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Dissecting political landscape of post-war Armenia

Aram TERZYAN*

Abstract

This paper explores the political landscape of post-war Armenia, focusing on both domestic and foreign policy implications of the devastating war of 2020. More specifically, it aims at explaining the aftermath of the 2020 war, with a special emphasis on Armenia's growing dependence on Russia. Since September 2020, Armenia has plunged into a deep crisis. The Nagorno-Karabakh war had a series of implications, both for conflicting parties and a wider region. The ceasefire agreement which entailed huge territorial concessions took many by surprise and raised questions as to the transparency and accountability of the government. Although the Russian-brokered ceasefire ended the hostilities, yet it left many fundamental matters unanswered. Furthermore, the war has exacerbated the pre-existing divisions amongst the foremost political actors and the general public. Combined with the war and its aftermath, the COVID-19 pandemic has also invited challenges, which resulted in an increased human toll, slowdown of economy, and deepened public anger and mistrust of the authorities. The situation is compounded by Armenia's deepening dependence on Russia, which has been largely treated as war-torn Armenia's irreplaceable ally by the Armenian leadership.

Keywords: Post-war Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh war, Russia, Armenian-Turkish relations

Introduction

The change in political leadership in Armenia instilled hope that the initial strive of new government toward democracy would help solve the deep-seated socioeconomic problems, and improve the country's immunity as it pertains to external threats. The newly incumbent Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan put forward an ambitious reform agenda, focusing on such objectives as cutting up corruption, attracting foreign investment, ending political influence over the courts, etc. Yet, regardless of certain political reforms, no large-scale institutional changes ever took place. Later, the above-mentioned objectives have been overshadowed by the existential problems related to the Nagorno-Karabakh war of 2020 and its aftermath.

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The ceasefire agreement, which took many by surprise, undermined the government's legitimacy, exacerbated political divisions, and brought new challenges many of which still remain unaddressed. For opposition parties and the society in general, the terms of the ceasefire called into question the position of the prime minister, who was presented as a traitor and whose resignation was demanded during the protests following the ceasefire agreement. Prime Minister resigned in April of the last year after months of anti-government protests. Yet, he was re-appointed as a result of the snap parliamentary elections of June.

The war also resulted in the decrease in civil space and liberties. The restrictions implemented first under the COVID-19 pandemic state of emergency, and later by martial law, led to disproportionate or groundless restrictions of media operations in the country. Growing hate speech and manipulating news content, particularly on social media, turned to be one of the growing problems in Armenia.

Combined with the war and its aftermath, the COVID-19 pandemic has also invited challenges, which resulted in an increased human toll, slowdown of economic and political reforms, and intensified public anger and mistrust of the authorities.

The Russian-brokered ceasefire ended the fighting but apparently Nagorno-Karabakh is still far from a stable peace. The issue of prisoners of war, demarcation and delimitation, mass displacement, the persistent belligerent rhetoric of Azerbaijan, and, more importantly, the open status question of Nagorno-Karabakh make way for new hostilities.

This paper specifically addresses the following question: *What are the implications of the war for Armenia's political landscape?*

The paper is structured as follows. First, I discuss the political crisis that Armenia plunged into in the aftermath of the 2020 war, including anti-government protests and government's attempts at restricting the freedom of expression. Subsequently, I delve into Armenia's deepening dependence on Russia due to the deployment of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno Karabakh and post-war hardships facing the country. In the next section I discuss the Armenian government's attempts at normalizing relations with neighboring Turkey. The conclusion briefly discusses the main findings.

1. The post-war crisis in Armenia

The year 2020 was a year of profound challenges for Armenia. After Pashinyan announced about the painful ceasefire agreement of November 9, masses of people stormed government and parliament buildings. Protesters accused the government of betrayal, labeling Pashinyan as

‘traitor’. The public was unprepared for such an outcome as the authorities did not fully reveal information on the territorial concessions and defeats. Pashinyan’s tweet (2020) from November 9th, in which he stated that the battle for Shushi was ongoing even after Armenian forces lost control over the city, is one of the examples of misguided information policy.

The defeat in the war unified former authorities and their supporters. They called the trilateral agreement an act of capitulation and even treason and issued an ultimatum for Pashinyan to step down by midnight. Ishkhan Saghatelyan, an opposition politician for the Armenian Revolutionary Federation party, announced the start of coordinated civil disobedience in a televised address after the deadline passed (Reuters, 2020).

