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Foreword

The May edition of the Peace and Security Monitor delves into the most recent and tense developments happening in the South Caucasus, Moldova, and Ukraine. Ongoing war in Ukraine and the beginning of the peace process, unresolved conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, and energy crisis in Transdniestria affected the stability of the region, which raised serious concerns for the future of European security.

In March, Azerbaijan and Armenia resumed aggressive rhetoric and brought uncertainty regarding the possibility of reaching a peace deal between both countries regarding the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and resolving all issues between the two countries.

The 2025 energy crisis exposed Moldova's and Transdniestria's dependence on external gas supplies and highlighted Transdniestria's vulnerabilities in terms of socioeconomic development. At the same time, the energy crisis created an opportunity for dialogue between Chişinău and Tiraspol, pushing Moldova toward energy independence and encouraging investments in renewable energy. Still, mutual distrust and Tiraspol's constant accusations hindered real progress and normalization of relations between the two entities.

Finally, the US President Administration tried to accelerate peace talks in the Ukraine-Russia war with the US involvement as mediator, which has resulted in number of rounds of negotiations between the US and Russian sides and Ukraine and US representative and the first meeting of Russian and Ukrainian diplomats to discuss 30 days ceasefire and peace deal. While Ukraine has accepted an unconditional ceasefire proposed by the US, Russia has deployed stalling tactics and is in no rush to end the war, and the Russian Federation continues to target civilians throughout Ukraine.



Armenia and Azerbaijan's Cautious Step Towards Peace

Marie Lureau

Key Takeaways

- On 13 March, Azerbaijan and Armenia announced they had finally agreed on the content of a peace deal, after two years of negotiations.
- Soon after, however, Azerbaijan seemed to backtrack by maintaining its aggressive rhetoric, bringing uncertainty on whether they will reach a signature.
- Enthusiasm for the agreement should also be prudent, as many of the most controversial issues will likely not appear.
- The statement might also be driven by external pressures, such as the prospect of reopening the border with Turkey and the concern over potential interference by Russia.

Introduction

On 13 March, late in the day, Azerbaijan's Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov declared to reporters that his country had finally reached an agreement on the terms of a peace deal with Armenia. Shortly after, Armenia's Foreign Minister confirmed they were ready to sign the 'Establishment of Peace and Interstate Relations Between the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan' text. World leaders were quick to congratulate the two parties on a deal two years in the making, promising to finally end the war in the South Caucasus.

Although this is unquestionably a step forward in the ever-warring neighbors' relations, it may not be as overwhelmingly positive as it first appears. A closer look at the events prior to, and immediately following, the 13 March declaration casts some doubts on both the eventual signature of the deal, and the meaningfulness of its significance.

From Peace Talks to Provocations: A Fragile Agreement

Only a few hours before the announcement, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev, speaking on the sidelines of the 12th Baku Forum, gave a speech full of aggressive rhetoric including allegations that Armenia was preparing a new war and attacks on Pashinyan's government and allies, in particular the French President and the former US administration. He is even quoted as saying that the "level of trust in Armenia is close to zero".^[1]

This narrative is bewildering, coming from the leader of a country about to declare the achievement of a peace deal negotiation. Looking at the dynamic between Yerevan and Baku over the past months, however, it's unsurprising. After promising breakthroughs in the summer, the relations between the two countries took a turn for the worse, as detailed in the March Peace & Security Monitor.^[2] The Azerbaijani official narrative in particular harshened, with Aliyev calling Armenia a "fascist State" in a 7 January interview and referring to it as "Western Azerbaijan". This, in addition to the start of the trials of former Nagorno-Karabakh officials, only promised more strain on the negotiations. The situation appeared paradoxical, with tangible progress toward a final agreement unfolding alongside persistent hostility from President Aliyev and Azerbaijani media. On 12 April, for instance, the pro-government outlet Caliber alleged that Armenia was preparing to launch a war against Azerbaijan.^[3] Since 13 March, Aliyev balanced a fine line between aggression, while agreeing that "until a peace agreement is signed, the stability is not here".^[4]

Exemplifying this trend is the reaction to the recent comment by the Armenian Foreign Minister. Following President Aliyev's declaration on 2 April that the main obstacle to the signature remained Armenia's unwillingness to let go of Nagorno-Karabakh in the treaty, the Armenian Foreign Minister, Ararat Mirzoyan, replied that there had been an effort to organize meetings with former officials of the territory, which they had refused. In the effort to assuage Aliyev's allegation, he raised a wave of criticism nationally, with certain accusing him of justifying ethnic cleansing.[14] Therefore, even if Pashinyan attempts to justify the referendum under the guise of his new Real Armenia policy, it will remain a hard pill to swallow for a large part of the country.[15]

The second of Baku's prerequisites, the dissolution of the Minsk Group, shouldn't be a major issue. The purpose of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group, created in 1992, is to encourage the peaceful resolution of the conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh. Chaired by France, Russia, and the United States, its existence implies that an issue persists, whereas Baku is determined to close the matter. Consequently, Azerbaijan has refused to work with the group since the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, and the entity is essentially defunct. Predictably, Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan was quick to state that, after the signature of the deal, they would consider the conflict nearly settled and therefore the Minsk group would no longer be needed.[16]

Despite national tensions, Armenia seems to be truly working for a swift signature of the agreement. Not only did they agree to consider changes in the Constitution and to investigate the alleged ceasefire violations, but they even went a step further in their compromise. On 24 March, Armenia's Deputy Foreign Minister Paruyr Hovhannisyan stated that once the peace treaty signed, Yerevan could consider a new mandate for the EUMA. This is a notable step on a highly debated issue. Azerbaijan has requested the removal of the EUMA from the Armenian side of the border for months, an issue on which Yerevan

hadn't yet budged.[17] Indeed, a shift in the mandate may jeopardize Armenia's efforts to strengthen its relationship with the EU.[18]

Overview of the Peace Agreement: Complicated Process, Lack of Oversight, and Contentious Topics

Despite all of this, an agreement was indeed reached. It hasn't been made public, but some elements can be surmised. From a December declaration by the Azerbaijani Foreign Minister, we know it will consist of a preamble and 17 articles.[19] It will likely settle the Nagorno-Karabakh issue in Azerbaijan's favor and cement the 2023 ceasefire border agreement. Most of all, it is the result of a series of compromises from both parties.

Armenia, of course, had to give up the Nagorno-Karabakh territory in its entirety and has shown a willingness to satisfy several of Baku's requests. In turn, in August, Azerbaijan agreed to drop the problematic Zangezur Corridor issue. The opening of this strip of land going through the South of Armenia could have allowed Azerbaijan to connect to the Nakhichevan exclave. As we've discussed, although it agreed to drop the constitutional issue from the text itself, by making it a prerequisite for signature, it is bringing the topic back to the negotiation table.

