

# Another perspective regarding the 2020 War in Karabakh: The relationship between a frozen conflict and securitization

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## Abstract

One of the most critical disputes in the Post-Soviet space is the long-lasting Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. While this issue has long been regarded as a land-based dispute to a large extent, it can also be stated from the securitization perspective that it is a conflict inherent in ethnic identity. The proposed way to solve a problem in the securitization approach is the desecuritization of the issue. However, negotiations conducted by the Minsk Group on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which were initiated within the framework of the OSCE, did not yield any results. In this context, the process of resolving the issue through negotiations, in other words, desecuritization, failed. This has led to the re-securitization of the problem and paved the way for taking extraordinary measures to come to a solution. The final military confrontation experienced in 2020 has also been triggered specifically by this approach.

## Keywords

nagorno-karabakh, securitization, identity, frozen conflict, Russia

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## Introduction

The frozen conflict zones, which have generally appeared in the former Soviet geography for ethnocultural reasons, are among the most debated issues in international politics. Accordingly, the “de facto” independent structures that appeared during and after the armed conflicts have eliminated the territorial integrity of the states to which they are affiliated in the sense of “de jure.”

The discomfort felt by the Armenian minority living in the Nagorno-Karabakh played an important role in the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In this context, the demand of the Armenian minority in Nagorno-Karabakh to leave Azerbaijan and join their homeland was also met positively by Armenia, causing the problem to turn from being a domestic problem into a regional crisis.

The dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh began in the late 1980s, but became a “frozen conflict zone” in 1994. Combined with Nagorno-Karabakh, the occupation of seven Azerbaijani districts surrounding the region by Armenian

forces, which located on the territory of Karabakh, led the issue to come to the forefront. After the ceasefire of which Russia played a mediating role being signed in 1994, no results were achieved from the negotiations conducted under the auspices of the OSCE. The fact that the parties did not take a step back from their theses and the mediating states approached the issue based on their own regional interests contributed to the consolidation of the issue’s outlook as a

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frozen conflict zone. However, the war that occurred in the autumn of 2020 resulted in Azerbaijan reclaiming a large part of its territories occupied by Armenia. In other words, the issue that has been tried to be “desecuritized” through negotiations over the years has been again securitized by military means and largely brought to a conclusion in favor of one of the parties.

In this study, first of all, the regional and systemic factors that caused the 2020 Karabakh War are shed light on. Thus, it has been tried to reveal the reasons why this conflict, which was seen as a frozen conflict, turned into a hot war again in 2020. At this point, it can be said that the failure to achieve a permanent peace agreement between the parties following the first war paved the way for both sides to securitize the problem for a solution. The main question of the study is what is the effect of the inability to resolve the conflict through normal political means on the securitization of it (and thus the emergence of the 2020 War)? The answer to this question has been tried to be revealed by examining the factors identified in the first part within the framework of securitization theory in the second part.

In this context, the Nagorno-Karabakh Problem is analyzed in depth with the content analysis method, and it is tried to understand whether the securitization of the problem has an effect on the process leading to the solution of the issue. We will touch upon the global and regional factors that have brought carrying out the military operation on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue back on the agenda. In the last chapter, the fact that the issue that was once expected to be resolved by desecuritization has now been solved by military means/operations will be elaborated on the axis of a conceptual framework.

### **Regional and Systemic Factors that Triggered the War of 2020 in Karabakh**

There are several regional and systemic reasons that led to a war in Karabakh again. Since negotiations conducted by the OSCE Minsk Group failed to reach a solution, the issue of maintaining the line of contact was largely dependent on Russia. By intervening in or directly influencing the formation of frozen conflict zones in the former Soviet geography, Russia has gained substantial political leverage that can be used in its foreign policy (Blank, 2008: 23–54). As a result of its involvement in these problems, Russia has not only had the opportunity to show a presence in the mentioned regions but also had the chance to indirectly shape the foreign policies of the countries where the problem occurred.

This also applies to Nagorno-Karabakh and its neighboring territories, which are under the occupation of Armenia, and where a “de facto” republic has been declared, which no UN member has even recognized (Kolsto & Blakkisrud, 2012: 141–151). With its political and

military support for Armenia, Russia has been considered an actor who protected Armenia from a possible Azerbaijani attack, as well as maintaining the continuity of the occupation in Karabakh. Since the first years of independence, Jumayeva (2018: 105–117) claimed that the ruling power in Yerevan has been shaped under the effect of Russian support that the military/civilian bureaucracy of Karabakh clan received from the Armenian diaspora. This ruling bloc, which favored a final solution to Karabakh in accordance with the line of contact drawn in 1994, was ousted in 2018 by a popular movement called The Velvet Revolution. The policies pursued by this bloc led to the country’s isolation by Turkey and Azerbaijan in a regional sense. Following the Velvet Revolution, which occurred with the demand for this situation to be changed, we see that a name who is seen close to a pro-Western discourse and positioned the country more distanced from Russia came to power (Terzyan, 2019: 24–43).