The Helsinki Committee of Armenia, which monitored the right to assembly during the year, reported inconsistent enforcement of the restrictions by security forces. Some gatherings were allowed to proceed, some received verbal warnings, whereas others were dispersed by force. Major protests were held after a ceasefire was secured in November. The November demonstrations were marked by intense public anger as well as calls for the resignation of PM Pashinyan. On a few occasions, gatherings turned into riots (Freedom House, 2021).

In response to these demonstrations, the government has repeatedly argued that Azerbaijan’s military might had left no other option. Not only Pashinyan did not resign, but he also blamed his predecessors for the defeat (PM Interviews and Press Conferences).

Following the post-ceasefire crisis, Pashinyan started to lose support, even within his own parliamentary group. Several MPs, including the head of the Deputy Prime Minister Office Varak Sisseryan, have resigned following Pashinyan’s Facebook post on 15 November. In this message, the leader appeared to suggest that frontline Armenian troops should come to Yerevan to deal with the opposition. The post was seen as a call for civil conflict even though later Pashinyan explained that he has been misunderstood (Konarzewska, 2020).

Numerous authorities, among them the Katholikos of the Armenian Apostolic Church and the President of Armenia, called for the resignation of the Prime Minister and for holding snap parliamentary elections (BTI, 2022).

In addition, some Armenian opposition parties created a joint platform, the Armenian Salvation Movement, and nominated former Prime Minister Vazgen Manukyan as a candidate to head a transition government before snap elections (Ibid). However, this movement, mainly composed of former leaders, has been unable to mobilize large groups of the population.

The post-war crisis in Armenia and an alleged attempted coup in February 2021 led by the Chief of the General Staff of the Armenian Armed Forces triggered snap parliamentary elections

in June 2021. The campaign was highly polarized and marred by violent rhetoric, with little substantive discussion of issues. At one rally, Pashinyan brandished a hammer, threatening to come after his opponents. Leaders of the two sides blamed each other for the defeat in Nagorno-Karabakh, and traded insults, describing each other as 'traitors', lunatics' and 'criminals' (EPRS, 2021). A record number of political parties and alliances have registered with the Central Electoral Commission (CEC), including those led by Armenia's first and second Presidents Levon Ter-Petrosyan and Robert Kocharyan. The results of voting have been surprising to many. Three parties gained seats in Parliament, with Pashinyan's Civil Contract Party winning a stable majority 71 seats with 53.9 percent of the vote. Though Pashinyan's win was contested by the opposition, the Constitutional Court upheld the election results (The Decision of the Constitutional Court of RA), and international observers considered the elections to be competitive and generally well-organized (OSCE PA, 2021).

After the elections, many imperative post-war issues remain unresolved, among them the issue of demarcation and delimitation of border with Azerbaijan, prisoners of war (POWs) and other captives, investigation of war crimes, etc.

The question of Armenian-Azerbaijani border demarcation and delimitation creates new risks for national security and territorial integrity. The territorial transfer left some Armenian villages exposed to new Azerbaijani military positions and risked the future of a major highway that weaves across the *de jure* border (Freedom House, 2021). Armenia and Azerbaijan have already signed a decree establishing a commission on border security and delimitation between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The first meeting of the heads of a joint commission took place on May 25 at the two countries' border in which "procedural and organizational issues relating to joint activities of the commissions" have been discussed (Azatutyun, 2022). In the post-war reality, this problem will surely be problematic. As Pashinyan himself admits, Azerbaijan is trying to somehow keep the military tension along the border for presenting hidden or open territorial claims against Armenia during the demarcation process.

Furthermore, Azerbaijan continues to hold an unknown number of Armenian soldiers and civilians in custody in blatant disregard to IHL and the November 9 ceasefire agreement. Reports of gross mistreatment and torture has exacerbated public anger at the government's failure to secure their return (Freedom House, 2021).

The trust in the government has also been challenged by the fact that no progress was made in investigating war crimes and other violations of international humanitarian law during the 2020 conflict and its aftermath (Amnesty International, 2022).

