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THE SECOND KARABAKH WAR AND THE DYNAMICS OF RELATIONS BETWEEN THE REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA AND THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

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Abstract
The article examines the dynamics of development of relations between Armenia and Russia after the Second Karabakh War. Armenian-Russian relations are considered in the context of a comparative analysis of regional processes. In the context of the cooling of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Russia managed to implement a key policy of containment, as well as maneuver between Azerbaijan and Armenia. However, this policy became ineffective when Turkey actively intervened in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict.
The article analyzes the factors that negatively influenced the revision of Russian foreign policy to the detriment of Armenia. The article substantiates the hypothesis that Russia was able to stop military operations in the Second Karabakh war in time to prevent the strengthening of Turkish influence in Azerbaijan. From the point of view of Russian interests, the most effective way to solve this problem was to deepen relations with Azerbaijan through a strategic alliance at the expense of Armenia.

Keywords: Armenian-Russian relations, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Second Karabakh war, Turkey, Syunik corridor, Azerbaijan, Iran, CSTO.

Introduction

The second Karabakh War was the prelude to the Russia-West conflict. During the years of D. Trump's presidency, the USA activated the Iranian vector of the regional policy, and the South Caucasus once again became important for Washington. The White House clearly understands that the US has important, but not vital, interests in the South Caucasus, and from that point of view, it is more imperative to focus on the relations with Russia, Turkey and Iran (O'Brien 2024; Beckley 2021).

Armenia did not understand that for Russia the Nagorno-Karabakh problem will not be as important as the Ukrainian issue, which is considered more strategically important. And under the conditions of sanctions against Russia, the factor of Turkey

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and Azerbaijan has become more important. Russia planned that, on the one hand, the development of regional cooperation with Turkey would not allow Western forces to influence the ongoing processes, and on the other hand, Russian armed forces would be stationed in Artsakh, as a result of which the influence of the Kremlin on both sides of Azerbaijan and Armenia would increase. That is why, without supporting its ally in the second Karabakh war, the Kremlin suspended military operations at the right moment, preventing the strengthening of Turkish influence. Thus, since the mid-2010s, the Kremlin has adopted a strategy of strengthening its position in the South Caucasus at the expense of its weakest link, Armenia. The most effective way to achieve this was to deepen relations through a strategic alliance with Azerbaijan at the expense of Armenia. The safety of such a strategy was also explained by the fact that the Kremlin was confident that from a geopolitical point of view, Armenia did not have the opportunity to maneuver and change orientation, so it needed to come to terms with the road map drawn by him. However, this forecast did not come true. In the context of the Russian-Ukrainian military confrontation, Russia's influence in the South Caucasus has decreased and Turkey's role has increased. After all, the Kremlin failed to prevent the depopulation of Artsakh. In the current situation, the Syunik corridor remains Russia's last effective tool for maintaining its influence in the South Caucasus. Having become the main beneficiary of this corridor, Russia is coordinating its steps with Turkey and Azerbaijan. In this context, Armenia is in the most difficult situation, since it has to resolve ontological issues. Russia does not care how the Armenian society perceives its policies, since it is ready to use economic, political and military tools if necessary. However, it is clear to everyone that over the past 30 years, Armenian-Russian relations are in the worst condition. Although officially Armenia is still a member of the CSTO, the Armenian society does not trust its ally, and now Armenian-Russian relations have entered a period of transformation, and all future governments of Armenia will have to take these sentiments and approaches into account.

It is clear that when Moscow planned to start its military operations in Ukraine, it had to secure its rear. Why did Moscow decide to become a global actor in the 20s of the 21st century? First of all, the strengthened and already more developed China became the competitor of the USA in different continents, whose economic rise was followed by the sharp increase in military potential (Dodds 2023; Sahar 2023). Beijing became an alternative to the helomonist power of the USA, increased its diplomatic and economic presence in different regions of the world. Over time, China became dissatisfied with PAX Americana, where the USA was the main judge and had the position of the final decisionmaker. China's power has prompted various regional actors to revise their regional tactics. Beijing began to support all regional initiatives that weakened American hegemony. In addition, after the collapse of the USSR, the USA did not correctly calculate its potential and got involved in conflicts of no vital importance to it in different corners of the world, where it wasted billions of dollars and thousands of Americans died. However, the fact is that as a result of the American invasions the situation in those countries destabilized and this circumstance was used by China, Iran, Russia and Turkey (Shokri Kalehsar 2021). This moment is important. Examples include Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya. At the same time, it should be noted that if previously only a few states in the world had powerful military potential and

weapons of mass destruction, after the Second World War, a number of regional states managed to create combat-ready armies equipped with modern ballistic missiles, air, sea and land weapons.