Most recently, two major changes have allegedly allowed Baku and Yerevan to reach the agreement. First, it is reported that in this new version, both parties would drop their respective cases in international courts.[20] This covers two competing cases pending at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), in which both parties have raised a lawsuit accusing the other of violating the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.[21] This would also include Azerbaijan's latest lawsuit, filed on 12 February at the Hague, in which it claims Armenia violated the 1979 Berne Convention on protecting nature areas by causing significant environmental damage in the Nagorno-Karabakh territory.[22]

Casting a shadow over the excitement of the announcement, only three days later, the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan put out a statement describing Armenian soldiers firing at Azerbaijani positions, followed by another claim just a few hours later.[5] Since then, the accusations have piled up, with, as of writing (12 April), 21 alleged shootings and two incidents of reconnaissance flights over Azerbaijani positions. [6]6 This is a significant increase, as there had only been three other reported incidents since the beginning of 2025. It is hard to determine the validity of these claims. The Armenian Defense Ministry systematically denied any ceasefire violation, saying that the accusations “do not correspond to reality” and blaming Azerbaijan for “spreading disinformation”. [7] On one occasion, it levied its claim against Azerbaijan, alleging that in the early hours of 31 March, Azerbaijani troops opened fire towards the Khnatsakh settlement in southern Armenia and damaged a residential building.[8] The European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA), stated in a tweet that it patrolled the border between 16-17 March and reported no unusual activity. However, on 9 April, they wrote that, starting in March, they had increased the number of night patrols to relieve possible tensions.[9] Armenia’s response has been consistent: not only has it rejected any claim of violation, but Prime Minister Pashinyan himself tweeted “My instruction to the Ministry of Defense of Armenia is clear: do not commit any violation of the ceasefire regime. Armenia is heading for peace, not war.”[10] Yerevan has repeatedly offered to establish a joint Armenia-Azerbaijan mechanism for investigating said ceasefire violations, while noting the lack of evidence.[11] Azerbaijan has yet to respond to this initiative. These repeated charges are just one of several signs that Baku is stepping back from the agreement.

Before the Signature: What Azerbaijan Expects

Indeed, in addition to increasing border tensions, the Azerbaijan government seemed to backtrack

on its announcement immediately. Foreign Minister Bayramov, in a statement, mentioned ‘pre-requisites’ necessary for the signature of the treaty, bringing back controversial topics on the table. Baku once again demanded a change to the Armenian Constitution, which it considers has claims against Azerbaijan sovereignty, over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh territory, because its preamble refers to the 1990 Declaration of Independence of the Republic of Armenia. Written while both states were still part of the Soviet Union, this text demands the “reunification” of Armenia with the Nagorno-Karabakh territory, then an Oblast under the jurisdiction of Azerbaijan. This issue of the constitutional change was contentious from the start.



Photo by Marie Lureau, Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan

Pashinyan had already announced on 19 January that they would hold a referendum on a new constitution. No precise date was given, but it is unlikely to occur before the 2026 Parliamentary elections, which would further delay a time-sensitive issue.[12] Outside of the time constraints, politically, it will be a hard sell to the population. The question is extremely sensitive, as Armenia is still suffering from the impact of the mass exodus of the Nagorno-Karabakh population. For the 100,000 refugees living in Armenia, representing 1 in 30 inhabitants of the territory, integration has also not been easy.[13] It has turned into tensions with the government’s attempt to make compromises with Baku.

Second, the issue of the Armenian and Azerbaijani exclaves in each other's territories was also left out. There is currently one Armenian village in Azerbaijan's territory (Artsvashen), and four Azerbaijani villages in Armenia (Karki, Yukhari Askipara, Barxudarli, and Sofulu), all controlled by the country in which they are situated. Overall, the decision to remove those topics from the text was productive in moving the process forward. However, given the current, highly tense situation, it also questions what good can come of a peace agreement stripped of all the contentious questions it seeks to resolve? The major issues of the exclave and the Zangezur Corridor will not be addressed, but will very much remain a subject at the heart of Armenian and Azerbaijani relations. To avoid confusion, the type of agreement they seek to achieve, if not a comprehensive one, should be clearly defined. Proceeding in this way is essential to avoid either a feeling of disappointment on the side of civil society or frustration in the medium term by the two parties when the issues keep getting in their way. If not a comprehensive agreement, its stated goal could be to address only a specific issue. Most importantly, this deal shouldn't be the end of negotiations between Baku and Yerevan and should include a framework for continued discussions.[23] Casting doubts on the comprehensiveness of the agreement is its somewhat convoluted process itself. Already, following the 2020 conflict, a negotiation framework had been established with the European Council, through its then-President Charles Michel, playing a mediating role. However, they withdrew from the process following the resurgence of conflict in September 2023.[24] Regardless, given Azerbaijan's mistrust of the EU, any attempt at a European-led mediation would have been unwelcome. From the American side, then-Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with both foreign ministers on the sidelines of the NATO summit in Washington on 10 July and subsequently offered to mediate.[25] That proposition was refused, largely due to Azerbaijan's resistance to US involvement, particularly under the Biden administration. Similarly, a proposal from President Putin was rejected, this time likely due to Armenia's growing mistrust of Russia, which it viewed as having

failed to uphold the 2020 ceasefire agreement. [26][27] Ultimately, it appears that none of the potential mediators were perceived as sufficiently neutral by both sides to play a constructive role in the negotiations. The pair seemed determined to hold bilateral talks, which have the benefits of facilitating the talks, making them more straightforward. Nevertheless, the absence of a mediating body pushing the core issues and the resulting lack of accountability could result in a weak and ineffective agreement.

International Pressure: Support and Opposition to the Deal

After the announcement, leaders of the international community rushed to congratulate the pair. It was 'historic' for Georgia's President and Estonia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, 'in line with President Trump's vision for a more peaceful world' for the US Secretary of State. As for the French President, there were 'no remaining obstacles to the signing of a peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan'.[28] In their enthusiasm, no leader appears willing to face the complicated reality, in which Azerbaijan seems reluctant to truly make peace with its neighbor. Besides the two countries, and the EU, there are other international players who are, or could be, playing a significant role in whether the agreement will be completed: Türkiye and Russia. In a Carnegie Endowment for International Peace article,[29] Olesya Vartanyan sheds light on Armenia's slowly warming relations with Türkiye, a state historically thought to be its 'sworn enemy'. This could be a critical development, as both countries prepare to open their borders, closed since 1993 and the first Nagorno-Karabakh war. With both its eastern and western borders closed, Armenia remains isolated—this step could greatly improve its trade access. An opening to Turkey would also mean a direct connection to the European market, a step further in reducing their dependence on Russia.[30] However, in a 13 March interview Turkish President's Chief Adviser on Foreign Policy and Security Issues implied that the opening of the border, and possibly the institution of diplomatic relations, was contingent on the signature of a peace deal.[31] Türkiye has

a lot to gain with the reopening of the border, opening doors to an increased influence in the South Caucasus, historically dominated by Russia. However, it cannot forgo of its privileged relation with Azerbaijan. Türkiye and Azerbaijan share deep-rooted cultural ties as Turkic states, a connection reflected in their strong political and economic relationship. Both countries are members of the Organization of Turkic States, reinforcing their commitment to regional cooperation. Their collaboration extends notably to the energy and military sectors, with Türkiye relying on Azerbaijani energy resources and supporting defence initiatives. Throughout the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Türkiye has consistently backed Azerbaijan, firmly positioning itself as a key ally. Thus, it is not surprising that Ankara would use this occasion to continue putting pressure on Armenia.

