

Caucasus Edition

Journal of Conflict Transformation

AUGUST 2011 – VOLUME 8

ISSN 2155-5478

ANALYSIS IN THIS ISSUE

From Kazan to Nowhere: A Reality-Check for Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict?

by [Anahit Shirinyan](#) – page 1

Moving Forward from Kazan: Prospects for Peace Process

by [Jale Sultanli](#) – page 5

From Kazan to Nowhere: A Reality-Check for Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict?

by [Anahit Shirinyan](#)

Even though the latest Armenian-Azerbaijani talks held in the Russian city of Kazan, mediated by Russian president Dmitry Medvedev, have recorded zero progress towards the long-standing Nagorno-Karabakh peaceful resolution process, they should not be considered to have yielded no results.

The meeting attracted much attention from both societies and the international community mainly because of an information leak suggesting that a breakthrough document on the basic principles (known as the Madrid Principles) would be signed in Kazan. Indeed, unprecedented pressure^[1] was put on both sides by the mediating countries –Russia, France, and theUS — to finally make a decisive step forward this time.

However, the statement issued right after the meeting revealed nothing, as did many other statements made after similar meetings previously held. A photo taken by a mobile device of the official document was even tweeted^[2] by the Armenian Foreign Ministry spokesman, thus ironically showing the null value the signed document had against the hopes and concerns of many those holding their breath and wondering what would eventually be signed.

Yet the meeting inKazanhad another, very important result, though apparently not what Nagorno-Karabakh peace process optimists would have loved to see. In a more blatant manner than ever before, it demonstrated how far the conflicting sides are from making concessions and getting closer to the final resolution. This was especially vivid in Armenia, not least because the possible signing of a document reflecting the Madrid Principles would cause the first difficult concession to be made on

the part of Armenia: the basic principles imply the withdrawal of Armenian troops from the Armenian-controlled areas surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh, while these areas are perceived by the Armenians as an important security buffer-zone for Nagorno-Karabakh.

As news about a possible deal in Kazan started to loom, an internal debate started in Armenia on whether this is a step Armenia could “afford” to make. It was probably the first time over the several last years that the possibility of concessions was being so intensely discussed in Armenia. Almost all existing political powers, media, and the wider public criticized possible concession in the form of Armenian troop withdrawal. There was especially strong debate in the media and social networks, where journalists, analysts, and ordinary people were critical to any unilateral concessions that Armenia could make. Publications that appeared in the media even suggested that any Armenian president that would go for “betrayal” could face the fate of the late Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

In contrast, the expectations from the Kazan meeting were naturally more positive in Azerbaijan, since hopes were that the would-be document might finally lead to withdrawal of Armenian troops from the surrounding areas.

However, the “concession threat” is not only haunting for Armenia. Similarly, reactions could be harsh in Azerbaijan when it comes to more realistic debates about the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh. According to the same Madrid Principles, after the withdrawal of Armenian troops, international peacekeepers would be deployed there to guarantee the safe return of Azerbaijani refugees back to their homes in Karabakh. An interim status of Karabakh would be preserved until the final status is decided through a legally binding “expression of will.” Even though the very details and the form of the expression of will remain unclear for now (ideally, that would be a referendum), a look at the pre-war demographics of the region (i.e., predominantly Armenian) might give an idea about the possible outcome of a referendum. In this regard, further stages of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution based on the principles could be highly disappointing for people in Azerbaijan, as well as the Azeri community/refugees of Karabakh waiting to go back to their homes, who have been continuously assured now for 20 years that Karabakh will never be outside the borders of Azerbaijan.

It is because of these painful mutual concessions that many experts and politicians have been talking a lot about the need to prepare the two nations for them. However, as we can see, not only are the two sides not taking any steps in this direction, but little is also being done by the mediators that have predominantly focused their efforts on the state regimes in Armenia and Azerbaijan while completely neglecting the need for wider dialogue and understanding at the grassroots level. The reactions in Armenia demonstrated this very drawback that the whole Karabakh resolution process has been experiencing since the very beginning.