Nikol Pashinyan has taken on the political leadership by stating that he would take steps to eliminate the spiral of corruption that the former ruling bloc created with security discourse. Although he did not take any adverse steps after taking office regarding his country’s membership in the Eurasian Economic Union, his close contact with Western actors has always been regarded as inappropriate from Moscow. After a government that has worked closely with Moscow for many years, it has seen that Pashinyan’s presence and discourse have been considered unreliable from the Russian side (Giragosian, 2019: 8–16).

The legal and political maneuvers targeting Kocharian and Sargsyan, who have been seen as Russia’s traditional allies, and other actors close to these names were interpreted in Moscow as a move to consolidate Pashinyan’s power (ArmeniaOnline, 2018). Thus, we see that Moscow did not interfere much in Azerbaijan’s military operation in Karabakh to show what Yerevan may face without the support of Russia. Russia prevented the complete withdrawal of Armenia from Nagorno-Karabakh and thus proved to Pashinyan how critical Armenia’s security is for Russia.

Another reason for the war in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 is that Russia has aspired to extend its contact sphere with Azerbaijan. As an energy-rich country and an alternative to Russia even to a certain extent, Azerbaijan is an actor closely monitored from Moscow’s side. It is claimed that the news of Turkey would have military bases in Azerbaijan has galvanized the intent of Moscow not to lose Azerbaijan (Daily Sabah, 2020). Since the Aliyev administration has recently been rigorously criticized by Brussels and Western capitals, a suitable room to be filled by Russia has also been given. In Azerbaijan, it is also known that the nationalist opposition, which was a supporter of the Azerbaijani Popular Front, has recently started to be active in the political arena (Sultanova, 2014: 15–37). In this sense, it is significant that Russia allowed Baku to end the Armenian

occupation in seven districts in Karabakh to support the Aliyev administration, which does not disturb the regional balance and maintains military and economic/commercial ties with Russia. This has enabled Ilham Aliyev to be seen as a national hero who took back most of its territory in Karabakh in the eyes of a vast majority of the public. Nevertheless, in order to manipulate the foreign and security-oriented policies of the Aliyev administration in the future, Russia has also ensured that a compromise has been reached that would prevent the complete separation of Nagorno-Karabakh from Armenia.

There are also works underway to enable Azerbaijan to become part of China's One Belt, One Road Initiative, through Trans-Caspian Energy and transport projects (investments in ports, railways, and warehouses, etc.). It is even known that Baku is one of the most critical components of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, known as the "middle corridor" of the Belt-and-Road Initiative. Ilham Aliyev's statements at the Belt and Road Forum II in Beijing in 2019, describing his country's role in the Trans-Caspian corridor, also showed the importance of this situation. The agreement between Azerbaijan Railway Company and Xi'an Logistics and the investments to be made in cooperation with Azer Telecom and China Telecom on the consolidation of the Asia (China)-Europe communication (internet) network also point to this issue (Babayev & Ismailzade, 2020: 2–4). The trade volume between the two countries has also been increasing steadily in recent years. As of 2019, this figure reached 1.3 billion dollars. Indeed, after Russia and Turkey, China is the most prominent import partner of Azerbaijan (CIA, 2021). The fact that Azerbaijan offers a means of commercial connection via Baku Cargo Terminal, Alat Trade Port, Caspian Trade Fleet, and Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway increases the importance of Azerbaijan for China (Babayev & Ismailzade, 2020: 2–5). The transport corridor through Azerbaijan will also be of critical importance in relation to the investments that China has made in the Port of Poti and considering to make in the future at the free trade zone in Anaklia (Jardine, 2018). Also, the fact that an official in charge of European and Eurasian Affairs of the United States made an assessment that Azerbaijan is the heart of the Belt and Road Initiative stresses the importance of this country (Babayev & Ismailzade, 2020: 4). Since Beijing's increased economic and commercial prominence in the region can lead to its becoming more visible in the political and regional sense in the long term, this is an issue that needs to be balanced for Russia. In order to achieve this balance, it has been thought that one of the most critical instruments that Russia can use in its hands is to take a step that Baku can gain ground considerably in terms of the occupation of Karabakh. So, Babayev and Ismailzade (2020: 4) claimed that one of the most important factors influencing Russia's stance on the axis of the war in 2020 has been China's moves, specifically in Azerbaijan.

Russia may want to expand the Eurasian Economic Union by including Azerbaijan, after ending the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with a peace treaty that will allow it to have a military presence in the region (Kofner, 2020). Azerbaijan's participation in this integration initiative, of which Armenia is a member, will open up a space that can also be used for Moscow in Baku, which stands out with its role on the Trans-Caspian axis. In addition, it will be able to create a regional economic integration that is likely to articulate Georgia to it in the long term. Russia reckons this move could create a domino effect in Eurasia. In this way, Moscow will have institutional control over the steps to be taken by China and the EU on the Silk Road, not only as an external regional actor but also through the Eurasian Economic Union.

