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The Russian Bloodletting Strategy in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War From Success to Hubris

Spyridon N. Litsas, PhD

Abstract: The article focuses on the role of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in shaping the balance of power in the Lesser Caucasus as a prelude to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It argues that Russia implemented a “bait and bleed” strategy to discipline Armenia for its pro-Western agenda. In addition, it focuses on Turkey’s role as a supportive apparatus for Azerbaijan’s military efforts against Armenia, evaluating the connection established between Moscow and Ankara. The Nagorno-Karabakh case marked a new manipulative Russian strategy to influence the balance of power in regions with geostrategic significance for the Kremlin.

Keywords: bait and bleed, Caucasus, Russia, Armenia, Turkey, war, Azerbaijan

Introduction

War does not constitute a single-dimensional event in international politics. It produces destruction and grief to humans, yet it endorses collective pride and confidence in the winning side. It leads to the violent end of lives and generates sociopolitical movements and ideologies. It is a multidimensional proceeding, purely political to every extent, associated with the organized use of violence and with different results of any kind, shape, and intensity for those with the ill fate of direct interaction. War is the continuation of politics by other means, as Carl von Clausewitz described it; therefore, its contextual depth is also directly linked to the grand strategy of the states since it

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closely relates to securing survival in the antagonistic and anarchic international domain. Heraclitus from Ephesus, the famous Greek pre-Socratic philosopher, thoroughly described the above equation by attributing the phenomenon an almost metaphysical, grandiose state in his well-known quote: “War is a father of all and king of all. He renders some gods, others men; he makes some slaves, others free.”¹ Therefore, war is usually seen as an active political tool that allows its handler to achieve goals, have the bitter taste of failure, or as a tool that aims to harm the opponent indirectly.

This article will focus on the 2020 Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, the clash between Armenia and Azerbaijan, using John J. Mearsheimer’s approach, known as the “bloodletting strategy” to comprehend its origins and the strategies that were implemented by all the involved parties.² It will be argued that the Russian side had used the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War as punishment toward Armenia for the latter’s efforts to come closer to the West. Second, Russia used it as a method to reinforce its presence in the South Caucasus. Through the implementation of the bloodletting strategy, as it will be shown, Russia succeeded in maintaining its control over Armenia and drastically reduced the Western influence inside the country, especially among the Armenian political elite. It will also be argued that Moscow had used the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War as a diplomatic procedure to further strengthen ties between itself and Ankara. Overall, the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War can be seen as the last act of the Russian regime before the attack on Ukraine. It was a process that underlined Russian narcissism and eliminated any doubts that the Kremlin might have regarding the unlimited course of action that it supposedly had to operate to shape the fate of the regions around itself. Thus, for the analyst to fully comprehend the origins behind the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, it is essential to study the methods that Moscow operated in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War too.

As will be discussed, through the bloodletting strategy in Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia revealed once again its manipulative diplomatic skills that have no moral, military, or political limits to satisfy its national goals. Under Vladimir Putin and with the direct involvement of Sergey Lavrov, Russia tried many times to project a different international image, more sophisticated and open to international cooperation.³ Nevertheless, all these were just Potemkin villages to conceal the true intentions of the Kremlin. As its involvement in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War showed, and later in Ukraine, Russia continues to be an enthusiastic follower of the Hobbesian etiquette, operating as a predator and using other aggressive states, such as Turkey, to enhance its revisionist agenda. The striking aspect is that the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War occurred some months before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Back then, the Western powers seemed either unaware of the Russian methods in the Caucasus region or excessively tolerant toward Moscow’s manipulative practices, including a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member (i.e., Turkey). This kind of behavior by the West toward the developments in the South Caucasus, analo-

gous to the Western naivete fully revealed in Munich in 1938, was an additional factor that encouraged Moscow to exhibit its aggression toward Ukraine.

