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2020 NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT
AFTERMATH

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To all the victims of 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war

To the fallen soldiers
They did not want to become heroes, they wanted to live

To my dear cousin Gor, who miraculously survived the war

To my family and girlfriend

Abstract

In September 2020 the “frozen” conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan has escalated into a full-scale war. The consequences of the 2020 events demonstrated the need for alternative peacebuilding strategies in the South Caucasus. The thesis focuses on the role of international actors in the conflict and on ineffectiveness of the regional actors in the peace settling process. In addition, this thesis explores the conflict from multiple perspectives, touching on topics like self-determination, disinformation campaigns, such as the environmental propaganda, refugees, and internally displaced people. The first chapter describes the background of the conflict, recent events and circumstances that escalated this conflict into another war. The second chapter continues the 2020 war, the strategies and diplomacy adopted by the sides as well as the reaction of international community. The third chapter focuses on the consequences of the war and the role of regional actors such as Russia, Turkey and Iran, global actors such as the United States, the European Union and the international organizations in the peace process. Finally, the possible solutions that could potentially lead to sustainable peace in the region will be discussed in the last chapter.

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Location and extent of Nagorno-Karabakh (Source: Released in Public Domain)

List of Abbreviations

AD	Anno Domini
AI	Amnesty International
BC	Before Christ
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
EU	European Union
EEU	Eurasian Economic Union
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NKAO	Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
U.S.	United States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Introduction

Disputes over Nagorno-Karabakh started in 1918, after the newly independent republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan both claimed the region, but were invaded by the Soviet Union 2 years later. The USSR placed Nagorno-Karabakh under Azerbaijani Socialist Republic, despite its' majority Armenian population. After being part of one country for around 70 years, in the last years of Soviet Union the countries engaged in a long-lasting war, that intensified further after the collapse of USSR.

After the end of First Nagorno-Karabakh war in 1994, widely considered as frozen, the low-intensity conflict continued until 2020, when it escalated into a new war, taking more than 6 thousand lives.

This thesis focuses on 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, also called a 44-day war and its' aftermath. The consequences of the 44-day war are still present since the conflict is continuing to this day, becoming the longest ongoing in post-Soviet region.

During the 35 years of the conflict Armenian and Azerbaijani population, including the residents of Nagorno-Karabakh and the refugees from the region developed a deep feeling of enmity and absence of trust towards each other, encouraged by their respective governments. The highly partial nature of reporting on the conflict contributes to spreading the narratives supported by the governments. These issues will be an obstacle for future conflict resolution efforts, which means that diverse peacebuilding strategies focused on needs of population are required to find the best solutions for future peaceful coexistence.

Despite all the present obstacles, peaceful settlement of the conflict has recently become more possible and the negotiations might take a positive turn very soon.

Main objectives of this thesis include exploring the circumstances and reasons for escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 2020, highlighting the underreported issues of the conflict, questioning the effectiveness of regional and international actors' involvement and lastly offering possible proposals for conflict resolution, based on the findings of the research.

The research in this thesis is done from two main perspectives. One is the perspective of the affected population, meaning the current residents of Nagorno-Karabakh living under humanitarian crisis, because of the blockade of Lachin corridor. Along with the current residents of Nagorno-Karabakh, the affected population also includes the refugees and

internally displaced persons from both Armenia and Azerbaijan, the prisoners of war still being detained to this day and the individuals from two countries forced into participation in hostilities against their will.

The second is the perspective of geopolitical context of the conflict. By analyzing the positions and involvement of external actors during and after Nagorno-Karabakh war, an examination of the reasons for escalation is made, as well as discussion about the role of external actors in future negotiations on conflict resolution.

By connecting the two perspectives, this thesis aims to accomplish its' objectives, but also generate impartial analysis of the conflict.

Considering the highly contested nature of the region's name, this thesis mainly uses the internationally accepted - Nagorno-Karabakh, but also sometimes referring to it as Republic of Artsakh, one of the historic names of the region, currently used by the local population. Names Shushi and Shusha are both used as well, while the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh is mentioned as Stepanakert.

The first chapter focuses on the historical background of the conflict, starting with the pre-Soviet times when the first hostilities over Nagorno-Karabakh were initiated between the newly independent Armenia and Azerbaijan and the further occupation of both republics by the Soviet army.

The circumstances and reasons of the USSR's government to place Nagorno-Karabakh within Azerbaijani Socialist Republic are also discussed.

While analyzing the historical perspectives, the vision of both sides is presented with references to the both opposing opinions on history of Nagorno-Karabakh, considering the bias existing among many reports on the topic. Simultaneously references are made to internationally renowned authors and specialists in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, such as Thomas de Waal and Svante Cornell.

For purpose of finding the reasons of conflict's escalation in 1990's, a detailed analysis of USSR leadership's latest policies is done and the connection between the new freedoms and emergence of ethnic conflicts in Soviet Union is presented.

While the timeline of the First Nagorno-Karabakh war is shown, the references are made to UN Security Council Resolutions, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International reports, alongside the reports by both sides about casualties or negotiation attempts. While presenting the events of First Nagorno-Karabakh war, Russia's destructive role in the conflict is examined as well. The outcome of the First Nagorno-Karabakh war affected the entire region, starting an economic blockade of Armenia by Turkey and Azerbaijan, slowing down the

development of many regional communication and transportation projects.

More than 60 thousand people lost their lives in a war that lasted since 1988 until 1994. The tragically high human casualties of the war affect the countries till nowadays.

The end of the first chapter discusses the development of Republic of Artsakh, which in addition to the territories controlled by the Russian peacekeepers today, controlled the surrounding areas and failed in gaining international recognition.

The examined period is the one between the end of the war in 1994 and 2010. The recognition of international status of the republic was promoted by the government of Armenia, but given the fact of occupation of surrounding areas, the possibility of exercising the right to external self-determination through exceptional circumstances was even lower than it is today.

During the examined period, OSCE Minsk group offered several solutions including a common state proposal. The other renown deals, called “step by step” and “package” mainly referred to phased withdrawal of Armenian forces and future possibility of referendum on Nagorno-Karabakh’s status. The detailed investigation of different proposals and the timeline of negotiation process in given period will be introduced, concluding the chapter. The negotiations within the framework of OSCE Minsk group resulted in all the deals being refused by either one or both sides.

The second chapter is focused on the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war itself. It starts with providing an overview of the existing circumstances prior to the escalation of hostilities. Internal political tensions in the conflicting countries at the time and their relationship with the regional powers will be analyzed. Additionally, the role of OSCE Minsk group, which slowly decreased its’ efforts in peace settlement process after the failure of negotiations in the framework of Madrid principles. The beginning of the chapter concentrates on those events in order to come closer to reasons of escalation and comprehending their preventability.

The course of the 44-day war will be examined from different dimensions. Among the military strategies used by the sides of the conflict, the usage of military drones (UAV) was unprecedented, heavily affecting the outcome of the war and setting a noteworthy precedent for future military clashes, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Turkey’s involvement in the war and its’ deployment of foreign mercenaries has been one of the main condemned topics, significantly affecting the outcome as well. The 3 attempts of signing a ceasefire were followed with the final ceasefire agreement being reached on 9 November, 2020.

The signing of the agreement started a political crisis in Armenia and nationwide celebrations

in Azerbaijan. While the articles from the ceasefire related to the corridor through Armenia are still being differently interpreted by the sides, becoming the reason of delays in current negotiations.

The chapter also focuses on the immediate aftermath of the 44-day war. The political crisis in Armenia leading to snap parliamentary elections in 2021 was an important moment where Russia was attempting to insert its' influence in Armenia by using the subtle moment of dissatisfaction with the outcome of the war.

While Azerbaijani leadership secured its' positions in the country after succeeding in the war, the establishment of Military Trophy Park sparked outrage of international community.

In order to display the course of 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and the events that preceded it in accurate and impartial manner, the chapter relies on information provided by the intergovernmental international organizations, such as UN, OSCE, EU, non-governmental organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, International Crisis group, Human Rights House Foundation, and the fact-checking investigative journalism such as Bellingcat. The media sources like BBC and the Independent are also used.

The next topic of the chapter are the disinformation campaigns. The excessive information wars were part of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict even before the start of 44-day war with the sides using all the means to attract more support from the international community. However, what happened during the 2020 war, has a potential of setting a new trend among future military conflicts in the world, especially during the current struggle against the climate change.

Perhaps the most distinctive trait of the conflict can be coined as environmental propaganda. The weaponization of the environment by the both sides took the large part of information wars during the hostilities.

The diaspora-based Armenian NGOs directed at attracting the international support through a coordinated lobbying activities were in a rivalry with Azerbaijani state-funded bot armies attempting to accomplish the same goal.

Among the main actions the sides continuously blamed each other for were the forest fires set by using white phosphorus and the devastating effect of cluster munitions on the environment, the endangered animals were also part of the debate. After the end of the war, the countries simultaneously filed cases against each other on destruction of biodiversity under Bern convention on nature.

In order to explore this unique trait of the war, investigations by The Conflict and Environment Observatory were used together with reports by Bellingcat and several media

sources.

The second chapter also includes the most dramatic and underreported issue of the conflict - the mandatory military service, and the arising issues. Armenia and Azerbaijan to this day remain two of the few countries in the world to strictly enforce mandatory military service to its' male citizens.

Stressing the importance of this topic and showcasing how underreported it remains, is one of the main arguments of this thesis. The reason for such an importance given to the topic is the fact the it represents continuous human rights violation that is not being voiced for decades.

By the Constitutions of both Armenia and Azerbaijan citizens aged 18 are subject to conscription. Despite the differences in length of the military service and the limit of age until which the individuals can be drafted to the military, the main procedure is almost identical.

There is no option for conscientious objection to the military service. Since the independence of the two countries, articles about the obligation to be conscripted to the military service appeared in their newly drafted Constitutions. Ever since, hundreds of conscientious objectors were either forcefully drafted to the military service or imprisoned in case of refusal. The only exception became the representative of Jehovah's Witnesses community in Armenia, after multiple decisions by European Court of Human Rights ruling in their favor. The alternative civilian service was established for them, but it also functions with violations and attempts to engage it into military.

Meanwhile in Azerbaijan such a practice has not started yet, but instead the exemption from military service is temporarily given to a number of university students, that after the end of studies face the same issue. The investigation on this topic aims to demonstrate the ongoing situation with violation of rights of conscientious objectors.

Among the fallen soldiers, the ones performing their mandatory military service are a majority and even though there cannot be a data collected on how many of them were conscientious objectors, but preventing conscientious objectors from being drafted to the military against their will should be a topic of interest for the international community and the second chapter focuses on proving this argument by analyzing and displaying the reasons why this topic remains out of discussion and why is it difficult for the world to relate to it.

While researching on this topic, the legislations of both countries were used in order to verify their compliance with international human rights instruments, such as Universal Declaration of Human Rights and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The legislative framework of the Council of Europe was also examined for the same reason. Several media resources were referenced on articles about the modifications in military

related provisions in the countries.

The last topic of the second chapter focuses on the refugees and the internally displaced persons. An issue that continues since the First Nagorno-Karabakh war when thousands of people had to leave their places of residence and flee amid the fighting. Many of them were not able to return to this day. Except of that harsh reality that dates to the 1990s, there is a new one that unfolds since December 2022. The blockade of Lachin corridor has left many current residents of Nagorno-Karabakh outside of their homes unable to return. As it was previously mentioned, the affected population is one of the two main perspectives of this thesis which argues that putting the needs of population, both current population and the potentially returning refugees must be the priority of any possible proposal on resolution of the conflict.

The actions of international organizations aimed at assisting the refugees and internally displaced in Armenia and Azerbaijan are described in this chapter with the goal of displaying the similarities in struggles that affected population on both sides is facing, while being under a constant informational pressure aimed at the demonization of the neighbors.

The issue of the population forced to flee these countries in order not to be involved in the hostilities is also necessary to be mentioned.

A detailed examination of numbers of people fleeing both Armenia and Azerbaijan for the same reason is done confirming the above-mentioned importance of the rights of conscientious objectors being respected. While fleeing their countries, those individuals do not get a refugee status for being a draft evader, but are sometimes even deported back, if located in the countries having cooperation agreements with Armenia and Azerbaijan, further violating their sense of freedom.

Thus, the end of the second chapter mainly focuses on the affected population, analyzing the consequences it faced as a result of the 44-day war and the conflict in general.

The third chapter is concentrated on the role of external actors – both regional and international. It starts with Russia and argues on its' destructive role throughout the entire conflict, the analysis starts from arguments on how the conflict was initially promoted by Soviet leadership, while independent Russia continued the same politics aimed at maintaining the conflict active for having leverage over the two sides.

Russian government's explicit criticism of Armenian leadership and continuous declarations supporting Azerbaijani claims, emboldened Azerbaijani President to start realizing the ambitions that he repeatedly voiced before. During the war Russia has acted passively, offering to mediate and expressing concern with resumed hostilities.

Signing the ceasefire agreement with the two conflicting countries, Russia received the opportunity of deploying a peacekeeping mission that was not in a collaboration with the OSCE co-chairs. With a bigger presence in the region Russia seemed to be the biggest beneficiary of the conflict, until the things started to change in 2022 with its' invasion of Ukraine. The circumstances of that change and what can be Russia's role in current situation are analyzed in the third chapter.

Role of Turkey in the conflict has always been the one of ally of Azerbaijan and during the 44-day war the extended Turkish involvement in hostilities was condemned by the international actors. Despite not getting the chance of deploying its' peacekeepers, Turkey now has better positions in the region and its' normalization of relations with Armenia can change the situation. The difficult relationship between the countries keeps the regional communication and transportation projects limited to this day. When discussing the role of Turkey in the conflict, this thesis views the perspectives of Turkey's involvement in future peacebuilding negotiations and intends to find grounds for Turkey's interest in the conflict's resolution considering the new circumstances.

The role of Iran in the Nagorno-Karabakh war was significantly passive, but the future regional frameworks for peace negotiations and country's interests in having options in its' link towards the north make the research of its' current and upcoming policies important for the peace settlement.

The last regional actor is Georgia and the importance of its' role in the negotiation process is explained by its' vital interest in the resolution of the conflict, since the renewed hostilities and possible further engagement of Russia can harm the country. Ultimately, the chapter demonstrates the engagement of international actors.

The change of United States' position on the conflict between the 44-day war and 2022 Azerbaijani offensive is analyzed since it presents prospects of US engagement in the region with the help of NATO member Turkey. In current circumstances the U.S. voiced its' support to Armenia and the need of immediate end of blockade.

The European Union's role seemed to disappear in the region for a while, but its' renewed involvement and the reasons for decision to employ the European Mission in Armenia along the Azerbaijani border will be displayed in the third chapter as well.

European Union has a potential of offering its' own proposals and engaging more in the negotiation process in the future. The discussion about the international organizations is the last topic related to the position of external actors, the crucial role of International Committee of the Red Cross and its' assistance for those who are deprived of their access to healthcare is

analyzed.

The end of the third chapter is dedicated to the current situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, the ongoing humanitarian crisis, and the possibilities for unblocking Lachin corridor. The findings done after researching each external actor are used for offering possible proposals for the conflict resolution.

In order to view the conflict from each actor's perspective, while displaying the topic of external actors, the foreign ministries and government statements by respective countries were referenced. The UN OHCHR, NATO, CSTO and EU Parliament reports were used as sources as well. Media Networks such as Al Jazeera, Deutsche Welle and TIME proved to be helpful in gathering the recent events happening in the region.

In conclusion, the thesis intends to emphasize the need of prevention of violence resumption and the need of peaceful settlement through multidimensional solutions that will benefit the affected population and not the geopolitical interests of any of the involved countries.

Chapter 1. The background of the conflict

The ongoing conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh dates to the 1920s. However, the region was claimed by both Armenia and Azerbaijan as their historic land and has been the reason of tensions between Armenians and Azerbaijanis long before, in times of Russian empire.

The longest ongoing conflict in post-Soviet region is also one of the longest ongoing conflicts in the world. With devastating consequences on civilian population of the region, the conflict has also had destructive effects on the environment of the region and its' surrounding areas. Historical arguments are often used by the sides in attempts to gain more support from the international community and as justifications during escalations.

According to multiple sources, the history of Nagorno-Karabakh, also called Artsakh, dates to the fifth century BC (Geukjian, 2016), as part of ancient Armenia under Orontid dynasty (Hewsen, 1982). Artsakh was the earliest known name of the region. Azerbaijani scholars however, reject the existence of an Armenian state in the region, referring to the existence of several tribal associations, that inhabited the region, later forming early state institutions of Azerbaijan (Mirza Jamal, 2006).

Thus, the very first evidence and information about the existence and even the name of the region is disputed between the sides. This very often creates a challenging environment for the research and investigations about the conflict, disinformation campaigns being one of the milestones of this conflict. In order not to go far from the focus of this paper, in this chapter we will mainly concentrate on the recent history of the conflict starting with the 1920s.

1.1 The recent history of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

The territory of modern Nagorno-Karabakh became part of the Russian Empire at the beginning of the 19th century as a result of the Russian-Persian war of 1804-1813. An agreement on the transfer of Karabakh to Russian Empire was reached in 1805.

In this subchapter I chose to focus on the recent history of the conflict, starting with the independence of South Caucasian Republics after the collapse of Russian Empire.

After the October¹ Revolution of 1917, Nagorno-Karabakh, as part of the South Caucasus (otherwise called Transcaucasia), was under jurisdiction of the Transcaucasian Commissariat, a coalition created on November 11, 1917. On April 22, 1918, the Transcaucasian Seim², which was convened by the Committee, adopted a resolution declaring Transcaucasia an independent Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic. The republic lasted only for a month, since three separate states – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia subsequently declared their independence in May 1918.

In a meeting that happened on May 28, 1918 between the members of the Muslim section of the Transcaucasian Seim it was agreed on decision to proclaim the independence of Azerbaijan. (De Waal, 2003).

As a result, the newly created state - the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic expressed its' claims to the territory of certain provinces of the former Russian Empire, that included Nagorno Karabakh and Zangezur³. The regions were as well claimed by the First Republic of Armenia that proclaimed independence on the same day.

Thus, the contrary position of Armenian population of Nagorno Karabakh was expressed immediately. The authority of the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic was categorically denied by Nagorno Karabakh Armenians. While region of Zangezur was included in the First Republic of Armenia, Nagorno Karabakh was destined to a more uncertain and instable future. (Olson, Pappas, & Pappas, 1994)

July 1918, the First Congress of the Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh declared Nagorno-Karabakh an independent administrative and political unit. The newly constituted people's government of Nagorno-Karabakh consisted of five commissariats. Already in the spring of

¹ Bolshevik or October Revolution

² The representative and legislative body of the South Caucasus

³ Southern province of modern Armenia - Syunik

the same year, the hostility between the settled Armenian population and Muslim nomads became an acute problem for the region.

