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**Between Victory and Legitimacy:
Azerbaijan, Armenia and the New
Order in the South Caucasus****Between Victory and Legitimacy: Azerbaijan, Armenia and the
New Order in the South Caucasus****Abstract:**

Azerbaijan's victory in Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 marked a historic turning point in the South Caucasus and opened a new phase of regional geopolitical reconfiguration, profoundly altering the balance of power that had emerged after the dissolution of the USSR. Azerbaijan thus consolidated a strategic victory after decades of conflict, while Armenia was left weakened and isolated. Today, the region is witnessing the gradual decline of Russia as a security guarantor, particularly in the face of the growing assertiveness of Turkey, the European Union and the United States, a development closely linked to the peace agreement signed in August 2025, which was clearly favourable to Baku and created the so-called "Trump Corridor", an infrastructure project designed to connect Azerbaijan with Nakhchivan and Turkey through Armenian territory. Beyond its economic dimension, the corridor also symbolises a new geopolitical architecture promoted by Turkey and the United States aimed at reducing the influence of Russia and Iran whilst strengthening Eurasian connectivity.

Keywords: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, Turkey, Trump Corridor, South Caucasus.

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Introduction: the collapse of an enclave

“Peoples possess a persistent memory, which does not always depend on what official textbooks say,” argues Jean Radvanyi, a French geographer and professor specialising in the South Caucasus, when discussing the long-standing conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis¹.

Today, this history is being rewritten once again, and it also marks a clear shift in the balance of power in the region.

In September 2023, Azerbaijan’s military offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh led to the definitive dismantling of the Armenian political entity known as the Republic of Artsakh, which had limited international recognition.

The rapid capitulation of local forces and authorities, together with the mass exodus of the Armenian population marked a turning point in a conflict that had been “frozen” or “hot” for decades. The Azerbaijani victory opened a new geopolitical phase in the South Caucasus, redefining historical alliances and challenging Russia’s traditional dominant role.

Tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan resurfaced following the collapse of the USSR, but they had existed previously.

The Soviet collapse eliminated the mechanisms of containment that had until then limited the violence. With the disappearance of the Soviet army as a force capable of imposing order, intercommunal clashes in Nagorno-Karabakh were left unchecked. Added to this was Boris Yeltsin’s decision to withdraw Russian intervention forces in 1991, which gave way to an open war that would last for three years.

The 1994 ceasefire, favourable to the Armenian side—which enjoyed significant support from the diaspora and controlled Nagorno-Karabakh, 13% of the territory internationally recognised as part of Azerbaijan².

¹ RADVANYI, Jean. ‘Armenia-Azerbaijan: “In the Caucasus, history is a powerful tool”, understanding the broader context of Nagorno-Karabakh’, *Le Grand Continent*. 25 September 2023. Available at: [Le Grand Continent](#) (accessed 6 May 2026).

² CENTER FOR PREVENTIVE ACTION. “Tensions Between Armenia and Azerbaijan”, *Global Conflict Tracker*. Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), 18 February 2026. Available at: [Council on Foreign Relations](#) (accessed 6 May 2026).

The new status was never accepted by the government in Baku, first under Heydar Aliyev and later under his son and successor, Ilham Aliyev, the current leader.

During the three decades following 1994, rhetoric on both the Azerbaijani and Armenian sides hardened to the point that compromise became almost impossible. The only attempt at a negotiated settlement came in 1997, when the Armenian president, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, proposed an agreement that included territorial concessions, an initiative that was blocked by the Armenian leaders in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The situation took a decisive turn in 2020, when Azerbaijan launched a military offensive backed by new allies, particularly Turkey.

Armenia was taken by surprise and found itself in a position of isolation, as Russia, despite its commitments under the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (hereinafter CSTO), of which both Armenia and Russia are members, chose not to intervene beyond deploying a force to maintain a fragile peace, whilst its influence was further eroded following the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

This marked the start of what became known as the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, which would lead to a complete Azerbaijani victory in September 2023.