compromises and appears forthcoming in the peace process, while Azerbaijan continues to stall the process. Armenia remains at the mercy of two hostile states, and it's unlikely to receive significant support for Western allies, whether from the new U.S. administration or an EU that has shown limited enthusiasm for Armenia's outreach. The opening of borders is also in line with Baku's plan for extending connectivity throughout the region on the base of the Soviet era railway. Indeed, its own trade route are blocked to the north by the Ukraine war and constrained through the Red Sea by Houthi attacks³².^[32] If the Turkish-Armenian border is opened, the next logical step allowing Baku free trade routes would be the opening of the Zangezur corridor, either through military action or the threat of it.^[33] In conclusion, the prospect of a peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan raises important questions: What compromises are acceptable in the name of achieving peace? How valid is an agreement if one party is pressured into compliance? And what are the consequences of a deal that overlooks key contentious issues? The coming months will be crucial—not only in determining whether an agreement is reached and what its terms will be, but also in shaping the future of regional tensions and the role of neighboring states in either easing or entrenching them.



Damage to a residential building from the alleged 31 March shooting of Azerbaijani troop at the Khnatsakh settlement. Source: Ministry of Defense of Armenia

If the opening Turkish border is a great opportunity for Armenia, it also highlights the clear imbalance of bargaining power at play. Yerevan has already made significant

Recommendations

- Armenia and Azerbaijan should make clear to the political actors, their citizens, and the international community what the goals of the agreements are.
- Armenia and Azerbaijan should create a framework for future discussions on contentious issues.
- Azerbaijan should be more consistent in its discourse about Armenia to reduce the level of uncertainty regarding the signature.
- The international community, especially Armenia's allies, should be more conspicuous of a deal that may cement the power imbalance in the South Caucasus.

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Humanitarian and Political Consequences of the Moldovan Energy Crisis

D. F.

Key Takeaways

- The 2025 energy crisis exposed Moldova's indirect dependence on external gas supplies and highlighted the Transnistria economic system's deep structural vulnerabilities.
- While solutions were found, the crisis had an important socioeconomic impact on the Transnistria region and on its industrial production. Current arrangements remain precarious, fostering uncertainty for local residents on the long-term energy and economic stability of the region.
- On the right bank, the energy crisis had almost exclusively a socioeconomic impact, mostly through increasing electricity tariffs. At the same time, it also accelerated Moldova's transition toward energy independence, reinforcing its ongoing diversification strategy, further encouraging investments in renewable energy.
- The crisis opened limited space for renewed dialogue between Chişinău and Tiraspol, but mutual distrust and Tiraspol's constant accusations hindered real progress.

Introduction

In January 2025, the Republic of Moldova faced a severe energy crisis triggered by the interruption of Russian natural gas supplies to the breakaway region of Transnistria. The halt, which followed the end of Ukraine's role as a transit country for Russian gas, affected mostly the Transnistrian region, but had consequences on both banks of the Dniester River, particularly regarding the distribution and price of electricity.

Today, while most immediate risks have been mitigated, and a certain amount of gas now

flows into the Transnistrian households and industries, the situation remains precarious. The agreement signed by Tiraspol under the so-called "Hungarian scheme"[1] allows the region to receive Russian gas indirectly, but maintains a high degree of dependency and lack of accountability. It remains unclear whether the crisis has truly ended or simply entered a prolonged, lower-intensity phase. What is certain is that the events have exposed critical weaknesses in Moldova's energy infrastructure and institutional preparedness, with significant consequences on both the socioeconomic and political levels.

Moreover, this fragile balance unfolds in a politically sensitive year for Moldova, following the 2024 presidential elections and ahead of the crucial parliamentary vote in autumn 2025.

Chronology of the Crisis and Temporary Solutions

In late 2024, Moldova activated different diplomatic channels to pre-empt the energy crisis due to the interruption of Russian gas supplies to Transnistria. Negotiations between Moldova and Gazprom were held in St. Petersburg in November and failed, mainly due to disagreements over a disputed \$709 million debt from the Moldovan side.[2] Subsequently, the Moldovan Minister of Energy resigned[3], and Moldova declared a state of emergency on 16 December 2024. Transnistria had already done this on 9 December 2024, meanwhile preparing the MoldGRES power plant for coal conversion and energy rationing measures.

On 1 January 2025, Russian gas delivery to Transnistria ceased entirely, leading to severe

heating and electricity shortages. About 72,000 households were left without heating, and a system of daily electricity blackouts was established.[4] Moldovan offers to assist Transnistria with gas procurement were largely ignored or rejected by Tiraspol, which blamed Chişinău and seemed to await Russian intervention.

Mid-January attempts at diplomatic and humanitarian dialogue stall, with mutual accusations between Chişinău and Tiraspol, including appeals from Transnistrian authorities to the UN Secretary-General and the UN Security Council to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe. [5] On 14 January Transnistrian leader Vadim Krasnoselsky even met in Moscow with the Russian Ministry of Energy, and it was announced that Russian gas would be supplied to Tiraspol as humanitarian aid, but the modality and timing were not disclosed.[6] On 27 January, an initial agreement with Chisinau provided Transnistria with 3 million cubic meters of gas loaned by Chişinău, aimed at maintaining minimal pipeline pressure and functionality.[7]

The EU subsequently stepped in, offering an initial €30 million (later increased to €64 million, with €20 million specifically for Transnistria) and proposing a long-term comprehensive €310 million energy support package, including €60 million for the Transnistria region.[8] However, Tiraspol rejected the EU aid, mostly due to the conditionality of the offer, with conditions requiring gas distribution at market-level tariffs. On 14 February, a critical turning point occurred via the "Hungarian scheme," agreed by Transnistrian authorities with two companies: the MET Gas and Energy Marketing AG – a company founded in Hungary in 2007 and now legally based in Switzerland –, and the Dubai-based JNX General Trading LLC, reportedly with Russian backing. Thanks to this arrangement, the Transnistrian region started receiving gas again. [9] On its side, Moldova permitted gas transit under certain conditions, including political prisoner releases, resolving the Evrika Lyceum issue, integrating Moldovan public television broadcasts, and dismantling illegal checkpoints

established internally to the Transnistrian region during the Covid-19 pandemic.[10]

The scheme, still operational under short-term renewals, has partially restored gas and electricity, albeit with slightly increased tariffs. Initial claims of insufficient gas for industrial activities proved to be partially false, with limited industrial resumption later confirmed by the Transnistrian authorities.[11] Nonetheless, the precise conditions of the agreement and the exact amount of gas supplied remain unknown, and overall, non-transparent. To date, the state of economic emergency has been extended until 8 June, with the possibility of further extension.