The Kazan “failure” thus demonstrates something that has been quite obvious before: the critical need for a more realistic understanding of the current situation — a *stalemate* notwithstanding the ongoing negotiations and optimistic expectations, and for a *reality check* that should be done in order to understand how feasible or not the signing of a peace document is at the moment. The following lines will particularly discuss the general prevailing attitude towards the concessions in Armenia, since, as discussed above, it is Armenia that is supposed to make the first painful concession based on the famous Madrid Principles.

There are a couple of factors in Armenia that practically make any concession from the Armenian side almost impossible, even if there is a will by the ruling authorities or external high-level diplomatic pressure to make those concessions.

The first one is characteristic of both sides, namely the **absence of any sincere constructive and pro-peace atmosphere** in the whole resolution process. It is needless to discuss the complete lack

of trust in the other side due to the continuing state propaganda and existing hatred towards each other among the two societies. Within this logic, the very withdrawal of Armenian troops without getting guarantees for Karabakh's independence is perceived by Armenian society as a *unilateral* concession. There are mainly security concerns among the Armenians, especially in light of the increased military budget in Azerbaijan, and the almost daily war rhetoric coming from Baku. In a situation where the sides approach the conflict resolution in zero-sum game terms, a possible withdrawal of Armenian troops is perceived as a "defeat" for the Armenian side and "victory" for the Azerbaijani side.

The second thing to consider — stemming from the above-mentioned point — is the **strong domestic opposition** against concessions. Though there is no lack of discussion on the Karabakh issue in Armenia, apparently there is a lack of a more serious internal debate on what Armenia is and is not ready to actually concede. While some realize the inevitability of mutual concessions, there are also hardliners that do not accept the possibility of any concessions at all. Among them are quite influential political powers and individuals, including the military, that directly participated in the Karabakh war and tend to claim that it is impossible to "give away what has been achieved with the price of blood," even the areas around Nagorno-Karabakh. Therefore, even with the best intentions, it is impossible not to take into account the factor of domestic opposition and underestimate how far this opposition could go.

What makes this opposition even stronger is the **lack of legitimacy** of the Armenian authorities that do not actually have the mandate of making vital decisions in the name of Armenian society. The post-February 2008 political crisis as a result of falsified elections, opposition protests, and clashes between demonstrators and police that resulted in 10 deaths still continue to dominate the political agenda of the country. This makes the authorities even more vulnerable to domestic pressure in terms of preserving their power they are so attached to. Any unpopular decision would add fuel to the crisis and lead to a revolution in the country, especially as all socio-economic prerequisites necessary for a revolution to happen in Armenia are there. In this context, no political will or international diplomatic pressure can change the general public stance on the Karabakh issue.

Since the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict involves more complicated relations in the region at large, such as those between Turkey and Armenia, the **Turkish factor** plays its role when it comes to making concessions. No matter how well we understand the natural interests of Turkey in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and Turkey's solidarity with Azerbaijan, its interference in the form of closing its border with Armenia has not only failed to result in anything, but it has made the Armenian official position, as well as the perceptions of society, even less flexible. There is a clear understanding in Armenia that the country's blockade is the price that Armenia had to pay for Karabakh's de facto independence. Yet people will not understand why this price had to be paid for so long only for Armenia to eventually give in and implement the "condition" for removing the blockade. This fact has created a kind of "no way back" situation where, when we also add the problematic Turkish-Armenian bilateral relations, a concession made to Azerbaijan is also perceived as a concession made to Turkey. This makes the situation around the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict even more complicated.