The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Origins and Rationale

In the early morning of 27 September 2020, Armenian and Azerbaijani forces clashed on the line of contact in Nagorno-Karabakh, the de facto boundary that separated the two sides since the cease-fire of the First Nagorno-Karabakh War in May 1994. No one, especially not Moscow, was truly surprised by the deterioration of events because the diplomatic ties between Yerevan and Baku had been problematic since the outbreak of the first phase of the war and were never regularized. Between 1994 and 2016, dozens of troops and civilians on both sides were killed along the dividing line of contact. The control of the region was crucial for both sides, from a geopolitical point of view, and for the notional strengthening of the post-Soviet national identity. As Taline Papazian argued about the importance of the struggle for the Nagorno-Karabakh for the Armenians, “the Karabakh conflict in Armenia was the ‘new political thinking’ of the Armenian National Movement.”⁴ During the late Mikhail Gorbachev era, the Armenians demanded the unification of Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia systematically, a process that soon led to the violent clashes between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in the small industrial Azerbaijani city of Sumgait that led to the death of 32 Armenians and 26 Azerbaijanis.⁵ At the same time, the first national Azerbaijani organization inside the Soviet framework, the Azerbaijan Popular Front, placed Nagorno-Karabakh at the center of its agenda. This was expressed through the systematic demands toward Moscow for the end of the autonomous status of Nagorno-Karabakh and the passing of the region under Azerbaijani sovereign control.⁶ From an opposing viewpoint, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict can also be seen as a typical manifestation of Moscow’s weakness, together with unwillingness, to control the domestic agenda of its periphery during the last days of the Soviet Union.

The First Nagorno-Karabakh War, from 1988 to 1994, over the control of the homonymous region in South Caucasus, ended with a cease-fire that did not resolve the dispute over the fate of the territory between Armenia, which claimed the region due to the large Armenian populations there, and Azerbaijan, who had administrative control of the province since the Soviet era.⁷ The main reason that led the Soviet regime to place the region under the administrative control of Azerbaijan, even though the majority of the Karabakhis considered themselves Armenians, was because the Bolsheviks wanted to dissolve any form of nationalism within the state. Thus, by offering Nagorno-Karabakh to the Azerbaijani administration, Moscow aimed to eradicate the solid psychological connection between the local population and the Armenian identity. Therefore, it can be safely argued that the animosity between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh indirectly resulted from the Soviet methods to establish Marxism-Leninism postmodernism within its vast territory. Nevertheless, as in other cases within the USSR or the Warsaw Pact states, Marxism-

Leninism proved insufficient to effectively meet the challenges posed by the re-appearance of nationalism during the 1980s. Consequently, in 1988, war broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the fate of the Nagorno-Karabakh region that lasted until 1994 when a cease-fire was reached between the two sides under Moscow's diplomatic umbrella; however, this did not persuade the two sides to end hostilities. At the end of the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, Armenia controlled the area. At the same time, populations from the two sides were forced to move away from their ancestral lands, and the war modified their national status. Therefore, it was no surprise that violent challenges between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh continued even during the cease-fire period.⁸

It is far from hyperbole to claim that since 1994 the Nagorno-Karabakh question has been one of the contemporary Gordian knots of modern diplomacy, together with the Turkish occupation of northern Cyprus and the Kashmir question. The conundrum becomes even more significant if one considers that Nagorno-Karabakh is not just an issue of national sentimentalism from the sides involved. On the contrary, its geostrategic importance is central since it offers the geostrategic advantages to whomever controls the region over the South Caucasus. At the same time, it also provides an excellent base for monitoring the area around the Caspian Sea.

Therefore, the outbreak of violence in late September 2020 between the Armenian and the Azerbaijani forces over Nagorno-Karabakh came as no surprise, not just to the two states but also to the rest of the international system since violent clashes between Azerbaijani and Armenian forces never ceased to torment the fragile status of Nagorno-Karabakh. This time, though, things were to be considerably different from the past regarding the role of external factors. The second phase of the war lasted less than two months; however, the collapse of the Armenian Army was so emphatic that the outcome of the clash influenced not just the status of Nagorno-Karabakh but also the balance of power in the South Caucasus. The intensity of the clashes throughout the conflict and the sophisticated technological means utilized by the Azerbaijani side led to the conclusion that outside powers were involved in Nagorno-Karabakh. After all, Azerbaijan needed the hard power capacity and the technological infrastructure to conduct such technologically advanced warfare. Some may note that the participation of Turkey by the Azerbaijani side is something that Ankara never hid. The Turkish involvement in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War was repeatedly advertised by various high-ranking Turkish officials and experienced analysts. Characteristically, the very next day from the beginning of the war, İlhan Uzgel from Ankara University stated that "Turkey is already supporting Azerbaijan militarily through technical assistance, through arms sales, providing critical military support, especially in terms of armed drones and technical expertise."⁹ Moreover, Mevlut Cavusoglu, the Turkish foreign minister, stated on the first days of the war, "The world must side with the right one in the Nagorno Karabakh tensions, and that right one is Azerbaijan."¹⁰

