

RUSSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS IN THE CONTEXT OF INCREASING NEW REGIONAL COMPETITION

ZHAK MANUKYAN* 
Yerevan State University

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to study various factors of Russia's foreign policy in the South Caucasus during the 44-Day Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) war of 2020 and in the post-war period. Russia's mediation efforts to end the war in Nagorno-Karabakh and establish peace are considered. Particular attention is paid to the deployment of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh and the military-political significance of this initiative and the consequences, as well as the main reasons for the failure of this peacekeeping mission. The article also analyzes the multi-vector foreign policy pursued by regional states in the South Caucasus, in particular Türkiye and Iran. In this context, the prospects for Russian-Turkish cooperation in the South Caucasus, in particular, in the process of settling the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, are highlighted. This also makes a comparative analysis of the foreign policies of the United States, European Union (EU) and France in the region significant. The article examines Russia's ability to maintain its military and political influence and expand its economic presence in the South Caucasus. Issues that have hindered the establishment of peace and stability in the South Caucasus were also discussed.

Keywords: South Caucasus, Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh, trilateral statement, regional security, Türkiye.

Introduction

For years, the military-political cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Armenia has played an important role in ensuring stability in the South Caucasus (Manukyan 2023a). Russia, together with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), occupies an important place in the security system of Armenia. However, the war that started in Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2020 and the events that followed it raised certain questions among society and political circles of Armenia regarding the policy conducted by Russia. It is important to understand how Russia

* **Zhak Manukyan** is a PhD in History, Associate Professor, Head of the Chair of International Relations and Diplomacy of the Faculty of International Relations at Yerevan State University. Email: zhak.manukyan@ysu.am. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0350-635X>.



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fulfilled its obligations as the main strategic ally of Armenia, combining this with its policy of a peacekeeper in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and its mediating mission in Armenia-Azerbaijan relations, as well as its role as a guarantor of the implementation of the agreements reached at the trilateral level with Armenia and Azerbaijan in this context (Ghazaryan 2023). Various authors have addressed the mentioned problems in the academic circles, who have presented the issues related to this topic from different viewpoints in their researches, analyzed them, and made conclusions, particularly Z. Makhmudova (2024), M. M. Aghazada (2023), R. R. Veliev and A. R. Veliev (2023), M. F. Oztarsu (2024), A. Ergun (2023).

Methodology

Two methods have been used during this research: the content analysis method and the comparative analysis method. The military-political developments in the South Caucasus are the result of certain processes, which at some stage of development were fixed in interstate documents, and thus express the end of certain developments or the beginning of a new phase. From this point of view, the trilateral statement of November 9, 2020, the subsequent statement of the President of Russia, as well as the texts of the trilateral statements of January 11 and November 26, 2021, and other official documents have been analyzed using the content analysis method. Meanwhile, in order to identify the possible changes in the policy conducted by Russia in the South Caucasus, as well as the factors influencing this policy, comparisons have been made with other processes running parallel in the region, in order to reveal how interconnected they are with each other, and what influence they leave on the policy conducted by Russia in the South Caucasus.

The policy of the Russian Federation in the South Caucasus during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh 44-Day War: The trilateral statement of November 9, 2020

On October 7, 2020, President of Russia Vladimir Putin spoke about Russia's position and policy regarding the ongoing military operations in Nagorno-Karabakh, which started on September 27, 2020, in an interview given to TV channel "Rossiya", stating that what is happening in and around Nagorno-Karabakh is a great tragedy and called on the conflicting parties to reach a ceasefire as soon as possible. At the same time, the Russian president emphasized: "As you know, Armenia is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and so we have certain obligations towards it under the treaty. It is deeply regrettable that the hostilities continue, but they are not taking place in the Armenian territory. As to meeting our obligations under this treaty, Russia has always honoured and will continue to honour its commitments¹." Thus, President Putin highlighted that Russia is Armenia's ally and has obligations in that regard, which he does not reject, but at the same time clarified in which case these obligations will be implemented.

¹ Kremlin. 2020. "Interview with Rossiya TV channel: Vladimir Putin answered questions from Pavel Zarubin, Rossiya 1 TV channel journalist, author and co-host of the Moscow, Kremlin. Putin programme". October 7, 2020. Accessed May 20, 2023. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64171>.