Finally, although all the above-mentioned factors can be attributed to the societies in both Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, there is a strong need for all sides, including the Armenian, to realize that the reconciliation process is not just about Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the **position of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic** must also be considered. The general perception in Armenian society is that whatever they think is good for Karabakh *is* good for Karabakh. It was this logic that made the ex-president of Armenia Robert Kocharyan to oust Nagorno-Karabakh in the negotiations back in 1998. Now *Azerbaijan* does not want to negotiate with Nagorno-Karabakh out of fear that this would mean de facto recognition of the enclave's independence. Though bringing Karabakh back into the negotiation process has been previously argued, it seems that the Kazan

“failure” is the critical point to make all sides realize that. Just before the meeting in Kazan, a number of Karabakh NGOs issued a statement about the unacceptability of any document based on the Madrid Principles that could be signed between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The statement made by the foreign minister of the unrecognized republic Georgi Petrosyan, who declared that the Madrid Principles are unacceptable to Stepanakert, was more alarming. This was actually the first such high-level statement from Karabakh denouncing the principles. Basically, Karabakh is not accepting the document that official Yerevan is using for its negotiations with Baku. Even though this reaction attracted little attention among all sides, including Armenia, how have the sides been negotiating over the last five years on something that Karabakh will not apparently accept when asked about *its* position?

The meeting in Kazan, thus, was an opportunity for a reality-check rather than a failure because it has inadvertently revealed the drawbacks of the Nagorno-Karabakh resolution process that have so far been either neglected or not fully recognized. However, it might actually mean that most of the peace process pursued all this time can be voided if some factors continue to be neglected. The number one factor is, surely, the impossibility to ignore the need to involve Karabakh Armenians in the negotiation process.^[3] There are also some other questions that arise, in particular: Are the Madrid Principles the best framework for the solution to the conflict? Do they provide a win-win solution for everyone? Does the current peace process reflect a sincere political will of all parties? Particularly, is it just a means to avert war at any rate or, on the contrary, an exercise to gain time in a war preparation effort?

The sincerity of both sides should therefore be questioned. In the case of Armenia, the question is how sincere official Yerevanis when it is negotiating something that clearly is not acceptable for the publics both in Armenia and Karabakh and thus it has no de-facto mandate to sign a deal on it. In the case of Azerbaijan, the issue is how sincere official Bakuis about going on with the Madrid Principles if it continues to reject any possibility of recognizing Karabakh’s independence one day. In other words, does Azerbaijan want all possible concessions from Armenia without being ready to make a concession itself? In this light, Armenians see no clear readiness on the part of Azerbaijan to make a concession that would make them feel comfortable about making their own concession. Thus, there is a clear need for wider public debate in both countries on the resolution framework based on the Madrid Principles.

And finally, the most important conclusion from the Kazan meeting that should be drawn is that an artificially imposed peace deal could cause more risks for war than the current status-quo since it might cause instability inside the conflicting countries (for Armenia, as previously discussed) as well as on the frontline.

The realization of these facts, however, are more alarming than anything, not least because they demonstrate an urgent need for radical revision of the whole peace process. Otherwise, the optimism of the mediators will not be justified in the near future as Armenia and Azerbaijan go on pretending they are negotiating for peace while preparing for war.

[1] For more on this, see “U.S., Russia, France press for progress in Karabakh peace talks,” ArmeniaNow, June 24, 2011, retrieved from http://www.armenianow.com/karabakh/30596/us_president_barack_obama_sargsyan_phone_call

[2] See <http://twitpic.com/5g78hb>.

[3] In this case Armenians might need to be ready to accept a possible involvement of some representatives of the Nagorno-Karabakh Azeri community into the negotiation process as well.

Moving Forward from Kazan: Prospects for Peace Process

by [Jale Sultanli](#)

Summer continues with increased attention and activity around the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the peace process. The international community intensified its efforts and encouragement around the June 24 talks in Kazan between Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian hosted by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. In the weeks leading up to the Kazan talks, several important statements were released, from the joint statement made by Barrack Obama, Medvedev and Nicolas Sarkozy at the G8 Summit in France to the words offered by the head of the European Union's Executive Commission Jose Manuel Barosso. Both statements urged the leaders to finalize and agree on the Madrid Principles — the peace process framework for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. A few days before the meeting, President Obama personally phoned Sarkisian and Aliyev to express his support for a breakthrough in the peace talks. Several op-eds and articles were published in leading world media outlets emphasizing the urgency and importance of an agreement. Even the Azerbaijani and Armenian presidents expressed what some media sources called “cautious optimism” for a breakthrough in the days before the meeting.

