

## TRANSFORMATION OF MODERN WARS IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: AZERBAIJAN'S HYBRID WAR AGAINST ARTSAKH

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### Abstract

The Third Artsakh war has dramatically transformed the security environment in the South Caucasus. Being a result and indicator of changing world order, it unleashed the parameters of the newly-developing formats of conflicts, confrontations, and wars, called hybrid warfare. From this perspective the paper studies the parameters of hybrid warfare against Artsakh launched by Azerbaijan. Application of hybrid warfare against Artsakh is not a new phenomenon and has been practiced by Azerbaijan at least during the last 10-15 years. However, the results of the 44-day war have provided new framework, opportunities, and instruments to intensify hybrid operations, striving to maximize the results.

Hence, the paper discusses the Azerbaijani strategy of hybrid war against Artsakh by analyzing the main strategies, tactics, instruments and tools used by Azerbaijan against Artsakh, specifically, after 44-day war.

The paper argues that after the Third Artsakh war of 2020 Azerbaijan has launched a full scale hybrid operation to provide ethnic cleansing of Artsakh and receive 'Nagorno-Karabakh without Armenians'. The operation was based on the following components: information-psychological campaign/influence operations (against Armenians in Artsakh), economic and energy aspects, ecological issues, blockade, international campaigns, support to split Armenian power (in Armenia and Armenian Diaspora), sabotage against critical infrastructure and population, and so on. Concluding the paper launches, a discussion about Azerbaijani engagement with Armenia after the ethnic cleansing of Artsakh of Autumn of 2023.

**Keywords:** Hybrid war, Artsakh, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Strategy, Ethnic Cleansing.

### Introduction

The Third Artsakh war has dramatically transformed the security environment in the South Caucasus. Being a result and clear indicator of changing world order, it unleashed the parameters of the newly-developing formats of conflicts, confrontations, and wars, called hybrid warfare, for instance, in form of the blockade of Lachin

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corridor, which resulted in ethnic cleansing of Artsakh. From this perspective the research is focused on the study of projection of the parameters of hybrid warfare against Artsakh by Azerbaijan. Application of hybrid warfare against Artsakh is not a new phenomenon and is being practiced by Azerbaijan at least during the last 20 years. However, the results of the 44-day war have provided new framework, opportunities, and instruments to intensify hybrid operations, striving to maximize the results. Even more, Azerbaijan's hybrid war has not stopped after the ethnic cleansing of Artsakh and forcibly displacement of over 100 thousand Armenians living in the unrecognized state. It continued against the Republic of Armenia with application of new and 'traditional' sophisticated mechanisms. Hence, the main objective of this paper is to reveal and analyze the Azerbaijani grand strategy against Artsakh, by discussing the main strategy, tactics, instruments and tools used by Azerbaijan against Artsakh, specifically, after 44-day war.

The hypothesis is that Azerbaijan has launched a full scale hybrid war, which includes the following components: information-psychological campaign, influence operations (against Armenians in Artsakh), economic and energy aspects, ecological issues, blockade, international campaigns, support to split Armenian power (in Armenia and Armenian Diaspora), as well cyber operations, sabotage against critical infrastructure and population, etc.

Thus the paper tests the ethnic cleansing of Artsakh as a strategic hybrid operation, which started long before the 3<sup>rd</sup> Artsakh war and continued afterwards, ended up with the depopulation of Armenians of Artsakh. In the meantime, the paper attempts to project the Azerbaijani tactics towards the Republic of Armenia and develop potential scenarios of Azerbaijani behavior.

It starts with the case of the Third Artsakh war and discusses its impact on the transformation of geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus and beyond. The author demonstrates the linkage between this geopolitical shift and increased area of 'grey zone', which on a further stage allowed the Azerbaijani authorities having much larger space for maneuver, which, in turn, led to more intensified hybrid operations against Artsakh and Republic of Armenia. The papers continues with a deep and comprehensive research of the phenomenon of 'hybrid war', tracing the concept from its 'birth' in 2007 to contemporary times. The research demonstrates the evolution of the concept, as well as shares the most sensitive debates around its novelty and ways of application (Elamiryan 2022). The research continues with the case-study of Azerbaijani operations against Artsakh and Armenia after the 44-day war, which led to the ethnic cleansing of the non-recognized state.

