

THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT AS A SPECIFIC EXAMPLE OF ASYMMETRIC CONFLICT

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Abstract:

The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh is one of the most serious conflicts in the post-USSR area. The aim of the article is to present this conflict in the asymmetric paradigm. Features of the conflict have been characterized respectively and the conflict has been interpreted based on the analysis of the legal status of the conflict sides as well as the goals, strategies and resources the sides' disposition. Referring to the asymmetric conflict paradigm allows for a new interpretation not only of its nature, but also of causes of the current state and the uncertainty regarding its further development.

Keywords:

asymmetric conflict, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Caucasus, Armenia, Azerbaijan

INTRODUCTION

Ethnopolitical conflicts remain to be one of the biggest challenges for the security in the post-USSR area. The reason for their occurrence in the current shape is long-term suppression in the Soviet country of mechanisms of articulation and aggregation of social demands as well as channels of communication (according to Karl Deutch's term) connected to the purposeful policy of the Soviet leaders resulting in ruling through conflict in ethno-heterogeneous parts of the USSR. As a consequence of *perestroika* and progressing disintegration of the USSR at the end of the 80s a wave of separatism emerged, which included the union republics (primarily the Baltic republics, the Ukrainian SSR or the Georgian SSR), subjects of lower rank in the administrative-territorial structure of the USSR (Abkhaz ASSR, Chechen-Ingush ASSR, Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast among others), as well as smaller ethnic groups aspiring

to gain their own territorial units as a part of the Soviet Union (Nogais Republic, Kumyk Republic).

The most spectacular sign of the unsolved problem in some of these conflicts is the continued and relatively stable existence of proto-states (Pridnestrovie, Abkhazia, Southern Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh) [11] deprived of common recognition since the beginning of the 90s. These are low intensity conflicts, but of highly unpredictable future, with characteristics of asymmetry. The aim of the article is to present the specifics of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and its characteristics based on the asymmetric conflict paradigm [6]. The Karabakh conflict remains to be the key problem for the security in the South Caucasus, significantly affecting the domestic and foreign politics of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Referring to the asymmetric conflict paradigm allows for the new interpretation not only of its nature, but also of the causes of the current state of “neither war, nor peace” as well as the high uncertainty regarding its further development.

The article consists of two major parts: the presentation of qualities characteristic for this conflict and its interpretation as an asymmetric conflict based on the analysis of the legal status of the conflict sides, the goals, strategies and resources belonging to the sides. The available literature on the subject and knowledge earned during the study visit in 2014 and talks with experts on the security of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia have been used during the work on this article.

1. SPECIFICS OF THE KARABAKH CONFLICT

The origins of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict reach the beginning of the twentieth century, when the nationalistic discourse was rising in both nations. The Nagorno-Karabakh [3] people representing both nations became a participant in tensions and conflicts that gained an armed character towards the end of the USSR's existence and were accompanied by forced and spontaneous exchanges of population. The enclave of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast composing the Azerbaijani SSR, dominated by the Armenian population, sought to become a part of the Armenian SSR, and in case of the fall of the USSR in September 1991 announced its sovereignty. This decision was confirmed by a referendum in which 99.9% of voters¹ supported independence. The arms conflict lasted from November 1991, as a result of which almost the entire territory of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast found itself under the Armenian control together the passage located between the oblast and Armenia with a strategically important, populated by the Azeris, city of Shusha and the so-called Lachin Corridor. Defeats of the Azerbaijani forces forced her to agree on ceasefire under the OSCE patronage in May 1994, which has been in place until today (regularly violated by both sides, last time in April 2016) [28].

The Karabakh conflict has an ethnic and political character. The Azeris and the Armenians claim their right to rule over the territory at issue, referring to historical arguments

¹ The Azeri population did not take part in the referendum and this fact is used as an argument against the recognition of the formation of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic as an expression of the common will of the population that lived there in the 80s and the 90s.

and supposed former settlement in this area [37]. Such arguments on both sides are supported by references to the international law: the Azeris refer to the right to maintain the territorial integrity, the Armenians - the right of nations to self-determination.