As for Russia, Moscow, developing its economic ties with Europe and receiving support from Beijing, modernized its military forces, the first experimental field of which was Syria.

At the same time, events in Crimea and Donbas were interpreted in Moscow as weakness of the West, and it was decided to neutralize the American influence in Eastern Europe. In our opinion, by presenting an ultimatum to NATO and the West in December 2021, Moscow was sure that it would be rejected and that military operations were inevitable (Banai 2023). Before that, Moscow decided to strengthen its rear and "solve" the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, the solution of which was beneficial to both the West and Turkey and Azerbaijan. In the Kremlin, they understood that in the event of sanctions against it, Turkey will become the only window to Europe and the South Caucasus will turn into a transport corridor connecting the East with the West. Back in 2019, we drew the attention of Armenian expert circles to this circumstance. When the "Southern Gas Corridor" was launched in Baku in May 2018, the importance of the "Ganja Corridor" increased, through which the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, Baku-Supas oil, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipelines, Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, optical cable connecting Western Europe with the Caspian region, as well as the E-60 European highway pass.

If we take into consideration the fact that Caspian and Central Asian energy sources can be exported to Europe bypassing Russia, then naturally it is not desirable for the West to have Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh controlled by Moscow, because the "Ganja Corridor" is only 50-60 km away from Artsakh, and in case of destabilization of the situation, the safety of these communications may also be endangered. Along with a number of factors, this circumstance contributed to the West being interested in the quick resolution of the Karabakh conflict (Vardazaryan 2023).

As for Moscow, the latter needs the support of Turkey, Iran and Azerbaijan in its region on the eve of confrontation with the West. For that, it was necessary to adopt an interim decision, as a result of which both the Russian army will appear in Artsakh and Azerbaijan will get back the territories adjacent to Artsakh and a part of the former Nagorno-Karabakh. Of course, the Velvet Revolution that took place in Armenia in April 2018 was not the best option for Moscow, but the new RA authorities initially did everything to dispel Moscow's mistrust. In the interviews given in the Western media, N. Pashinyan repeatedly stated that there will be no change in the geopolitical vector (Vardazaryan and Vardazaryan 2019). In the relations with the Russian Federation, its behavior as an ally was demonstrated by the RA's position and vote at the United Nations on the Crimea problem, the involvement of the Armenian forces in the mission carried out by the Russian Federation in Syria. Here we consider it necessary to emphasize that in the current Russian-American tense conditions, even Russia's closest allies Belarus and Kazakhstan did not dare to take such a step.

Did the new authorities of the RA have slip-ups in their relations with Moscow? Of course, yes. But it came more from lack of experience than from unprofessional

diplomacy. From that point of view, we can mention the hasty arrest of the CSTO General Secretary Yu. Khachaturov and the RA Second President R. Kocharyan.

A part of the Armenian political circles tries to blame only the Armenian side for the deterioration of the Armenian-Russian relations, not analyzing its deep reasons.

Let us remind that unlike Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova, Azerbaijan was never considered by Moscow as an enemy state. Even the affiliation to GUAM in 1997 and the closing of the Gabala Radar Station were not perceived with dismay in Moscow. Azerbaijan was never included in any of the integration processes put forward by Moscow, pursued a policy independent of Russia, and especially during the presidency of V. Putin, Russian-Azerbaijani relations became closer.

After the 1994 ceasefire, the best option for Moscow was the freezing of the NK conflict, which enabled the Kremlin to exert pressure on both Yerevan and, if necessary, Baku. L. Broers, director of the Caucasian programs of the British Organization Conciliation Resources, called this policy "pivotal containment policy", within the framework of which Russia, which is the "pivot", maneuvers around Armenia and Azerbaijan, sometimes implementing an inconsistent policy. However, that policy became ineffective and meaningless when Turkey was actively involved in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict and provided large-scale political and military support to Azerbaijan (Meister 2024; Colibășanu 2023).

