will demand status for Armenians in Karabakh, why shouldn't Azerbaijanis demand status for Azerbaijanis in Western Zangezur? Because it was fully inhabited by Azerbaijanis. So, this way will lead to a deadlock*".¹¹ Clearly, the post-conflict peace agenda requires rather delicate work and the avoidance of language that could negate the meagre progress achieved so far. The parties, especially Armenia, must do their best to this end and refrain from words and deeds that provoke a reaction from Azerbaijan.

On a more positive note, Azerbaijan and Türkiye initiated a new '3+3' format upon the end of the 44-day Karabakh War that would involve all-inclusive cooperation among the states in the South Caucasus plus Russia, Iran, and Türkiye. The first meeting of the 3+3 format took place in December 2021 in Moscow, although without the participation of Georgia which, due to its strained relation with Russia, has avoided joining the initiative. The format is still active, however, and the location of the next meeting was being discussed, with Türkiye proposed.¹² Georgia is still sceptical of joining the format, but the doors are said¹³ to be open for it to join at any stage. Although still in its nascent form, 3+3 aims to¹⁴ foster confidence-building measures, cooperation, peace, and economic development in the region. This includes Armenia–Azerbaijan and Armenia–Türkiye normalization; fighting against common threats; and, overall, keeping the handling of regional issues to the region's states themselves.

The Armenia–Azerbaijan normalization process is being accompanied by an Armenia–Türkiye normalization process, with the special representatives of the two countries having already met three times: in Moscow; on the margins of Antalya Diplomacy Forum in Türkiye (this

11 *President.az, Ilham Aliyev Attended the IX Global Baku Forum*, June 16, 2022, available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/56442> (accessed: June 18, 2022)

12 *Azerbaijani Vision, Next "3+3" format meeting planned to be held in Turkey – Erdogan*, January 23, 2022, available at: <https://en.azvision.az/news/154152/next-3+3-format-meeting-planned-to-be-held-in-turkey-%E2%80%93-erdogan.html> (accessed: May 30, 2022)

13 *APA News Agency, Zakharova: "Door of 3+3 format is always open for Georgia*, December 24, 2021, available at <https://apa.az/en/cis-countries/zakharova-door-of-33-format-is-always-open-for-georgia-364584> (accessed: June 15, 2022)

14 *Turan News Agency, First meeting of the 3+3 format to be held in Moscow on 10 December*, December 9, 2021, available at: https://turana.az/ext/news/2021/12/free/politics_news/en/10288.htm/001 (accessed: May 30, 2022)

was the meeting between the two foreign ministers); and again in Vienna, in January, February, March, and May 2022, respectively.¹⁵ However, it was made clear by both Türkiye and Azerbaijan that the two processes will not be detached and progress on Armenia–Türkiye normalization will be contingent on the developments in regard to Armenia–Azerbaijan normalization.¹⁶

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The image of the traditional mediator in terms of Armenia–Azerbaijan normalization has recently been shifting, too. With Azerbaijan liberating its lands using politico-military means, it became clear that the OSCE Minsk Group, which had been mediating the conflict for nearly three decades to no avail, is effectively defunct. Since the 44-day Karabakh War, the Azerbaijani side has repeatedly emphasized that “the conflict is resolved”,¹⁷ which leaves the OSCE Minsk Group without its *raison d’être*. On a positive note, the Minsk Group could look for a new role for itself in post-conflict rehabilitation, facilitation of Armenia–Azerbaijan normalization, and other relevant issues relating to the post-conflict era.

The European Union steps up

Another interesting development in this regard is the increased activism by the European Union (EU) to facilitate the process of normalization between the parties. Historically, the EU has mostly remained on the back burner in matters relating to conflict resolution in the South Caucasus, having left the initiative mostly to Russia to mediate between the parties in the most critical period of the [former] conflict. Although the former mediator of that conflict was the OSCE Minsk Group co-chair institute that comprised France and the United States alongside the Russian Federation, the tacit acknowledgement of the latter’s leading

15 Anadolu Agency, *Turkish, Armenian special representatives to hold 3rd meeting on May 3*, April 28, 2022, available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/turkish-armenian-special-representatives-to-hold-3rd-meeting-on-may-3/2575715> (accessed: June 19, 2022)

16 Daily Sabah, *Azerbaijan fully supports normalization of Turkey-Armenia ties: FM*, March 6, 2022, available at <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/azerbaijan-fully-supports-normalization-of-turkey-armenia-ties-fm> (accessed: June 17, 2022)

17 AzerTac, *President Ilham Aliyev: Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was resolved by military-political means*, December 4, 2020, available at https://azertag.az/en/xeber/President_Ilham_Aliyev_Armenia_Azerbaijan_Nagorno_Karabakh_conflict_was_resolved_by_military_political_means-1658185 (accessed: June 17, 2022)

role in regional affairs in the South Caucasus has always been present. This became apparent when Russia once again took the lead to mediate the signing of the 10 November 2020 Statement between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

