

# **WALKING THE TIGHTROPE IN KAZAN: The summit and its aftermath**

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**Common space.eu, 10 July 2011**

The June 2011 Armenian–Azerbaijani summit in Kazan joins a long tradition of near misses in the Karabakh peace process about which much more is conjectured, than actually known. Like a complex simultaneous equation where everything is defined except the value of  $x$ , speculation is as much as we can achieve in terms of which specific parts of the formula flummoxed the Minsk Group mediators this time.

Despite the inevitable post–Kazan backtracking, the outcome was a genuine disappointment because the indications had been good. As the co–Chairs have argued on various occasions the Madrid Principles represent a highly evolved formula, moving beyond the ‘step–by–step’ and ‘package’ debates of the 1990s, and through various amendments in their own right. President Serzh Sargsyan and President Ilham Aliyev had both made encouraging noises in the run–up to the summit, while the domestic political contexts offered no immediate obstacles. Russia’s hands–on sponsoring of the process, and in particular President Dmitry Medvedev’s staking of some personal political capital on the outcome, also seemed to many observers as a potential dealmaker.

A journey through Armenian and Azerbaijani societies at the time of the summit revealed, however, the multiple fractures and disparate realities that the Kazan summit was attempting to reconcile. Closer to the ground, Kazan and the peace process as a whole seemed a distant mirage, a

separate, lonely reality shared by the presidents and foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan, and a narrow stratum of Karabakh-watchers in each country and the international community.

In Yerevan cautious optimism that the Karabakh ‘problem’ might be solved was tinged with misgivings that the Karabakh conflict could still be lost. Armenia has recently been more preoccupied with internal political bargaining, following the reinvigoration of opposition politics and the failure of the Armenian–Turkish process to deliver a new political opening in 2010. Any breakthrough on Karabakh was seen in the light of what it would mean for the shifting internal constellation of power, amid fears that international and Russian approval and support of a signing could be deployed as a foil against domestic pressures. However, it was also evident that no one expected the Madrid Principles per se to be signed. Reservations on a number of core aspects of the Madrid Principles run very deep, from return of occupied territories to the sequencing and timing of any plebiscite to determine Karabakh’s status. These reservations reflect Armenia’s core dilemma: whether and how the Madrid Principles can deliver a securable improvement, with international approval, on today’s widely disapproved of status quo.

Given the hype on the possibility of a breakthrough of far-reaching implications, the mood in Nagorny Karabakh was surprisingly calm. In contrast to previous scenarios, there appeared to be no significant mobilization against a signing. Was this because of the close personal relationship between President Sargsyan and the President of the de facto Nagorno–Karabakh Republic, Bako Sahakyan? Or was it because after the Meindorf (Moscow) Declaration of 2008, signings are no longer seen as harbingers of an all-encompassing “solution”, but more as a delaying tactic, buying more time in a process quite removed from local reality?

Either way, whether informed about them or (as in most cases) not, society in Nagorny Karabakh remains categorically opposed to many of the core tenets of the Madrid Principles. This is a fundamental problem, since it is difficult to imagine how several of the core principles, including return of Azeri displaced persons, return of territories and deployment of peacekeeping forces, could be viable without local consent in Karabakh itself. While some would argue that Yerevan can “deliver” this consent, this still assumes a top-down imposition of a solution, which is questionable on grounds of ethics, logistics and sustainability. There is much still to be done to reach out to the population in Karabakh, to inform and transform its attitudes so that it can re-conceive security as deliverable through political frameworks, and not the ransom of occupied territory.

In Azerbaijan, expectations of the Kazan summit were greater. There was some palpable disappointment evident in the immediate aftermath of the meeting. This disappointment reflects Azerbaijan’s fundamental dilemma: can diplomacy regain what was lost on the battlefield? Or can a return to the battlefield deliver more than the current diplomacy? Azerbaijan’s sophisticated political messaging machine is definitely keeping both options open, with “tandem messaging” affirming Azerbaijani readiness to pursue either possibility. Azerbaijani diplomacy, however, remains the reserve of a tiny number of individuals. Much of the disappointment in civil society circles in Baku was at the failure of the Kazan meeting to create at least an opening for increased civil diplomacy efforts. Azerbaijani civil society’s peacebuilding potential, consistently hampered by boisterous rhetoric condemning cross-conflict contact and by fighting a second front on human rights issues, is effectively kept in reserve for a day that may never come.

Yet just a short stay in Azerbaijan was enough to be suggestive, at least, of a fundamental divide in Azerbaijani society. On the one hand there are those who in various ways are included in the current economic boom and resulting transformation of the country. The remarkable changes in especially central Baku but also the wider Absheron peninsula speak to a vision of a consumerist, depoliticized society, compliant with the formal rhetoric on Karabakh but far from ready to risk newfound wealth and affluence on a military adventure. On the other hand are those who, for various reasons, are not included in the new vision of Azerbaijan, and who, in different ways, are more inclined to see governance, rather than Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict, as the main problem confronting them. For many people in both constituencies, the Karabakh conflict must compete with other imperatives; those who have the most to gain from a peace deal, Azerbaijan’s displaced population, are the most distant from influence and power. Given this context and the counter–intuitive assumption that a peace process can reverse military defeat, President Ilham Aliyev’s continued investment in the Minsk Process is rational, while hardline military rhetoric is deployed to outflank criticism that it won’t deliver.

What can we conclude from Kazan? One illusion that has been shattered is Russia’s brokering potential. Although Russia may call the shots in the Abkhazian and South Ossetian contexts, Karabakh is another matter. Russia has an indispensable role to play in underpinning any eventual peace settlement, but it is much too implicated in conflict outcomes nearby that are far from status–neutral to play the role of an honest broker on Karabakh. The personal rapport between Presidents Medvedev, Sargsyan and Aliyev may be genuine and of itself significant, but this is not enough. The Karabakh conflict has many times defined the limits of

leadership, and President Medvedev has become as much a victim of the system sustaining the status quo as everyone else.

Kazan also provides opportunities to reflect on where the blockages to peace really lie. Presidents Sargsyan and Aliyev are right to be nervous of reactions to any decisions relating to the Madrid Principles that seem permanent. Armenian and Azerbaijani societies remain profoundly sealed off from one another, a situation sustaining diametrically opposed expectations of any agreement. One corrosive impact of this situation is that the core ideas under discussion, such as interim status, the return of displaced people or of occupied territory, are deployed as slogans, rather than principles for public education and on the basis of that, further elaboration. Concerted work with societies to unpack, explain and demystify these ideas before they are seemingly set in stone by a signing is essential. Today's leaders, however, still adhere to the view that societies should be brought in only after agreement has been reached.

The presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan are like two tightrope walkers, trying to meet each other at a golden middle point over a deep abyss. Kazan has shown once again that they need a safety net to break the falls in the Minsk Group negotiations and keep the momentum going when the formal talks suffer setbacks – moments such as now. That safety net can be provided by solid networks of Armenian and Azerbaijani citizens united by commitment to the non-violent resolution of their problems, and, consequently, a long-term vision for peace in the region. It is only this collective vision that can ultimately reassure presidents walking the tightrope of the Karabakh peace process, and cushion them from a precipitate fall.

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