The results of the talks held in Kazan were much less than the promising optimism in the days leading up to it. The statement issued by the presidents did not mention more than a “mutual understanding on a number of issues whose resolution would help to create conditions for the approval of the basic principles.” In the days that followed, the international media echoed the disappointment of “failed” talks while the local media in the two countries covered a number of blame statements from officials and commentators alike.

Despite the obvious setback in the Kazan talks, Medvedev, supported by the United States, continued to push for talks in an effort to use the window of opportunity that will close as elections approach in both countries. To keep the momentum, the Minsk Group Co-chairs made public statements with positive assessment of the Kazan talks and emphasized the work on the Madrid Principles as a priority task in the peace process.^[1] Such a positive evaluation was also echoed by a number of Azerbaijani officials, including Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov who said to the Russian news agency Interfax that Kazan was not a failure and that certain progress was achieved. As part of a wider effort to support the peace process, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton phoned the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents while the Minsk Group Co-chairs visited Baku and Yerevan to meet with the two presidents. Last week, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov delivered a letter to Aliyev and Sarkisian from Medvedev with a new proposal on the peace talks. Both Azerbaijani and Armenian presidents already responded to Medvedev's proposal although the content of both the proposal and the responses remain confidential.

But what are the real chances for progress in the peace talks right now? Is engagement and the efforts of international players enough to produce results in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict? Is there a political will to make such progress on the negotiating sides, and what are the some of the major obstacles facing the peace process?

The usual suspects and Russia's lead role

One thing the Kazan talks demonstrated was that even the strongest encouragement from the biggest players, Russia and the United States, is not enough to produce progress in the peace talks. The peace process has other important prerequisites that need to be met in order for a breakthrough to be achieved.

Interestingly, currently Russia is the only key player in the region taking an active role of mediator. The United States lacks a coherent, consistent strategy in the region and its policies are often held hostage to domestic politics — manipulated by the Armenian Diaspora lobby and now recently joined by Azerbaijan’s oil lobby — which undermine development of a sound policy in the Caucasus^[ii].

Turkey, despite its ambition to assert its influence in the region and become a key player, has not been able to do so due to its complicated relationship with Armenia. The recently failed rapprochement process between Armenia and Turkey left Turkey in no position to play a lead role, and even if the process moves forward, it would likely be a long process. The European Union’s weak policy and lack of institutional and political capacity also does not put it in a strong position to play active role — something the region could benefit from. In this environment, the international community can only rely on Russia to lead the process. Whether Russia is fit to do the job is another question. Its lead in negotiating the peace talks is a double-edged sword. While Russia’s involvement and key role in achieving and maintaining peace in the region is vital, its role as a broker is likely to be perceived with caution and suspicion by both sides, even if the breakthrough is achieved. Despite the improved relations between Azerbaijan and Russia, its interest and alliance is and most importantly perceived to be with Armenia. This makes Russia poorly fit to play a neutral and trusting third party to broker peace in an atmosphere that is already full of mistrust and animosity.

Political will, political realities

The OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs’ statement following Kazan calling for the demonstration of political will pointed to the obvious factor prevalent in the Kazan talks and in the peace talks generally — that there is no commitment on the end of both sides towards the process.^[iii] Despite both sides’ interest in resolving the conflict, neither side has demonstrated a serious commitment — a readiness to make difficult decisions and deal with consequences. An imbalance in political will also exists, dictated by interests of the parties and political realities at home.

