

# ARMENIAN-AZERBAIJANI RAPPROCHEMENT: FACING A HURDLE

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*The ongoing negotiations between Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders that have been realized through separate Russian and EU intermediaries since 2021 have become more intense lately. The United States has also increased its diplomatic support in 2023. Two top-level meetings between Ilham Aliyev and Nikol Pashinyan have been held through Russian facilitation in Sochi and Moscow (31 October 2022 and 25 May 2023) and four top-level meetings have been hosted by the President of the EU Council, Charles Michel, in Brussels since April 2022 (22 May 2022, 31 August 2022, 14 May 2023, and 15 July 2023). In addition, the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders met twice in Prague and Chisinau on 6 October 2022, and 1 June 2023, on the margins of the first and second summits of the European Political Community respectively.*

**Gulshan Pashayeva\***

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\*Dr. Gulshan Pashayeva is a Board Member at The Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center) in Baku, Azerbaijan.

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**O**ne year ago, in a piece titled “Towards Armenian–Azerbaijani rapprochement: Initial steps,”<sup>1</sup> I evaluated the initial developments towards the rapprochement undertaken by the governments of both Azerbaijan and Armenia, and Armenia and Türkiye. The piece ended on a positive note highlighting the first direct phone conversation between Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers (Jeyhun Bayramov and Ararat Mirzoyan) in nearly three decades. The conversation took place on 11 April 2022, and they discussed various issues relating to the future peace treaty, the establishment of the Joint Border Commission, and humanitarian issues.

Now, a year later, after the recent talks between Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev held in Brussels on 15 July 2023, it is useful to return to this topic and take a closer look at the current status of the Azerbaijan–Armenia and Armenia–Türkiye normalization processes.

The ongoing negotiations between Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders that have been realized through separate Russian and EU intermediaries since 2021 have become more intense lately. The United States has also increased its diplomatic support in 2023. Two top-level meetings between Ilham Aliyev and Nikol Pashinyan have been held through Russian facilitation in Sochi and Moscow (31 October 2022 and 25 May 2023) and four top-level meetings have been hosted by the President of the EU Council, Charles Michel, in Brussels since April 2022 (22 May 2022, 31 August 2022, 14 May 2023, and 15 July 2023). In addition, the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders met twice in Prague and Chisinau on 6 October 2022, and 1 June 2023, on the margins of the first and second summits of the European Political Community respectively.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken also organized a joint meeting with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference on 18 February 2023, to advance the bilateral peace negotiations between the two states, as no meetings at the top level or at the level of foreign ministers had been held since the Prague meeting on 6 October 2022. At the same time, the U.S. has continued its efforts in this direction and facilitated bilateral talks at the level of foreign ministers on May 1–4 and June 27–29 at the George P. Shultz National Foreign Affairs Training Center in Arlington, Virginia. On both occasions, the Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers, Jeyhun Bayramov and Ararat Mirzoyan, met with U.S. Secretary Anthony Blinken and Assistant to the President and National Security Adviser Jake

1) “Towards Armenian–Azerbaijani rapprochement: Initial Steps,” *Transatlantic Policy Quarterly*, 14 April 2022. <http://transatlanticpolicy.com/blog/84/towards-armenian-azerbaijani-rapprochement-initial-steps>

Sullivan in Washington. As a result of these bilateral talks, it was announced after the second meeting that the ministers had reached an agreement on additional articles of the draft bilateral “Agreement on Peace and Establishment of Interstate Relations.” They also acknowledged that the positions on some key issues require further work.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, four meetings have been held within the framework of the Joint Border Commissions led by Azerbaijani and Armenian deputy prime ministers Shahin Mustafayev and Mher Qrigoryan without any intermediaries with the aim of addressing all questions relating to the delimitation of the border and how best to ensure a stable situation (24 May 2022, 30 August 2022, 3 November 2022, and 12 July 2023).

At the same time, talks between Armenia and Türkiye about the normalization of relations started, without preconditions, in 2021, after the Second Karabakh War, when both countries appointed special representatives for the normalization process: Ambassador Serdar Kılıç and Deputy Speaker of the Armenian Parliament Ruben Rubinyan. These were the first direct negotiations between Armenian and Turkish officials in over a decade.<sup>3</sup> Their first meeting was held on 14 January 2022, in Moscow, and further meetings were organized on February 24 and May 3, and on July 1 of 2022, in Vienna.

