

Opinion: The future of the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process hinges on the Agdam-Khankandi road

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The stalemate that surrounds the progress of various humanitarian convoys that seek to supply the Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh aptly symbolizes the situation at the moment in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process, writes Vasif Husseynov in this op-ed for commonspace.eu. "Azerbaijan relies on the international law and hopes that the principle of territorial integrity will eventually prevail over all other counterclaims. At the same time, Azerbaijan takes measures to ensure that the local Armenians will have alternative for humanitarian supplies if they indeed face the threat of starvation. The dispatch of humanitarian cargo and declaring Baku's readiness to provide more is the manifestation of this policy. For many observers in the region and as proposed by the Azerbaijani government, the only exit from the present deadlock in Karabakh looks like to be the opening of both Agdam and

Lachin roads at the same time. It might create necessary conditions for the supplies of humanitarian aid to the local population and help Baku and Yerevan to proceed with the peace treaty negotiations", he argues.

The Lachin road that connects Armenia with the Karabakh region will be opened 24 hours after the opening of the Agdam-Khankandi road, said Hikmet Hajiyev, foreign policy advisor of the Azerbaijani president on August 30. This statement was made a day after Azerbaijan sent 40 tons of humanitarian cargo to the Armenian population of the Karabakh region via the Agdam road that was stopped by the separatist regime. Another humanitarian cargo was dispatched to the region with the French support at the around same time was stopped at the Lachin checkpoint before entering the Azerbaijani territory. Yet another humanitarian convoy that was sent by Armenia got stuck at the border with Azerbaijan since July 26. The stalemate that the convoys find themselves in aptly symbolizes the situation at the moment in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process.

The situation has worsened since the Brussels summit on 14 May when the two countries recognized each other's territorial integrity

Although Baku and Yerevan made significant breakthroughs and tangible progress in the peace talks even after the installation of a checkpoint at the Lachin road on April 23, the situation has deteriorated since then. While Azerbaijan expects the Armenian side to fully respect the Azerbaijani regulations at the checkpoint and honor its commitment to recognize Azerbaijan territorial integrity, with Karabakh as part of it, Armenia insists on unchecked and unregulated passage to the Azerbaijani territory. The control over the Lachin road is seen in Baku as of extreme importance to ensure the security of the liberated territories as this passage has been always used by the Armenian side as a lifeline for the separatist movement.

Another issue of contention between the sides is related with the Azerbaijan's offer to use the Agdam-Khankandi road instead of the Lachin road for the humanitarian supplies. For example, Baku wants the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to use this road for humanitarian supplies to Karabakh and coordinate its work with the Baku office of the Committee not with the office based in Yerevan.

The Armenian side reads these demands of Baku as an effort to restore Azerbaijan's control over the Karabakh region – which is the rightful interpretation. The officials of Baku do not deny Azerbaijan's intention to re-establish sovereignty over the part of the Karabakh region that is under temporary control of Russia's peacekeeping mission. In Baku, this is seen to be in line with international law. Supporting Baku's assertions, the latest rulings of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) rejected Armenia's request to order measures "withdraw any and all personnel deployed on or along the Lachin Corridor since 23 April 2023". These rulings of the international courts indirectly confirmed the legality of the checkpoint.

The separatist regime counts on external support

The international calls for dialogue between Baku and the representatives of the Armenian community in Karabakh have not delivered any results, either. The separatist regime that currently rules over the local Armenians remains resolutely uncompromising. On the one hand, they count on the support of the international actors that are not interested in the full dissolution of the separatist entity and reintegration of the region into Azerbaijan.

Above all, it is the Russian side whose interests partially overlap with that of the local separatists. It was no surprise to see Alexander Bordov, the head of the local Russian community that was recently installed by Russian peacekeepers, has called upon Russian President Vladimir Putin to annex Karabakh. As demonstrated by many statements and actions of the Russian officials, Moscow, in a similar vein to the Karabakhi separatists, is not happy with the present pace of the peace talks and recognition of Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan by the Armenian government. For Moscow, this constitutes a direct threat to Russia's military presence in Karabakh and, in the long term, even in Armenia.

On the other hand, the separatist regime gets emboldened by the support of France and the political circles in some other Western countries. France's dispatch of humanitarian cargo to the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, despite being well aware that it will have similar fate to the one sent earlier by Armenia, was largely seen as a cheap show and a pressure tool against Azerbaijan. Instead of acting as a responsible international actor and seeking

to bring about a joint solution to this crisis, France acts like a divisive player with its own agenda. The separatist leaders seemingly hope that the fact that France and Russia share similar positions if not interests in this conflict will soon force Azerbaijan to backtrack.

Azerbaijan could not afford to compromise on its efforts for the restoration of its sovereignty over Karabakh

The resistance of the separatist leaders and external support to them have created a deadlock in the situation placing the sides at the extreme ends of the spectrum and increasing the stakes for both parties. Azerbaijan relies on the international law and hopes that the principle of territorial integrity will eventually prevail over all other counterclaims. At the same time, Azerbaijan takes measures to ensure that the local Armenians will have alternative for humanitarian supplies if they indeed face the threat of starvation. The dispatch of humanitarian cargo and declaring Baku's readiness to provide more is the manifestation of this policy. For many observers in the region and as proposed by the Azerbaijani government, the only exit from the present deadlock in Karabakh looks like to be the opening of both Agdam and Lachin roads at the same time. It might create necessary conditions for the supplies of humanitarian aid to the local population and help Baku and Yerevan to proceed with the peace treaty negotiations.

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photo: A road sign on the Agdam road to Nagorno-Karabakh

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