In the interviews given to the Russian mass media, N. Pashinyan stated that everyone in Armenia and the Diaspora is sure that the Russian Federation has all the means to restrain Azerbaijan and prevent the tension in the region from growing. Russia also has all the means and tools to prevent Azerbaijan's attack on Armenia or Karabakh, and it will act in that way, because it is Armenia's strategic ally, our centuries-old brother and friend.

In Yerevan, they did not understand, as in 1920, as well as now, that the Ukrainian issue will have more significance for Moscow, than the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. And it is no coincidence that, to the surprise of Yerevan, during the September 2020 war, Moscow, like the other co-chair countries of the Minsk Group, took an emphatic neutral position. And this is when Turkey began to support Azerbaijan in a demonstrative way, and even transferred fighters from Syria to Karabakh. However, among the Minsk co-chairs, only Moscow managed to stop the military operations. What does that indicate? Not having the opportunity to fight on several fronts at the same time, considering Ukraine important and predicting that the RF will have to enter into a fight with the collective West, the Kremlin focused on the issue of the control of the South Caucasus with Turkey, reserving the role of a senior partner (Bartolini 2024). At first glance, it may seem that Moscow and Ankara planned all their moves and the main beneficiary of the second Karabakh War is Russia, which managed to freeze the conflict, deployed peacemakers (in fact a military base) in the "territory" of Azerbaijan, and a significant part of the territory of Artsakh actually appeared under control of the Russian military forces. The tripartite statement of November 9 was unclear enough and in Moscow it was believed that the authority gained was enough to not focus on the issue of the status of the peacemakers. At the same time, on the eve of the military confrontation against Ukraine, on February 22, 2022, the Declaration on Allied Cooperation was signed between Russia and Azerbaijan with the agreement of Ankara.

It should be reminded that before that, Baku had signed the "Shushi Declaration" with Turkey, according to which Turkey would provide military support to Azerbaijan if necessary.

The cooperation with Turkey, despite some existing contradictions, which sometimes turn into military strikes, nevertheless enables Moscow to maintain its presence in Syria without wasting large resources. However, in this case, it is important for Moscow that by cooperating with Turkey, it limits the possibility of maneuvering for the USA and the EU (Smith 2023). In the South Caucasus, it also derives from the interests of Turkey, and for that reason, it accepts the presence of the Russian Federation in the strategic Middle Eastern zones. Both in 1920 and 100 years later, Turkey's anti-Western position is more important to Moscow than the overall Christian political platform. Currently, the Kremlin prefers conservative and anti-Western Islam to the liberal West. The presidents of Russia and Turkey agree on changing the world order created by the West and are in favor of a multi-polar world order. This circumstance explains the mutually approved policy for Erdogan with Moscow, the clarification of the spheres of influence and the diversification of policy. It is important for the region how much the elements of cooperation and competition between the two countries will be combined.

It is clear that Nagorno-Karabakh alone could not withstand the Turkish-Azerbaijani attack. And how should Armenian-Russian relations develop after the defeat? From this point of view, the editorial review of RIA News, date October 1, 2020, are noteworthy. It is noted that as a result of the Karabakh War, Russia may lose its influence in the South Caucasus, because the defeated Armenia, disappointed with Moscow, will turn to the West, and Azerbaijan, having seen the effective Turkish assistance, will freeze its ties with the Kremlin. As a result, Turkey will become stronger, and becoming the most influential force in the South Caucasus, it will also initiate the expulsion of Russia from Syria and Libya (Özdal 2023).

But in the Kremlin, this concept was considered harmful and wrong. By not helping anyone in that war, Russia will restore its influence in the region by quickly stopping it if necessary. In order to maintain its influence, Moscow is not even bothered by the fact that Turkey does not recognize Russia's approaches to Crimea, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. It is further noted that although Turkey bought half of Georgia and formed the "two states, one people" concept with Azerbaijan, Tbilisi, which does not have diplomatic relations with Russia, cannot ignore the Moscow factor (Özdal 2023). Moscow believes that the strengthening of Turkey's position in the region is acceptable, but not at the expense of Russian interests. They consider the approaches of Turkey as wrong, that if they were able to reach an agreement with Moscow in Syria, then the same parity approach should be in Artsakh. Moscow is not interested in excessively strengthening Turkey's influence in the South Caucasus, because Turkey is a member of NATO and if it cooperates with Moscow as a national state under Erdogan, what guarantees will the Kremlin have that the power in Ankara will not be transferred to the NATO-oriented forces in the future? However, Moscow considers that Turkey is not interested in stopping the 17-year Moscow-Ankara cooperation. This is also evidenced by the statement of the Press Secretary of the President of the Russian Federation, D. Peskov, that Moscow is in full contact with Ankara regarding the Nagorno Karabakh situation (Avdaliani 2022).