Humanitarian and Socioeconomic Consequences

The energy crisis highlighted different structural weaknesses in the Transnistrian economic and political system, as well as a strong capacity for self-organization by local residents, and had serious humanitarian and socioeconomic consequences. The cessation of Russian natural gas supplies on 1 January 2025 left the majority of households without central heating and hot water. In urban areas, particularly in Tiraspol, limited gas reserves were utilized to maintain stove and cooking gas, but in other cities and rural areas domestic gas supply was completely cut off. Due to the scarcity of electricity, some of the water pumps in residential buildings did not work, and apartments on higher floors did not receive constant supplies of water. Anticipating the shortfall of gas, many residents had, since late December 2024, purchased electric heaters and stoves, in some cases leading to shortages and price surges for both items. A surge in purchases of gas cylinders was also registered, with authorities deciding to confiscate them if used inside apartments, due to safety concerns. [12]

Moreover, the demand for alternative heating solutions also spurred the production of wood stoves, with the local factory of "Elektromash" operating at high regime to meet the demand. [13]

By mid-February, the partial restoration of gas supplies under the "Hungarian scheme" alleviated the energy shortages, with most of the immediate consequences of the crisis being solved and daily life coming back almost to normality. However, the exact volumes and sustainability of the gas supplies under the current agreement remain unknown, perceiving the current situation as quite precarious. Moreover, while most factories resumed production, not all workers were reintegrated, generating important social costs for the population.

In addition, the energy crisis could have long-term implications for the sustainability of Transnistria's budget. Currently, the region is not selling electricity to Chisinau, an activity previously crucial to Transnistria's financial stability.[16] It remains unclear how long the current arrangement can be sustained. Thus, the energy crisis might escalate into a broader economic crisis with potentially severe repercussions. Already, tariffs for gas and electricity have significantly increased in the region,[17] although they remain lower than those on the right bank, where gas and electricity are now purchased from European markets. The energy crisis has indirectly affected Chisinau as well. Apart from villages previously connected to the Transnistrian energy grid, which have now transitioned to the Moldovan network[18], the most significant impact has been the steep rise in tariffs, clearly felt by residents on the right bank. With gas tariffs already experiencing substantial increases over the past three years, the recent surge in electricity costs has further burdened Moldovan households. Initially, the Moldovan government provided compensations to citizens during the first two months of the crisis; however, this support was limited, reaching only a minority of consumers and covering only a small portion of the price hikes.[19] Nevertheless, with EU financial assistance, compensations have substantially increased since late February, extending coverage to nearly the entire population.

On the other hand, from the perspective of the right bank, the energy crisis can be considered a partially successful test of the energy strategy

developed and implemented by the Moldovan government over the past four years, with the support of the EU and other international organizations.[20] Not only did Moldova cease importing Russian gas, thereby shielding itself from the worst consequences of the crisis, but it also began diversifying its electricity sources, increasing national renewable energy production capacity eightfold since 2020.[21] The Moldovan government appears committed to an ambitious green energy strategy, even raising the prospect of transforming Moldova from an energy importer into an exporter through renewable sources.[22] Undoubtedly, the crisis, together with the subsequent €250 million EU-Moldova comprehensive energy strategy, has further accelerated this shift, spurring additional development of wind farms and solar power plants, and attracting foreign investment.

Political Consequences: Promises of Reintegration and Parliamentary Elections

At the beginning of the crisis, several analysts saw in the halt of Russian gas transit and supply to the Transnistrian region an unexpected opportunity to reopen the long-frozen question of reintegration.[23] Moscow's apparent unwillingness to provide prompt and direct support to Transnistria in a moment of acute need was interpreted by many as a sign that the Kremlin was deprioritizing the region or cynically using it to destabilize the Republic of Moldova. From this perspective, Chişinău and Brussels seem to have adopted a strategic and calibrated crisis response aimed at bringing Tiraspol closer to the negotiating table, despite regular accusations against the Moldovan government advanced by Tiraspol. The openness shown by Moldovan authorities – such as allowing Krasnoselsky to transit through Chişinău airport on his way to Moscow, back in January – and the EU's readiness to offer humanitarian and financial assistance, under certain conditions, were read as signals of potential re-engagement. Notably, during the crisis, Transnistrian authorities publicly thanked the EU for its support and even called on

it to mediate with Chişinău. A visit by the EU delegation to Moldova was organized in March to Pre-emptive relocations to countryside houses were also registered, with a considerable increase in wood gathering, and authorities urging residents to avoid illegal deforestation. At the same time, members of the army were mobilized by local authorities to collect firewood to be distributed and sold to the population, operating particularly in the forest of Kitskany, just outside Tiraspol.[14]

Regarding the production and supply of electricity, the MoldGRES power plant, situated in the East suburbs of the city of Dnestrovsk, and on the banks of the Cuciurgan reservoir, transitioned from natural gas to coal to sustain electricity production. Already in the last days of December, the chimneys of the section of the plant operating with coal were seen working by local residents. However, the quantity of coal, a specific one, sourced in the past from the Donetsk region, was limited, and was said to be enough for around 50 days of rationed use. Consequently, from the first days of January, authorities implemented various systems of rolling daily blackouts, lasting four, eight, or five hours, regulated by a system of rotating shifts between districts. In the most frequently used system, all addresses were distributed into three groups, in which the outage would happen at a different time (the most common ones being 7AM-12PM; 12PM-17PM; 17PM-22PM), which would change every day. Schedules were announced every three days, or sometimes only for the next one or two days. Unexpected outages – mostly during the evening – also occurred due to grid overloads from increased usage.

Healthcare facilities faced operational challenges, with a reduction of working hours and services, but heating of the structures was temporarily maintained thanks to gas reserves. On the other hand, schools and universities suspended in-person classes, extending January holidays until the 20th of January, and transitioning to remote learning where feasible. Though this was hindered by inconsistent electricity and internet connectivity.

Industrial activities were severely impacted by the energy crisis. Selected factories, like Elektromash and the meat processing plant of Bender (BMK), kept working. However, some of the most important industrial centers of the Transnistrian region stopped operating, in an attempt to save gas and electricity. In particular, the Moldovan Metallurgical Plant, the cement and bread factories of Ribnita were temporarily closed, with thousands of workers left without work – more than 2000 only from the metallurgical plant[15] – with almost no notice. Local small businesses, such as restaurants and shops, mostly equipped themselves with fuel generators to work through the daily outage schedule. However, this was possible mostly in Tiraspol and in the biggest urban centers, while in the city of Ribnita and the northern region, already affected by the closure of the metallurgical plant, more businesses temporarily closed or reduced the amount of working hours.

It is important to notice that the crisis's impact varied greatly across the Transnistrian region. Tiraspol was surely the place where the crisis was less experienced and visible. The New Year decorations are still hung in the city center and illuminated, and most businesses still working.



Moldovan State Electro-Power Plant, 2015, photo by D. F.

In other areas, the crisis had a much more visible impact, which led to closing commercial activities and a rapid rise in unemployment. Moreover, it is important to notice that even in Tiraspol the energy crisis was not the same for everyone, with

Sheriff's supermarkets and Hotel Russia not being affected at all by the blackouts. the left bank, and in the following weeks, OSCE-facilitated meetings were held between the two sides, with discussions about reactivating existing negotiation formats. In this light, the crisis temporarily revived diplomatic dialogue and enhanced the EU's credibility as a possible mediator. Also, the conditions imposed by the Moldovan government to allow the transit of gas towards the Transnistrian region could be read through a lens of rapprochement.