A close relationship to be built with Azerbaijan will also offer an opportunity to expand the contact scope between Turkey and Russia, which has reached a strategic dimension in the recent period. As a matter of fact, Azerbaijan is Turkey's closest ally and a central actor in the South Caucasus Strategy. This country is also the central actor of Turkey's Central Asian and Eurasian strategy in general. As a result of the "controlled" approval that Russia will grant to Baku to end the Armenian occupation in Karabakh, it could be claimed that it will be able to reduce even to some extent the Moscow-oriented suspicions of the "nationalist" sections in both Azerbaijan and Turkey. Furthermore, Russia will also convey a message to Turkey that there may be a rapprochement on the issues that have been considered "never irreconcilable." Behind such a message, of course, is the aspiration of Azerbaijan, as well as Turkey, to have close ties with Russia on the Eurasian axis. Although Balta (2019: 69–86) argued that the rapprochement between Russia and Turkey presents a "preferential" look on the axis of various problem areas, Ankara's problems with Western actors open up a space that can also be benefited by Russia. Therefore, Russia's goal is to expand the area of cooperation with Turkey, specifically in the South Caucasus and throughout Eurasia, so that it can have more influence on Ankara's foreign policy actions in its favor. The fact that the Karabakh War took place at a time when Turkey's relations with the EU and the United States were quite tense means that Russia wants to open the door to this approach. Avdaliani (2020) thought that the expectation about the level of tension in US-Russia relations is not likely to decrease after Biden's presidency also pushes Russia to make some moves. Considering that Turkey may face severe pressure during Biden's presidency, Moscow wants to keep the door open for cooperation with Ankara (Turak, 2020).

Russia is also closely monitoring Turkey and Israel's increasing role, concerning Azerbaijan's defense investments (CIA, 2021). Although Russia is still the most critical player in meeting Baku's weapons needs, the increasing role of Israel and Turkey has alarmed Moscow, which plays a

“hegemonic” role in meeting the defense needs of countries situated in the former Soviet geography. We see that Israel has become an important actor in meeting Azerbaijan’s weapons needs after the treaty signed in 2012 (a treaty of \$ 1.6 billion between Azerbaijan and Israel Aerospace Industries) (Lindenstrauss, 2015: 69–79). Under this treaty, Baku has begun to purchase drone and air/missile defense weapons from Israel. Turkey took the necessary steps to enable Azerbaijan to take advantage of its recently developed drone technology (Bayraktar TB2s) during the Nagorno-Karabakh War (Yermakov, 2020). As a matter of fact, we know that Baku breached Yerevan’s defenses in and around Karabakh by benefiting from this military technology procured from both Israel and Turkey. Russia has been concerned the advances in the defense industry of these two countries could reduce Azerbaijan’s dependence on Russia. Moreover, the success achieved in the Nagorno-Karabakh War could lead other former Soviet Republics as well to turn to Israeli and Turkish companies as an alternative to Russian companies. In addition, Moscow has been closely monitoring the willingness in Azerbaijan and Turkey to revitalize Turkey-Israel relations due to Israel’s role/support in the Nagorno-Karabakh War. For this reason, Russia has changed its absolute pro-Armenian stance and thus does not want to be an actor to consolidate a period of political rapprochement between Turkey and Israel based on Azerbaijan.

## War in Karabakh within the Frame of the Securitization Approach

### *Securitization Approach and Societal Security*

*Securitization approach.* Security is generally considered based on national security, from a realist and liberal perspective. Yet, national security has neither been fully framed nor provided for within the scope of a state. The alternative route to a broader security concept requires the threats even outside of the military ones to be included in the security agenda as well (Waever, 1995: 49–51). In this context, securitization theorists suggest that, unlike the traditional understanding, the security agenda should also be opened up to different threats. Within this framework, they have tried to build a new and more radical understanding of security work by securitizing non-military threats along with military ones (Buzan, 1998: 4). Buzan has expanded the debate on security that he initiated from the military field to political, economic, environmental, and social sectors. This argument obviously suggests that security starts from the military field but is also increasingly shifting towards these new sectors (Waever, 1995:52).

Securitization theorists point out that there are three fundamental elements of an act of securitization. The first one is the “reference object”, which is the subject of securitization. The second one is the “securitizing actor”,

which expresses security as a verbal action; and the third one is the “functional actors”, which have a significant impact on the appearance of the security image through their actions (Balzacq, 2005:178).

To the question “what makes something really a security problem?”, Waever answers that the events that threaten the sovereignty and independence of a state and deprive it of the capacity for self-government are a security problem. For this reason, such a threat should be responded to by exerting maximum effort (Waever, 1995:54). The unique nature of these mentioned threats provides justification for the use of extraordinary measures to deal with them. Implementing security plays a key role in legitimizing the use of force, but more generally this practice opens up a space for the state to take action or take alternative measures for the sake of combating existential threats (Buzan, 1998: 21–22).

