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# Patron-Client Relations in the Post-Soviet Area in the 21st Century—The Case Study of Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic

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## Abstract

The aim of the article is to analyze Armenia's limited capacity to function as a patron of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR). In the article, the author focused on the analysis of 3 levels of relations on the line Yerevan-Stepanakert: (1) the political dimension of bilateral relations; (2) the economic dimension of bilateral relations; (3) the security policy dimension, in particular the significance of the last phase of the armed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh (2020) for the further shape of relations. In addition, the features that distinguish Armenia's relations with the NKR from Russia's relations with the de facto states for which it is a patron are highlighted. The results prove that mid-level states have a limited capacity to be a patron for de facto states, including being a guarantor of their survival.

**Keywords:** Eurasia; ethnic conflict; nation-building; international relations; de facto states

## Introduction

One of the implications of the dissolution of the USSR was the emergence of de facto states (alternatively referred to using the interchangeable terms: quasi-states or para-states) in the post-Soviet space. An example of such a geopolitical entity is the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR), with numerous attributes characteristic of a state. Its survival in the present form for many years was determined by the cooperation with the Republic of Armenia. The article focuses on analyzing 3 levels of Yerevan-Stepanakert relations: (1) the political dimension of the bilateral relations; (2) the economic dimension of the bilateral relations; (3) the security policy dimension, in particular, the significance of the last phase of the conflict the importance of the Nagorno-Karabakh autumn war (2020) for the further development of relations. The aim of the article is to examine Armenia's limited capacities as a patron-state (comparison with Russia). The main contribution of the article in the field of studies on the functioning of de facto states is empirical and is reflected in the analysis of the collected data on patron-client relationships between selected entities. To achieve the indicated research objective, the author focused on answering the following research questions:

- How does the Armenia-Nagorno-Karabakh Republic patron-client relationship differ from Russia's relationship with other de facto states?
- What are Armenia's limitations as a patron?
- What is specific about the ties between these actors?

The author's motivation to initiate research on this topic is its importance for maintaining stability and security in the South Caucasus region. The research used research methods and techniques characteristic of political science, including critical analysis of the literature, analysis of statements by political decision-makers of Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as secondary analysis and interpretation of quantitative data. The analysis of the aspect related to new phase of armed conflict in the region covers data from the start of the hostilities on September 27 to November 10, 2020.

### De Facto States and Patron-Client Relations in the Post-Soviet Area—Theoretical Aspects

The dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) influenced the transformation of the international order. The states that gained independence confronted a dilemma related to the dominant foreign policy vector (striving for integration with Western international organizations, such as the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), or developing a strategic partnership with Russia). One of the implications of the collapse of the USSR was the intensification of inter-ethnic and inter-religious antagonisms in the former Soviet republics, which culminated in armed conflicts. Finally, after the armed phases of the conflicts were frozen and the status of the separatist regions could not be ultimately determined, the following *de facto* states began to function in the post-Soviet area: the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic, the Republic of Abkhazia, the Republic of South Ossetia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic.

A comprehensive definition of the *de facto* state, its characteristic features, and possibilities of self-rule is a challenge for the researcher. It is undeniable that these are unrecognized entities by the international community, but their secession was successful, and the authorities enforce the law on their territory. One of the problems in this context is that their citizens fully recognize these entities, so it must be said that separatist tendencies are not just the efforts of politicians but are accepted by society. In view of this, the actions of the international community to reach an agreement between the *de facto* state and the mother country must take into account this variable (Markedonov 2012, 194). *De facto* state authorities have taken steps to stabilize and develop their economies after secession, struggling with the transition from a wartime model to an appropriate peacetime form. *De facto* states have relied to varying degrees on their resources and their patron's support. War blockades, destruction of infrastructure, paralysis of markets, lack of investment—these are the challenges faced by the authorities of *de facto* states following the freezing of separatist conflicts (Broers 2012).

In recognition of statehood, the criteria that are important to the international community include the ability to establish diplomatic relations or respect for democratic standards. *De facto* states have a limited capacity to establish external relations. When analyzing the preconditions that would enable them to engage in relations with other states, it should be noted that a strong economy, the support of a powerful patron, and respect for human rights create such a potential (Tokarev, Margoev, and Prikhodchenko 2021). In view of this, the issue of *de facto* states should not be reduced simply to the possibilities of establishing diplomatic relations or observing democratic standards (some of which are satisfactorily implemented). Attention should be focused on the source of success of secession and the involvement of the patron, which is not identical in all cases. In this context, it is important to analyze the significance of patron-client relations in three spheres: political, economic, and security (Tokarev, Margoev, and Prikhodchenko 2021).

