

THE EU AND AZERBAIJAN: TIME TO TALK TOUGH

By launching a military offensive in Nagorny Karabakh, President Aliyev forfeited the trust of Europeans. Azerbaijan's status as a transport hub cannot be a reason for the EU to go soft on Baku. September 26, 2023

The events of the last week are triggering a debate on the need for a deep reset of Europe's policy toward Azerbaijan. It's all about Karabakh, but it's even bigger than that.

On September 19, Azerbaijan used [military force](#) to retake the Armenian-populated territory of Nagorny Karabakh, crossing a red line drawn for it by both the European Union and the United States.

The consequences are [cataclysmic](#). The eventual casualties will run into the hundreds. Fearful for their future, thousands of Karabakh Armenians are now making a mass tragic exodus from their homeland to Armenia.

Many in Brussels and Washington feel shocked and betrayed by Azerbaijan's use of force. Up until the last minute, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev was reportedly assuring high-level interlocutors—including European Council President Charles Michel and U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken—that he would not launch a military operation.

At the United Nations, German foreign minister Annalena Baerbock, [said](#) it most clearly: "Baku broke its repeated assurances to refrain from the use of force, causing tremendous suffering to a population already in dire straits."

An egregious aspect of this is that Azerbaijan was getting pretty much everything it wanted at the negotiating table. After years of deadlock and many equivocations, the Karabakh Armenians had agreed to talks with Baku, which would have resulted in a deal on some kind of integration into Azerbaijan. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan had acceded to the international norm in [acknowledging](#) Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, including Nagorny Karabakh.

So it can't be business as normal. The human rights issue is now crucial. Baku [says](#) that it is in full control of the region and that remaining Armenians have nothing to fear. Yet that is not how bitterly contested ethnic conflicts are fought, when armed groups are sent into civilian areas. There many [reports](#) of abuses by Azerbaijani soldiers coming from Armenian sources.

Having thus far rejected efforts to send in an international [monitoring mission](#) to the region, Baku bears a great responsibility here. It is not so easy to hide war crimes in the digital age. If atrocities are confirmed in Baku's war of choice or remaining Karabakhis suffer abuse, there should be calls for prosecution of the abusers concerned, along with cases in the European Court of Human Rights.

The geopolitical implications of this are also significant.

The fact that Western actors were blindsided strengthens the supposition that Aliyev cleared his military assault in advance with Moscow—which then [failed to condemn](#) Baku—and is coming into closer alignment with Russia. That is all the more relevant as the [next big issue](#) is the planned

transport route across Armenia to Azerbaijan's exclave of Nakhchivan. Russia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey all have a shared interest in imposing their own version of what the latter two call the Zangezur Corridor with as little Armenian control of the route as possible—and perhaps by force. Aliyev has also started to use the irredentist term “Western Azerbaijan” to describe Armenia. Its southern Syunik province, also known as Zangezur, had a substantial Azerbaijani population in the early twentieth century. Last December Aliyev designated the creation of a “[West Azerbaijani community](#)” and said “they must be able to return to their native lands.”

Aliyev qualified that this return would happen “peacefully.” But after what happened in Karabakh, how seriously can reassurance be taken?

There is a context, of course, that Azerbaijan has been a victim too. Azerbaijanis have compelling stories to tell about the 1990s that many do not know—and which I tried to tell in my book [Black Garden](#). In the first Karabakh war, both sides committed acts of ethnic cleansing, but Azerbaijan undoubtedly came off worse. Hundreds of thousands of displaced people driven from lands captured by Armenian forces deserved sympathy—probably more sympathy than they often got internationally.

That's a reason to avoid the [civilizational discourse](#) that still lingers in some European circles, especially in France and on the Christian right, who say Azerbaijanis are somehow inherently genocidal.

But after the 2020 war, when Azerbaijan recovered its lands by force, the “occupation” excuse lost its relevance. When statesmanship was called for, President Aliyev stayed aggressive. In May this year he gave a bellicose [speech](#) in which he told the Armenians that they should either “bend their necks” in defeat or face worse consequences.

Aggression continues on the home front, too. Azerbaijan's democracy [ranking](#) with Freedom House is rock-bottom. In July the well-known economist and opposition activist Gubad Ibadoghlu, linked to U.S. universities and the London School of Economics, [was arrested](#) on palpably bogus charges and is now in ill health in detention.

Baku's main sales pitch in the West is about business and geography—its status as the only country located between Russia and Iran with east-west oil and gas and transport infrastructure as a link in the so-called [Middle Corridor](#).

In Western capitals this frequently produced a silo effect. One part of the establishment—in the Brussels case, Michel and the European External Action Service—would press for peacemaking and resolution of the conflict with Armenia. Another—the European Commission in Brussels—would hold talks with Baku on energy and transport projects.

In an ill-conceived act of public diplomacy in July 2022, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen [went to Baku](#), struck a deal with the EU's “partner” Azerbaijan to provide extra volumes of gas to the EU, and did not even mention the words “conflict,” “peace,” or “Armenia” in public.

Azerbaijan will always be a transport hub, but there are two caveats to the pitch. First, experts conclude that the EU gas deal is [very unlikely](#) to deliver the promised high volumes of gas—a declining asset in the green transition anyway. To achieve export levels of more than 3 or 4 billion cubic meters would require upgrading infrastructure and confronting the often-overlooked fact that Russia and Iran are also stakeholders in the South Caucasus gas pipeline.

Secondly, connectivity and conflict are inextricably linked. The Middle Corridor route, running from China through Central Asia to Europe via the South Caucasus, is a multi-country route that also involves Armenia. It needs regional cooperation to work—and almost certainly funding from Western governments and international financial institutions.

In short, it is time for the EU to talk a lot tougher with Azerbaijan.

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