

## Nagorno-Karabakh - Road Map for the Occupied Territories of Georgia

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*December 3 2020*



*Photo: RIAN*

Recent developments in Nagorno-Karabakh have fundamentally changed the geopolitical architecture, shifting both the balance of power in the regional centers and a reducing the role of international actors in resolving the conflict. Armed conflict has also provided an opportunity to draw important conclusions from a military point of view. A political configuration has been created that poses a significant challenge for the de facto leaders of the occupied territories of

Georgia by presenting them with a new understanding of their strategic choice. Numerous analyses of the consequences of the Karabakh war have been made, with different interpretations made about the success and failure experienced by the parties involved. A key issue on which there is general consensus is the significant strengthening of the military and political influence of the Russian Federation in the south of the south Caucasus. It is even more interesting to assess Russia's actions based on an analysis of the dynamics of the war and its share of responsibility in the outcome.

Until recently, the idea of separatism and de facto independence of the so-called Artsakh Republic was supported in practice by the Russian Federation, which provided the Kremlin with an effective mechanism for influencing the policies of Armenia and Azerbaijan. The scope of influence has varied between the countries; Russia has had leverage against practically all fields of Armenian policy, in the case of Azerbaijan, influence has been mainly limited to strategic directions of foreign policy. The starting point for the Russian Federation to support separatist movements in the South Caucasus and Transdniestria is the establishment of geopolitical hegemony, explained by a desire to dominate the post-Soviet space. Ethnic conflicts proved to be most effective in hindering the independent play and rapid development of the former socialist countries. And if anyone still believes Russia's repeated rhetoric on supporting the self-determination of the peoples of the region, a reference to the Chechen Wars should dispel that notion. Understanding the roots of the neo-Bolshevik aspirations of the country today recalls the policies of the Soviet Union – the legal and ideological predecessor of the Russian Federation. The Hungarian Revolution and the Prague Spring, the Chechen Wars, as well as the 1978 protests in Georgia against attempts to impose Russian as the national language are sufficient grounds for concluding that the Soviet- and Russian-backed principle of self-determination is a political oxymoron.

It is not news that the separatist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia were activated with the Russian Federation's support. The the very idea of statehood, or independence, is fueled by the geopolitical interests of their northern neighbor and has not gained any legitimate international support. Thanks to Georgia's partners, its government, and those public servants responsible for foreign affairs, the policy of non-recognition is being upheld quite successfully. As a result, Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty have been strengthened by a number of international legal instruments while a small minority of states recognize the regions as independent. Given this, the occupied regions of Georgia are trying to get the most out of their relations with Russia – a guarantee of security and the prospect of economic development. The policy of international recognition initiated by the separatist regions, inspired by the example of Kosovo, has, without exaggeration, ended in failure. Consequently, by maintaining the status quo under Russian auspices and postponing the prospect of independence for the future in the hope that the international community will someday recognize their sovereignty, has become the only objective of their 'foreign policy.'

The recent war in Nagorno-Karabakh has significantly changed the political picture in the region. It made clear the Russian Federation's willingness to sacrifice breakaway territories it previously supported for the sake of expanding its regional interests and shifting the greater balance of power in its favor. In less than a month and a half, a sudden dramatic escalation of the conflict practically

shattered the Artsakh dream of independence. The core of the Artsakh Republic's sovereignty, the support of the Russian Federation, collapsed beneath them. Armenian military forces, which should have been the last line of defense, turned out to be no match for Azerbaijan, as the military dynamics of the armed conflict quickly revealed.

Perhaps it would be naive to say that Abkhazia and South Ossetia believe in a good and equal partnership with Russia. However, the Karabakh lesson has brought to the forefront evidence that a rapid change in their northern protector's priorities is more than a theoretical danger. Thus, there are three realistic scenarios for the future of the de facto regions 1) they fully assimilate into Russia, 2) Russia's political tactics change, or 3) Georgia's actions determine the status of both regions (as it happened in Karabakh's when Azerbaijan took action). To discuss these scenarios, it is necessary to consider both the demographic structure and domestic politics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Certainly, the two regions each have their different realities, however, this theorized development of events is equally relevant to both. Abkhazia's lack of desire to assimilate with Russia is clear, from citizenship-based restrictions on land ownership to an ethnocentric policy that has sacrificed a number of de facto governments willing to move too close to Russia. In South Ossetia, joining its counterpart in the north would have some opposition, but would still be supported by a large section of the public. Regardless of interest from the regions themselves, assimilation is less appealing to Russia, not because of any generosity in Moscow's politics, but because of the logical consequences that would follow such an action. After the annexation of Crimea, Russia needed serious reputational rehabilitation, and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict served as a life raft onto which the mantle of the defender of Azerbaijan's internationally recognized sovereignty and a role as the main guarantor of peace in the region could simultaneously cling. The annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia would come at a significant political price that is well understood among the Russian establishment. Unlike in Crimea, there is no historical link with these regions that could support an argument of national interest. With regard to economic pragmatism, the financial costs incurred from annexation would far outweigh the potential benefits – a move unpalatable to the Russian population who has little interest in or benefit from the small, economically weak regions on their country's rim. Georgia should not be misled by Russia's strategic agreements with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These documents are formally steps towards assimilation, which Georgia must oppose in an orderly policy, but the bigger picture reveals that the agreements are little more than tactical moves to gain a political and psychological advantage.

The second approach, at the expense of expanding Russia's influence in Georgia, entails the Georgian central government handing the Kremlin its key to the double political lock that seals the fate of the two regions. In this scenario, the interests of the de facto ruling circles of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are largely neglected and the consequences of the recent war in Karabakh are practically repeated. This direction's feasibility, in the case of intersecting Georgian and Russian interests, was proofed by the Karabakh example. However, Georgia would have two major hesitations in pursuing this scenario - the use of Georgian military force and an increase in Russia's military presence in the region. The concept that the country should only be unified through peaceful means is not simply Georgian rhetoric pandering to western partners, but is established in generally unified public opinion and state policy. This scenario would involve either the use of

armed forces to restore territorial integrity or the threat of the use of such force. Such an approach is unacceptable in principle, because Georgia does not see the future of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as depopulated regions. This is evidenced by the numerous humanitarian programs and the cooperation in the energy sector that have active participation from the populations of both occupied territories. As for the second aspect, the increase of Russia's military presence, it poses a great threat to Georgia's sovereignty in the long run as it would leave Russia in an even more direct position to provoke new ethnic conflicts and resume armed conflict within Georgia, or use the threat of such action as political leverage.

The third scenario involves agreeing on a common future through mutual respect and identifying intersections of interests. This can only mean the creation of a socio-legal structure within Georgian statehood in which the principles related to self-determination are fully respected. Russia's participation in this scenario comes with the reservation that they will not be permitted to open a military base on Georgian territory. Russia's interests will instead be represented in other formats. The third scenario mutually beneficial, yet it is the most difficult to implement. It will be challenging to find a political middle ground between Georgia and Russia, and there are many obstacles in the process of reconciliation of post-war societies. The main hope in modern international relations is the occasional exercise of pragmatism. The current situation is a dead end, and for the parties to extricate themselves from it, it is necessary to rearrange the traffic in a way that results in peace for all sides. A rational understanding of the situation shows that changing the existing status quo, according to the proposed scenario, would be far more beneficial than detrimental. There will be no losing side.

Is there a reason to be optimistic? If the Nagorno-Karabakh agreement holds as is, we have entered a new reality which in the Caucasus which, quite unexpectedly, may contribute to a foundation for regional peace.

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