Another factor contributing to the lack of trust was the mismanagement of the pandemic by state authorities. In the aftermath of the mandatory lockdown, thousands of people in Armenia who work either abroad, or on a daily cash basis faced serious financial problems. In addition, like in several other countries, there has been a lack of strategic communication in the management of the COVID-19 outbreak in Armenia, due to which the public was unable to form an accurate perception of risk. The attributed “irresponsible behavior” of citizens was an example of this failed communication (Giebel, 2020). Although the Government has initiated a number of support measures to reduce the social impact of coronavirus, as to the results of the survey of the CRRC (2020), the overwhelming majority of respondents (65%) said that they and their family benefitted from none of the support measures undertaken by the Government (CRRC, 2020). Particularly, at the onset of the second wave of the pandemic the general attention shifted more to war crisis.

Moreover, according to the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression, the restrictions implemented under the COVID-19 pandemic state of emergency, and later by martial law, led to disproportionate or unfounded restrictions of media operations in the country (BTI, 2022).

Indeed, simulated, unauthentic, and manipulative news content has been a growing problem in Armenia. Since 2018, it has been particularly manifested in social media, as Prime Minister Pashinyan chose Facebook posts and livestreams as his main communication tool with society. Much of online public discourse has been concentrated on Facebook, although Twitter and Telegram use among Armenians increased during the 2020 war (Freedom House, 2021, p. 8). Prior to the war, in April 2019, Pashinyan ordered the National Security Service, Armenia’s intelligence agency, to crack down on social media users who spread “fake news” about the government. This move was heavily criticized by the opposition parties and the country’s human rights ombudsman as a threat to the freedom of expression (BTI, 2022). The problem became even more acute during the war and its aftermath. Seemingly, wartime restrictions on media coverage and risky conditions in war zone limit the opportunities of independent journalism (Freedom House, 2021, p. 19). As such, the State Unified Information System became the only reliable source of getting information. However, after the ceasefire announcement, the skepticism toward the state information system has significantly grown.

The government imposed several new restrictions on journalistic freedoms in 2021, including limiting the free movement of journalists in the parliament and in parts of the Syunik region. These measures have been widely criticized by local and international organizations, and local media organizations have called for an end to government obstruction of the media (Freedom House, 2022).

During the post-war period, there has also been a growing hate speech particularly on social media, which as former Ombudsman Arman Tatoyan aptly notes “has nothing to do with freedom of

speech” (Public Radio of Armenia, 2021). Pro-government and opposition politicians have regularly accused each other of running troll factories to bully and discredit political rivals. On April 15, 2020, the Armenian parliament adopted amendments to the Criminal Code to criminalize public hate speech. According to the amendments, publicly calling for violence, threatening anyone’s life or health, and publicly justifying or inciting such violence, will be subject to penalties, from fines up to imprisonment (BTI, 2022).

On October 9, 2021 the Armenian Constitutional Court upheld recent legislation, which substantially increased the penalties for insulting individuals for their “public activities”. In effect, the law is consistent with measures that non-democratic governments resort to in order to silence dissent. Meanwhile, amongst the driving forces behind the 2018 Velvet Revolution was the Armenian people’s fervent desire to flourish in a more democratic country, where their political freedoms are protected. Thus, the Armenian authorities have provided the legislative ground for controlling the media narrative on politically sensitive issues.

The political instability in Armenia further complicated following opposition parties’ rallies demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian in May -June 2022. As a result, hundreds ended up detained in anti-Government Protests (Radio Liberty, 2022).

Regarding safeguards against official corruption, in April 2021, the parliament adopted legislation providing for the creation of an anticorruption court. The government also established the Anti-Corruption Committee (ACC) - a new agency to investigate cases of corruption. However, regardless of such developments, international bodies, including the UN Human Rights Committee (OHCHR) and the Council of Europe’s anticorruption monitoring unit, the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO), have found that serious shortcomings remain in the government’s anticorruption strategies; as of 2021, GRECO has deemed the Armenian government’s compliance with global corruption prevention standards unsatisfactory (Freedom House, 2022).

As it relates to civil society, notwithstanding the constrained political space, a vibrant civil society has evolved in Armenia over time. Yet, since the revolution, civil society has been “nationalized” in the sense that many leaders and activists moved to the ruling party “My Step” and into the government (BTI, 2022).