However, a new trend is emerging with EU attempting to raise its profile in the normalization of Armenia–Azerbaijan relations. After the meeting between Azerbaijani and Armenian leaders held in Sochi on 26 November 2021, the EU has demonstrated increased interest in the facilitation of normalization between the two countries, although the decisions taken by the EU mediation team mostly build on existing agreements, including those agreed in November 2020, on 11 January 2021, and in November 2021 in Sochi. In this connection, the meeting that took place in Brussels on 14 December 2021 delivered important outcomes, including those relating to the opening of economic communications, delimitation and demarcation of the state border, demining, and humanitarian issues.¹⁸

The meeting on 6 April 2022 in Brussels further emphasized the importance of the above issues, but this time taking matters one step forward. It was agreed to convene a Joint Border Commission by the end of April 2022. This will be in charge of the delimitation of the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Moreover, progress was also made in the facilitation of signing a peace treaty between the two countries. In this regard, the final Statement of European Council President Charles Michel following the 6 April Brussels meeting reflects the agreement to instruct the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of both countries to work on the preparation of a future peace treaty.¹⁹ Later, on 11 April 2022, the first ever official direct telephone contact happened between the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia. The two ministers had an opportunity to discuss matters

18 European Council, “Statement of President Charles Michel following the trilateral meeting with President Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan”, December 15, 2021, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/12/14/statement-of-president-charles-michel-following-the-trilateral-meeting-with-president-ilham-aliyev-and-prime-minister-nikol-pashinyan/> (accessed: May 20, 2022)

19 European Council, “Statement of European Council President Charles Michel following the Second Trilateral Meeting with President Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan”, April 6, 2022, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/04/06/statement-of-european-council-president-charles-michel-following-the-second-trilateral-meeting-with-president-ilham-aliyev-and-prime-minister-nikol-pashinyan/> (accessed: May 20, 2022)

related to the preparation of a future peace treaty, the convening of the Joint Border Commission, and humanitarian issues.²⁰ Another landmark achievement in this regard was Azerbaijan clarifying the locations of two checkpoints on the border with Armenia adjoining Qubadli district (Eyvazli village) and Zangilan district (Qazanchi village).²¹

The most recent round of talks in Brussels with EU mediation took place on 22 May 2022 and also delivered important outcomes related to the post-conflict agenda between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Namely, the parties agreed to further work towards progress on border issues, connectivity, and signing the peace agreement. Moreover, the EU also pledged to “take forward with both parties the work of the Economic Advisory Group, which seeks to advance economic development for the benefit of both countries and their populations.”²²

However, Azerbaijan is unhappy with the changing narrative and mood of Armenia’s leadership when it comes to the implementation of the agreements reached so far, in particular the 10 November 2020 and 11 January 2021 Moscow agreements. Official Baku considers this as an attempt to sabotage the post-conflict peace agenda and kick the can down the road. Recurring opposition protests in Armenia against making peace with Azerbaijan certainly add more difficulty to the advancement of peace agenda, thus making the reactions of the Government of Armenia unpredictable. For instance, despite the agreements reached in April 2022 in Brussels under the EU’s mediation about the commencement of the Joint Border Commission by the end of April, the Azerbaijani side

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20 Mfa.gov.az, *Information of the Press Service Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan on telephone conversation of Minister Jeyhun Bayramov with Foreign Minister of Armenia Ararat Mirzoyan*, Press Release, April 11, 2022, available at: <https://www.mfa.gov.az/en/news/no17422> (accessed: May 20, 2022)

21 Nk.gov.az, *On amendments to the “Number of checkpoints and the list of territories and their location” approved by the Decision of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan, No. 256, dated September 10, 2021*, May 5, 2022, available at: <https://nk.gov.az/az/document/6111/> (accessed: May 30, 2022)

22 European Council, “Press statement by President Michel of the European Council following a trilateral meeting with President Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Prime Minister Pashinyan of Armenia”, May 23, 2022, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/05/23/press-statement-by-president-michel-of-the-european-council-following-a-trilateral-meeting-with-president-aliyev-of-azerbaijan-and-prime-minister-pashinyan-of-armenia/> (accessed: May 30, 2022)

reported that Armenia refused to join the meetings on the Armenia–Azerbaijan border that were planned for the end of April and mid-May. Azerbaijan even reported completing the composition of its delegation to participate in the discussions.²³