Nevertheless, a question arises from all these events and concerns Moscow's stance toward escalating the crisis in the South Caucasus region. Since the region is one of Russia's primary zones of geostrategic interest, under which terms did Russia allow Turkey to openly support Azerbaijan with its drones to expose the Armenian artillery above? These questions become even more compelling if one considers the close connection that Ankara has established with Moscow during the last few years, especially since the failed coup d'état against Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2016. Like the rest of the globe, Ankara was fully aware of Russia's sensitivities to any development in the wider Caucasus region. After all, Moscow never ceased to regard, even during the early post-Soviet days when its profound fragility negatively affected its international status, the Caucasus as closely connected with Russian security.¹¹

The central thesis of this article is that Russia never turned away from the developments in Nagorno-Karabakh and manipulated the tense condition between Armenia and Azerbaijan to promote its objectives in the region further. Moscow used Turkey as the key instrument to operate its bloodletting strategy over Nagorno-Karabakh and achieve its political goals for Armenia and Azerbaijan. As it will be argued in the following paragraphs, Armenia was the victim, Azerbaijan was Turkey's pawn, Ankara the Russian puppet, and Russia the master of puppets in this geostrategic gambit. So, what is the bloodletting strategy, and how was this implemented in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War?

Bloodletting

To analyze the bloodletting strategy, it is vital to define the type of polarity that classifies today's international system. Various analysts claim that a new Cold War is bound to occur between the United States and Russia or between the United States and China.¹² This article argues against these views for the following reasons. First, the original Cold War was drastically influenced by the mutually assured destruction doctrine that transformed the antagonism between the two superpowers into a soft-power competition. The global ideological magnitude of liberal democracy, on the one hand, and Marxism Leninism, on the other, was so predominant that it influenced every major military or political event between 1945 and 1991. These include the Greek Civil War, the establishment of the European Economic Community, and the collapse of Salvador Allende's government in Chile. All these and many more events that deeply affected the direction of the twentieth century, had an exegesis on the soft-power antagonism between the two superpowers and the friction that was produced at an international level. Today, neither China, despite having considerable soft power leverage that mainly refers to the country's imperial past and not to the Communist present, or Russia, can reach large audiences outside their regions. This deficit of both states can be mainly attributed to the fact that they are justifiably considered by a large part of the global public opinion as the two main parts of the international axis of autocracy. While the rest of the Western world still regards the United States as the champion of the democratic world,

it is very difficult for both China and Russia to develop their soft-power stance other than just a raw anti-Americanism that is not as convincing as it used to be during the 1960s or the 1970s due to the Vietnam War and other events that affected the United States' international position. Additionally, twenty-first century China and the United States are not revisionist powers, while Russia lacks the military, political, ideological, or economic capacity to reclaim the role of the Soviet Union as its poor performance in the war in Ukraine exhibits.¹³

Nevertheless, the inability of Russia and China to produce a high level of antagonism toward the United States does not mean that they are incapable of operating cunning strategies, as the case of the Russian bloodletting in Nagorno-Karabakh reveals. As John Mearsheimer argues, great powers frequently implement buck-passing strategies to avoid being directly involved in a military conundrum in multipolar systems. This means they are allying with other state actors willing to accept the military burden to come forward and take the pressure on behalf of the buck-passer.¹⁴ By minimizing the friction through such kinds of strategies as buck-passing, a state maintains a relatively active presence in international politics without the disadvantages that the activity may cause to its own security. The same indirect way may be followed by a great power in case it has decided to punish another state without wanting to be conclusively connected with the whole process, as happened in the Armenian case by Russia.

In international politics, there are various direct or indirect punishment methods for other states. For example, coercion, economic sanctions, or bait-and-bleed strategies are straightforward ways of applying pressure on a country for its behavior.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the bloodletting strategy is an indirect way of punishment in the international arena. The aim of bloodletting is an ongoing warfare to turn into a lengthy and costly clash while the instigator remains out of the actual conflict. Mearsheimer describes the bloodletting strategy: "Here, the aim is to make sure that any war between one's rivals turns into a long and costly conflict that saps their strength . . . the bloodletter is mainly concerned with causing its rivals to bleed each other white, while it stays out of the conflict."¹⁶ An excellent example of this can be found in the U.S. stance during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, with Washington being the pivotal source of support for the mujahideen side fighting against the Red Army. The American side supported the mujahideens with money, weapons, and ammunition under the code Operation Cyclone to lead the Soviets toward intense friction that would have resulted in the loss of considerable power of the Soviets in the Afghan mountains. The Soviets eventually had to withdraw from Afghanistan in 1989, and this lengthy and costly involvement was one of the main reasons for the already obsolete economy to collapse. A few decades after the collapse of the Red Army in Afghanistan, it was time for the newborn Russian state to implement its bloodletting strategy in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.¹⁷