In the 'discussion and conclusion' section the paper applies the theory of hybrid wars of Azerbaijan's operations and justifies its strategy as a hybrid war. Finally the paper argues that after the ethnic cleansing of Artsakh, Azerbaijan applies hybrid war strategy towards the Republic of Armenia, by weaponizing every aspect of interactions and making the latter to compromise its strategic interests.

The research applies the methods of desk and discourse analysis, uses case-study method, as well as discusses and analyzes high-level declarations, speeches, and interviews.

The paper contributes to the academic debate on the development of hybrid wars in the process of the contemporary transformation of world order. On the example of Azerbaijani strategy it argues that hybrid wars can be applied to overcome international law and create 'grey zones' to use force and/or threat of use of force, when the international community does not stand firm to protect the international norms.

### **Third Artsakh War and transformation of geopolitical environment in the South Caucasus**

On 27 September, 2020 Azerbaijan, with the support of Turkey, initiated a new war against Artsakh. The conflict was 'frozen' after the first Artsakh war of 1992-1994 with Trilateral ceasefire agreement of May 1994, signed by Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia (Ceasefire Agreement 1994). The peace talks were held under the umbrella of the OSCE Minsk Group, co-chaired by Russia, the United States and France. Despite the fact that during these years the ceasefire regime was periodically violated, and Azerbaijan often demanded that the negotiations were shifted under the auspices of the UN, nevertheless, the OSCE Minsk Group remained the only format for peace negotiations (OSCE Minsk Group). Armenia has never questioned the format of negotiations.

The OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs periodically visited Baku, Yerevan and Stepanakert (the capital of Artsakh), and also organized direct meetings between the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia. During the last 15 years, negotiations have been conducted around the so-called Madrid Principles (2007) and the updated Madrid Principles (2009): 1). non-use of force or threat of force, 2). the right of peoples to self-determination, and 3). territorial integrity of states; as well six conflict resolution principles (OSCE 2009).

The conflict escalated in April of 2016 with the April war, ended by the interference from Moscow with not much substantial change on the ground (The Four-Day War Has Diminished 2016). The peace talks continued under the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairmanship, more or less continuing the logic of the updated Madrid Principles. The situation on the ground remained rather unchanged after the Armenian Velvet Revolution of 2018. However, the Third Artsakh War and the Trilateral Statement of the President of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of Armenia, and the President of Russia on November 10, 2020 (the Statement) on the ceasefire has changed the security environment not only for Armenia, Artsakh and Azerbaijan, but the regional security architecture in general, or, to be more precise, have clearly demonstrated an already changed reality by making it more obvious (Poghosyan 2022).

Among others, in the context of this paper, few closes deserve specific attention: Article 3 stated the deployment of Russian peacekeepers to Nagorno-Karabakh. Article 5 mentioned the establishment of a peacekeeping center for ceasefire control, which "shall be deployed for the purpose of increasing effective control over the implementation of arrangements between the Parties to the conflict." Later this became the trilateral observation center of Russia, Turkey, and Azerbaijan in Aghdam, a region which Azerbaijan received after the 44-day war. The article 9 stated that "all economic and transport links in the region shall be unblocked." Moreover, the security of new

communication routes should have been provided by the Russian side (Prime Minister of the RA 2020).

The results of the Third Artsakh war has opened the Pandora box for increasing major power competition around Nagorno-Karabakh and the wider region. In particular, for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey openly supported Azerbaijan by means of “hard power” and demanded full participation in peace negotiations along with Russia, without the US and France (Mianji 2020).

Being one of the most important security issues not only in the South Caucasus, but in the entire post-Soviet space as a whole, if successful, the new format would have meant a complete transformation of the security environment in the region, reducing the role of the West. However, back then Russia and Armenia sought to oppose Turkey's involvement, each with their own reasons. The Russian Foreign Minister made this clear in June 2021, stating that if Turkey becomes part of the negotiation process around the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Iran, as a regional actor, should have the same privileges as Turkey (MFA of the RF 2021).