Hopes still exist that, after the next, third round of talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan with EU mediation, things may develop at a quicker pace in terms of both the border delimitation and demarcation process and the signing of a peace treaty. The recent decrees of both President Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan on the establishment of the relevant commissions on the delimitation of the state border between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia²⁴ on 23 May 2022, the day after the third round of talks in Brussels, could be a harbinger of things finally moving in the right direction. On 24 May 2022, the first meeting of the Border Commission took place with the participation of the Deputy Prime Ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia, Shahin Mustafayev and Mher Grigoryan respectively, along the Armenia–Azerbaijan inter-state border.²⁵

The little progress that is made on the political track is, however, often challenged by the persistent revanchist forces in Armenia, who seek to challenge the existing post-44-day Karabakh War reality by regularly taking their dissatisfaction to the streets. Armenia is reported to have conducted mass arrests during one recent protest, which demanded Prime Minister Pashinyan’s resignation over the latter’s position in favour of signing a peace treaty with Azerbaijan.²⁶

23 “The first meeting on the border was proposed by the Armenian Foreign Ministry. Azerbaijan accepted the offer and we were ready to send a delegation. However, on the last day - April 29, Armenia canceled the already agreed meeting”, Official Twitter Account of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, May 19, 2022, available at: <https://twitter.com/azpresident/status/1527298424294428674> (accessed: May 20, 2022)

24 Azertag.az, *State Commission on delimitation of state border between Azerbaijan and Armenia established*, May 23, 2022, available at: https://azertag.az/en/xeber/State_Commission_on_delimitation_of_state_border_between_Azerbaijan_and_Armenia_established__ORDER-2147375 (accessed: May 30, 2022); News.az, *Armenian PM signs decree regarding establishment of commission on delimitation with Azerbaijan*, May 23, 2022, available at: <https://news.az/news/pashinyan-signs-decree-regarding-establishment-of-commission-on-delimitation-with-azerbaijan> (accessed: May 30, 2022)

25 APA News Agency, *First meeting of Commission on Azerbaijan-Armenia delimitation held at the border*, May 24, 2022, available at: <https://apa.az/en/foreign-policy/first-meeting-of-commission-on-azerbaijan-armenia-delimitation-held-at-the-border-376868> (accessed: May 30, 2022)

26 Al-Jazeera, *Armenia detains 180 protesters demanding PM’s resignation*, May 2, 2022,

Russia remains an influential mediator

The geopolitical aspects of the EU's new-found activism in the Armenia–Azerbaijan normalization process should not be overlooked. As noted above, traditionally the South Caucasus region has been regarded as Russia's 'near abroad' by both the Russian Federation and external players, which mostly explains the latter's heretofore somewhat detached approach to the security problems in region. The same goes for the decades-long animosity between Armenia and Azerbaijan whereby, despite the existence of the OSCE Minsk Group to mediate the negotiations on the resolution of [former] Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, Russia became almost the chief mediator between the two warring parties. Both the ceasefire that ended the war in 1994 and the trilateral statement that terminated all hostilities in November 2020 were negotiated by Russia, and attempts to compartmentalize the post-conflict peace agenda are also present.

The first follow-up meeting between Armenia and Azerbaijan happened on 11 January 2021 in Moscow, where important agreements on border issues and the opening of communications were reached through the second trilateral statement. Later, a meeting took place in Sochi on 26 November 2021, which also tasked the parties through a third trilateral statement with furthering the post-conflict agenda in terms of the implementation of existing agreements, the establishment of a border delimitation and demarcation commission, etc.

With the EU actively taking over Russia's leading role and three rounds of meetings already having taken place in Brussels, it is understandable that a certain degree of jealousy may be present in Russia's perception of the increased EU role in the post-conflict agenda. In the final statement of the meeting that took place between Nikol Pashinyan and President of Russia Vladimir Putin on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two states, on 19 April 2022, it was stated that *“The parties agreed to expedite the creation of a bilateral commission on delimitation and*

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available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/2/armenia-detains-180-protesters-demanding-pms-resignation> (accessed: May 30, 2022)

*security issues around the Armenian–Azerbaijani border in accordance with existing tripartite agreements dated November 26, 2021, with the Russian Federation providing advisory assistance at the parties’ request.”*²⁷ The last part of this sentence indicates that there is a degree of commotion in Russia’s perception regarding the EU’s rising profile in the post-conflict agenda.

For example, Russia’s Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, complained that Russia had been excluded from the Minsk Group, which is co-chaired by the United States, France, and Russia. A spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Maria Zakharova, also lambasted the EU for what she described as “the shameless attempts of Brussels to appropriate” the previous agreements that were reached between the parties with Russia’s facilitation.²⁸ Nonetheless, it seems that, despite apparent discontent with the EU’s increasing role in the facilitation of the normalization process between Armenia and Azerbaijan, with Russia’s own priorities being mostly focused in Ukraine at the moment, the EU will likely preserve its lead in the post-conflict agenda in the South Caucasus.

