

## On Turkey's attempts to reconcile Azerbaijan and Armenia ARVAK Center comment, 22.12.2024<sup>1</sup>

The process of signing a peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan is currently delayed. Based on the limited information available about the negotiations, it is difficult to speak about the timing of the final stage, if it happens at all. Each side continues to insist that it is ready to sign the agreement, while claiming that the process is being hindered by their counterpart. Official Yerevan is more concise regarding the last unresolved points of the draft agreement, while Baku prefers to openly state the problematic points that have not yet been agreed upon, allegedly due to Armenia's unconstructive position.

On December 6, 2024, Armenian foreign minister Ararat Mirzoyan stated at the 31st meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council in Malta that the parties had agreed on the Preamble and 15 of the 17 articles of the draft agreement. Mirzoyan did not say this directly, but implied that Azerbaijan should show the will and remove the last obstacles so that the agreement could be *"quickly concluded and signed"*. However, the Armenian foreign minister did not specify which unresolved points were being discussed. In response, on December 12, 2024, Azerbaijani foreign minister Jeyhun Bayramov claimed that the process was being delayed by Yerevan. Bayramov confirmed that only two points of the draft agreement remained unresolved and reiterated the demand for Armenia to amend its Constitution, which allegedly contains territorial claims against Azerbaijan. According to J. Bayramov, it is impossible to establish peace and good neighborly relations between the two republics without revising Armenia's Constitution.

In fact, by mentioning the two unresolved points, the Azerbaijani foreign minister essentially confirmed Mirzoyan's words. However, in a recent interview with TV journalist Dmitry Kiselev, aired on one of the Russian TV channels on December 17, 2024, president Ilham Aliyev presented his version of the unresolved articles. According to Aliyev, the issues include the mutual renunciation of filing lawsuits against each other in international judicial institutions, the future of international observer missions on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, the dissolution of the OSCE Minsk Group, and the demand for constitutional amendments in Armenia.

Thus, if we believe the Azerbaijani leader, there are 4 unresolved points, not 2, as it was stated by A. Mirzoyan and confirmed by J. Bayramov. Azerbaijan must understand that increasing the preconditions and Baku's maximalist approach to the mentioned points leads the negotiations to a dead end. Therefore, many experts who study the negotiations believe that Baku is deliberately delaying the signing of the peace treaty and is waiting for a favorable moment when the dynamically changing regional and global situation will allow it to resolve the issue of the so-called *"Zangezur Corridor"* by force.

At the same time, the rhetoric of president I. Aliyev, which is not coordinated with the Azerbaijani foreign minister J. Bayramov, may indicate that the Azerbaijani president has not yet finalized his demands in the negotiations with Armenia. This could be a sign of pressure on him to abandon some of the demands in the context of negotiations, which in

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<sup>1</sup> The original (in Rus.) was posted on our website on 20.12.2024.

fact are indeed extremely problematic for prime-minister N. Pashinyan and his team. Paradoxically, Turkey, a country that objectively has the most significant influence on Azerbaijan, may be an interested party in such a scenario of easing Azerbaijan's position.

It is commonly believed that Ankara and Baku do not have significant disagreements on regional and global issues. The leaders of the two “*brotherly countries*” and their high-ranking officials make demonstrative efforts to emphasize this fact, insisting that their interests always coincide, and their positions are coordinated. In the context of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, Turkey has officially stated that it views Turkish-Armenian relations in conjunction with Baku's relations with Yerevan. Consequently, Ankara's “Armenian policy” supposedly cannot be developed without first considering Azerbaijan's interests.

However, this belief seems to be mistaken.

While Baku focuses on the “Armenian issue” and the prospects of asserting its leading military-political and economic positions in the sub-region through its “favorable” resolution, Ankara is playing on several “chessboards” simultaneously (Africa, the Middle East, Europe, Greek issues, the South Caucasus, Central Asia, Russia, etc.), and all of them are organically intertwined within a single concept aimed at elevating its weight and influence to a new geopolitical level. Therefore, Turkey cannot afford to consider the South Caucasus agenda and, in particular, the “Armenian issue”, in isolation from the global context of its foreign policy. From this perspective, many issues deemed of “*existential importance*” to the “*brotherly and allied Azerbaijan*” may be seen by Ankara as “*local*” problems that have little significance for its global plans or often contradict them. In such cases, official rhetoric about prioritizing Azerbaijani interests appears somewhat implausible.

Turkey's attempts to change Azerbaijan's perspective on the “Armenian issue” are evident, as Ankara may now be more interested in the possibility of “peacefully” and comprehensively pulling Yerevan into its geopolitical orbit without arousing the fears of Armenian society and elites or visibly undermining their dignity. This is important for Turkey because Azerbaijan's maximalism in its attempts to ultimately “*defeat*” Armenia risks causing a change of power in Yerevan, changing the country's foreign policy orientation, and intensively restoring the weakened Armenian-Russian military-political relations. Such a scenario is highly undesirable for Ankara as it would affect its South Caucasus, Central Asian, and Iranian “games”, and lead to the failure of its expansionist policy in the East, supported by the Western centers. Against the backdrop of the recent events in Syria, this issue is now relevant for Ankara, as there are fears that Russia and Iran, “left out” in the Syrian game, will retaliate in the South Caucasus by initiating the ouster of prime-minister Pashinyan. The prolonged “peace negotiations” between Yerevan and Baku, whose actual lack of results is undermining Pashinyan's already weak position, could trigger such actions. Ankara clearly understands that the maximalism of the Azerbaijani demands, which prevent Pashinyan from “standing firmly on his own feet”, could lead to a situation where “*revanchists*” come to power in Armenia, nullifying Ankara's meticulously conducted strategy of peacefully “squeezing” the Russian bases out of Armenia and ultimately de-Russifying the South Caucasus.

