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## The Nagorno-Karabakh war of 2020 and the change of the regional *status quo*

**Abstract:** The article aims to determine how the change in the *status quo* in the aftermath of the Karabakh war in 2020 influenced Russia's position in the region. It strives to answer the question of how this change impacted the geopolitical power balance for Russia. The author used the historical events' analysis method as well as examined both official information and the opinions of independent experts before attempting to make the most important provisions by comparing, contrasting and analysing these frequently diametrically opposed forecasts and opinions. The author argues that, contrary to some speculations, the situation might have changed not in favour of Russia in the longer run. The Karabakh war of 2020 highlighted the competition between regional powers, including Turkey, in the region and beyond. As a result of the war of 2020, Russia was able to station its peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh but also had to count with Turkey's substantial influence over the region, which has a tendency to expand to Central Asia and Northern Caucasus. To withstand the regional competition Moscow has charted a policy to foster economic cooperation projects between warring states, to enhance internal cohesion in this post-USSR territory under its guidance. This will allow Russia to transform the South Caucasus into a more or less stable region that will be its buffer belt, with guaranteed non-hostile regimes.

**Key words:** The Nagorno-Karabakh war of 2020, Russia, Turkey, geopolitics, power balance

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*The result in war is never absolute.*

C. Clausewitz

### Introduction

For quite some time, the resumption of hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh has been widely anticipated. There were signs of impending war and both local and Russian (Markedonov, 2018), as well as Western experts (Cavanaugh, 2017) warned about them. This time, though, the anticipated war was not the same as what everyone had been talking about. The war broke out precisely at the time when Covid's second wave began; when Europe was consumed by Brexit; the United States was preparing for elections, Russia was dealing with the crises in Belarus and Navalny, and it appeared that no one cared about the local conflict between two small states compressed in South Caucasus over an even smaller piece of land known as Nagorno-Karabakh. According to the International Crisis Group (Grono, 2016), the Nagorno-Karabakh war, which began as a strictly post-Soviet conflict between Armenians and Azeris, has evolved into a precursor of geopolitical shifts in the South Caucasus, the Middle East, and Central

Asia. Despite the fact that Covid-19, Brexit, and the US elections took place at the same time this war was closely watched in Beijing, Brussels and Washington. The fact that neighbouring Iran was watching the war and the deployment of Israeli specialists and intelligence in Azerbaijan with concern was also noteworthy; the war piqued even more interest in Ukraine, which was particularly interested in the Turkish drones Bayraktar TV2 which it hoped to use in the conflict with Russia in Donbas. The conflict piqued the interest of India too, once it became evident that Pakistan was supporting Azerbaijan. From a variety of other perspectives, this war was unlike any other in the post-Soviet space and had more similarities with the Middle Eastern scenarios due to its complexity and involvement of actors. Over the last two decades, Azerbaijan has undertaken a large-scale novelization (Barabanov, 2018, Gurbanov, 2019) of its military-technical potential, resulting in the fact that, according to many experts (Detsch, 2021; Hecht, 2022; Shaikh, Rumbaugh, 2020), it was precisely the Israeli made drones in service of Azerbaijan that determined the war's outcome, i.e. the widespread use of high precision-guided munition gave Azerbaijan air supremacy. Although drones have been deployed in a variety of conflicts in the past, including the Syrian conflict, the scale of the operation this time was by far larger.