Due to the fact that the separatist province has not been officially included in the territory of Armenia and any country in the world has not recognized her as a factual independent entity, the Karabakh conflict is sometimes described as engaging “two and a half sides”[38]. It is justified by close cooperation between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh on the political, military and economic grounds as well as Erivan representing the interests of the proto-state in the international arena.

Unlike other separatist conflicts in the post-Soviet territory, in case of Nagorno-Karabakh Russia plays a relatively smaller role, while in Southern Ossetia, for example, she takes up a role of a patron of centrifugal pursuits. In Nagorno-Karabakh the role of a patron is played by Armenia and Russia’s role in the conflict is indirect, through military alliance with Armenia (participation in the Collective Security Treaty Organization) and possession of a military base on her territory (102 military base in Giumri) among others. Russia is mostly interested in keeping the *status quo* in the conflict, which is supposed to serve as a tool for influence in the domestic and foreign politics of Azerbaijan and Armenia. Among the Karabakh Armenians, pro-Russian attitudes are dominant and the use of the Russian language is more common in everyday life than in Armenia.

In the conflict zone the international disengagement forces are not present. Although in the first half of the 90s Russia expressed her will for dislocation of the contact sphere of both sides, the OSCE, the countries constituting the so-called Minsk Group and Azerbaijan, did not agree [4]. As a result, since 1994 the front line has been sustained, along which the opponents expanded their defense infrastructure and minefields, substantially hindering a possible attack by the infantry among others.

Since the armistice that took place in Bishkek in May 1994, the state of “neither war, nor peace” can be used to describe the conflict, which allows classifying it as a conflict of low intensity. Azerbaijan regularly negates the possibility of keeping the present state and declares her will to restore the territorial integrity, also including the use of armed forces. Regular exchanges of fire and even clashes have occurred on the front line, in which several dozen soldiers have died on both sides. So far, the Azeri side has initiated them, probably in order to check the combat readiness of the enemy and her own capabilities, resulting, however, in the defeat of the Azeri side². It is possible that these factors are a substantial factor restraining Azerbaijan from a full offensive campaign.

² The example was the clash of 3-4 March 2008, when, due to the tense atmosphere after the election in Armenia, the Azeri forces decided to check the alertness of the Armenian forces. In the fights next to Lewonarch the attacking Azeri forces were defeated – around 15 soldiers dies, while the losses on the Karabakh side were limited to 2 wounded.

2. DEFINITION OF THE ASYMMETRIC CONFLICT

Although the concept of asymmetry in the international relations has not been used for a long time, especially in the context of post-Cold War conflicts, the phenomenon has been known for centuries. Asymmetry, in this context used as an abstract notion, resulting from a comparative analysis of the (power) potential of states, is defined as a lack of symmetry, balance, reciprocity and as a mutual relationship between the subjects, which lacks such features. The phenomenon of an asymmetric conflict as a heuristic tool is a paradigm resulting from the development of the concept of asymmetry on the interstate ground [35].

On the ground of war studies, the concept is used in studying local conflicts, chosen issues of those conflicts as well as in studying global politics. In this frame, it is treated more broadly than a disproportional conflict or imbalance of forces taking part in a conflict, as well as a “dynamic and multidimensional phenomenon, conflict, the pivotal characteristic of which remains the difference in the distribution of key resources between the fighting sides [21], their mutual “disproportionality, incompatibility” [16]. In this paradigm, separatist conflicts, civil wars of the center versus periphery character and antiterrorist campaigns are usually analyzed. Fundamentally, they are initiated by the weaker side, associated with a non-state actor, who is interested in the change of relations with the stronger side, a state actor [29]. The stronger side seeks to keep the asymmetry, the hierarchy of relations and possibly the removal of the conflict’s origin. The stimulus for conducting research in this paradigm was constituted by failures of leading countries in peripheral wars in the so-called third world, mainly the failure of the United States in the Vietnam War [15]. The asymmetry of fighting sides and resources in their disposition (military, human, economic, symbolic) as well as their approach to the conflict have also been linked to its nonlinearity. An asymmetric conflict does not necessarily need to be associated with the lack of frontline, dispersion of the enemy, reaching for terror or information warfare. They may be used, however, not as a source of the asymmetric conflict that is connected to a difference in goals and means of their realization by conflict sides, but by its materialization [24] [35]. The set of these characteristics, constituting the asymmetry of enemies, is supposed to justify what it would paradoxically seem as a defeat of stronger sides in a conflict with weaker ones.