In February 2022, reciprocal charter flights between Armenia and Türkiye resumed. Due to the bankruptcy of Atlasjet, the airliner operating flights between the two states in 2020, there were no direct flights between Türkiye and Armenia for over two years.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, the Turkish and Armenian ministers of foreign affairs, Mevlut Cavusoglu and Ararat Mirzoyan, met on the sidelines of the Antalya Diplomacy Forum on 12 March 2022.

On 1 July 2022, the special representatives for the normalization process between Türkiye and Armenia, Serdar Kılıç and Ruben Rubinyan, agreed “to enable the crossing of the land border between Türkiye and Armenia by third-country citizens visiting Türkiye and Armenia respectively” as well as “commencing direct air cargo trade between Türkiye and Armenia at the earliest possible date.”<sup>5</sup>

2) “US supports continuation of talks between Azerbaijan, Armenia - State Department,” Trend.az, 10 July 2023. <https://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3771371.html>

3) “Turkey–Armenia border opens for the first time in 30 years for earthquake,” Commonsplace.eu, 11 February 2023. <https://www.commonspace.eu/news/turkey-armenia-border-opens-first-time-30-years-earthquake-aid>

4) “Passengers happy about flights resuming between Türkiye,” aa.com.tr, 2 February 2022. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/passengers-happy-about-flights-resuming-between-turkiye-armenia/2492391>

5) “Press Release Regarding the Meeting of the Special Representatives for the Normalization Process Between

On 1 January 2023, Türkiye and Armenia lifted barriers and began direct air cargo amid normalization talks between the special representatives of both countries.<sup>6</sup>

Armenia also provided humanitarian aid during the devastating earthquake that occurred in Türkiye in February 2023. Five Armenian aid trucks passed over the Margara–Alican border bridge, which was opened for this specific purpose.<sup>7</sup>

Overall, four major highlights within the Azerbaijan–Armenia and Armenia–Türkiye normalization processes can be distinguished for the past year.

*First*, on 22 May 2023, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan made it clear that Armenia is ready to recognize Azerbaijan's territorial integrity of 86,600 square kilometers. He has also explicitly stated that Azerbaijan's 86,600 square kilometers includes 'Nagorno-Karabakh' and Azerbaijani enclaves.<sup>8</sup> This was, in fact, Pashinyan's first clear public statement acknowledging Azerbaijani sovereignty over so-called 'Nagorno-Karabakh.' Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev positively assessed this statement of the Armenian Prime Minister officially recognizing the parameters of the territory of Azerbaijan, including Karabakh and the Azerbaijani enclave villages, but added that "now it's time for the same words to be confirmed on paper, signatures to be made and relations to be established."<sup>9</sup>

However, Nikol Pashinyan, in the above-mentioned statement, also noted that recognition of Azerbaijani territorial integrity is inseparable from the rights and security of the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh, and they should discuss it in direct dialogue with Baku, but for these negotiations it is necessary to create an international mechanism.<sup>10</sup> Azerbaijan has repeatedly rejected this stance because it considers Karabakh its internal matter and does not want to discuss it with any other country.

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Türkiye and Armenia," Ambassador Serdar Kılıç and Deputy Speaker of the Armenian Parliament Ruben Rubinyan, 1 July 2022. [https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no\\_-212\\_-turkiye-ve-ermenistan-normallesme-sureci-ozel-temsilcileri-nin---gorusmeleri-hk.en.mfa](https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-212_-turkiye-ve-ermenistan-normallesme-sureci-ozel-temsilcileri-nin---gorusmeleri-hk.en.mfa)

6) "Türkiye, Armenia Start Direct Air Cargo Trade," <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/t%C3%BCrkiye-armenia-start-direct-air-cargo-trade-64230>

7) "Turkey–Armenia border opens for the first time in 30 years for earthquake," Commonsplace.eu, 11 February 2023. <https://www.commonspace.eu/news/turkey-armenia-border-opens-first-time-30-years-earthquake-aid>