It turns out that Moscow thought that they should strengthen their positions in the South Caucasus at the expense of the weakest link, Armenia. And before carrying out that step, it was necessary to launch an information campaign against Yerevan, the main goal of which was to show that such a situation was formed through the fault of the authorities who "betrayed" Moscow (Avdaliani 2022). From this point of view, Ye. Prigozhin's statement that "Soros", which feels so free in Armenia, intervened in the conflict, and Turkey has the right to intervene in the Karabakh conflict without violating the borders of Armenia, is remarkable.

A. Dugin also believes that the activities of Soros and N. Pashinyan's government were problematic for Moscow in the South Caucasus, and, as for Turkey, it will not take hostile steps towards Russia in this region (Dugin 2023).

The Kremlin understands well that Turkey has no alternative but NATO in terms of security in the near future, and in the event of the alignment of the interests of that country and the West, Russia's influence will decrease for Ankara. At the same time, from the point of view of the authority and interests of the Russian Federation, it followed that Armenia would not completely lose Artsakh, and in that case, Yerevan, not completely satisfied with the Kremlin's policy, would have to keep the alliance with Moscow. In Yerevan, they could not understand in time that in the new situation, the interests of the Russian Federation began to coincide more with those of Azerbaijan. In 2018, a conference entitled "Azerbaijan is Russia's only ally in the South Caucasus" was organized in the immediate vicinity of the Artsakh borders. Representatives of the "International Eurasian Movement", "Izborsky Club", "Yedinaya Rossiya" (United Russia) and the Russian Democratic Party could not participate in the event without Moscow's direct consent. Here, on October 19, 2018, A. Dugin announced that the most effective way to increase Russia's influence in Armenia is to deepen strategic alliance relations with Azerbaijan at the expense of Yerevan.

For Moscow, the increase of the role of Azerbaijan is connected with the launch of the "North-South" Corridor. By bypassing the Suez Canal, India should connect with Russia through Iran. The agreement on the creation of the "North-South" Corridor was signed between the governments of Russia, Iran and India back in September 2000. The western section would pass through Azerbaijan and the Astra-Resht-Kaghzvan section would be built for that purpose.

Although Yerevan joined the agreement in 2004, it was actually left out of all the projects.

In 2023, in Astara, the Russian authorities announced that they will build a logistics center on the Iran-Azerbaijan border (Vinokurov, Ahunbaev and Zaboev 2022). Now it becomes clear why the "Zangezur Corridor" is also necessary and why the problem of Artsakh received such a solution. A. Dugin noted that the results of the 44-day war were not due to the Baku-Ankara alliance, but Putin gave his consent for Azerbaijan to restore its territorial integrity by force. The main decision was made in Moscow and it depends on Putin who will own Karabakh (Kremlin 2020).

Then the head of the "International Eurasian Movement" states that after the 44-day war, any leader of Armenia will have to unconditionally implement the tripartite declaration of November 9. However, according to A. Dugin, after the second

Karabakh War, N. Pashinyan helps Moscow more than anyone else, because he will no longer have a single chance for a maneuver, and if does anything incorrect, he will immediately be deprived of power. Moreover, he notes that V. Putin has started to protect and support N. Pashinyan in Armenia, with whom Moscow has started to conduct a constructive policy. At the same time, A. Dugin announces Moscow's expectations regarding Baku's inclusion in the CSTO and EAEU[1].

Thus, Armenia found itself in a rather difficult situation. After the second Karabakh War, Yerevan is militarily defenseless. Officially, it is an ally of Moscow and a member of the CSTO. Moscow and the CSTO declare that Azerbaijan is also a brotherly and friendly country for them, and a more acceptable country from the point of view of the political administration. We should not forget that on the eve of Ukrainian military cooperation, it also signed a strategic cooperation agreement with Russia.