The interpretation of causes of a success of the weaker side and failure of the stronger side in an asymmetric conflict refers to the following issues. First of all, different perceptions of the conflict by participating sides. For the dominant side it is a peripheral war and for the weaker side it is a war for physical survival. As a result, the weaker side is able to perform a more successful social mobilization around the goals of the conflict as well as fight for the victory in a longer and more persistent way. Usually, the weaker side – unlike the stronger one – is not torn by internal disputes and doubts regarding the sense and manner of the conflict. Secondly, different methods of fighting are used. The weaker side aspires to eliminate the quantitative and qualitative advantage of the opponent by leading irregular, partisan fights, which are also fostered by better knowledge of the topography of the disputed area and relying on terror attacks at the

enemy's rear. For organizational-technical reasons and under pressure of public and international opinion, the stronger side, the state one, does not, at least officially, use such methods and techniques of fighting. Thirdly, aims of the conflict and success in it are interpreted differently. For the weaker side, the absence of failure is a success; hence it fights aiming for annihilation, weariness of the enemy as well as in order to arouse an antiwar climate in the stronger side's society. The stronger side is usually weakened by a lower degree of consolidation of the society around the matter of the conflict and presence of pacifist groups. Fourthly, the international community has an influence on the conflict, which can put pressure on the state subject to a greater extent, following the demand to end the bloodshed as soon as possible.

3. DIFFERENT STATUS OF THE SIDES IN THE KARABAKH CONFLICT

In case of Nagorno-Karabkh, the different status of the conflict sides is a key factor for considering it as asymmetric, determining the mutual relations between the sides together with their goals and strategies. The Karabakh conflict flared up together with secessionist demands of the Nagorno-Karabkh Autonomous Oblast, populated mostly by the Armenians and a part of the Azerbaijani SSR. During the factual disintegration of the USSR at the end of August 1991, the Republic of Azerbaijan declared independence, which was proceeded by the declaration of the Karabakh autonomous leaders about her coming into the composition of the Armenian SSR. The Karabakh separatism was therefore *irredentism* – its goal was the incorporation of the disputed area into the neighboring union republic of the USSR. Despite the military success of the Karabakh separatists supported by the Armenian leaders, the annexation did not take place. It is explained by the will not to burden Armenia with the odium of an aggressor and a state aiming to revise the commonly accepted borders. Since the beginning of 1992 the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic proto-state has functioned as a factual independent entity with the attributes of sovereignty, although any member of the UN, even Armenia, have not recognized it. The Nagorno-Karabakh Republic is characterized by a stable political system, with social legitimacy, and a relatively democratic political system [3], which, however, does not mean that its leaders are perceived as a valuable partner in the talks about the peaceful regulation of the conflict.

The Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh owes its stability, as well as the victory in the war in the years 1992-1994, to a versatile support from Armenia [13]. The political elites of the modern Armenia are to a large degree constituted by emigrants from Nagorno-Karabakh, which guarantees mutual loyalty of the two subjects and their common interests [17]. Armenia is the guarantor of peace and security of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic – in May 1994 in Bishkek she signed the armistice documents (together with representatives of Azerbaijan and the defense army of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic) and till this day indirectly remains a side in the conflict. A possible renewal of military operation would with no doubt result in a direct participation of the Armenian army in the war.

The opponent of the Armenians representing both Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic is Azerbaijan, a commonly recognized state, who, before the conflict, had had a policy aiming to change the ethnic structure in the disputed area as well as limiting

the bonds of the Armenians with their homeland and the access to the Armenian culture (these facts became the cause of voicing separatist demands) [3]. Currently – due to the possession and export of natural resources, oil and gas – Azerbaijan has at her disposal a repeatedly higher budget than Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. It has a non-trivial influence on the state of the army and the Azerbaijan's armament, which deepens the asymmetry of the involved sides.