During the war and its aftermath, the Armenian civil society and the population in general have demonstrated a strong sense of solidarity and support towards persons displaced by the conflict, including by providing shelter and necessities to them. Such efforts were all the more outstanding as the population was also faced with the hardships caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Commissioner for Human Rights, 2021).

When Pashinyan came to power, it was expected that the new government would closely cooperate with civil society groups having field-specific expertise. Still, the government often failed to properly check or discuss ideas with local experts or researchers before taking action, something which is indispensable to effectively taking country characteristics into account (BTI, 2022).

As to international rankings for post-war period, the results are remarkable. According to 2021 report issued by Freedom House, “the political crisis that followed the Second Karabakh War poses extraordinary challenges for democratic progress in 2021, including security risks along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, low public trust in the current government, economic strain, and the toll of the COVID-19 pandemic.” (Freedom House, 2021). Interestingly, just a year later Armenia improved its position in international rankings, moving from authoritarian to hybrid regime (Freedom House, 2022). Positive score improvements have been traced in national democratic governance, electoral process and judicial framework, whereas there has been a decline in independent media rating. Still, it is mentioned that such regimes may be democratic in the minimal sense that they feature regular, competitive elections, but their dysfunctional institutions are unable to deliver the definitive components of a liberal democracy. Arguably, the Armenian government has somehow improved democratic governance to “offset” the heavy war defeat and thus to enhance its legitimacy. Nevertheless, the attempts at restricting the freedom of expression remain of serious concern as there has been a tendency to control media narratives on politically sensitive issues, related particularly to the Nagorno Karabakh conflict.

2. Russia’s strengthening role

Before coming to power, Pashinyan positioned himself more as a pro-Western politician. He even initiated in parliament a bill on Armenia’s withdrawal from the EAEU. Yet, as a Prime Minister, Pashinyan denied the possibility of a withdrawal from the EAEU and reasserted the continuity of strategic relations with Russia. The newly-elected Prime Minister explained the change of his beliefs by the fact that his political role had changed and now he should be guided not by the political situation, but by the national interests of Armenia.

Pashinyan declared at every opportunity that there were no problems in bilateral relations with Russia, however, he himself became the initiator of some incidents that triggered Moscow’s irritation. One of such incidents happened months after the change of power in Armenia. Yerevan has charged the head of the Russia-led security bloc with the crime of “subverting public order” with regard to 2008 bloody crackdown in Armenia. Although Armenian officials emphasized that the charges have

only to do with Khachaturov's role in the 2008 events and had nothing to do with the CSTO, this was not perceived enthusiastically in Moscow (Kucera, 2018). Former Armenian President Robert Kocharyan, who does not hide his close relations with the Russian President Putin has also been accused in the same case.

Certainly, with the passing of time, Pashinyan remained more faithful to the CSTO military bloc and the EAEU economic union. Armenia's official reaction to Kazakhstani President Tokayev's appeal to the CSTO for military intervention in Kazakhstan was symbolic in this regard. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, the then holder of the CSTO's rotating presidency, announced hours later that Russia and four other ex-Soviet states making up the bloc will send troops to Kazakhstan to help "stabilize and normalize the situation" there. Furthermore, in March Armenia abstained from voting on a UN security resolution calling for Russia's withdrawal from Ukraine. Days later, when the UN Human Rights Council called for an urgent debate on the war, Armenia again abstained (The Jerusalem Post, 2022).

The 44-day war was a turning point in the South Caucasus region, which drastically altered the geopolitical configuration of the region. A joint statement of November 9, 2020 by the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia put an end to the war in Artsakh and set the way for the deployment of Russian peacekeepers in territories remaining under the *de facto* control of Artsakh and along the Lachin Corridor. With the deployment of its forces (although relatively modest in number), Russia extended its involvement beyond diplomacy and ensured its presence in the region for at least next five years.

In the interim, Russia faced an arduous task of balancing its relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan. Although Moscow's influence has amplified, so has its vulnerability, due to the position of its peacekeepers, who are both in Armenia-controlled Nagorno-Karabakh and the critical Lachin Corridor, now under the control of Azerbaijan (Bohlen, 2021).

After the deployment of troops, Russia has also been expanding its soft power in Artsakh. Last year, the Artsakh National Assembly, by a vote of 27 to 0, adopted a bill making Russian an "official language" in Artsakh. Several years ago, Russian parliament speaker Vyacheslav Volodin suggested giving Russian language an official status in Armenia, the only EEU member, where this is not the case. Nevertheless, Armenian officials rejected the idea at the time (USC Institute of Armenian Studies, 2021).