At the same time, it would be wrong to overestimate the reconciliation effects of the energy crisis and its impact on the Transnistrian political system. Already at the beginning of February, Transnistrian authorities proposed new legislation introducing criminal penalties for collecting, storing, and transferring personal data or classified information to foreign citizens, organizations, and authorities – provisions that could easily be used against local residents speaking with journalists and reporters.[24] In April, they also proposed legislation to introduce a new regime of fines against foreign journalists, which again could be used to curtail freedom of expression.[25] In May, they adopted a law allowing the disconnection of internet and telephone services in cases of security threats, raising evident human rights concerns.[26] Moreover, the crisis sharpened accusations from Tiraspol to Chişinău and reinforced existing divides in public narratives and perceptions. Throughout January, Transnistrian officials repeatedly accused the Moldovan government of triggering the crisis, orchestrating a “gas blockade,” pursuing a policy of discrimination, and, in some cases, even invoking genocide.[27] These statements likely resonated with parts of the local population, particularly those more exposed to pro-government media. From this perspective, the agreement allowing Moldovan public television to be broadcast in Transnistria may represent a small step toward reopening alternative information channels, but could be too little even to start. Meanwhile, both Moldovan officials and EU representatives clearly pointed to Russia as the principal actor responsible for the situation.

For some, the stance adopted by the government was too soft, and its strategy too open to dialogue and assistance. In this regard, the Moldovan government was in the difficult position of dealing with a potential humanitarian crisis on what is de jure its territory, while receiving accusations from separatist authorities of having caused the crisis, and having to reconcile incompatible expectations and public opinions. Some analysts argued that the Republic of Moldova emerged weakened from the energy crisis.[29] What is certain is that the Moldovan government, probably in concert with the EU, decided to adopt a more cautious approach, trying to show – particularly in front of Transnistrian residents – openness and willingness to help.



Vadim Krasnoselsky, 9 October 2018, photo by D. F.

Among the different lenses through which to analyze this choice, timing appears key. With parliamentary elections approaching in the autumn of 2025, and following the presidential elections and constitutional referendum of November 2024, openness and dialogue with the Transnistrian region could have been considered the most effective tools from an electoral and a social cohesion perspective. For instance, this time, unlike during the presidential elections of 2024, polling stations will be allowed in the Transnistrian region.[30]

Conclusions

The 2025 energy crisis showed the extent to which the Republic of Moldova has remained

indirectly exposed to external energy shocks. While short-term solutions were eventually found, the precariousness of current arrangements and Transnistria's structural dependencies remain unresolved, leaving Transnistrian residents in a state of persistent uncertainty and economic vulnerability. Moreover, however, it has been verified that industrial activities resumed, but most factories have not reached the pre-crisis level of production and employment. On the other hand, the crisis reopened space for cautious diplomatic engagement between Chişinău and Tiraspol, but without fundamentally shifting the balance of power and mutual trust. On both sides of the Dniester, conflicting narratives and political calculations have shaped public opinion and shown that any reintegration prospect would require addressing a deep social divide within the population. As Moldova moves toward its parliamentary elections, the legacy of this crisis will likely continue to influence political discourse, particularly for those Transnistrian residents who will vote, its energy security policy, and the country's broader issue of territorial cohesion.

Recommendations

- Continue strengthening Moldova's energy resilience by accelerating infrastructure integration with the EU market and diversifying sources of electricity, reducing dependency on unpredictable regional actors.
- Address clearly the socioeconomic costs of switching to energy sources that are more expensive for Moldovan citizens, putting into place compensation tools that cover effectively the increases for more vulnerable parts of the population, without belittling or doubting legitimate economic concerns, as Russian propaganda.
- Invest in strategic communication to address conflicting narratives on both sides of the Dniester, supporting more informed and inclusive public debate around reintegration, promoting territorial social cohesion while countering disinformation.
- Reinforce EU and OSCE facilitation roles in the dialogue between Chişinău and Tiraspol, using post-crisis momentum to promote confidence-building measures in education, media, and humanitarian access in cases of future crisis.

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Peace Process in Ukraine and Ongoing Talks

Emma Munnelly

Key Takeaways

- After Donald Trump's win in the 2024 Presidential election in the US, he vowed to end the Ukraine-Russia war and the US involvement in the conflict. This has resulted in the Trump administration accelerating peace talks with both sides.
- Trump's administration has deployed a vastly different approach to the war compared to his predecessor, Joe Biden, who was a staunch supporter of Ukraine. Trump has instead opted to restore trade ties and build better relations with Russia.
- While Ukraine has accepted an unconditional ceasefire proposed by the US, Russia has deployed stalling tactics and is in no rush to end the war.

Introduction

Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, escalating a conflict that began 8 years earlier when Russia illegally annexed the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. Donald Trump's victory in the 2024 US Presidential election marked a shift in Washington's foreign policy, most notably regarding their approach to the Ukraine war. The US, under Trump's leadership, has begun to re-establish relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin, while Trump has publicly criticised Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.[1] This article will explore the key developments in the peace process since Trump was re-elected.



US President Donald Trump and President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin meeting in Helsinki on 16 July 2018. Source: The White House via Flickr.

Trump in the White House: New President, New Strategy

Under President Joe Biden's administration, the US and European allies viewed the Russian invasion of Ukraine as an illegal act of aggression on NATO's frontier, launched by Russian President Vladimir Putin to bolster his revanchist ambitions. However, when Trump assumed office as the new President of the US in January 2025, he drastically changed the US position.[2] His decisive victory in the November Presidential election over Vice President Kamala Harris, who had committed herself to continuing Biden's "ironclad" support of Ukraine, coincided with a Republican sweep of Congress. Trump's Republican Party adopted a more Ukraine-sceptic view than the previous Democratic administration, which aligned with Trump's "America First" approach to foreign policy.[3] Trump's presidential victory marked a definitive turning point in Washington's approach to the war and, in particular, its attitude towards Ukraine. At times, Trump even blamed Ukraine for starting and prolonging the war, while positioning himself as an impartial mediator aiming to find a peace deal.[4] Ending the war in Ukraine was one of Trump's top priorities on the campaign trail, which he vowed to end within 24 hours of taking office. US officials later changed this target to within 100 days of his inauguration.[5] However, it soon became clear that ending the war would be a more difficult task than Trump first anticipated, and there has yet to be a breakthrough in negotiations.