8) "The territorial integrity of Azerbaijan includes Nagorno-Karabakh" and other statements by Pashinyan," Jam-news.net, 23 May 2023. <https://jam-news.net/pashinyan-on-the-topics-azerbaijan-russia-csto/>

9) The Meeting Dedicated to the Socio-Economic Results of the 6th Month of This Year was held Under the Chairmanship of Ilham Aliyev, 11 July 2023. <https://president.az/az/articles/view/60429>

10) "The territorial integrity of Azerbaijan includes Nagorno-Karabakh" and other statements by Pashinyan," Jam-news.net, 23 May 2023. <https://jam-news.net/pashinyan-on-the-topics-azerbaijan-russia-csto/>

According to Thomas de Waal, in terms of recognizing the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, the incumbent Armenian government has gone much further than previous administrations. However, he adds that “Yerevan is doing this under clear international pressure, Armenia is being told to come to terms with the fact that the idea of Karabakh’s independence has disappeared. But, on the other hand, it is also clear that no power in Armenia will ever completely abandon the people of Karabakh.”<sup>11</sup>

*Second*, on 23 April 2023, Azerbaijan established a border checkpoint at the entrance to the Lachin road. This can be considered “the most significant tactical achievement for Baku since the end of the Second Karabakh War in 2020.”<sup>12</sup> This border checkpoint has been established “in accordance with the internal legislation of Azerbaijan as well as the international rules to prevent illegal activities and to ensure transparency. Over the past few months, hundreds of Armenian residents have been allowed to pass through this checkpoint in a well-regulated and transparent manner”.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, this step has not only contributed to fully controlling the Armenian traffic to and from the Karabakh region, including halting the illegal exploitation of natural resources, the illegal flow of weapons, military equipment and landmines, the rotation of illegal armed formation, as well as the illegal transportation of third-party citizens into the sovereign territory of Azerbaijan, but has also enabled Azerbaijan to restore its last remaining section of the border with Armenia, which had been in a state of limbo since the occupation of Lachin, the first adjacent district located outside of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO), in 1992

*Third*, on 6 February 2023, the border between Türkiye and Armenia was opened for the first time in 30 years to allow Armenian aid trucks to pass to the Turkish regions affected by the devastating earthquake.<sup>14</sup> Although this was for a short time, it had an enormous symbolism for Turkish–Armenian rapprochement. However, it is well known that Türkiye closed its border with Armenia due to the occupation of Kalbajar, the second adjacent district outside the NKAO seized by Armenian armed forces in April 1993. Thus, without any tangible progress in the Armenian–Azerbaijani normalization process, it is difficult to expect any serious positive results

11) “Baku uses ‘Coercive Diplomacy’ against Yerevan,” Thomas de Waal, Jam-news.net, 3 July 2023. <https://jam-news.net/thomas-de-waal-on-armenian-azerbajjani-talks/>

12) Fuad Chiragov, “Azerbaijan Establishes Border Checkpoint Along Lachin Road,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 20 Issue 78, 15 May 2023. <https://jamestown.org/program/azerbaijan-establishes-border-checkpoint-along-lachin-road/>

13) Commentary on the Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation of 15 July 2023. No:393/23. <https://mfa.gov.az/en/news/no39323>

14) Turkey–Armenia border opens for the first time in 30 years for earthquake aid,” Commonsplace.eu, 11 February 2023. <https://www.commonspace.eu/news/turkey-armenia-border-opens-first-time-30-years-earthquake-aid>

in Turkish–Armenian rapprochement, because these two processes are inextricably linked to one another.

*Fourth*, the Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s attendance at Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s inauguration ceremony following his re-election in Ankara on 3 June 2023, is an extraordinary event in Turkish–Armenian relations. However, this decisive step by the Armenian prime minister was negatively assessed by the Armenian Diaspora as, in their opinion, it discredited their lobbying efforts in the USA.<sup>15</sup>

However, existence of certain disagreements between the sides impedes both Azerbaijan-Armenia and Armenia-Türkiyenormalization processes so far.

The *fate of the Armenian population* who reside in that part of Azerbaijan’s Karabakh economic region that is currently under the control of Russian peacekeepers is the first key issue in this context.