On October 8, 2020, the President of Russia made another statement in which he said that after a series of telephone conversations with the President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev and the Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan, he called on the parties to stop military operations for the exchange of bodies of the dead and prisoners of war for humanitarian reasons. He also invited the foreign ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia to hold consultations for this purpose on October 9 in Moscow². This was a definite and tangible mediating mission that was carried out. As a result of a trilateral meeting in Moscow at the level of the Foreign Ministers of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia, on October 10, the Foreign Ministers of Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan made a statement, according to which the conflicting parties stop military operations for humanitarian purposes in order to exchange the bodies of the dead and prisoners of war. It is also noteworthy that in the statement, the parties mentioned that, with the mediation of the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group, they are starting substantive negotiations to reach a peaceful settlement as soon as possible, and that the parties confirm that the negotiation format will not change³. However, the cease-fire reached with the mediation of Russia was violated by Azerbaijan on the same day⁴. In the following days, the military operations continued, as Türkiye supported Azerbaijan in an undisguised manner. Taking into consideration the military-political situation created in the region, as well as the unfavorable developments for Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, on October 31, 2020, the Prime Minister of Armenia sent a letter to the President of Russia presenting the situation created as a result of the aggression undertaken by Azerbaijan and Türkiye against Nagorno-Karabakh, including the transfer of foreign armed terrorists from the Middle East and the facts of their involvement in military operations against Nagorno-Karabakh. Taking into consideration the fact that the military operations had approached the border of Armenia and there had been encroachments on the sovereign territory of Armenia, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia addressed the President of the Russian Federation “to launch immediate consultations to define the type and the scale of assistance which the Russian Federation can provide to the Republic of Armenia for ensuring its security, based on the allied relations between Armenia and Russia and Article 2 of the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance of August 29, 1997.”⁵

On the same day, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, in response to the letter of the Prime Minister of Armenia, announced that, “In accordance with this treaty, Russia will provide the necessary assistance to Armenia if hostilities spread directly to

² Kremlin. 2020. “Statement by President of Russian Federation”. October 8, 2020. Accessed May 22, 2023. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64180>.

³ MFA of the RF. 2020. “Statement by the foreign ministers of the Russian Federation, the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia”. October 10, 2020. Accessed May 23, 2023. https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/1443876/.

⁴ MFA of the RA. 2023. “Military aggression of Azerbaijan. Chronicle of developments”. October 10, 2020. Accessed May 20, 2023. https://www.mfa.am/en/awaa_chr/2020/10/10/w_nk_2020/10563.

⁵ MFA of the RA. 2023. “Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan sent a letter to President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin”. October 31, 2020. Accessed May 20, 2023. <https://www.mfa.am/en/press-releases/2020/10/31/let/10617>.

the territory of Armenia.”⁶ At the same time, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia once again called on the conflicting parties to cease fire and resolve the issue through negotiations in accordance with the agreements reached between the Foreign Ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan on October 10, 2020⁷.

The military operations in Nagorno-Karabakh ended with the signing of the trilateral statement by the Prime Minister of Armenia, the President of Azerbaijan and the President of Russia on November 9, 2020. Russia acted as a mediator and guarantor for the implementation of the provisions of this statement. With this statement, the security zone formed around Nagorno-Karabakh in 1994 returned to Azerbaijan; besides, a number of regions of Nagorno-Karabakh, including Shushi and Hadrut, came under the control of Azerbaijan. With the signing of this document, new developments were initiated in the South Caucasus. The statement of November 9, 2020 reserved an exclusive role for Russia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. If previously Russia was a co-chair and intermediary country in the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group regarding the settlement of this conflict, now it also became the main guarantor of peace, as Russian peacekeepers were deployed in the conflict zone (Singh 2023; Ditel 2023; Morozov 2023). The next important circumstance was point 9 of this statement, which mentioned unblocking of communications. If we compare it with the 1994 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict cease-fire document, we will see it said nothing about the post-conflict situation, while the trilateral statement of November 9, 2020 clearly states further steps of the parties in the post-war period for the establishment of peace in the region⁸. After signing this document on November 9, in his statement, Russian President Putin also stressed the necessity for unblocking the economic and communication routes and emphasized that, “the blockade of the economic and transport communications in the region will be lifted. The oversight of transport communications will be ensured with the involvement of the agencies of the Border Guard Service of Russia.”⁹ In addition, the President of Russia once again highlighted the need to create favorable conditions for further establishment of peace: “We proceed from the assumption that the agreements reached will create the necessary conditions for a lasting and full-scale settlement of the crisis over Nagorno-Karabakh on a fair basis and in the interests of the peoples of Armenia and Azerbaijan”¹⁰. On November 10, President Putin also signed the Decree “On measures to maintain peace in Nagorno-Karabakh”, where in paragraph 2 it was noted about the deployment of a peacekeeping contingent in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone, along the line of contact in Nagorno-Karabakh and along the Lachin corridor.