The starting point was the blockade of the Lachin corridor, which began in December 2022, the only land route connecting Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia. On 22 February, the International Court of Justice ordered Azerbaijan to ensure the free and uninterrupted movement of people, vehicles and goods through that corridor, in both directions. However, the humanitarian crisis continued for months, with restrictions on access to food, medicines, fuel and basic supplies.

The Azerbaijani offensive of 19 September 2023 precipitated the final collapse. By the 28th, more than 65,000 people had fled from an estimated Armenian population of around 120,000, that is, more than half of the enclave's population in just a few days. The self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh itself announced its dissolution, following the ceasefire that followed the offensive, which cemented a new reality on the ground and left Baku in a winning position³.

³ "ICJ orders Azerbaijan to unblock Lachin Corridor", *OC Media*. 23 February 2023. Available at: [OC Media](#) (accessed 6 May 2026).

After several unsuccessful attempts, at meetings held in Washington on the initiative of President Donald Trump, on 8 August 2025 Armenians and Azerbaijanis signed a peace agreement with Trump himself acting as the principal mediator, rather than the United States. The US president was keenly interested in the opening of energy and logistics corridors in the South Caucasus, particularly the so-called Zangezur Corridor.

This corridor is intended to connect Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan enclave and, via this, with Turkey and other wider trade networks between Central Asia and Europe, reducing dependence on traditional routes under Russian or Iranian influence.

The agreement reflected a clear imbalance between the parties, as Azerbaijan negotiated from a position of military victory and international backing, with Turkey as its key supporter and the main beneficiary in military, economic and political terms. Armenia, by contrast, did so from a position of strategic weakness and isolation, in a clear process of distancing itself from Russia and moving closer to the European Union and the United States, a move that has generated mistrust in both Russia and Iran, which have traditionally been aligned in containing Azerbaijani and Turkish influence in the region. Furthermore, Armenia formally renounced its sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh⁴.

The “Trump Corridor” as a solution

The so-called “Trump Corridor” — officially the TRIPP or Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity — is the most controversial element of the August 2025 peace agreement, as it is more than just infrastructure; it is a geopolitical project that reconfigures the connections between the South Caucasus, Central Asia and Europe.

Geographically, it centres on a stretch of around 40 kilometres crossing southern Armenia and connecting with the Azerbaijani enclave of Nakhchivan, capable of facilitating large-scale trade, energy and logistics flows, as the project envisages the construction of infrastructure such as roads, railways, potential oil and gas pipelines, and fibre-optic cables.

⁴ COFFEY, Luke. “Next Steps for Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace”, *Hudson Institute*. Policy Memo. Washington D.C., October 2025. Available at: [Next Steps for Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace | Hudson Institute](#) (accessed 6 May 2026).

From a political perspective, Armenia formally retains legal sovereignty over the territory of Nakhchivan, but it is the United States that obtains exclusive rights to economic and commercial development and management for 99 years, presumably through a business consortium.

In this way, Armenia places the economic and commercial management of the region in American hands, thereby making it dependent on Yerevan, and seeks to resolve the main Armenian political dilemma, which was to guarantee its territorial integrity whilst meeting the Azerbaijani demand for a functional, unimpeded corridor to its enclave⁵.

Therefore, the corridor's name is far from neutral. Azerbaijan traditionally refers to it as the Zangezur Corridor, but Armenia prefers terms such as “corridor for peace and development” to avoid it being perceived as an Azerbaijani political imposition resulting from its victory in the war, and it is also presented as a project framed within a narrative of economic integration under US sponsorship, whilst simultaneously reconfiguring Eurasian transit routes by bypassing Russia and Iran.

In fact, according to US sources, one of the explicit objectives of the “Trump Corridor” is to reduce the influence of Moscow, Tehran and even China in the South Caucasus – a historic shift that also benefits Turkey, which is strengthening its direct connection with the Turkic world of Central Asia, and Azerbaijan itself, a crucial and burgeoning energy hub⁶.

Armenia: a new European partner and a retreating Russia?