Bloodletting in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War

Russia did not start the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War because the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan for this landlocked region in the Lesser Caucasus mountains had never really ended. As discussed above, the clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh since 1994 were on and off, with victims from both sides, just enough to preserve the animosity between the two sides. Therefore, Russia found a fertile ground to implement its bloodletting strategy and an eager agent to intensify it—Turkey.

From the early days since the establishment of the Turkish state in 1923, Ankara established a close affiliation with the South Caucasus since the region was considered a stronghold for Turkic entities, including Azerbaijan. Even during the Cold War era, the cultural links between the two states were strong since Ankara wanted to take advantage of the cultural connection and enhance its political role as the leader of the Turkic world.¹⁸ Thus, immediately after the demise of the Soviet Union, Ankara started a colossal soft power campaign in the region, financing the opening of Turkish schools and private academic institutions or setting the political and legal framework for the establishment of various Turkish cultural societies that were promoting the Turkish soft power agenda.¹⁹ Characteristically, since 1991 and the emergence of Azerbaijan as an independent state, the motto that the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs had used to delineate Turkish-Azerbaijani relations was “one nation, two states.”²⁰ Therefore, no one was surprised when Ankara openly supported Azerbaijan during the First Nagorno-Karabakh War and repeated more systematically during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. Turkey provided a large number of unmanned combat aerial vehicles to the Azerbaijani forces, in particular the Baykar Bayraktar TB2, allowing the Azerbaijani side to spot from above and neutralize the Armenian units that were stationed in the mountainous terrain of Nagorno-Karabakh. Turkey also provided TRG-300 Tiger multiple launch rocket systems and a large number of military advisors with experience in mountainous warfare. At the same time, many Azerbaijani officers are graduates of Turkish military academies.²¹ Would it be possible for the Azerbaijani Army to win the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War without Turkish support? The question is purely rhetorical due to the chameleonic nature of warfare in general. It is much safer to suggest that without Turkey’s direct and open involvement, the Azerbaijani victory would not have been as extended as it was. After six weeks of fighting, Armenia did not only accept that the war was not a victory as the Armenian prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan, openly admitted, but also it lost almost all the territories it had won during the First Nagorno-Karabakh War.²² In addition, the war fully exposed the weaknesses of the Armenian armed forces at every related level, from logistics to the lack of technologically advanced weapons, as well as the low morale and training.²³

Someone with relatively little knowledge of the region and Russian foreign policy in the twenty-first century would have assumed that South Caucasus is

transformed into the venue of direct antagonism between Moscow and Ankara. Especially since the end of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, many analysts consider Turkey one of the major powers in the South Caucasus.²⁴ Views like these need to be more aware of the strong connection between Turkey and Russia. A cardinal transition in the Turkish grand strategy occurred in July 2016 and was mainly generated by the failed coup d'état against Erdoğan and his government. For reasons that mainly concern Erdoğan's unsavory personality, he blamed Washington for the failed attempt of a group of army officers to overthrow his government. Since the first moments of the coup, Moscow offered Erdoğan its full support.²⁵ From this point onward, a close connection had been established between Russia and Turkey, leading Turkey to abandon its traditional approach toward the United States since the end of the Second World War.²⁶