⁶ MFA of the RF. 2020. “Foreign Ministry statement in connection with Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan’s address to President of Russia Vladimir Putin”. October 31, 2020. Accessed May 20, 2023. <https://www.mid.ru/en/maps/am/1445841/>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Kremlin. 2020. “Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation”. November 10, 2020. Accessed May 20, 2023. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64384>.

⁹ Kremlin. 2020. “Statement by the President of Russia”. November 10, 2020. Accessed May 20, 2023. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64381>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

And in the 3rd paragraph of the decree, the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation was tasked with monitoring the provision of the Republic of Armenia transport communication between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Autonomous Republic of Nakhichevan for the unimpeded movement of citizens, vehicles and cargo in both directions¹¹. On November 18, 2020, the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation adopted a resolution to give consent to the President of the Russian Federation to send the military formation of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation to Nagorno-Karabakh on November 10, 2020, in order to comply with the agreements on the cessation of fire and other hostile actions with Azerbaijan and the Armenian side, in order to avoid the mass death of the civilian population of Nagorno-Karabakh and causing significant damage to civilian objects¹².

Despite the efforts made by the USA and France on the one hand, and the open support of Türkiye to Azerbaijan in the war on the other hand, the conflicting parties agreed to stop military operations under a document signed with the mediation of Russia. This again demonstrated the primary role played by Russia in the ongoing developments in the South Caucasus. But the regional and extra-regional states did not drop out of the processes taking place in the South Caucasus, each of them activated their role based on the situational developments in the post-war period. The fact that the 5-kilometer-wide Lachin Corridor connecting Armenia with Nagorno-Karabakh also remained under the control of Russian peacekeepers contributed to the growth of Russia's military-political influence. Thus, Russia de jure becomes the guarantor of the security of Nagorno-Karabakh. However, although the trilateral statement of November 9, 2020 defines the steps of the post-war period, this document does not say anything about the status of Nagorno-Karabakh or the further format of the negotiation process.

The policy of the Russian Federation in the South Caucasus after the end of the 44-Day War in Nagorno-Karabakh

On November 11, 2020, Russia and Türkiye reached an agreement to establish a monitoring center to monitor the maintenance of the ceasefire regime in Nagorno-Karabakh. With this agreement, Türkiye got the opportunity to be legally involved in the post-war period processes of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan expressed hope that Ankara-Moscow cooperation will have a similar result in Syria as well¹³.

¹¹ Kremlin. 2020. "Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of 10.11.2020 No. 695 "On measures to maintain peace in Nagorno-Karabakh" ". Accessed May 20, 2023. <http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/46042>.

¹² Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the RF. 2020. "Resolution "On the use of military formations of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in Nagorno-Karabakh" ". November 18, 2020. Accessed May 20, 2023. <http://council.gov.ru/activity/documents/121580/>.

¹³ Hürriyet Daily News. 2020. "Turkey, Russia to set up joint center to watch Nagorno-Karabakh peace". November 11 2020. Accessed May 20, 2023. <https://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/turkey-russia-to-set-up-joint-center-to-watch-nagorno-karabakh-peace-159920>.

The Russian-Turkish monitoring center started its work on January 30, 2021, but not in Nagorno-Karabakh; it was located in the Aghdam region of Azerbaijan¹⁴. It meant that the Turkish military did not have any direct presence in Nagorno-Karabakh. On the other hand, Türkiye received limited military presence in the South Caucasus, which can be considered one of the consequences of the 44-Day War and a concession made by Russia, which has traditionally had military presence in the region (Poghosyan 2022; Manukyan 2023).