In the light of the above, the interpretation of the Karabakh conflict as engaging “two and a half sides” may consist of:

- treating the conflict as occurring between recognized states: Armenia and Azerbaijan with the participation of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic – in this case it is not an asymmetric conflict;
- treating the conflict as engaging Azerbaijan and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic operating with the support of Armenia, who is not formally engaged in the conflict. In this case the conflict can be perceived as asymmetric, primarily due to the asymmetry of the status of the fighting sides, although with its own unique specifics.

4. DIFFERENT GOALS AND STRATEGIES OF THE SIDES

The Karabakh conflict is an example of a zero sum conflict – the success of one side means the defeat of the other because until now a model of conflict regulation accepted by both sides has not been worked out. It proves the rule that the asymmetry of strength of enemies engaged in a conflict conditions the asymmetry of their interests [1].

Azerbaijan imperturbably takes a position voicing the necessity of restoring the territorial integrity, particularly the return of the Azerbaijani SSR borders from 1991, in which existed a Karabakh enclave that had a status of an autonomous oblast. For this purpose, she refers to the international law: the UN Charter and the resolution of the UN General Assembly, which condemned the occupation of the western part of Azerbaijan by the Armenians. The opponent, including Armenia, is presented as an aggressor that occupies not only the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast, but also adjacent areas (including the so-called Lachin Corridor and a belt of land bordering Iran). While recognizing the conflict as inspired by secessionist attitudes of the Armenians and demanding liberation of territories adjacent to the former autonomy remain to be the constant demands of Azerbaijan, in case of the future status of the disputed area she allows, after a prior return of control, some form of autonomy of a cultural character (though not political). The course of the armed stage of the conflict in the years 1992-1994 and the defeat of Azerbaijan urge her to construct military strategies other than only offensive, which have evolved in the last 2 decades characterized by their own dynamics. In the face of avoiding military actions on a bigger scale since 1994 against the Armenians, the strategy of the Azerbaijan's actions is based on:

- engaging diplomatic means – aspiring to confirm the territorial integrity of the state, recognizing Armenia as the aggressor guilty of ethnic cleansings of the Azeris by the international community, using violence against civilians in

Nagorno-Karabakh as well as not allowing for the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic;

- putting psychological pressure on Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. Azerbaijan, with the support of Turkey, maintains a full blockade of the enemy. The blockade of energy resources and food to Armenia in the beginning of the 90s very seriously disorganized people's lives, today this factor, however, play a much smaller role. Since the end of the 90s, Azerbaijan has really significantly increased her spending on armament, threatening to use the army in order to realize her goals. Until this day such threats have not been materialized and the clashes on the front line provoked by the Azeris have ended in their defeats. In the face of an unstable geopolitical situation, Azerbaijan can count on one-sided concessions from the Armenians, although there have not been such signals until now.

The Karabakh proto-state uses methods of petrification of social and political institutions, following the strategy of accomplished facts. Its goal is to maintain the current *status quo*, so to confirm the military success from the years 1992-1994 and to gradually accustom the international community with the existence of independence statehood in the disputed area. Although the authorities do not explicitly voice it, the entity creates together with Armenia a factual single country with federal features (where the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic lacks some attributes of a sovereign state). Confirming the sovereignty of the proto-state from Azerbaijan and "raising" its status in the international community's opinion is based on the following strategies:

- referring to the international law in the area of the right of states to self-determination and the examples of Kosovo, Eritrea and South Sudan among others. In this context, the Armenians indicate that the affiliation of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast to the Azerbaijani SSR was an arbitrary decision of the Soviet leadership in the second decade of the twentieth century and was based on the interests of the totalitarian regime, not the local population. It indicates that the secession of the enclave from Azerbaijan took place based on the USSR's law that was in place, before the Azerbaijan's declaration of independence and in this context the Azeri side becomes the aggressor that breaks the international law in case of not using violence in order to resolve conflicts;
- strategy of the accomplished facts based on building and reinforcing the institutions of the proto-state, which the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic remains to be. In this case, the process of state building does not diverge from similar processes occurring after 1991 in the whole area of the former USSR. With her ethnic homogeneity and low level of sociopolitical divisions, Nagorno-Karabakh seems to be the most stable political entity in the South Caucasus [3] with regard to domestic conditions. It is accompanied by a functioning, relatively stable democratic political system and the existence of pluralistic and rivaling party system. The argument referring higher standards of coherence to the human rights and rules of democracy in the Nagorno-