Full demilitarization, demining and reconstruction efforts

Full implementation of the 10 November 2020 Statement is absolutely necessary for the elimination of any chances of future war in the region. Unfortunately, both Azerbaijan and Armenia know the horrors of war in reality, not by hearsay. If there is one thing that everyone, including Armenia, has to learn from the 44-day Karabakh War, it is that forceful occupation of the internationally recognized territories of sovereign states, attempts to violate the inviolability of state borders, policies aimed at ethnic cleansing, and other unlawful policies do not stand a chance of survival.

However, it was very unfortunate that Azerbaijan had to enforce through military means the observance of international norms and principles, as well as the relevant UN Security Council resolutions reaffirming

²⁷ Caucasus Watch, *Pashinyan met with Putin in Moscow*, April 20, 2022, available at: <https://caucasuswatch.de/news/5239.html> (accessed: May 30, 2022)

²⁸ Isayev, H. et al, “EU emerges as major player in Armenia-Azerbaijan negotiations”, *Eurasianet*, May 25, 2022, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/eu-emerges-as-major-player-in-armenia-azerbaijan-negotiations> (accessed: June 19, 2022)

Azerbaijan's territorial integrity (822, 853, 874, 884). It is therefore very important that the existing agreements that ended the war between the two nations are fully observed, including the Article 4 of the 10 November 2020 Statement, which calls for the complete withdrawal of all remaining armed forces of Armenia from the liberated Azerbaijani territories. The statement specifies in this regard: "*The peacekeeping contingent of the Russian Federation shall be deployed in parallel with the withdrawal of the Armenian armed forces*".²⁹ Lamentably, setbacks still remain vis-à-vis this clause of the trilateral November Statement, and the onus in this regard lies with Armenia proper and the peacekeepers of Russia, who must ensure that no armed Armenian forces remain in Azerbaijan's territory.

There is still an issue relating to the danger posed by landmines in Azerbaijan. It is reported that the liberated areas of Azerbaijan's territories are among the most contaminated in the world. In liberated Aghdam alone, which was described by many as the 'Hiroshima of the Caucasus' due to the massive destruction of the district by Armenia during the years of occupation, 97,000 landmines³⁰ were reported to have been found. The problem with mine contamination in Azerbaijan's liberated territories is not only confined to its magnitude.

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After persistent appeals by Azerbaijan, with the mediation of international actors such as the OSCE, the USA, the Russian Federation, the EU, and Georgia, Armenia, in exchange for Azerbaijan returning Armenian detainees, finally released the minefield maps to Azerbaijan, despite previously denying their existence. Nonetheless, much to chagrin of Azerbaijani side, the accuracy of those minefield maps was found to be only 25%.³¹ This still certainly does not include the massive mining process conducted

29 President.az, *Statement by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation*, November 10, 2020, available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/45923> (accessed: June 17, 2022)

30 Trend News Agency, *Aside from Aghdam, there are hundreds of thousands of mines in other districts - Azerbaijani president*, June 23, 2021, available at: <https://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3444459.html> (accessed: June 14, 2022)

31 Karimli, I. "President Aliyev Blames Armenia for Providing Inaccurate Minefield Maps", *Caspian News*, August 16, 2021, available at: <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/president-aliyev-blames-armenia-for-providing-inaccurate-minefield-maps-2021-8-16-0/>, (accessed: May 30, 2022)

by some retreating units of the armed forces of Armenia, who have confessed to embarking on such activity near the Lachin and Kalbajar districts.³² Obviously, one cannot hope to have properly charted minefield maps in such instances of random and purposeful landmine contamination done in haste and for inflicting maximum damage.

The Azerbaijani National Agency for Mine Action (ANAMA) has projected that, despite the intensity of the work done by Azerbaijan, the clearance of some areas may take up to a decade.³³ Demining work is very time and resource consuming, and Azerbaijan is bent on clearing the liberated areas as soon as possible. Assistance from the international community in this regard is welcome and highly necessary. Although some countries have extended a helping hand, for example, the UK contributing over AZN 1 million (£500,000) to Azerbaijan's recovery efforts and demining activities;³⁴ France also announcing a donation

Reports suggest that, since the end of hostilities in the fall of 2020, over 200 military personnel and civilians have been killed or maimed as a result of mine explosions.

of 400,000 euros³⁵ to mine clearance; and the United States Marshall Legacy institute donating dozens of mine detection dogs to Azerbaijan,³⁶ the burden of the landmine contamination problem unfortunately lies entirely on Azerbaijan.