The organization of the return of refugees and the provision of humanitarian aid was of particular importance from the perspective of ensuring stability in Nagorno-Karabakh. In early February 2021, according to the information provided by the Ministry of Defense of Russia, more than 52000 refugees returned to Nagorno-Karabakh from Armenia¹⁵. At the same time, the implementation of the points of the statement of November 9, 2020, continued to be a priority for Russia. Based on that goal, on January 11, 2021, a trilateral statement was signed by the Prime Minister of Armenia, the President of Azerbaijan and the President of Russia in Moscow, which specifically emphasized the implementation of point 9 of the trilateral statement of November 9, 2020. Namely, for unblocking the economic and transport routes of the region, at the recommendation of the Russian President, a trilateral working group was formed co-chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister of Armenia, the Deputy Prime Minister of Azerbaijan, and the Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Government¹⁶. Thus, putting an emphasis on the economic component of cooperation, Russia attempted to create favorable conditions for the establishment of long-term peace. However, Azerbaijan's aggression against the sovereign territory of Armenia in May 2021¹⁷ created tension in the region, which was accompanied by the activation of Türkiye's policy in the South Caucasus. This was demonstrated on June 15, 2021, by the President of Turkey Erdogan's visit to Shushi where he and the President of Azerbaijan signed the Shushi Declaration¹⁸. On the same day the Foreign Affairs Ministry of Armenia issued a statement saying, "We strongly condemn the joint visit of the Presidents of Türkiye and Azerbaijan on June 15 to the Armenian historic and cultural center of Artsakh–Shushi, which is currently under the Azerbaijani occupation, as an outright provocation against regional peace and security."¹⁹

¹⁴ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. 2021. "Turkish-Russian Center Begins Monitoring Nagorno-Karabakh Truce". January 30, 2021. Accessed May 20, 2023. <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkey-russia-nagorno-karabakh-cease-fire-center-31077154.html>.

¹⁵ Sputnik. 2021. "More than 52 thousand refugees have returned to their homeland: the Russian Ministry of Defense presented data on Karabakh". February 6, 2021. Accessed May 20, 2023. <https://am.sputniknews.ru/20210206/Na-rodinu-vernulols-bolshe-52-tysyach-bezhentsev-MO-Rossii-predstavilo-dannye-po-Karabakhu-26363409.html>.

¹⁶ Kremlin. 2021. "Statement by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and the President of the Russian Federation". January 11, 2021. Accessed May 21, 2024. <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/5606>.

¹⁷ Ministry of Defence of the RA. 2021. "Announcement". May 13, 2021. Accessed May 22, 2024. <https://mil.am/en/news/9398>.

¹⁸ AzeMedia. 2021. "The full text of the Shusha Declaration". June 18, 2021. Accessed May 25, 2024. <https://aze.media/the-full-text-of-the-shusha-declaration/>.

¹⁹ MFA of the RA. 2021. "Statement of the Foreign Ministry of Armenia regarding the visit of the Presidents of Turkey and Azerbaijan to the occupied territories of Artsakh". 15 June, 2021. Accessed May 25, 2024. https://www.mfa.am/en/interviews-articles-and-comments/2021/06/15/Erdogan_visit_Shushi/10994.

With the Shushi Declaration, Türkiye and Azerbaijan plan to further deepen their alliance. It is noteworthy that in this declaration, the parties declare their allegiance to the Kars Treaty of October 13, 1921, which can also be considered a fact proving that the status quo established in the region by the 1921 Kars Treaty continues to be maintained. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan gave Türkiye a leading role in security matters. Parallel to such regional transformations, the tension between Armenia and Azerbaijan did not weaken, which was manifested by another act of aggression by Azerbaijan in November 2021²⁰. The reason for the tension was the absence of border delimitation and demarcation between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which became the subject of discussion at the trilateral meeting in Sochi on November 26, 2021, at the initiative of Russia and was also reflected in the joint statement. In the trilateral statement of Sochi, the parties first of all emphasized the important contribution of the Russian peacekeeping contingent in stabilizing the situation and ensuring security in the region. The next important point was about the mechanisms of starting the process of delimitation and demarcation of the state border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which would proceed with the consultation and support of Russia in case of request of Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Sochi statement also referred to the activities of the working group formed by the trilateral statement of January 11, 2021²¹.