This novel connection started to bear fruit within a short period. For example, Turkey's role during the Syrian Civil War favored the Russian strategic objectives in the region since it targeted the pro-American Kurdish forces with an anti-Bashar al-Assad agenda, the Russian protégé.²⁷ At the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, President Bashar al-Assad turned to Iran for military support in an apparent attempt to activate the Shia connection between the two regimes. However, when Turkey entered the Syrian Civil War, allegedly to promote the Western anti-Assad policies, Damascus was convinced that the situation was overall transcending Tehran's true capabilities; thus, it turned toward Russia. Within a short period since 2015, Syria became a Russian bastion in the Eastern Mediterranean, with the naval base in Tartus and the military base in Latakia to offer Moscow the opportunity to reenter the Middle East's geostrategic plateau with a clear advantage.²⁸ However, the Syrian Civil War was not beneficial only for Moscow. Turkey secured the backing of various Sunni Islamist Syrian groups fighting against Assad (e.g., Jabhat al-Nusra or Ahrar al-Sham), enhancing Ankara's objective to undermine Saudi Arabia's influence over Sunni Islam in the Middle East, a critical development in the broader competition between Ankara and Riyadh over the hearts and minds of the Sunni world globally.²⁹ In 2016, during the Astana meetings between Putin and Erdoğan, it was decided that the latter would allow the al-Assad forces to take control of Aleppo, the most prominent Sunni urban installment in Syria and the main center of the anti-Assad opposition during the first half of the Syrian Civil War, while Russia gave the green light to Ankara to unleash Operation Euphrates Shield in northern Syria that targeted the Kurdish forces there.³⁰ In other words, while Turkey offered Aleppo to the al-Assad forces, allowing a critical blow to the Syrian Sunnis, Russia allowed the former to implement its preventative anti-Kurdish agenda in areas outside the Turkish frontier. As Guney Yildiz explains,

In December 2016, Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan envisaged Astana, Kazakhstan's capital, as a new venue for carrying on the Syria peace talks. In doing so, they also set in motion a game plan through which Moscow and Ankara controlled the warring parties in Syria and took control of the conflict. The Astana Process removed in-

ternational mediation mechanisms set up in Vienna and Geneva from the centre of attention. The Turkish-Russian cooperation also further curbed Iran's influence, since tensions between the Turkey-backed rebels and proxies and the Assad regime had been resolved through bilateral Ankara-Moscow talks rather than in Astana.³¹

Besides supporting Assad in Syria, a pivotal move for the return of Russia to the Eastern Mediterranean, Moscow aimed at other strategic objectives too.³² One of the weightiest was the punishment of the Kurds in Syria, the People's Defense Units (YPG), which had developed close relations with Washington to face Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the al-Assad forces. Moscow's punishment toward the Kurds was implemented by proxy through the Turkish Army. Russia remained silent while Turkey was hammering the Kurds in northern Syria with the unfolding of Operation Euphrates Shield. At the same time, the United States did not take any military or diplomatic actions against Ankara because it did not want to jeopardize the unity of NATO. A pattern was created in 2016 when Operation Euphrates Shield began, with Russia planning and Turkey implementing the plan. This role will be identified again in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War.³³

Turkey by the Side of Russia

Is Turkey standing by the side of Russia? First, Turkey's energy structure is heavily influenced by Russia. The TurkStream, a natural gas pipeline running from Russia to Turkey, allows Russia to penetrate the European continent using Turkey instead of Ukraine to stretch a 930 kilometer pipeline network across the Black Sea toward the Balkans with a total throughput capacity of 31.5 billion cubic meters annually.³⁴ Official research analysis by the U.S. Congress mentions the significance of the TurkStream for Russia and the spread of Russian influence over Turkey through this specific project: "[The] TurkStream project may strengthen Russia's foothold in European energy markets, especially in southeastern Europe. It also could cement Turkey's longtime status as a lead recipient of Russian gas."³⁵ Moscow holds the keys to TurkStream and the Turkish gas supply. In addition, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, with the Turkish economy finding it hard to meet the rising demands of the public health cost, Russia provided the country with 16.3 billion cubic meters of gas while the U.S. contribution was 3 billion cubic meters.³⁶ If Russia had decided to decrease the gas flow to Turkey, then the Turkish people would have frozen during the winter, with unprecedented sociopolitical consequences in the volatile political scene of the state. In addition, Russia controls the Turkish nuclear energy plans since ROSATOM, the Russian state atomic energy corporation, builds, owns, and will operate the first country's nuclear plant at Akkuyu in the Mersin Province in southern Turkey. This development means that Russia will have a large share of control over the energy proportion of Turkey since the Akkuyu nuclear plant will have a total capacity of 4,800 mega-

watts, able to produce 37 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity annually.³⁷ In addition, while claiming that Russia exclusively controls the Turkish hard power structure would be an exaggeration, Ankara's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system in 2017 offers a high-tech alternative to the Turkish air defense apparatus. It also exposes the American hesitancy to fully apply the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act to Turkey.³⁸ Lastly, an archetypal asymmetric interdependence is formed in the economic sector at the Turkish expense. Russia is among Turkey's top three trading partners. It is one of the primary sources of Turkish imports, while Russian touristic income is one of the chief financial sources for the Turkish summer locations in the Mediterranean Sea.³⁹ This asymmetric interdependence is vital for the fragile Turkish economy, allowing Russia to extend its control over Turkey. Characteristically, as one of the top Turkish tourist sales managers stated in an interview with Reuters on May 2021, "if Russian tourists do not come, there will be serious bankruptcies and potential layoffs."⁴⁰