On the other hand, at that moment Turkey continued to strengthen its positions in Azerbaijan, probably with the aim of further expansion in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. The dualism of the situation laid in the fact that Russia perceived the region as part of its special and even exclusive interests, while Turkey returned to the region, strengthening its ‘capabilities’, in particular, through an alliance with Azerbaijan. As a result, we have already been seeing the transition of South Caucasus from exclusively post-Soviet to the Middle Eastern agenda. Russia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs made this clear in June 2021, stating that if Turkey enters the peace-building process in Nagorno-Karabakh, Iran, as a regional power, should have the same privileges, as Turkey (MFA of the RF 2021).

On the other hand, Turkey continued strengthening its positions in Azerbaijan, most probably, with the aspiration of further expansion both in the South Caucasus and further to the Central Asia.

There were several views on Russia's position in the South Caucasus after the Third Artsakh War. Some argued that Russia has lost some influence because Turkey get involved in a military conflict, which did not happen since the Sovietization of the region in the early 1920s. Indeed, in Aghdam, the occupied part of Artsakh, Turkey even received a formal military presence (together with Russia) to monitor the ceasefire, which though stopped its activities in April of 2024 (ARMENPRESS 2024).

On the other hand, Russia had deployed a peacekeeping contingent of about 2,000 troops to Artsakh and expanded its military presence in Armenia to help Armenia contain the growing territorial ambitions of Azerbaijan. Moreover, with the successful implementation of the Trilateral Statement of November 10, Russia would have gained control over important transport routes in the south of the South Caucasus.

Thus, looking back to the end of 2020, one could claim that the Third Artsakh war has significantly changed the power balance in the South Caucasus and beyond, particularly, strengthening Russia’s and Turkiye’s positions, weakening the positions of the West (or fully removing from the peace process), but also creating a very fragile power balance on the ground, which, as the later history showed, collapsed very shortly with slight refocusing of Russia’s attention towards Ukraine. The new status quo

significantly contributed to the transformation and implementation of an updated Azerbaijani strategy towards Artsakh and the Republic of Armenia, inter alia, in the form of hybrid warfare. The new reality has triggered a new wave of hybrid war against Artsakh and the Republic of Armenia, ended with ethnic cleansing of the non-recognized state and ongoing conflict with the Republic of Armenia.

### **Understanding the concept of hybrid warfare in contemporary international relations**

The concept of hybrid appeared almost twenty years ago with the publication of Frank Hoffman's publication entitled "Conflict in the 21st century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars" (2007). Hoffman argued (2007, 7-8) that:

*There are a broadening number of challenges facing the United States, as the National Defense Strategy (NDS) noted in 2005. These include traditional, irregular, terrorist and disruptive threats or challengers. This has created a unique planning dilemma for today's military planners, raising a choice between preparing for states with conventional capabilities or the more likely scenario of non-state actors employing asymmetric or irregular tactics. However, these may no longer be separate threats or modes of war. Several strategists have identified an increased merging or blurring of conflict and war forms. The potential for types of conflict that blur the distinction between war and peace, and combatants and non-combatants, appear to be on the rise. Indeed, the NDS itself suggested that the most complex challengers of the future may seek synergies and greater impact by combining multiple modes of war.*

*As this paper reveals, future contingencies will more likely present unique combinational or hybrid threats that are specifically designed to target U.S. vulnerabilities.*

*Hybrid threats incorporate a full range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder. Hybrid Wars can be conducted by both states and a variety of non-state actors. These multi-modal activities can be conducted by separate units, or even by the same unit, but are generally operationally and tactically directed and coordinated within the main battlespace to achieve synergistic effects in the physical and psychological dimensions of conflict. The effects can be gained at all levels of war.*

According to him "Hybrid Wars" blend the lethality of state conflict with the fanatical and protracted fervor of irregular warfare. The term "Hybrid" captures both their organization and their means. Organizationally, they may have a hierarchical political structure, coupled with decentralized cells or networked tactical units. Their means will also be hybrid in form and application." Hoffman thinks that hybrid wars are based on application of wide range instruments, including both conventional and irregular means, "formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder" (Hoffman 2007, 28-29).

