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**Azerbaijan**

# **Nagorno-Karabakh condemned to famine in the indifference of the international community**



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**The situation of the around 120,000 people who live in Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian enclave within Azerbaijan claimed by both Yerevan and Baku, is today tragic.**

Cut off from the rest of the world, and especially from Armenia, the inhabitants, ethnic Armenians, see the spectre of a disastrous famine looming, imposed by the Azerbaijani authorities, who wish to force them into exodus.

Neither Russia, although it is supposed to be close to Armenia, and whose peacekeeping forces are deployed in the region, nor Western countries are intervening to prevent the looming humanitarian catastrophe. How can we explain this?

## **Decades of conflict, sometimes violent, sometimes "frozen"**



This map shows the distribution of land following the peace agreement in 2020. The ethnic Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh are now cut off from Armenia, with the areas separating the two territories having been taken over by Azerbaijan

Nagorno-Karabakh is a region that has been disputed between Armenia and Azerbaijan since the fall of the Soviet Union. In the 1920s, this area, populated by more than 90 per cent Armenians, was annexed to the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR). In 1991, after the fall of the USSR, Nagorno-Karabakh proclaimed its independence. Baku sent in the army. Supported by Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh (called Artsakh by the Armenians) ended up, in 1994, winning this war with a very heavy toll (several tens of thousands of deaths). On this occasion, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh conquered lands from Azerbaijan over which they decided to retain control, in order to establish a sanitary cordon around Nagorno-Karabakh and to be directly linked to each other.

In the nearly thirty years since, Armenia, which itself has never recognized the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh, did not sign any peace treaty with Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan prepared its revenge, [keeping its refugees in temporary accommodation](#) despite the wealth generated by hydrocarbon exports (unlike Armenia, Azerbaijan has significant oil and gas reserves).

In 2018, a velvet revolution took place in Armenia. It brought to power the journalist and until then political oppositionist Nikol Pashinian, which raised hopes, now almost evaporated, of democratization and the fight against corruption. Vladimir Putin saw a parallel with the Orange Revolution (2004) and the Revolution of Dignity (2013-2014) in Ukraine, as well as with the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003). This is why he did not intervene in September 2020 when, while the borders were closed and the world's eyes were glued to the Covid-19 statistics, Azerbaijan violently attacked Nagorno-Karabakh.

After forty-four days, Armenia and Artsakh, poorly prepared, had to admit defeat. The protocols of November 9, 2020 provided for the return of the districts of Kelbajar, Aghdam and Lachine to Azerbaijan, and the installation of a Russian peacekeeping force on the Lachine corridor, in order to ensure security along this essential route for the transit of goods and people between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

## The impact of the war in Ukraine

The war in Ukraine has shaken up the relationship of forces in the region. The sanctions adopted against Russia have officially put a stop to Russian hydrocarbon exports to Europe. But a few days before the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Ilham Aliev, the [irremovable and very authoritarian president of Azerbaijan](#), who succeeded his father Heydar Aliev in 2003 Aliev after his death, went to Moscow, where he met Vladimir Putin. During these discussions, Azerbaijan's capacity to increase its gas exports to Europe was discussed.

In November 2022, Azerbaijan concluded an agreement with Russia: part of Russian gas is exported to Azerbaijan, which is then re-exported to Europe. The EU buys gas from Baku, turning a blind eye to its real origin.

[Ursula von der Leyen 's declarations](#) according to which the EU has succeeded in putting an end to its energy dependence on Russia are therefore just smoke and mirrors, and intended to maintain an acceptable diplomatic posture as part of the European response to the invasion of Ukraine. The consequences of this posture are, however, extremely serious for Armenians.

By concluding its gas agreement with Azerbaijan, Europe has strengthened the position of a dictatorship all of whose indicators are even more alarming than those of Russia, in its region and on the international scene. Convinced that no one would come to the aid of the Armenians anymore, and finding themselves in a position of strength against Russia, the Azerbaijani authorities blocked the Lachine corridor from December 12, 2022.