The right to call a development a security problem is a privileged choice granted to the state and its elites. In other words, an issue simply turns into a security problem when the state elites declare it in this manner. Benefiting from the language theory, Waever states that security is a verbal action, responding to the question “what is security?” As a verbal action, the security itself does not indicate a real situation; in fact, its verbalization creates it (Waever, 1995: 54–55 and Balzacq, 2005: 176–177). On the other hand, the identification of something as an existential threat to any reference object is not adequate for securitization, and this is defined as an “attempt to securitize”. An issue is only being securitized when the audience agrees that is the case (Buzan, 1998: 24–25).

In this respect, there are three essential components of securitization: The threat leading towards the existence of an object; putting the threat on the political agenda of the state through a “verbal action” process by the political elites, and demanding urgent measures to deal with it; and the approval of taking urgent measures by accepting the threat to the existence (bib\_AA\_2011Akgül-Açıkmeşe, 2011: 61).

According to the Copenhagen School theorists, there is no reason to define a situation in terms of security if this is not a security issue. In this sense, it is not likely that an issue can be overcome politically just by calling it with security matters; on the contrary, the only way to deal with this problem is maybe to avoid using this expression (Waever, 1995: 56). For this reason, the School gives reasons to identify and solve problems through routine political processes, excluding them from being a security issue. The School recommends that security be limited to issues related to the survival of the state, while other issues should not be securitized and resolved only by debating them in routine political processes (Bilgin, 2010: 83). At this point, this concept, which has been introduced into the terminology of security by the Copenhagen School and is also referred to as “desecuritization”, can be characterized as the anti-thesis of securitization. In fact, according to the securitization theorists, the classification or securitization of an issue as a

security issue is considered to be a failure of the normal political process. Desecuritization, on the other hand, is that an issue that was once considered a threat has now been excluded from being a threat. In this way, the extraordinary measures required to eliminate the threat are nullified, paving the way for the normalization of the issue and its resolution through negotiations in the political process (McDonald, 2008: 6 and Sandıklı & Emeklier, 2012: 54).

*societal security.* The most common issues that are considered as a threat to societal security are summarized by Waever (2008: 158–159) as follows:

- (1). Migration – The people of X are invaded by the people of Y, or lose their characteristics because of that people; so the community of X will probably not exist as before, because others will eventually constitute the population. The identity of X gradually differs due to the change in the structure of the population (such as the migration of the Chinese to Tibet, the Russians to Latvia).
- (2). Horizontal competition – Even if there is still the ‘X’ people living in a country, the way of life of the people of ‘X’ will ultimately change due to the prominent cultural and linguistic influences of the neighboring culture of ‘Y’ (for example, Canada’s fear of being Americanized).
- (3). Vertical competition - People will stop seeing themselves as X, because there is either an integration project (for example, Yugoslavia, the EU), or a separatist-“regionalist” project (for example, Quebec, Catalan, Kurdish). These projects force them to move towards more broad or narrowed identities. (...)
- (4). Another probable fourth issue is the depopulation due to plague, war, famine, natural disaster, or genocide policies.

The issue of “migration” and migrants, which are considered to be among the most challenging matters that pose a threat to societal security, are always thought to be elements that disrupt the normal course of life in political and economic discussions. In addition, migrants and refugees are not simply considered as elements that disrupt the ordinary life of a large number of people but are also seen as a factor that endangers the collective lifestyle of a human community. For this reason, security studies present the issue of migration as a threat to societal security (Huysmans, 2006: 45–46). There are two reasons for securitization regarding migration; the first one is mostly related to the external borders of a country and is related to the fact that migrants are not admitted to the country or are not allowed to settle down due to the fact that they bring terrorism and crime with them. The second reason is mostly related to internal borders and is based on the belief that migrants will pose a threat to the peace and stability of a country in the long run. Therefore, it is envisaged that they are not given equal citizenship rights with the citizens of the country. As a whole, migrants are presented as a threat to public order, peaceful coexistence, the well-being of the state system, the

labor market, and cultural identity (Banai & Kreide, 2017: 907).

Another threat category, “horizontal competition”, is that social groups with prominent cultural structures exert influence on the culture of the weak; which can be seen also in the case of the reconstruction of the cultural structures of the occupied enemy societies by the victorious states (such as the Americanization of Japan and Germany). In addition, “horizontal competition” can also be used to eliminate the “cultural barriers” used as a tool in modern trade policy. In this context, while importing states put cultural values at the forefront to justify the protectionism they support, exporters try to weaken local cultural values in order to eliminate this opportunity (Waever, 2008: 160).