Reports suggest that, since the end of hostilities in the fall of 2020, over 200 military personnel and civilians have been killed or maimed as a result of mine explosions. Although specialists from Türkiye are assisting Azerbaijan in the physical clearance process, more assistance from the international community

32 Turan News Agency, *Danger! Mines!*, June 10, 2021, available at: <https://www.turan.az/ext/news/2021/6/free/Interview/en/4890.htm> (accessed: May 30, 2022)

33 Mammadli, N. "Azerbaijan Neutralizes Over 15,000 Armenian Landmines in Liberated Lands", *Caspian News*, January 7, 2022, available at: <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/azerbaijan-neutralizes-over-15000-armenian-landmines-in-liberated-lands-2022-1-6-0/> (accessed: June 17, 2022)

34 AzerNews, *Envoy: UK supports Azerbaijan in demining Karabakh*, March 4, 2022, available at: <https://www.azernews.az/nation/190149.html#:~:text=The%20UK%20contributed%20over%20AZN,the%20UK%20embassy%20reported%20earlier> (accessed: May 30, 2022)

35 Karimli, I. "France Plans To Donate €400K to Azerbaijan's Mine Action in Karabakh Region", *Caspian News*, September 10, 2021, available at: <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/france-plans-to-donate-400k-to-azerbajians-mine-action-in-karabakh-region-2021-9-9-0/> (accessed: May 30, 2022)

36 AzerNews, *U.S. to donate 30 more mine detection dogs to Azerbaijan*, November 22, 2022, available at: <https://www.azernews.az/nation/185939.html> (accessed: May 30, 2022)

and relevant international organizations is certainly needed.³⁷ The EU is also preparing an assistance package amounting to €2.5 million euros to Azerbaijan for demining purposes, which should be allocated through the United Nations Development Program (UNDP).³⁸ Armenia, for its part, could finally demonstrate its readiness for peace by providing more accurate minefield maps.

Azerbaijan's efforts towards reconstruction in the liberated territories should be supported. About US\$1.3 billion were allocated from state budget of Azerbaijan for rebuilding the devastated infrastructure of the liberated territories.³⁹ Recently, this number was increased up to US \$1.6 billion (2.7. billion manats) for the year 2022.⁴⁰ The reconstruction works are in full swing, with some massive infrastructure already in operation, such as Fuzuli International Airport. The airports in Zangilan and Lachin districts are set for construction and all new settlements in the liberated territories will be built under the smart city/village concept. The first such pilot project has already been completed in Aghali village of Zangilan district.

Additionally, the liberated territories have been declared a green energy zone, the renewable energy potential of which is estimated to be about 9,200 megawatts of combined solar and wind energy.⁴¹ Apart from restoration of hydropower stations in the liberated territories, the government is also working towards investing in the region's solar and wind energy potential. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed with BP in 2021 on building a 240-megawatt solar power plant in the Zangilan and Jabrayil districts is a clear example. Moreover, Azerbaijan is also building the Khudafarin and *Qiz Qalasi* (translated

37 President.az, *Ilham Aliyev attended the international conference themed "South Caucasus..."*, *op.cit.*

38 Trend New Agency, *EU preparing new assistance package to Azerbaijan for de-mining on liberated lands – ambassador*, May 4, 2022, available at: <https://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3591069.html> (accessed: May 30, 2022)

39 AzerNews, *Azerbaijan discloses planned state budget allocations for social spending for 2022*, November 23, 2022, available at: <https://www.azernews.az/nation/186008.html> (accessed May 30, 2022)

40 Hajiyeva, G. "Azerbaijan Allocates More Funds Towards Restoring War Torn Liberated Lands", *Caspian News*, June 20, 2022, available at: <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/azerbaijan-allocates-more-funds-towards-restoring-war-torn-liberated-lands-2022-6-20-46/> (accessed: June 25, 2022)

41 President.az, *Ilham Aliyev attended 8th Ministerial Meeting of SGC Advisory Council*, February 4, 2022, available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/55362> (accessed: May 30, 2022)

as ‘Maiden Tower’) hydropower plants with a total capacity of 280 megawatts in cooperation with Iran. Work towards the integration of the energy system and electricity lines in the liberated territories with the rest of the country is also under way. On 4 June 2022, Azerbaijan’s Energy Ministry and the United Arab Emirates’ Masdar Company signed an implementation agreement in the liberated city of Shusha on the evaluation, development, and implementation of 4,000 megawatts of solar, wind, and green hydrogen projects, which will be the largest renewable energy production capacity in the region and in Azerbaijan’s history. Some of these projects will be implemented in the liberated areas, which will contribute to the development of the region under the ‘green energy zone’ concept with zero emissions.⁴²