Thus, Russia continued to keep its hand on the puls of military-political developments in the South Caucasus, and in some cases outlined the directions of their further development. The declaration on allied cooperation between the two states signed by the presidents of Azerbaijan and Russia in Moscow on February 22, 2022 was also aimed at strengthening Russia's positions in the South Caucasus²². By signing this document, Russia wants to raise military-political cooperation with Azerbaijan to a new level. However, the start of a special military operation by Russia on February 24, 2022, in Ukraine had an impact on the politics of the South Caucasus, particularly the serious developments in this region, which proved to be not very desirable for Russia. For example, the activation of Türkiye and Azerbaijan in the region became quite noticeable, which caused certain concern to Iran, because this activity was taking place near its northern borders. On July 19, 2022 Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei during a meeting with the President of Türkiye Erdogan in Tehran on the one hand he "expressed his satisfaction with Nagorno-Karabakh's return to Azerbaijan" as a result of the 2020 Armenian-Azerbaijani war. On the other hand he added, "if there is an effort to block the border between Iran and Armenia, the Islamic Republic will oppose it because this border has been a communication route for thousands of years."²³ Despite such warnings, on September 13, 2022, Azerbaijan

²⁰ Ministry of Defence of the RA. 2021. "Release". November 16, 2021. Accessed May 22, 2024. <https://mil.am/en/news/10111>.

²¹ Kremlin. 2021. "Statement by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and the President of the Russian Federation". November 26, 2021. Accessed May 22, 2024. <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/5741>.

²² Kremlin. 2022. "Declaration on Allied Cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Azerbaijan". February 22, 2022. Accessed May 22, 2024. <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/5777>.

²³ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. 2022. "Khamenei Warns Against Attempts To 'Block' Armenian-Iranian Border". July 19, 2022. Accessed June 7, 2023. <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/31950738.html>.

launched a large-scale military aggression against Armenia²⁴. Taking into consideration the current situation and the fact that Azerbaijan was carrying out direct aggression against Armenia by occupying a part of its territory, the authorities of Armenia turned to the CSTO with the expectation of support²⁵. Under the decision of the CSTO Collective Security Council, in order to carry out a monitoring mission the operational group of the CSTO Joint Staff headed by the Chief of the CSTO Joint Staff, Colonel-General Anatoly Sidorov arrived in Armenia on the evening of September 15, 2022²⁶. However, such a reaction by the CSTO objectively caused dissatisfaction among the political and public circles of Armenia, because the provisions laid down in the founding documents of the CSTO clearly provide for the kind of assistance that should be provided to the allied state in case of aggression against a CSTO member state, as it happened during the events unfolded in Kazakhstan in January 2022, when after the request of the President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, CSTO mechanisms were operationally activated, thanks to which the situation in Kazakhstan was stabilized (Manukyan 2023b). However, CSTO's policy towards Armenia was different during Azerbaijan's September 2022 aggression. Such a position of the CSTO forced Armenia to review its future policy towards the CSTO. In addition, the security mechanisms that exist between Armenia and Russia on a contractual-legal basis did not work either.

As a result of the large-scale aggression of Azerbaijan in September 2022, the EU, France and the USA showed activity in the context of the developments in the region. On October 6, 2022, a meeting between the Prime Minister of Armenia and the President of Azerbaijan was organized in Prague with the participation of French President Emmanuel Macron and President of the European Council Charles Michel within the framework of the first meeting of the "European Political Community." As a result of this quadrilateral meeting in Prague, a statement was adopted, which was somewhat different from the trilateral statements signed with the mediation and participation of Russia, firstly, this statement did not mention the statement of November 9, 2020, secondly, it did not directly mention the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, thirdly, it did not mention Russian peacekeepers, instead it mentioned "Armenia and Azerbaijan confirmed their commitment to the Charter of the United Nations and the Alma Ata 1991 Declaration through which both recognize each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty" that is, the legal basis for the regulation of Armenia-Azerbaijan relations was clearly stated. One of the important clauses of the Prague statement was the introduction of a new mechanism to ease tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which was formulated as follows: "There was an agreement by Armenia to facilitate a civilian EU mission alongside the border with Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan agreed to cooperate with this mission as far as it is concerned. The mission

²⁴ Ministry of Defence of the RA. 2022. "Statement of the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Armenia". September 13, 2022. Accessed May 25, 2024. <https://mil.am/en/news/11009>.