There is a large debate if the concept of ‘hybrid war’ is new (Cirdei 2017). The argument is that there are such concepts as ‘Fifth Generation Warfare’, ‘Compound wars’, ‘Unrestricted Warfare’, ‘Asymmetric Warfare’, ‘Grey Zone Operations’ and so on, which incorporate the ‘hybrid warfare’ elements.

Murray and Mansoor (2012, 3) in this regard argue that:

*Hybrid war does not change the nature of war; it merely changes the way forces engage in its conduct. However, it is waged, war is war. Much as the term “combined arms” describes the tactical combination of infantry, armor, artillery, engineers, and other branches of service in battle, the term “hybrid warfare” is a useful construct to analyze conflicts involving regular and irregular forces engaged in both symmetric and asymmetric combat.*

This paper uses the term ‘hybrid war’ as, in our opinion, it comprises not only key elements of war, but also structures, agents, form of organization, and decision-making. Another debate around the concept of ‘hybrid war’ was evolving with regard to the so called “future of war”. Though Hoffman (2007, 43) argued that “the rise of Hybrid Warfare does not represent the defeat or the replacement of “the old-style warfare” or conventional warfare by the new. But it does present a complicating factor for defense planning in the 21st Century,” on the other hand, some scholars, especially before the 2022 Conflict in Ukraine, argued (Wither 2016) that hybrid war was replacing conventional ones. In particular, Third Artsakh war and later the Ukrainian conflict of 2022 clearly demonstrated that conventional wars have not left the contemporary international relations. It is important to mention the evolution of the concept, too, which started from more military-focused and developed to a much more engaging one. For instance, J. Vuković, D. Matika and S. Barić (2016) write that:

*The research, based on the two study cases, confirmed the hypothesis that the hybrid way of warfare has a significant impact on the development of new capabilities of military organisation. Military organisations, in order to meet their basic tasks, are being forced to adapt to constant changes in the international strategic environment and the complexity of threats (“synergy of threats”), which together form a hybrid consisting of conventional and unconventional forms of warfare.*

Murray and Mansoor (2012, 3) also write in quite similar understanding of ‘hybrid war’ in military domain:

*Hybrid warfare also plays out at all levels of war, from the tactical, to the operational, to the strategic. In particular, military organizations must not ignore the political framework and its narrative within which all wars occur. At the strategic level, nations might choose to support insurgent movements with conventional forces to weaken an adversary, much as the French did when they allied with the Americans in 1778 to weaken the British. At the operational level, a commander might use guerrilla forces to harass enemy lines of communication or prevent the enemy from massing forces, as General Nathanael Greene did in the Southern campaign in 1780–1781 in the American Revolution. Finally, regular and*

*irregular forces might occasionally join tactically, as they did at the Battle of Cowpens in 1781.*

They continue and mention that much as the term “combined arms” describes the tactical combination of infantry, armor, artillery, engineers, and other branches of service in battle, the term “hybrid warfare” is a useful construct to analyze conflicts involving regular and irregular forces engaged in both symmetric and asymmetric combat (Libiseller 2023).

However, they go beyond of attaching ‘hybrid war’ only a tactical level and argue about political implications of hybrid wars: “In the world of hybrid war, it is not enough to destroy the enemy’s armed forces; to win, the indigenous, home-front, and international audiences must believe that the war is over. In other words, military success must lead to a commensurate political outcome as perceived by the affected populations” (Murray and Mansoor 2012, 10). Although it is still about military component only.

Quite similar approach is demonstrated by Wither (2020), when he discusses ‘hybrid war’ in the military domain: “New generation warfare emphasizes the use of nonkinetic techniques that promote social upheaval and create a climate of collapse, so that little or no military force is necessary. The armed forces have a supplementary role in this strategy. Special forces may conduct reconnaissance, subversion and espionage while, if necessary, large-scale conventional military exercises close to a target state’s borders seek to coerce and intimidate. Ideally, the use of armed force remains below the threshold that might trigger a conventional military response.”