There is more urgency and yearning on Azerbaijan’s side to move the peace progress forward by signing the Madrid Principles, as this would expedite the withdrawal of Armenian forces from the territories around Nagorno-Karabakh and a gradual return of the internally displaced. This was evident in the President Aliyev’s tweets following the most recent statement by the OSCE Minsk Group, whose statements were surprisingly in a “peace-oriented” tone compared to the usual statements about the return of territories through military means. Although the usual positional and some negative statements about Armenians were made, Aliyev also said that Azerbaijan is interested in constructive negotiations and is not involved in the peace talks for the sake of imitating negotiations. He called to use this window of opportunity and clarified the first steps upon signing of the Madrid principles, citing the return of five territories, the provision of temporary status and a functioning corridor with Armenia. The usual threat of a military solution predominant in his statements was not mentioned. On a similar note, Deputy Foreign Minister Araz Azimov said in an interview to a Turkish newspaper that “the war would start only with a provocation from Armenia,” which is a change from the aforementioned rhetoric about a military solution to the war^[iv]. Foreign Minister Mammadyarov in an interview with the Interfax Russian media agency positively assessed the Kazan talks and proposed bypassing the signing of the Madrid Principles to immediately start negotiating on the actual treaty. This recent discourse among Azerbaijani top officials shows that despite Azerbaijan’s earlier concerns with the Madrid Principles, it is eager to change the status quo and willing to be flexible with the process.

This willingness is dictated by Azerbaijan’s interest in changing the status quo and returning the territories and is enabled by a less challenging domestic political environment in comparison with Armenia. Aliyev doesn’t face a major challenge on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue at home — neither from the opposition that is very weak nor from the public.

In Armenia, the situation is different and there is less interest in changing the status quo. Having gained control of Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding territories called “the buffer zone” by Armenia, it is reluctant to sign the principles, which requires the withdrawal from the surrounding territories as the first step. This reluctance stems from two factors: first, there are genuine security concerns as these territories are seen as a buffer zone that would maintain the security of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh and removing this would require a level of trust and confidence in the other side, none of which exists. Giving up this “safety zone” would also be an unpopular move within Armenia and among Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians, because these territories are increasingly referred to as “liberated territories” indicating a shift in public thinking that has happened during the stalemate. Given that the status of Nagorno-Karabakh will not be determined at the time of withdrawal from these territories, this move would also remove a valuable negotiating chip from the Armenian side. Finally, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians have been eager to stick to the status quo with the aim of using the stalemate and time as a way of legitimizing the unrecognized republic.

In the context of already existing security concerns and resistance to change in the status quo, Sarkisian is also operating in a difficult political climate. He has to deal with considerable domestic opposition that has been challenging his authority and appearing weak in negotiations or making concessions — which is how the signing of the Madrid Principles is perceived — will further decrease his legitimacy.

In addition, Sarkisian has to also consider the voices of Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians who are more openly demanding “a seat at the table” as a Washington Post article put it^[v]. Although Azerbaijani politicians (and experts) deny that Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians have a voice in decision making, Armenians have long been reiterating that Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians have independence of decision making and often differing opinions from official Armenia. There is also support among the Armenian public for Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians’ participation in the decision-making over their own fate. And while they are left out of the negotiation process, Sarkisian has to also negotiate internally before conceding to any agreement.

All these factors show that Sarkisian has very little space to maneuver, and signing the Madrid Principles could be extremely damaging for him politically.

Finally, a joint problem and major obstacle that both leaders face is the lack of readiness in both societies to compromise that makes any agreement a hard sell and implementation impossible. Military and hateful rhetoric of the past few years have created a climate of hostility and distrust and contributed to constructing an enemy image. This discourse has led to the belief among the public majorities of both countries that war is the only solution that would settle the conflict.

Issues I outlined above show that the prospects for signing the Madrid Principles and peace remain feeble even as Moscow and international mediators have increased their attention to the conflict. The Azerbaijani and Armenian leadership as well as the Minsk Group Co-chairs need to proceed cautiously as they continue the peace talks.