²⁵ CSTO. 2022 "Extraordinary session of the CSTO Collective Security Council has discussed the situation in connection with the sharp deterioration in certain areas on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan". September 14, 2022. Accessed June 7, 2023. <https://en.odkb-csto.org/session/2022/na-vneocherednoy-sessii-soveta-kollektivnoy-bezopasnosti-odkb-obsudili-situatsiyu-v-svyazi-s-rezkim-/#loaded>.

²⁶ Ministry of Defence of the RA. 2022. "The operative group of the CSTO Joint Staff has arrived in Armenia". September 15, 2022. Accessed June 8, 2023. <https://mil.am/en/news/11030>.

will start in October for a maximum of two months. The aim of this mission is to build confidence and, through its reports, to contribute to the border commissions.”²⁷ After the Prague meeting, the West began to publicly accuse Russia of hindering the establishment of peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In particular, French President E. Macron, on October 12, 2022, accused Russia of deliberately provoking clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan²⁸. On October 14, at the meeting of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Heads of State Council in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, the Russian President Putin countered the French President Macron by stating that, “Russia has always been sincerely striving to settle any conflicts, including those linked with Karabakh and around it”²⁹. The USA also assessed the Russian policy in the South Caucasus. Specifically, on October 14, the representative of the State Department announced that the USA did not see any efforts by Russia to support the resolution of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict³⁰. Such political statements and accusations already showed the kind of competition that has developed in the region. Iran, in its turn, opened a consulate general in Kapan, the regional center of Syunik Region of Armenia, on October 21, 2022, to emphasize the importance of the border with Armenia³¹. With this step, Iran has already shown in practice how much importance it attaches to the border with Armenia, because it is not only the border of two states, but also one of the roads connecting Iran with the outside world (AI-kuwari 2024).

The EU also resorted to practical steps, in particular, on October 20, 2022, an EU observation group was deployed in Armenia from among the observers of the EU observation mission operating in Georgia, which was monitoring the situation in the border regions with Azerbaijan³². The EU monitoring group completed its activities on December 19, 2022³³.

²⁷ Council of the EU. 2022. “Statement following quadrilateral meeting between President Aliyev, Prime Minister Pashinyan, President Macron and President Michel, 6 October 2022”. October 7, 2022. Accessed May 25, 2024. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/10/07/statement-following-quadrilateral-meeting-between-president-aliyev-prime-minister-pashinyan-president-macron-and-president-michel-6-october-2022/>.

²⁸ Reuters. 2023. France accuses Russia of stoking Armenia, Azerbaijan conflict. France accuses Russia of stoking Armenia, Azerbaijan conflict”. October 13, 2022. Accessed June 8, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/france-accuses-russia-stoking-armenia-azerbaijan-conflict-2022-10-12/>.

²⁹ Kremlin. 2022. “Meeting of the CIS Heads of State Council: Vladimir Putin took part in a meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the Commonwealth of Independent States”. October 14, 2022. Accessed June 8, 2023. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69595>.

³⁰ United States Government. 2022. “Department Press Briefing”. October 14, 2022. Accessed May 25, 2024. <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-october-14-2022/>.

³¹ MFA of the RA. 2022. “Opening ceremony of the Consulate General of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Kapan”. October 21, 2022. Accessed May 25, 2024. https://www.mfa.am/en/speeches/2022/10/21/consulate_iran/11696.

³² EU Neighbours East. 2022. “EU Monitoring Capacity in Armenia becomes operational”. October 21, 2022. Accessed May 25, 2024. <https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/latest-news/eu-monitoring-capacity-in-armenia-becomes-operational/>.

³³ Council of the EU. 2023. “Armenia: EU launches a civilian mission to contribute to stability in border areas”. February 20, 2023. Accessed May 25, 2024. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/02/20/armenia-eu-launches-a-civilian-mission-to-contribute-to-stability-in-border-areas/>.