On the political front, another point of conflict between key regional and world powers, this time including Iran, has emerged on the global political chessboard. As a result of the arrival in the region of Israeli high-precision technology and expertise, Syrian jihadists (OHCHR, 2020) brought in by Azerbaijan and the open participation of the Turkish army in the war there are numerous possibilities for future developments. If Armenia had not been a close ally of Russia it would not have become the epicentre of geopolitical transformation. As for Azerbaijan, even though it is an oil-producing country, its position and geopolitical relevance would be negligible if it had no access to the Caspian Sea and direct access to Central Asia, which is sandwiched between the influences of Russia and China, as well as turbulent Afghanistan. In the framework of such a political scenario, the reason why the Karabakh war in 2020 is being referred to as a 'local world war' (Derlug'yan, 2021) becomes evident. As a result of this local world war, the stability of the countries in the region was severely impacted, resulting in the South Caucasus becoming a volatile region once again. After the war, many began to question Russia's role as an ally of Armenia during the conflict. Those who believed Russia had betrayed its ally were divided; some believed (Baunov, 2020) that by not supporting an ally Russia had strengthened its positions in the region (Broers, 2020; Tamrazian, 2021); others believed that Russia had lost along with its ally and would now have to contend with the direct presence of Turkey at its underbelly (Iskandaryan, 2021), let alone with Turkey's ambition to expand its influence in Central Asia and the North Caucasus through Azerbaijan. The Russian government's stance on this issue is quite dubious. There is no agreement between official statements made by state media and the Kremlin, as well as the viewpoints held by independent experts on this subject. The truth, as is customary in such situations, is somewhere in between; however, given the disparity in rhetoric and the new context of international relations in the region, one can try to figure out what Russia has at the moment and why this intermediate state cannot be characterized as either a victory or a defeat. The author will attempt to address the following question, which is the primary issue of the article: **How did the change of the *status quo* in the**

**region change the geopolitical power balance for Russia?** To respond to this question, the author used the historical events' analysis method as well as examined both official information and the opinions of independent experts before attempting to make the most important provisions by comparing, contrasting and analysing these frequently diametrically opposed forecasts and opinions.

### Revisiting history

Armenians have historically settled in Anatolia, which is now mostly part of Turkey. For centuries Armenia acted as a buffer zone between the great empires of its time, as it frequently happens when states are pressed between more powerful neighbours. For ages, Armenia and its feudals had been able to maintain their dominion by balancing the forces. However, the region's status changed during the invasion phase of Turkic-speaking peoples. Over several centuries Armenia, the Byzantine Empire and the Middle East were conquered, culminating in the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Throughout centuries the national composition of the entire region likewise shifted. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottoman Empire controlled the majority of the Anatolia, while Persia controlled a tiny portion, which included the Southern Caucasus and today's Nagorno-Karabakh. The Persian Empire began to wane over time. Meanwhile, another state in the north began to consolidate in order to expand its borders. At the turn of the 19th century, Russia conquered the present-day territories of Armenia, Karabakh, and Azerbaijan from a weakening Persia. The Russian Empire now henceforth included the South Caucasus.

Modernization, industrialisation, colonialism, enlightenment, and the development of national identity characterised the 19th century. The dynamics of developments and exacerbations of rivalry between world powers that occurred in the nineteenth century pushed the world into the First World War, among other things. As a result of the war the former world order, as well as some European empires, including the Russian Empire, crumbled. New states arose on the rubble of the former Russian Empire. Given its geographical position the South Caucasus as a region is heavily dependent on what happens in larger bordering states, and neither individual republics nor the region as a whole can play an autonomous geopolitical role. In 1918, in Tbilisi, which was the main centre of the South Caucasus at the time, the national parties of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia declared their states' independence amid turbulence and on the ruins of the defunct empire. National self-proclaimed bourgeois republics, however, were doomed to fail after a period of turbulence and revolutions. As early as in 1920 soviet socialist republics were established in Armenia and Azerbaijan, while Georgia became a soviet socialist republic a year later (Kvashonkin, 1997). The issues of territorial division and boundaries, on the other hand, remained unresolved.

In 1921, the territorial boundaries in the South Caucasus were established. The question of why Stalin awarded the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic with Armenian populated territories, remains unanswered. According to the official documents, Stalin decided (Tarasov, 2011) that "Based on the need for national peace between Muslims and Armenians and the economic ties of upper and lower Karabakh, its constant ties with Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh should be left within the ASSR, giving it broad regional