As for Turkey, the latter is a politically and economically vital country for Moscow after February 24, 2022.

However, the Kremlin's analysis is not always correct. The situation changed after the Russian-Ukrainian military operations. As a result of them, Moscow's influence in the post-Soviet space was decreasing, and it is no coincidence that the issue of the settlement of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict smoothly began to move to the West.

Moscow's last step as an "ally" was the depopulation of Artsakh, which has always been loyal to the Russians in the region. The September 2023 One-day War showed that Moscow does not want to risk the lives of its soldiers and go to confrontation with Baku. With the de facto expulsion of Armenians from Artsakh, the question of the expediency of the presence of Russian peacekeepers there was also lost. However, the question of Russian peacekeepers leaving Artsakh is still not officially discussed. On January 7, 2024, the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation made a statement that "the Russian peacekeeping force continues to carry out tasks in 18 observation posts of the Karabakh economic region of the Republic of Azerbaijan."[2] Already this wording means a revision of the tripartite agreement of November 9. The nine-month blockade in anticipation of getting the Meghri Corridor and the depopulation of Artsakh, the capture of its political and military leadership, raised doubts in the RA political circles and public opinion about the possibilities and desires of Moscow to fulfill its ally duties. It will not be an exaggeration to mention that the Third Armenian Republic was formed as a result of the Artsakh War and for more than 30 years, the Armenian people handed over all their economic powers to the strategic ally and suffered many deprivations, believing that as a result they received a security guarantee. After the war, some issues arose in the Armenian society, which were never clarified. For example, could Azerbaijan, without the awareness or consent of the Kremlin, start military operations first against Artsakh, and then directly against the RA? Or did Moscow use its all tools to prevent that war? These questions do not bother

[1] Aravot. 2021. "Revelations from Dugin: "We have accomplished our task. Now it is time for Baku to join the CSTO and the EAEU"."[Otkroveniya ot Dugina: «My svoyu zadachu vypolnili. Seychas prishlo vremya Baku vstupat' v ODKB i YEAES»]. Accessed April 30, 2024. https://ru.aravot.am/2021/04/16/354685/.

[2] Ministry of Defence of the RF. 2023. "Russian peacekeeping forces in Nagorno-Karabakh." Accessed April 30, 2024. https://eng.mil.ru/en/russian_peacekeeping_forces.htm.

the Kremlin at all, because after February 2022, the priority for Moscow is Ukraine, and the issues in the South Caucasus region can be resolved jointly with Turkey and Azerbaijan. Armenian-Russian tension was also created in the first years of ANM's rule, but later Moscow revised its approaches and Yerevan became Moscow's closest ally in the South Caucasus. However, the situation is different now, and even if the crisis in Armenian-Russian relations is overcome, mistrust towards Russia will remain after the depopulation of Artsakh. However, Moscow is not concerned about this, because they believe that from a geopolitical point of view, "Yerevan has no other way" and Moscow has enough effective methods to punish it. For example, by expelling ethnic Armenians from Russia, freezing economic ties, stopping gas supplies, and finally carrying out military pressure with the help of Azerbaijanis.

In Yerevan, they are trying not to aggravate relations with Russia, thinking that if Moscow is not an ally, at least Armenia should not acquire a new enemy in the face of Russia. At the same time, it is clear that from the security point of view, the West cannot assume the role of Russia. Russia, in its turn, which is under sanctions, does not want to aggravate relations with Yerevan, because it is not sure whether by harming Armenia it can return it to its sphere of influence, or whether these pressures can have the opposite result, because new actors have already appeared in the region.

In the current situation, the easiest way for Moscow to justify itself is to resort to manipulations. For example, who said that in Armenia they expected Russian soldiers to fight instead of Armenians? In Yerevan, it was believed that Moscow could fulfill its ally duties by supplying weapons, which also did not happen. Or that N. Pashinyan recognized Nagorno- Karabakh as a part of Azerbaijan and did not give Moscow the opportunity to act. It is so, but the Russian President announced it first in his interview after the tripartite agreement on November 9[3]. And could Armenia, abandoned by its ally, get involved in the war again, this time losing Syunik and waiting for the next "rescuers".