Timeline of the Peace Negotiations

First Trump-Putin Phone Call

On 12 February, President Trump had a phone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin. This was the first known conversation between the presidents since Trump assumed office in January. The two discussed a wide range of topics, and both agreed to begin negotiations to end the war in Ukraine. Later that day, Trump called Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to inform him

about his conversation with Putin and his plans to move forward with peace talks.[6] Trump's opening unilateral talks with Putin raised concerns for officials in Ukraine and Europe that a deal may be made without their involvement.[7]

EU Foreign Policy Chief, Kaja Kallas, said "in any negotiation, Europe must have a central role," adding Europe's priority must be "strengthening Ukraine and providing robust security guarantees."[8] Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha, said, "Nothing can be discussed on Ukraine without Ukraine or on Europe without Europe."[9]

European Leaders' Emergency Paris Summit

On 17 February, European leaders gathered in Paris for an emergency meeting convened by French President Emmanuel Macron, which European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte also attended. The emergency meeting was called after the surprise move by the US to exclude Ukraine and Europe from a meeting between US and Russian representatives due to commence the next day in Saudi Arabia. Key points of discussion for European leaders at the Paris meeting included Trump's peace efforts,



Prime Minister of Poland Donald Tusk, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, French President Emmanuel Macron, UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer, and German Chancellor Friedrich Merz are speaking on the phone with US President Donald Trump at the European Political Community summit on 16 May 2025 in Tirana, Albania. Source: Presidency of Ukraine via www.president.gov.ua.

security guarantees for Ukraine, and the possibility of sending peacekeeping troops to Ukraine.[10]

US–Russia Summit in Saudi Arabia

On 18 February, delegates from Russia and the US met in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, for discussions. This marked the first high-level attempt to negotiate an end to Putin’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine since the early days of the war, when talks collapsed over Putin’s demands. The US delegation was led by US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, accompanied by envoy Steve Witkoff and US National Security Advisor Michael Waltz. The Russian delegation was headed by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Advisor Yuri Ushakov. At the summit, the US and Russia agreed to explore the “economic and investment opportunities” that could arise as a result of a peace settlement in Ukraine.[11] The discussions in Saudi Arabia further emphasised the rapid pace of US efforts to bring the war to an end, raising major concerns in Kyiv and Europe regarding their exclusion from participating. The day prior, European officials met to discuss the possibility of sending peacekeeping troops to Ukraine. However, on Tuesday during the US–Russia negotiations, Lavrov rejected such a proposal. He outlined that the deployment of NATO troops to Ukraine, even operating under a different umbrella, was unacceptable to Moscow. Russia has repeatedly rejected the idea of Western soldiers in Ukraine.[12]

Zelenskyy White House Meeting

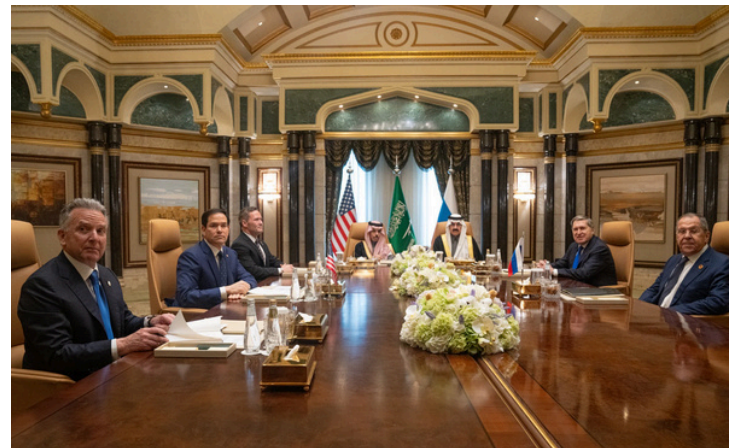
On 28 February, Zelenskyy travelled to Washington to meet with Trump and US Vice President JD Vance. Here, Zelenskyy was expected to sign a long-awaited minerals agreement between Ukraine and the US. However, the highly anticipated Oval Office meeting descended into chaos when the three disagreed over the conflict. [13][14] This resulted in Trump accusing Zelenskyy of “gambling with World War three.” Vance joined in and accused Zelenskyy of “litigating in front of the American media,” adding that the Ukrainian

leader’s approach was “disrespectful.” Vance then went on to accuse Zelenskyy of showing no appreciation for the military aid the US has provided to Ukraine.[15]

After the confrontation, it was reported Zelenskyy was asked to leave the White House, while both the mineral deal signing and a news conference scheduled for afterwards were cancelled. This in turn led to a temporary suspension of US military aid to Ukraine.[16] The public clash further underscores how the change of administration in Washington has resulted in a major shift in the US position on Ukraine.

30-Day Ceasefire Proposal

On 11 March, US and Ukrainian officials met in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, where Ukraine agreed it would accept a proposal from the US for a 30-day ceasefire. As part of the agreement, the US announced it would resume military aid and intelligence sharing with Ukraine. The proposal now relied on Russia’s approval, with Marco Rubio stressing “the ball was now in Russia’s court.” The ceasefire agreement was welcomed by European leaders.[17]



US Secretary of State Marco Rubio holds a meeting with Russia in Saudi Arabia on 18 February 2025. Source: US Department of State via Flickr.

On 13 March, US envoy Witkoff travelled to Moscow to discuss the US-proposed plan with Russian officials. Putin indicated he agreed in principle but stated a number of conditions needed to be worked out before Russia could agree to a ceasefire, effectively dismissing the

proposal. These conditions included Ukraine pausing mobilisation and training of its military personnel, as well as other countries, pausing the supply of weapons to Ukraine during the ceasefire.[18][19]

Energy Infrastructure Strike Moratorium

On 18 March, Trump had a phone call with Putin where the Russian leader agreed to temporarily halt attacks on energy infrastructure for one month. The conversation failed to convince Putin to agree to the US-backed ceasefire agreement already approved by Ukraine. From 23–25 March, the US held separate talks with Ukrainian and Russian officials in Saudi Arabia.[20] The White House said the two sides had agreed “to eliminate the use of force” in the Black Sea. While both sides also agreed to implement the previously announced pause on attacks against energy infrastructure.[21] Zelenskyy confirmed that Ukraine had agreed to stop using military force in the Black Sea. But the Kremlin released a statement outlining they would only agree if a series of terms were met, including the lifting of US sanctions on the Russian Agricultural Bank and other financial institutions involved in food trade. [22] In a statement, the White House pledged to help restore “Russia’s access to the world market for agricultural and fertiliser exports” by lowering insurance costs and improving access to payment systems and ports, subject to Russia’s adherence to the ceasefire agreement. Zelenskyy criticised the move, saying it was “a weakening of our position on sanctions” as it implied the US would help Russia improve its economic position while the war raged on.[23] Both Putin and Zelenskyy cautiously agreed to limit attacks on energy infrastructure, however, both sides have accused the other of violations.[24] On 18 April, the energy infrastructure ceasefire agreement expired and it was not renewed.[25]

30-Hour Easter Ceasefire

On 19 April, Putin announced a surprise one-day ceasefire for Easter. Putin outlined the truce will

run for 30-hours, with “all hostilities” paused between 6pm Moscow time on Saturday and midnight on Monday. Ukraine responded to the announcement with scepticism, with Zelenskyy pointing out that Putin still has not agreed to the US-proposed 30-day ceasefire.[26][27] Putin’s decision to announce a one-day ceasefire raised some questions, particularly regarding its timing, as it came just one day after the Trump administration revealed it was running out of patience with Russia and Ukraine. Furthermore, the announcement came just hours after Russia’s defence Ministry declared its forces had driven Ukrainian troops out of one of their last remaining strongholds in Russia’s Kursk region, where the Ukrainians launched an unexpected incursion last year.[28]