Historically, Russia has perceived the South Caucasus as an area of existential importance for its national security. As Sergei Markedonov aptly argues, Russia's approach to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was always highly cognizant of developments concerning Armenia, Nagorno-

Karabakh and Azerbaijan, with a historic lens dating back to imperial times. In this context, Russia has always formulated its own specific approach toward the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and it has always been commensurate with Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh being important components of its southern security flank (Markedonov, 2019, pp. 1-9).

The recent announcements made by Russia seem to be an indirect message on the possible shift of trilateral format. At an April meeting in Moscow with his Armenian counterpart, Ararat Mirzoyan, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov accused the United States and France of Russophobia and cancelling anything that has to do with Russia.” “As for the activities or the future, I would even say, of the troika of the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group, I do not know what the future will be,” Lavrov said (Ria Novosti, 2022). The breakdown at the Minsk Group comes as tensions between the United States and Europe, on one side, and Russia, on the other side, have escalated dramatically since Russia’s military operations in Ukraine began in February. While Pashinyan would previously raise the issue of revising inherently asymmetric relations with Russia, his government has been unable or unwilling to do so. Moreover, the deployment of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno Karabakh further plunges Armenia into the orbit of the Russian influence. Meanwhile, Russia’s strengthening role is likely to impair Armenia’s further rapprochement with the European Union especially amid the Russian-European escalating confrontation in their shared neighborhood. Armenia’s consistent solidarity with Russian policies significantly impair the country’s ability to achieve a Russian - European balance. Moreover, Armenia’s depending dependence on Russia may adversely affect the state of human rights and democracy across the country, as it did in the other countries of the Russian-led Eurasian Union, including Belarus and Kazakhstan.

3. Attempts at normalizing relations with Turkey

The future role of Russia in the region to some extent depends on the recent process of normalization of the Armenian-Turkish relations - one of the several attempts since Armenia regained its independence. As Poghosyan (2022) argues, it will open a new horizon for Turkey to increase its influence in the region and better compete with Russia.

On August 29, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated that Turkey was ready to normalize relations with Armenia based on “neighborliness and mutual recognition of territorial integrity”. He also expressed hope that the actions of Armenia’s new government would be constructive as the region needed new approaches (Azatutyun, 2021). Weirdly, this call for constructive approach is being made by the leader of the country, which directly supported Azerbaijan

in its military offensive against the people of Nagorno-Karabakh, including the transfer of mercenaries to Azerbaijan. This has been asserted not only by the Armenian authorities and a number of international periodicals, but also by the European Parliament (EP report, 2020).

On December 2021, Armenia and Turkey announced the appointment of Special Representatives for the normalization of relations and the possibility of resuming charter flights. The normalization process was officially launched on January 14, 2022 when Special Representatives, Ruben Rubinyan and Serdar Kılıç, met in Moscow. The groundwork for this meeting began in mid-2021, when the Armenian government proposed the idea of peace in the South Caucasus and normalizing relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey (Poghosyan, 2022). During the Moscow meeting, the special representatives exchanged their initial views on the settlement process through the Armenia-Turkey dialogue. The parties agreed to continue negotiations for a full settlement without preconditions (MFA of the RA). During the second and third meetings both held in Vienna, the Special Representatives confirmed that the ultimate goal of the negotiations is to achieve full normalization between Armenia and Turkey and reiterated their agreement to continue the process without preconditions. Earlier Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu announced the existence of agreements on "border clarifications". However, the Armenian Foreign Ministry denied any such agreement or discussion of the issue (News.am, 2022).

The 'no preconditions' policy is a rare illustration of foreign policy continuity inherited from the previous Armenian authorities. It consists of removing any direct linkage between normalization efforts and other long-standing issues, including Turkey's acknowledgement of the Armenian genocide and progress on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Armenia has expected Turkey to take a reciprocal stance and has made it clear that any demands or prerequisites imposed by Turkey on Armenia would derail the process between the countries (Giragosian and Aydıntaşbaş, 2022).