Azerbaijan is ready to reach out and engage in direct negotiations with Karabakh Armenians. In fact, the first meeting between the representatives of Azerbaijan and representatives of the Karabakh Armenians was held on 1 March 2023, at the headquarters of the Russian Federation’s peacekeeping contingent in Khojaly. Later, on March 13 and March 27, the Presidential Administration of the Republic of Azerbaijan issued invitations on Twitter addressed to “representatives of the Armenian public in Karabakh” to talks in Baku on “reintegration” and the “implementation of infrastructure projects.” The Karabakh Armenians reaffirmed that they are ready to meet with Azerbaijani representatives in Khojaly and insisted on Russian peacekeeping mediation.<sup>16</sup>

However, Azerbaijan wants to directly negotiate with the local Karabakh Armenians without any third-party mediation. As President Charles Michel underlined it the EU encourages “direct dialogue between Baku and representatives of Armenians living in the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast”, and such “dialogue should provide multi-needed confidence for all those involved”.<sup>17</sup>

15) Harut Sassounian, “Pashinyan’s Ankara Visit used by Turkish officials to undermine Diaspora Efforts,” Panorama.am, 4 July 2023. <https://www.panorama.am/en/news/2023/07/04/Pashinyan-Ankara-visit/2861615>

16) “Azerbaijan Again Proposes Reintegration talks with Karabakh Armenians in Baku, rejected by Stepanakert,” Karabakhspace.commonspace.eu, 28 March 2023. <https://karabakhspace.commonspace.eu/news/azerbaijan-again-proposes-reintegration-talks-karabakh-armenians-baku-rejected-stepanakert>

17) Press remarks by President Charles Michel following trilateral meeting with President Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Prime Minister Pashinyan of Armenia, 15 July 2023. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/07/15/press-remarks-by-president-charles-michel-following-trilateral-meeting-with-president-aliyev-of-azerbaijan-and-prime-minister-pashinyan-of-armenia/>

However, the existence of *members of illegal Armenian armed detachments* that are still entrenched in Karabakh and de facto governing structures (the so-called ‘Parliament,’ ‘ministries,’ etc.) existing in Karabakh are among important pending issues that create serious obstacles to the start of direct interaction between Baku and Khankendi. Azerbaijan demands the withdrawal or disarmament of the former and the latter's dissolution.

Another controversial question within this issue is related to the new Armenian narrative that has evolved around the idea of a “humanitarian crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh” and a fictitious accusation against Azerbaijan that it intends to carry out ethnic cleansing of Karabakh Armenians.<sup>18</sup> Through this “old new narrative,” the Armenian side is trying to misrepresent the current situation. On the one hand, they would like to keep the old format of interaction that was used between Armenia and so-called Nagorno-Karabakh before the Second Karabakh War, and is therefore trying to remove the ‘Lacin’ border checkpoint in order to get unimpeded access to Karabakh. However, although Armenia requested on 12 May 2023, the modification of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) 22 February 2023 Order in the Armenia v. Azerbaijan case concerning the “Application of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination” to include removal of the Lachin border checkpoint, the ICJ unanimously denied this request on 6 July 2023.<sup>19</sup>

It is clear that, despite the two and a half years that have passed since the Second Karabakh War, it is still difficult for the de facto leaders of separatist forces in Karabakh to readjust to a new political reality. At the same time, there is no consolidated vision about the Armenian–Azerbaijani normalization process in Armenia. Pashinyan’s recognition of Azerbaijani sovereignty over Karabakh has also triggered shock, ire, and outrage among the main opposition forces in Armenia as well as representatives of the Armenian diaspora.

However, in order to come to a peace agreement with Azerbaijan, more consistent work should be done not only by the Armenian leadership, but also by the representatives of the international community especially in the direction of facilitation of the smooth integration of the Karabakh Armenians into Azerbaijan, because there is no doubt that Karabakh as a whole, including its lowland and highland parts, is firmly situated within Azerbaijani sovereign territory.