US ‘Final’ Peace Proposal

On 23 April, the details of the ‘final’ US peace offer to end the Russia-Ukraine war were reported. The week prior, the US reportedly presented its peace proposal to Ukraine officials during a meeting in Paris. At the same time, US officials revealed that if both parties did not agree to a peace agreement soon, they would withdraw from the talks.[29]

Trump’s final peace proposal includes de jure US recognition of Russian control over Crimea and de facto recognition of Russia’s occupation of Ukrainian territories in Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia oblasts. The deal includes the lifting of sanctions on Russia that have been imposed since 2014, while it also includes the enhancement of economic cooperation in the energy and industrial sectors between the US and Russia. The deal prevents Ukraine from joining NATO but does allow for EU membership.[30]

In exchange, the US promises Ukraine “a robust security guarantee” supported by European countries and potentially other allies from non-European countries. Trump’s proposal does not provide any detail of how this peacekeeping mission would function, or it does not mention the US role in the mission.[31]

The US peace proposal would require significant concessions from Ukraine, where Zelenskyy has strongly rejected the possibility of accepting Russia's occupation of Crimea and parts of four regions in eastern Ukraine.[32] On the other hand, the proposal outlines several "tangible gains" for Russia.[33] Although Putin has allegedly offered to freeze the current front lines to reach an agreement, he has previously dismissed other parts of the US's proposal, such as the presence of European peacekeepers in Ukraine.[34]



US President Donald Trump and Vice President JD Vance clash with Ukrainian President Zelenskyy during a meeting in the Oval Office on 28 February 2025. Source: The White House via Wikimedia Commons.

Russia's Victory Day Ceasefire

On 28 April, Putin announced a 72-hour ceasefire from 8-10 May. The Kremlin stated, "all hostilities will be suspended during this period" and called on Ukraine to follow suit and pause fighting. The three-day truce was called to coincide with celebrations to mark the 80th anniversary of the Soviet Union's victory in the Second World War. Zelenskyy was critical of the announcement and called for a "full and unconditional ceasefire for at least 30 days" to allow for "a basis for real diplomacy." [35] Both Kyiv and Moscow have accused each other of breaches. Ukraine dismissed Putin's three-day ceasefire as "political theatrics," intended to appease the US, which is growing increasingly impatient in its attempts to broker a ceasefire.[36]

US-Ukraine Mineral Deal

On 30 April, after months of negotiations, Ukraine finalised a mineral deal with the US. The agreement will grant the US preferential access to new Ukrainian minerals and natural resources licences. In return, the US will provide financial and military support to Ukraine in its post-war rebuild of the country.[37] The deal was signed by US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent and Ukraine's Vice Prime Minister Yulia Svyrydenko in Washington. Bessent said the "historic" economic partnership would send a strong message to Russia that Trump is committed to a peace process. In Ukraine, Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal welcomed the agreement and added it was "good, equal and beneficial" for both the US and Ukraine.[38] Key features of the agreement include the establishment of the US-Ukraine Reinvestment Fund. This fund will be jointly managed by Ukraine and the US under an equal partnership framework. Ukraine will retain complete ownership and authority over its resources and will decide the locations where minerals may be extracted.[39] For months, Trump pushed for a mineral deal, as he claimed the US had provided Ukraine with substantial military assistance worth \$350 billion, although the US Department of Defence say the figure is closer to \$182.8 billion. Trump said the US-Ukraine mineral deal represents a form of "payback" for this support.[40][41] The Trump administration has portrayed the deal as a lucrative opportunity that can recover funds spent supporting Ukrainian interests.[42]

Following the announcement of the deal, in a statement issued by Ukraine, they clarified "the agreement focuses on further, not past US military assistance," therefore, Ukraine has no debt obligations to Washington, which was a crucial aspect of the negotiations between the two sides.[43]

In general, the deal can be viewed as a "diplomatic win" for Ukraine. Kyiv managed to persuade Trump to leave out some of his key demands from earlier negotiations.[44] The mineral agreement is a positive development in

US-Ukraine relations, especially following the contentious White House meeting between Trump and Zelenskyy in February. While the agreed deal is more favourable to Ukraine than earlier proposals, it ultimately failed to make the US add security guarantees as part of the agreement. [45]

Istanbul Peace Talks

On 11 May, Putin proposed a meeting for peace negotiations in Türkiye, due to commence later that week on Thursday, 15 May. However, he did not respond to the 30-day ceasefire proposal put forward by Ukraine and its European allies a week prior, where they provided Russia an ultimatum: agree to an unconditional ceasefire or face fresh sanctions. By offering direct talks Putin sidestepped the ultimatum. Trump also welcomed Putin's offer and urged Zelenskyy to "immediately" agree to the direct talks. Zelenskyy responded by saying he would travel to Türkiye and expected to meet Putin there "personally." At the time, Trump was on a tour in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE, and outlined he may travel to Istanbul if the direct talks happen. [46][47]

On Thursday, 15 May, Zelenskyy met Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara, where he further pushed his intention to personally attend the meeting on Friday if Putin also attended. [48] However, on Wednesday, the Kremlin announced that Putin would not be present, and Vladimir Medinsky, former Culture Minister, would instead lead the Russian delegations. On the Ukrainian side, Zelenskyy appointed his Defence Minister, Rustem Umerov, to lead his delegation. [49] The talks ultimately took place on Friday, 16 May, a day later than originally scheduled. This was the first direct talks between the two sides since the early days of the war. [50] The discussions ended without any breakthrough on a ceasefire. However, both parties agreed to a prisoner exchange deal, which will see each side approve the release of 1,000 prisoners of war. The Russian delegation said the swap would take place "in the coming days." A potential meeting between Putin and Zelenskyy was also discussed at the request

of the Ukrainian delegation. It remains unclear whether the Kremlin will consider this request. [51]

Latest Trump-Putin Phone Call

On 19 May, Trump had a two-hour phone conversation with Putin. Earlier that morning, Trump and Zelenskyy had a brief phone call, and the day prior, Trump also spoke with European leaders. The intended plan was for Trump to push Putin into accepting an unconditional ceasefire, or the US would apply sanctions to Russia. However, during the conversation with Putin, Trump moved away from this stance. Afterwards, Trump briefed Zelenskyy and other European officials on his discussion with Putin, where their reaction was one of shock and disappointment as Trump appeared to be once again easing pressure on Moscow. [52][53] Putin described the conversation with Trump as "very meaningful and frank," and expressed he was ready to work with Ukraine on a memorandum for a future peace agreement. However, he refused to support the 30-day unconditional ceasefire proposal. [54] On his Truth Social network, Trump claimed the talks went "very well." He again implied that the US would be stepping back from the negotiations, advising the two sides to conduct direct bilateral talks. While Trump also proposed that the Vatican would be a suitable host for the peace talks. [55] [56]

Trump – Running Out of Patience

Trump was unable to fulfil one of his campaign promises of ending the war in Ukraine within 24 hours in office, while finding a solution within his first 100 days also proved unattainable. Trump's 'dealmaker' approach to foreign policy is a fundamental aspect of his political identity and a strongpoint that has defined his time in office. However, it is becoming clear he is growing impatient with the lack of progress in negotiations to end the war.