Internationally, and following the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023, Armenia has distanced itself from Russia, even publicly questioning in forums such as the CSTO the reliability of its traditional security guarantor. However, beyond the recovery of some

⁵ U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE. “Joint Statement on the Publication of the U.S.-Armenia Implementation Framework for the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP)”, *Office of the Spokesperson*. 13 January 2026. Available at: [State Department](#) (accessed 6 May 2026).

⁶ ROZANSKIJ, Vladimir. “The importance of the ‘Trump Corridor’ for Central Asia”, *AsiaNews*, 18 August 2025. Available at: [AsiaNews](#) (accessed 6 May 2026).

border posts by the Armenians during 2024 and 2025, Russia is bolstering its military assets in the country.

In July 2025, the Gyumri base—Russia's 102nd base, located near the border with Turkey—was expanded. Historically, this facility has hosted several thousand troops, armoured vehicles, air defence systems and tactical aircraft, and constitutes Russia's primary instrument of military projection in the South Caucasus⁷.

Furthermore, Russia's economic, commercial and energy influence in Armenia remains highly significant, not to mention the social and demographic ties with millions of Armenians living in Russia. Conversely, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, who has led the Armenian government since 2018, is exploring closer ties with the European Union and the United States⁸.

Relations between Armenia and the European Union have accelerated significantly since late 2023, although a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) had already been in place since 2021, serving as a framework for reforms and regulatory convergence with the EU. On 23 January 2023, it was agreed to establish a civilian mission in Armenia (EUMA) under the Common Security and Defence Policy, and on 13 February 2024, a further agreement was announced to renew and deepen the bilateral partnership, following the annual meeting of the EU-Armenia Partnership Council⁹.

From an economic perspective, European involvement has taken on a quantifiable dimension. The EU Economic and Investment Plan has mobilised over €550 million in Armenia, focused on infrastructure, connectivity and sustainable development, to which is added an additional package of €270 million in grants and financial support, making the EU one of the country's main external financiers. At the same time, Brussels increased its humanitarian aid by €5.5 million to address the crisis of displaced persons from Nagorno-Karabakh.

⁷ KUCERA, Joshua. 'Russia reinforcing military base in Armenia', *Eurasianet*. 9 July 2025. Available at: [Eurasianet](#) (accessed 6 May 2026).

⁸ DE WAAL, Thomas. 'There Is No Shortcut for Europe in Armenia', *Strategic Europe* (Carnegie Europe). 30 April 2026. Available at: [Carnegie Europe](#) (accessed 6 May 2026).

⁹ COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. "Armenia", *Council of the European Union*. 2026. Available at: [Council of the European Union](#) (accessed 6 May 2026).

This pro-European shift is also reflected in public opinion: 51% of Armenians were in favour of joining the EU, a level of support backed by political action, as the European Parliament acknowledged in March 2024 that Armenia could apply for membership if it met the Copenhagen criteria, and in 2025 Yerevan took legislative steps to initiate that process. However, this shift has a limitation that appears to be key, also reflected in public opinion polls: the absence of security guarantees equivalent to those once offered by Russia¹⁰.

An underlying political-religious clash

The rift between Moscow and Yerevan is also reflected in the religious sphere, which is vital to understanding the historical power structure in the South Caucasus.

There is a clash with political implications between Prime Minister Pashinyan and the current Patriarch of the Armenian Apostolic Church, Karekin II, also Catholicos of Armenia and All Armenians, who exercises moral and religious leadership among believers beyond the country's borders, in the diaspora: some eight million people worldwide, whilst in Armenia itself there are around three million.

The Armenian Apostolic Church, with more than seventeen centuries of history, is regarded as a national institution and the pillar of Armenian cultural identity.

Following the defeat in 2023, Karekin became one of the leading voices of political opposition to the agreements adopted by Pashinyan, rejecting any territorial concessions and defending the link with Nagorno-Karabakh¹¹. Thus, since 2024, the tension has shifted from the symbolic to the institutional and from the religious to the political sphere, when Pashinyan accused the ecclesiastical hierarchy of corruption and even called for Karekin II's immediate resignation, demanded reform of the Apostolic Church and questioned its political role.