There was no state power taking charge of the security issues. The Armenians, who were a settled population, were aware of possible attacks from the nomads and undertook a strategy of preventing their passage to the summer mountain pastures. That meant a threat of starvation for the nomads. Thus, the sides started seeing each other as mortal enemies. This factor played a huge role in subsequent events.

When the Turkish troops invaded the Transcaucasia in 1918 after the signing of the Brest-Litovsk Peace between Turkey and Soviet Russia, the commander of the Turkish troops presented an ultimatum to Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh to recognize the authority of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic but the Second Congress of the Armenians of Karabakh rejected it.

During the same year, this ultimatum was presented to National Council of Nagorno Karabakh twice more, but was repeatedly rejected. Turkish troops occupied Shushi (Shusha) the cultural capital of Nagorno Karabakh. They heavily outnumbered the Armenian units, disarmed them, and made mass arrests. However, there were several Armenian military groups still successfully operating in the mountainous regions, continuing to resist the Turkish army. (Barsegov, 2008)

After Turkey's capitulation to the Entente, British troops entered Azerbaijan. British administration unexpectedly provided all the support to Azerbaijan Democratic Republic in Nagorno Karabakh issue. National Council of Nagorno Karabakh was expecting the opposite outcome, given the fact that Armenians were involved in confrontation with Turkey. (Potier, 2001)

Meanwhile General Sir William M. Thomson became military governor of Baku and pursued the goal to force the National Council of Nagorno Karabakh to recognize the authority of Azerbaijan. The most probable reason of the British stance on Nagorno Karabakh is believed to be the presence of natural resources in Azerbaijan. However, according to General Thomson's official stance, Nagorno Karabakh's economic integration with Azerbaijan was more realistic and the possibility of summer migrations was critically important.

In this subchapter we will not discuss the timeline of 1918-1920 Armenian-Azerbaijani war, since not all of its' events have direct connection to the development of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, like the military clashes over Zangezur (Syunik) and Nakhichevan, however I chose to present the relevant events alongside with the role of the British Command in the region and argue on their role in the conflict's development.

Important to note that under supervision of British appointed Azerbaijani governor Khosrov Sultanov massacres of Shushi and Gaybulashen were carried out, where thousands of Armenian civilians were killed (Cornell, *The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*, 1999).

Because of those events, the representatives of the British command declared, that Sultanov should be put on trial.

National Council of Nagorno-Karabakh convened to find out whether Nagorno-Karabakh will be able to defend its independence in the event of a war, the created commission concluded that the Nagorno Karabakh people would not be able to do this. Taking into account the fact that British troops were preparing to evacuate from Azerbaijan and the situation could get dangerous for the Armenian population, on August 22 an agreement was concluded, according to which Nagorno-Karabakh declared that it considers itself temporarily until the final decision of the Paris Peace Conference “within the borders of the of Azerbaijan Democratic Republic”. (King, 2008)

As it is known, the Supreme Council of Allied states at the Paris Peace Conference recognized both republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan, however avoided to define their borders, declaring it a topic that should be solved between the two states.

1.2 The development of the conflict during Soviet period

In 1920's the New Bolshevik government of the Russian Socialist Republic was on its' way to start recovering the country's economy after the recent wars. One of the goals was to restore the former borders of the Russian empire.

The Transcaucasia was considered important for the RSR in order to enlarge its' dominance in the Black and Caspian seas and benefit from the natural resources of the region. Azerbaijan became the first South Caucasian state to become a part of the Soviet Union. The overthrow of the former Azerbaijani government was met very positively among Armenians, who even sent a delegation to Moscow to establish adequate relations, however the Soviet leadership of

Azerbaijan was not preparing to satisfy their needs regarding the Nagorno Karabakh region (Yoshimura, 2007).

After around a year of resistance against the Soviet Red Army in Karabakh and Nakhichevan, Armenian units were defeated. Soviet Armenian Academy of Sciences suggests that there was a popular opinion among the Armenian Bolsheviks that the Soviet takeover of these regions could have a positive outcome for Armenia in a long-term perspective, believing that after the success of Soviet power in Armenia, those regions would be returned (Kvashonkin, 1997).

On August 1920, Soviet troops take control of all the three disputed regions - Nagorno Karabakh, Zangezur and Nakhichevan. According to the subsequent agreement with Armenia, the purpose of occupation was the peaceful settlement of the territorial issues. The agreement also indicated, that the takeover by Soviet troops of the disputed territories does not prejudice the rights of the Republic of Armenia or the Socialist Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan to those territories.

On November 29, 1920, Soviet power was proclaimed also in Armenia, after the occupation of the entire republic. Here, comes an important event for the Nagorno Karabakh conflict: the next day after Armenia became part of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijani Soviet Republic declared that the population of Nagorno Karabakh should be granted the right of self-determination. (Starr & Dawisha, 1994).

On 12 June, 1921 the Caucasian Bureau of Soviet Union in the resolution ordered Armenian government to declare Nagorno Karabakh a part of Armenia. However, very quickly it became known, that not everyone in the Azerbaijani Soviet leadership was aware of Azerbaijan's agreement on Nagorno Karabakh's inclusion into Armenia (Altstadt, 1992). During the next meeting of the Caucasian Bureau in July, the decision was confirmed once again, however, the Azerbaijani side requested the question to be transferred to the Central Committee of Moscow.

The initial agreement to postpone the final decision-making for the Central Committee was not carried out. As a result, another meeting of the Caucasian Bureau was convened the next day, the July 5, at which the Azerbaijani leadership made success in negotiations, by pressure, using the threat of prevention of petroleum gas deliveries to Moscow, they requested to reconsider the decision of the previous meeting and solve the issue in favor of Azerbaijan. (Altstadt, 1992)

The result of the new meeting was a resolution, that stated the necessity of inclusion of Nagorno Karabakh into Azerbaijan, with a status of regional autonomy.

There are multiple opinions about reasons for such a switch of decision.

One of the officially given reasons for changing the initial decision was the economic connection of the region with neighboring Azerbaijani regions. It was specifically mentioned that it would facilitate the free movement of the Azerbaijani nomads between the Karabakh mountains and Azerbaijani plain regions. This reason raises a lot of controversy, since the borders between Soviet Republics in a physical sense would only have a formal meaning. The other official reason provided by Caucasian Bureau was considered the necessity of national peace between Muslims and Armenians of the region. It is commonly believed that the decision was based on the famous principle of “divide and rule”, considering also the previous history of the conflict and Russia’s role and interest in it.

After assessing this situation from different points of view, I believe there is another very important reason to be mentioned: this decision was widely considered one of the many attempts of Soviet Union leadership to build a better relationship with Turkey, earlier the same year the western regions of Soviet Armenia - Kars and Surmalu were formally transferred to Turkey in Treaty of Brotherhood in 1921. In the same agreement, the disputed region of Nakhichevan was passed to Azerbaijan (Debo, 1992).

Until 1923 the status of Nagorno Karabakh region was not officially defined.

In 1923 an Autonomous Oblast⁴ was established within the Azerbaijan Soviet Republic, formed from the Armenian-populated part of the region. The NKAO⁵ had a population consisting of 94% of ethnic Armenians and was connected to Armenian Soviet republic by Lachin corridor. Its’ status of autonomy was reconfirmed in 1937. (Zinin & Malashenko, 1994)

In the 1930’s, the Armenian side protested and desperately tried to return Nagorno Karabakh into Armenian Soviet Republic but has never achieved enough support by the Soviet leadership.

Attempts to raise the issue of Nagorno Karabakh by Soviet Armenia continued in 1945, 1965, 1967 and even 1977 and were continuously suppressed by the Central Committee of the Soviet government. During the Soviet rule up until the last few years before the collapse, Armenian and Azerbaijani Soviet republics coexisted in a relative peace and harmony. There was a significant population of Armenians in Azerbaijan and Azerbaijanis in Armenia, the relationship between the two was an important factor that contributed to a relatively peaceful

⁴ Oblast means a region in Russian, the word was used to describe an administrative entity in Soviet Union

⁵ Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast

coexistence in Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast as well.

The Soviet Union consisted of 15 Soviet Republics, among which some had Autonomous Oblasts inside them. The Soviet Republics had a certain limited level of sovereignty, they were appointed by their nationalities and ethnic groups, having their own institutions and flags, but no decision-making power. Ethnicity and nationality were also formally indicated in the documents. (De Waal, 2003)

Each citizen possessing a Soviet Union passport, besides the Soviet Union being mentioned in it, would have his nationality (meaning the Soviet Republic he was from) and his ethnicity specifically indicated in it. This fact has played a big role later when the Armenian side started accusing the Azerbaijani Soviet Republic in forcefully changing the demographics of the region. The Azerbaijani leadership was accused in executing a plan of institutional discrimination against the Armenian population and facilitating the resettling of Azerbaijani population.

The 1979 census showed that percentage of Armenian residents of the NKAO was reduced to 75.9% and the percentage of Azerbaijanis rose to 22.9%.

Thus, the percentage of Armenians was steadily decreasing. This data caused a public outrage both in Soviet Armenia and in NKAO itself, the Armenian leadership compared this data to the one collected in 1923 and stressed the importance of interference from the Soviet government to solve the issue. Soviet Armenia claimed that Azerbaijan's real intention was to completely displace Armenians from Nagorno Karabakh, with the example of Nakhichevan. The fact of authorities conducting an intentional policy aimed at changing the ethnic balance of the region was even confirmed by Azerbaijani leadership, more specifically by Heydar Aliyev⁶, the head of Soviet Azerbaijani government at the time. He admitted to organizing the transfer of Azerbaijani students to Stepanakert⁷ schools and universities and constructing factories, where only Azerbaijanis were sent to work. (De Waal, 2003). In his vision, this was a long-term solution to reach the goal.

The tendency of changes in the ethnic and national composition of the population played a crucial role in shaping the preconditions of the future crisis.

Later in the first Nagorno Karabakh war and after it, demographic data was used by the sides and sometimes even manipulated in order to gain international support and justify their actions.

⁶ Heydar Aliyev was the President of Azerbaijan (1993-2003), Soviet Azerbaijan (1969-1982)

⁷ Stepanakert is the capital of Nagorno Karabakh and its' most populous city

1.3 The First Nagorno Karabakh war

After the arrival of the last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, a new wave of Soviet politics began.

During his first years, Gorbachev successfully improved the freedom of speech and press and decentralized the Soviet economy. Later, he shifted towards social democracy, which led to undermining the narrative of “one-party state” and the Communist party’s “ruling” status. These events gave a hope to the local Nagorno Karabakh population, who felt that their demands could be heard this time. Several delegations of Karabakh Armenians headed to Moscow to try to negotiate the issue with the Central Committee. Simultaneously, Armenian diaspora in Europe and USA started lobbying for the issue abroad. The goal was annexing Nagorno Karabakh to Armenia.

In 1987, the first incident between Armenian residents and Azerbaijani authorities happened in village of Chardakhli, where residents were assaulted, some Armenians were forced to flee (De Waal, 2003).

These events caused general dissatisfaction and protests in Nagorno Karabakh. Meanwhile in Armenia, as in many other Soviet countries, there was a rise in environmental activism. Initially, the environmental protests were about pollution and demonstrators achieved the closure of 2 large power plants. However, in 1988 the environmental demonstrations were transforming into a movement more concentrated on political reforms and independence. (Ishkanian, 2013).

It is fair to claim that this was a crucial point for the development of the conflict. Considering the fact that much later, the environmental propaganda would become a tool of battles fought online and even a justification for creating a humanitarian crisis nowadays.

The new policy of glasnost⁸ implied a softer stance on demonstrations so they continued spreading.

Abel Aganbekyan, an ethnically Armenian economic adviser of Gorbachev at a time, held a speech in Paris, favoring the idea of transfer of Nagorno Karabakh to Armenia. For Armenians it indicated support from Soviet Union leadership.

⁸ Glasnost was the policy enhancing the freedom of speech and information in late years of Soviet Union

Meanwhile the incidents with ethnic Azerbaijanis being forced to leave Armenia also started to happen, at the beginning of 1988, Azerbaijani residents of Kapan⁹ escaped to Baku. On February 1988 protests in Stepanakert demanding unification with Armenia were gathering thousands of people. As a result, on February 20, the NKAO leadership adopted a resolution, containing a request of unification with Armenia, addressed to the Soviet government. The fact that there were no possible solutions offered regarding the future of the Azerbaijani minority was an issue of concern. The Soviet Union government rejected the demands for unification (Human Rights Watch, 1994).

Despite of the fact that the Central Committee's decision maintained the status quo, the ongoing situation caused rise in nationalism in both Soviet republics. In Azerbaijan counter-demonstrations were initiated, later they evolved into planned attacks on Armenian villages. Meanwhile, in Armenia the already mentioned environmental demonstrations developed into something much bigger, still spoken about to this day "Karabakh movement." A movement that not only strengthened the connection of Nagorno Karabakh Armenians with Armenia itself, but also became the moment in which Armenian diaspora, that was irrelevant during Soviet years, got involved again and undertook a crucially important role in the further events, clearly affecting the outcome of the First Nagorno Karabakh war.

"Karabakh movement" quickly started gathering large amount of people on the streets. On 25 February, a million people were protesting, that was almost a third of Republic's population at a time (Zinin & Malashenko, 1994).

Meanwhile in Azerbaijan, in the same period, a massacre of Armenians took place in the city of Sumgait, not far from the capital Baku. During the massacre, that subsequently became known as Sumgait pogrom, Azerbaijani residents of the town were organizing armed groups and attacking the Armenian population without any resistance from the local police. 26 Armenians and 6 Azerbaijanis killed: those were the numbers presented by the Soviet government however many sources argue about death toll being much higher than 100 people.

These events caused anger and revengeful actions from the Armenian side, Azerbaijani residents of Armenia, mainly residents of the southern region of Syunik, were also attacked and forced to flee, 25 killed were the confirmed numbers with Azerbaijani side arguing about a higher number. (Vaserman & Ginat, 1994)

In both cases the sides disagreed on numbers and failed to take the responsibility and punish

⁹ Kapan is a city in Southern Armenia (Syunik region)

the perpetrators, but the conclusion I can make from these events is that there was an important circumstance behind all of these events.

With all its' positive outcomes, the new political shift of the Soviet leadership has also had destructive consequences on the case of ethnic conflicts. When before, such cases were immediately dealt with Soviet army in order to prevent the rise of nationalism, now with the glasnost policies, the violence was also more likely to happen and go unpunished.

As a result of ethnic violence, in 1989, all Azerbaijanis had already left Armenia, the only Armenians remaining in Azerbaijan were in the capital Baku, in significantly reduced numbers.

On July 12, 1989 the resolution of secession of Nagorno Karabakh from Azerbaijani Soviet Republic was adopted. The state of emergency, that was being imposed by the internal troops was introduced, but failed in preventing the clashes.

In Armenia, the "Fedayi" formations started appearing. Representing a militia formed not only by locals but also from Armenian diaspora volunteers, these formations were the result of the already spoken Karabakh movement's evolution into an all-national movement.

These militias started to execute their crucial role in the war alongside the small army organized by the Ministry of the Interior. In Azerbaijani side, the Popular Front of Azerbaijan was the organizer, succeeding in gathering significant quantity of military forces.

The remaining Armenians of Baku became a subject of another massacre by Azerbaijani protesters in January 1990. Soviet leadership's reaction was significantly belated. (Suny & Curtis, 1994).

In the summer of 1991 Soviet Army collaborated with the local Azerbaijani one in an operation called "Ring", resulting in deportation of around 5 thousand local Armenians.

The events started anti-Soviet and anti-Russian feelings in Armenia and contributed to the struggle for independence.

In November 1991 when the Azerbaijani leadership decided on dissolution of NKAO, the local Armenians proclaimed the creation of an independent state, following a referendum with over 99% of population voting pro in an 82% turnout.

The clashes increasingly intensified and the full-scale war started between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Nagorno Karabakh Defense Forces with the help from Armenia quickly started making military gains, capturing all of the Azerbaijani villages of the region by February 1992. On February 26, another tragic massacre took place. After Armenian forces

captured an important stronghold of the Azerbaijani Army – the town of Khojaly¹⁰, 200 civilians were killed. (Human Rights Watch, 1994).

Azerbaijani government suggests a much higher number of victims and very often uses this event in international politics with the goal of giving Azerbaijan a status of victim making Armenia the aggressor. The term of “genocide” is also being used often by Azerbaijani media. Armenian side in its turn, denies the massacre, presenting the fact of provided humanitarian corridor as the main argument for denial.

Human Rights Watch investigated and condemned the massacre. On April 10, another massacre was carried out, this time it was carried out by the Azerbaijani military on Armenian population of Maraga¹¹ village. 100 people were killed with 53 being taken as hostages (Amnesty International, 1993).

This massacre although being as cruel and tragic as the Khojaly one, despite all the evidence and reports, was not given the necessary attention, was neither covered by international media, nor condemned. Azerbaijani side has never commented on the massacre.

There is a very important conclusion that one can draw after researching about these 2 massacres. None of the sides showed any willingness to hold the perpetrators accountable or to accept the reality of what happened. Both were led by the desire to diminish the extent of negative impression their actions would cause among the international community.

These decisions, unfortunately contributed to growing reciprocal demonization that made further peaceful coexistence even less possible.

In Azerbaijan, because of the poor military performance during the war, a political instability was unfolding. Shushi¹², the cultural center of Nagorno Karabakh, the most important city for both sides, was taken by Armenian forces on May 9, which became considered as biggest military gain in the war so far. On the same day, Artsakh Defense Army was established, introducing the newly defined organization, structure, and the mandatory military service. As a result of capture of Shushi, the entire former Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast was already under the control of Armenian forces. In order to connect the region to Armenia proper, the Artsakh Defense Army had the last remaining goal – the capture of Lachin corridor¹³, the direct link between Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh. The offensive had successful outcome and the result of the war seemed predictable. (Cheterian, 2009).

¹⁰ Khojaly is an Azerbaijani village in Nagorno Karabakh

¹¹ Maraga is an Armenian village in Nagorno Karabakh

¹² Shushi/Shusha is a city in Nagorno Karabakh

¹³ Lachin corridor is a 5km link between Armenia and Republic of Artsakh

Meanwhile the political tensions in Baku resulted in the change of leadership and the new government with Abulfaz Elchibey¹⁴ as President was determined to not give up and try to overturn the outcome of the war.

After a successful offensive operation, that started from the north of the region, by July 1992, Azerbaijan had already gained more than a third of Nagorno Karabakh. Reacting to military gains of Azerbaijan, Armenian government expressed the readiness of direct intervention and started transferring more forces to the region (Goldberg, 1992).