Finally, it is important to mention that Murray and Mansoor (2012, 294) describe some main aspects of hybrid wars, especially accentuating the issue of its duration: “It would seem on the basis of the chapters in this study that success in such cases has rested on several crucial factors. The first and perhaps the most important lesson is that overwhelming superiority in resources and manpower can be but is not always decisive in such conflicts. Equally important is the will power to expend those resources over substantial periods of time because the historical cases suggest that there are no “silver bullet” solutions in these conflicts. In other words, blitzkrieg is not in the vocabulary of hybrid war.”

The evolution of the concept of ‘hybrid war’ can be traced in the edited volume entitled “Hybrid warfare: Security and Asymmetric Conflict in International Relations” (Nilsson et al. 2021), where the authors extend the pure military understanding of the concept:

*HT&HW – twenty-first-century style – differ from traditional threats and warfare more in intensity and degree than in kind. The exception is the virtual or digital realm, which empowers new tools and lowers the entry cost of using them. HT&HW denote adversaries or antagonists who aim to achieve outcomes without a war, to disrupt, undermine or damage the target’s political system and cohesion through a combination of violence, control, subversion, manipulation and dissemination of (mis)information.<sup>3</sup> Hence, they target opposing societies, not combatants.<sup>4</sup> HT&HW imply the simultaneous presence of a range of possible adversarial means, from threats of war to propaganda and everything in between. They therefore*

*include multiple instruments of power and influence, though with an emphasis on threats, non-military as well as military, operating below the threshold of open war. The identification of HT&HW does not allow for a clear-cut distinction between different forms of actors, be they state or non-state; soldiers or civilians; organized violence, terror, crime or war in a traditional sense. Regardless of the actor from which the threat originates, it has become customary for such actors to combine and tailor a mix of conventional and irregular means to achieve maximum effect (Nilsson et al. 2021, 3).*

Cullen and Reichborn-Kjennerud (2017) continue the above logic and define hybrid war as “as the synchronized use of multiple instruments of power tailored to specific vulnerabilities across the full spectrum of societal functions to achieve synergistic effects.” They argue that:

*Hybrid warfare is designed to exploit national vulnerabilities across the political, military, economic, social, informational and infrastructure (PMESII) spectrum. Therefore, as a minimum national government should conduct a self-assessment of critical functions and vulnerabilities across all sectors, and maintain it regularly. Hybrid warfare uses coordinated military, political, economic, civilian and informational (MPECI) instruments of power that extend far beyond the military realm. National efforts should enhance traditional threat assessment activity to include non-conventional political, economic, civil, international (PECI) tools and capabilities. Crucially, this analysis must consider how these means of attack may be formed into a synchronized attack package tailored to the specific vulnerabilities of its target.*

Additionally, Cullen and Reichborn-Kjennerud (2017) argue that in hybrid warfare actors can “synchronize its military, political, economic, civilian, informational (MPECI) instruments of power to vertically and horizontally escalate a series of specific activities to create effects. It also shows how a hybrid warfare actor can either vertically escalate by increasing the intensity of one or many of the instruments of power, and/or horizontally ‘escalate’ through synchronizing multiple instruments of power to create effects greater than through vertical escalation alone.” According to them the actors can create synchronized packages, which might vary based on the operational needs: “The instruments of power used will depend on the capabilities of the hybrid warfare actor and on the perceived vulnerabilities of its opponent, as well as the political goals of the hybrid warfare actor and its planned ways to achieve those goals. As with all conflicts and wars, the character of hybrid warfare depends on the context.”

Finally, Johnson (2017) writes about hybrid wars impact not only the military domain, but also international relations. He argues that this erosion appears in five forms:

*The first is political, such as the subversion of our political economy by means of misinformation, cyber sabotage or espionage.*

*The second takes the form of being diplomatic, namely the attempt to break or divide allies.*



*The third takes the form of military means, using local irregular forces, one's own troops in disguise, sabotage and assassination, proxies, brinkmanship or terrorism. The fourth is the social dimension, using media campaigns to demoralize our populations.*

*The fifth is economic attack, using sanctions, the purchase of our assets, the buying up of resources or even interference with the prices that our consumers pay.*

He summarizes “that the military instrument appears to be less relevant or appropriate than diplomatic, economic or political measures.” Thus ‘hybrid war’ is a multifaceted concept which has significantly evolved since first used in 2007. It encompasses military and non-military elements, which are forming targeted packages based on the requirements of specific cases. Hybrid warfare can be both hierarchical and network-centric, covering all the spectrum from strategic to tactical levels.