In a negative development, it appears that some commercial organizations of foreign countries have had a role in the destruction and contamination of the natural environment in the formerly-occupied territories. One horrific example in this regard is the pollution of the transboundary Okchuchay river by Armenia with effluent containing heavy metals generated by Armenian factories over the past decade.⁴³ The Zangezur Copper Molybdenum Combine (ZCMC), which is one of two Armenian mining factories involved in this pollution, was managed by Germany’s CRONIMET Mining AG until 2019, which makes it liable for the ecological terror inflicted on Azerbaijan’s natural habitat. This is one lamentable, but certainly not the only example, of how Azerbaijan’s natural resources and ecosystem were continually abused and exploited, not only by Armenia, but also by some international organizations, during the years of occupation.⁴⁴

Similar stories could also be told about the illegal exploitation by Armenia of the Vejnali gold and other precious metal fields in the

42 [Minenergy.gov.az](https://minenergy.gov.az), *Ministry of Energy and Masdar signed the Implementation Agreements on 4 GW onshore and offshore wind and solar power projects*, June 4, 2022, available at: <https://minenergy.gov.az/en/xeberler-arxivi/energetika-nazirliyi-ve-masdar-quruda-ve-denizde-umumi-gucu-4-qvt-olan-kulek-ve-gunes-enerjisi-layiheleri-uzre-icra-muqavileleri-imzalayib> (accessed: June 17, 2022)

43 Veliyev, C. “Armenia’s ecological invasion of Azerbaijan’s Okchuchay”, *Daily Sabah*, July 29, 2022, available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/armenias-ecological-invasion-of-azerbajjans-okchuchay> (accessed: May 30, 2022)

44 [Mfa.gov.az](https://mfa.gov.az), *Illegal Economic and Other Activities in The Occupied Territories of Azerbaijan*, Report by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2016, available at: https://mfa.gov.az/files/shares/MFA%20Report%20on%20the%20occupied%20territories_March%202016.pdf (accessed: May 30, 2022)

liberated Zangilan district during the years of occupation. Unfortunately, this case was also not without the participation of foreign citizens, including those of Armenian origin. Azerbaijan has vowed to hold all perpetrators, including foreign citizens and companies, accountable in international courts for their illegal deeds.⁴⁵

However, full-scale reconstruction of vast territories is not an easy task, and Azerbaijan is relying on its national resources to achieve this without, unfortunately, much assistance from the international community. Rebuilding territories that were strenuously exploited and looted over decades requires a king's ransom in resources, which are certainly not confined to material ones alone. There is a lot the international community can do to support Azerbaijan's work towards reconstruction.

Connectivity issues

The implementation of all provisions of the 10 November 2020 statement, in particular that concerning the opening of all communications, is also a matter of concern. Article 9 of the statement clearly states that:

All economic and transport links in the region shall be restored. The Republic of Armenia guarantees the safety of transport links between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic in order to organize an *unimpeded* movement of citizens, vehicles and goods in both directions. Control over transport shall be exercised by the bodies of the Border Guard Service of the Federal security Service (FSB) of Russia.⁴⁶

“Zangezur” is the historic Azerbaijani name for the territories through which this corridor is proposed to pass. These territories used to belong to Azerbaijan, but were, however, ceded to Armenia by Soviet Russia in the early 20th century.

This new connectivity line, quickly dubbed the ‘Zangezur Corridor’, aims to facilitate ‘unimpeded’ movement in both directions and finally end Armenia’s decades-long isolation from all regional infrastructure and connectivity projects.

45 President.az, *Ilham Aliyev received in video format Vahid Hajiyev on his appointment as Special Representative of President in Zangilan district*, May 4, 2022, available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/55936> (accessed: May 30, 2022)

46 President.az, *Statement by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and the President of the Russian Federation*, November 10, 2020, available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/45923> (accessed: May 30, 2022)

“Zangezur” is the historic Azerbaijani name for the territories through which this corridor is proposed to pass. These territories used to belong to Azerbaijan, but were, however, ceded to Armenia by Soviet Russia in the early 20th century.⁴⁷ Reconstruction of roads and other infrastructure in the liberated territories is in full swing and, among other projects, are the Horadiz–Aghband highway and railway, which constitute the Azerbaijani portion of the Zangezur Corridor. Some 60 out of 100 km of the railway are reported to have been completed by Azerbaijan,⁴⁸ with the remaining 40 km set to be finished in early 2023.⁴⁹

However, Armenia’s position in this regard is still unfortunately inconsistent. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has sent often contradictory signals as to whether the opening of all communications between Armenia and Azerbaijan is what Armenia wants, although Article 9 of the 10 November 2020 statement clearly defined the parties’ obligations to provide unobstructed movement upon the opening of all communications in the region. Article 9 specifies that:

All economic and transport links in the region shall be restored. The Republic of Armenia guarantees the safety of transport links between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic in order to organize an unimpeded movement of citizens, vehicles and goods in both directions. Control over transport shall be exercised by the bodies of the Border Guard Service of the Federal Security Service (FSB) of Russia.⁵⁰