By September 1992 the Azerbaijani military progress stopped when they failed to recapture the important Lachin corridor.

In March 1993, the region of Kelbajar¹⁵, situated west from Nagorno Karabakh was remaining in a difficult position, being stuck in between Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh. Armenian forces were determined to attack and after the start of the offensive, it took 3 days for Artsakh Defense Army to capture it. This operation gave the Armenian side more stability and a possibility to not to rely only on Lachin corridor as a link.

It is very important to note, that this operation turned out to be determining for the international community's reaction to the events.

The first UN Security Council resolution on the conflict passed on April, 1993 calling the actions of Armenian side an occupation, mentioning specifically Kelbajar region. Earlier, since 1992 the peace process was proposed to be within the OSCE framework and included only proposals on a possible peacekeeping force, that did not become a reality, however with the Armenian side taking control over Kelbajar region, there was a clear demand from the Security Council – the withdrawal of the forces, seen as occupying ones. (United Nations Security Council, 1993).

In Azerbaijan, the events caused further internal political unrest. As a result, in June 1993 the government fell in a military coup, that later brought Heydar Aliyev to the power.

Meanwhile, the Artsakh Defense Army captured Aghdam, another region recognized as part of Azerbaijan¹⁶, causing a new UNSC resolution, condemning the events and demanding the withdrawal of forces from the region. (United Nations Security Council, 1993).

By the end of summer 1993, three more regions on the southern direction were captured and the position of Nagorno Karabakh was significantly improved.

The following period of around 6 months turned out too be the most violent and bloody phase

¹⁴ Abulfaz Elchibey - The second President of Azerbaijan

¹⁵ Kelbajar or Kalbajar is a region in Azerbaijan, previously controlled by Artsakh Defense Army

¹⁶ Aghdam is a region in western Azerbaijan

of the war. They were continuous offensive initiatives from both sides, but their outcomes failed to significantly affect the strategic situation, however they heavily affected the human toll.

UNSC adopted two more resolutions that reaffirmed the Azerbaijani sovereignty and condemned the hostilities from both sides. OSCE framework was again mentioned as the best path for peace settlement.

The First Nagorno Karabakh came to an end in May 1994.

The most important thing to remember is the fact that the war didn't end because there was an agreement the sides reached, but because of the exhaustion of both militaries and economic incapability to continue financing the war. Finally, the ceasefire agreement was signed, due to its' location being in Kyrgyzstan's capital, the agreement is called "Bishkek Protocol".

The areas, that caused UN Security Council's condemnation were officially considered occupied territories, Armenian side has also referred to them as "security zone", but agreed to potentially return them if a long-lasting peace is to be reached in the future.

Azerbaijani side, in its' turn, remained in control of certain parts of Nagorno Karabakh. Once again, as it has happened in pre-Soviet period, I believe it is important to deduct that Russia's role proved to be destructive in this conflict. Starting with participation in massacres on both sides and executing operations on forceful displacements of indigenous populations of several areas, the Russian leadership provided proceeded to transferring significant amounts of arms to Armenia in the first phase of the war and to Azerbaijan in the later one.

Given the fact of reciprocal demonization, Armenia and Azerbaijan were too concentrated on the conflict between themselves and failed to objectively address the issues that arose from the Russian involvement.

As a result of the First Nagorno Karabakh war, 60 thousand people lost their lives, more than a million people became refugees or internally displaced. Among Azerbaijani military, the human toll was significantly higher compared to the Armenian one. Additionally, 40 thousand people were wounded during the war (Bertsch, 1999).

1.4 Republic of Artsakh and its' international status

In this subchapter I consider important to discuss the geopolitical situation that unfolded after the end of the First Nagorno Karabakh war in the region. As previously mentioned, the region declared its' independence as the Republic of Nagorno Karabakh earlier in 1991, when Armenia and Azerbaijan did the same. However, after the end of the war, already de-facto independent republic declared itself the Republic of Artsakh, referring to the region's historical name. We will use both names of the republic in this work, since one represents the more common version and the other represents the choice and will of the current local population.

The newly established Republic of Artsakh was in possession of nearly all territories that were part of former Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous region and 7 occupied territories surrounding the region. While initially considered an area of security and only subject for negotiation of return, the districts were later included in the administrative structure of Republic of Artsakh (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the NK Republic, 2005).

Although, some attempts of repopulating the areas left by Azerbaijani residents were made at some point, they were minor and the population of the districts remained very low in the future. The geopolitical situation that was created in the region was very unstable.

The negotiations on the topic of Republic of Artsakh started with none of the sides showing readiness to compromise and consider the other's needs. OSCE Minsk Group, previously created in 1992 by OSCE to offer a peaceful resolution, could finally start functioning.

During the first OSCE summit in Budapest, the Azerbaijan's unwillingness to recognize the Republic of Artsakh as a party of the conflict became clear.

Azerbaijan refused to recognize Nagorno-Karabakh as a political actor. Meanwhile for Armenia, the recognition of the status of Artsakh became the main goal in negotiation process. The local population did not believe in a possibility of future peaceful existence under the Azerbaijani authorities and openly expressed it multiple times when Armenian politicians were offering possible compromises.

In 1997 the OSCE Minsk group offered 2 proposals, called "package deal" and "step by step". (OSCE Minsk group, 1997).

The status of Nagorno-Karabakh was more specified in the first one, giving it certain level of

self-governance based on the principle of self-determination. After analyzing the second proposal, I came to a conclusion that the second proposal proved to be less specific on this matter. Nevertheless, the positions of the sides became more transparent: the Armenian side was mainly expressing the readiness of returning the occupied districts for the recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh's status by Azerbaijan.

Meanwhile, the Azerbaijani side was inclined towards the coexistence with Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan, offering peaceful, non-discriminatory conditions.

Unfortunately, none of the proposals came to reality. The first one was firmly dismissed by both, while the later one was mainly refused by Armenian side. Furthermore, Levon Ter-Petrosian¹⁷, Armenia's President at the time, had to resign in 1998 because of his remarks on going to certain compromises for the peace process offered by OSCE (Astourian, 2000). The population of Nagorno-Karabakh was against the offered deals and the parliamentary forces in Armenia were powerful enough to force the President into resignation.

The next proposal by Minsk group from 1998 was called "common state deal". Analyzing this proposal, the conclusion I make is that was the deal that could be called the most neutral one, since it did satisfy the needs of full self-governance of the Artsakh people, but also Azerbaijan's side's demands of withdrawal of all Armenian forces and Artsakh's integration into a sovereign state of Azerbaijan. However, this proposal was also never implemented, because of the reluctance of Azerbaijani government given the fact, that they were not many examples of a "common-state" format with successful outcome in the past.

The next attempts were 2001 meetings in Key West (FL) and Paris; however no specific comments were made about the result or any agreements reached. After several failed attempts to bring the sides closer to reaching an agreement in the following years, OSCE Minsk group decreased the intensity of its' involvement, somehow considering the option of the sides reaching a bilateral agreement themselves. That is how the Prague Process was initiated.

The new format was not guided by the Minsk group, but rather depended on the bilateral agreements. This could not realistically improve the peace settlement considering the firm stance of both sides and further rise of nationalism and hatred towards each other. Even in case of reaching certain agreements, the leaders were often risking to face a fierce opposition from their colleagues in government and the population itself.

One might have reasons to conclude, that since 2001, the Minsk group's role in the peace

¹⁷ Levon Ter-Petrosian was the first President of Armenia

settlement started to slowly fade, with both countries questioning the productivity of the group's actions for the resolution of the conflict.

Simultaneously with Prague process, there was a meeting of Armenian and Azerbaijani Presidents during a CIS summit in 2004, but the possible solutions discussed did not vary from Minsk group proposals, while the outcomes of discussions were again ineffective. I consider the framework that followed the Prague process may be called the last major OSCE Minsk group's effort. In 2007, the Madrid document was released, stating basic principles that included gradual withdrawal of forces from occupied territories, demilitarization of those territories and deployment of OSCE peacekeepers. (OSCE Minsk group, 2007)

While the above-mentioned principles were agreed to some extent by the sides, the other ones were highly argued about. Among the principles stated in the document, there was a future right to determine a legal status for Nagorno-Karabakh through a referendum, in other words a popular vote, while there was also the right of all refugees and internally displaced people to return to their residences (Radio Free Europe, 2010).

Initially, this meant that by the time the future referendum was expected to be held, all the ethnic Azerbaijanis: refugees and internally displaced, that formerly resided in Nagorno-Karabakh could be back in the region and have the right to participate in the referendum. It is important to consider that even though theoretically this turn of events presents itself as a just and idealistic way of resolution, the implementation of the following would be impeded with many obstacles, like the common organization of the referendum, technicalities, and containment of possible minor conflicts, given the fact of ongoing reciprocal demonization for more than 20 years. However, when in the updated version of this principle, the referendum was replaced with "legally binding expression of will" (OSCE Minsk group, 2009), it became obvious that those issues did not matter anymore.

For the Armenian side this meant that the people of Nagorno-Karabakh could not exercise their right to self-determination, that they would in the best case achieve a self-governance in form of an autonomy, while the Azerbaijani side was also not ready for any agreement that would compromise the sovereignty of Azerbaijan.

The already crucial clash of self-determination against sovereignty once again stopped the countries from agreeing on the proposals. Madrid principles remained a theory and were never implemented, paving the way to the biggest border clashes and ceasefire violations since the First Nagorno-Karabakh war.

Chapter 2. The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war

After 2 decades of ineffective attempts to reach an agreement on constructive peace settlement, none of the sides of the conflict was willing to soften their position or offer a compromise. In the same time, the OSCE Minsk group was decreasing its' efforts after the last major attempt with promotion of Madrid principles and failure to achieve their implementation.

Starting in 2008, the unprecedented since the First Nagorno Karabakh war border clashes proceeded in the next 8 years, in a continuously intensifying manner. With the increasing economic potential of Azerbaijan and the international community's interest in its' national resources, Azerbaijan's investment in its' military completely changed the balance of power between the two sides of the conflict.

Given those facts, Azerbaijan's leadership started adopting a much less flexible position in negotiations, followed by open threats in recapturing the Armenian-controlled territories, including Nagorno-Karabakh by force.

Meantime, for Armenian side it was becoming obvious that the proposals made by the OSCE decades before represented a much more beneficial outcome for Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia than any outcome possible nowadays. Armenia had little to offer to the international community, finding itself in a blockade from the west by Turkey and east and southwest by Azerbaijan. Analyzing the situation and taking into account those geopolitical realities, it was to certain extent reasonable to expect the events that were going to unfold in the following years.

2.1 Escalation circumstances

While in diplomacy, the meetings in the framework of the OSCE Madrid principles were not giving any hope, on the ground the situation started escalating, the first clashes were in Martakert¹⁸ province, in 2008 (Fuller, 2010). 2

years later, the clashes on the line of contact were already happening in a broader area. Azerbaijan's position started to become increasingly impatient, with its' leadership undermining the Minsk group's relevance in conflict resolution.

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev started openly declaring readiness for capturing Nagorno-Karabakh by force. Meantime more than 100 soldiers from both sides lost their lives between 2008 and 2015.

Considering those intensifying border clashes, OSCE Minsk group offered possible OSCE investigations or civilian missions at the border, directed at finding the perpetrators of provocations. Armenian leadership accepted the offer, while Azerbaijan denied (OSCE Minsk Group, 2015). As a result, the clashes continued, with the governments blaming each other for provocation with different reasons and the international community expressing concern in a neutral manner.

The above -mentioned situation resulted in a bigger military conflict, coined by many as a Four-day war. It became the most serious aggravation of the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in between the First and Second wars, taking place in April 2016.

There are multiple theories by both sides and the international community on why this escalation happened exactly in given time period. Armenian and international scholars suggested the Azerbaijani side was trying to shift the attention from internal economic crisis in the country.

Analyzing this suggestion, it appears to be a simplified presentation of the events, since considering the dictatorial nature of Azerbaijani leadership, one can attribute all the timeline of Azerbaijani stance on Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to shifting the attention from the internal problems, since the hatred towards Armenians is deliberately promoted by the Azerbaijani President.

¹⁸ Martakert is a town in Nagorno-Karabakh

A President, who inherited the power from his authoritarian father, meanwhile appointing the First Lady of Azerbaijan as Vice President. It is obvious to conclude that this offensive by Azerbaijani side was not only for shifting attention, but was intended to partially recapture some of the Nagorno-Karabakh provinces in the east. In the same time this was a great opportunity to check the Armenian army's readiness. At the beginning, the Azerbaijani side denied initiating the hostilities, but the later events made the reality obvious. As a result of the Four-day war, Azerbaijan achieved control of 2 strategic military positions (International Crisis Group, 2017), part of the neutral territory was also captured.

The extent of this achievement was downplayed from Armenian side and significantly exaggerated by the Azerbaijani side, even called a "great victory". However, the April war gave a practical confirmation to all the allegations of increasingly unequal military power balance between Azerbaijan and Armenia. In any case, this military achievement had a significant cost for Azerbaijan. Even though denied by Azerbaijani leadership, according to investigations by Bellingcat group, in four days of the war Azerbaijani army suffered around 400 human casualties, while the numbers in Armenian army were much lower, ranging around 100 (Bellingcat, 2016).

Azerbaijan also lost an entire unit of special forces and a valuable number of military equipment.

The hostilities came to an end with a ceasefire that was assisted by Russian government. This showed the increasing irrelevance of the OSCE Minsk group with Russia trying to take control of the peace process and generally the region.

The ceasefire did not last and was violated less than a year later. From the 2017 till 2019 the border clashes continued with a relatively low intensity.

Meanwhile in Yerevan, the general dissatisfaction with Serzh Sargsian's government and the Republican party as such was growing and reached its' culmination when in 2018, after 2 Presidential mandates, the government appointed the former president as the new Prime Minister and head of government.

In 2015, Armenian government adopted a proposal on changing the Presidential system to the Parliamentary one. After serving two mandates as President, Serzh Sargsian could become the new Prime Minister without violating the Constitution of the country.

It was already obvious for the opposition and population that it was the main reason of this proposal, but after the scandalous referendum, criticized as rigged, gained more than 60% approval, Sargsian openly stated about his intentions to become the Prime Minister. Thus, in those 3 years before it actually happened the opposition became much more active.

In April 2018, the “velvet, non – violent revolution” initiated by opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan achieved Serzh Sargsyan’s resignation, further pressured by the protests, in May the ruling Republican party had to elect Nikol Pashinyan as prime-minister and agree to snap parliamentary elections later that year.

In Snap parliamentary elections defined by international observers as unprecedented for Armenia and South Caucasus by its’ high standards, Pashinyan’s My Step Alliance gathered shocking 70% of the votes, while the former ruling Republican party didn’t even pass the 5% threshold to have representation in the parliament. The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly issues the following conclusion:

“The 9 December early parliamentary elections were held with respect for fundamental freedoms and enjoyed broad public trust that needs to be preserved through further electoral reforms. Open political debate, including in the media, contributed to a vibrant campaign”. (International Election Observation Mission, 2018). It appears that crucial connection of these events with the escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the reasons to suggest that are many. First, Russia’s reaction towards the “velvet revolution” and the snap elections was negative and somewhat aggressive.

The events received big amount of attention from Russia’s state sponsored media, where many pro-government experts started talking about the problems that Armenia will face and defining the choice of Armenia’s population as pro-European and anti-Russian. The Russian Armenian community, famous for their pro-government stance also contributed to criticism of new Armenian leadership and the need for Armenia to adopt a political stance closer to Russia.

The criticism by the Russian media and high-ranked politicians was expressing the view of Russia’s authoritarian regime, however it became even more clear, when Vladimir Putin himself openly expressed his sympathy to former ruling Republican Party and specifically Robert Kocharyan¹⁹, who was under arrest and investigation on overthrowing the Constitution during the 2008 protests. Putin called Kocharyan a friend and even asked Armenian authorities to release him. (Jam News, 2020).

Lastly, very often in Russian media the “velvet revolution” and Armenia’s new leadership was compared to the Mikheil Saakashvili’s²⁰ rise of power in Georgia, a highly demonized politician in Russia.

¹⁹ Robert Kocharyan is the former President of Armenia (1998-2008)

²⁰ Mikheil Saakashvili is the former President of Georgia

One of the reasons for such a reaction from Russia is that the Russian leadership has consistently supported any authoritarian rule over a democratic one, especially in its' own region of influence, seeing a pro-western sentiment in any liberal and democratic state structure. Thus, the democratic government in a country with so many ties with Russia would mean a direct threat to its' authoritarian rule and weakness of its' influence in the region. That might encourage its' own opposition to intensify the protests and attempt to make a change.

Another reason for Russia's hostile stance was the fact that the former 2 Armenian leaders Kocharyan and Sargsyan declared their allegiance to Eurasian Economic Union and Collective Security Treaty Organization and other organizations dominated by Russia, despite the useless nature of those organizations for Armenia, while the new Prime-Minister Pashinyan has long criticized joining the EEU and engagement in agreements and organizations that are not in Armenia's national interest. (Ter-Matevosyan & Drnoian, 2017). One might conclude that Russia's stance was increasingly pressuring Armenia's leadership to acknowledge that the country depends on Russia and will face severe consequences in case of attempts of politically distancing itself.

The above-mentioned situation appears to be one of the main factors of escalation of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 2020. Russia's stance on Armenia's change of leadership emboldened Azerbaijani government to start pressuring Armenia and further threatening to take Nagorno-Karabakh by force. Observing Armenia's worsening relationship with Russia, Azerbaijani leadership could see an opportunity to use the created vulnerability of its' rival country.

In July 2020, the escalation of the conflict started with the clashes on Armenia-Azerbaijan border, none of the clashes involved Nagorno-Karabakh, predominantly happening in Tavush region of Armenia bordering with Tovuz region of Azerbaijan.

The clashes started on 12 July and continued until the end of the month with no apparent reason for the escalation being clear. More than 20 soldiers both Armenian and Azerbaijani lost their lives. As it is known, the consequences of those clashes grew to become a much bigger conflict. During those clashes Azerbaijani side also lost 2 generals and more high-ranking officials (BBC, 2020).

These events caused a big dissatisfaction in Azerbaijani society, and the marches for the memory of soldiers were becoming increasingly aggressive and politicized.

On 14 July the biggest demonstration in years happened in Azerbaijan, with 50 thousand people demanding more action from the government, involving a large-scale war for

Nagorno-Karabakh against Armenian forces, mobilization and improvement in country's military structure.

The protesters stormed and were even able to enter the parliament, but the demonstration ended in clashes with police.

A commonly accepted narrative is that after the rally, the war for Nagorno-Karabakh became an issue for Azerbaijani president's retention of power. But as earlier mentioned, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has always been the central manipulation point of the Azerbaijani authoritarian leader and in any difficult moment of society's dissatisfaction, Aliyev was shifting the attention to the conflict.