Karabakh Republic than in Azerbaijan is used in order to justify the impossibility of putting the disputed area under the jurisdiction of Baku. These facts are supposed to serve as a confirmation of the necessity to incorporate the authorities of the de proto-state into the peace process as a full-fledged member;

- lobbying in order to recognize the independence of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic in different societies, especially among Western state elites. The Karabakh issue is treated in this context more broadly, as an element of the Armenian martyrdom and her tragic relations with neighbors. The irredentist movement in Nagorno-Karabakh in the 80s and 90s in the Armenian narration is presented as the continuation of the chains of events such as the Young Turks exterminations, massacre in Sumgait and creation of independent Armenia. At the same time, actions are being taken in order to recognize the independence of the proto-state in these countries, in particular US states, where local Armenian diaspora communities are influential³.

In the conflict, Armenia takes a unilateral stance with the interests and goals of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic⁴. She declares that she will accept every resolution of the conflict, which would be beneficial for the proto-country residents. At the same time, the Armenian authorities repeat the most important for the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic demands: rejection of the possibility of return of the disputed area under the jurisdiction of Azerbaijan, maintenance of the land corridor between Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic – so a factual disagreement to leaving all occupied territories as well as granting it an international guarantee of security [18].

Goals and strategies of the conflict sides cancel each other out, which makes the peace process under the auspices of the OSCE unproductive and it is difficult to expect any significant change occurring in this matter [10].

5. DIFFERENT RESOURCES IN THE DISPOSITION OF THE CONFLICT SIDES

The sides of the conflict have different territorial, population, economic, military and social resources in their disposal as well as the ability to use external support, which substantially influences the asymmetry. Azerbaijan, in fact, controls a territory of 7.8 thousand square kilometers (officially, including the conflict area, 86.6 thousand square kilometers), Armenia – 29.8 thousand square kilometers, the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic – 11.7 square kilometers. The population of Azerbaijan is 9.6 million and growing, of Armenia – 3 million and decreasing, only 146 thousand people populate the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic and the number is growing. Economic indicators show an important difference in the potential. The GDP at Purchasing Power Parity of Azerbaijan is 165 billion USD, of Armenia – 24 billion USD and Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh – around 1.5 billion USD. The GDP at Purchasing Power Parity per capita

³ In 2014, for example, the independence of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic has been recognized by California and Louisiana, at the same time calling the federal authorities to take a similar step.

⁴ Postulating for negotiating the future of Nagorno-Karabakh with Azerbaijan by the president of Armenia Levon Ter-Petrosyan in 1998 became the reason for a coup d'état and his loss of power.

equals: in Azerbaijan – 17.7 thousand USD, in Armenia – 8.1 thousand USD and in the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh – around 2.5 thousand USD. In Azerbaijan and Armenia the raw material sector has the biggest share in the GDP (61% and 46% respectively); however, the Azerbaijan's economy has the most raw material character. In the microscopic economy of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic the income of a similar degree is delivered by the industrial and service sectors, but the share of the agriculture remains relatively high (24.5%).

Since the armistice in 1994 the sides of the conflict have significantly increased their armament levels, partly modernized their armies, although they are still based on Soviet and post-Soviet equipment, while spending an important share of their budget on it. It mainly applies to the armed forces of Azerbaijan, which considerably increased their combat potential in comparison to the years 1992-1994 [18]. Currently, in terms of all quantitative indicators regarding the army, including the number of soldiers, financial contributions and equipment, Azerbaijan is on top of Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. The army of Azerbaijan officially consists of almost 67 thousand soldiers, therein 57 thousand in the infantry, 8 thousand in the air forces and 2 thousand in the navy. Unofficially, it can hold up to 100 thousand and have 300 thousand of reservists in its disposition [27].