¹⁰ GHAZANCHYAN, Siranush. "IRI poll: Armenians prioritise peace, support EU integration, Civil Contract leads ahead of 2026 elections", *Public Radio of Armenia (Armradio)*. 6 March 2026. Available at: [Armradio](#) (accessed 6 May 2026).

¹¹ ATANESIAN, Grigor. "Armenia's PM accuses head of Church of fathering child in heated political row", *BBC News*. 20 June 2025. Available at: [BBC News](#) (accessed 6 May 2026).

Since then, bishops and priests accused of supporting anti-government movements or conspiracies have been arrested. For the Armenian clergy and their supporters, however, this amounts to political persecution by Pashinyan and an attempt to subordinate an independent historical and religious institution to political power.

The conflict spread beyond the country's borders when, in February 2026, around a thousand Armenians demonstrated in Armavir (Russia) in support of the Apostolic Church, demanding the release of the detained clergy and respect for the authority of Karekin II. These protests highlight several key factors, such as the significance of the Armenian diaspora in Russia and Moscow's exploitation of this conflict to present itself as the protector of traditional Armenia, whilst putting pressure on Pashinyan's government on the grounds that it is becoming increasingly pro-Western.

In response, the Armenian Prime Minister has sought support from US evangelical circles, which have close ties to Western networks, meeting with actors such as the Pray.com platform, in what is interpreted as another attempt to undermine the authority of the Apostolic Church and to persuade it to accept both the current borders signed in Washington in 2025 and a rapprochement with the EU and the United States itself, to the detriment of Russia¹².

Nagorno-Karabakh: ethnic pressure and the destruction of Armenian heritage

What has been the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh since September 2023? The Armenian exodus reached an almost total scale and more than 100,000 people fled to Armenia, which led to the almost complete emptying of the historic Armenian presence in Nagorno-Karabakh and caused humanitarian pressure in Armenia itself, which was unable to accommodate and care for this enormous exodus that took place in a matter of weeks.

According to a legal analysis published in the *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, the combination of fear, violence, intimidation and the absence of security guarantees

¹² ROZANSKIJ, Vladimir. "Protests also in Russia over the Armenian conflict between the Church and the State", *AsiaNews*, 10 February 2026. Available at: [AsiaNews](#) (accessed 6 May 2026).

supports the argument that the Armenian population did not leave the region of their own free will, but under coercive pressure from Azerbaijan¹³.

Following the blockade of the Lachin corridor, the International Court of Justice intervened again on 17 November 2023 and ordered Azerbaijan to allow those who had left Nagorno-Karabakh to return safely and freely, guaranteeing their safety and preserving their identity documents, records and property rights. However, for Azerbaijan, this population simply left without any coercion whatsoever, whilst the persecution and arrest of the remaining Armenian local authorities were announced, on charges of terrorism, illegal possession of weapons, war crimes and violations of international law¹⁴.

For their part, following the definitive capture of the territory by the Azerbaijani, various organisations have warned of the destruction or reinterpretation of Armenian cultural heritage in the region, including churches, cemeteries and historical monuments. This process forms part of a broader strategy of territorial consolidation and the redefinition of Azerbaijani identity in opposition to the Armenian one, eliminating the visible signs of their presence in history.

Among the most notable cases are the “We, Our Mountains” monument (Tatik-Papik), built in 1967 and vandalised since late 2024, the Stepanakert Cathedral and the Surb Akob Church, which have been almost destroyed, as have many monasteries and khachkars (medieval Armenian stone crosses), notably those in the regions of Gandzasar, Dadivank and Amaras, all of great religious and architectural heritage value¹⁵.

From the perspective of international law, the destruction of cultural heritage in conflict situations may constitute a violation of the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property and, in certain cases, a war crime if intent is proven. However, in Nagorno-Karabakh there is a lack of effective international monitoring mechanisms and,

¹³ PAYLAN, Sheila and ASHRAPH, Sareta. ‘Justice for the Victims of the Nagorno–Karabakh Conflict: Ongoing Accountability Efforts and the Path to the International Criminal Court’, *Journal of International Criminal Justice*. 2026. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jicj/mqaf055> (accessed 6 May 2026).