autonomy with the administrative centre in the city of Shusha, which is part of the autonomous region” (Guliyev, 1989). Did he anticipate the conflict that developed several decades later? Was he influenced by the adage “divide and rule,” or by Marxist and materialist ideologies? Despite the fact that Stalin, as a materialist, considered nationalist ideas a sign of backwardness (Berezko, 2007, p. 145), it was his policies that laid the groundwork for numerous current national conflicts not just in the South Caucasus but also in the North Caucasus. However, if we follow the logic of the time, we can assume that his decision could be based exclusively on economic considerations, as stated in the text. Baku, as an industrial centre, had more opportunities to develop Karabakh at the time than underdeveloped Yerevan, and, ironically, Baku had more Armenians than Yerevan (Derlug‘yan, 2021). In 1923 Nagorno-Karabakh was granted the status of an autonomous region (NKAO) (MFA, 2022) as part of the Azerbaijan SSR. According to the 1926 census (All-Union population census, 1928), Armenians made up 94 per cent of the population of Nagorno-Karabakh (out of 125.2 thousand people), however, according to the 1989 Soviet census, they made up 77 per cent (out of 189 thousand) (TASS, 2020). During the next few decades, the republics’ national identities became stronger. Armenia repeatedly broached the idea of bringing Nagorno-Karabakh under its control during the Soviet era, but the Soviet leadership refused to endorse it. When Gorbachov came to power in the Soviet Union there appeared optimism for change and democratization. In 1987 a movement to collect signatures for reunification with Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh began (Kocharyan, 2020). On February 20, 1988, the regional council requested that the Supreme Council of the USSR, as well as the Supreme Councils of the Azerbaijan and Armenian Union Republics, consider the issue of transferring the area to Armenia (Ibidem). The Soviet leadership interpreted this appeal as a show of nationalism. On July 12, 1988, the Nagorno-Karabakh’s regional council declared independence from Azerbaijan (NKR, 2022). In response, the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet issued (Public International Law & Policy Group and New England Center for International Law & Policy, 2000, p. 4) a resolution on July 18 declaring that moving the NKAO to Armenia was impossible. In December 1989 (Ibidem, p. 5) the Armenian SSR and NKAO councils adopted a resolution on the “reunification” of the country and area. The Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR however, pronounced it illegal in January 1990. On January 15 the allied authorities proclaimed a state of emergency in the NKAO and surrounding areas. In April–May 1991, internal forces of the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs and parts of the Soviet army carried out Operation Ring (Cheterian, 2011, p. 121) in the region with the purpose of disarming ‘Armenian bandit formations’ Karabakh. On December 10, 1991, more than 99% of those voting in a referendum on the NKR’s status voted in favour of independence (Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Artsakh, 1991) but neither the Soviet authorities nor the international community acknowledged the results. As a result of the Soviet Union’s collapse, the internal forces of the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs withdrew from Nagorno-Karabakh in December 1991. On January 6, 1992, the NKR Supreme Council issued the Declaration “On the State Independence of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic” (NKR, 2022). The conflict lasted until 1994, and as a result of the fighting, NKAO was *de facto* separated from Azerbaijan and annexed to Armenia. In May 1994 the representatives from Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Nagorno-Karabakh signed the Bishkek Protocol (National Assembly