In international relations theory, it is not unusual for the weaker side in an interdependent asymmetrical connection to either embrace initiatives or comply with the will of the more decisive element to obtain its survival. Today, Turkey is one of Russia's closest aides, which was fully revealed in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. During this conflict, Russia allowed Turkey to help Azerbaijan openly. At the same time, it did nothing to support the Armenian Army, which was rapidly deteriorating under the systematic military pressure of the Azerbaijani armed forces. However, what were the main motives that led Russia to implement such a harsh punishment to Armenia?

"Crime" and Punishment a' la Russe

The connection between Russia and Armenia is long and mainly concerns the two enduring tools of Russian diplomacy: religion and land. Both Russia and Armenia are Christian Orthodox entities. Their churches are both autocephalous, meaning that they maintain absolute independence from the high control of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, the religious and administrative core of Orthodox Christianity worldwide since the Byzantine era and the Great Schism of 1054 between the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox Churches. In addition, for the Armenian Church, the close connection with Moscow meant it had the luxury of a formidable ally against the Persian and Ottoman challenges. Moreover, the lands inhabited by Armenian majorities within the Russian imperial framework, and later the Soviet one, held a high strategic value for Moscow since they were functioning as natural blockades of the eastern access to the Russian mainland for every potential invader. It is helpful to underline here the long-established Russian phobia, something that surprisingly can still be traced in today's national geostrategic way of thinking, that had to do with the unobstructed access to Russia that the steppes were offering to potential invaders. Controlling the pathways toward the Russian mainland was and still is a permanent strategic priority for Moscow. As Jeffrey

Czerewko says regarding this deep sense of insecurity of the Russian side, “Russia exhibits a deep-seated sense of geopolitical insecurity which motivates it to pursue strategic objectives that establish an uncontested sphere of influence in the post-Soviet region.”⁴¹

This tight connection between Russia and Armenia became even firmer in 1922 when the latter became a member of the Soviet structure, and even after the Soviet demise in 1991, Armenia continued to be under Moscow’s influence. For example, in 1992, Armenia became a full member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a Russian-led military alliance consisting of ex-Soviet states, while in 2013, it entered the Eurasian Customs Union, another Russian initiative to compete with the West.⁴² Armenia decided to preserve its close connection with Moscow during the first post–Cold War era, yet it began to act more independently after 2018. There were various reasons for that turn. Armenian society had enough of the corrupted political elites, inefficient governance, and Moscow’s close control regarding every aspect of the nation’s ontology. The resentment of a large social majority against Russia and the Russian political guard inside Armenia was so strong that a grassroots, peaceful uprising began in April 2018 in the Armenian capital and lasted 11 days.⁴³ The revolt was named the Velvet Revolution due to its nonviolent character. It was led by Nikol Pashinyan, a charismatic yet populist politician who aspired to regulate Russian control over Armenia by bringing the state closer to the West. The Velvet Revolution began as a collective resentment toward the appointment of Serzh Sargsyan as the country’s prime minister by the Armenian National Assembly after serving two terms as president of the state. Sargsyan represented all the things that the Velvet Revolution was protesting against. He was a vital figure of the establishment, involved in many corruption cases controlled by Moscow. Thus, every anti-Sargsyan protest adopted an open anti-Russian stance, too, with thousands of Armenians signing pro-Western slogans and carrying the flags of the European Union and the U.S. flag. The revolt was a genuine collective uprising of the majority of Armenians, who were demanding the signing of a new social contract and the redirection of the nation’s direction in the international order, away from the Russian shadow.⁴⁴ As was widely expected, this was a development that Moscow did not appreciate and never forgot, especially since Serzh Sargsyan was forced to step down and Nikol Pashinyan was appointed the new prime minister. Armenians and many Western analysts thought a new era was beginning for the country; alas, they did not correctly calculate the Russian reaction.