Taking this into account, I suggest that this rally rather benefited the Azerbaijani president, then damaged. Of course, it resulted in certain level of pressure too, but given the initial rhetoric of "readiness to take the region by force" and ongoing intensified clashes, one could suggest that at the moment after the rally, the Azerbaijani president had all the support to start the war having the excuses for potential human loss.

Considering that meantime the country actively rearmed and bought several billion dollars' worth of arms. This is somewhat dramatic if taken into account that before the July clashes there was a specific proposal for a peace settlement being negotiated. From the other point of view, it is important to note in what terms this settlement was being negotiated. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov speaking about this in April 2020, made several controversial statements, clearly favoring Azerbaijani side in the conflict and indirectly demanding compromises to be made by Armenian side (Kucera, 2020).

This stance by the Russian Foreign Minister further emboldened Azerbaijani leadership in its' future actions, clearly boosting its' confidence. In May the sides were getting ready to discuss each other's ideas in detail. At the end, pandemic was given as a reason to postpone the negotiations. The pandemic, that in my opinion is the other circumstance of escalation, in other words the element that was important in determining the time of the upcoming war. It is no secret, that during the Covid pandemic, that started in February 2020, many governments, especially the authoritarian ones enacted and enforced policies that went relatively unnoticed by the general public and Ilham Aliyev was no exception. First, the president used the Covid pandemic to limit the protests and demonstrations and enforced strict quarantine.

Under the pandemic excuse, dozens of people were violently arrested and several peaceful protests were dispersed by the police (Human Rights House Foundation, 2020). But Covid played a bigger role in planning the full-scale war that was to begin just 4 months later, since

it is difficult not to notice the fact that 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war went largely unnoticed in foreign media because of its' preoccupation with Covid pandemic.

2.2 The course of 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war

The unsuccessful peace settlement negotiations that lasted for 26 years and the unresolved and underreported border clashes that almost never stopped were among the many other reasons that led to the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war.

On 27 September 2020, a full-scale war started along the entire line, that was previously called the "line of contact" between Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan.

The Second Nagorno-Karabakh war lasted 44 days, being later called the 44-day war.

Probably the most characteristic trait of the war was usage of unmanned aircraft systems/vehicles (UAS or UAV) also known as military drones.

The fighting was on 2 main directions, the relatively plain southern regions surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh and the northern side of the region, where the terrain is more mountainous. (Jones & Harrington, 2022)

From the very beginning the clashes at the southern side were the most intense ones and that's where the Azerbaijani offensive directed its' main effort.

The regions of Jabrail and Fuzuli were among the widely considered occupied territories, that have always been part of the negotiation between the sides. Those provinces include the part of border with Iran.

The technological superiority of Azerbaijani military could be crucially put into practice in those regions, considering the lack of natural obstacles found everywhere else in the region, such as mountains.

The military drones were largely used to detect the positions of Artsakh Defense Army and strike them or pass the coordinates to the artillery. Despite the fact, that Artsakh forces contained the Azerbaijani offensive for the first 10 days, the visible inequality in air defense systems resulted in Azerbaijan's victory and capture of both provinces by mid-October. (Times Now, 2020)

The advance of Azerbaijani forces also began in Nagorno-Karabakh proper, in the local populated areas. In Nagorno-Karabakh proper the situation was different. Considering the mountainous nature of the region, it was much more difficult to succeed in the offensive there. The fighting there continued until the last day before the ceasefire.

Here, the Azerbaijani advantage of UAS's usage could not be benefited to the same extent. Armenian forces were in stable and well protected positions behind forested and mountainous areas.

Throughout the course of the war, Artsakh Defense Army improved its' resistance techniques against the military drones, used by Azerbaijan, but the damage that was already done, could not be recovered. The UAS's had already played an important role in determining the outcome of the war.

The discussion about the role of the military combat drones in this war leads us to the other important factor. The involvement of Turkey, the producer of infamous Bayraktar drones, that came to even bigger prominence during 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Bayraktar drones constituted the majority of combat drones used during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war.

Coming back to the involvement of Turkey, there are several important actions to be mentioned. First, when traditionally voicing its' support to Azerbaijan, Turkish leadership openly declared about its' readiness of not only diplomatic support, but in ground explicit support. Those promises did not remain in theory, Turkish military members started getting increasingly involved in Nagorno-Karabakh war and were spotted commanding units of Azerbaijani military multiple times.

Additionally, to its' direct involvement, Turkey went further, transporting more than 500 Syrian mercenaries to Nagorno-Karabakh (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), 2020).

This became reason of multiple condemnations from the United States and EU member states. European Union and OSCE also explicitly condemned the actions of Turkey.

During the 44-day war, there were 3 attempts by the international actors to bring the sides to the negotiation table and sign a ceasefire. The first attempt was initiated by Russia's efforts

and followed negotiations for the entire day of 10th October. On the same day, the Armenian side admitted to Azerbaijani army's advance into territories formerly controlled by Artsakh Defense Army.

In the following days, it became clear that not only ceasefire was not respected, but even the intensity of clashes was not decreasing, resulting in further advance of Azerbaijani Army into Nagorno-Karabakh. On 17th October, the negotiations restarted again, coordinated by Russia with a scope to reach another, more effective ceasefire, but those attempts also led to failure, since 17th October became the day when Azerbaijani Army captured Fizuli, another province south to Nagorno-Karabakh (Roblin, 2020).

26th October became the day of the 3rd ceasefire attempt. This time the ceasefire negotiations were initiated by the US and even though the expectations this time were higher the result was the same. The ceasefire was violated immediately. Perhaps, the most dramatic and meaningful moment for both sides in this war has happened in the very last 2 days, when the Azerbaijani forces reached the city of Shushi (Shusha).

Shushi has long been considered from both sides as the cultural and art capital of the region. Apart from the strategical importance of the town, it also had emotional importance for both sides.

For Armenians, the victory in battle of Shushi during the First Nagorno-Karabakh war was still being celebrated every year, while for Azerbaijanis it was the town that had the largest number of residents forced to flee after the First Nagorno-Karabakh war. On November 8, Azerbaijani president claimed having captured the town, the next day Armenian government confirmed the claims of having lost the control over city (Independent, 2020).

The battle for the city was the biggest in terms of human toll during the war. It resulted in anti-government protest and chaos in Armenia, while in Azerbaijan it was considered the biggest victory, with Azerbaijani leadership starting to rename streets and squares after it. The victory of Azerbaijani side in the battle of Shushi and the fact of small distance between Shushi and the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh republic – Stepanakert was putting the survival of the entire self-proclaimed republic under threat.

As a result, the Armenian side agreed to signing a ceasefire with major compromises, a ceasefire that was called a victory in Azerbaijan and a capitulation in Armenia.

On 9 November, 2020 the ceasefire calling for immediate end of any military operations from 10th November was signed by the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia. According to the agreement Armenia had to return the remaining territories around Nagorno-Karabakh until December, while Russian peacekeeping forces were to be deployed along the entire

newly established line of contact (Kramer, 2020). Only a part of Nagorno-Karabakh remained under control of the Republic of Artsakh.

The fact of Russian peacekeepers entering the region was once again indicating that the Azerbaijani offensive was agreed with or either confirmed by Russian side. After almost 30 years of failed attempts of deployment of OSCE peacekeeping forces, now the Russian peacekeepers were to be deployed.

Another term of the deal was the exchange of prisoners of war and bodies of the fallen soldiers. Later, this term was to become major issue between the sides. On the day when the ceasefire agreement was signed, protesters stormed the Armenian Parliament in Yerevan, demanding the Prime-Minister Pashinyan to resign.

The situation was used by the former ruling Republican party that tried to create the resistance alliance demanding the change of the government and accusing the Prime-Minister in a “betrayal.”

The narrative of “betrayal” started increasingly circulating in Armenian media and public and turned the situation into a political crisis. By 2021 it was decided that parliamentary snap elections are to be held. Meanwhile in Azerbaijan the celebrations on the victory were used to pursue further demonization of Armenians and incitement to hatred. The Baku Victory parade, that took place a month after the ceasefire, demonstrated equipment captured from Armenian soldiers and even their own items and replicas.

As it could be predicted, the immediate result of this war was intensified reciprocal hatred and even more difficult environment for further peaceful solution.

Considering all the effects of the war on both countries and the geopolitics of the region, I still believe the most important and tragic issue was the human toll.

Perhaps the same can be said about any other war, but there are few ongoing conflicts in the world that involve 2 countries that both heavily rely on mandatory military service enforced on their young generation.

The Second Nagorno-Karabakh war took lives of 7 thousand soldiers on both sides, and majority of them were completing their mandatory military service. 200 civilians were also killed, while around 100 soldiers became prisoners of war (Roblin, 2020).

The war raised many essential issues in both countries. In Azerbaijan it hugely benefitted the authoritarian rule of Ilham Aliyev, justifying his ambition of staying in power, basically giving him an achievement to base those ambitions on.

In case of Armenia, it mainly polarized the society. One part of Armenians started to blame the government in losing the war and territories that were crucially important for the survival

of Armenia proper. Comparing the stance of Pashinyan's government to a more hardline former leaders and participants of the First Nagorno-Karabakh war. Many were dissatisfied by the fact that the government was reluctant to declare that the territories will be returned. While others were putting the loss of human life over the victory in war or the territories, considering the safety under current borders and line of contact as a priority, thus siding more with the current government.



Figure 1. Location and extent of Nagorno-Karabakh (Source: Released in Public Domain)

2.3 Disinformation campaigns and environmental propaganda

During the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, one of the most visible and distinctive features of the conflict were the intense online disinformation campaigns from both sides. Such an amount of propaganda on topics related to the environment has never happened during any other conflict, even though it increasingly happens in latest conflicts. The published posts mainly referred to the forest fires, caused by use of white phosphorus.

Among other mentioned topics were issue of water and deforestation. In those online battles Armenia was mainly represented by its' diaspora, NGO's, civil societies. Meanwhile Azerbaijan was represented by its' government related media supported by Turkish media. Considering the fact, that Azerbaijan found itself on the 12th position from the end in 2020 Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index, it becomes clear that execution conducting such would be very difficult for an Azerbaijani NGO. (Darbyshire, 2021).

The government's role in information management can be seen also in decisions towards the international journalists, that were allowed the entry from Nagorno-Karabakh, but prohibited in Azerbaijan.

The fact that before the start of the conflict, Azerbaijan was experiencing a water crisis can be considered one of the circumstances and reasons of starting the conflict, since gaining control of Nagorno-Karabakh's rich water resources would existentially change the situation. However, it is not less important to mention, that the whole infrastructure, as everything else was targeted during the war, which brought significant damage to the water infrastructure.

The relatively new term of ecocide was extensively used by both sides in attempts of increasing the extent of accusations towards the other.

The lack of information was definitely not an issue during this conflict, since both sides were willingly disclosing any evidence that could benefit them, even combat footages to raise the morale of their respective militaries, but that created a very biased environment, where an objective analysis was difficult to be done.

The most large-scale campaign by Armenian civil societies in collaboration with European ones was "Ecocide Alert", with 51 NGO's signing it. The topic was threat from the abovementioned white phosphorus and list of endangered species of the region. Some of the NGO's presented the situation in a more neutral manner, however the others undertook a

clearly pro-Armenian stance that damaged the overall awareness raising process (Arnika, 2020).

Meanwhile the Azerbaijani side accused Armenians in “Environmental terrorism against Azerbaijan” and held international events on that topic, Azerbaijani representation in UNESCO also tried to raise awareness among the international community.

According to the reports by Conflict and Environment Observatory Azerbaijan in collaboration with Turkey successfully launched “an ecosystem of fake news sites playing off each other in an attempt to control the international narrative.” The results of CEOBS investigations have also concluded, that a significant amount of social media posts with a pro-Azerbaijani stance are promoted through Turkish social media accounts, especially during the 44-day war, when social media in Azerbaijan was often blocked. It is clear that both sides engaged used any means possible to impact the international community’s stance and influence what is to become the commonly accepted narrative in the future. (Darbyshire, 2021).

Despite of all the negative outcomes of these online battles, there is still a positive side to it, which is the fact that after the period with the most intense online battles about environment, number of fires in the forests of the region started declining.

My deduction is that paying attention to this aspect of Nagorno-Karabakh war is very important because in current circumstances of climate change, using the environment as a tool for propaganda can easily become a tendency.

When it does become a tendency, it will be increasingly used in major and minor ongoing conflicts and the ones that could possibly happen, having a destructive effect on efforts of tackling climate change. Because regardless of the stance that international actors are taking in any conflict, in these new realities it is important to consider the effects that conflicts are having on environment. If anything harms the climate of the region, the international community should assist in preventing those actions happening again.

As a result of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, many species native to the forests of the region were endangered and the forest itself lost the density. But because of highly biased nature of reporting from both sides, accompanied with fake information, deliberately designed for blaming the other side on international platform, the precise amount of damage couldn’t be calculated in a reasonable manner and possible solutions to the created issues were not discussed.

If this negative example of dealing with environmental situation will gain enough attention internationally, it could help prevent similar mismanagement of the situation in other cases in

the future. Not necessarily during the international conflicts, but also during minor clashes or illegal mining activities.

The other, certainly more expected topic of the information battles was use of banned weapons. Except of the incendiary weapons, that became mainly involved in the environmental topic, there were widespread reciprocal accusations about cluster munitions. The use of incendiary weapons is not only catastrophic for the environment, but also for the humans finding themselves anywhere near to the action, since the fires and the smoke directly affects them as a result. The use of cluster munitions on the other hand, is specifically designed to indiscriminately kill the adversary military personnel, causing extensive human casualties (Conference for adoption of a Convention on Cluster Munitions, 2008).

Armenian side's version of the use of banned weaponry by Azerbaijan claimed that it started from the very first day of the war and specified that the civilians were directly affected by it. The Azerbaijani side's version was about incendiary weapons used by the Armenian side, that were used to counter the drones, confusing them in the air, Azerbaijan also accused Armenia of using cluster munitions.

The accusations on this topic were relatively more from sources that were related to Artsakh and Armenia based media channels. The crucial fact regarding these reciprocal accusations about cluster munitions is that when in 2008, the Convention on Cluster Munitions was signed and ratified, both countries were reluctant to sign it and haven't made an effort to do so until nowadays.

At the end of the Nagorno-Karabakh war, the use of cluster munitions by both sides was confirmed and documented by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Both sides were condemned for failure to comply to the internationally accepted norms of warfare (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Another violation of internationally accepted norms to be mentioned is that according to international humanitarian law the natural environment is a civilian object and should be protected from the use of incendiary weapons, with purpose of avoiding extensive human casualties. The fire resulting after the use of incendiary weapons very often has the ability to spread and cause amounts of extended damage compared to the initial one. Considering this, it becomes clear why respecting those norms is essential. These provisions were clearly violated by both sides.

After signing the ceasefire and effectively ending the war, the officials from both countries accused each other of causing environmental damage. Later, Azerbaijan launched a criminal case in international tribunal for destruction of biodiversity, to which Armenia filed a similar

case countering the Azerbaijani one (The Guardian, 2021).

2.4 The issue of mandatory military service

One of the main distinctive features of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is that the war was fought by two militaries that heavily rely on the function of compulsory military service in their countries. At the moment, considering the population difference and military expenditure capacity of the two countries, it can be understood that Armenian and Nagorno-Karabakh Defense armies rely on conscription more than Azerbaijan does, however the figures were much closer throughout the decades of the conflict.

In Armenia and Artsakh, the military service is compulsory for the male citizens starting with the age 18 and until the age of 27. Previously, the duration was set to 2 years, but with the new plans of current government to gradually invest into a professional army, the duration was reduced to 18 months. (National Assembly of Armenia, 1998).

The highly criticized “Amnesty decree” that allows people who were abroad to return to Armenia or Artsakh after they turn 27 is being adopted once in several years in a uniquely inconsistent manner. For instance, such a decree has not been adopted since the beginning of 2021. (The Government of Armenia, 2021).

Previously, being adopted on a yearly basis, it was repeatedly followed with criticism and alternative proposals of an established fine, a sum of money, that could realistically be paid only by individuals of significantly high financial capabilities or otherwise said, a very small proportion of population.

The punishment for evading the conscription can cause criminal charges pressed against the individual and can result in 3 years of imprisonment. By Constitution of the country, there is no exemption from military service on basis of pacifist, antimilitarist views of the individual, meaning the cases when the conscience of the person prevents him to participate in combatant activities, take up weapons and fully engage in clashes. (Parliament of Armenia, 1995).

Constitution clearly states that evading to serve the defense forces of the country is a criminal

activity itself. Until the 2018, there was also no alternative way of completing the military service, an option given in the majority of other states, such as social service or administrative and non-combatant position in military.

That changed after multiple complaints in between 2011 and 2018 by the representatives of the community of Jehovah's Witnesses, stating that conscription to the mandatory military service is against their religious beliefs. Reluctant at the beginning, Armenian government had to recognize the right to conscientious objection.

The alternative civilian service was offered and established by the decision of the European Court of Human Rights.

At the beginning, the implementation caused new complaints, because of being supervised by military in an attempt to incorporate the alternative service to military related structures. But after several new decisions by the European Court of Human Rights directed at specific way of enforcement of the alternative civilian service and its' nature the situation started improving (European Court of Human Rights, 2017).

All that said, it only resolved the issue for roughly 200-300 people, representatives of the Jehovah's Witnesses community, however it made no progress for the people who are not willing to be drafted to the military for not religion related reasons.

Moreover, this option is available only for the residents of Armenia proper, while residents of Artsakh are not given the same opportunity even for religious reasons and are jailed if refuse to perform the military service. Previously, temporary exemptions existed for educational purposes. Thus, all the students who were accepted to the scholarship funded positions in the local universities or participants of intergovernmental programs in the foreign universities could get exemptions for the entire period of studies. However, after 2016 these exemptions were limited only to several students with outstanding academic achievements each year.

The only exemptions possible are in case of existential health conditions, that would impede an individual to perform the military duties. For female citizens military service is voluntary.

This conditions currently fail to comply with the internationally recognized right to conscientious objection, which I will further discuss in this subchapter. However, it is important to state that there is a slow improvement in two directions: first being the shift to the idea of professional army and the second being the reduction of corruption in military institutions, especially military hospitals.

Before the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, the number of citizens attempting to engage in corruption with the scope to reach a deal that would potentially exempt them from joining the military was significantly higher, the main ones being related to medical professionals

releasing false diagnosis about physical fitness making the military service impossible (Ghukasyan, 2021).

The biggest problem about these procedures is that it was giving an opportunity to people with better financial capabilities to avoid the military, while forcing the low-income population to be the only one carrying the burden.

