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**Армянский Центр Стратегических и
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MANVEL SARGSYAN

Senior Analyst

Armenian Center for National and International Studies

**Diplomatic Commotion Surrounding
the Mountainous Karabagh Problem**

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Diplomatic Commotion Surrounding the Mountainous Karabagh Problem

Ilham Aliev, the president of Azerbaijan, visited Moscow on September 16, 2008. According to information sources, the Russian president Dmitry Medvedev sought assurance that Azerbaijan would not move to resolve the Karabagh problem by military means. It became known, moreover, that Medvedev also had proposed that the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents hold a meeting in Moscow. It was obvious, too, that president Serzh Sargsyan was ready for such meeting.

The aforementioned sequence of events gained significance in light of the sudden reactivation—after the events in Georgia—of the Mountainous Karabagh problem. Everybody took part in the commotion, but Russia's position still remains somewhat incomprehensible. Its position was formerly expressed through Sergey Lavrov's statement issued on September 4. The statement maintained that the Mountainous Karabagh problem has nothing in common with that of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In other words, no clarifications were made.

But time is running out. Initiatives for discussion on Karabagh—whether in New York or between Armenian and Azerbaijani ministers of foreign affairs—are parallel realities now. Furthermore, there is a vague discussion on the possibility of including the Turkish foreign minister in these talks. And, for that reason, we now can speak about the crystallization of the two distinct visions of resolution: Russian and American. It is not yet clear, however, as to what extent these initiatives are devoted to the maintenance of prior principles of conflict resolution.

One factor unifies both initiatives: their initiators are the authorities of the aforesaid countries. The OSCE Minsk Group—the traditional diplomatic mechanism—does not appear in these initiatives as of yet. Moreover, the joint activities of its co-chairs are paralyzed. This is evident by the separate visits which the co-chairs of this intermediate structure paid to the conflict region. It is noteworthy that each visit begins in Karabagh. The US co-chair, Matthew Bryza, came to Mountainous Karabagh Republic (MKR) on September 12 while the French co-chair, Bernard Fassier, arrived on September 16.

Fassier explains why the co-chairs visit the conflicting sides separately: “This is not my first separate visit. If we could, we would have come together. Our schedules were fairly busy and could not correspond. But we hope very much to be in New York together and to organize a meeting among the ministers.” What is more, he thoroughly coordinated, together with Matthew Bryza and Yuri Merzlyakov, the current trip to MKR which in itself bespeaks the existence of serious problems connected with the Minsk Group.

This is more apparent in the words of Matthew Bryza who, in Stepanakert, did not hide that the US secretary of state had sent him to MKR. Bryza's statements had a clearly expressed objective: to let the conflicting sides know of the risk of changing the talks' format. Judge for yourselves: “The precept of territorial integrity really exists, but if an agreement is reached among the conflicting sides, everybody must accept it and also include the other precepts of international law and diplomacy. The agreement must be acceptable for all sides.” In addition, he expressed his confidence in the possibility of such an agreement. “If it were impossible, I would not have been here,” he said.

If we take into consideration that the issue refers to the changing of the boundaries by way of talks, the abovementioned US position becomes quite unusual. And that is why it is necessary to see a purely political meaning in this. It is no coincidence that the almost-forgotten Paul Goble, who recently characterized the Mountainous Karabagh problem as “Stalin's heritage” and advised the US to return the precept of “self-determination” to official politics, appeared at that very moment. In any case, the new pivotal changes in the fates of Abkhazia and South Ossetia had to have their

resonance on the politics of the empires, in terms of Mountainous Karabagh. The United States, in particular, is searching for new ways to keep the conflict zones under its control. This is expressed in the parallel actions of promoting new precepts and attempting to maintain the process in the framework of the Minsk Group.

The attacks, from different sides, on the talks' format in the frames of the OSCE Minsk Group started after the Georgian events in August. Abdullah Gul, the Turkish president, criticized the Group saying that its 17-year efforts to settle the conflict peacefully have not yielded any results. Gul's visit to Armenia on September 6 became an occasion for Turkey to carry out independent activities regarding the Karabagh issue. An opportunity arose to begin "managing" the normalization of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. And after his ensuing visit to Azerbaijan, on September 11, Gul announced: "Armenia has promised to release Azerbaijan's occupied lands." The fact that Turkey's standing as regards to this issue immediately was accepted by Azerbaijan is evident in the following statement by president Ilham Aliiev: "There are certain reassuring factors and reassuring information alike."

In fact, it seems Turkey and Azerbaijan are ready to take the settlement process out from the frames of the OSCE Minsk Group and assist in the emergence of a new diplomatic format with their active involvement. They know that at present it is not easy for Russia to continue collaboration with the US in the framework of the Minsk Group. Accordingly, one can play around with this fact. This is the case even more so because Turkey's initiative to sign the Pact on Security and Collaboration in the Caucasus is on the agenda. The Karabagh issue likewise can be included into this initiative and their terms can be offered to Russia. This initiative in itself poses an additional opportunity for Turkey and Azerbaijan to maneuver.

Somehow it seems that the Karabagh issue faces the problem of inclusion into different configurations of international initiatives. The nature of diplomatic settlement can depend only on the potential success of the initiatives. Now, based on unique situations, the conflicting countries must make their decisions. President Bako Sahakyan of MKR reached a decision at once: "It is early to talk about a change in the format of the OSCE Minsk Group... The OSCE Minsk Group format has not yet exhausted itself..." It seems Armenia also is in favor of the existing format, but it favors Mountainous Karabagh's independence as well. At the same time, Armenia has not rejected Russian president Dmitry Medvedev's initiative. The initiative toward a meeting in New York among the ministers of foreign affairs likewise will not be rejected. This is Armenian complementarity.

It is rather difficult for Armenia to act otherwise. Russia recently signed a declaration with Azerbaijan on strategic partnership in which the position regarding Mountainous Karabagh is not so promising for Armenia. The agreement included not only a commitment to Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, but also a readiness from the sides jointly to fight against any encroachment upon the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the two countries. But this was on July 3—that is to say, before the Georgian crisis. The Russian position perhaps has changed in many aspects. But how can we know? The time has created more uncertainties in the actions of Russia. So far, it is evident that Russia wishes to remove its Western opponents-rivals from the diplomacy geared toward resolving the Mountainous Karabagh issue. But the West does not surrender. It seems, therefore, that Karabagh's problem must, for the time being, swim in the currents of these different initiatives.

Manvel Sargsyan

Senior Analyst

Armenian Center for National and International Studies (ACNIS)