The Armenian army officially consists of 47 thousand soldiers, therein 3.5 thousand serving in the air forces. Unofficially, it has up to 50 thousand soldiers and 210 thousand reservists. The army of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic consists of about 20-25 thousand soldiers, while all men can serve in the reserve (in practice – up to 30 thousand). Its strength lies in the organizational structure, conducive for conducting defensive battles in mountainous areas, easiness of dislocating units, good knowledge of the topography of the conflict area and the experience of commanders gained during the armed stage of the conflict in the 90s.

Azerbaijan has an uncompromising advantage in terms of armament spending. In 2010 2.8 million USD were spent on it, which accounted for 2.9% of the country's GDP, while Armenia spent 400 million USD, which accounted for 4.2% of the GDP. No data regarding the armament expenditures of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic are available.

In terms of the military equipment on the conflict sides, Azerbaijan also has an advantage, although it is mainly a quantitative one. The disproportion in the air forces is the most visible one. According to *World Air Forces 2015*, Azerbaijan has around 42 airplanes and 72 helicopters (according to other sources it is around 105 combat aircrafts and 35 helicopters). Its basis is constituted by MIG-29 and SU-25 multi-purpose aircrafts. It is also in possession of a single MIG-21 and a single transport aircraft Il-76 as well as training machines L39. There have been talks with China about purchasing multi-task aircrafts JF-17 Thunder, but there is no information about introducing such machines into the army. The primary helicopters in the Azerbaijani air forces are – according to *World Air Forces 2015*, modernized combat MI-25's (about 18 pieces) supported by transport MI-17 and KA-32. In 2010 24 pieces of MI-35M have been ordered from the manufacturer. The anti-aircraft defense is based on approximately 30 surface-to-air missiles S-125 Neva (after modernizations), single S-200, S-300 and about

100 S-75 systems (with modifications). The air force of Armenia consists of 11 combat pieces of SU-25, a few transport Il-76's and training L-39's. The helicopter fleet is made of 15 MI-25's and 20 transport MI-8's [30]. The army of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic has 2 SU-25 aircrafts, 4 MI-24 helicopters and 5 pieces of MI-8. The anti-aircraft defense of Armenia has around 100 S-75 and similar systems and a few S-300 rocket launchers.

The basic equipment of the Azerbaijani land forces consists of 350 T-72 tanks, modernized with the help of Israel and all together around 200 T-55 and T-90 tanks. It also has 300 infantry fighting vehicles BMP-1/2/3 and several hundred armored personnel carriers (mainly BTR-70 and BTR-80). It also has at its disposal up to 200 pieces of surface-to-air missiles, including OTR-21 *Tochka*, BM-30 *Smerch* or BM-21 *Grad*. The land forces of Armenia have around 170 tanks, primarily T-72 and T-80, around 150 infantry fighting vehicles BMP-1/2/3 as well as approximately 300 armored personnel carriers (mainly MT-LB and BRDM-2). The defense army of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic owns 370 tanks, up to 460 armored personnel carriers, up to 50 rocket launchers BM-21 *Grad* and a new, closer unidentified anti-aircraft system.

According to the *Global Firepower* ranking, Azerbaijan is on the 64th place among the classified countries with the rate of 1.5221; Armenia – 74th place with the rate of 1.8231 (the lower the rate the higher the military power of a country) [2]. The analysis of the data, to a large degree estimated, indicates that in terms of the land forces Azerbaijan does not have a significant advantage over the enemy. It seems doubtful, however, that the Armenians would be ready to use the land forces for offensive purposes. The territory currently occupied by the Nagorno-Karabakh forces is described by the separatists as optimal from the military point of view [39]. Strengthening of the front line allows for effective defense of the owned territory. Azerbaijan, due to strengthening and minefields on the enemy's side, would probably also not decide to undertake land operations without a prior air attack, which would lead to the destruction of the Armenian forces.