Along with the activation of the West, Russia tried not to give up the initiative and to advance its agenda of establishing peace and security in the South Caucasus. This reality led to the tripartite meeting of the President of the Russian Federation, the Prime Minister of Armenia and the President of Azerbaijan in Sochi on October 31, 2022, during which, as stated in the official statement, they discussed the implementation process of the tripartite statement of 2020 November 9, January 11 and November 26, 2021. In this document the parties once again emphasized that they recognize territorial integrity in accordance with the UN Charter and the 1991 Alma Ata Declaration. In the tripartite statement of October 2022 Sochi, the parties also emphasized the importance of the role of Russian peacekeepers³⁴. It was clear from the meeting in Sochi that Russia, on its part, is trying to manage the development of events in the South Caucasus without the involvement of extra-regional forces. However, this meeting did not ease the tension between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Moreover, on December 12, 2022, Azerbaijan violated the tripartite statement of November 9, 2020 and blocked the Lachin Corridor connecting Armenia with Nagorno-Karabakh³⁵. Actually, in order to avoid a possible military conflict, on December 27, 2022, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia appealed to the High Representative of the EU to deploy an EU civilian mission in Armenia. On January 23, 2023, the EU Council decided to establish an EU civilian mission in Armenia³⁶.

On January 26, 2023, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia issued a statement criticizing the deployment of the EU civilian mission in Armenia, at the same time expressing its belief that the Russian peacekeeping force remains the main factor of stability and security in the region in the foreseeable future³⁷. However, contrary to this statement, on April 23, 2023, Azerbaijan, in violation of the November 9, 2020 statement, set up a checkpoint in the Lachin Corridor. On this occasion, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia issued a statement about the following: “We call on the Russian Federation to finally fulfil the obligation under provision 6 of the Trilateral statement by eliminating the illegal blockade of the Lachin corridor and ensuring the withdrawal of Azerbaijani forces from the entire security zone of the corridor, and we call on the member states of the UN, having a mandate for the preservation of international security, to clearly record Azerbaijan’s actions undermining the regional security and take effective steps towards the unconditional implementation of the

³⁴ Kremlin. 2022. “Statement by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and the President of the Russian Federation”. October 31, 2022. Accessed May 25, 2024. <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/5860>.

³⁵ MFA of the RA. 2022. “Statement of the Foreign Ministry of Armenia on the Azerbaijani provocation in the Lachin Corridor”. December 13, 2022. Accessed May 25, 2024. https://www.mfa.am/en/interviews-articles-and-comments/2022/12/13/mfa_statement_lachin/11783.

³⁶ Council of the EU. 2023. “Armenia: EU launches a civilian mission to contribute to stability in border areas”. February 20, 2023. Accessed May 25, 2024. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/02/20/armenia-eu-launches-a-civilian-mission-to-contribute-to-stability-in-border-areas/>.

³⁷ MFA of the RF. 2023. “On the establishment of a civil monitoring mission of the European Union in the border areas of Armenia”. January 26, 2023. Accessed May 25, 2024. https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1849816/.

decision of the ICJ, the highest international legal body.”³⁸ Before that, the armed forces of Azerbaijan had repeatedly violated the ceasefire regime in Nagorno-Karabakh. The Russian peacekeeping contingent in Nagorno-Karabakh never restored communication in the Lachin Corridor. In September 2023, Azerbaijan again violated the tripartite statement of November 9, 2020 and resorted to military operations in the presence of the Russian peacekeeping contingent, as a result of which Nagorno-Karabakh was completely forcibly depopulated. Although the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia issued a condemning statement³⁹, the situation did not change. Some time after this act of aggression from the Azerbaijani side, the Russian peacekeeping forces, which were viewed as the main factor ensuring safety and stability in both Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, were withdrawn from Nagorno-Karabakh⁴⁰.

The Armenian people living in Nagorno-Karabakh for centuries were not only completely displaced from their homeland, but also existing Armenian cultural and religious structures and monuments were threatened with destruction.