of the Republic of Armenia, 2022), which was mediated by Russia and Kyrgyzstan. On May 9, the Russian side drafted an indefinite ceasefire agreement, which was signed by all three parties. A period of relative peace and negotiations began under the leadership of the OSCE Minsk Group, which included the US, France, and Russia. The changes that occurred in the belligerent states, in Russia and the world over the next twenty-five years largely predetermined the current scenario. In the subsequent years both states, Armenia and Azerbaijan constructed their republics' political ideology around the idea of either retaining or recapturing Nagorno-Karabakh. In 1994, Yeltsin's Russia was still on the road to democratization and Westernization. Many people suspected Yeltsin of having pro-Armenian sympathies, although it is not entirely clear whether he was pro-Armenian because he disliked H. Aliyev or those sympathies were due to the large incorporation of Armenians into the army, power and administrative structures in Russia (Budberg, 2020). However, after V. Putin's ascension to power, Russia's rhetoric has shifted more in favour of Azerbaijan, despite Russia's effort to act as a mediator. As the president of the Russian Federation, V. Putin enhanced his country's relations with Azerbaijan and in a press conference, he stated (RBC.ru, 2004) that Russia may act as a mediator, but did not intend to directly intervene in the conflict. Later, while organizing multiple talks between the leaders of the belligerent states the Russian leader repeated his statement about not wanting to be a part of the conflict. The Madrid proposals (ANI, 2016), offered by the Minsk Group of OSCE, were one of the options for resolving the war. The Kazan document, submitted by the Russian side, was a slightly modified version variant of the Madrid proposals, offered by the Russian side. Both documents assumed that both parties would make mutual concessions. While working on a resolution, Russia continued to sell weapons to both parties, claiming that it was necessary to maintain the balance (Sotnikov, 2016). When Azerbaijan started spending heavily on the modernization of its army and began purchasing weapons from other states (Barabanov, 2018), including Israel (Smith, Wezeman, Kuimova, 2021), the balance was thrown off. Turkey's support for Azerbaijan was another factor impacting the overall situation in the region. As a result, Azerbaijan's position has strengthened over time, while Armenia's manoeuvrability has dwindled. The negotiations came to a deadlock following the 2018 revolution in Armenia, the outcome of which the official Kremlin had to reluctantly accept.

Moreover, Moscow is wary of Armenia's new leader, premier N. Pashinyan, who came into power after street demonstrations with slogans about democracy, rule of law, anti-corruption and 'old habits'. The mere fact that the leader of a post-Soviet country that hosted a Russian military base as well as was a member of the EEU and the CSTO came to power as a result of the so-called velvet revolution and tried to diversify its foreign policy was unforgivable for the Kremlin.

After twenty-six years of unsuccessful negotiations the war started on the 27th of September, 2020. Unlike the clashes that happened in 2016, which lasted 4 days, and were stopped by a call from Moscow, this time the war lasted 44 days, claimed up to 7000 lives (Meister, 2021) and involved more actors than the two Caucasian republics. Azerbaijan had prepared for the war not just by purchasing sophisticated weapons, bolstering its global positions but also by seeking Turkey's direct assistance. The new situation shifted the power balance as a call from Moscow would no longer be adequate to stop the hostilities. Despite being Armenia's strategic partner Moscow acted

as a self-interested mediator between the parties this time. On 9–10 November 2020, the war came to an end with a three-party agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan, negotiated and brokered by Russia<sup>1</sup> outside the agreed upon OSCE arrangements. The Russian peacekeepers were supposed to be stationed in the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic's Armenian populated area. With the exception of the five-kilometer-wide Lachin transit corridor between Karabakh and Armenia, which is now controlled by the peacekeepers, Armenia lost control of all seven regions around Karabakh that it had acquired in the early 1990s. It also lost over a third of the territory of Karabakh, including Shusha/Shushi, a strategically and historically significant town for both sides. Moreover, Armenia must provide a corridor connecting to Azerbaijan's exclave Nakhichevan to Armenia, which will be controlled by the Russian Federal Security Service. As a result Russia will gain control of two crucial corridors for both parties: the Lachin corridor between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, and the Lachin corridor connecting Azerbaijan and the exclave.

### Russia's stance

Because the government controls or owns the majority of Russian media, any officially broadcasted material or analysis that contradicts the Kremlin's official perspective is highly unlikely to emerge on television or the Internet. The media producers, on the other hand, had to consider the fact that Russia is a diverse country with big Armenian and Azeri diasporas, as well as other Muslim nations that would be offended if the media covered anything from the standpoint of religious strife or conflict. As a result, three storylines that were prevalent during the war may be identified.

1. It is not about blaming nations. Both Azeris and Armenians are "our" people. We will not wage war against our people. In contrast the Russian state media used neutral language or the passive voice to describe the clashes. While the media predicted that this attitude would cause widespread discontent among the Armenian community in Russia and in Armenia as a partner, the media also tried to emphasize that the territory attacked was not the Republic of Armenia's territory, but the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, and that Russia had no obligation to protect it, unlike Armenia.<sup>2</sup>
2. Russia claims that the only way to resolve the conflict is through "peaceful resolution" and that it can serve as a peacekeeper while remaining neutral in the conflict, i.e., it will not fight for or with Armenia.
3. Turkey is now a participant, and Russia, unwilling to fight Turkey openly, must collaborate with it to find a solution, because "Erdogan is a reliable partner" (Akonov, 2020).