“Vertical competition”, on the other hand, is probably a threat category that is being implemented more intentionally compared to other ones. It is mainly based on integration or separatism projects implemented within a state. In this context, integration projects aimed at creating a common culture to embody a state, seek to control some or all of the mechanisms of cultural recreation such as schools, churches, and language rights. However, minorities may lose their ability to recreate their own culture if there is excessive integration pressure exerted on the different ethnic and linguistic groups within the framework of this project. This, in turn, may push them to implement separatist projects. “Vertical competition” has two dimensions. First, the threat to the minority group is more abstract, it is related to transformation, and people begin to think of themselves as something else. Second, political decisions taken to prevent the recreation of a culture (such as migration, bureaucratic practices) influence the identity of the minority group, and the targeted cultural identity is deprived of the opportunity to control the institutions necessary for recreation (Waever, 2008: 161).

Another issue that is considered a threat to societal security, the “depopulation”, hurts the continuity of identity by threatening the existence of the human factor, which is the backbone of culture. However, policies that are largely led by the desire to eliminate an identity or group through some means, such as ethnic cleansing, are more often the subject of societal security (Waever, 2008: 159–160).

On the other hand, the reference objects whose existence is threatened by the above four elements and whose existence is defined within the scope of the societal sector are “identity”, “religion”, and “gender” in general. Maybe the most important one among these reference objects is “identity”. Since identities are constantly changing and are not long-lasting and objective, defending an identity is a controversial issue indeed. Nevertheless, once an identity is securitized, it is as if something that has existed since the very beginning and has long been built is being defended. The fact that national identity is at the heart of political authority makes national identity more effective and

significant than other identities. Thus, national identity can be more easily securitized and turn into a position that can include all other identities in the case of any conflict (Waeber, 2008: 155–156).

Another reference object within the scope of societal security is “religion”. Religious communities are important self-continuing self-identities and groups. Since they also have institutional structures, encompassing formalized authority and rule-making, they can be a reference object for societal security. When a real conflict occurs due to threats to a belief system, where groups will act with “us” and “them” mentality, protect their members from the threat of their enemies, and be concerned about the cohesion of the social group, also begins to happen in this sphere of religion. But only working on the dynamics of societal security in this way will cause us to distance from the core of the situation, as it will reduce religion to the community and exclude the dimension of faith. Because religion is not only related to the formation of social groups but also of faith communities, it has a religious aspect as well, and therefore it is necessary to deal with both dimensions equally (Waeber, 2008: 165–167).

Another reference object on the agenda of societal security is “gender”. In order for gender to be included within the scope of societal security, it is necessary to take action to uphold “we”, defined by the concept of gender. But that does not mean that men are trying to eliminate the category of women, both physically and socially. It can be mentioned that the issue is securitized in terms of gender in these two cases as follows: Firstly, sexuality is made the center of excessive securitization by including other types of sexuality, such as homosexuality, into this category. Secondly, men and women are built with gender roles that compete with each other, and this is the case in which what is threatened is being a woman or non-dominant states of masculinity (Waeber, 2008: 168–169).

### *Looking at the 2020 War in Karabakh from the Securitization Approach*

The Nagorno-Karabakh issue is essentially a conflict based on ethnic identity. This disagreement between Azeri and Armenian identities has turned into a frozen conflict following the confrontation in the 1990s. The Securitization Approach is considered as a useful theoretical framework, considering that the formation of frozen conflict zones is generally related to identity-based conflicts.

The Nagorno-Karabakh issue is essentially a dispute between two neighboring countries, which fight for control of a region that belongs geographically to Azerbaijan, but through migrations and wars, that the demographic balance has been changed in favor of ethnic Armenians (Matveeva, 2008: 179). The dispute between the two countries over Karabakh has been going on for centuries. The desire of the

Armenian minority in Nagorno-Karabakh to leave Azerbaijan and join Armenia played an important role in bringing the issue back to the agenda. Alexandrova-Arbatova (2008: 304) claimed that the declaration of separation in February 1988 was a reaction to the restrictions imposed by the Soviet administration and Azerbaijani authorities on the culture and religion of the Armenian community in Karabakh. This gives the impression that the conflict is not a territorial problem between the two countries, but rather an identity-based problem that includes elements such as culture and religion.

Combined with the newly independent states’ nationalization processes, the power gap caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union led to the rise of nationalism in the former Soviet geography. At this point, Kymlicka claimed that states, as experienced in many parts of the world, have taken various measures to reduce the power of minorities living within their borders and destroy a sense of having a separate national identity. He noted that this issue is based on the claim that it cannot be said of the loyalty of minorities who consider themselves separate “nations” and that they would potentially be in favor of separation. However, as Kymlicka stated, whenever the state has taken action against the minorities’ aspirations to be a separate nation, this generally resulted in even greater disloyalty of the minorities to the central state and further strengthening of the separatist movement, contrary to what was expected (Kymlicka, 1998: 16).