¹⁴ SUÁREZ, Mariano. ‘The 23 Armenians kidnapped by the Azerbaijani regime denounce torture and call for international aid’, *Infobae*. 16 May 2025. Available at: <https://www.infobae.com/america/mundo/2025/05/16/los-23-armenios-secuestrados-por-el-regimen-de-azerbaiyan-denuncian-torturas-y-piden-ayuda-internacional/> (accessed 6 May 2026).

¹⁵ ROZANSKIJ, Vladimir. “The Destruction of Armenian Heritage in Artsakh”, *AsiaNews*. 28 April 2026. Available at: <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/The-Destruction-of-Armenian-Heritage-in-Artsakh-65335.html> (accessed 6 May 2026).

furthermore, the Yerevan government's own limited capacity to even denounce these acts is striking.

Azerbaijan: Aliyev, the “friend of all”

Ilham Aliyev, President of Azerbaijan since 2003, has been one of the major winners following the Azerbaijani victory in Nagorno-Karabakh. He has consolidated a pragmatic foreign policy based on balancing relations with various actors, maintaining particularly close ties with Turkey, whilst also having key energy relations with the European Union and open channels of communication with the United States, as well as with Iran, Russia and Israel.

In fact, in February 2024, a few months after the victory in Nagorno-Karabakh, Aliyev won the early presidential elections and secured another term—his fifth—with seven more years in office, as there are no term limits under the 2009 constitutional reform. He also secured over 90% of the vote, in a context with no real opposition and a turnout of around 76% of the electorate. Elections that were due to be held in 2025, but which Aliyev decided to bring forward, capitalising on his popularity, presenting himself as the leader who “restored Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity” since the dissolution of the USSR in 1991¹⁶.

The military victory in Nagorno-Karabakh strengthened Aliyev and legitimised his power, by consolidating Azerbaijani nationalism as a unifying political force, undermining any attempt at real opposition and, above all, granting Azerbaijan international prestige and influence.

Aliyev thus begins a new seven-year term with an unprecedented domestic position, and the objective is no longer territorial reconquest with the full integration of Nagorno-Karabakh, but to look beyond that: to drive accelerated economic growth, consolidate strategic corridors and redefine the regional balance, in competition with Armenia and on an equal footing with actors such as Russia, Turkey, Iran and the United States.

Azerbaijan is now an attractive player on the international stage.

¹⁶ GAJRAMÁNOV, Farid. “Aliyev re-elected president of Azerbaijan with 94% of the vote”, *EFE*. 7 February 2024. Available at: <https://efe.com/mundo/2024-02-07/aliyev-reelegido-presidenciales-azerbaiyan/> (accessed 6 May 2026).

According to World Bank data, its economic situation is positive, with growth of around 4%, contained inflation, moderate unemployment and a *per capita* GDP that places it among the middle-income economies. The Azerbaijani economy is heavily dependent on the energy sector, particularly oil and gas, which form the basis of its exports (accounting for 85% of the total), a substantial part of its revenue, and explain its integration into international energy markets and the web of alliances within the global order¹⁷.

The recent geopolitical context has clearly worked in its favour. Following the war in Ukraine and the reduction in Russian energy supplies to Europe, Azerbaijan strengthened its role as an alternative gas supplier to the EU. This sustained high level of revenue underpins its growth and consolidates its stability.

Regarding the EU, Azerbaijan has a partnership based on the 1999 Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, reinforced in 2017, under which Azerbaijan is part of the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership—key frameworks for regional cooperation.

The EU is Azerbaijan's main trading partner and investor, as it is its strategic energy partner and supplies around 5% of the gas consumed in Europe via the Southern Gas Corridor. This energy dimension has gained significance, particularly following the war in Ukraine, as the EU seeks to diversify its supplies. Although there is close cooperation, tensions persist regarding the rule of law in Azerbaijan¹⁸.