When a military reforms plan was put into action by the new government after the velvet revolution, it partially resolved this unacceptable situation making military difficult to avoid for everyone. Covering the loopholes and enforcing the laws more effectively definitely had a positive effect. However, on the other side, it gave no solutions to the people who did not agree to be drafted to military.

Meanwhile in Azerbaijan, the military service is also compulsory for the male citizens starting with the age 18 and until the age of 35 (Parliament of Azerbaijan, 2011).

Same way as its' rival, Azerbaijan also has no alternative for the people whose conscience doesn't let them participate in combatant activities.

The duration of military service is 18 months, but can be reduced if in possession of a higher educational degree. But unlike Armenia, Azerbaijan still offers the possibility of pursuing Bachelor's or Master's degree prior to being drafted for military service. Also, having the high educational degree in Azerbaijan can affect one's role in the military, giving the opportunity of using the knowledge for the administrative issues and being engaged less in combatant activities as a result.

Regarding the alternative civilian service option, by the beginning of 2023, it is still not available in the country, the Presidential administration's representative had earlier in 2021 claimed, that this option is not under the discussion, considering the fact of ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Similar to the situation in its' neighboring country, in Azerbaijan also Jehovah's Witnesses community and their representatives were so far the only ones to challenge the country's strict stance on the issue in the European Court of Human Rights (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2003).

Even though the decision of the ECHR was again in favor of the applicants, it was never taken into account or implemented. To this day, the conscientious objectors are jailed in the country and given no alternatives. Moreover, both countries declared their intentions on respecting the right to conscientious objection and implementing it in 2003, shortly after joining the Council of Europe, however both failed to meet the expectations.

These facts alongside the very administrative details of pre-conscription registrations and

physical fitness tests show the big similarity between the countries conscription systems. In Azerbaijan the problem with compulsory military service enforcement doesn't come from the same reasons as in Armenia, but rather has a more political meaning, since even taking a stance against war and posting about it on social media can get a criminal sentence for an individual. Because the government uses Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in a somewhat unifying purpose, aiming to direct the people's focus on the topic and glorify the military, thus giving the appreciation to the highest military commander, the President. Therefore, conscientious objectors are not only viewed as individuals who are breaking the imposed law, but as a potentially emerging groups with anti-governmental political ideology. Whilst in Armenia, conscientious objection and its' spread is also seen as a threat for government, not in a political, but rather in logistical sense. Since the country struggles with the quantity of active personnel and has only started the planning of professional army.

The need to question and challenge the enforcement of compulsory military service is one of the most important arguments of this thesis. As stated above, in both states, even though the right to conscientious objection being formally recognized, it is not protected or allowed to be exercised. However, the right to conscientious objection is closely related to the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief, it is basically one of its' manifestations.

The UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights explains the protection of this right, indicating that both The Human Rights Council or the Commission on Human Rights "have recognized the right of everyone to have conscientious objection to military service as a legitimate exercise of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion" (UN General Assembly, 2017).

The reference is made to the article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the same article of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Taking into account the fact of an international consensus on this topic, one may realize that the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is being violated in both countries, by refusal to exempt conscientious objectors or offer them an alternative service and persecuting them in case of failure to comply to conscription. The reasons why it is repeatedly happening without receiving the proper condemnation are many.

The bureaucratic one is that because the right to conscientious objection is derived from the Article 18, but not integrated into it, meaning that in theory one can exercise the right to conscientious objection as part of the right of freedom of thought, conscience and religion, but it is not specifically explained which are the legitimate reasons to refuse the conscription.

Taking this loophole into account, the both countries successfully reduced the possible reasons to only religious ones and as a result only a small number of one religious community partially achieved the option of alternative civilian service.

Besides a small number of people, thousands of others in both countries were dismissed in their objection to be conscripted and were either conscripted under threats or persecuted and jailed. Perhaps the most negative side of it is the fact, that under the existing framework, it is very difficult for the international organizations to influence Armenia and Azerbaijan in promoting the right to conscientious objection for non-religious reasons, since the committees reviewing the application are able to dismiss the application for non-sufficient reasons for objection. (War Resisters' International, 2021).

For instance, pacifist and antimilitarist views in current framework do not specifically represent a legitimate reason.

One of the reasons for such a situation is the fact that very small number of countries in the world currently have such systems of conscription as Armenia and Azerbaijan, for this reason the issue is becoming increasingly irrelevant for the international and human rights organizations. For example, one of historically important organizations supporting the needs of conscientious objectors and giving them the necessary legal support, the Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors was dissolved in 2011 in the United States, showing that issued dealt on this topic remained in the past. Another reason why the international community struggles to pressure the 2 countries is that both Armenia and Azerbaijan are trying to censor this topic and, so far are succeeding in stopping it from gaining attention abroad.

Based on the research conducted on this topic, the most reasonable solution with a potentially long-lasting outcome seems to be the change of the framework that is used by the international organizations in attempts to convince the countries to implement the exercise of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. More specifically, mentioning the anti-militarist belief as a legitimate reason, equal to the religious one for conscientious objection. The anti-militarist belief being specifically mentioned would possibly allow all the individuals with either religious or non-religious reasons, conscientiously object the military draft and either be exempt or conduct the alternative civilian service. It would be idealistic to believe that it will immediately have an effect and force both countries to start exempting the conscientious objectors, however it will be crucial in long-time perspective.

With the modified framework of negotiations, the future conscientious objectors with non-religious motives could apply to the European Court of Human Rights the same way as the

ones with religious reasons did years before and expectedly win the cases. The precedent would encourage both governments to soften their policies on this topic.

The other issue would be the question on how and why this discussion would take place in organizations like UN Human Rights Council or Council of Europe.

The answer lies in non-governmental organizations from Armenia and Azerbaijan. They have the potential of raising the awareness on this issue abroad and in case of successful collaboration they can achieve bigger attention to this issue in a very short time period.

2.5 Refugees, IDP's, prisoners of war and conscientious objectors

The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war forced more than 130 thousand people on both sides to flee their home and find themselves in a refugee-like situation. Azerbaijani government claimed the number of people to be 40 thousand. Those people were coined by the government as internally displaced and the vast majority of them were able to return to their initial places of residence after the end of hostilities, since the new line of contact for them became more distant than it was before the war, thus making the return possible (UN OHCHR, 2020).

The numbers on Armenian side were estimated to count 90 thousand individuals in a refugee like situation after the 2020 war.

By the beginning of 2022, the numbers decreased to 20 thousand individuals, among who the majority were from the areas that were either captured by the Azerbaijani forces during the 2020 war or transferred to Azerbaijan by the November 9 ceasefire agreement (International Federation of Red Cross / Crescent Societies, 2021). This fact means that some of them will remain in a refugee-like situation at least in the near future and will need further assistance by the government and international organizations. Their return to the initial places of residence would be impossible in current circumstances.

Another perspective to the refugee situation in the region is the fact, that the territories captured by or transferred to Azerbaijani control were among the very same territories that Azerbaijani refugees fled during and after the First Nagorno Karabakh war. Something, that in Azerbaijan was seen positively, while the promises of building infrastructure in the newly gained territories followed. It did not start happening yet, due to the issue with land mines

and incidents of military vehicles exploding on them and the slow demining operations. Discussing this topic, one cannot avoid noticing the connection between the issues that arise in the aftermath of the 2020 war in both countries.

From one side, Azerbaijan is blaming Armenia for not providing the land mine maps, considering it the main reason why the operations on demining are going slow and the possibility of the refugees from the First Nagorno-Karabakh war to return to their former places of residence still remains very low. However, from the other side, there is the issue of Armenian prisoners of war still being held in Azerbaijan (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Currently, the number of Armenian prisoners of war still being held in Azerbaijan as of February, 2023 is not determined, since the available and precise numbers only regard the prisoners that were returned through Russian, Georgian or EU mediation efforts. Regarding Azerbaijani prisoners of war detained in Armenia, all of them were returned by 2021 through a prisoners' swap deal between the two countries.

Among the prisoners still detained in Baku, majority are under investigation, being accused of various crimes defined as terroristic from Azerbaijani government's perspective (Human Rights Watch , 2021)

Despite all the efforts from international organizations, USA, European Union and even Russia calling for immediate release of all the remaining Armenian prisoners of war with no additional conditions, Azerbaijani government did not change its' stance on this topic and still detains them to this day. In response, as its' opportunity to pressure Azerbaijan to return the remaining prisoners, Armenian government is very slowly revealing the landmine maps, thus causing a difficult environment for Azerbaijani refugees to return to their places of origin (Synovitz, 2021).

The stance of Armenian side implied that when the Armenian prisoners of war, meaning the ones identified and confirmed by Armenian side are returned, all the remaining landmine maps will be handed to Azerbaijan. However Azerbaijani leadership claims that the remaining Armenian individuals detained in Azerbaijan are not prisoners of war, but defendants under prosecution for crimes committed in Azerbaijan.

These positions from the two countries are making the situation impossible to progress and as a result Azerbaijani soldiers and civilians are still facing the threat of being killed by landmines.

The Azerbaijan National Agency on Mine Action has repeatedly condemned the accuracy of provided landmine maps and issued reports on civilian and military casualties since the war. The estimated accuracy of maps was claimed by the Azerbaijani agency to be lower than

40% (ANAMA, 2021).

At the same time, Armenian prisoners of war are still facing the inhuman treatment and torture in Azerbaijani jails. The authenticity of various reports and videos of executions and torture of Armenian prisoners of war was proven by the fact-checking and international organizations.

For instance, Human Rights Watch addressed a video of the execution of 8 Armenian prisoners of war, who were captured during the 2022 September fighting between the countries.

The video showed Azerbaijani soldiers indiscriminately shooting from close range at 8 Armenian prisoners of war. The investigation later confirmed the authenticity of the video and Human Rights Watch condemned and asked for a detailed and unbiased investigation of the incident by Azerbaijani authorities. (Waters & Bellingcat, 2020). Another list of several incidents was reported by Amnesty International describing 2 incidents of torture and decapitation of Armenian civilians. Those reports were also later confirmed to be proven. (Amnesty International, 2020).

Situation appears even worse when considering that a big amount of those terrible events happened and are happening in locations, that are part of the sovereign territory of Armenia, occupied by the Azerbaijani army long after the end of the war in 2021 and 2022 (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Considering the outcome of the war, the reports about Armenian forces committing similar war crimes have declined since the 2020 war, since there were no Azerbaijani prisoners of war remaining after the swap deal, however Amnesty International has confirmed the crimes committed during the 2020 war by Armenian soldiers. Among several reports by Amnesty International, there are videos of mutilation of deceased Azerbaijani soldiers' bodies extrajudicial killing of a captured Azerbaijani border guard. (Amnesty International, 2020). Mainly the videos were appearing on Telegram and after being reposted on many platforms, were gaining the attention of fact-checking organizations, that were mainly using map technologies to reveal the location and time of the events and the proceeding to a more detailed investigation of the cases.

The information war between the two countries is the reason why those videos and reports were so difficult to verify, since the amount of fake information was bigger than the amount of the credible one and highly biased sources were more than the objective ones.

This whole situation created and still creates many obstacles for raising awareness on the conflict. Unfortunately, the efforts of the international community to intervene and facilitate

the resolution of this issue are so far unsuccessful. One of the reasons why the international community is failing to make an impact on this issue is the secretive nature of information revealed by both sides and lack of universal consensus on all the details like the number of the prisoners of war or the amount of landmine and extent of the information they reveal. Another point, that is not only impeding the resolution of this issue, but overall, the peace process itself is the frustration among the societies of the two countries that are reacting in a highly sensitive manner towards any decision that involves a compromise taken by the leaders of the two sides.

Refugees and the Internally displaced people are not the only ones who had to flee their places of residence as a result of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

A big number of young Armenians and Azerbaijanis, among who students and recent graduates chose not to return to their countries under the risk of being drafted to military service. Besides the young people who already were abroad, a large number of conscientious objectors have applied for political asylum and emigrated to different countries while still having the possibility of leaving their states. In that matter, before the partial and general mobilization, for Azerbaijani objectors, it was relatively easier to exit the country, however the exact number of people who left and did not return since the 2020 war is not being specified.

Meanwhile in Armenia, the already mentioned amnesty provision from 2021 was expected to affect more than 5 thousand people (Jam News, 2021). A big part of those people were Armenian students who chose to evade the military draft by not returning home after finishing their studies. Currently, as of February, 2023 around same number of people awaits the readoption of the provision.

In conclusion, it is important to focus on the fact that the thrive of both countries to secure the international support using the disinformation campaigns results in difficulties of exploring topics that seem of smaller significance at first, but researching them and exploring the details it becomes clear how important they are and what is their effect on local population of both countries. For this reason, addressing those topics more often would be crucial in involving the international organizations and seeking their support in resolution of issues. Currently the arguments about the geopolitical significance of the region and the historical perspective are the main focus of the research and if it changes, the effect would be very positive.

Chapter 3 – The regional and global actors

The regional actors have been playing crucial role in the development of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict since the very beginning of it. Moreover, their positions and geopolitical interests very often provoked bigger clashes and intensified the situation.

The regional powers very often were involved in fighting on one side, sometimes even on both sides, which only further worsened the conflict. When the both countries were part of Soviet Union, the Soviet government was the only one to have any influence for many years being able to contain the ethnic tensions, however closer to its' collapse it affected the conflict in a destructive way.

The different actors started reemerging in the picture, but none of them so far succeeded in taking an objective stance and offering a long-lasting solution for a sustainable peace. In this chapter about the regional and global actors, the main topic of focus will be their actions and positions during and after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and the role they are playing in current situation, however their strategic role in the events from the past, that are relevant for the war, shouldn't be omitted either. Through that perspective the current situation around Nagorno-Karabakh will be also analyzed.

Among the regional powers Russia is the one involved the most with its' stance changing quite often depending on the circumstances, the controversial effect of Russia on this conflict has many details to be analyzed and argued about. Meanwhile, Turkey has had a clear pro-Azerbaijani position and direct involvement in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war.

Turkey's role in this conflict becomes more important nowadays, since as of 2023 the diplomatic relations between Armenia and Turkey are about to start and with restarted trade and economic interest, certain changes are very probable. Iran and Georgia have a smaller role in the conflict, the latter mainly taking a neutral position and making efforts to not be involved, but both can increasingly become more relevant, considering the Russia's weakening amidst invasion of Ukraine and Iran's worsened relationship with Azerbaijan. The ineffective role of the regional powers in this conflict involved many efforts by international organizations and global actors to propose solutions, that were often not implemented because of the lack of agreement from both sides or sometimes even because of regional powers and their interests.

All these issues make big part of the reason why the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict still exists to

this day and that is why the topic deserves to be argued about. Analyzing it in depth, we can come closer to solutions that could serve the most important goal, which is saving more lives amidst the conflict.

3.1 The role of Russia

Since the very beginning of 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, one of the main topics of discussion was Russia's reaction to the newly intensified clashes. Russia's stance on the war became increasingly surprising when further intensification of the hostilities went mostly unnoticed by the Russian government.

Considering the extent of the involvement of the country in all the regional disputes such as Abkhazia or South Ossetia and the ongoing war in Donbas, a passive reaction on a new Nagorno-Karabakh war was to say the least unexpected.

Considering that Armenia is part of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, Russia and the other CSTO allies have the obligation to intervene in case if Armenia's sovereign territory is under attack, but Russian President has made it clear that Nagorno-Karabakh war is taking place outside of the territory of Armenia and therefore the CSTO has no obligations on this regard. (CSTO, 2002)

The Armenian side however has attempted to request the assistance even after those declarations, pointing on the fact of Turkey's direct involvement and the presence of Syrian mercenaries on the ground.

After the condemnations from the European Union, United States and several international organizations about the issue of Syrian mercenaries, Russia also confirmed the fact of their presence, although it did not change the country's passive stance on the war (UN OHCHR, 2020).

From the other side, during the war, Russia has invited leaders of both sides and assisted twice in reaching a humanitarian ceasefire, however both times it was almost immediately

violated.

On November 9, the final ceasefire agreement was signed and it was brokered by Russia. This time it came into effect and ended the hostilities. The ceasefire included important points, among which the deployment of Russian peacekeeping forces for 5 years with the goal of locating along the line of contact around Nagorno-Karabakh and Lachin corridor, securing the transportation and guaranteeing safety (Peace Agreements Database, 2020). As a result, after a passive role during the war, Russia emerged as a sole mediator, without the OSCE Minsk group being anyhow involved.

The peacekeeping operation in Nagorno-Karabakh was being proposed and prepared by the OSCE Minsk group for decades, however at the end of the 2020 war, the only peacekeeping forces to be deployed on the ground were the Russian ones.

The reasons for the passive role of Russia during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war can be multiple. One of the possible reasons is that maintaining the status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh was not in Russia's interest any more. From Russia's perspective - the further the war would have gone, the more justified its' potential presence would be and the role of mediator after the change of status quo was seen as a beneficial outcome for the country.

Another very probable reason is the need to balance its' cooperation with Turkey amid the US and European sanctions, compared to a much less valuable relationship with Armenia from the economic point of view.

Turkey's close relationship with Azerbaijan enlarged its' presence in South Caucasus and Russian leadership could consider that fact.

At the same time, Russia has never wanted to make a clear choice between the two sides of the conflict, since it would not benefit from a decisive victory of either side over the other, considering it would completely solve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Something, that would clearly not be in Russia's favor. If either side was to reach a decisive victory, Russia's role in the region would ultimately fade, since the two countries would not depend on it and would be able to take a more pro-European stance.

In case of Azerbaijan's victory, the Turkish role in the region would also drastically grow, which would be unacceptable for Russia. In case of Armenian success, the country's leadership could critically evaluate the benefits and detriments of membership in organizations like CSTO or Eurasian Economic Union, where Armenia was drawn under Russian pressure and would consider further EU integration and closer ties with the West in general.

Taking this into account, it is important to mention that the outcome of the Second Nagorno-

Karabakh war was in line with Russia's interests.

The whole peace settlement process however, drastically changed to Azerbaijan's favor. As it was discussed in the previous chapters, each new proposal by the OSCE Minsk group was less beneficial for Armenia and it was the same with Madrid principles' initial and updated versions. But the ceasefire agreement that was signed on the 9 November 2020, included an absolutely new point never negotiated before – the transport communication between Azerbaijan and its' exclave Nakhichevan to be guaranteed by Armenia (Markedonov, 2020). This point along with the fact of exclusion of any reference to the future status of Nagorno-Karabakh has put Armenia in a more difficult position than ever and shows the change of priorities for Russia, the sole mediator of the ceasefire agreement.

In the aftermath of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war, the peacekeeping forces of Russia proved to be little effective, since the Russian leadership could not focus on the organization of mission's specific duties, especially since the start of the war with Ukraine.