Besides, Kymlicka stated that national minorities, which have a neighboring kindred state, played a leading role in many of the most violent conflicts in the post-Soviet region. According to him, in such a situation, the problem is not only the fact that the minority longs for reunification with the kindred state. This is also closely related to the possibility that the kindred state may have the potential for political and even military intervention to protect its own people’s interests. In this regard, Kymlicka also points out that when a kindred state demands the right to speak on behalf of the minority with its own agenda, it becomes impossible to find a stable way to coexist with the national minority. Within this framework, he suggested that the most violent ethnic conflicts in the former Soviet geography occur around this triple relationship between an ethno-cultural minority, the state in which this minority lives, and the kindred state of the minority (Kymlicka, 1998: 19–20).

In this context, from the securitization perspective,<sup>1</sup> in the Karabakh conflict, we face the identity-based separatism agenda of the ethnic Armenian mass, supported by Armenia and settled in the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. The ethnic Armenian community established in Nagorno-Karabakh, whose demographic structure has been changed by migrations<sup>2</sup> and wars, are at the center of this dispute. Since these people are minorities in Azerbaijan, they considered the project of creating an Azerbaijani nation,

which was implemented primarily in the early years of the country's independence, as a significant threat (horizontal competition) to their identity. In order to eliminate this threat, they sought to put into practice an integration project (vertical competition) based on affiliation to Armenia for the continuity of their identity, by inclining to Armenian identity. In addition, hardline Armenian militias carried out some practices even up to the level of the massacre, as experienced on February 26, 1992, in Khojaly, in order to homogenize the population in the occupied region (depopulation).<sup>3</sup> It is seen in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that identity, defined within the framework of Societal Security,<sup>4</sup> and one of the sub-sectors of the Securitization, plays a significant role, and that threats such as migration, horizontal competition, vertical competition, and depopulation are also present.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, Kurt (2017: 10–14) stated that all of the components necessary for the securitization of the issue are present.

Security and insecurity are not essentially a dichotomy, Waever described a state of security as a situation in which there is a security problem, but the necessary measures are already taken against it, while a state of insecurity indicates a situation in which no measures are taken against an existing security problem. However, there is a security problem in both cases, so he asserts there is no logic in explaining the situation when there is no security problem in place. In this context, Waever states that a problem cannot be overcome politically by defining it with security discourse. Even perhaps, the only way to overcome this problem is to avoid using this expression (Waever, 1995: 56).

At this point, securitization theorists suggest that problems should be solved by desecuritization rather than securitization. Pointing out that desecuritization is an optimal long-term option, it is stated that as a result of desecuritization, solving an issue that is considered a "threat whose measure is taken" could be possible by moving it away from the threat-defense sequence. Thus, using the extraordinary measures demanded for the fight, due to the securitization of the issue, becomes invalid and paving the way for its resolution through negotiations in a usual political process (Buzan, 1998: 29 and Kurt, 2017: 5).

Regarding the Karabakh conflict, Azerbaijan and Armenia signed a ceasefire in May 1994, mediated by the Russian Federation, and began peace talks through the mediation of the OSCE (Alexandrova-Arbatova, 2008: 304–305). It was expected these peace talks would reduce the tension between the parties and pave the way for the issue to be resolved (in other words, the desecuritization of the issue) in a usual political process. Nevertheless, despite vigorous diplomatic efforts, the mediators have reached the end of the road to make proposals that will resolve the conflict within the process. In their statement dated June 22, 2006, the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs expressed this

situation as follows: "We have reached our limits of creativity in determining, formulating and concluding the principles for the settlement of the agreement. We do not believe that additional alternatives generated by mediators through additional negotiations with the parties will have a different outcome." (Matveeva, 2008: 197).

On the other hand, this failure is seen to cause the parties to lose their belief that the issue can be resolved through negotiations as the process progresses. For example, shortly before the Rambouillet talks in early 2006, Armenian President Robert Kocharian had stated he was not optimistic and expressed disappointment with the efforts of mediators to force the parties to make concessions (Cornell, 1997: 55). In addition, Kocharian, following the Rambouillet negotiations, even mentioned a three-stage "worst-case scenario"<sup>6</sup> for the annexation of Karabakh to Armenia in case successive rounds of negotiations failed (Socor, 2006). Also, Kocharian once again expressed his distrust of the negotiations, saying that "there is no solution in the Karabakh conflict that will make all parties happy" (Ural & Çaykiran, 2011: 125). On the other hand, Ilham Aliyev, too, stated Azerbaijan would not change its current stance and added by saying, "we will resolve the Karabakh conflict based on the territorial integrity of the country." In addition, in 2008, Aliyev expressed his dissatisfaction with the failure of the negotiations to reach a conclusion, stating that "a diplomatic solution alone is not enough, and if necessary, Azerbaijan can prefer to use force." (Matveeva, 2008: 187). Securitization is a process that proceeds as a speech-act (Waever, 1995: 55). In this context, it can be stated that the statements made by the parties also play an essential role in the securitization of the issue again and again.