Three events intensified Armenia’s punishment by Russia, as expressed in the Second War of Nagorno-Karabakh. The first came with the two congressional resolutions that passed by both houses of the U.S. Congress, on October 2019 by the House of Representatives and December 2019 by the Senate, recognizing the Armenian Genocide by the Ottoman Empire, a process that was fully concluded in April 2021 when the Armenian Genocide was recognized by the White House, too.⁴⁵ The vindication of millions of murdered Arme-

nians during the last phase of the Ottoman Empire by the American political system was not welcomed by Moscow. The Kremlin feared this was giving the green light to the pro-Western political forces in Armenia to intensify their anti-Russian campaign and bring Armenia under complete Western influence. If such a development had occurred, Russia would be in front of a significant geostrategic gap in the South Caucasus, with a pro-Western element controlling areas highly esteemed by Moscow, such as Nagorno-Karabakh. The outbreak of the second war in Nagorno-Karabakh occurred only a short period after the U.S. Congress recognized the Armenian Genocide, revealing the Russian disturbance. According to Article 4 of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, Russia had to move against Azerbaijan as soon as the war began, standing by the side of its ally. However, Russia chose to adopt the role of Pontius Pilate, simply watching in total apathy as the Armenian forces were crushed by the Azerbaijani Army with Turkish logistics support.⁴⁶

The second event was the deadlock inside the Minsk Group during the summer of 2020 when it became clear that Armenia and Azerbaijan had no desire to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Established in 1992, the Minsk Group was a French-Russian-American initiative within the OSCE to find a peaceful settlement over Nagorno-Karabakh.⁴⁷ In July 2020, severe clashes between the Armenian and the Azerbaijani forces began in Nagorno-Karabakh. Various analysts began to bombard the Western public opinion that the Minsk Group could not resolve the dispute in the Caucasus and that a new diplomatic initiative, institutionally and politically more potent than the outworn Minsk Group, was needed.⁴⁸ The Kremlin began to get suspicious of a Western plot against the existing diplomatic status quo regarding Nagorno-Karabakh. According to Moscow's way of thinking, a possible collapse of the Minsk Group was opening the door for the arrival of United Nations Peacekeeping in the region, allowing the United States to gain indirect access to the South Caucasus. Moscow did not have any problem burying the Minsk Group initiative; however, it wanted to be the one to put the casket in the ground, while it made clear to all the involved sides that it was not willing to accept the United Nations Blue Helmets in Nagorno-Karabakh. As Maxim Suchkov describes the Kremlin's policy in the wider Caucasus, which reflects highly on the Russian conduct over Nagorno-Karabakh, "Russia is the controlling security stakeholder in the Caucasus and has no interest in 'selling its shares' to anyone else . . . Russia's other interests in the region . . . mean that the Kremlin is unlikely to cede any ground."⁴⁹ A few months after the crisis within the Minsk Group, the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War started. As analyzed above, Russia did not start the war in Nagorno-Karabakh. Still, it did nothing to control the intensity of the Azerbaijani attack and likewise did not assist Armenia. On the contrary, it implemented its bloodletting strategy to punish the Armenian political attempts to adopt a pro-Western orientation in its foreign policy.

Third, the Russian bloodletting strategy during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War can also be seen as Moscow's continuous efforts to show Azerbaijan that it was in Baku's geostrategic interest to maintain a close connection with the Kremlin. Azerbaijan is one of the leading importers of Russian goods in the region, a trade relationship that does not only focus on commodities or energy but also Russian armaments too.⁵⁰ The usage of Russian military technology by as many states as possible is one of the key strategic goals for the Kremlin since it establishes a network of hard power affiliation with various states (e.g., Azerbaijan and Turkey), contributing to Russian influence and prestige. By not aiding Armenia during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, besides Armenia's punishment for its pro-Western inclination during and after the Velvet Revolution, Moscow wanted also to show Baku that there was only one feasible diplomatic stance in South Caucasus, and that was to rally to Russia's side. Otherwise, the status of the state trying to break free from the Kremlin's influence was to be under reconsideration with dire consequences ahead for every disobedient element, for example, Armenia.

While Turkey was openly by the Azerbaijani side throughout the war in Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia avoided standing by the Armenian side. At the same time, it did not try to minimize Turkish involvement either.⁵¹ Russia just monitored the unfolding of the Armenian defeat in Nagorno-Karabakh while the technologically advanced Azerbaijani army demolished the Armenian Armed Forces with the pivotal assistance of Turkish drones. This defeat of the Armenian side, at least to the extent it materialized, would not have occurred if not for Russia's absence and for Moscow giving the green light to Turkey to support Baku. An analyst must consider here that there is no other case in Russia's Caucasus policy since the imperial era that Moscow tolerated the heavy intervention of a third country in the region. The fact that Turkey was allowed to move with such great ease in the region, which is considered vital for Russian security, enhances the main argument of this article that Moscow used Ankara as the bloodletting booster in Nagorno-Karabakh to support Azerbaijan and thus punish Armenia for its willingness to adopt a pro-Western turn after 2018.