*De facto* states have a complex structure. Successful control of a defined territory and consolidation of state authority should be considered a characteristic of these entities. In addition, *de facto* state authorities take action to create foreign policy by, for example, establishing permanent diplomatic representations in various countries, participating in peace negotiations to determine their status (Markedonov 2012). *De facto* states, such as the Republic of Abkhazia and the Republic of South Ossetia, have achieved limited international recognition, including that of the permanent United Nations Security Council (UNSC) member power, the Russian Federation. As has already

been mentioned, it is necessary to move away from the binary division of recognized state/non-recognized state and consider the gradualness of state-building by individual separatist regions.

The strength of the patron-client relations depends on the position of the patron state of the *de facto* state in the international system. In this context, we can differentiate two types of the described ties. The first type of patronage is constituted by the great power-client formula, while the essence of the second type is constituted by the middle power-client relations. The dynamics of client relations significantly differ in both variants at the previously indicated levels of client power. Unquestionably, the formation of a *de facto* state is facilitated by the weakness of the parent state. However, despite the weakness of the parent state, *de facto* state regimes depend on the cooperation of the patron to protect their statehood, which strengthens the efficiency of political institutions, the functioning of the economy, and the maintenance of adequate defense capabilities of the client (Kolstø 2006, 757). In the case of patronage by a great power, the strength of the relations with the client is at a high level, and the scale of support is adequate to the client's expectations. It was the patron's economic aid that, in most cases, mitigated the negative implications of armed conflicts that resulted in the start of the process of *de facto* state formation. The credibility of the security guarantees provided by great power is confirmed, among other things, by the permanent presence of a contingent of the patron's armed forces in the area of the separatist region, capable of rapid mobilization in the case of a risk to the client's existence. There are also certain negative implications of strong client relations in which a great power plays the role of the patron, e.g., the emergence of a rentier regime, i.e., one that remains in power only thanks to external resources provided, which reduces the extent to which the public can identify its citizenship (Broers 2005, 69). This may impact negatively on the nation-building process. Nevertheless, the political independence of the patron, the influence on the format of negotiations with the parent state, the credibility of security guarantees, the resources at their disposal, and the willingness to distribute them all make patronage relations in this variant strong and stable at all levels.

The type of patronage relations in the middle power-client formula differs significantly from the cooperation of an unrecognized state with great power. The political and security aspects of the middle power-client relations are highly unreliable, while we can identify the economic aspect as very strong. When a middle power state performs the patron function, we can identify its patronage as an example of a dualistic focus of client relations. Such a situation occurs when the patron of a *de facto* state is at the same time a client of great power. Such a situation should be identified as unique because of the entity's dual role. It also generates serious constraints on the ability to create effective client relations.

Of interest, differences between the 2 types can be seen in the motivation for the constitution of patron-client relations. For a great power, to a great extent, the relationship in issue serves as an instrument for influencing the client's parent state and an opportunity to a projection of power (although *de facto* states sometimes demonstrate autonomous interests) (Kolstø 2006). The logic of fixing patron-client relations by middle power is different and often associated with ethnic identity, essential for the legitimacy of ruling forces in the patron state. The relevance of the issue in focus varies for patrons' domestic policies—for great power, it is a secondary activity area. It can be an important priority for a middle power that creates political discourse. A middle power with a weak economy decides to become a patron due to the priority of this issue in its domestic policy (e.g., support of the same nation). The strong development of relations at the economic level can also be explained by the positive impact on the economy of the patron state and the lack of border security by the parent state. In the case of great power-client relations, the economic plane of connection is of marginal importance for the overall strength of the patron economy.

These limitations of middle power result from their symbolic autonomy in the creation of policy vectors, i.e., dependence on the political line of their patron and an insufficient surplus of power (including military) aimed at securing the survival of the client. In the context of the patron's external dependence, the guarantees given to the client are unreliable. The patron's weakness manifests itself in its inability to effectively represent the client's interests at the diplomatic level.

The potential scale and effectiveness of support in the event of the unfreezing of a separatist conflict depends on the involvement of its external patron. In this context, an external patron may manifest an interest in protecting an unrecognized state relating to its client if this connects with its geopolitical interests. If no such interests exist, the threat to its client's patronage is irrelevant to the continuation of the great power-client relations. In contrast, the middle power state does not have the instrumentality of forcing such a response from its patron.

In her research, the author used a model concerning the intensity of involvement of the patron state (Armenia) in the de facto state (Nagorno-Karabakh Republic), analyzing 3 levels of relations: politics, economy, and security. The cooperation between these entities is an example of client relations in the middle power-client formula. This will make it possible to answer the research questions posed in this article and realize the set goal.

### The Political Dimension of the Bilateral Relations

The uniqueness of the patron-client formula in the present case is the ethnic homogeneity of these relations. The same ethnic group prevails among the citizens of the patron and client state, i.e., they are Armenians. According to the census data conducted in the Nagorno-Karabakh region in 2015, as much as 95% of the population is Armenian (more than 150 thousand people populate the region; National Assembly of the Republic of Artsakh 2020). This is unique and does not occur in the case of ties created by Russia with other de facto states. The para-state's relations with Armenia are a priority in the foreign policy created by Karabakh politicians. Both entities have strong not only ethnic but also cultural and historical ties, and Yerevan actively supported Stepanakert during the armed phase of the conflict with Azerbaijan in the 1990s (Cornell 1999; de Waal 2003; Mooradian and Druckman 1999). Armenia is trying to represent effectively the interests of the de facto state in the ongoing Minsk Process, to which Armenia and Azerbaijan are parties. The Armenian representatives in the Minsk Group have stressed the priority of the principle of self-determination of peoples as the basis for regulating the final status of the region. Nevertheless, in this sphere, one can see Armenia's limitations in acting as a patron. Yerevan does not play the role of a key negotiator who could dominate the negotiations and impose its solutions. This is a much weaker position than that of the Russian Federation, which is the key negotiator for the talks on the settlement of the status of, for example, Transnistria. To summarize, Armenia's influence on the shape of negotiations is limited and unsatisfactory. In addition, it should be clearly noted that Yerevan has not recognized the independence of the NKR. As for diplomatic relations, Stepanakert has its diplomatic mission on the territory of the patron, but the patron has not decided to establish its representation on the territory of the de facto state. Unlike Russia's relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Yerevan-Stepanakert relations have not been regulated by any official document (consequently not recognizing the statehood of Nagorno-Karabakh).

The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh also strongly influenced Armenia's domestic policy. Until 2018, the country's political system was dominated by elites constituted by the armed conflict—many political decision-makers were directly involved in the armed conflict, and the issue concerning the region was part of the program of all parties active on the Armenian political scene<sup>1</sup>. Armenian presidents Levon Ter-Petrosyan, Robert Kocharyan, and Serzh Sargsyan were actively involved in supporting the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh during the conflict of the 1990s. Remarkably, the Karabakh issue was so important in Armenia's political sphere that Ter-Petrosyan's moderate position, opposition to the recognition of the NKR, and his desire to normalize relations with Azerbaijan, were among the key considerations in reducing his popularity in society, conflating him with nationalists. He finally resigned in 1998. This shows the importance of the client in the patron's domestic policy and contradicts the servile nature of the ties in all aspects. On the one hand, Stepanakert's foreign policy development depends on relations with Armenia; on the other hand, the Karabakh issue influenced the composition of the patron's political

elite. This is also a unique aspect of Armenia-Nagorno-Karabakh relations distinguishing this case from Russia's relations with *de facto* states.

The concern about the continuation of the cooperation between Yerevan and Stepanakert was implied by the rotation of the political elite in Armenia following the Velvet Revolution of 2018 (Miarka 2019; Markarov and Davtyan 2018). At that time, the Karabakh elite were removed from power, and the political system was dominated by a party called the "My Step Alliance," led by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. This is important because Pashinyan was not a veteran of the Nagorno-Karabakh war, nor did he have any connections with the old regime. The issue of the Karabakh–Armenian relationship focused the attention not only of the decision-makers and of the people living in the region, but also of the international community as a whole, as the decline in Yerevan's attention could affect the stagnation of peace negotiations. However, the policy of the post-revolutionary government continues to emphasize the issue of Karabakh. Pashinyan confirmed this during his first foreign visit, whose destination was in fact Nagorno-Karabakh, in May 2018. He declared his support for Stepanakert during the Minsk negotiations and the readiness to revive talks with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, but stressed that Nagorno-Karabakh should be recognized as a party to the conflict and that the region's representatives should participate in the negotiations (Prime Minister of Armenia 2018). This is a new element in the political dimension of the Armenia–Nagorno-Karabakh relations, indicating that the Armenian government does not want to act as an intermediary for the autonomous position of Stepanakert, while still acting as guarantor of the *de facto* state's survival. Although representatives of Nagorno-Karabakh have tried to engage in the peace process since the 1990s, their status has never approached that of at least the elites of the unrecognized Donetsk People's Republic and Lugansk People's Republic (official participation in the Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine). The new approach to this issue was understandable as the post-revolutionary political forces focused their activity on the implementation of internal reforms in Armenia and on a profound system transformation (Miarka 2020).

Armenia's diplomatic relations with Nagorno-Karabakh should be regarded as dynamic at all government levels with an emphasis on the ministerial one. The main aspects addressed during the visits of representatives from both sides involve the agenda related to the Karabakh–Azerbaijani conflict, including the need to implement diplomatic and political measures to deter Azerbaijan to guarantee regional security and to restore the full participation of the Republic of Artsakh in the negotiations. Trilateral dialogue on the regulation of the region's status is a highly emphasized aspect<sup>2</sup>.

It is worth noting that Karabakh decision-makers repeat the Yerevan model in the process of forming the foreign policy vectors, based on complementarianism consisting in balancing the interests of the superpowers, and consequently they maintain relations with both the Russian Federation and the USA (Minasyan 2012; Poghosyan 2011). In terms of developing relations along the US vector, the large and well-organized Armenian diaspora plays an important role. Of interest, the NKR has an official diplomatic post in the United States (Office of the Nagorno Karabakh Republic 2020). In relations with Russia, their importance increased after the end of the 2020 armed conflict, as will be presented later in this article.

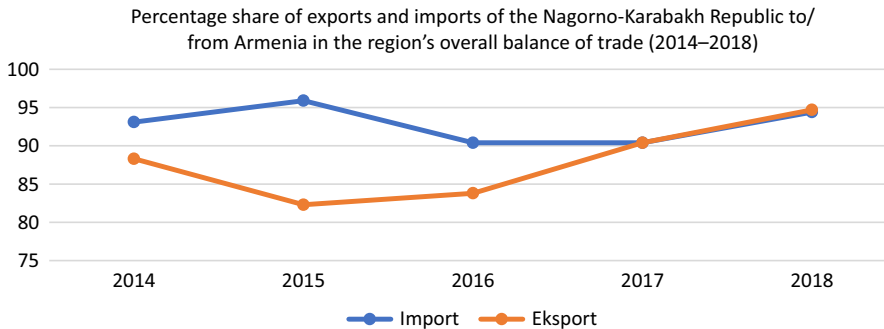
### The Economic Dimension of the Bilateral Relations

Following the declaration of secession, Nagorno-Karabakh, like other *de facto* states, faced the challenge of building a stable economy as an essential element in establishing the foundations of statehood. The transition from a state of war to a state of peace involves ensuring the protection of property rights, minimizing predatory behavior of businesses in the market, stimulating trade, and attracting investors. *De facto* states choose different economic models, e.g., focusing wealth-building on their power, involving citizens, or depending on trade, ignoring social potential. It seems that the Karabakh economic model is a hybrid (Marandici and Leşanu 2021). Unique in the Karabakh model is the basing of the economic development of this entity, not only on the

intensification of trade with the patron, its potential but on the prominent support of the Armenian diaspora from countries such as the USA. This confirms Armenia's limited capacity as a patron has been the foundation for the survival of the client economy. The opposite is true for the economic model in Transnistria, where the elites of the *de facto* state, e.g., satisfy the social needs of the citizens thanks to satisfactory assistance from the Russian Federation, obtain energy resources at preferential prices, and sell most products to the Russian market. The patron in this example, to a high degree, acts as a guarantor of the functioning of the *de facto* state's economy.

The economic cooperation between Karabakh and Armenia takes place on many levels. The intention to improve land connections had a strategic dimension to support the economic development and tourism of the region. Examples of these activities include the construction of the Goris–Stepanakert Highway (completed in 1999) and of the Martakert–Vardenis Highway (completed in 2017)<sup>3</sup>. The latter investment amounted to over USD 35 million, and the funds came mainly from the Armenian diaspora from all over the world (including Armenia, of course). The land connections in the issue exemplify the asymmetry of patron-client relations in favor of the client—in the case of the NKR, they generate new jobs in tourism, agriculture, and trade. From Armenia's perspective, they contribute to deepening engagement with the separatist region's economy. Although part of the political elite treats it as a symbolic success, in reality, it strains the state's economy, limits the possibility of building a positive image on the international arena (supporting a non-recognized entity). As already mentioned, the discussed projects do not only prove the success of Armenia's patronage, but the organization and possibilities of influencing the region of the Armenian diaspora from many countries. Investments in the separatist region are coordinated by the Armenia Fund (Armenia Fund Website 2021). The indicated organization has been functioning since 1992. Its activities are focused on providing humanitarian aid and implementing infrastructure development projects in Armenia and the NKR. Importantly, the organization has a donor base of 20,000, constituting the largest Armenian-American grassroots charity in the United States. In recent years, the Fund's offices and diaspora have garnered more than 100 million USD for various projects in Armenia and the NKR (Armenia Fund. 2021)<sup>1</sup>. In the context of supporting Stepanakert (in addition to road construction), the Armenia Fund coordinates a variety of projects. One of them is the provision of equipment and mobility to war veterans in the region, which was started in 2014 (Armenia Fund 2021). In addition, thanks to individual donors, a project was started in 2016 to build houses for large families facing difficult financial situations (cost of 50,000.00 USD to build and equip 1 house). Between 2018 and 2020, a project was implemented that involved digging deep wells and building drip irrigation systems to support agriculture in the region (cost 100,000.00 USD per unit; Armenia Fund 2018). These projects benefit the region, and their implementation is not just due to the use of the patron's resources but to the contribution of the diaspora. Although the previously mentioned limitations of Yerevan in the context of its role as a patron in the economic dimension, the development of Stepanakert's trade depends on cooperation with Armenia, which monopolizes both exports and imports of the *de facto* state. Obviously, this is related to the non-recognition of the NKR in the international arena, but unlike Transnistria, which cooperates in this area (apart from Russia) with, among others, Ukraine, Romania, Moldova, Poland, Stepanakert's relations with other entities are practically non-existent. It is also worth noting that the NKR does not have its currency and the Armenian dram is in use.

According to information provided by the State Statistical Office of the NKR, Armenia is the Republic's most important trading partner. In fact, it is both the key country in terms of imports of goods and services and the key destination country for Karabakh exports. Looking for trends in bilateral trade cooperation, one can find that exports demonstrate a growing trend, while the changes in imports are step-like. In 2018, imports of goods and services accounted for 94.4% of the total import structure of the NKR (USD 333,254.30), while exports of products to the Armenian market accounted for 94.7% of the total Karabakh export structure (USD 191,483.10; Republic National Statistical Service 2019). The region's economic sphere is monopolized by the relations



**Figure 1.** Own compilation based on: *Structure Export and Import of the Republic of Artsakh*, Artsakh Republic National Statistical Service, [http://stat-nkr.am/files/yearbooks/2019/21\\_artaqin\\_306-323.pdf](http://stat-nkr.am/files/yearbooks/2019/21_artaqin_306-323.pdf).

with Armenia. Stepanakert supplies mainly the following to external markets (2018 data): mineral resources (over 70% of exports), precious stones and metals (15.1%), vegetables (5.6%), processed foods (2.3%), as well as animals and animal products (1.8%; Republic National Statistical Service 2019). The NKR's overall export balance demonstrates an upward trend, and the comparison of the data for January–September 2019 with the same period in 2018 indicates a growth rate of approximately 130%. In the period discussed here, the total value of products exported to Armenia increased from approximately USD 141,710.70 (2018) to USD 145,029.70 (2019; Republic National Statistical Service 2019). The period analyzed by the author was not chosen at random, as it shows the impact of the Velvet Revolution in Armenia on relations with its “sister republic.” The data quoted here belie any negative trends in this respect, which is also confirmed by the figures showing imports in the years 2014–2018, as well as by the latest data comparing the situation before and after the revolution (Figure 1).

When discussing the volume of the NKR's imports, it is once again important to point out that the structure was dominated by the relations with Armenia in the years 2014–2018. The Nagorno-Karabakh Republic acquires mainly the following from external markets (data from 2018): machinery and equipment (13.1%), means of transport (13.6%), mineral resources (16.4%), processed foods (12.6%), chemicals (6.9%), precious stones and metals (9.7%) as well as furniture, toys and other industrial goods (6.7%; Republic National Statistical Service ...2019). The NKR's overall import balance demonstrates an upward trend, and the comparison of the data for January–September 2019 with the same period in 2018 indicates a growth rate of approx. 106%. In the period discussed here, the total value of products exported to Armenia increased from approx. USD 238,093.00 (2018) to USD 264,217.50 (2019; Republic National Statistical Service 2019).

Armenia is the main destination country for labor migration of Armenians from the NKR, which is in line with the patron-client relationship building model. The same migration model is observed in other separatist regions such as Transnistria, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia, whose migration destination country is the Russian Federation. The export and import values, proves the total economic dependence of the Republic of Artsakh on access to the Armenian market and the positive relations with the ally in external trade. The region's functioning in the present form is conditioned by the support of Yerevan in external trade, which did not diminish after the political transformation in the country following the events of 2018, part of the patron-client relationship model. However, the mobilization of the Armenian diaspora in various countries is extremely important for the region's economic condition, constituting an important pillar of Nagorno-Karabakh's development. Thus, it should be concluded that the relationship with the patron, although meaningful, is not the only guarantor of the functioning of the region's economy. The scale of patron support is smaller than the support Moscow offers to the entities it patronizes.

### The Security Dimension of the Bilateral Relations

As with diplomatic relations, security cooperation has not been fully formalized. According to the 1994 agreement, Armenian citizens can perform compulsory military service in Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenians from the region in Armenia. As already mentioned, Armenia actively supported the Karabakh Armenians during the conflict in the 1990s. It is worth noting the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia dated January 26, 2007. Chapter 3 of the document states that Armenia is the guarantor of the security of the population of the NKR. The official position of the state toward the conflict was also expressed: all key solutions and the document ending the dispute should be approved by the Karabakh regime, and Armenia is ready to support only such a resolution that takes into consideration the right of existence of the NKR (Republic of Armenia 2007). On the one hand, such an approach strengthened the client's trust; on the other—it created an image of Armenia's aggressive policy, which Azerbaijan effectively used to discredit Yerevan in the international arena. All such accusations negatively affect the appearance of Armenia as a country aspiring to EU membership (although this is currently a secondary goal). There are also several benefits for Armenia of being a patron.

It should be mentioned that the patron–client relations with the NKR are used by Yerevan for support from other entities. In the former case, Yerevan seeks to involve Euro-Atlantic actors in the normalization of relations with Turkey, which is linked to the Nagorno-Karabakh issue due to Ankara's strategic ties with Baku. Furthermore, by stressing the importance of involving international organizations in the peace negotiations, Armenia is strengthening its image as a country seeking to add dynamism to the integration into European structures (mitigate the influence of Baku's narrative; Minasyan 2014).

Armenia's limited capacity to act as a guarantor of client security was confirmed by the latest phase of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 2020. As the government in Baku sees it, the only acceptable solution in terms of regulating the status of the region consists in reintegrating it into Azerbaijan, even using the armed forces, in line with the idea of maintaining the state's territorial integrity. The conflict was important for strengthening the country's prestige and for confirming the effectiveness of President Aliyev's administration, so it is a zero-sum game. In Armenia's case, the region is important for the general public as the Armenian's historical legacy.

Military operations started in the region on September 27 and, despite the international initiatives (including in particular activity on the part of the Moscow administration) to obtain a ceasefire, they lasted until November 10, 2020 (although since the signing of an agreement, limited military actions have continued). Over 4,000 people (including civilians) perished as a result of the armed operations, and over 8,000 were injured (both sides; Vedomosti 2020). After the ceasefire was signed, 219 more people were killed and wounded (The Crisis Group 2022). The skirmishes affected mainly the civilian population, causing major damage to the region's infrastructure: more than 50,000 people left the region and went to Armenia, or moved to areas of Nagorno-Karabakh not yet covered by the activity of military formations (RBC 2020).

The goal of the operations of Azerbaijan's armed forces indicated by Aliyev was to end the occupation of the region and to free it from Armenian forces (RIA Novosti 2020; President of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2020a). It is worth pointing out that Baku managed to take control quite smoothly over several regions, including Fuzuli and Jabrayil (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan. 2020b). As President Aliyev stressed during an interview for the Interfax agency, the Armenian side was not only supposed to return the occupied territories, but also to allow Azeri refugees to return (indicating the historical significance for the Azeri people of areas such as Shusha and Khankendi, which is the Azeri name for Stepanakert). The intention of the authorities is to have both Azeri and Armenian people live harmoniously in these territories. The fulfilment of this plan would mean the return of the Azeri to a region inhabited virtually only by Armenians since the 1990s. Moreover, Baku connected adherence to the ceasefire hammered out by Moscow, and subsequently Washington, with the complete withdrawal of Armenian military support for the



separatists and the with the return by Stepanakert of the Kalbajar and Lachin districts. This was unacceptable from Yerevan's point of view, this was unacceptable as it would have meant preventing the further deepening of client relations with Stepanakert, including the possibility of providing military assistance (road traffic between Stepanakert and Yerevan passes through Lachin). Furthermore, the return of Azeri refugees could also be interpreted as the will to relaunch "Azerbaijanization" of the region.

Nikol Pashinyan pointed out that the activity of Azerbaijani forces posed a serious threat to the Nagorno-Karabakh region, and that Turkey's declared support for Azerbaijan was a key action making it impossible to develop a solution to de-escalate the current conflict situation (IRNA 2020). In fact, Ankara's superpower ambitions manifested themselves strongly during the current phase of the conflict, representing an opportunity for Turkey to increase its influence in South Caucasus. Furthermore, the Armenian side pointed to the need to change the formula of negotiations, legitimately stressing the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group's consent to deploy the Russian peacekeeping forces in the region (Prime Minister of Armenia 2020a). At the same time, Pashinyan argued that the international community should recognize the NKR's independence, as the claims of the Azerbaijani side were contrary to the historical determinants of the region, which should be important in defining its status in compliance with the international law. The Armenian Prime Minister argued that the formula for the region's liberation used by the government in Baku was in fact tantamount to ethnic cleansing and genocide of Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians, so it would be necessary to apply the "separation for the sake of salvation" principle (Prime Minister of Armenia 2020b). Significantly, despite the diplomatic offensive, the patron did not decide to engage its armed forces to support the client in the conflict's interiors. Analyzing the military potential (no matter which factor is chosen) of Armenia and Azerbaijan, it should be pointed out that there is an asymmetry of military capabilities in favor of Baku.