Russia's war with Ukraine fully attracted the attention of the whole international community, making the other conflicts in the post-Soviet space even less mentioned in the international media.

That new reality gave more space for Azerbaijani leadership to pursue their military ambitions. The hostilities between Azerbaijan and Armenia started again in September 2022, this time on the border that the two countries share. This was a visible example of an attempt of realization of the ambitions that Azerbaijani leadership had. (McAllister, 2022)

The resumed hostilities lasted mainly from 12 to 17 September 2022 and had a significantly high human toll, claiming several hundred lives.

A very high number of human casualties was an important worrying sign. Especially taking into account the fact that as a result of those hostilities a part of Armenian sovereign territory was invaded and remains so as of 2023 (International Crisis Group, 2023).

Those territories have never previously been ground for battle between the two sides. Using the situation of Russia's intensified focus on Ukraine's invasion, Azerbaijan was attempting to achieve a modified, new peace agreement that was not favorable for Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia. (Atasuntsev, 2022)

Returning to the topic of Russia's obligations within CSTO and bilateral agreements with Armenia, this time the situation was different. It was not Nagorno-Karabakh being attacked, but Armenia proper, however Russia not only failed to provide any assistance, but failed to even condemn the Azerbaijani aggression, while the United States, France, the European Parliament and the OSCE Minsk group condemned the invasion and called for withdrawal of

Azerbaijani forces from internationally recognized Armenian territory.

Russia limited itself by urging both sides to respect the ceasefire. If in 2020, Russia had all the legal reasons to reject the request for assistance, in 2022 the situation was completely different. According to the CSTO Charter, Armenia was eligible to request and receive the assistance from the CSTO.

Even the productivity of the peacekeeping mission was put under question, since not only it failed to stop the hostilities at least in the areas closest to the peacekeepers, but it also failed to report the fact of military aggression and ceasefire violation.

It was obvious for Nagorno-Karabakh population that the peacekeeping mission will not make efforts to guarantee their safety in the future. This operation by Azerbaijani military was not so sudden, since minor attempts some of which successful, have been made starting with May 2021 to pass through the border and capture positions and have never been condemned by the Russian side either (European Parliament, 2021).

Right before the September clashes, a Russian delegation was on a visit in Azerbaijan to hold talks on Nagorno-Karabakh and it is not clear whether Azerbaijani side notified Russian delegation of the attack that was being prepared, but in either case it shows that Azerbaijan started feeling emboldened to act on its' ambitions.

Another important point, mentioned in the chapter about escalation circumstances to the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war is Russia's stance on Armenian leadership. Since coming to power after velvet revolution in 2018, Prime Minister Pashinyan's views were visibly different from his predecessors. Even the nature of the more democratic rule and freedom of speech in Armenia seems a threat to Moscow.

Having a potential liberal democracy in its' sphere of influence is not what Russia ever wanted. Thus, after the end of the 2020 war, Russian leadership openly supported the more Russia-oriented former Armenian President in 2021 June elections. Luckily for the majority of Armenian population, who did not vote for his return, this collaboration did not prove to succeed (OSCE, 2021).

Russia's current stance on the conflict resolution can be explained by a proposal of a treaty that delays the Nagorno-Karabakh status definition and only regards the borders. Azerbaijani leadership disagrees, considering Nagorno-Karabakh issue over, while Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh simply an ethnic minority like many others in Azerbaijan.

Meanwhile for Armenia, giving up on demands of a status for Nagorno-Karabakh would be too difficult to consider. However, if Nagorno-Karabakh passes under Azerbaijani control any soon, Russia will have no more leverage to pressure Armenia and will have no influence

on Azerbaijan at all.

Ultimately, it is impossible to avoid a discussion around Russia's position on two current ongoing events in the region. First, the blockade of Lachin corridor, that has to be subsequently analyzed in a more detailed manner. Second, is the EU Common Security and Defense Policy Civilian deployment in Armenia along the border with Azerbaijan (Council of the EU, 2023).

In case of Lachin corridor, Russia has made no efforts on opening the Lachin corridor and considering the 9 November ceasefire agreement, Russia and not Azerbaijan is responsible for the secure transportation through the Lachin corridor (Peace Agreements Database, 2020). It is often mentioned in various sources that Azerbaijani environmental activists closed the Lachin corridor. It is understandable that the pretext of environment is just an excuse for the government-backed protestors. However, it would be impossible with a disagreement of Russian peacekeepers to intervene in their area of responsibility and close the transportation. This poses serious questions and already puts Armenian government in a desperate position of risking its' relations with Russia and by reaching new agreements with European Union. Regarding the second ongoing procedure, the European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA) is a civilian deployment that will patrol the border areas in order to report violations of ceasefire and try to build a more secure situation on the ground.

The EUMA has already faced backlash from Russian leadership that accused the EU of bringing their geopolitical interests in the region and to oppose Russia. Additionally, Russian government mentioned, that an alternative CSTO mission could be deployed instead of EUMA, if Armenian leadership would opt so (Asbarez, 2023).

Considering the number of requests by Armenia in the past to involve CSTO in the region, that were all denied by Russia and the CSTO in general, it becomes more visible that for whatever reason EU needs the EUMA mission, it is still convenient option for Armenia, because only by demonstrating that it has alternatives for foreign policy, Armenia can have that little leverage in relationship with Russia.

In conclusion, the involvement of Russia once again proved to be absolutely ineffective for both sides of the conflict. While during the First Nagorno-Karabakh war Russia proceeded to act only guided by its' own geopolitical interest, nowadays during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war and after it, nothing changed.

The excessive involvement that Russia is trying to have in countries from post-Soviet space is pushing them more towards the European integration and the organizations like CSTO are only joined under Russia's pressure, which not only often results in scopeless cooperations,

but also very often involves impeding the local regional cooperation that could have happened in case if Russia was involved less in their external or sometimes internal affairs. The future extent of Russia's implication in Nagorno-Karabakh in the next few years will be mainly defined by the situation in Ukraine, because in case of a failure there, it would be too difficult to continue asserting dominance in the South Caucasus.

A crucial moment will come on 9 November 2025, when the Russian peacekeeping mission in Nagorno-Karabakh comes to an end. It is very difficult to predict the outcomes that could happen, but what is predictable is the intention of Russia to remain in the area.

3.2 The role of Turkey

Turkey has historically been an ally of Azerbaijan. Since the very beginning of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict Turkey has not only stood by Azerbaijan, but very often fought alongside its' ally. Even during Soviet Union's existence and the deals made between the USSR and Turkey, the factor of Azerbaijan's closeness with Turkey has always been taken into account and significantly affected the Soviet leadership's decision to assign Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan. After relatively small involvement in the First Nagorno-Karabakh war, Turkey reacted with closing its' border with Armenia in a scope of starting an economic blockade for the neighboring country (de Waal, 2010).

The diplomatic relations were also not established, the only attempt being the 2009 negotiations, that ended in a failure because of the disagreement about Nagorno-Karabakh. But when the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war started in 2020, the extent of Turkey's involvement was unexpected.

Turkey has always declared its' support to either peaceful or militarist decision by Azerbaijani government for regulation of Nagorno-Karabakh issue and it was predictable that Turkey would provide large amount of weaponry and military training, however the direct involvement of Turkish military personnel in the most acute phases of the war and the

deployment of mercenary groups from Syria was above the expectations that international community had (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), 2020).

Perhaps the most constructive contribution by Turkey to Azerbaijan's military was the army building. After the defeat in the First Nagorno-Karabakh war Azerbaijan started rebuilding its' military and Turkey was guiding the entire process.

The modern structure of Turkey's military is constructed by the close collaboration with NATO forces and throughout decades Turkish military officials have been sharing their experience and gradually preparing the Azerbaijani army, that was even often involved in NATO exercises under Turkish command (NATO, 2021).

Meanwhile Armenian military still relies on acquisition of Russian arms that often lacks quality, it also has little diversity in terms of weaponry suppliers. The CSTO exercises have always been criticized in Armenia as ineffective and believed to only carry a symbolic meaning.

The reasons for Turkey to involve in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war on such a level are not only limited to foreign policy and national interest. There is also a subtle internal issue that could have played important role in government's decision of involvement in the war. Armenian government decided to hold a conference on regard of 100th anniversary of Treaty of Sevres in August 2020 (The RA Prime Minister Office, 2020).

The Treaty from 1920 was signed in the aftermath of the First World War and it highlighted the principle of self-determination and equity of peoples and was the first international treaty where Armenia, as an independent nation, was one of the participants. These 2 points related to the Treaty were cited by the Armenian government during the conference and the importance of the Treaty of Sevres for Armenia's history was stressed.

The Treaty of Sevres was subsequently not implemented but considering that in case if it was, Turkey's territory would be divided and part of its' territory would be transferred to Armenia and Greece explains the fact that in Turkey the conference and resumed explicit attention for Treaty of Sevres by Armenian government was met in a very hostile manner. With the rise of nationalism in Turkey and the current leadership's alliance with a nationalist party, it was another trigger to embolden Turkey in its' actions during the war. (Cornell, The Armenia-Azerbaijan Crisis, 2020) Moreover, if a nationalist party comes to the power after upcoming general elections in Turkey, a more hardline stance on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue can be expected in the following years (Tekines, 2023).

The outcome of the 44-day war allowed Turkey to strengthen its' positions in South Caucasus. After successfully assisting Azerbaijan towards victory in the 44-day war, Turkish

President Erdogan participated in a Victory parade dedicated to the outcome of the war, where he once again voiced his unconditional support to Azerbaijan and threatened Armenia to find itself in a much worse position. Turkey's actions and militarist rhetoric were condemned by Iran, U.S., and Russia. (Al Jazeera, 2020).

At the same time, when talking about broadening the economic partnership with Azerbaijan in the aftermath of the war, Turkey's leadership expressed the willingness to include and economically integrate Armenia in future regional projects. This regional cooperation would significantly endanger Russian positions in the region.

The regional projects currently benefiting Turkey, Azerbaijan and Georgia could finally take Armenia out of the long-lasting economic blockade and generate a lot of benefit for the country, since in the current circumstances it is the country that needs regional cooperation to function the most.

The economic factor has all the reasons to become decisive in Turkey's role in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In 2020 helping Azerbaijan in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war was a decision that took into account facts like the closed borders and no economic ties with Armenia, however currently, with intensified talks of establishing diplomatic relationship with Armenia and opening the borders, the interests of Turkey might significantly change. In a more long-term vision, Turkey could attempt to spread its' influence on the region economically.

Involving Armenia in the future projects with the neighboring countries, starting trade with it and being able to have direct transportation towards Azerbaijan, besides the Nakhichevan exclave would largely benefit Turkey and in that situation, the country might not be interested in another resumption of hostilities between its' neighbors.

As of February, 2023, the cooperation that seemed only to be in theory is starting to become more practical. There have been multiple meetings between Armenian and Turkish delegations and the atmosphere seems even more positive after the land border was symbolically crossed by Armenian Aid trucks, for the first time in the last 30 years.

The reason for this move were the disastrous earthquakes in Eastern Turkey, but it is one of the steps towards the normalization of relations between the two countries. Right after those events, in a meeting between the delegations of the two countries, it was agreed to gradually start opening the land border and Turkey lifted the ban on air cargo to Armenia. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Turkiye, 2023)

Those events have direct connection to Turkey's role in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and in a certain development of the situation in future, Turkey could be in a position where the final

resolution of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict would be highly appealing for it.

Certainly the outcome of Russian invasion of Ukraine may be determinant in extent of Turkey's influence in the South Caucasus and generally its' relationship with Russia, since now Turkey is trying to balance its' membership and obligations in NATO with a relatively stable relationship with Russia, but in case of Russia's weakening, it wouldn't lose the opportunity to dominate the South Caucasus region, especially if the current government remains in power after upcoming general elections. In the current blockade of Lachin corridor, Turkey so far expressed itself with few declarations, mostly voicing support to Azerbaijan.

Turkey's Foreign Minister declared that the Lachin corridor situation and Armenia's reaction will show the country's sincerity in normalization of relations with Turkey. Such a declaration may have many interpretations, however in the following months it could become clear where will these negotiations lead. (Asbarez, 2023)

Ultimately, the current presence of Russian peacekeeping forces may temporarily prevent Turkey from taking new steps, whether economic projects or military operations, however very soon when the mandate of the mission is over, the situation may suddenly change. In the November 9 ceasefire agreement, Azerbaijan proposed the involvement of Turkish peacekeepers and a joint Russian-Turkish peacekeeping mission to take place in Nagorno-Karabakh, however because of the big opposition from Armenian and Russian sides, Turkish peacekeepers were limited to operating remotely from a monitoring center, signing a deal of establishing it jointly with Russia on the territory of Azerbaijan outside of Nagorno-Karabakh and the line of contact (Al Jazeera, 2020).

Currently, Turkey is involved in the newly established format of 3+3, created for collaboration between the three South Caucasian countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia and the three regional actors – Russia, Turkey and Iran. Considering the current circumstances, the newly created platform is not going to necessarily benefit Turkey, however it is difficult to predict its' outcome at such an early stage.

The first meeting in the framework of the new format was held in the end of 2021 and did not yet generate specific multi-lateral agreements or projects. The proposal was first voiced by Turkey, but the other regional powers are advocating for it as well (Kaleji, 2021).

3.3 The role of Iran and Georgia

Iran's role in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been increasing since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, however it is not the only reason for the change.

Iran's role has also been varying throughout the time due to the changes in the country's relationship with the two conflicting neighbors. The changes that are certainly affecting the national interest of the country and the geopolitical reality of the region (Motamedi, 2020).

Discussing the relationship with the neighbors, it has to be mentioned that Iran has initially had a balanced relationship with Armenia and Azerbaijan since their independence. The government of Iran has ratified the UN resolutions calling for immediate withdrawal of Armenian forces from the provinces surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh.

Iran being a Shia Muslim theocracy throughout the time had a very positive approach to Azerbaijan, considering that it is one of the few countries that shares Shia Islam as a majority religion with Iran, others being only Iraq and Bahrain.

For Iran, it has been an important factor until recent times, however the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war was a turning point when the things started to change.

The other factor that explains the positive approach in the past are the northern regions of Iran, namely East and West Azerbaijan.

The residents of the two northern regions have cultural and ethnical proximity with the population of the Republic of Azerbaijan (Britannica, 2017).

Many Iranian Azerbaijanis expressed their support to Azerbaijan after the First Nagorno-Karabakh war.

At the same time, Iran has always had a positive relationship with Armenia as well, historically there is a big Armenian diaspora residing in Iran, the migration of which dates to the beginning of 20th century and the Armenian Genocide in Ottoman Empire.

Despite of Iranian government's repressive nature and religion's role in the politics, Armenian minority continued to benefit from exercising their religion and language freely even after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Having established schools and Armenian Apostolic churches (Barry, 2018).

These facts contributed to a relatively positive relationship between the two countries and to a

balanced position of Iran in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

When the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war started, Iran has called for termination of hostilities multiple times, but did not intervene neither militarily or diplomatically, later welcoming the ceasefire agreement signed at the end of the war (Bazoobandi, 2022). However, not as much the outcome, but more the manner in which the war unfolded has put Iran in a significantly unstable position.

Turkey's big involvement in the conflict that mainly was happening in the provinces to the south of Nagorno-Karabakh could not go unnoticed by Iranian leadership and Azerbaijan's even closer relationship with Turkey, their joint military trainings have forced Iranian government to respond with concentrating forces near the northern border of the country. But the most obviously disturbing topic for Iran, is the so-called Zangezur corridor, which is the idea of a corridor similar to the Lachin one, that would pass through Syunik region of southern Armenia linking Azerbaijan to its' Nakhichevan exclave (Kaleji, 2021).

According to one of the 2020 ceasefire agreement articles, Armenia is undertaking the responsibility of securing a land transportation route between Azerbaijan and its' exclave, through Armenian territory, however currently Turkey and Azerbaijan are trying to pressure Armenia into providing a corridor, similar to Lachin thus interpreting the article in a different way more suitable for Azerbaijan.

In case of such a corridor becoming a reality, Iran and Armenia would be deprived of their direct link by an Azerbaijani checkpoint securing the corridor, thus they would partially lose their connection. Additionally, nowadays the same route passes through Iran having its' own benefits. From Iranian perspective, that outcome puts the country in a very complicated point, where it will only have the Azerbaijani or Turkish link towards the north (Mammadli, 2023). Considering the deteriorating relationship and the rise of Turkish presence in the region, the outcome seems unacceptable for Iran.

The concentration of Iranian military forces near Azerbaijani border and frequently happening military drills are not the only steps taken by Iran to show its' position.

In October 2022 Iranian Foreign Minister arrived to Kapan, in the very same southern Armenian region of Syunik, where the corridor was suggested to be realized. The reason of the visit was the establishment of a new Iranian Consulate General (Gavin, Iran is Filling Armenia's Power Vacuum, 2022).

The city of Kapan is situated within few km distance from Azerbaijani border, in an area where a lot of clashes happened after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war, for instance the ones in September 2022.

This move is a direct manifestation of Iran's intention to maintain the status quo and oppose any attempt of modifications in international borders in the region. It was proven in the action after multiple previous declarations by Iranian officials that in case of any attempt of forceful change of international borders in the region, the country is ready to intervene and stop it (Iran International, 2021).

Except of the geopolitical interest in South Caucasus, the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute for Iran is also connected to another rivalry the country is involved in. The relationship with Israel in the recent years has deteriorated even more and considering that Israel is Azerbaijan's biggest arms supplier, it does not sit well with Iranian government.

Additionally, Iranian government suggested Azerbaijan's anti-Iranian recent declarations can be explained by the influence Israel has on Azerbaijan in recent years (Iran International, 2021).

With the ongoing rivalry with Israel getting intense, Iran is taking a cold stance towards Azerbaijan and cannot allow itself losing access to Armenia. Moreover, the major infrastructure project called North-South Highway planned by Armenia is already being challenged by the latest border clashes and could be endangered if the hypothesis of the corridor through Armenia gains more approval.

The North-South Highway is projected to enhance the transportation communications in the region potentially connecting Iran and Central Asia to Georgian port cities in the Black Sea. The realization of the project would be highly beneficial for Iran and represents another reason for Iran's future involvement in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Hauer, 2021).

Ultimately, Iran's participation in the 3+3 format is the main platform, where Iran can directly involve in South Caucasus security and transportation issues and their resolution in a multilateral framework.

One might consider this format to be having the most advantages for Iran even more than Turkey or Russia. Since the other 2 have already their positions set in the region. While Iran could benefit from this platform trying to promote its' own ideas on future resolution of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict related issues and the communication issues.