In attempting to complete its own portion of the work, Azerbaijan has also complained on numerous occasions that Armenia’s tiptoeing around the issue and attempts to procrastinate create unnecessary complications. Delays on the part of Armenia in providing the geographical coordinates for the highway through the Meghri region as well as in starting the feasibility study for the construction of the railroad are all putting a wrench in the works.⁵¹

47 Niftaliyev, I. “How Azerbaijan Lost Zangezur”, *Irs.az*, available at: https://irs-az.com/sites/default/files/2021-11/Heritage_50_2021%20%D1%81%D1%82%D1%80.%2030%20-%2035.pdf (accessed: June 15, 2022)

48 *President.az*, *Ilham Aliyev attended the international conference themed “South Caucasus...”*, *op.cit.*

49 *Ibid.*

50 *President.az*, *Statement by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and the President of the Russian Federation*, November 10, 2020, available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/45923> (accessed: May 30, 2022)

51 *President.az*, *Ilham Aliyev attended the international conference themed “South*

For one thing, Armenia seems to be unhappy with the use of the word ‘corridor’ which, according to their perception, grants some sort of extraterritoriality to a portion of the territory of Armenia. Azerbaijan, in contrast, believes that the word ‘corridor’ could be used interchangeably with terms such as ‘passage’, ‘route’, etc., and does not carry a specific meaning other than simply indicating the freedom of passage along the indicated route. It is also noteworthy that Armenia’s position seems to soften after each meeting mediated by the EU. For instance, if, before and between the EU-mediated meetings of the parties in Brussels, Armenia was sending very controversial messages as to the possibility of the Zangezur Corridor, in the aftermath of the agreements reached during the meetings Nikol Pashinyan announced that both a railway and highway connecting Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the wider neighbourhood may be possible.⁵² Similar positive trends were noticeable following each meeting of the parties in Brussels and, after long beating around the bush, Armenia finally agreed to holding the first meeting of the border commission along the inter-state border.

However, Azerbaijan has also made it clear that, if Armenia continues to hold the issue of the Zangezur Corridor hostage, Azerbaijan may also pursue alternatives. The signing of a memorandum of understanding with Iran about new communication links that envisages the establishment of new transport and electricity supply routes connecting Azerbaijan with Nakhchivan via Iran and mirroring the Zangezur Corridor is a case in point.⁵³ Azerbaijan signalled that, if Armenia refuses to implement its obligations regarding Article 9 of the 10 November 2020 statement on the opening of all communications, things may well be promoted without its participation.

Humanitarian dimension

Last, but not least, the humanitarian issues must be considered. After the 44-day Karabakh War, one of the claims made by Armenia related

Caucasus... ”, op.cit.

52 ARKA News Agency, *Pashinyan: Armenia ready to reopen railway and motor roads with Azerbaijan*, March 31, 2022, available at: https://arka.am/en/news/politics/pashinyan_armenia_ready_to_reopen_railway_and_motor_roads_with_azerbaijan/ (accessed: June 15, 2022)

53 Jalilov, O. “Azerbaijan to Establish New Communication Links with Iran”, *Caspian News*, March 14, 2022, available at: <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/azerbaijan-to-establish-new-communication-links-with-iran-2022-3-13-0/> (accessed: May 30, 2022)

to so-called Armenian ‘prisoners of war’ (PoW) that Azerbaijan is supposedly still holding. Azerbaijan, on the contrary, says that it has already returned all Armenian PoWs, and any detainees that might still be held in Azerbaijan are those who came to Azerbaijan from Armenia proper after the signing of the 10 November 2020 Statement to conduct sabotage activities and who therefore do not qualify as PoWs. So far, Azerbaijan has returned all PoWs, dozens of detainees in exchange for landmine maps, and more than 1,700 bodies of Armenian servicemen.⁵⁴

However, the situation concerning about 4,000 missing persons from Azerbaijan who disappeared during the First Karabakh War is still unknown. The fate of missing Azerbaijanis from the First Karabakh War

However, the situation concerning about 4,000 missing persons from Azerbaijan who disappeared during the First Karabakh War is still unknown.

was acknowledged by the EU in a statement issued by the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, on 6 April 2022, in which he underscored “the need for the full and speedy resolution of all outstanding humanitarian issues, including the release of remaining detainees and comprehensively addressing the issue of missing persons.”⁵⁵ Although,

following the online summit between the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan that took place on 4 February 2022 with the participation of President of the European Council Charles Michel, President of France Emmanuel Macron, President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, and Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan, the Armenian side announced that it had returned 147 sets of human remains to Azerbaijan,⁵⁶ it remains unclear why it took Armenia so long to return those bodies to their families. Thus, the issue of Azerbaijani missing persons is not completely resolved.