Experts note that factors substantially weakening the Azerbaijani army are the commonness of corruption and nepotism in its ranks, which fundamentally reduce military's morale. The embodiment of such a negative phenomenon was Safar Abiev [7] performing the function of the Minister of National Defense in the years 1995-2013. Similar problems, also present in the Armenian army, do not significantly affect the functioning of the Armenian forces. The success in the war in the 90s, awareness of disposing of less resources and necessity to oppose pressure from the enemy's side serve to maintain high morale. The army of protection of Nagorno-Karabakh makes up for technical shortcomings by the level of training and mobility of units, which make it, in the opinion of some experts, the fittest army in the South Caucasus [25].

The sides of the Karabakh conflict refer to the external environment and the engagement of the international factor for the achievement of their own goals to a different degree and in a different way. Due to the geopolitical importance of the South Caucasus and the participation of world powers in the area, relations with Russia and Western countries, especially the United States, are important for the conflict sides.

Azerbaijan maintains the policy of symmetrical distancing away from Russia and countries of the West. It results from the interests of the President Ilham Aliyev's regime, who tries to petrify the undemocratic political system and at the same time avoid an excessive dependence on Russia. It is possibly due mainly to natural resources and the sale of them to Western countries, which makes them have a liberal policy towards the Azerbaijani government. In order to enhance her position in the international arena and gain support in terms of the Karabakh issue, Azerbaijan works with countries from the Organization of Islamic Collaboration, especially with Turkey who is also in a long-term conflict with Armenia, and does not maintain international relations with her.

Due to lack of recognition of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, her interests and the influence of the external environment is absorbed by Armenia. She conducts specific foreign politics described in terms of complementarity [19]. It is based on maintaining and balancing close relations with Russia, who remains the guarantor of the Armenian security, as well as with the countries of Western Europe and the United States. On the territory of Armenia, a Russian 102 army base is located, which, like the very membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization, significantly influences the level of security of the country. The success of the complementarity policy is influenced by the undoubtedly numerous Armenian diaspora in countries that which lead the Minsk Group of the OSCE, responsible for conducting the peace process. There is about 1.5 million Armenians in Russia, more than 1 million in the US and approximately 500 thousand in France. Due to the Armenian diaspora in the US, the Karabakh proto-state is the only unrecognized political entity in the world that benefits annually from a financial support from the US. The influence of the diaspora has been visualized by the adoption by the UN General Assembly of the 62/243 resolution *Situation in the Occupied Territories of Azerbaijan* in March 2008. The co-leaders of the Minsk Group spoke against it, claiming that it had a unilateral character and did not serve the peace process in the current situation. The appeal calling Armenia to stop the occupation included in the document has remained with no answer, confirming the helplessness of the international community and the specified attitudes of the members of the Minsk Group [13].

Due to this strategy, Armenia tries to ensure the *status quo* in the Karabakh conflict as well as to neutralize a potential threat from Turkey and Azerbaijan. It means that generally on the international arena the Armenians have a higher influence, mainly of the informal character, which to a certain degree contributes to maintaining the situation in the Karabakh conflict. It did not prevent Azerbaijan from pushing a few resolutions supporting her aims for regaining the territorial integrity on the forum of the UN General Assembly.

CONCLUSION

The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh is one of the most serious and complicated ethno-territorial conflicts in the post-Soviet area. The analysis of the conflict based on the asymmetric conflict paradigm allows for indicating its most substantial features. It is a conflict in which opposing sides have a different legal status, goals and strategies of

their implementation. Azerbaijan uses the tactics of psychological pressure, threats of military action renewal, therefore intimidation of the enemy, while the proto-state of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic and allied Armenia carry out actions, which can be defined as deterrence of the enemy.

As a result of the dissimilarity of goals it is a zero-sum conflict: there is no possibility of reaching a solution that would satisfy demands on both sides. The course of the conflict, its current state of "neither war, nor peace" as well as unclear perspectives of the future course can be interpreted in categories of asymmetry, mainly in the scope of resources belonging to the sides in the conflict. In the short and mid-term, the resumption of regular fighting between the sides should not be expected, whereas further increase of psychological pressure and intensification of actions in the diplomatic sphere is possible. Surely, the imbalance of potential between the sides will grow and therefore the asymmetric character of the conflict will deepen.

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