Aside from these narratives, experts held organized debates in which they lobbied for the interests of one of the warring states. It is worth mentioning that, in reality, Russia

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<sup>1</sup> At one of the press conferences, when asked about the declaration, Putin said that he did not have to read it thoroughly as it was him who drafted it.

<sup>2</sup> The author mainly analyzed the news and political shows/debates transmitted by such TV channels as Первый канал (Pervyj kanal), Россия-1 (Rossija-1), Россия-24 (Rossija-24), also the internet channel Russia today (rt.com).

was not interested in resuming hostilities, because doing so would have forced Russia to support Armenia at the expense of its relations with Azerbaijan, which Russia did not desire. Another reason why Russia would rather stay out of the war is the instability that has developed along its western borders. The situation in Ukraine and the Donbas region was difficult, and developments in Belarus proved that Lukashenko's regime would not last long. The poisoning of Navalny had engulfed Russia, and the waves of hysteria and western sanctions had heightened internal tensions: thus, another hotspot in the post-Soviet region that may have gotten out of hand and upset the *status quo* was undesirable. Any change in the *status quo* that would entail another state's entrance to the region, implies Russia has lost its hegemony and must contend with the influence of other states or, as was the case this time, the military presence of another (NATO's army) state directly on its southern border. A terrible peace, as the Russian proverb says, is preferable to a good conflict. It was in Russia's interest to keep the conflict "cold" when it was between two countries with close links to Russia. When the "hot war" erupted, with Turkey as a participant, Russia preferred to manage the escalating risks rather than solve or resolve the problems that had already arisen. Ankara's strong involvement in the Karabakh war in 2020 had a significant impact on its outcome and changed the region's geopolitical environment. Ankara's and Baku's relations have grown in recent years, resulting in not just economic and cultural rapprochement but also military cooperation. In light of Russia's annexation of Crimea, Turkey's government is critical of Moscow's attempts to alter the military balance in the Black Sea in its favor. Turkey has indicated its ambition to become an influential power in the South Caucasus (Meister, 2021), as well as, in the Caspian Sea and, if possible, Central Asia (Avdaliani, 2021) through its indirect engagement in the Karabakh conflict.

### Geopolitical shift

The world around us is changing. It is changing rapidly these days, and those changes, whether they occur in public discourse, social movements, economic policies, or international relations, are becoming more visible and pushing the world into a state of instability. Multipolarity, regionalism, and transcontinental economic integration are not new concepts<sup>3</sup> in international relations. Along with such changes, there have been significant technological advancements, both in the sphere of information technology and in the production of weapons. According to forecasts (Kazalet, 2021; Sprengel, 2021) future battles may be characterized by hybrid approaches and widespread employment of high-precision guided weapons, which may eventually replace not only airplanes but also ground-based artillery. One of the first testbeds for such new high-precision-guided weapons was the six-week war in Nagorno-Karabakh. As the number of actors in international relations expands, so do the regional powers' objectives and ambitions. Regional powers participation in local wars can frequently assist world powers or large TNCs (Shahbazov, 2021), by diminishing the opposing power's influence in the particu-

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<sup>3</sup> Chinese East-West economic integration plan as well as Indian South-North economic integration plan that will connect the whole of Eurasia.

lar region. The author of this article considers examining the Nagorno-Karabakh war of 2020 from the perspective of a confrontation of world powers' interests.