The parties that have given up hope of negotiations, and especially Azerbaijan, whose land is under occupation, have taken steps that put the military option in the first place. In this context, after the military confrontation in the early 1990s, the advances in the defense industry of both sides (especially Azerbaijan) have been observed. While the military expenditures of both countries were approximately at the same level in 1997, a significant military capacity building was performed by Azerbaijan from that time on. As a result, Azerbaijan's military expenditures increased three times more than the annual expenditures of Armenia until 2007 (Özdamar, 2010: 356). When it comes to 2011, Azerbaijan was seen as the country with the largest proportional increase in military spending in the world. Azerbaijan military expenditures, which reached \$ 3 billion in the same year, even exceeded Armenia's total budget (Gumbatov, 2012: 88). On the other hand, the arms import of Armenia, which procures 94% of its weapons from Russia, increased by 415% between 2010 and 2019. Although Azerbaijan's arms imports shrank by 40% during the same period, they reached about three times Armenia's arms purchases between 2015 and 2019 (Euronews, 2020). In this

arms race, Azerbaijan relies heavily on revenues it derives from rich fossil fuel reserves. Since an immediate increase in military spending is often interpreted as an indication of plans for a military confrontation with possible adversaries, this significantly undermined the expectation that the conflict could be resolved peacefully (Özdamar, 2010: 356–357).

This, however, as expected, resulted in a re-escalation of the hot conflict between the parties in the period. The first violent armed conflict between the sides since the ceasefire in 1994 occurred on April 2, 2016. The Azerbaijani army, which launched a counterattack due to the fact that Armenian forces opened fire on Azerbaijani positions, took over some strategically important hills and settlements areas (NTV, 2016). Even though the Chiefs of the General Staff of Azerbaijan and Armenia, who met in Moscow on April 5, 2016, mediated by Russia, agreed on a ceasefire, clashes between the parties, which accused each other of violating the ceasefire, continued (BBC, 2016).

The conflict dated April 2016 can also be essentially described as an indication that the negotiation process between the parties failed. This conflict proved that it strengthened nationalist sentiment in both countries. This also nurtured political dissatisfaction in Armenia, and showed Azerbaijan that it could also take over some territory by using force, the likelihood of breaking out a violent conflict between the parties at the level of April 2016 or more was started to be seen as too high (Cavanaugh, 2017: 1).

This was also reflected in Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev's statements in the summer of 2020 when conflicts reignited. On July 12, 2020, Aliyev called Armenia a "fascist state" since the civilian settlements of Azerbaijan were set on fire, and he said, "The patience of the people also has a limit. We have built a powerful army. We will not take even a step back on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue." This is also a declaration that proves Azerbaijan has been on a path that cannot be reversed (Rehimov, 2020).

The clashes, which reignited on September 27, 2020, have resulted in Azerbaijan retaking most of its long-occupied territory, contrary to many of the assessments made by experts. On November 10, 2020, the Armenian side accepted the defeat with the words of the Armenian President Pashinyan, "I signed an agreement with the heads of Russia and Azerbaijan to end the Karabakh war." Furthermore, an agreement consisting of nine articles was signed between the parties mediated by Russia. According to this agreement, Azerbaijan and Armenia would keep the positions they controlled, and Russian peacekeeping troops would be deployed for a period of 5 years on the line of contact in Nagorno-Karabakh and the Lachin corridor, where the region connects to Armenia. In addition, Agdam would be left to Azerbaijan by December 20, 2020, and Armenian forces would leave out Kelbajar by November

15, 2020, and the city of Lachin by November 1, 2020. Another article of the treaty states that a corridor between Nakhchivan and Azerbaijan passing through Armenian territory would be opened, and this corridor would be under the control of Russian forces (TRT Haber, 2020).

As can be seen, there are all the necessary conditions for the securitization of the issue in the Karabakh conflict, and this led the parties into war at the beginning of the 1990s. The war resulted in the great superiority of the Armenian side and Yerevan invaded not only Nagorno-Karabakh but also other Azerbaijani territories in the Karabakh region. While the negotiation process was expected to open an opportunity for the desecuritization of the problem, the positions of the parties unwilling to make concessions, as well as the regional power struggles of the actors in the negotiating team, undermined the negotiation process. This situation caused the parties, and especially Azerbaijan, whose territory was under occupation, to despair of the negotiations, leading to the re-securitization of the issue and taking extraordinary measures (military measures) again. The most remarkable example of this is the enormous increase in military spending of both sides in the process. This has led to a war between the parties, first in 2016 and then in 2020. Although the fundamental issue in the approach of securitization is the desecuritization, that is, resolving the problem through negotiations in a usual political process, the Karabakh conflict has been resolved, in one respect, through securitization.

## Conclusion

Like other disputes triggered by the power gap created by the dissolution of the USSR, the Karabakh issue also turned into a conflict between the parties in the early 1990s. However, as observed in other conflicts, the ceasefire agreements signed after the military confrontation created an environment in which there was neither war nor peace, thereby causing these conflicts to be labeled "frozen conflicts."