Futile meetings that are not meant to produce results, and the blame rhetoric that happens after, further undermines the public’s trust, not only in the negotiation process but also in their belief that peace is possible. “Failed” talks further contribute to the image of ‘intractability’ of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, reinforce negative messages about the other (with the help of statements from leaders after the meetings) and undercut any progress that might be made in secret negotiations. While it is essential to continue negotiations and keep them publicly visible, too many setbacks and negotiation secrecy may have an accumulative negative effect, thereby worsening the environment.

Following Kazan, mediators and other international officials reinstated the Madrid Principles as the main document for the peace process. Having a roadmap for a peace process is crucial to success,

and the Madrid Principles emerged after years of difficult work. Given that the results of Kazan and Medvedev's new proposal still remain to be seen, it is now the time of "wait and see." However, if the sides fail to agree, repeated failure to achieve an agreement on the Madrid Principles raises a question about reconsidering it as a key document for the peace talks or coming up with more creative solutions for the process. Interestingly, an article by Tom de Waal published on July 28 described a different scenario from the one discussed in this article. According to de Waal, it was Azerbaijan that blocked the deal due to its disagreement with a number of points in the document while Azerbaijan was ready to sign. If true, we can conclude that the Madrid Principles is even farther from being an acceptable document to sides. Even if Sarkisian was ready to sign at the Kazan talks, he will still need to get Karabakh Armenians to agree – something the recent history shows is not likely to happen in the current climate. Despite the reversal of the roles at Kazan meetings the larger circumstances and the roadblocks remain the same in Nagorno Karabakh conflict making Madrid principles a difficult instrument for moving the process forward. Discarding the Madrid Principles will be a setback for the peace process, then again, engaging in more problem-solving and developing alternative solutions might be more productive than chasing a document that does not have a chance of being signed.

It is time to bring more attention to the most neglected and equally important issue in the peace process: the environment in which the negotiations are taking place and lack of involvement of Azerbaijani and Armenian societies and Armenian and Azerbaijani communities of Nagorno Karabakh. Without addressing this shortcoming of the peace process, any document even one with fewer issues than the Madrid Principles will not be implementable. The mediators and international players need to put significant emphasis in encouraging and supporting such measures and endorsing more peace oriented rhetoric. This might shift the environment positively towards peace – where deals may not only be made but will also stick.

[i] <http://www.tert.am/en/news/2011/07/21/osce/>

[ii] Brookings Institute Report US policy. http://www.brookings.edu/articles/2001/02foreignpolicy_hill.aspx

[iii] OSCE statement issued on July 5, 2011. <http://www.osce.org/mg/80642>

[iv] <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=top-azeri-official-warns-of-fresh-war-in-caucasus-2011-07-18>

[v] "Nagorno Karabakh Wants a Seat at the Table", Washington Post, July 8, 2011

ABOUT JOURNAL OF CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

The Journal of Conflict Transformation is an independent online publication that provides a forum for scholars, practitioners, policy analysts, starting researchers and bloggers to analyze as well as discuss the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and issues related to it. The purpose of the publication is to contribute to sustainable resolution of the conflict by expanding scholarship on the subject and encouraging diverse perspectives and analysis.

The Journal welcomes contributions from established researchers and is also committed to include the voices of emerging analysts and writers within the peace process. This inter-disciplinary online publication accepts scholarly and analytical articles, as well as reflective writings, that contribute to the better understanding of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Armenian-Azerbaijani relations and suggestions for improvement of the peace process and positive transformation of inter-societal relations. The articles can analyze the conflict as a whole or any factor that potentially has implication for the conflict and/or its resolution from the perspective of political science, economy, sociology, anthropology, social psychology, collective memory studies, comparative history, ethnic conflict, identity-conflict, conflict resolution, peace studies, mediation and facilitation, conflict transformation and comparative case studies.

The publication is supported by grants from the Democracy Commissions of the U.S. Embassy to Armenia and the U.S. Embassy to Azerbaijan and the Norwegian Atlantic Committee. Views expressed in the publication are those of its authors. The publication is established and managed by the Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation.