

SOUTH CAUCASUS: REGIONAL CONFLICTS AND CHALLENGES

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RUSSIA AND THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT: SPOILING THROUGH MEDIATION?

Abstract

The aim of this research is to examine the role of the Russian leadership in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and to understand whether they were mediating the conflict or spoiling its peaceful resolution. The cases of Boris Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev are illustrated in order to compare their efforts to reach a peaceful resolution to the NK conflict. The methodology of study comprises secondary data analysis and content analysis of six presidential statements. As a result, based on the analyzed data we conclude that Russia neither spoiled nor mediated the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh by being content with the current state of frozen negotiations over Nagorno-Karabakh. What is more, from the analysis of findings we conclude that compared to Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin, Dmitry Medvedev made significant efforts to put the NK conflict on the edge of its resolution.

Keywords: Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia, mediation, spoiling, frozen conflict

Introduction

When observing the causes behind the failure of various efforts to find solutions to frozen conflicts, it is necessary to consider the interests and demands of all regional stakeholders, which are involved in the conflicts. More to that, it is essential to take into account that each conflict is unique and that distinct actors always pursue their separate interests by either spoiling the resolution of conflicts or finding a peaceful ground for their settlement. This study focuses on the issue over NK, inasmuch as this topic never loses its importance by remaining a significantly relevant case not only with regards to Armenia and Azerbaijan but also for the entire Caucasian region. The paper will view the Nagorno-Karabakh con-

flict through the Russian lens, as Russia is an important external player and stands behind various attempts and efforts to provide a peaceful solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The cases of Boris Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev will be explored in order to compare their actions towards the NK conflict resolution.

The reason behind the analysis of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue during different Russian presidencies is to compare the stance of Russia towards the conflict and to find out the major changes occurred in Russia's position during the administrations of Boris Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev. Furthermore, the paper will examine the theoretical notions of "spoiling" and "mediation" within the context of international relations in order to elucidate whether Russia was mediating the conflict rationally or was trying to spoil its peaceful resolution.

Setting the context

There is a significant volume of literature covering the mediation missions of various international players by presenting, discussing and evaluating their efforts to end the NK conflict. As such, in their books, the first Russian ambassador in independent Armenia, Vladimir Stupishin, and the head of Russia's mediation mission over the NK conflict from 1992 to 1996, Vladimir Kazimirov, share their memories from Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh by focusing on the mediation of Russia in the settlement of the conflict. For instance, Vladimir Stupishin regards Armenia as a Russian ally and displays a pro-Armenian position by underlining the significance of Nagorno-Karabakh's independence for Russian national interests.¹ In his turn, Kazimirov blames the conflicting sides for the unresolved NK conflict as despite various Russian suggestions on ceasefire, the sides continued violent military operations.²

On the other hand, Sergey Markedonov who focuses on the region of Caucasus and post-soviet conflicts asserts that unlike various other conflicts in the Caucasus, in the case of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, both Yerevan and Baku value the role of Russia as a mediator. In addition, he indicates that the Russian balance of support towards Armenia and Azerbaijan leaves the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the frozen format of negotiations and continuing violence.³

¹ Vladimir Stupishin, "*Moya missiya v Armenii 1992-1994: Vospominaniya pervogo posla Rossii*," (in Russian), ["My mission in Armenia, 1992-1994: Memories of the first Russian ambassador,"] (Moscow, Academia, 2001), 27.

² Vladimir Kazimirov, *Peace to Karabakh*, (Moscow: Ves Mir, 2014), 423, http://www.vn.kazimirov.ru/mir2014.files/Peace_to_Karabakh_book.pdf (accessed February 10, 2017).

³ Sergey Markedonov, "*Kavkaz-region povishennogo riska*," (in Russian), ["Caucasus-Region of Increased Risk,"] (Moscow: Rossiyskiy Sovet po Mejdunarodnim Delam, 2016), 30.

Following it further, Elena Pokalova from the College of International Security Affairs, focuses her study on the timing of conflict resolutions. According to Pokalova, the mediation attempts that take place right after the escalation of hostilities, damage the real picture of future aggressions by temporarily calming the tensions. In contrast, peace efforts that are too late from responding to the expanding violence, might end up with failure due to the creation of a new prominent party.⁴

Moreover, the mediation process of the NK conflict is also widely discussed among Armenian observers. For instance, Tatul Hakobyan, a reporter and an analyst at the Civilitas Foundation, argues that both regional and global players are demonstrating a neutral stance towards the NK conflict resolution by being content with frozen negotiations.⁵ Following it further, in their works, Philip Gamaghelyan, from the School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution of the George Mason University and Sergey Minasyan, a political scientist and the Deputy Director of the Caucasus Institute, examine the possible solutions to the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and present the existing stakeholders. As such, Gamaghelyan posits that Russia will gain long-term security and economic benefits from the regional stabilization and the peaceful resolution of the NK conflict. However, according to Gamaghelyan, inasmuch as the stable regional peace will result in decreased Russian political influence within South Caucasus, in short-term Russia will mostly benefit from the unstable situation in NK.⁶ Similarly, Minasyan argues that Russia does not have a vision concerning the future status of Nagorno-Karabakh by leaving the resolution of the NK conflict to an indefinite future.⁷ In his turn, when referring to Russian position towards the NK issue, Gerard Libaridian, a historian and the former adviser of Armenia's first president, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, argues that Russia is mainly interested in preserving a stable situation in the border by being busy with other imminent issues.⁸

Additionally, by presenting the Azerbaijani perspective, Tofik Zulfuqarov, the former minister of foreign affairs of Azerbaijan (1998-1999), posits that both Russia and the West refer to their control over any peacekeeping operation in NK as a key factor leading towards the increase of their influ-

⁴ Elena Pokalova, "Conflict Resolution in Frozen Conflicts: Timing in Nagorno-Karabakh," *Journal of Balkan & Near Eastern Studies* vol. 17, issue No.1 (2015): 81.

⁵ Tatul Hakobyan, *Karabakh Diary: Green and Black: Neither War nor Peace* (Lebanon: Antelias, 2010), 35.

⁶ Philip Gamaghelyan, "Intractability of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: A Myth or a Reality?" *Peace Monitor*, (2005): 3.

⁷ Sergey Minasyan, "The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the context of South Caucasus regional security issues: An Armenian perspective," *Nationalities Papers*, (2016), 6.

⁸ Gerard Libaridian, "The elusive 'right formula' at the 'right time'," in *The limits of leadership. Elites and societies in the Nagorny Karabakh peace process* (London: Conciliation Resources, 2005), 37.

ence in the region. What is more, as the author argues, the preservation of a one-sided approach to mediation was more important for Russia than the negotiations concerning the issue over Nagorno-Karabakh.⁹

The mediation process of the NK conflict also caught the attention of Western analysts. For instance, Svante Cornell, a scholar and the director of the Stockholm-based Institute for Security and Development Policy, and Thomas de Wall, a senior associate in the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, do not blame Russia for the unresolved NK conflict. As such, Cornell claims that only direct face-to-face discussions between the conflicting sides will serve as a good ground for resolving the NK conflict.¹⁰ In a similar manner, Thomas de Waal argues that the major reason behind the continuing violence is the lack of direct negotiations between the conflicting parties.¹¹

Based on the literature review, it becomes clear that the Russian efforts to resolve the NK conflict were unsuccessful. What is more, in the literature it was frequently stated that Russia is satisfied with the frozen status of the NK conflict. Furthermore, the reviewed literature illustrated that while trying to find a peaceful solution to the NK conflict, Russia had always remained neutral towards the question over NK by preserving balanced relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan. The literature also revealed that there is lack of sufficient research concerning the role of individuals and institutions in the Russian mediation process over the NK conflict. Hence, this research aims to understand whether Russia was mediating the conflict or spoiling its resolution by doing a comparative analysis of the Russian mediation missions during the presidencies of Boris Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev. What is more, the study intends to find out whether Russian foreign policy towards NK has changed during three presidencies or the neutral approach towards the conflict resolution characterized the three Russian leaders during their administrations.

1. Russian mediation missions between 1991 and 1999

1.1. Boris Yeltsin and the Institutional Dualism

When discussing the mediation missions of Russia in the process of NK conflict, it is worth to state that Moscow took steps for conflict resolution earlier than any other interested player did. What is more, among

⁹ Tofik Zulfaqarov, "The obstacles to resolution: an Azerbaijani perspective," *The limits of leadership. Elites and societies in the Nagorny Karabakh peace process* (London: Conciliation Resources, 2005), 40.

¹⁰ Svante Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2005), 48.

¹¹ Thomas De Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War* (New York :NYU press, 2013), 204.

other intermediaries in the mediation process of the NK conflict, Moscow firstly recognized Nagorno-Karabakh as a party to the conflict.¹² The presidents of Russia (Boris Yeltsin) and Kazakhstan (Nursultan Nazarbaev) made the first attempt of international mediation for the peaceful settlement of the NK conflict in September 1991. Boris Yeltsin perceived the conflict over NK as an excellent opportunity to demonstrate his distinct foreign policy approach from Gorbachev by getting international and domestic recognition as a triumphant mediator. According to Boris Yeltsin, Russia had an aim to transform into the guarantor of stability and peace in its “backyard” (former Soviet Republics).¹³ The most disputable issues discussed in Zheleznovodsk concerned the necessity of ceasefire, the participation of representatives from NK in the process of negotiations and the status of NK.¹⁴ Even though, initially the Zheleznovodsk negotiations were believed to bring positive results, the Yeltsin-Nazarbaev mediation failed on November 20 when an Azerbaijani (MI-8) helicopter containing 22 officials was shot down near Nagorno-Karabakh.¹⁵

Further, after the first unsuccessful effort to resolve the NK conflict, the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) became interested in the issue over Nagorno-Karabakh. During their meeting in Prague on January 30-31, 1992, it was decided that the Soviet republics could also be included in the CSCE composition.¹⁶ More to that, on March 24, 1992, during their Helsinki Additional Meeting, the CSCE Council decided to have its significant contribution to the peace process of the NK conflict.¹⁷ Hence, a decision was made to convene a conference in Minsk that would contain 11 countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Germany, Italy, Russia, the USA, Turkey, France, Czechoslovakia (later-Finland) and Sweden), as well as the elected representatives of Nagorno-Karabakh. However, inasmuch as the hostilities escalated between the opposing sides the conference was postponed. Even though the conference in Minsk failed, the “Minsk Group” became the only body that is internationally mandated to promote negotiations and to settle a good ground for the NK conflict resolution.¹⁸

¹² James Nixey, “The Long Goodbye: Waning Russian Influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia,” *Chatham House Briefing Paper*, (June 2012), 12.

¹³ David Laitin and Ronald Suny, “Armenia and Azerbaijan: Thinking a Way out of Karabakh,” *Middle East Policy* vol. 7, issue No.1 (October 1999), 158.

¹⁴ Zheleznovodsk Declaration, 23 September 1991, http://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/Azerbaijan_ZheleznovodskDeclaration1991.pdf (accessed February 10, 2017).

¹⁵ Hakobyan, *Karabakh Diary: Green and Black: Neither War nor Peace*, 103.

¹⁶ Daniel Druckman and Moorad Mooradian, “Hurting Stalemate or Mediation? The Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh,” *Journal of peace research* vol. 36, issue No.6 (1999): 710.

¹⁷ Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe, *Helsinki Additional Meeting of the CSCE Council: Summary of Conclusions*, 24 March 1992, <http://www.osce.org/mc/29121?download=true> (accessed January 8, 2017).

¹⁸ Sergey Minasyan, “Nagorno-Karabakh after Two Decades of Conflict: Is Prolongation of the Status Quo Inevitable?” *Caucasus Institute*, issue No. 2(2010): 28.

Following it further, when referring to Boris Yeltsin's administration it is worth mentioning that inasmuch as, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia had lost its glory and power, Boris Yeltsin was concerned that Russia would no longer be able to influence the economic and political processes of its former Soviet Republics. Hence, the regaining of the Russian "Soviet" power became the first priority for Boris Yeltsin. However, during the first years of his presidency, Boris Yeltsin did not possess enough power to make independent decisions. Hence, during the administration of Boris Yeltsin, Russia was actively engaged in the NK mediation process through two ways: the ministry of foreign affairs (Andrey Kozirev (in office from 1990-1996)) and the ministry of defense (Pavel Grachev (in office from 1992-1996)).¹⁹

Nonetheless, even though the Foreign Affairs Ministry of Russia was trying to reach a peaceful settlement to the NK conflict, its efforts were fruitless not only because of the growing violence in the battlefield but also because of the chaotic management of state affairs. As such, a good example for the illustration of weak state management was the agreement made on September 19, in Sochi, between the defense ministers of Armenia (Vazgen Sargsyan) and Azerbaijan (Rahim Gaziev). The two sides agreed upon a temporary ceasefire (two months) with the help of Pavel Grachev (Defense Minister of Russia). However, this time again Russian efforts did not produce positive results as Sochi Agreement was a result of an uncoordinated plan and the Foreign Affairs Ministry of Russia was unaware of the agreement.²⁰

Further, it is worth mentioning that behind the independent actions of Pavel Grachev and Andrey Kozirev firmly stood their personal interests that were signaling distinct Russian foreign policy approaches. As such, Andrey Kozirev was in favor of the CSCE involvement in the mediation process of the NK struggle. In his turn, Grachev was prioritizing the Russian role in the NK conflict resolution. More to that he was supporting Armenians in the battlefield by the supply of necessary armaments. Nonetheless, inasmuch as Boris Yeltsin favored balanced relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan, he wanted to convince the Azerbaijani president that their military cooperation with Armenia would never be used against Azerbaijan.²¹

Between 1992 to 1994, during the initial stages of the mediation process, besides setting deadlines for the establishment of a permanent

¹⁹ Laitin&Suny, "Armenia and Azerbaijan: Thinking a Way out of Karabakh," 162.

²⁰ Kazimirov, Peace to Karabakh, 79.

²¹ Liz Fuller, "Caucasus/Nagorno-Karabakh: Russia seeks to mollify Baku," *Radio Free Europe*, March 1999, <https://reliefweb.int/report/armenia/caucasusnagorno-karabakh-russia-seeks-mollify-baku> (accessed February 16, 2017).

ceasefire and emergency meetings between representatives of the conflicting sides neither the Foreign Affairs and Defense ministries nor the Minsk Group were able to achieve a concrete solution for peaceful conflict resolution. Among the major reasons behind the failed mediation were the continuous hostilities and clashes on the border, Russian weak state control and the independent functioning of Russian Foreign affairs and Defense ministries.²²

1.2. Compromised behavior between Russia and the West: 1994-1999

Starting from 1994, Russia highlighted its dominant role in the NK mediation process. As such, it is worth mentioning the Russian efforts to establish a ceasefire and its mediation by solely the Russian representative.²³ Pavel Grachev firstly initiated the discussions on the cessation of military operations by arranging a meeting with the Armenian (Serzh Sargsyan) and Azerbaijani (Mamedrafi Mamedov) defense ministers in Moscow on February 18, 1994. Further, on May 5, 1994, several CIS and Russian officials with the heads of the parliaments of Kyrgyzstan, NK and Armenia assembled in Bishkek and signed a Protocol that called for a ceasefire. The Russian Foreign Affairs and Defense Ministries put forward the “fax diplomacy” and collected three separate ceasefire agreements by fax-machines. As a result, a ceasefire was established and the shooting was stopped on May 12 at midnight.²⁴ Furthermore, aside from the “fax diplomacy” another important and unusual thing about the ceasefire was its establishment without peacekeeping forces. It is explained with the tense relations between Russia and the West during the initial stages of the NK conflict.²⁵ However, the disagreements between Russia and the West became less apparent soon after the Budapest Summit in December 1994. During the Budapest Summit, the conference members expressed their desire to harmonize their mediation efforts with Russia.²⁶ Hence, Russia obtained permanent co-chairmanship in 1995.²⁷

²² International Crisis Group. “Armenia and Azerbaijan: A Season of Risks”. *Europe Briefing*, issue No.71 (26 September 2013), 4.

²³ Sergey Markedonov, “Gotova li Armeniya priznat Nagorniy Karabakh,” (in Russian) [Is Armenia ready to Recognize Nagorno-Karabakh?] *Moskovskiy Centr Karnegi*, 2016, <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/?fa=63589> (accessed March 3, 2017).

²⁴ Hakobyan, *Karabakh Diary: Green and Black: Neither War nor Peace*, 221.

²⁵ De Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War*, 238.

²⁶ Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe. *Budapest Document 1994: Towards A Genuine Partnership in a New Era*, <http://www.osce.org/mc/39554?download=true> (accessed February 16, 2017).

²⁷ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). *Mandate of the Co-Chairmen of the Conference on Nagorno-Karabakh under the auspices of the OSCE*, 23 March 1995, <http://www.osce.org/mg/70125?download=true> (accessed March 10, 2017).

The OSCE Lisbon Summit in December 1996 was another turning point that increased the attention of the international community towards the NK conflict. During the summit, the co-chairmen of the Minsk Group recommended three principles to settle the conflict: highest level of self-rule for NK in Azerbaijan, territorial integrity of both Armenia and Azerbaijan, and security for Nagorno-Karabakh. Even though all the Minsk Group members agreed to the proposed principles, Armenia used its veto power and hindered the establishment of an official ground for further discussions. Armenia justified its veto by emphasizing that the NK status should be determined according to the principle of self-determination.²⁸

Further, in January 1997, France became the next co-chair country, and during the next month, the United States joined and became the third co-chair of the Minsk Group.²⁹ As Boris Yeltsin stated, “It is important that the parties to the conflict literally feel the breath on their backs of the three great powers and understand that there is no other way than rational proposals to peace and harmony. On our part, we are ready to enhance cooperation with the US to ensure stability and security in the Caucasus and the world as a whole.”³⁰ What is more, during the Denver Summit, on 20 June 1997, Boris Yeltsin together with the presidents of the US and France stated, “We express our deep concern over the continuing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. We are encouraged by the continued observance of the ceasefire. However, the ceasefire by itself is insufficient. Without progress toward a durable settlement, the ceasefire could break down. The international community thus has repeatedly called for a settlement; we believe there should be no delay in establishing a stable and lasting peace in the region.”³¹

Hence, the three major world powers focused on possible ways for the resolution of the NK conflict by proposing the “package”³² (“land-for-status”) and “step-by-step”³³ (“land-for-peace”) settlement models. As such, in July 1997, the Minsk Group presented its “package” approach for the

²⁸ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). *Lisbon Document 1996*, <http://www.osce.org/mc/39539?download=true> (accessed March 10, 2017).

²⁹ Volker Jacoby, “The role of the OSCE: an assessment of international mediation efforts,” in *The limits of leadership. Elites and societies in the Nagorny Karabakh peace process*, (London: Conciliation Resources, 2005), 32.

³⁰ Boris Yeltsin, “Boris Yeltsin’s Karabakh Letter to Bill Clinton,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, 1997, <http://epress.am/en/2011/01/09/boris-yeltsin%E2%80%99s-karabakh-letter-to-bill-clinton.html> (accessed January 3, 2017).

³¹ Joint Statement on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. *G7 Information Centre. Denver*, 20 June 1997, <http://www.g8.utoronto.ca/summit/1997denver/nagorno97.html> (accessed January 12, 2017).

³² OSCE Minsk Group. “Comprehensive Agreement on the Resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict,” July 1997, <https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/4b2ddb/pdf/> (accessed January 3, 2017).

³³ OSCE Minsk Group. “Agreement on the End of the Nagorno-Karabakh Armed Conflict,” December 1997, http://www.c-r.org/downloads/accord17_22Keytextsandagreements_2005_ENG.pdf (accessed January 3, 2017).

settlement of the dispute.³⁴The proposal included two agreements: the end of armed hostilities and the status of NK. However, Stepanakert was not hesitant in rejecting the proposal, as it did not express the right to self-determination of NK population. The “step-by-step” approach did not put a specific deadline for the determination of NK status. Nonetheless, this time again Stepanakert rejected the proposal and brought the argument that it cannot establish good relations with Azerbaijan.³⁵

After the failure of previous proposals, the OSCE Troika presented its new “common state” proposal in November 1988. According to the new suggestion, Azerbaijan and NK should form two components of a single state. Nonetheless, Azerbaijan was against the proposal by arguing that it did not preserve its territorial integrity.³⁶ In his turn, Boris Yeltsin defended the position of Azerbaijan, by indicating that Russia would not support the “common state” proposal as a mechanism to reach towards the NK conflict resolution.³⁷ Following it further, starting from April 1999, the negotiations over NK were held at the presidential level. As such, during the CIS Moscow summit, on April 1, Kocharyan and Aliyev had a long discussion that continued on April 26 in Washington. Within the framework of those meetings, the “land-swap” proposal was being circulated. The idea behind the new approach of resolving the NK conflict was the annexation of NK to Armenia and the control of the Armenian Meghri region by Azerbaijan. Nonetheless, the “land-swap” approach towards the resolution of the NK conflict failed in 2001 after the Key West negotiations.³⁸

From 1994 to 1999, during the second stage of the mediation process, several serious steps were undertaken towards the resolution of the NK conflict. During Boris Yeltsin’s presidency, Russia successfully utilized the NK struggle as its external policy tool by obtaining short-term benefits. Further, the period was also characterized by the compromised behavior of mediators in reaching a concrete solution to the common problem. Nonetheless, the preservation of the “frozen” status for the NK conflict seemed favorable to Boris Yeltsin, as he perceived the peaceful resolution of the NK struggle as a possible threat to Russian expanding influence within the region.

³⁴ Vladimir Kazimirov, “Karabakh: Rethinking “phased” vs. “package,” *Radio Free Europe*, June 2001, <https://reliefweb.int/report/armenia/karabakh-rethinking-phased-vs-package> (accessed January 21, 2017).

³⁵ Levon Zourabian, “The Nagorno-Karabakh settlement revisited: is peace achievable?” *Demokratizatsiya*, 2006, 253.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 260.

³⁷ Liz Fuller, “Caucasus/Nagorno-Karabakh: Russia seeks to mollify Baku,” *Radio Free Europe*, March 1999, <https://reliefweb.int/report/armenia/caucasusnagorno-karabakh-russia-seeks-mollify-baku> (accessed February 16, 2017).

³⁸ Jacoby, *The role of the OSCE: an assessment of international mediation efforts*, 32.

2. Russian mediation missions between 2000 and 2016

2.1. The centralized state administration of Vladimir Putin: 2000-2008

The new stage of negotiations, referred to as the “Prague Process,” continued after 2003, following the presidential changes in Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia. Within the framework of the “Prague Process,” on March 19, 2004, with the attendance of the Minsk Group Co-Chairs, a meeting took place in Prague between the Armenian (Vartan Oskanian) and Azerbaijani (Vilayat Guliyev) foreign ministers. Further, Kocharyan and Aliyev had another meeting in Astana on September 15, with the participation of the new Russian President, Vladimir Putin.³⁹ After the meeting, he stated, “We all recognize the complexity of the NK issue. It is very important that the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents continue the negotiations, as without mutual talks it is impossible to find ways for conflict regulation. No matter what is being said on this subject, Russia is interested in settling this issue, as we want to have full-fledged cooperation with Azerbaijan and Armenia.”⁴⁰ The other Kocharyan-Aliyev meetings took place in Warsaw on May 15, 2005 and in Kazan on August 27, 2005.⁴¹

The major points discussed within the “Prague Process” were the referendum, the notion of “interim status” and special arrangements for Kelbajar and Lachin regions.⁴² Following it further, during the “Prague Process,” the Armenian side agreed to withdraw its forces from five districts other than Kelbajar and Lachin, by taking into consideration their strategic importance for Armenia. Nonetheless, the Kelbajar case was further discussed during the Rambouillet meeting in 2006 when Armenia stated that it would withdraw its forces from Kelbajar only after the holding of the referendum concerning the NK status.⁴³

Vladimir Putin had positive expectations from Rambouillet meeting and stated, “Despite the difficulty of the problem, the parties can find a mutually acceptable solution. There is a chance to solve the problem and we will support in every way so that the problem stays in the past.”⁴⁴ Even though the new Russian president was also engaged in the

³⁹ Pokalova, “Conflict Resolution in Frozen Conflicts: Timing in Nagorno-Karabakh,” 76.

⁴⁰ Vladimir Putin, “Putiny Lernayin Xarabaxi xndiry hamarum e “cayrahex bard,” (in Armenian) [Putin refers to NK issue as “extremely difficult”] *Azg* No. 62, 16 September 2004.

⁴¹ Vadim Romashov & Helena Rytövuori-Apunen, “Nagorno-Karabakh: Steps of Settlement Market Out by Russia’s Interests,” *Tampere Peace Research Institute* (2016): 146.

⁴² Elkhan Mehtiyev, “Armenia-Azerbaijan Prague Process: Road Map to Peace or Stalemate for Uncertainty?” *Conflict Studies Research Centre* (2005): 4.

⁴³ International Crisis Group. “Nagorno-Karabakh: Risking War”. *Europe Report*, issue No. 187 (14 November 2007):5.

⁴⁴ Vladimir Putin, “Lernayin Xarabaxi kargavorman hamar lracucich xorhrdakcutyunner,” (in Armenian) [Additional consultations over the NK resolution] *Azg* No. 33, 23 February 2006.

NK mediation process, in contrast to Boris Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin did not link the Russian mediation mission in NK to the creation of a powerful Russian state. Differently, he mostly relied on Russian energy resources by using them as tools to conduct Russian foreign policy. Consequently, during the first term of his presidency, Vladimir Putin displayed little interest in the NK conflict and centralized his efforts to make Russia a self-confident and strong state.⁴⁵

Following it further, the Prague Process resulted in the creation of “Madrid Principles” that were presented by the Minsk Group co-chairs in Madrid, in 2007. The document included basic principles for the peaceful resolution of the NK conflict. Even though Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed on several principles, the countries did not come up with a common decision concerning the NK status.⁴⁶

To conclude, it is worth mentioning that when comparing the presidency of Boris Yeltsin with Vladimir Putin’s first administration, the major difference concerns the functioning of the Russian internal state affairs. As such, due to Vladimir Putin, the foreign policy of Russia towards the region of South Caucasus became coherent and homogeneous without the inner divisions between the Defense and Foreign Affairs Ministries. More to that, as a president, Putin had a clear picture of Russia’s internal and external policies and was able to control his new centralized state administration.⁴⁷

2.2. *On the edge of resolution: Dmitry Medvedev*

The NK peace process entered into a new stage during the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev as Russia was most actively engaged in the mediation of the Nagorno-Karabakh struggle during the years between 2008 and 2012. Inasmuch as the administration of the new president coincided with the Russian war with Georgia in 2008, it was important for Medvedev to demonstrate to his Western counterparts that Karabakh was a distinct case and would have a peaceful resolution due to Russian mediation efforts. Hence, to decrease the chances of another significant explosion within the region, on November 2, 2008, Medvedev arranged a meeting between the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Mayendorf Castle. The initiative resulted in the “Declaration on Regulating the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict,” the first signed agreement since the May 1994

⁴⁵ Richard Sakwa, “Putin’s leadership: Character and Consequences,” *Europe-Asia Studies*-vol.60, issue No. 6 (August 2008): 882.

⁴⁶ Romashov and Rytövuori-Apunen, “Nagorno-Karabakh: Steps of Settlement Market Out by Russia’s Interests,” 148.

⁴⁷ Sakwa, “Putin’s leadership: Character and Consequences,” 881.

ceasefire. The presidents agreed to use Madrid Principles as a basis to initiate the final settlement of the NK conflict.⁴⁸

Furthermore, another significant event concerning the NK settlement that took place during the administration of Dmitry Medvedev was the L'Aquila Summit in 2009. The Summit was famous in two ways: joint statement of the three Co-Chairs and the presentation of the updated version of the Madrid Principles. According to the Co-Chairs, the updated Basic Principles stood for a compromise between the right to territorial integrity and the right to self-determination.⁴⁹

However, the updated version fell short of a finalized settlement and further meetings were organized for finding a common ground between the opposing presidents. As such, on January 25, 2010, Medvedev hosted a meeting in Sochi with his Azerbaijani and Armenian counterparts. Another important meeting that was organized during Dmitry Medvedev's presidency was the Muskoka Summit in June 2010. Nonetheless, the meetings did not produce positive results, as according to Aliyev, Armenians were not ready to take the Basic Principles as a basis for resolving the conflict peacefully. However, it is worth to state that Medvedev did not give up and still believed in resolution of the NK conflict.⁵⁰ As such, on August 20, 2010, during his first state visit to Armenia, he indicated, "In spite of the challenges and contradicting emotional statements of the sides, Russia continues working with Azerbaijan and Armenia as we believe that it is of utmost importance to preserve peace and order within the region."⁵¹ Furthermore, Dmitry Medvedev once again highlighted the importance of regional stability and the mutual talks during Serzh Sargsyan's first state visit to Russia. As such, on October 23, 2011 the Russian president stated, "Our usual meetings are intended to discuss the ongoing events. These discussions are wonderful opportunities to speak of the resolution of the NK conflict by outlining necessary guidelines for the future." More to that, during the Armenian state visit, the Russian president also prioritized the preservation of good relations and military cooperation with Armenia.⁵²

⁴⁸ Dominik Sonnleitner, "Russia's backyard-unresolved conflicts in the Caucasus," *Politics in Central Europe* vol. 12, issue No. 1 (2016): 90.

⁴⁹ Vadim Romashov and Helena Rytövuori-Apunen, "Russia's Karabakh policy: new momentum in regional perspective," *Caucasus Survey* (2016), 4.

⁵⁰ Pokalova, "Conflict Resolution in Frozen Conflicts: Timing in Nagorno-Karabakh," 77.

⁵¹ Dmitry Medvedev, "Joint press-conference of the Presidents of Armenia and Russia in the framework of the state visit of the president of RF to RA," President of the Republic of Armenia, 20 August 2010, <http://www.president.am/en/interviews-and-press-conferences/item/2010/08/20/news-54/> (accessed January 21, 2017).

⁵² Dmitry Medvedev, "Rusastany exel e ev vstahoren mnum e Hayastani arajin gorcynkery," (in Armenian) [Russia had always remained the first partner of Armenia] *Hayastani Hanrapetutyun*, No.194, 25 October 2011, 4.

Even though the next Astrakhan trilateral meeting on October 29, 2010 between the presidents of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia had an intention to strengthen confidence-building measures and bolster the regime of ceasefire, it was not an exception and did not produce positive results.⁵³ Eventually, the updated Madrid Principles entered into a final stage during the Kazan Summit in June 2011. Both the Armenian and the Azerbaijani presidents had positive expectations from the Summit. In his turn, Dmitry Medvedev believed that the NK conflict is a unique struggle that has big chances to be resolved. "Russia is committed to back the sides and the process will go on," indicated Medvedev.⁵⁴ What is more, when referring to the conflict settlement perspectives, the Russian president stated, "There is only one way to resolve the NK conflict: by making arrangements. Arrangements do not have alternatives. Only the war is an alternative of an arrangement. Hence, the conflict has to be resolved by making arrangements. As a president, I have spent a lot of time on this issue. Due to my efforts throughout the last couple of years eight trilateral meetings were organized. In my opinion, it is a good result as we were able to bring the viewpoints closer to each other."⁵⁵ Nonetheless, the Kazan Summit ended up with failure as the opposing sides started to blame each other for extending the talks. Unfortunately, after the failure of the Kazan initiative, the international community was silent and did not propose new approaches for satisfying the conflicting parties.⁵⁶

However, it is important to note that even though, the Kazan Summit, the Mayendorf declaration and the other meetings organized during Dmitry Medvedev's presidency resulted in failure, they represented major steps towards the NK conflict resolution when over the long period of time, the sides believed in success and compromise. Hence, even though Dmitry Medvedev had a short presidential term, due to his increased attention to the conflict settlement process, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was on its edge of resolution.

2.3. Vladimir Putin and the increased level of violence: 2012-2016

The significance of the year of 2013 is explained with the May Decrees signed by Vladimir Putin, as he started his second presidential term. According to the new Foreign Policy Concept, Russia gained an active

⁵³ Sonnleitner, "Russia's backyard-unresolved conflicts in the Caucasus," 91.

⁵⁴ Dmitry Medvedev, "Dmitry Medvedev believes NK conflict can be settled," *Aysor*, 2011, <http://www.aysor.am/en/news/2011/10/21/medvedev-nkr/350556>, (accessed January 21, 2017).

⁵⁵ Dmitry Medvedev, "Heracox Medvedevy cankanum e arag lucel Lernayin Xarabaxi himnaxndiry," (in Armenian) [Leaving Medvedev wants a quick solution for the NK issue] *Chorord inqnishxanutyun*, No.485, 27 December 2011, 3.

⁵⁶ Pokalova, "Conflict Resolution in Frozen Conflicts: Timing in Nagorno-Karabakh," 79.

role in the diplomatic and political conflict settlement process within the framework of the CIS. Hence, Russia also highlighted its important contribution to the NK settlement process with other Minsk Group Co-Chairs. As such, in May 2013, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated that they have a primary task of unblocking the complex situation in NK as the preservation of peace and stability constitutes a priority within their foreign policy objectives.⁵⁷ In his turn, Vladimir Putin referred to NK conflict, during his state visit to Armenia on December 2, 2013. Putin stressed the unique relationship between Armenia and Russia by indicating that it goes beyond strategic partnership. Further, the Russian president mentioned, “Instead of resolving the regional complications by the use of force, we would all like to find solutions to the regional disturbances by using the diplomatically agreed upon international arrangements. The Russian Federation welcomes the direct contacts between the two presidents. We will do our best to resolve the NK conflict and to find solutions that would be acceptable for both parties.”⁵⁸

Nonetheless, for the situation on the border, the notions of “routine violence” and “ongoing hostilities” best characterized the NK conflict particularly during the second administration of Vladimir Putin when the violent military attacks started to escalate by melting the frozen conflict. Hence, Vladimir Putin was trying to continue the diplomatic process between the opposing sides for preventing the resumption of hostilities on the border.

Along these lines, the Minsk Group organized a meeting between the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents on 19 November 2013, in Vienna. Furthermore, president Putin had bilateral meetings with the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents when in 2014, the escalations of hostilities induced the Russian president to persuade the sides to find mutually acceptable conditions for the conflict resolution.⁵⁹ Still, Putin’s efforts were fruitless as in April 2016 the violations escalated when the Azerbaijani side presented its carefully organized offensive and surprised Armenians. The primary attacks targeted villages within NK with rockets and artillery. The Armenian side was not hesitant in responding the Azerbaijani offensive and as a result, the Line of Contact went through four days of war.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Romashov & Rytövuori-Apunen, “Russia’s Karabakh policy: new momentum in regional perspective,” 7.

⁵⁸ Vladimir Putin, “RD naxagah Vladimir Putini petakan ayey Hayastan,” (in Armenian) [“The state visit of the president of the RF, Vladimir Putin, to Armenia,”] *Hayastani Hanrapetutyun* No. 220, 3 December 2013, 2.

⁵⁹ Sabine Freizer, “Twenty years after the Nagorny Karabakh ceasefire: an opportunity to move towards more inclusive conflict resolution,” *Caucasus Survey* vol. 1, issue No. 2 (2014): 5.

⁶⁰ Artsrun Hovhannisyanyan, “Analysis of the 4-day April war,” *Armenpress*, April 2016, <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/843561/analysis-of-the-4-day-april-war.html> (accessed February 8, 2017).

It is important to state that, during the April uprisings, Russia was actively engaged in stopping the further developments of the April war. As follows, on April 2, Putin called the sides for stabilizing the situation and restoring the ceasefire. Even though the ceasefire violations did not stop, on 5 April, due to Putin's efforts, the Armenian and the Azerbaijani chiefs of staff agreed to finish the fighting. Hence, Vladimir Putin highlighted the significance of the Russian mediation mission by initiating the second ceasefire during the April violations.⁶¹

What is more, in June 2016, Putin organized a trilateral presidential meeting in Saint Petersburg in order to maintain the dialogue between the conflicting parties and to strengthen the termination of hostilities.⁶² In addition, on 10 August 2016, in a joint press conference with Serzh Sargsyan, Vladimir Putin summarized the stance of Russia over NK, "Russia is interested in decreasing the tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Armenia is looking for a way out of this conflict for the sake of its economic development. Azerbaijan seeks the same goals. However, it is necessary to find the appropriate approach to make sure that neither side feel themselves to be either 'losers' or 'winners'."⁶³ Hence, by this statement Putin supports the Russian "balanced relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan" doctrine by trying to reach towards a solution that will not harm any of the sides. Nonetheless, it is important to mention that when compared to Dmitry Medvedev, during his second presidential term, Vladimir Putin had taken a more neutral position towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution. The April War was a signal that throughout time, the Russian mediation mission over Nagorno-Karabakh needed a push factor for taking the matters more seriously.

3. Analysis and Findings

With an aim to understand whether Russia mediated the conflict over NK or spoiled its peaceful resolution, it is important to understand the theoretical notions of "spoiling" and "mediation." On this subject, "spoilers" have a primary objective to hinder or extend the peaceful resolution of conflicts for the sake of their interests and desires. Accordingly,

⁶¹ International Crisis Group. "Nagorno-Karabakh: New Opening or More Peril?" *Europe Report*, issue No. 239(4 July 2016): 3.

⁶² "Trilateral presidential meeting ends in Saint Petersburg: Presidents issue joint statement," A1+, 20 June 2016, <http://en.a1plus.am/1239134.html> (accessed March 5, 2017).