Turkey is undoubtedly the main beneficiary of the new power realignment in the South Caucasus, as a solid Ankara–Baku axis has been consolidated following Azerbaijan's victory in the wars of 2020 and 2023, opening a continuous land route to Central Asia. A corridor that is not only economic, but also ideological and geopolitical, linked to Erdoğan's pan-Turkic vision and the integration of the Eurasian space¹⁹.

¹⁷ WORLD BANK. *Data: Azerbaijan*. 2026. Available at: <https://datos.bancomundial.org/pais/azerbaijan> (accessed 6 May 2026).

¹⁸ COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. *Azerbaijan*. 2026. Available at: [Consilium – Azerbaijan](#) (accessed 6 May 2026).

¹⁹ NIKOGHOSYAN, Hovhannes. 'The Zangezur Corridor and the Turkey-Russia Standoff in the Caucasus', *AsiaNews*. 27 September 2024. Available at: <https://www.asianews.it/noticias-es/El-corredor-de-Zangezur-y-el-enfrentamiento-entre-Turqu%C3%ADa-y-Rusia-en-el-C%C3%A1ucaso-63480.html> (accessed 6 May 2026).

Another international player that is gaining influence in relations with Azerbaijan is Israel, albeit through a deliberately low-key relationship; yet one that is of crucial importance given Azerbaijan's geographical position on the border with Iran, its role as an energy supplier, and its military and intelligence cooperation. Around 30% of Israel's oil comes from Azerbaijan, and in some years this figure will rise to over 40–60% via the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline, which connects the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean²⁰.

The second pillar of the relationship is defence, as Azerbaijan is one of the main buyers of Israeli weaponry, which accounts for approximately 60% of Baku's military imports, in the form of drones, missile systems and electronic intelligence. These assets, alongside Turkish ones, played a key role in the Nagorno-Karabakh war since 2020.

A less visible but significant aspect is Azerbaijan's role as a bridge between Israel and Turkey. Despite recurring tensions between Netanyahu and Erdoğan, Baku has acted as an intermediary between the two countries.

A key factor explaining this Azerbaijani alliance with Turkey and Israel is Iran. Azerbaijan shares a border with the Islamic Republic and is home to a significant Azerbaijani population within Iran itself. For its part, Iran views this Azerbaijani influence, with Turkish support, as a threat to its own role as an alternative route and to its regional influence.

On 5 March, in the context of the war against Israel and the United States, Azerbaijan accused Iran of launching several drones at the airport in Nakhchivan, precisely the Azerbaijani enclave at the heart of the economic corridor and situated very close to the Iranian border. The attack also struck the vicinity of a school in the town of Shakarabad, which heightened the gravity of the incident and led Baku to describe the attack as a violation of international law and an act of aggression, threatening possible retaliation and reorganising transport to Nakhchivan via Turkey²¹.

Relations between Russia and Azerbaijan are characterised by growing cooperation, although, as in Armenia, there is a perceived gradual loss of Russian control. In August

²⁰ ARADHAN, Sudarshan. "Israel's imports of Azerbaijani oil via Turkey jump despite Ankara's trade ban", *Reuters*. 21 January 2026. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/israels-imports-azerbaijani-oil-via-turkey-jump-despite-ankaras-trade-ban-2026-01-21/> (accessed 6 May 2026).

²¹ TUDOR, Nadira. "Aliyev vows attacks on Azerbaijan will face our 'Iron Fist' after Iran drone strike", *Euronews*. 6 March 2026. Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2026/03/06/aliyev-vows-attacks-on-azerbaijan-will-face-our-iron-fist-after-iran-drone-strike> (accessed 6 May 2026).

2024, Putin travelled to Baku, one of the few places not subject to the International Criminal Court's arrest warrant issued in connection with the invasion of Ukraine, a move that reaffirmed Azerbaijan's independent position on the international stage.

Putin and Aliyev highlighted their relationship as that of "close allies and partners", with a strong emphasis on the energy sector, and signed several cooperation agreements covering everything from food security to industrial and energy projects, including initiatives linked to the North-South Corridor, which is key to connecting Russia with the Indian Ocean²². Furthermore, Azerbaijan purchases Russian arms worth around \$5 billion annually.