At first, the country sent fake eco-activists, who blocked the corridor under so-called environmental pretexts. This operation was easy to see through: on the one hand, Ilham Aliev himself encouraged the demonstrators, and on the other hand, the [real Azerbaijani eco-activists were arrested in the context of other demonstrations](#). On April 23, 2023, under the eyes of Russian peacekeepers, and despite the 2020 agreement, Azerbaijan set up a checkpoint in Lachine. Nothing and no one was able to enter or leave without the agreement of the Azerbaijani authorities.

## The strangulation of Nagorno-Karabakh

From December 2022, it was the [ICRC which took over which took over](#) transporting patients from Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia. To do this, it always came to an agreement with the local Azerbaijani authorities. However, on July 29, 2023, and despite the prior agreement of these authorities, the Azerbaijanis [stopped the convoy carrying Vagif Khachatryan to Yerevan for urgent care](#). He was [accused of participating in the Meshali massacre on December 22,](#)

[1991](#), when Armenian soldiers killed twenty-two Azerbaijani villagers. However, the [investigations carried out in particular by the Armenian rights defender](#) showed that the person who participated in these crimes was a homonym, because the arrested man had only enlisted in the army the following year.

Furthermore, all Armenians took part in the conflict at one time or another. If participating in one of the wars becomes a crime, the entire population is threatened with arrest. [Armenophobia is systemic in Azerbaijan](#), especially since the end of the USSR. In school textbooks, [Armenians are depicted as bloodthirsty barbarians](#). Official Azerbaijani theses present the Armenians of Karabakh as intruders having settled by force on lands stolen from the Azerbaijanis. They are also doing the same thing with the Republic of Armenia, thus showing that the project was never to recover Nagorno-Karabakh but to complete the land connection between Azerbaijan and Turkey. Any researcher in the human sciences knows, however, that demography is plural within the confines of empires like the Caucasus.

Furthermore, if all war crimes must be condemned, then in order to build peace, war crimes committed by Azerbaijan should also be prosecuted. However, this is not the attitude of Baku, on the contrary, as shown in particular by the Ramil Safarov case. In 2004, during a NATO-sponsored exercise in Hungary, this Azerbaijani soldier murdered Armenian soldier Gurgen Margarian in his sleep with an axe. Sentenced to life in prison in 2006, he was extradited in 2012 to Azerbaijan, where he was welcomed as a hero and pardoned by Ilham Aliiev himself. The invocation of war crimes – exclusively Armenian – is used by the authorities in Baku to justify their actions targeting the Armenian populations of Nagorno-Karabakh.

On June 15, 2023, Azerbaijan finally [banned the ICRC from passing through the Lachine corridor](#), accusing its employees of trafficking, including cell phones and cigarettes. While no food has been able to be transported there since December 2022, at the end of July 2023, a convoy of 19 trucks transporting 400 tonnes of food aid was [blocked in Kornidzor, the last village before the border](#).

Flour stocks are gradually dwindling, and residents are now relying on a less rich mixture to make some bread. On Facebook groups, residents organize themselves and exchange their last reserves for a little formula milk, or a few chocolates for the children. They now queue all night in the hope of getting a loaf of bread. Transport is at a standstill due to lack of fuel. A 40-year-old man [died of starvation on August 15](#).

On August 16, 2023, Armenian authorities called on the UN Security Council to end the blockade. Demonstrations regularly take place in Yerevan, in front of the UN headquarters, but also in other cities around the world, such as Paris, Sydney or Los Angeles. The situation there is deteriorating day by day, and is undermining any hope of peace in the region; This is also what [a feminist collective for peace in Azerbaijan](#) denounces.

Peace cannot be achieved under these conditions, but that is not what the Azerbaijani authorities are seeking. Their policy is intended to force Armenians in the region to leave or die, and that is why on August 18, the Lemkin Institute for the Prevention of Genocide published [an alert on the dramatic situation in Nagorno-Karabakh](#).

The situation in Nagorno-Karabakh has provoked only timid reactions on the international scene, and many states are calling on both parties to reopen traffic in both directions. At the UN, only France and Malta have denounced Azerbaijan's attitude. In Europe, no one, apart from a few Armenian activists, denounces the gas agreement. To end the blockade, a much stronger response is needed in the face of Azerbaijan's attitude.

*This article was first published on August 28, 2023 in [The Conversation](#). It was updated on September 22.*

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