Prior to 2021, Armenia and Turkey last tried to normalize relations in 2008-2009 in what was named "football diplomacy." The culmination of "football diplomacy" was the signing of the Zurich Protocols on October 10, 2009, by the foreign affairs ministers of Armenia and Turkey. By signing the Zurich protocols, Armenia and Turkey were agreeing to open the border two months after the protocols would be ratified. Furthermore, the participants agreed to construct a working group chaired by the two countries, which would work toward creating an intergovernmental commission. The protocols also included a clause on creating a joint commission which would address historical issues between the two countries by examining historical documents and archives. However, the preconditions were later imposed on Armenia. Just weeks after the signing of Protocol Erdogan

announced that Turkey could not take positive steps toward Armenia unless ethnic Armenian armed forces withdrew from Nagorno-Karabakh (Dermoyan, 2022).

Thus, the declarative statements made during the meetings of Special Representatives do not guarantee the success of the process, particularly given the former experience of the last-minute demands from Turkey. There is still no roadmap nor an agenda on the table for starting substantive negotiations.

Much of the future in Armenia and Artsakh as well as in a wider region also depends on the evolving events in Armenia. There were anti-government protests in Armenia, in May and June based on the fears that Prime Minister would make substantial concessions to Azerbaijan. Opposition figures who organized these protests accused and continue to accuse Pashinyan of planning to allow Azerbaijan take complete control of Nagorno-Karabakh, and they demand the Prime Minister's resignation. Nevertheless, the opposition has been unable to mobilize the Armenian society and despite the latter's growing disillusionment with Pashinyan's government, he does not seem to be threatened by his rivals. A fitting explanation for Pashinyan's lingering legitimacy is less about the public favoring Pashinyan and more about the public's painful recollections of the former administrations of presidents Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan, who are currently the opposition leaders. While former President Serzh Sargsyan ran into huge resistance, when he strived to normalize relations with Turkey in 2008, the Armenian society appears less sensitive to possible Armenian-Turkish normalization, especially after the 2020 heavy war defeat.

Conclusions

Consequently, the war and its aftermath, combined with the adversities produced by the pandemic caused a tragic death toll, a slowdown in the political and economic developments, undermined governmental legitimacy, and exacerbated the pre-existing divisions amongst central political powers and the general public. Furthermore, the government's failure to secure the return of POWs, the lack of progress in the investigation of war crimes, and the mismanagement of the pandemic, have all contributed to public anger and mistrust of the authorities.

Artificial and manipulated news content as well as hate speech are also growing problems in Armenia. Regardless of some amendments initiated by the government with regard to these issues, no effective measures have been taken to prevent the increasing marginalization of civil society actors. Rather, on some occasions, officials' public comments contributed to the problem or the measures undertaken led to disproportionate or groundless restrictions.

As to civil society, notwithstanding the constrained political space, a vibrant civil society has evolved in Armenia over time. During the war and its aftermath, the Armenian civil society and the population in general have demonstrated a strong sense of solidarity and support to those affected by the war. Still, there is no close cooperation with civil society groups having field-specific expertise, which is of notional importance for addressing post-war issues.

With the deployment of its forces in the aftermath of the war, Russia extended its involvement beyond diplomacy and ensured its presence in the region for at least next five years. In the meantime, it faced a hard task of maintaining a balance in its relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan. Although Moscow's influence has augmented, so has its vulnerability, because of the position of its peacekeepers who are in both Armenia-controlled Nagorno-Karabakh and the critical Lachin Corridor, now under the control of Azerbaijan. Overall, Armenia has further plunged into the orbit of the Russian influence with its ensuing adverse effects on the state of human rights and democracy across the country. Meanwhile, Armenia's deepening dependence on Russia and consistent solidarity with Russian policies significantly impair the country's ability to achieve a Russian-European balance.

The political configuration of the region is also contingent upon on the normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations. Although the process is ongoing based on 'no preconditions' policy, the previous experience of Turkey making last-minute demands does not allow for much confidence in the success of this process. There is no roadmap nor agenda for commencing substantive negotiations just yet.

The November agreement was far from a true peace treaty. It left many issues unresolved, among which the status question which lies at the heart of the conflict. Ongoing incidents of military hostilities threaten the livelihoods of civilians living in Nagorno-Karabakh and along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border. The threat of new hostilities will persist as long as there is no internationally recognized status for Nagorno-Karabakh.

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