There is another key factor in how Russia seeks to preserve its alliance with Azerbaijan, even above that with Armenia: the loss of direct influence over its elites. The decline of figures such as the now-detained Ramiz Mekhtiev, accused of treason and considered for decades to be Moscow's main intermediary in Baku, symbolises the weakening of the political networks inherited from the Soviet era and the consolidation of Aliyev's leadership, as well as Russia's acceptance of this new balance. This includes recent episodes that have strained this bilateral relationship, such as the downing of AZAL flight 8243 on 25 December 2024, which left 38 dead and forced Putin to apologise to Aliyev—something that would have been unlikely years ago²³.

Conclusions: a Caucasus in flux

The outcome of the 2023 crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh highlighted, first and foremost, Russia's relative decline as a guarantor of security in its immediate periphery, the South Caucasus. However, this relative retreat does not imply the emergence of a new stable order, but rather the opening of a more fragmented competitive landscape, which is reshaping the regional order and in which other international actors such as Turkey, Iran, Israel, the EU and the United States are taking centre stage.

²² EADAILY. "Putin met with Aliyev: Full text of the conversation", *EADaily*. 9 October 2025. Available at: <https://eadaily.com/en/news/2025/10/09/putin-met-with-aliyev-full-text-of-the-conversation> (accessed 6 May 2026).

²³ CUESTA, Javier G. 'Putin promises compensation for the downing of an Azerbaijani passenger plane but blames Ukraine', *El País*, 9 October 2025. Available at: <https://elpais.com/internacional/2025-10-09/putin-promete-indemnizaciones-por-el-derribo-de-un-avion-de-pasajeros-de-azerbaiyan-pero-culpa-a-ucrania.html> (accessed 6 May 2026).

The Washington agreement of August 2025 not only brings a cycle of conflict that began in the late 1980s to an end, but also ushers in a new phase in which stability will depend less on Moscow and more on an unstable balance between external actors. Within this context, Armenia finds itself in a particularly fragile position. On the one hand, Erdoğan's pan-Turkic ambitions and Aliyev's strategic objectives—particularly the creation of the Zangezur land corridor, which crosses Armenian territory—compound an unstable domestic situation and a degree of international isolation, forcing Armenia to rely on routes and resources controlled by unfriendly actors, such as Azerbaijan itself.

As in the case of Ukraine, the relationship with the EU—which offers no security guarantees nor has set out a specific timetable for accession—implies potential tensions with Russia, which, nevertheless, continues to maintain a military presence and influence. This places Armenia in a complex position, forcing it to balance its aspiration for autonomy with the demands of a greater power, whatever that may be.

Unlike in Azerbaijan, the proposed corridor, although it crosses Armenia, will not integrate the country into regional dynamics, nor will it open up an alternative land route for hydrocarbons, minerals and goods — which in many cases come from Russia — nor will it strengthen connections with the Central Asian economies, which are in the hands of the Azeris and their allies.

The result will be a more volatile South Caucasus, characterised by unstable balances, flexible alliances and growing competition between regional powers. Far from being resolved by the Azerbaijani victory, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict thus enters a new phase where territorial control coexists with latent tensions and far-reaching geopolitical disputes.

For its part, the Zangezur Corridor will be much more than just infrastructure: it will be the axis around which a new potential rivalry between Russia and Turkey may unfold; with Azerbaijan's indisputable victory in Nagorno-Karabakh, Turkey has consolidated its own geopolitical sphere of influence stretching from Anatolia to Central Asia.

For Russia, this could mean the risk of permanently losing its dominant position in the region and witnessing a more profound transformation: the shift from a South Caucasus structured by Russian hegemony to a multipolar, competitive and open landscape, where

Ankara emerges as one of the main beneficiaries of the new balance, but not the only one, as the EU, the United States, Iran and Israel also have their own plans, most of which involve strengthening their ties with Baku rather than Yerevan.

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