54 Azertag.az, *Azerbaijan’s Foreign Ministry comments on Armenian PM’s statement on return of remains of missing persons*, February 11, 2022, available at: https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Azerbaijans_Foreign_Ministry_comments_on_Armenian_PMs_statement_on_return_of_remains_of_missing_persons-2009297 (accessed: May 30, 2022)

55 European Council, “Statement of European Council President Charles Michel following the Second Trilateral Meeting with President Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan”, April 6, 2022, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/04/06/statement-of-european-council-president-charles-michel-following-the-second-trilateral-meeting-with-president-ilham-aliyev-and-prime-minister-nikol-pashinyan/> (accessed: May 30, 2022)

56 AzerNews, *Official: Armenia returns 147 human remains to Azerbaijan*, February 22, 2022, available at: <https://www.azernews.az/nation/189606.html> (accessed: May 30, 2022)

One of the most important humanitarian issues on the agenda relates to the reintegration of the Armenian population of Azerbaijan's Karabakh region into the country's socio-economic life. Azerbaijan has made it repeatedly clear that it considers the Armenian population of Karabakh region as its citizens and is ready to undertake the necessary measures to ensure their seamless integration into Azerbaijani society.⁵⁷ However, it is clear that there are both administrative-managerial and psychological challenges to the reintegration of Armenians living in the Karabakh region. Administrative-managerial issues are mostly a matter of time and, with the adoption of best policies, could be successfully completed; however, psychological issues, apart from being time-bound, also are much harder to overcome and require genuine human-level healing and national reconciliation.

Moreover, there are also security concerns; radical and criminal elements still remain in Azerbaijan's territories in defiance of Article 4 of the 10 November 2020 Statement. These should be removed, illegal armed groups must be demilitarized, and those who commit crimes against the civilian Azerbaijani population should be excluded from the reintegration process. This will create the necessary conditions for the rapid and effective reintegration of the Armenian residents of the Karabakh region into Azerbaijan as an ethnic minority group. Additionally, the reintegration of Armenian residents in the Karabakh region should be carried out in parallel with the repatriation of former Azerbaijani residents who fled their homes in the early 1990s. The government also has plans regarding the speedy return of Azerbaijani IDPs to the liberated territories, and relevant surveys indicating the percentages of potential returnees are conducted. As a result, as early as May 2022, the 'smart village' project built in Aghali village of Zangilan district received its first residents.⁵⁸

57 APA News Agency, *President of Azerbaijan: "We accept Armenians living in Karabakh, as our citizens"*, April 29, 2022, available at: <https://apa.az/en/III-sector/president-of-azerbaijan-we-accept-armenians-living-in-karabakh-as-our-citizens-374820> (accessed: May 30, 2022)

58 APA News Agency, *Azerbaijani President and First Lady attended the opening ceremony on first stage of "Smart Village" project in Zangilan*, May 27, 2022, available at: <https://apa.az/en/official-news/azerbaijani-president-and-first-lady-attended-the-opening-ceremony-on-first-stage-of-smart-village-project-in-zangilan-377134> (accessed: May 30, 2022)

Conclusion

Among the lessons learned from the 44-day Karabakh War, the most prominent is certainly the one that nullifies the perception that the forceful occupation of a sovereign state's lands may last forever. Azerbaijan's territorial integrity was recognized internationally in numerous international documents, including the four resolutions of the UN Security Council (822, 853, 874, 884). However, in blatant violation of all international norms and documents, Armenia, for nearly three decades, refused to de-occupy Azerbaijan's territories. Azerbaijan had to enforce those resolutions by itself, using its own national resources in addition to existing international instruments.

In the context of the new reality, there are number of important areas that demand a good deal of further work, resource mobilization on the part of Azerbaijan, as well as bona-fide cooperation on the part of Armenia. Issues in the political track, i.e., those relating to the Armenia–Azerbaijan normalization process; the signing of a peace treaty; demilitarization and demining; reconstruction of the liberated territories; connectivity; and humanitarian issues are currently the most pressing ones that require cooperation, dedication, and continuity. This piece has attempted to highlight relevant work on those clusters.

Azerbaijan is fully embarked on reconstruction work, demining, and is pressing for the opening of all communications and for signing a peace treaty with Armenia. Armenia's position, although often contradictory and lukewarm in the immediate aftermath of the 44-day Karabakh War, is slowly approaching the point at which common ground with Azerbaijan could finally be reached. This process in Armenia is, nevertheless, not free of hurdles, as manifested in the recurring rallies organized by revanchist groups against Pashinyan's attempts to make peace with Azerbaijan. This, however, should not throw a spanner in the works of the post-conflict agenda, as putting behind the demons of the past is the only way to realize the future.