### **Ethnic cleansing of Artsakh as a hybrid operation**

The Trilateral Statement and the results of the 44-day Nagorno-Karabakh war, despite all tragic consequences, brought some hope for a long-term settlement between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Given that starting from 1994 Azerbaijan was claiming that the self-determination of Artsakh was the main problem Armenia and Azerbaijan, some believed that the resolution of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (specifically in the form of transfer of territories around Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region to Azerbaijan and deployment of Russian peacekeepers) will bring peace and, hence, prosperity to the South Caucasus.

Though the text of the Statement was drafted for immediate intervention to stop the war, it had quite specific clauses to prepare a ground for a further peace-building process. Article 1 stated that “as of 00:00 Moscow time, 10 November 2020, a complete ceasefire and cessation of all military operations in Nagorno Karabakh conflict zone is hereby declared.

The Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia, hereinafter referred to as the Parties, shall stop at their current positions”; it stated about the deployment of peacekeepers as guarantor’s peace and stability; in the meantime, the Statement specified that “all economic and transport links in the region shall be unblocked” (Prime Minister of the RA 2020). Thus the Statement, if implemented, would have allowed starting building mechanisms to provide a peaceful and prosperous environment between Armenians and Azeris. However, very soon it became clear that the Statement is not going to work due to insufficient political will, maximalist demands from Azerbaijan, and its leadership desire to maximize the gains from the results 44-day Nagorno-Karabakh war, as they see it with the lenses of zero-sum gain. In particular, already in mid-December 2020, a month after the Statement, in violation of Article 1, Azerbaijan initiated an offensive and attacked Armenian positions in Hin Tagher and Khatsaberd villages, which had strategic location on Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh: Hin Tagher and Khatsaberd 2020).

This was the first, but not the last violation of the Article 1 of the Statement. In particular, two major Azerbaijani assaults against NK took place in March and July, 2022, when Azerbaijani troops overtook strategic Kartanglukh heights in Nagorno-

Karabakh's Armenian-populated areas and important locations in mountainous areas in the Lachin region and Nagorno-Karabakh's north, respectively (International Crisis Group 2023).

Thus, the military activities of Azerbaijan were directed towards both strengthening and improving strategic military positions after the Statement was signed. On the other hand, in addition to military gains, the military oppression of Azerbaijan covered at least two more domains – trust towards Russian peacekeepers among, particularly, Armenian of NK, and sense of safe life in their homeland – two significant and interconnected components.

The deployment of Russian peacekeepers in NK were greeted with great hope by both the authorities and population, as they were seen as guarantors of stability in non-recognized state. For instance, an extensive billboard with Putin's picture was placed at the main road leading to the capital city of Artsakh, Stepanakert. Russian language was announced as the second official language (International Crisis Group 2023). Even some rumors spread that NK might become a part of Russia (Grigoryan 2022). However, the Azerbaijani offensives largely undermined the trust towards Russia (Council on Foreign Relations 2024). However, the gone trust meant no trust towards their safe and sustainable life and future in NK. In addition, this agenda was supported by provocations and strikes against civilians, which very often were attacked in presence of Russian peacekeepers (JAMnews 2021).

In the meantime, Azerbaijan kept targeting the territory of the Republic of Armenia to, presumably, keep it busy and make sure it does not interfere in NK issues (International Crisis Group 2023). Very soon Azerbaijan started attacks towards the NK critical infrastructure, inter alia, gas and electricity supplies.