It has to be noted that the Russian-Turkish relation that was first tested in Syria and then in Nagorno-Karabakh is still in full display in the war in Ukraine, where Ankara maintains the closest connection with Moscow even if the former is a member of NATO. As Iliya Kusa says about Russian-Turkish relations,

To improve its geopolitical and geoeconomic position in the region, Turkey needs to maintain its partnership with Russia, squeezing out concessions and counterbalancing Western influence. To this end, Turkey must engage with Russia politically, preserve close trade and economic ties, continue to realize steady Russian tourism revenues, find ways to attract more investment, further expand its regional political clout, and maintain the status quo—where it benefits Turkey—with respect to regional security issues, such as the Syria conflict, the geo-

politics of the Black Sea, or the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, in which Turkey sides with Azerbaijan.⁵²

The strong connection between the two states can be easily spotted, and it would be a great mistake for the West to disregard this as a trivial development.

The Aftermath

The conclusion of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War had the following effects on the regional balance of power. First, Armenia was forced to abandon its pro-Western aspirations and adopt the stance that without Russian support it would not be able to survive with Azerbaijan as a neighbor. Most of the Armenian political system hurried to reassure the Kremlin that its pro-Western orientation was just a phase that belonged to the past and that the state's grand strategy remains pro-Russian. For example, immediately after the end of the war and while Armenia was still trying to face the consequences of its defeat, Pashinyan, the ex-pro-Western leader of the Velvet Revolution, made the following public statement: "We will continue developing the strengthening strategic partnership with Russia, which is our number one partner in the security sphere."⁵³ It was apparent that the message was received. Therefore, in the 2021 national elections, Nikol Pashinyan maintained his office as prime minister by publicly showing his allegiance to Moscow through a pro-Russian foreign policy agenda. Characteristically, as Emil Mustafayev, an Azerbaijani analyst, stated to Al Jazeera just a few weeks before the 2021 elections day, "The Kremlin fully controls the situation in Armenia, and premiere Pashinyan is no longer a threat to Moscow the way he was in the first years of his prime-ministerial work." Sergey Strokan, the well-known Russian columnist, wrote in an op-ed about the transformation of the Armenian premier: "The former leader of Armenia's 'color revolution' became an example of . . . a bad boy transformed into a politician who finally understood who is who and how much things are."⁵⁴

In addition, Moscow managed to be the only significant power to monitor the peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan after the end of the clashes in Nagorno-Karabakh, meaning that it succeeded in keeping out both France and the United States from future developments in the region.⁵⁵ Consequently, 2,000 Russian troops, instead of the United Nations peacekeeping forces as it should have been, are stationed in Nagorno-Karabakh, offering the strategic advantage to Moscow to control the area.

In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia reached its peak regarding its potential as a great power with the perfect execution of the bloodletting strategy. On the one hand, the Kremlin punished Armenia by allowing the latter to taste a bitter defeat in Nagorno-Karabakh. The punishment resulted from the opening of Armenia toward the West after the days of the Velvet Revolution. On the other hand, the Kremlin succeeded in safeguarding its control over the South Caucasus by showing the two involved sides that without its leading participation in the future of the region, Nagorno-Karabakh would continue to be

a source of military friction between Armenia and Azerbaijan. By implementing its bloodletting strategy, Moscow underlined its role as the pivotal factor in the region's fate. As Dumitru Minzarari argues, "Moscow's ability to stop the Azeri offensive immediately after the fall of Shushi revealed its control. Russia would only have allowed the status quo change if its expected gains exceeded the related risks and costs. This occurred, while the Kremlin used Baku to pull its chestnuts out of the fire."⁵⁶ How things unfolded in favor of Russia in Nagorno-Karabakh must be seen as the hubris booster that ultimately affected Russia's approach to Ukraine. Moscow felt that Kyiv's attempts to diversify its foreign policy by implementing various openings toward the United States and the European Union had to be punished too. Only this time, the role of the punisher to magnify the disciplining effect was to be filled by Russia. The Russian regime failed to comprehend the profound differences between Ukraine and Armenia. This fallacy fully demonstrates that there are no panaceas or secrets of success in military strategy, mainly when the excessive feeling of superiority influences the decision-making process, as the Russian invasion of Ukraine shows.

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