Geographic location has a significant impact on one's ability to perceive the world and geopolitics. What is deemed the peripheral from the perspective of one state may also be the entryway to another region. Russia has long considered the South Caucasus as the periphery of the near abroad, but Turkey sees it as a launching pad for its eastward ambitions (Khitakhunov, 2022). Russia is wary of any change or disturbance in the Southern Caucasus because it serves as a backdoor to the turbulent Northern Caucasus. Russia, as previously stated, prefers to keep out of the conflict, even if it means harming its reputation as an ally. However, Turkey's intervention in the conflict altered the forces' dynamics. In this context, Russia needed to establish a policy that would allow it to remain in the region, avoid open conflict with Turkey, and maintain its role as a mediator between the two warring republics. Russia's inability to assist its ally in this situation originated from the premise that Armenia had become the weakest link in its triangle of interests (Baunov, 2020). While Russia was unable to avoid the conflict without losses for itself, it pursued a reactionary policy of reducing the risks for itself and getting the maximum possible benefit. Turkey's aspirations as a regional force are significant, but because it is still a member of NATO, they cannot be incompatible with or outweigh NATO's policy. The South Caucasus provides access to both Central Asia and the Caspian Sea. Turkey is interested in these areas because of the oil and gas resources (Seren, 2018). Turkey's natural gas demand is growing, and the country is significantly reliant on imported gas, from Russia, Iran, and, more recently (2019–2020), Azerbaijan as major suppliers. Strengthening ties with Azerbaijan, which has become more reliant on Turkey due to its military assistance, as well as stronger links with Central Asian republics, would enable Turkey to diversify its imports and become less reliant on Russia and Iran. The trilateral deal made in 2021 by Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan to jointly develop the Dostluk (Friendship) gas field beneath the Caspian Sea (O'Byrne, 2021) is a notable example of diversification. This is an issue where Russian and Iranian interests are aligned against Turkey's ambitions since both see Turkmenistan as a competitor in the European gas market (Avdaliani, 2021). Turkey turned to Central Asia offering itself as a third partner with a shared ethnic background to diversify their external policy, capitalizing on the Central Asian republics' dissatisfaction with China's growing influence and Russia's grip. Apart from oil and gas, Turkish expansion into Central Asia aims to promote Turkic identity-based cooperation with Central Asian republics (Amirbek, Aydin, 2015), and in the long run, this narrative may cast a shadow over Russia, which is home to millions of Turkic people (Zhukovskaya, 2015), and China, which has problems with Turkic Uyghurs in the west of the country. The organization of the Turkic States, formerly known as the Turkic Council or the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States is already taking shape as a geopolitical philosophy of pan-Turkism. As a result, Turkey sees the South Caucasus, particularly Azerbaijan, as a springboard for its geopolitical and economic aspirations. Because the world has been split into spheres of interest and there is no blank space in it, the expansion of those interests can only be at the expense of the powers that are already present in the regions – Russia and China. Turkey's aspirations can be considered as linked with NATO's goal of undermining Russia and China because both countries' relations with NATO are deteriorating. Nonetheless,



Turkey and Russia cooperate as adversaries on a variety of subjects. It goes without saying that this is a tactical rather than strategic relationship. Despite possessing NATO's second-largest army, Turkey purchases S-400 missiles from Russia. Despite their differences in Syria and Libya, Turkey and Russia continue to work together.