Additionally, there are certain points that contribute to making its' role crucial within the format, like the fact that it is the only regional power to have stable bilateral relationship with all the 3 South Caucasian countries, with present diplomatic representation and history of successful cooperation. Iran also borders with the two conflicting countries, almost entirely surrounding Nakhichevan exclave of Azerbaijan (Azizova, Hovhannisyan, & Khitsishvilli, 2022)

Regarding the diplomatic relationship between the countries, Armenia and Turkey are making progress but even with a continuous improvement, it is still on early stage. Here it is important to mention Georgia, the other regional actor, that perhaps is affecting the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict the least.

Georgia has no diplomatic relationship with Russia since the 2008, the reason being conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia being occupied by Russia. This view on the situation is shared by the most UN member states and this issue is determining Georgia's position on Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as well.

Having 2 breakaway states within its' borders, Georgia would expectedly oppose Nagorno-Karabakh gaining independence (Kipiani, 2021).

Recognizing Azerbaijan's sovereignty, Georgia ratified the UN resolutions regarding the withdrawal of Armenian forces from the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh. At the same time, Georgia has equally good relationship with Armenia and in recent years enlarged the bilateral cooperation with the southern neighbor.

Georgia has had its' own minor territorial disputes with the two conflicting neighbors throughout the time, however the disputes did not go further then Azerbaijani minorities being deported from Georgia or Armenian minorities wanting bigger degree of autonomy. Georgia being the country that was least involved in the conflict, can be arguably considered the country that needs peace in Nagorno-Karabakh the most. Because in case of Georgia the reasons are not limited to regional projects and economic benefit, neither they include any kind of attempt of influencing the neighbors, the reason in this case is Georgia's own security. If Nagorno-Karabakh conflict fails to be settled in the near future, it will become a threat to Georgia's national security as well.

In 2020, Russia acted passively during the war, but in case of resumption of hostilities with Turkey being involved again, Russian side might react differently and as discussed above, the same can be said about Iran. In such a turn of events, Georgia might suffer devastating consequences, since the only way to go south for Russian troops will be through Georgia, considering that Russian forces already have presence in Georgia, this scenario doesn't seem too complicated to happen.

During the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war, Georgia had a very balanced position, making a strategic decision of banning the transit of military cargo through its' territory (Seskuria, 2020).

The ban was for the both sides and was meant to show that Georgia will not be taking sides in the escalation and will make effort in peace settlement. In the aftermath of the war, Georgia

continued pursuing the same goal by offering several times to assume the role of mediator in the peace settlement process.

On practice, Georgia mediated one of the swap deals on prisoners of war in 2021 (Gotev, 2021). However, due to the influence of regional powers, Georgia's proposal of mediation might only come into practice if the possible multilateral platforms for peace settlement do not prove to be effective.

Georgia's participation in the multilateral frameworks in the region might be put under question because of presence of Russia. In the already mentioned 3+3 format Georgia was the first state to express reluctance to its' participation.

The reasons are understandable, entering in a regional multilateral cooperation with Russia is not the most beneficial decision at the moment for Georgian leadership (Coffey, 2021).

Despite the reluctance from Georgia to send representation at the meeting of the format, Russian side declared hopes that Georgia will reconsider its' decision, showing again that for regional powers this is a potentially important format in the future.

Georgia's role in the future negotiations will mainly depend on the framework that will be chosen, but the attempts of Georgian government to contribute to the peaceful settlement of the conflict are visible and have clear reasons.

3.4.1 The role of USA and EU

The role of United States and the European Union in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was usually limited by the lack of influence in the region. In between the First and Second Nagorno-Karabakh wars the involvement of the U.S. and EU can be analyzed only within frameworks of different international organizations.

Bilateral relationships between these international actors and the two conflicting countries were balanced with none of the sides receiving more support in comparison with the other throughout the time.

During the Second-Nagorno Karabakh war U.S. has made efforts of mediating a ceasefire, that was later violated and condemned the involvement of Turkey and its' use of Syrian mercenaries. (Deutsche Welle, 2020). However internally, United States leadership was criticized for undertaking a passive role, so when the leadership changed, the involvement

and attention to the conflict increased.

The new leadership stressed the importance of region's proximity with both Middle East and Central Asia. In the same time there is an important factor for the U.S, which is South Caucasus neighboring Russia.

From the American perspective, the outcome of the war can be beneficial in case if it starts a new period of enhanced communication between the countries in the region. Theoretically, the condition that Turkey had for resuming the diplomatic relations with Armenia was withdrawal of Armenian forces from Azerbaijani recognized territories. By 2022, there were no Armenian forces remaining neither in Nagorno-Karabakh, nor in the surrounding territories. (Mejlumyan, 2022)

Therefore, the NATO member Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan could start the full collaboration and for the U.S. it is critically important since it would decrease the dependency of the region on Russia, thus decreasing its' influence and would allow the U.S. to establish more presence.

Thus, the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations is an important step in this direction, which U.S. lately seems to successfully assist to. Considering the new Armenian leadership's desire of an independent foreign policy for the country and closer relationship with the Western states, the United States is more ready to develop Armenia's economy and infrastructure through the investments, possibly using the Armenian-American diaspora. Considering the influence of Russia in the region, before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, succeeding in these ideas would seem less possible, however after the change of status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh and Russia's attention being focused on other conflict, this turn of events starts to become possible. (Maghakyanyan, 2022)

After the Azerbaijani offensive on the border with Armenia in September 2022, the United States did not only react with showing concern with renewed hostilities and a hope for them to end, but specifically blamed Azerbaijan in starting the hostilities and invading sovereign territories of Armenia.

These declarations were followed up with a much bigger decision of sending a U.S. congressional delegation, headed by Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Armenia. Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of House of Representatives at a time, is to this day the highest ranking official of United States to ever visit Armenia. (Gall, 2022)

During the visit, the delegation expressed their support for Armenia and condemned the Azerbaijani attacks again.

This visit proves that the possibilities for the United States are growing as Russia's influence

decreases. For Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution it is a positive sign, giving the Armenian side a hypothetical choice and leverage in negotiations for Nagorno-Karabakh status mediated by Russia.

Since there is still the option with the Russian leadership deciding to simply abandon the region after the end of the peacekeeping forces mandate in 2025, a peaceful resolution might be very difficult to reach in that case, because the Azerbaijani side will be willing to capture the remaining parts of Nagorno-Karabakh, as it was already declared by the President Aliyev and with an absence of international support towards the self-determination of the region and a possible alternative peacekeeping mission, that turn of events would be very difficult to avoid. In the framework of the Eastern Partnership, European Union equally cooperates with both Azerbaijan and Armenia, however since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EU has named Azerbaijan its' reliable partner and an alternative to Russia.

This shows the vulnerable position of the European Union when it comes to the alternatives to Russian gas and oil, at the same time, it created controversies, believed to not contribute to having a balanced stance on the conflict.

The European Union is concerned about the conflict due to the region's proximity to Eastern Europe and potential to create security issues. It became one of the reasons for the deployment of European Union Mission in Armenia across the border with Azerbaijan in February, 2023. (Ritter, 2023)

The other and perhaps the main reason was an expected reaction to Azerbaijan's offensive in September 2022. At a Parliamentary discussion held in October 2022 the first negotiations on establishing EUMA took place.

This move by the European Union balanced its' current position on the conflict, since Azerbaijani officials strongly condemned it, the same way as Armenian ones condemned the declarations of EU officials about Azerbaijan being a trustworthy partner and a reliable replacement for gas and oil import. Even though, the European Mission in Armenia is expected to be reporting the cases of ceasefire violation and generally guaranteeing the security on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan only, among the ultimate goals of the mission would be assisting an improved peace settlement efforts that would solve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

The EU also supports the potential upcoming regional projects in South Caucasus and could assist to their development. The European Union has repeatedly declared that Nagorno-Karabakh conflict should be resolved peacefully but it has never had other proposals and projects separate from participation in OSCE Minsk Group initiatives, so it has many times

stressed the importance of Minsk group in the process. However, the EU has recently expressed readiness of its' own peacebuilding strategies in the future (European Parliament, 2022).

European Union's inclusion in OSCE Minsk group as a permanent member has long been discussed, but there is no specific proposal yet and considering the fading role of the Minsk group it is not currently expected to happen.

Discussing the role of European Union in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, it is impossible to avoid mentioning France. France has historically voiced its' support to Armenia and has always propagated it in the European Union.

Being also a member of the Minsk Group, France has always been criticized by Azerbaijan and Turkey for a biased stance, practically being the closest and most effective ally for Armenia in the whole conflict resolution process.

After the 44-day war in 2020, the French parliament has even voted to adopt the resolution on recognizing the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh, becoming the first state to do so (Senate of France, 2020).

The resolution has not been adopted at the end however it shows the firm stance France has on the conflict. Moreover, the French President Macron was the first leader to hold talks with Russian leadership about the outcome of war and the future perspectives, as well as being the one to criticize Turkey the most, by suggesting the Nagorno-Karabakh war to be one of the steps of Turkey's imperialistic ambitions in the wider region. However, France as the rest of EU was unable to critically affect the outcome of 2020 war. (Gegelashvilli, 2021)

Current development of peace settlement in Nagorno-Karabakh is expected to meet the international human rights standards and European Union is taking an important role in observing the conformity with those principles.

In conclusion, the interests of United States and European Union in Nagorno-Karabakh can increase because of the region's geopolitical position, creating a possibility of a future collaboration between the two, aimed at increasing the presence in the region amid Russian shift of attention. Taking an important role in negotiations on Nagorno-Karabakh status can be possible after resolution of certain urgent issues.

The United States and EU can assist in issues like delimitation and demarcation of the borders, since until nowadays, it was visibly difficult to affect the situation or assist in resolving issues without collaboration with Russia.

Developing the transportation links in the region can be a long-term beneficial investment for European Union as well.

3.4 (2) The role of International Organizations

Among the international organizations involved in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution the most prominent one so far has been the OSCE. In March, 1992 during the ongoing First Nagorno-Karabakh war, the organization has founded the OSCE Minsk group²¹.

Negotiating a peaceful resolution to Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, through providing an effective framework and potentially organizing the Minsk conference have become the main goals of Minsk group. (OSCE Minsk group, 1997)

In between the First and Second Nagorno-Karabakh wars, the organization assumed a crucial role in the conflict resolution, with all the international community agreeing that the framework provided by the Minsk group is the most suitable and effective for reaching sustainable peace settlement in the region.

The already discussed Madrid Principles have unfortunately become the last significant effort by the Minsk group to make any progress and afterwards the role of the organization has started to decrease. Since then, Armenia and Azerbaijan started to undermine the function of the group, with Azerbaijan being more vocal in its' criticism.

After the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, the influence of the group was disappearing with the co-chairs France, United States and Russia often refusing or blaming each other in refusal to collaborate. (The Wilson Center, 2021)

Those issues intensified further with deteriorated relationship between the co-chairs amid the invasion of Ukraine and present sanctions imposed on Russia. Even though none of the sides is satisfied, the views on OSCE Minsk group's function vary in Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan has always denounced participation of France and generally considered Minsk group to be ineffective, while currently considering its' mission to be over. (Aliyev, 2022)

While in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh the disappointment is related to lack of accomplishments made to this day with a little hope for a change still existing

Nevertheless, the fact of Second Nagorno-Karabakh war happening in 2020, after almost 30 years of fruitless negotiation process, is a failure for OSCE Minsk Group as well.

²¹ The OSCE Minsk Group is co-chaired by Russia, the United States, and France, and includes Belarus, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Finland, Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the OSCE Troika.

The last joint statement, reaffirming the peaceful principles for resolution by the co-chairs of Minsk group dates to December 2021. Thus, one might conclude that nowadays, OSCE Minsk group has no new proposals that consider the current circumstances, like the blockade of Lachin corridor and possible withdrawal of Russian peacekeeping mission in 2025.

(McAllister, 2022)

Another organization involved in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is the Council of Europe. Both conflicting states joined the organization in 2001 and ever since have violated many resolutions and commitments of resolving the conflict in a peaceful manner.

Council of Europe has frequently called the sides to commit to the framework provided by the OSCE Minsk group and has repeatedly stressed the danger of humanitarian consequences.

(Parliamentary Assembly, 2021)

One of the main unfulfilled commitments by both countries that remains so to this day is the treatment of conscientious objectors. Council of Europe still addresses the violation of this right, attempting to have an impact on situation.

Another main topic of involvement for the Council of Europe are the refugees and internally displaced people. The COE has also addressed the issue of inhumane treatment to prisoners of war. By implementing the human rights standards set by the Council of Europe in their policies regarding the displaced persons, both Armenia and Azerbaijan could ensure a better humanitarian situation and critically tackle the local issues.

Analyzing the humanitarian consequences of the conflict, the most crucial role in securing the basic needs of the refugees and internally displaced was taken by International Committee of Red Cross. ICRC was also the organization that has been visiting the prisoners of war ever since. Additionally, ICRC is currently responsible for the transportation of the critically ill individuals from Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenian hospitals through Lachin corridor.

(International Committee of the Red Cross, 2022).

The UN Refugee agency was also present in coordinating the situation with people who found themselves in a refugee like situation. The Inter-Agency Response plan by the UNHCR assisted Armenia's government in securing the first stage of urgent humanitarian assistance to 90 thousand people (The UN Refugee Agency, 2021).

The assistance provided by the international organizations during Second Nagorno-Karabakh war has significantly helped to meet many basic needs of displaced population both in Azerbaijan and Armenia, however their efforts in conflict resolution were sidelined by the regional powers and difficult geopolitical circumstances. Currently, the possibility of any future solutions, for instance a newly proposed framework for peace settlement negotiations

or a possible peacekeeping mission in Nagorno-Karabakh does not seem to be in works yet.

3.5 Current situation in Nagorno-Karabakh and possible solutions

Snap parliamentary elections in June 2021 resulted in a new mandate for Armenian ruling party that was competing in elections with specific slogans such as “the new era of peace” and “there is future”. This stance convinced the population exhausted by the 44-day war and unwilling to start a new one for “returning” the lands. (Grigoryan, 2021)

Since then, the leadership intensified its’ efforts in normalizing the relationship with Turkey and putting more effort into signing a final peace treaty with Azerbaijan.

One of the results of this foreign policy is a more independent decision making of Nagorno-Karabakh with less guidance by Armenia, leading to the first direct negotiations between the representatives of Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan (Isayev & Shahverdyan, 2023).

Even though the meeting took place amid an ongoing blockade in a significantly negative moment for negotiations, it is still a new format that could give another opportunity for the development of a reasonable dialogue between the sides.

Nagorno-Karabakh becoming a side of the conflict separate from Armenia has always been a goal for the Armenian side, because that turn of events had a potential of impacting the negotiations on Nagorno-Karabakh status within the OSCE Minsk group. However, nowadays Nagorno-Karabakh as a side of conflict separate from Armenia can be beneficial also for Azerbaijan which started to view the conflict as an internal issue. At the same time, the circumstances created after the 2020 war have put Nagorno-Karabakh in a difficult position even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine started in 2022. Everything deteriorated even more after Russia’s quick switch of attention from the conflict.

Since December 12, 2022 Lachin corridor, the only link of Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia remains in a blockade, totally isolating the 120 thousand Armenian population of the region. Lack of access for civilian and commercial traffic has already created a humanitarian crisis

(Amnesty International, 2023).

The exceptions are only made for the ICRC vehicles transporting the critically ill residents. The devastating consequences of a long-lasting blockade already include such basic needs as food and medicine. Alongside the blockade, the Azerbaijani side is also periodically disrupting the supply of natural gas and electricity, making the situation even more complicated.

The blockade of Lachin corridor was started by the self-described Azerbaijani environmentalists. There are no individuals with records of previous involvement in environmental activism among the participants of the blockade. (Gavin, Europe watches on as humanitarian crisis unfolds in Nagorno-Karabakh, 2023).

Moreover, many of the participants of the so-called environmental activism have been identified as military personnel of Azerbaijani army. The initially supposed non-governmental organizations that organized the blockade, are directly financed by Azerbaijani government, with some of their participants being also members of extremist Grey Wolves²² organization. (Loughton, 2023). The photo and video proofs identifying the protesting individuals as military personnel went viral since the first days of the blockade. Considering the situation with freedom of speech and press in Azerbaijan one could argue that long-lasting protests happening without intervention of Azerbaijani government have no precedent whatsoever. (Reporters without Borders, 2022)

Certainly, given the facts, blaming the Azerbaijani side in blockade of Lachin corridor is easy, but is it reasonable to put the responsibility of the blockade on Azerbaijani side only is arguable. By the November 9 ceasefire agreement, Russia assumed the responsibility of guaranteeing safety along the line of contact including the entire Lachin corridor.

Thus, all the territories where the peacekeeping mission is deployed are under the responsibility of Russian side. Russia's obligations include securing the transportation in Lachin corridor, the only link between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh (Peace Agreements Database, 2020).

Russia's failure to perform its' obligations resulted in Azerbaijani side choosing to put pressure on Nagorno-Karabakh population and undertake a policy of slowly forcing the population out of the region.

The most critical issues, that resulted from the blockade are related to the access to healthcare. Hospitals and pharmacies report various cases of drug and medical supply

²² Grey Wolves is a Turkish far-right paramilitary organization with its' branches in several other countries

shortages. The cases of critically ill refusing to be transported to Armenia through ICRC vehicles are also increasing, given the fact that among the population there is widespread feeling of desperation and many individuals being transported to Armenia do not have any certainty about when would they be able to return to the original places of residence in Nagorno-Karabakh. (TIME, 2023).

Another critical issue that is important to be addressed is the right to education. An internationally recognized fundamental right that is being challenged in Nagorno-Karabakh as a result of the blockade. Schools and kindergartens are usually attended by 27 thousand children in Nagorno-Karabakh. But since the beginning of the blockade for a long time they were closed due to the disruption of natural gas and electricity supplies (Ghazaryan, 2023). Being partially opened in February, 2023 the schools only operate for limited hours each day, challenging the usual course of educational program. Those issues make the need of conflict's resolution and the development of the dialogue between the sides more urgent than it has ever been.

The reaction of international community was expectedly condemnatory, with European Union and United States stressing the need of immediately unblocking Lachin corridor. But perhaps the most crucial question in this situation is how the current events are going to affect the issue of self-determination of Republic of Artsakh.

The issue of self-determination for Nagorno-Karabakh remains unresolved. From one side, the war and its' aftermath strengthened Azerbaijan's claims of sovereignty over the region, since now it controls big part of Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding territories, alongside having the international recognition of sovereignty over the whole area. However, from another point of view, a breakaway state being attacked and put in blockade by the state exercising the sovereignty over it could possibly gain more legitimacy in exercising its' self-determination before international community, since the conflict already highlighted the need for a peaceful resolution that respects the right of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh to determine their own future.