18) “Pashinyan Says No Alternative to Peace Treaty with Azerbaijan Despite Baku’s Ongoing Provocations,” Hetq.am, 6 July 2023. <https://hetq.am/en/article/157820>

19) Press Release No:381/23 on the decision of the International Court of Justice of 6 July 2023, on unanimous denial of Armenia’s request, <https://mfa.gov.az/en/news/no38123>; Application of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (Armenia v. Azerbaijan) Request for the modification of the Court’s Order indicating a provisional measure. No. 2023/40.

It is undeniable that despite almost 30 years in a state of limbo, this geographic region and people currently residing there must be firmly aligned with Azerbaijan and should be associated with the legal and administrative structures of the Azerbaijani state. In this context, special mention should be made regarding the statement made by Kristina Kvien, the U.S. Ambassador to Armenia. “Commenting on the views that it will be impossible to live peacefully if Nagorno-Karabakh remains part of Azerbaijan, Kristina Kvien said the U.S. believes and hopes that it is possible, that all parties should make joint efforts to make this possible, that this is the right approach”.<sup>20</sup>

Azerbaijan’s willingness to provide humanitarian supplies to Karabakh Armenians via Aghdam should be considered as one of the positive humanitarian gestures in this context. This issue was also underlined in the press remarks by President Charles Michel following trilateral meeting with President Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Prime Minister Pashinyan of Armenia on 15 July 2023.<sup>21</sup>

The second disagreement between the sides is related to the connectivity issues such as *unblocking transportation and economic links in the region*. Despite the establishment of a trilateral working group on this specific topic based on the provisions of the 11 January 2021 Trilateral Statement, and the fact that twelve meetings of this working group have been held, the outcome still seems elusive. However, the positions of the sides are somehow getting closer. This issue was also discussed during the recent meeting in Brussels and the sides agreed that modalities of future transport arrangements will respect the principles of sovereignty, jurisdiction and reciprocity. It was also noted that the construction of the railway connection should be undertaken forthwith, and the EU would be ready to contribute financially in this context.<sup>22</sup>

*Border delimitation* has also been a difficult topic which needs a special attention. However, at the recent meeting in Brussels “both leaders reconfirmed their unequivocal commitment to the 1991 Almaty Declaration as a political framework for the delimitation” and agreed to intensify and accelerate the work of border commissions.<sup>23</sup>

20) "US Ambassador to Armenia on Chances of Karabakh Armenians surviving in Azerbaijan: We Believe It Is possible," News.am, 4 July 2023. <https://news.am/eng/news/768688.html>

21) Press remarks by President Charles Michel following trilateral meeting with President Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Prime Minister Pashinyan of Armenia, 15 July 2023. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/07/15/press-remarks-by-president-charles-michel-following-trilateral-meeting-with-president-aliyev-of-azerbaijan-and-prime-minister-pashinyan-of-armenia/>

22) Press remarks by President Charles Michel following trilateral meeting with President Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Prime Minister Pashinyan of Armenia, 15 July 2023.

23) Press remarks by President Charles Michel following trilateral meeting with President Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Prime Minister Pashinyan of Armenia, 15 July 2023.



On the other hand, some disagreement between Armenia and Türkiye also exist.

The *unveiling of the so-called 'Nemesis' Monument in Yerevan* on 25 April 2023, has been negatively perceived in Türkiye. As a result of this act, Türkiye “closed its airspace for Armenian planes, and the Turkish foreign minister later demanded that Armenia dismantle the monument, otherwise threatening to take unspecified additional actions against Armenia.”<sup>24</sup>

Today Azerbaijan tries to use both diplomacy and force to achieve some progress in its efforts towards peace. However, Armenia is still stuck between myth and reality. A drastic shift is required to move from myths related to ‘imagined communities’ defined by kinship and history to new, pragmatic relations with Azerbaijan and Türkiye. But past narratives, stereotypes, grievances, phobias, and geopolitical implications create hindrances for ‘crossing the Rubicon,’ that is, passing a point of no return for the time being.

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24) Dr. Benyamin Poghosyan, “The Other Side of the Armenia–Turkey Normalization Process,” *Armenianweekly.com*, 11 May 11 2023. <https://armenianweekly.com/2023/05/11/the-other-side-of-the-armenia-turkey-normalization-process/>