Like other frozen conflict zones in the former Soviet geography, the Karabakh conflict is thought to be unable to survive the spiral of conflict-negotiation for a long time. The war that ended in November 2020 has led to an important step towards resolving the problem, even if not completely. This is an indication that it has been taken a different path compared to other frozen conflict zones in resolving the Karabakh conflict.

The most important reason for pursuing such a course in this conflict can be explained, like all other frozen conflict zones, by the negotiation process's failure after the military confrontations in the early 1990s. This failure led to the securitization of the issue by both sides again and again, paving the way for the eventual confrontation. It can be stated that states conducting the negotiations prioritized their own interests rather than the internal dynamics of the problem, as well as the reluctance of the parties, played an

important role. The mobilization of extraordinary measures for the final military confrontation, triggered by the securitization dynamic created by the deadlock, ignited the clashes. In other words, the failure of the negotiation process is considered to pave the way for military confrontation by considerably eliminating the possibility of desecuritization of the problem.

This brings to mind the likelihood that a similar course would take place at other frozen conflict areas. In other words, other frozen conflict parties, moving on from the example of Karabakh, resolve their problems by taking extraordinary measures (such as the use of military force) through the securitization of their problems. This, however, can lead to the widespread use of violence in the mentioned regions and further increase in regional instability.

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### Notes

1. The Securitization Approach offers a theoretical perspective in which all kinds of public issues, either political or non-political, can be securitized by broadening the perspective of classical security studies. For more information, see Barry Buzan et al., *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, London, 1998, pp. 23–27.
2. Due to the struggle for sharing of the great powers within the framework of their strategic goals towards the Caucasus since the 18th century, developments in the region, including migrations, paved the way for the Karabakh conflict. One of the most important events in terms of the origin of the problem is the mass settlements of Armenians in the region. Under the Treaty of Turkmenchay signed in 1828, the territories of present-day Armenia and Azerbaijan were attached to the Russian Tsardom. See Françoise J. Companjen, “Nagorno-Karabakh”, *Atlantisch Perspectief*, Vol. 34, No. 4, 2010, p. 11. Then the war in the Caucasus between the Ottomans and the Russians in 1828–1829 also closely influenced the region’s fate. Before and after this war, the Russians forced around 18,000 Armenians from present-day Iranian territory in 1825–1826, 50,000 in 1828, and 84,000 after the Ottoman-Russian war in 1829, to migrate to the Karabakh region. Russian sources of the period claim that at least 1 million Armenians migrated or were forced to migrate to the Caucasus from Anatolia and the

present-day territory of Iran during this period. As a result of these migrations, the Russian Tsar Nicholas I even established the Armenian region, which included the lands of the Revan and Nakhichevan Khanates. In this way, the population balance in Nagorno-Karabakh has deteriorated against Azerbaijanis in the historical process. And as a result of the war that started with the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic’s proclamation in January 1992, the population structure became completely in favor of the Armenians when the Armenians who occupied the region expelled Azerbaijanis from Karabakh. See Araz Aslanlı, “Kafkasya’da Güvenlik ve İstikrara En Büyük Tehdit” in Cavid Veliev and Araz Aslanlı (ed.) *Güney Kafkasya: Toprak Bütünlüğü, Jeopolitik Mücadeleler ve Enerji*, Ankara, Berikan Yayınları, 2011, pp. 154–156. As a result of this war, Azerbaijan had to host between 1 - 1.2 million Azerbaijanis who fled from the Karabakh region. For this reason, 10%–15% of the Azerbaijani population, which was less than 7.5 million at that time, were displaced people due to the war. See Svante E. Cornell, “Undeclared War: The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Reconsidered”, *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 4, 1997, p. 9.

3. Human Rights Watch reported that in the “Khojaly Massacre” on February 26, 1992, approximately 200 Azeri villagers, women, and children were massacred by the Armenians and described this incident as the biggest massacre in the history of the Karabakh conflict. See Human Rights Watch, *Seven Years of Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh*, Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, New York, 1994, p. 6.
4. Societal Security arises when certain groups within a society feel that they are under threat and that their identity is in danger due to migration, integration, or cultural imperialism, and in this case, these groups take action to defend themselves. See Waever, 1995: 67. It can be stated in this context that societal insecurity arises when a community considers a development or a possible situation as a threat to its own social existence. See Buzan, 1998: 119.
5. For detailed information on migration, horizontal competition, vertical competition, and depopulation, which are generally considered threats to Societal Security, see Buzan, 1998: 121. and Ole Waever, “Toplumsal Güvenliğin Değişen Gündemi” (The Changing Agenda of Societal Security), *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 5, No. 18, 2008, pp. 158–164.
6. According to this scenario, firstly, Armenia would recognize Karabakh as a de jure; secondly, a defense agreement package would be signed that an attack on Karabakh will mean an attack on Armenia; and thirdly, the security zone around Karabakh, which has been cleansed from the ethnic Azerbaijanis, will be strengthened with a completely new approach and a more active process regarding the defense integration of Karabakh with Armenia will be followed.

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