Despite Turkey's official declaration that it does not acknowledge Crimea's annexation and backs Ukraine, Russia develops a nuclear power facility there. The Turkish presence in the South Caucasus, which has long been considered Russia's sphere of interest, has provided a new point of contact between the two countries. Turkey's presence in Nagorno-Karabakh, which took the shape of a cooperative surveillance centre in Agdam (the part of Nagorno-Karabakh controlled by Azerbaijan) had to be accepted by Russia. Putin's and Erdogan's deteriorating ties with the West have drawn the two countries closer together. Unlike the United States or China, however, Russia sees Turkey as a tool in the hands of the US rather than a power centre. Thus, if Russia were to reach an agreement in the South Caucasus in the future and gain *carte blanche* from the US, it is envisaged that Russian-Turkish cooperation in the Caucasus would begin to diminish. Until those improvements occur, Russia's best interests are served by maintaining tight cooperation with Turkey, which, by the way, has been disillusioned with the war's outcome. Turkey gained less than it expected as a result of its failure to join the trilateral declaration made by Moscow, Yerevan, and Baku, which is remarkable. France and the United States, co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group, were also left out. Though some claim that Russia currently possesses military bases in all three South Caucasus states, the situation is convoluted. Russia has a military base in Armenia, and it established bases in South Ossetia and Abkhazia after the 2008 conflict with Georgia, and it has recently undertaken a peacekeeping mission in Nagorno-Karabakh, which is nominally part of Azerbaijan. For now it has strengthened its position in South Caucasus. However, the mandate is just for five years, and it is unclear what will happen during that time or after it. The recent clashes in Kazakhstan and war in Ukraine are a proof that the situation in post-Soviet states in general is tense and the intensity level is likely to grow. Time will show whether the cooperation with Azerbaijan will be used as a leverage on it or the other way around. The only certainty at this point is that the new *status quo* is exceedingly precarious, and Russia's position in what is considered its backyard, has been contested. Russia, on the other hand, has no intention to leave the region. The Nagorno-Karabakh war of 2020 was one of several signs pointing to an era of a regional power rise, and for the time being, it is unclear whether Russia will be able to withstand the competition with other states with regional ambitions. Regional or local conflicts were commonly resolved during the Cold War based on which of the two blocs a certain state belonged to. In recent years, the competition for resources and territories has intensified as the number of international actors and their goals has grown. This war has shown that a regional player can try to force a global power out of its zone of influence. Russia, on the other hand, was able to seize the last-minute opportunity and send in its own peacekeeping (military) mission. As a result, the international community (Isachenko, 2020) began to speculate (Markedonov, 2021) about a second Syria or that Russia and Turkey had divided the region once again. However, Armenia and Azerbaijan are Russia's neighbours, and previous generations of Armenians and Azerbaijanis lived in the same country as Russians, unlike Syria, which is a Russian ally but has never been a strategic partner and

is thousands of kilometres distant. Although Russia benefited from the opportunity and made a breakthrough, Turkey's participation in the war in territories that Moscow had always considered its zone of interest demonstrates a shift in the balance of power in favour of Turkey while it is uncertain if and how Russia will be able to maintain its current position in the upcoming years. Taking all of the above into account, it becomes obvious that Russia must have set a difficult objective of transforming the former Soviet republics (at least those over which Moscow still has influence) into a buffer belt with guaranteed non-hostile regimes. Similar scenarios can be observed with relations with some other post-Soviet republics, including Belarus and, in particular, Ukraine where the situation has escalated into a full-scale war recently. According to Brzezinski (Brzezinski, 1997) without Ukraine, Russia would become an Asian state and lose its status as a major world force. It is worth mentioning that if Russia were to be kicked out of the Caucasus, the same would happen. A day before Russian military attack on Ukraine, the Presidents of Russia and Azerbaijan V. Putin and I. Aliyev signed a declaration on allied cooperation following the talks in Moscow. It is symbolic that in this declaration there was a point about refraining from any action directed against each other, including those carried out through third states (BBC.com, 2022). The Kremlin is aware of the danger it is facing in the Caucasus which could become another hotspot while Moscow would be in war with Ukraine, as well as its inability to act decisively if a scenario like that would take place. As a result, it is aiming to use its leverage over both warring states to coerce peace through the prospect of economic cooperation under Moscow's supervision. Hence, the ninth point in the trilateral declaration of ceasefire envisages the opening of regional communications, as according to it Armenia will provide Azerbaijan a road to its enclave Nachijevan, while Armenia will be able to use the Azerbaijan's railways to reach Russia and Iran. This point, when realized, has the potential to boost the region's transit appeal, attract investments, particularly from Russia. Strategically, Moscow has charted a policy to foster economic cooperation projects between warring states, to enhance internal cohesion in this post-USSR territory, and expand transportation and other connectivity along the north-south and east-west lines (Trenin, 2021b). One of those initiatives, that can create greater economic integration in the region, thereby minimizing the risks of a new war is the India, Iran and Russia founded project of North-South transit corridor. It will connect routes from India to Russia via republics in the South Caucasus and could be regarded as one of those projects that might induce tighter economic integration in the region, thus reducing the risks for a new war. Although it would be unrealistic to expect a resolution in the near years, if Moscow is able to eliminate the threat of another Karabakh war by regional economic integration, this can already be considered a victory for Russia, as another war would be highly detrimental to Russia's position and might lead to its expulsion from the region.