The warfare was extremely significant from the point of view of the relations between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. It was a test for the reliability of the support of the post-revolutionary government in the context of its role as a guarantors of regional security. Unfortunately, Armenia has suffered a crushing defeat in this aspect. The conflict culminated in the Azeri forces taking control over the city of Shusha (Natikkizi 2020). The city is located on the route to Stepanakert, which allowed the Azeri forces to advance with their offensive as far as the regional capital, potentially making its complete pacification possible. It was also a significant victory for Baku, as Azerbaijani armed forces took control of the city that was the symbol of NGR statehood. In the context of strong Azeri domination in the interior of the conflict region, the Russian Federation once again undertook to mediate in negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which finally resulted in the signing of a trilateral ceasefire agreement on November 10, 2020. The agreement states the following, among other things: a ceasefire between the parties from 00:00 on November 10, the return to Azerbaijan of the Districts of Agdam (by November 20), Kalbajar (by November 15), Lachin (by December 20), the deployment of Russian Federation peacekeeping forces (for a period of 5 years with the possibility of extension) to monitor the ceasefire and the functioning of the Lachin Corridor, as well as the return of internally displaced persons and refugees to the region (Prime Minister of Armenia 2020c.). As President Harutyunyan pointed out, as a result of the fighting, the Armenian forces had lost control of the following districts: Fuzuli, Jabrayil, Qubadli, Zangelan, Hadrut, and parts of the Martuni and Askeran districts (Konets voyny v Karabakhe 2020).

If the agreement remains in force, it will be of fundamental importance for the further development of Armenian-Karabakh relations as well as for Armenia's domestic policy. Pashinyan's acceptance of the agreement on Nagorno-Karabakh caused great social discontent and intensive protests in Yerevan, with the protesters demanding the Prime Minister's resignation (Aleksandrova 2020). For many Armenians, the concessions made by the Armenian government to Azerbaijan represent a betrayal of national interests. It is beyond any doubt that the approval of the

discussed solution is a failure of the post-revolutionary government, potentially affecting the future shape of government in Armenia. This also highlights the limited capacity of political decision-makers in Armenia with regard to protecting the region's vital interests, and thus to carry out the function of patron. As both Stepanakert and the Armenian public opinion see it, the agreement is an example of the ineptitude of the post-revolutionary political forces, which is skillfully exploited by the opposition parties in Armenia, seeking to have a special session of parliament convened to dismiss Pashinyan and to annul the agreement with Azerbaijan (Romashenko 2020). The particularistic use of the issue of the region in political infighting is an inherent element of Armenian political life. Moreover, consent from the Armenian side means a prestigious victory for Baku and the strengthening of its position in South Caucasus. One must not forget about the provision allowing Azeri refugees to return, posing a significant threat to future Armenian domination in the region.

The armed conflict had a geopolitical background. The involvement of the powers already mentioned in the article, namely Turkey and Russia, was noticeable. The agreement signed by the parties increased Moscow's role in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Moscow's position toward Nagorno-Karabakh is derived from its allied relations with Armenia. Armenia is an extremely important actor in terms of projecting Russia's power in the post-Soviet space as part of the "near abroad" concept (Kopeček 2010, 102). Before the 2020 war, Nagorno-Karabakh was not the focus of the Russian administration, unlike other *de facto* states. The agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan should be considered a confirmation of the effectiveness of Russian diplomacy. Nagorno-Karabakh became another geopolitical point where *miroformers* were deployed to guarantee compliance with the ceasefire, including the monitoring of the Lachin Corridor, crucial for communication between Armenia and the region. The Russian peacekeeping mission staff includes 1,960 soldiers and 90 armored personnel carriers, 380 vehicle units and special equipment. Observation posts were organized along the contact line in Nagorno-Karabakh and along the Lachin Corridor (23 posts). The core of the Russian contingent consists of subdivisions of the 15th separate motorized peacekeeping brigade of the Central Military District. The headquarters of the peacekeeping mission is located in Stepanakert (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation. 2021.). Moscow has now assumed the role of guarantor of security in the region. In this context, it is worth noting the position of the Commander-in-Chief of the Russian forces in the region, General Rustam Muradov, who is the key decision-maker coordinating many important activities in the region, e.g., the process of demining the territory, the distribution of humanitarian aid, and others necessary for the peacekeepers to control Nagorno-Karabakh (Commander of the Russian Peacekeeping Force. 2021.). Due to the functioning peace mechanism, the *de facto* state politicians' point of view is no longer the political line of the patron and suggestions from Armenian politicians (in the security sphere), but rather Russia. Muradov represents their interests in the region. In conclusion, the Armenia-Nagorno Karabakh relationship has been deeply transformed in the security sphere, and Russia autonomously holds the role of guarantor of the region's existence.