Until then, official Yerevan never made any territorial claims to Azerbaijan. In addition, if the RA leadership recognized Artsakh as part of Azerbaijan, does this circumstance cancel Moscow's guarantees given to the Armenians of Artsakh by the Russian Federation? In our opinion - no. If we approach with the same logic, then Moscow recognizes the Transnistrian region as a part of Moldova, but it has deployed its peacemakers there as well. However, not having the opportunity or not having wish to fulfill its responsibilities as an ally, Moscow considers every contact of Yerevan with the West as a hostile step. For example, when in May 2021 and especially in September 2022, Azerbaijani troops carried out an aggression against the RA and hundreds of soldiers were killed, Moscow was silent. The Russian side had about 2 months to react to the September battles, but even the bombing of the border base of the Federal Security Service of the RF did not change the situation. Moreover, the Russian side preferred to reject that fact and call it fake news.

The RF and the CSTO delayed the response to Yerevan's official appeals and eventually described it as a "border incident" on the grounds that the Armenian-

[3] Anadolu Ajansı. 2023. "Putin says Karabakh 'irrevocably' became part of Azerbaijan in 2022." Accessed April 30, 2024. https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/putin-says-karabakh-irrevocably-became-part-of-azerbaijan-in-2022/3018909#.

Azerbaijani border was not clearly defined. When European civilian observers arrived in the region at the request of Armenia, Moscow reacted very harshly, accusing the USA and the EU of inciting geopolitical conflicts (Council of the EU 2023). Arriving EU civil observers recorded the Azerbaijani aggression and the Armenian occupied territories (EEAS 2023).

Not wanting to aggravate the situation again, Yerevan tried to explain to Moscow that before applying to the EU, many applications addressed to Moscow remained unanswered and this action was a deliberate step by the Armenian side, and not a matter of geopolitical choice. Another manipulation took place during the CSTO 2023 November summit, when Russian Foreign Minister M. Lavrov announced that the organization is ready to send observers to the Armenian-Azerbaijani border regions, but Armenian colleagues said that this decision will be important only if the actions of Azerbaijan are condemned (Reuters 2023). Lavrov then responded that they explained to their Armenian colleagues that if it comes to condemnation, rhetoric, or expressing views, then everyone has the right to do what they want (Reuters 2023; MFA of the RF 2023). In other words, for Moscow and the CSTO, the territorial integrity of its ally, the bombing of the city of Jermuk, which is 13 km from the border, and the hundreds of victims should have remained unresponsive.

The latest disappointment of the Armenian authorities was the 2024 briefings of M. Zakharova, the representative of the MFA of the RF, where she stated that Russia is not aware of any facts of ethnic cleansing by Azerbaijan in Nagorno Karabakh (FIP 2024). She claims that the Armenian side did not present any facts in this regard. It is not possible that the Russian side does not know how the UN clarified the concept of "ethnic cleansing" after the events in Yugoslavia.

It is obvious that the official point of view and rhetoric of the MFA of the RF created a new gap between Armenia and the RF, because the Armenian authorities are still actively fighting for the elimination of the consequences of the genocide and ethnic cleansing carried out by Azerbaijan against the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh (MFA of the RA 2023).

Thus, the 44-day war and the depopulation of Artsakh dramatically changed the balance of power in the South Caucasus. First of all, the influence of Turkey increased significantly. Many people in Moscow do not want to understand that the defeat of the RA, an ally of Russia, is also their defeat. The Kremlin's passive and neutral position is predictable for Turkey and Azerbaijan. The actual diplomatic support of Moscow was theirs (Karlinsky and Torrisi 2023; Lantsov 2022).

For Armenia, its previous security system collapsed and the neutralization of existential threats became a matter of agenda. After the 44-day war and in the conditions of the Russian-Ukrainian war, it was necessary to diversify the RA's foreign policy. After the second Karabakh War, it became clear that Russia needs the neutrality of Turkey and Azerbaijan in the region, which has its price. Actually, Nagorno-Karabakh was sacrificed to the Middle Corridor, and now it is the turn of the "Zangezur Corridor" - Russia. If Russia fails to control the Meghri region, Moscow will lose one of its most important factors in relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan. Russian border guards are actually already in Syunik. Syunik has become an important zone of West-East confrontation.