Conclusion and discussion

New geopolitical realities appeared in the South Caucasus after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh 44-Day War, and it became evident that the interests of Russia, the USA, France, the EU, Türkiye and Iran are essentially clashing in the region, as a result of which the possibilities of establishing peace in the South Caucasus are not so visible. It is a fact that after the 44-Day War Russia managed to strengthen its military presence in the current situation by deploying Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh. However, the Russian peacekeeping mission suffered a failure, as a result of which Azerbaijan first blocked the Lachin Corridor and then militarily depopulated Nagorno-Karabakh, which reduced the chances of establishing peace in the region.

The next important circumstance is Russia's efforts to unblock the economic and communication routes, which could be a way to establish peace in the region. It has been confirmed in the trilateral statements signed by the Prime Minister of Armenia, the President of Azerbaijan and the President of Russia that the unblocking of the economic and communication routes is an important step to establish mutual trust and peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan. All this was and now is also of great importance for Russia, as it creates a serious opportunity to deepen economic ties with the South Caucasus republics, and in case of success, to involve Azerbaijan in the Eurasian Economic Union in the future. The activation of Russian policy of unblocking economic and communication routes in the South Caucasus was to some extent conditioned by the developments around Ukraine. Before the start of the special

³⁸ MFA of the RA. 2023. “The Statement of MFA of Armenia regarding the installation of an illegal checkpoint by Azerbaijan in the Lachin corridor”. April 23, 2023. Accessed May 25, 2024. https://www.mfa.am/en/interviews-articles-and-comments/2023/04/23/statement_lachincorridor/11980.

³⁹ MFA of the RA. 2023. “MFA statement on Azerbaijan's aggression in Nagorno-Karabakh”. September 19, 2023. Accessed May 26, 2024. https://www.mfa.am/en/interviews-articles-and-comments/2023/09/19/MFA_Statement/12203.

⁴⁰ Armenpress. 2024. “Azerbaijan announces complete withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers from Nagorno-Karabakh”. June 12, 2024. Accessed June 28, 2024. <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1193455>.

military operation in Ukraine, the Russian authorities realized that after the start of military operations in Ukraine, both the USA and the EU would apply economic sanctions against Russia. So, in order to mitigate the negative consequences of these economic sanctions, Russia was in need of new routes and markets, and in the case of unblocking the economic and communication routes between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Russia could solve this problem to some extent. But, on the other hand, the USA and France counteracted Russia's policy in the South Caucasus, even putting under question its policy in establishing peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Naturally, such developments only increase the tension in the region. As a result, Russia failed to unblock the roads between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020-2023, although "logistics diplomacy" continues to play an important role in establishing peace in the region. At the same time, in terms of its policy in the South Caucasus, Russia was also concerned with the involvement of Türkiye and Iran in the affairs of this region. Both Türkiye and Iran, which also sought to increase their influence in the South Caucasus, were in opposition or competition with the Russian factor. On the other hand, the unabated tension between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the conditions of such competition and opposition has made it more difficult for Russia to advance its agenda of stability and peace in the region, although Russia's military, political and economic potential is quite sufficient, compared to other external actors in the South Caucasus, to influence the course of events and manage them.

The way to achieve peace or order in the South Caucasus could also be to establish the balance of power between Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, Russia, which was the main supplier of arms to Armenia, could not provide timely supplies in the conditions of special military operation in Ukraine, and that is why Armenia faced difficulties in this field, which were related to the issue of acquiring new suppliers as well as logistical problems. In this context, it is important to note that Russia's policy towards pre-war Armenia in the military sphere allowed for a unique format of bilateral relations, which provided the Armenia with the opportunity to turn to Russia's military potential to ensure its own security. The deployment of the 102nd Russian military base on the territory of Armenia strengthens Russia's position in the South Caucasus and is a deterrent to potential threats to regional security.

Post-war Armenia continues to pursue a multi-vector foreign policy. As a member of the CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union, the country is building relations with NATO and the EU and its Member States. The actions of Western countries demonstrate a desire to reduce Russian-Armenian cooperation in the political and economic spheres. The importance and necessity of using soft power in Armenia for Russia is increasing in the context of ever-increasing competition between regional (Russia, Türkiye, Iran) and extra-regional (the USA, the EU) players in the South Caucasus region.

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found at

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Conflict of interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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