In light of this, it is unlikely that the forcible capture of the so-called “Zangezur Corridor” is relevant for Ankara at present, as is expecting the necessary referendum on the Constitution from Yerevan, which, according to preliminary polls, is initially doomed to fail. Forcing Armenia through power and blackmail into actions that may actually have the opposite effect is counterproductive for Turkey’s interests. It is another matter to provide the current Armenian authorities with the opportunity to present the signed “Peace Treaty” to their society as a “*great success*” and allow Ankara’s “soft power” to finally dissolve Armenian sovereignty in the Turkish orbit.

It is possible that from the perspective of Turkish interests, Yerevan’s policy already provides favorable starting positions for such a program. This includes the complication of Armenian-Russian relations, the recognition of Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity, the abandonment of an active policy on the international recognition of the Armenian genocide, the readiness to open the borders with Turkey, and the agreement to a simplified Turkish-Azerbaijani transit regime through Syunik. Even without formal claims to Armenia’s sovereignty, the above may be sufficient to implement the “soft” Turkish expansion, which could turn the South Caucasus republic into a satellite of Turkey in the foreseeable future.

Apparently, Ankara has already outlined the fine line of its current demands to Yerevan, crossing which could collapse the complex Turkish game in the South Caucasus. In this light, Baku’s inflated demands, largely driven by Ilham Aliyev’s personal ambitions rather than Azerbaijani real interests, as well as Azerbaijan’s revision of Turkish-Armenian contacts, cannot but irritate Ankara. Therefore, at the unofficial level, Ankara will try to put pressure on Azerbaijan to stop the “parade of new demands” to Yerevan. Ankara needs reconciliation between Azerbaijan and Armenia, which is crucial for its global strategy and its moves on all “chessboards” without exception. Recently, it has increased its statements on the need to urgently conclude an Armenian-Azerbaijani “*peace deal*”. On October 18, 2024, Turkish foreign minister Hakan Fidan expressed this view at a meeting with his colleagues from Iran, Russia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia within the “*3+3 Platform*” in Istanbul. He also emphasized that Turkish-Armenian relations are directly dependent on this agreement. Following this, on November 26, 2024, Turkish defense minister Yasar Guler, speaking in the country’s parliament during the discussion of the 2025 budget of the Ministry of Defense, called for the quick conclusion of the agreement. After that, on December 6, 2024, Turkey’s Security Council, following a meeting in Ankara, expressed its “*expectations and wishes that positive shifts in negotiations between Azerbaijan and Armenia will lead to the conclusion of a peace treaty*” and noted that “*lasting peace serves the interests of all the parties in the region*”. Finally, on December 14, 2024, Turkish defense minister Yasar Guler, during another speech in parliament, called on Azerbaijan and Armenia to establish a “*lasting peace in the South Caucasus*”.

It is noteworthy that in none of these statements did Turkish officials specifically mention Armenia as the main addressee of their statements or as the party bearing the primary responsibility for the successful outcome of the peace talks. Whereas previously, Turkish political and military officials blamed and threatened Yerevan for its unwillingness to behave “*constructively*” and agree to “*fair Azerbaijani conditions*”. Clearly, the recent statements may refer specifically to the Azerbaijani side, and Ankara, for obvious reasons,

does not want to publicly voice its claims to Baku. It is also significant that the increased intensity of these statements coincided with the recent events in Syria, where Turkey, despite its initial geopolitical success, faced the dilemma of large-scale involvement in problematic military-political processes in that country – processes whose outcomes are difficult to predict in both the short and long term. Under conditions where the “Syrian game” may consume Ankara’s time, resources, and attention, it is extremely disadvantageous for it to have an unresolved Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict on its borders, which could quickly develop a different logic from the current one. It is unknown how Russia and Iran will behave, and it is unclear what stance the eccentric Donald Trump will take towards the South Caucasus after his inauguration.

Thus, it should be noted that there is a high probability that Ankara is exerting pressure on Baku to complete the final stage of the negotiations. Given the new reality, Azerbaijan might have had to remove, at least, the issue of the Armenian Constitutional referendum and the additional demands regarding the “*Zangezur Corridor*” from the negotiation agenda, as they hinder and deadlock the entire settlement process and interfere with Ankara’s geopolitical maneuvers in the region. Perhaps this is why the assessments and figures from Ilham Aliyev and Jeyhun Bayramov regarding the unresolved negotiation points differ so much.

It is possible that Ilham Aliyev has practically conceded to Ankara’s demands but, in his rhetoric aimed at the Russian audience he is trying to show that the parties are still far from the final stage of the settlement. We should not exclude the possibility that in exchange for such concessions from Baku, Ankara may have agreed to some concessions for itself, including the pompous opening of the first foreign office of the so-called the “*Western Azerbaijan Community*” on December 12, 2024, in Izmir. Thus, Azerbaijan was given the green light to involve Turkey in this long-term game of changing Armenia’s demographic landscape in the post-negotiation period.