Analyzing the principle of self-determination, it can be seen that the fundamental principle of international law recognizes the right of people to freely determine their own political, economic, social, and cultural development. This principle is part of various international human rights documents, including the United Nations Charter, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

In the context of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the principle of self-determination is being interpreted and compared to the concept of secession, which suggests a situation where a

region or territory breaks away from an existing state to form a new independent state. However, with all the importance of the principle of self-determination and successful cases that lead to greater political autonomy or even independence, it does not automatically lead to secession. (Closa, Margiotta, & Martinico, 2020)

In case of Nagorno-Karabakh, the principle of self-determination, if used for secession, would be conflicting with other principles of international law, such as the respect for the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan.

The fact of occupation of surrounding territories not being part of Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast under Soviet Union by Artsakh Defense army in collaborations with Armenia are also violating one of the points of the principle, which is the peaceful resolution of conflicts through a dialogue and no unilateral declarations of secession and military actions.

Under international law the right to secession is usually viewed as an exceptional measure that should only be considered as a last resort. The International Court of Justice has specified that the right to self-determination does not necessarily grant a right to secession.

At the same time the importance of the principle of territorial integrity is specifically mentioned and recognized (Wood, 2015).

Therefore, it emphasizes the need to respect existing borders and the sovereign rights of states. In case of Nagorno-Karabakh, the exceptional circumstances where peoples have a right to external self-determination including secession can be analyzed to be viewed applicable or not.

Discussing those points separately, the severe and persistent violations of fundamental human rights can be mentioned as a reason in this case. Nagorno-Karabakh population has been repeatedly deprived of the fundamental right to education by Azerbaijani authorities during the ongoing blockade. The right to freedom of movement was violated by the blockade and by excessive new checkpoint installing policies as well (Amnesty International, 2023).

Moreover, the right of Nagorno-Karabakh to exercise their right to self-determination was not respected since the very independence of former Soviet Republics, when Nagorno-Karabakh was deprived of its' status of autonomy, which was a form of internal exercise of self-determination. All those fundamental rights being violated could be interpreted as exceptional circumstances under which the principle of self-determination can technically allow the possibility of secession.

At the same time, interpretation of given circumstances as exceptional and satisfactory involves considering the actions undertaken by the breakaway state itself. Artsakh Defense

Army was involved in occupation of territories outside of the former Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous region borders under Soviet Union. Moreover, Armenia's direct involvement made it an international conflict where for decades the status of Nagorno-Karabakh was negotiated under conditions of returning surrounding territories for recognition of status. While international law states that the resolution of any issue related to secession should be achieved through peaceful means, and any unilateral declaration of independence or use of force is not recognized as a legitimate means of achieving independence.

The fact that Armenia has since its' independence officially recognized the sovereignty of Azerbaijan and has not yet recognized the independence of Republic of Artsakh makes the situation even more difficult (International Crisis Group, 2019).

Nagorno-Karabakh's representatives have not been a side of the conflict both because of Azerbaijan's refusal to negotiate with them and because of Armenia's recognition of Azerbaijani sovereignty.

Between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the conflict has been negotiated technically as an international one either in regional framework or in the OSCE Minsk group, which deprived Nagorno-Karabakh residents from negotiating it from internal point of view declaring the exceptional circumstances for Nagorno-Karabakh's secession from Azerbaijan.

Ultimately, any decision on secession should be based on a democratic process that respects the rights of all affected communities and considering the First Nagorno-Karabakh war and the number of Azerbaijani refugees who had to flee the region, in current circumstances it would certainly not satisfy all the affected communities.

The principles of peaceful negotiation and dialogue should be followed to achieve a mutually agreed-upon solution, that in this case is only possible with many compromises from both sides (Cavanaugh, 2020).

Another point often mentioned around this case is the fact that Nagorno-Karabakh has been part of Soviet Azerbaijan, making part of Soviet Union, but not the Republic of Azerbaijan after its' independence, simultaneously proclaiming its' own independence, thus rejecting the idea of Azerbaijan being the mother state.

This idea has not been developed a lot during the negotiations and was not given importance by the experts however in case of peaceful development of the situation after the collapse of USSR, it could have led to a possible status of the region. In that case, creating a demilitarized zone in the whole territory of Nagorno-Karabakh would be more realistic to achieve.

After analyzing the current situation in Nagorno-Karabakh and the legal perspective of the

conflict, it is important to state that the possible future solutions need to be focused on securing the right to live peacefully for Nagorno-Karabakh people as well as opportunities to exercise their basic Human Rights.

With the ongoing stagnation of OSCE Minsk group, Russia and Turkey have secured their extended presence in the region, offering regional cooperation frameworks, that could include negotiations on Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution. However, no specific negotiation process was established in the aftermath of 2020 war, like it was done after the First Nagorno-Karabakh war, resulting in no peace process existing, as of March 2023 (Glantz, 2022).

The positions of both Armenia and Azerbaijan imply unrealistic resolutions that would only favor one side politically and would not resolve the issue of securing peaceful life for the population.

Armenia has historically wanted independence for Nagorno-Karabakh. Considering the situation on the ground, the negotiation process in the last 3 decades and the legal side of the conflict, the independent status of Nagorno-Karabakh appears an impossible solution.

Currently it is not recognized as an independent state by any country including Armenia. Important to mention, that if Nagorno-Karabakh was to hypothetically gain independence, the possibility of thousands of Azerbaijani refugees from the region to return to their initial places of residence would not be realistic. However, the current softened stance on Nagorno-Karabakh status by Armenian leadership does not underline the term “independent” as state, but rather argues on general status of being able to exercise self-determination at certain level (Osborn, 2021).

Azerbaijan, in its’ turn wants absolute control over entire Nagorno-Karabakh as it is recognized a sovereign territory of Azerbaijan. The complete control of Azerbaijani government over Nagorno-Karabakh will have disastrous consequences, as it is already proven by many cases that attacking or even murdering Armenian individuals is promoted and welcomed by Azerbaijani government (European Parliament, 2013).

The demonization of Armenians in Azerbaijan has been more integrated in nation-building of the country since its’ independence compared to the same practice in Armenia. This directly puts the safety of 120-thousand Armenian population under threat. After losing the First Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijani leadership has repeatedly shifted attention of internal issues on external enemy – Armenians and this did not change even after victory in 44-day war. After the end of the war Baku victory parade was held, where Azerbaijani leadership praised the Turkish “Young Turks” party members - the perpetrators of Armenian genocide.

The parade was followed by establishment of an appalling Trophy Park, where humiliating wax figures of dead Armenian soldiers alongside their helmets were displayed (BBC, 2021). These actions by the authoritarian Azerbaijani government are a proof that even if there is any solidarity among Armenian and Azerbaijani population on peaceful coexistence in the future, under current circumstances, de-facto control of Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijani leadership cannot be a solution. Only a future process of successful democratization in Azerbaijan could put this reality under question (Caucasus Edition, 2021).

While analyzing the positions of the two sides, one can conclude that possible solutions of the conflict should not simply be a “golden middle” with compromises from both sides, but should base on the needs of the population first, with a final goal of saving lives.

The current 120 thousand population of Nagorno-Karabakh finally living in peace with the refugees from both Armenia and Azerbaijan being able to return to the region and live in their initial places of residence is what the negotiation process can put as a priority.

Another priority could be reaching an agreement before the end of the mandate of Russian peacekeeping mission, because the mandate will be renewed in 2025 only if none of the sides opposes to it, so the risk of escalation could be eliminated if the agreement is reached faster. Armenia’s position as a side of the conflict is changing with Republic of Artsakh becoming itself a side and starting direct negotiations for the first time in 2023.

This factor can revolutionize the negotiation process and a new framework developed by either international or regional actors could already be built considering the new circumstances.

After a detailed analysis of the current situation, alongside the legal and historical perspectives, the solution that would contribute to achieving sustainable peace the most appears to be a de-facto independent Nagorno-Karabakh region de-jure located within Azerbaijan.

Agreement upon demilitarization of the region could prevent possible escalations considering that one of the sides could oppose a new long-term peacekeeping mission. Exclusion of violence would allow the peaceful coexistence of the population.

The effective function of these type of agreements would need certain level of democratization, however in case of demilitarization and a possible civilian mission by the United Nations, like the European Union Mission, that recently started in Armenia, it could contribute to efforts of building trust between the communities. Thus, the status of the region in form of autonomy with high level of internal self-determination would allow to constitute a local government with representation of both Armenian and Azerbaijani communities. The

civilian mission could also assist in securing the prevention of attempts to create settler societies by any of the sides.

The lack of trust between the communities created by the decades of reciprocal demonization is going to be one of the main obstacles for this type of solutions, alongside the democratization level of the region, but these 2 are the obstacles that are present for most of the other possible resolutions of the conflict. In order to effectively implement such a proposal for resolution, a thorough comparison with similar regions with high levels of autonomy throughout the world could be done.

A significantly different alternative resolution to the conflict is establishment of a UN Interim Administration Mission in Nagorno-Karabakh without immediate specification of the status of the region. UN Security Council Resolution has previously established a similar mission in Kosovo, while it was still part of Yugoslavia and remained there under Serbian and Kosovo authorities as well. (UN Security Council, 1999).

Certainly, the circumstances were different, as they are in any conflict, however this type of mission by UN could be the most effective especially when it comes to assuring safe return of the refugees and internally displaced persons to their original places of residence.

The duties of UN Interim Administration Mission can be determined both with Nagorno-Karabakh representation and Azerbaijani government. Contributing to establishment of a local government based on principles of representative democracy with respect to rights of minorities, building independent institutions in the region and facilitating the process for determining a status of Nagorno-Karabakh, such as autonomy can become long-term goals, while the immediate goals would be securing the safety and building trust between the representatives of both communities. In theory, this proposal for resolution can face opposition from Azerbaijani government considering that the similar mission by UN has contributed to Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008. However, if negotiations on such a proposal happen in practice, there is a possibility for sides to reach an agreement on what are the long-term plans and expectations related to the status of Nagorno-Karabakh. Moreover, the circumstances during the deployment of UN Mission in Kosovo were indeed very different, with interests of international actors being different as well. In case of Nagorno-Karabakh a scenario of the mission leading to future independence is very little likely. In addition, if before this proposal would not be possible with Russia's opposition, currently with a passive stance of Russia it seems increasingly probable.

The last proposal, that appears relatively vague compared to the other two is the regional resolution of the conflict, that could be reached in the already discussed framework of 3+3 or

any other future regional cooperation platform.

This resolution would not aim at a long-term resolution of the conflict but instead would only focus at securing the safety of the region by a joint peacekeeping force, consisted of the forces of 3 regional powers- Russia, Iran, and Turkey, together with Georgia.

The presence of Iran and Georgia would balance the biased stance of Turkey and currently unfocused Russia. In the same time the presence of Turkey as a state of NATO could balance the alliance of Russia and Iran, thus drawing more approval from the international community.

In conclusion, any possible proposal being discussed should eventually be agreed with interests of international and regional actors, often great powers.

The resolution of similar issues with principle of self-determination and requests for remedial secession conflicting with the principles of territorial integrity and sovereignty are very often being influenced and decided by the external actors.

These principles under international law do not have specific framework of interpretation yet, which is why similar ethnic conflicts can result in radically different resolutions. While considering different options for Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution, conflicts that resulted in establishment of high-level autonomies like Aaland Islands and South Tyrol should be reviewed and analyzed. Cases that brought to partial recognition of independence like Kosovo, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Northern Cyprus can as well lead to some new findings.

At the same time while researching the precedents or considering the current situation it is important to consider that the situation in this conflict is constantly changing and very often even recent proposals can lose the relevance as they failed to predict the change of situation. Currently, the peace process is stalled, while the humanitarian crisis needs urgent solutions and any progress in negotiations would be crucial for the vulnerable population.

Conclusion

Despite the complicated nature of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and existing circumstances that require urgent solutions, the future of the region can take a peaceful turn. Throughout decades the negotiation process has theoretically been focused on finding an acceptable resolution for both sides and their positions have been changing according to the military potential and international support. But in practice, interests of regional and international actors have been decisive to this day.

In this thesis the research of 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and its' aftermath was done from two different perspectives. One is the perspective of population and their fundamental rights, more specifically the residents under current humanitarian crisis and the ones willing to return to the region – refugees and internally displaced persons from both Armenia and Azerbaijan. But also, the residents of the two countries, forced to participate in the renewed hostilities directly or indirectly during and after the 44-day war. While the information war in this conflict is so fierce, that it started a new direction of disinformation campaigns, focused on weaponizing the environment, important issues of thousands of people in need very often went underreported.

The environmental propaganda that was so remarkable during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war did not stop when the war ended, currently serving as the main excuse for blockade of Lachin corridor and creation of humanitarian crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh. The blockade's condemnation by international community and the recent decision by European Court of Human Rights to issue interim measure to enable essential travel through Lachin corridor can lead to positive turn of events in near future, however, at present the situation remains unresolved.

There was no lack of information about 44-day war, the issue most often was the topic of information, that was lacking attempts on raising awareness on basic needs of affected population. On this perspective the thesis argues on the rights of conscientious objectors being violated in both countries and in Nagorno-Karabakh are going unnoticed by the international organizations. The reason for that appears to be the uniqueness of the situation. Many of the organizations specialized in protecting the rights of conscientious objectors are not active nowadays, because the legislations of most of the countries either specifically protect the exercise of this right, either accept the interpretation of freedom of thought,

conscience, and religion.

This fundamental right is present at any international human rights instrument. Freedom of thought, conscience and religion is an essential component of individual autonomy and is crucial for democratic societies. The limitations to this right, since it is not absolute can be done only if it violates others' human rights, but so far there are no reported cases in any of the two countries where conscientious objection to perform military service has resulted in such outcome. Among the fallen soldiers from both sides, the majority were performing their mandatory military service and were aged 18-21. It will never become known how many of them objected to participating in war but their choice has been between the military and prison. This situation requires more involvement from Council of Europe and European Court of Human Rights, that previously condemned the actions of both states. Pressuring the two countries to amend their legislation on this matter or to perform the obligation to comply with ratified international treaties could solve this ongoing critical issue. Pressuring Azerbaijan on returning Armenian prisoners of war still being detained in Baku is also crucially important for the peaceful resolution.

The findings of the research regarding the situation with refugees and internally displaced persons indicated the need of including this crucial question in any conflict resolution proposals. Without the possibility for thousands of people to return to their original places of residence, the trust between the two conflicting communities cannot be built and reaching an agreement where this question is not put as a priority would postpone the final conflict resolution. Taking that into account, the possible proposals for the conflict resolution discussed in the third chapter all include this condition as one of the key points.

The other perspective is the conflict's importance in geopolitical context and the emerging influence of external actors.

The detailed analysis of pre-war negotiation process and the change of status quo resulting from the outcome of the war leads to findings that explain the reasons of resumption of hostilities and the extent of benefits or detriments for each external actor. On this perspective the thesis argues that the outcome of 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and the change of status quo had benefits for most of external actors.

Among regional actors, both Russia and Turkey benefited from the 44-day war. Russia was able to deploy a peacekeeping mission and enlarge its' presence in the region doing so independently from the OSCE Minsk group co-chairs that failed in reaching agreement on OSCE peacekeeping mission for decades. The resulted situation gave Russia a more leverage in pressuring Armenia to remain in CSTO and EEU even later after obvious violation of

CSTO Charter in decision to not intervene during Azerbaijani offensive in 2022 and Armenia's criticism of ineffectiveness of the organization.

At the same time Russia maintained certain level of influence over Azerbaijan. The advantages did not prove to be as long-term for Russia as expected due to circumstances that were created later in 2022, however the short-term benefit was satisfactory for Russia. At the same time Turkey massively profited from the 44-day war installing its' presence and influence over South Caucasus. Closest ally of Azerbaijan, Turkey always had ambitions on expanding its' interests in the region and Azerbaijan's victory in the war gave it more opportunities for that.

Iran was the only regional power to face detriments, considering that it risks losing the link with Armenia if there is any Azerbaijani corridor linking it with Nakhichevan exclave to be installed through Armenian southern province of Syunik.

The corridor would replace the one currently functioning through the territory of Iran. That turn of events would force Iran to rely only on Azerbaijan and Turkey for its' connection towards the north and that decrease in options amid tense relations with Azerbaijan could be harmful for the country.

For international actors the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war presented new opportunities. The passive stance of European Union and United States during the war was seen as indifference and the outcome as detrimental, however the aftermath of the war proved all those predictions wrong. While Russia is fully immersed in the invasion of Ukraine the United States took an active stance on supporting Armenia during Azerbaijani offensive of September 2022, while the European Union deployed a civilian mission in Armenia along the border with Azerbaijan in February 2023.

These actions by the international actors indicated that the outcome of the war and the change of status quo created more opportunities in balancing its' influence in the region, since the fact of Armenian forces being withdrawn from surrounding territories of Nagorno-Karabakh created better circumstances for normalization of relations between Armenia and Turkey, a NATO member that is also an ally of Azerbaijan. Through assisting to the normalization of relations between the three, the US and EU can be more involved in South Caucasus amid potential decrease in Russia's influence in the region in coming years and their difficult relationship with Iran.

The possible proposals for conflict resolution discussed in this thesis included different strategies for negotiations. One of the offered solutions includes establishment of United Nation's Interim Administration mission.

Other option is an agreement between Nagorno-Karabakh leadership and Azerbaijan or a peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan that would make the region de-facto independent while de-jure remaining in Azerbaijan with possible civilian observation missions assisting in allocation of returning refugees. Another solution discussed is a joint peacekeeping mission by Russia, Iran, Turkey and Georgia, the solution would be effective in case if the regional powers oppose to the UN or EU missions fearing that such an intervention would undermine their influence in the region. In such a turn of events the 4 regional actors could balance each other's interests in the region and make further escalation harmful for the whole region.

Overall, an important issue that can create obstacles for any of the possible proposals of conflict resolution is the level of democratization. The researched cases with successfully functioning high-level autonomies, comprised of ethnic or linguistic minorities indicate that high level of democratization is crucial in sustainable peace settlement. With authoritarian Azerbaijan and Armenia still on its' way to a flawed democracy, the circumstances for Nagorno-Karabakh are not the easiest.

Building trust between the communities after the decades of reciprocal demonization will require great efforts and long period of time. But the conflict remaining frozen for a long time already proved to result in its' escalation. The Second Nagorno-Karabakh war had one of the highest numbers of fatalities among the conflicts from 2020 and the situation should be prevented from repeating itself again.

At present, the negotiations on a peace treaty between Azerbaijan and Armenia are ongoing. The direct dialogue between Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan has also started recently, which allows the international community to be more involved in the peacemaking process and despite present issues, the prospects for peace in the region are more than before.

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