Below is an extract from International Crisis Group report for March 8, 2022: "Damage to pipeline causes gas crisis in NK. Nagorno-Karabakh had no natural gas for almost a month after the only pipeline that delivers gas from Armenia to Stepanakert was damaged near Azerbaijani military positions. The damage occurred during an unusually cold season" (International Crisis Group 2023). The cuts in gas supplies had become a 'new normal' since afterwards. Very soon cuts in electricity supplies became part of the Azerbaijani approach, too (Azatutyun.am 2023).

Interestingly, despite some problems internet connection worked quite well over the whole period from November 2020 to the end of ethnic cleansing. The reason might be that Azerbaijan quite extensively used internet connection and social networks for propaganda and influence operations campaigns and did not want to lose that channel.

Finally, the Azerbaijani agenda towards the NK actively explored the international stage. In particular, Aliyev and other officials were constantly blaming both Armenia and the leadership of NK in not following and avoiding to implement the Statement. Specifically, they were targeting the NK army and demanding to provide its de-armament (Hajiyeva 2022).

In the meantime, in violation of the Article 9 of the Statement in July 2021 Aliyev introduced the so called 'Zangezur corridor': "An Azerbaijani presidential decree, establishes the "Eastern Zangezur" economic zone, which comprises several districts (Kelbajar, Lachin, Kubatly, Zangilan and Jebail) of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone bordering Armenia. The term "Zangezur", first used by Azerbaijani President

Ilham Aliyev in mid-July, has irritated Armenia, which sees it as a claim on its territory” (International Crisis Group 2023).

However, the worst started in December 2022, when Azerbaijan started the NK blockade, which lasted till September, 2023 and ended with the ethnic cleansing of over 100 thousand Armenians from the non-recognized state (Azerbaijan: Blockade of Lachin corridor 2023). Despite the multiple calls for de-blockade, coming from the international community, including the ICJ decision (International Court of Justice 2023), the Azerbaijan not only continued and intensified the blockade but also successfully implemented the ethnic cleansing of the NK.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

Becoming more and more popular in contemporary international relations and security studies, the paper demonstrates that hybrid war occupied central role in Azerbaijani strategy towards Nagorno-Karabakh to gain full control over the non-recognized state, as well as provide its ethnic cleansing. The application of military and non-military measures allowed the Azerbaijani authorities to prepare the necessary measures gain full control of the NK and provide ethnic cleansing of its Armenian population. By exercising tools of hard power, influence operations and psychological turbulence, diplomatic and economic efforts, spreading fear and mistrust towards safe existence in the homeland, as well as under silence from international community, Azerbaijan managed to wholly depopulate NK, where Armenians lived for thousands of years. In particular, after the November 10, 2020 Trilateral Statement, the Azerbaijani authorities launched targeted operations of occupying strategic heights and locations, undermining the prestige of Russian peacekeepers, undermining faith towards the future among Armenians of the NK. The agenda was further developed by attacks towards critical infrastructure, namely gas and electricity supplies, specifically during cold winter time, and continued and supported by the full blockade, making people starving to death. This allowed creating the necessary ground to break the will for further struggle among the Armenians of the NK and leave their homeland, as soon as there is a chance.

Finally, Azerbaijan led a two-layer ‘game’ with the Republic of Armenia. On the one hand, it used force and threat to use force for multiple times, occupied some internationally recognized territories of the country. On the other hand, it quite actively participates in the peace talks and promises economic benefits for the Republic of Armenia, if there is a peace deal.

Ben Connable (2017) argues that “it is unrealistic to imagine irregular wars ending on clear, finite terms, so American strategist should stop trying to shoehorn irregular war planning into an ill-fitting end, ways, and means paradigm designed for conventional war.” He suggests that “U.S. and its allies should consider similar modifications to the strategic design process writ large, with the intent of improving military and governmental effectiveness, reducing costs, and avoiding the kind of political backlash that often undermines long-term military operations” (Connable 2017).

Given the above, the uncertainties and turbulence around Armenia-Azerbaijan normalization process leaves no space not to suggest deeply and comprehensively studying the Azerbaijani modifying ends, ways and means, adopting Armenia's strategies to the reality of hybrid wars.

### Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.46991/JOPS/2024.3.7.010>

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### Conflict of interests

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

### Ethical standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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