On the one hand, the West is against Azerbaijan opening a road to Nakhichevan through the territory of Iran, on the other hand, it demands that the Meghri road not be controlled by the Russian border guards. Taking into consideration the sanctions, the tense situation in the Middle East, the activation of the Houthis, the control of Syunik, the shortest route to China and India, is becoming a vital issue for Moscow. That is why Yerevan is trying not to aggravate the situation, because it is clear that if Moscow sees strategic risks for itself, it is ready to become active on this front as well. Much depends here on the Russian-Ukrainian and situational developments in the Middle East. That is why, from a deep point of view, Armenia and Russia are trying to solve the problems between them, but it is quite clear that the problem should be solved with the participation of Middle Eastern actors, and increasing the role of the West will aggravate the situation (Smith 2023; Banai 2023).

Fundamentally, Yerevan did not function effectively in the past three years. In fact, Yerevan failed to diversify its foreign policy and there is no real balancing. Armenia cannot rely on other power centers, because it has not seriously clarified its strategic interests with them, and therefore it is not realistic to expect help from the West (Beckley 2021; Shokri Kalehsar 2021; O'Brien 2024). We had a situation where we could not find guarantors of Armenian-Azerbaijani peace, neither in Moscow, nor in Brussels, nor in Washington. The three power centers are not going to give clear security guarantees to Yerevan. Yerevan also hesitates that if it chooses the western platform and it does not justify itself, the consequences of that step can be devastating and in what form they will return to the Russian platform in the future. At the same time, they understand in Yerevan that what Azerbaijan wants, Moscow also wants. Yerevan's announcements cannot restrain either Russia or the West. Azerbaijan and Moscow do not yet have a peace agenda until they control all communications. Currently, the situation is complicated by the fact that there is talk of concluding a large interstate agreement between Moscow and Tehran. In other words, serious repositioning processes are expected in the region. During the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Iran had the opportunity to improve relations with the West and work in a different format, but chose a different strategy by allying with Moscow. If Yerevan had deepened relations with Moscow and Tehran, that strategic cooperation would not cause new challenges for us, and now Tehran may change its principled approach regarding the Syunik Corridor. At the same time, in case of Russian-Iranian rapprochement, the importance of Turkey and Azerbaijan for the West will increase.

Conclusion and discussion

1. Thus, in the post-war years, Yerevan did not manage to restore the balance of power and diversify its foreign policy. Yerevan adopted the wrong approach by being open to all intermediaries and placing responsibility on all of them.
2. When the Russian-Ukrainian military confrontation started, Russian influence in the South Caucasus decreased and Moscow's economic, political and technological dependence on Turkey increased. It became clear when the Kremlin announced that it was refusing to go ahead with the grain deal. R. Erdogan "convinced" Moscow to reconsider its decision within two days.

3. In fact, until today, Yerevan believes in regional rather than Western integration and has not actually taken any steps that would not meet the interests of Russia and Azerbaijan.
4. The southern part of the RA is at the center of the conflict between the geopolitical interests of Russia, China and the West, and is one of the links of conflicts arising one after the other on China's logistics roads (Taiwan, Baloch people, Houthis, Arab-Israeli conflict, etc.). Now the main beneficiary of the Meghri Corridor is Moscow, for which the control of that section is vital.
5. A situation has been created when none of the world's power centers is going to give security guarantees to Yerevan. Currently, compared to Moscow, the West has better tools of diplomatic and economic control over Turkey and Azerbaijan, but Yerevan cannot have special expectations in this matter, because they have not combined their interests with it.
6. In Yerevan, they are wary that rapprochement with the West may cause many new challenges for the RA. For Yerevan, the West cannot replace Moscow in matters of vital importance such as security, energy, economy, etc. Ultimately, the security architecture of the South Caucasus depends on the results of Russian-Ukrainian and Middle Eastern political developments. That is why Yerevan is trying to get out of the sphere of conflicts of power centers and take a neutral position as much as possible.
7. Brussels' opportunities to maneuver in the South Caucasus increased when Georgia received EU candidate status at the end of 2023. It implies that Tbilisi will have to reduce the intensity of cooperation with Moscow.
8. Armenia now has to choose between bad and worst. However, it is already clear that after the loss of Artsakh and the events surrounding Syunik, Armenian-Russian relations underwent a transformation that cannot be restored in the near future. All governments of the RA cannot ignore this factor in their relations with the Kremlin.

Supplementary material
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The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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