### **Conclusion**

After the war in 2020, the power balance in the South Caucasus shifted. Armenia lost not just the war but also its military power accumulated during the last twenty-five years and it is unlikely that it will recover fully in the short-term run. As for Azerbaijan,

even though it won the war and received the territory, yet short time has passed to assess whether the victory would not become a pyrrhic triumph. Iran, concerned about Israel's presence in the region and Turkey's growing influence, strives to foster diplomacy as well as strike up economic integration projects that would make another escalation worthless. Turkey tends to expand to Central Asia via Azerbaijan (Markedonov, 2021). On the map of the "Turkish world" that has been handed by the nationalist party representatives to Erdogan recently, Azerbaijan, all Central Asia, some regions of Iran, Mongolia and big parts of Russia were highlighted as "The Turkish world" (RBC.ru, 2021). It is noteworthy that official Kremlin's reaction to this was quite mild (Izvestiya IZ, 2021). Russia is under heavy sanctions, its relations with the United States are tense, the war in Ukraine aggravated the situation and there is no chance of amelioration in the foreseeable future. However given the current state of affairs, it is still too early to speculate on final outcomes or even mid-term repercussions of it for Russia. The immediate effect of the war was another Russian military base's appearance in the third South Caucasian state and this move, even when it was at the expense of its ally, can be considered as a tactical victory for Russia. However, many other elements, including black swan events, will determine how the further development of the situation in the region will be. Much is contingent on the current economic and political conditions in Russia internally, its relations with the West and Turkey. Whether Erdogan will stay in the office may also play a role in both Turkey's ambitions as well as its relations with Russia. Russia on the other hand prefers to benefit from the fragile state of imposed peace. As long as Russia has adequate resources and internal stability, it can pursue a policy of exploiting conflicts rather than resolving them. Nevertheless, having allowed Turkey into the sphere of its interests, Russia compromised its role in the South Caucasus. This time in the multi-faceted competition for regional dominance Russia nearly lost the battle before it was able to grasp the moment and deploy its peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh, thus strengthen its presence in the region but it is now uncertain how it will be able to maintain its place in the region without a further escalation.

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## Wojna w Górskim Karabachu z 2020 roku i zmiana regionalnego status quo

### Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest określenie, w jaki sposób zmiana status quo w następstwie wojny karabackiej 2020 roku wpłynęła na pozycję Rosji w regionie. Autorka stara się odpowiedzieć na pytanie, jak ta zmiana wpłynęła na geopolityczny układ sił Rosji. Autorka posłużyła się metodą analizy wydarzeń historycznych, zbadała zarówno oficjalne informacje, jak i opinie niezależnych ekspertów przed podję-

ciem najważniejszych zapisów, porównując, przeciwstawiając i analizując te często diametralnie przeciwstawne prognozy i opinie. Autorka przekonuje, że wbrew niektórym spekulacjom sytuacja mogła się zmienić na niekorzyść Rosji w dłuższej perspektywie. Wojna karabaska w 2020 roku uwydatniła rywalizację między mocarstwami regionalnymi, w tym Turcją, w regionie i poza nim. W wyniku wojny z 2020 roku Rosja rozmieściła siły pokojowe w Górskim Karabachu, ale musiała też liczyć się z istotnymi wpływami Turcji w regionie, który ma tendencję do ekspansji na Azję Centralną i Północny Kaukaz. Aby przeciwstawić się regionalnej konkurencji, Moskwa opracowała politykę wspierania projektów współpracy gospodarczej między walczącymi państwami, aby wzmocnić wewnętrzną spójność na tym obszarze poradzieckim. Pozwoli to Rosji na przekształcenie Kaukazu Południowego w mniej lub bardziej stabilny region, który będzie jej pasem buforowym z gwarantowanymi niewrogimi reżimami.

**Słowa kluczowe:** wojna karabaska 2020 r., Rosja, Turcja, geopolityka, równowaga sił