⁶³ Vladimir Putin, "Putin: If the Karabakh problem is not solved, Armenia will not have a chance to develop," *MeydanTv*, 11 August 2016, <https://www.meydan.tv/en/site/politics/16619/> (accessed March 10, 2017).

they use violence and concentrate their efforts to impede the settlements of conflicts by delaying their peaceful resolution.⁶⁴ In its turn, mediation has positive significance by standing for an interactive and dynamic process where the third party helps conflicting sides to resolve the conflict by means of negotiation and communication mechanisms. Hence, when being a mediator, the third party is highly interested in the rapid conflict resolution.⁶⁵

The examination of the Russian mediation missions between 1991 and 2016 illustrated that none of the three Russian presidents had an intention to instigate the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. In other words, Russia did not spoil the peaceful settlement of the NK conflict. In contrast, throughout years, Russia used various negotiation and communication mechanisms to help the conflicting sides to resolve the NK conflict. Nonetheless, Russia did not act as a mediator in the NK conflict resolution process as Russia benefited from the chronic insolvency of the conflict. This is to say, that the constant mediation of the NK conflict increased the Russian positive reputation both within the international and regional arena. What is more, the frozen format of the NK conflict stood as a good opportunity for Russia to preserve good relations with both Armenia and Azerbaijan, by selling weapons and by staying neutral towards the victory of either side. Nonetheless, even though when mediating the conflict over NK, Russia had an aim to establish a positive image and preserve balanced relations with the opposing sides, it still controlled the situation within the region and did not let NK conflict split into war. What is more, when comparing the three Russian presidential administrations it was evident that there were cases when NK conflict was standing on the edge of its resolution. Hence, the content analysis of presidential statements will give an opportunity to illustrate the differences between the presidential efforts to end the frozen conflict.

3.1. Content Analysis

Table 1 presents the content analysis of six presidential statements, separately showing the intensity means for the three Russian presidents. When analyzing the statements of Boris Yeltsin, the table shows that the category of ***regional stability*** has the highest mean (3.75) when compared

⁶⁴ Stephen Stedman, "Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes," *International Security* vol. 22, issue No. 2 (1997): 6.

⁶⁵ Jenonne Walker, "International mediation of Ethnic Conflicts," *Survival* vol. 35, issue No. 1 (1993): 106.

to the other two categories. Nonetheless, the intensity mean of the category of ***direct contacts between the opposing sides*** (1.75) indicates that Boris Yeltsin did not give much importance to the organization of mutual talks between the conflicting parties of the NK conflict. In addition, the high-intensity mean (3.25) of the ***balanced relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan*** category supports the previous argument by illustrating that Yeltsin was prone to military cooperation with both of the conflicting countries by not supporting the victory of any side.

Furthermore, the content analysis of Vladimir Putin's presidential statements demonstrates that compared to Boris Yeltsin, he gave importance to the category of ***direct contacts between the opposing sides*** (4.25) by stressing the significance of the establishment of an environment of trust between the conflicting sides. In addition, Putin was also interested in the category of ***regional stability*** (4) by encouraging long-term solutions and durable settlement for the conflict. Hence, it can be deduced that compared to Yeltsin, Putin was more engaged in resolving the NK conflict by arranging trilateral talks and making the sides agree upon similar viewpoints. Nonetheless, the category of ***balanced relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan*** (4.75) signifies that among the existing categories Putin prioritized the military cooperation with Armenia and Azerbaijan and did not want to see 'losers' and 'winners' in the NK conflict. Finally, when referring to the content analysis of Dmitry Medvedev's presidential statements, the point worth mentioning is that when compared to Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin, he did not give much importance to the category of ***balanced relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan*** (2.5). What is more, he prioritized the category of ***direct contacts between the opposing sides*** (4.75) by stressing the significance of international arrangements and mutual talks between the conflicting parties. In addition, inasmuch as during his short presidency he initiated more than 10 meetings and came up with innovative approaches towards the conflict resolution, he was able to push the NK conflict on the edge of its resolution.

Hence, content analysis revealed that the NK conflict had real chances to escape from its frozen status and ensure stability and peace within the region. Even though, Russian cooperation with Armenia and Azerbaijan was also important for Medvedev, compared to Yeltsin and Putin, he made significant effort to escape the existing emotional statements of the parties by bringing the sides together and by approaching towards the conflict resolution.

Table 1 ¼ Content Analysis of Presidential Statements

Category	Descriptors	Boris Yeltsin	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev
Regional Stability	Security and Peace in Caucasus	5	5	5
	Observance of cease-fire	5	3	5
	Durable settlement	2	3	5
	Long-term solutions	3	5	3
	<i>Intensity mean</i>	<u>3.75</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4.5</u>
Direct contacts between the opposing sides	International Arrangements	2	5	5
	Similar viewpoints	1	4	5
	Emotional statements	3	3	5
	Environment of trust	1	5	4
	<i>Intensity mean</i>	<u>1.75</u>	<u>4.25</u>	<u>4.75</u>
Balanced Relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan	Military Cooperation	4	5	3
	Mutually acceptable solutions	3	5	3
	Full-fledged cooperation with the sides	4	4	2
	No 'losers' or 'winners'	2	5	2
	<i>Intensity mean</i>	<u>3.25</u>	<u>4.75</u>	<u>2.5</u>

Conclusion

The study revealed that Russia neither spoiled nor mediated the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh by being satisfied with the frozen status of conflict resolution. Throughout years, Russia did not want to deteriorate its good relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan by preserving neutrality towards the victory of the opposing sides. Following it further, even though Russia benefited from the frozen status of the NK struggle, Russian efforts towards the conflict resolution did not remain the same under different presidencies. The content analysis revealed that there were cases when the NK conflict had real chances of resolution due to Russian efforts. As such, among the three Russian presidents, the NK conflict gained increased chances of resolution and was on the edge of its settlement during Dmitry Medvedev's administration. Thus, the NK conflict did not have equal chances of resolution during the three Russian presidential administrations.

To conclude, it is worth mentioning that the Russian role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution was influenced by several factors. Even though, the three Russian Presidents made significant efforts to resolve the NK conflict, they never betrayed their 'preservation of good relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan' and 'no losers' and 'no winners' foreign policy approaches towards the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.