## Conclusion

The relationship between Armenia and the NKR is a client relationship and is characterized by several unique features. Unique are the ethnic ties between the entities, which distinguishes them from Russia's relations with other *de facto* states of which Moscow is the patron. In contrast to Russia's position as a patron, Armenia has limited capacity to act as such. In the diplomatic dimension, Yerevan is not a player that effectively influences the form of negotiations for the final status settlement of the region within the Minsk Group. In the economic dimension, the region's trade is monopolized by relations with Armenia, but financial aid provided by the large Armenian diaspora living in various countries is crucial for the well-being of the people of the GK. In the

security dimension, the patron has lost its status as guarantor of the de facto state's survival following the 2020 war in the region, and the destiny of the region depends on the effectiveness of the Russian peacekeeping mission. Moscow has responsibility for the situation in the GK, thus strengthening its position in the South Caucasus.

The described variables distinguish Armenia from Russia, although both states are patrons for de facto states. In the case of Moscow, the critical role of the negotiator in all negotiating formats concerning the statuses of de facto states and their effectiveness in protecting the regions' current form of functioning (protecting their interests in the international arena) should be highlighted. Moreover, they are strongly dependent on the Russian patron in the economic sphere (e.g., social aid or distribution of energy resources) and security (Russian armed forces as a guarantor of stability and freezing armed conflicts in the separatist regions). In all areas of patron-client relations, asymmetry in favor of the Russian administration can be seen. In the case of Armenia, the asymmetry of patron-client relations is not noticeable at all levels. In this context, it should be noted that the Nagorno-Karabakh issue formed Armenia's political elite until 2018. The region is also an important element of political discourse in the state. In the case of Russia, the de facto states do not influence the political elites in the country to any extent. Cooperation with separatist regions is one of the methods of protecting Russia's traditional sphere of influence, bringing many benefits in this aspect, e.g., the existence of separatisms on the territory of states such as Georgia, Moldova, or Ukraine prevents them from participating in NATO and the EU, i.e., from being included in the orbit of Western influence. In turn, supporting Nagorno-Karabakh does more damage than help Armenia in the international arena. This means that only superpowers, due to their unique capabilities and their position in the structure of the international system, can effectively function as patrons. At the same time, medium-sized states in a similar situation are exposed to a series of negative implications.

**Disclosures.** None.

## Notes

- 1 The presidents of Armenia, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, Robert Kocharyan, and Serzh Sargsyan, were closely associated with the Karabakh movement. Ter-Petrosyan was one of the leaders of the Karabakh Committee and then the first president of independent Armenia. In turn, Kocharyan was the first president of the NKR, then prime minister (1997) and president of Armenia (since 1999), while Sargsyan (who was president of Armenia between 2008-2018), among others, led the Nagorno-Karabakh Self-Defense Forces between 1989-1993.
- 2 Examples of visits after the Velvet Revolution: PM attends triple holiday-dedicated events in Artsakh, <https://www.primeminister.am/en/Artsakh-vi-sits/item/2018/05/09/Prime-Minister-Nikol-Pashinyan-visited-Artsakh/>; Meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the Republic of Artsakh and the Republic of Armenia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Artsakh, <http://www.nkr.am/en/news/2018-09-17/1115>; Meeting of Foreign Ministers of the Republic of Artsakh and the Republic of Armenia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Artsakh, <http://www.nkr.am/en/news/2019-07-05/Майилян-Мнатсакяны;Встреча-с-представителями-фонда-«Мой-шаг»-и-организации-«Ворлд-Вижн»>, <http://president.nkr.am/ru/news/archive/search-from--to--Categories-4-55-56-57-58-59-69-29/page15/4540/>, 8.11.2020.
- 3 See the importance of the Armenian diaspora: R. Adriaans, The humanitarian road to Nagorno-Karabakh: media, morality and infrastructural promise in the Armenian diaspora, *Global Studies in Culture and Power* 26(1), 2019.

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