In early May, the US indicated it plans to reduce its role as mediator. US State Department Spokesperson, Tammy Bruce, said the US would

no longer “fly around the world at the drop of a hat to mediate meetings.” She added it is “between the two parties,” and it is now time they proposed concrete solutions to end the war. In April, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio stated Washington may “move on” from ceasefire discussions if progress was not made soon.[57] These announcements follow months of stalled diplomatic efforts to get the warring parties to agree to a peace deal. This policy shift suggests Trump is becoming increasingly frustrated with the lack of progress.[58]

Putin – In No Rush for Peace

After months of negotiations, it has become clear that Putin is in no rush to end the war. While Ukraine has agreed to an unconditional ceasefire, Russia has refused to commit to one. The Kremlin has instead opted to make excuses and use stalling tactics in an attempt to prolong the peace process indefinitely.[59] Trump has attempted to persuade Putin to make a deal by forcing Ukraine to make concessions, while at the same time offering the possibility of a lucrative future of cooperation between the US and Russia. While it appears that Putin is reluctant to outrightly reject Trump’s peace proposals, he resorts to endless excuses and delays, indicating his intention is to continue the war.[60]

For Putin, his goal in the war remains unchanged – Ukraine must abandon its intention to join NATO, suppressing Ukraine’s nationalism, and Russia expanding its territorial control.[61] Putin may try to hold out for as long as possible, so he can get even more concessions from Trump, who is becoming increasingly frustrated with the lack of progress. Trump may become so desperate to strike a deal with Russia that it eventually comes at the expense of Ukraine’s statehood.[62]

Conclusion

This article has discussed the peace process and negotiations to end the Ukraine war since Trump took office. Trump has increased the pace of peace talks and put pressure on Ukraine to make concessions to reach a deal. On the other hand,

[1] Trump has been less forceful with Putin and has looked to re-build relations with Russia. Trump’s approach has not had the intended results, leading to growing frustrations in the White House. The Trump administration has adopted a vastly different foreign policy agenda to his predecessor, Joe Biden, creating concerns for European allies that the US can no longer be relied on. While Trump’s efforts have made Ukraine accept an unconditional ceasefire, Russia has been less willing to cooperate, deliberately stalling and delaying peace efforts to prolong the conflict, suggesting Putin has no intention of ending the war.

Recommendations

- European countries and allies from non-European countries should maintain their support for Ukraine and seek to protect the country’s sovereignty, territorial integrity, and Euro-Atlantic aspirations.
- The US and other negotiators should continue their efforts to secure an unconditional ceasefire in Ukraine and put pressure on Russia to de-escalate the war.
- If Russia continues to reject ceasefire proposals, the US and European countries should employ a coordinated response, including economic sanctions.

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The Present Status of Armenian Prisoners of War in Azerbaijan Amidst Normalisation

Mia Baxley

Key Takeaways

- Although the international community remains optimistic about the prospect of a permanent peace solution in the South Caucasus, human rights organizations continue to monitor and flag grave concerns for the safety of Armenian prisoners in Azerbaijan.
- Former government officials of the now-dissolved Republic of Artsakh are considered at the highest risk of human rights violations in the legal process of Azerbaijan's military courts. Former soldiers and civilians also remain
- To understand the gravity of the human rights situation in the South Caucasus, there should be further acknowledgement of the use of torture and violence against prisoners of war and how identity-based violence manifests in Azerbaijan's prisons.

Introduction

The diplomatic tensions between the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan have gained new international attention in 2025. Following Azerbaijan's lightning military offensive against the Armenian-majority region of Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia and Azerbaijan have taken their first official steps towards a permanent ceasefire and have opened a pathway to eventual diplomatic relations. However, amidst the normalization process and the international committee's hope for a lasting peace in the turbulent South Caucasus region, human rights watchers and genocide prevention activists have raised alarms on the continuing presence of, and abuse against, Armenian prisoners-of-war (POWs) in Azerbaijan.

While the international community has been preoccupied with the peace process, Azerbaijan has begun carrying out legal proceedings against political prisoners without any external forces monitoring the trials for transparency and fairness. Many prisoners are facing charges of terrorism, both from the recent conflicts and from the First Nagorno-Karabakh War (1988-1994). The following article seeks to shed light on their current conditions in prison and what remains at stake during their trials in Baku.

Prisoner of War Abuse as an Expression of Genocidal Ideology

Since the 2020 Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, and in subsequent military offensives, Azerbaijan has taken approximately 200 prisoners-of-war from Armenia's Syunik municipality and Nagorno-Karabakh.[1] Captured individuals from the most recent military offensive on Nagorno-Karabakh include civilians, high-ranking officials from the dissolved Republic of Artsakh, and servicemen and women captured during active combat.[2] When questioned, the government of Azerbaijan has either refused to answer, downplayed the total number of captives, or denied the presence of POWs in their prisons.[3] Additionally, Azerbaijan maintains its silence on the presence and status of domestic political opposition, which the government is also accused of oppressing to uphold its regime.[4]

However, while oppression of native-born critics follows the standard pattern of an authoritarian regime, its abuse against Armenian prisoners deserves extra scrutiny for its roots in genocidal ideology.

The crimes against humanity committed by Azeri servicemen against POWs have a well-documented history and digital trail. Many released Armenian POWs attest to extreme cases of abuse, torture, and killings of their captured compatriots. Human Rights Watch documented four detainees from the 2020 war shortly after their release in 2021, who testified that they were held with very little, if any, water while also tortured with electric shocks, beatings, and sharp metal prods.[5] After the 2022 offensive against Armenia's Syunik province, unknown participants identified as Azeri servicemen in uniform executed multiple surrendered POWs on camera. [6] The video emerged on the social media platform Telegram and spread unedited, showing nearly 20 seconds of rapid fire from a military-grade Kalashnikov-like assault rifle.[7]

These acts of violence against unarmed POWs, both living and deceased, follow a trend of a phenomenon which political science scholar Lee Ann Fujii called "extra-lethal violence." [8] According to Fujii, this form of violence "transgress[es] shared norms about the proper

treatment of persons and bodies" and not only violates international human rights law, but also encourages increasingly more disturbing behaviour towards victims by participants of the violence. When extra-lethal violence is conducted in groups, peer pressure acts as an accelerant for depravity and a willingness to violate a victim's humanity. The presence of this form of violence in war escalates in severity and prevalence when there are other motivating factors, such as driven hatred towards a victim's religious or ethnic identity. Abuse against Armenian POWs should be viewed through such a lens to fully understand why violence is so pervasive in Azeri prisons and detention centres.

POWs as Diplomatic Collateral

The most recent assault in September 2023 coincided with the opening week of the 78th United Nations General Assembly in New York City; during this time, the Minister of Foreign Affairs for Azerbaijan, Jeyhun Bayramov, reiterated to the international community claims by the Azeri government that the operation was



Azeri soldiers and released Armenian prisoners of war during the December 13, 2023 exchange. Source: France24 via AFP

by the Azeri government that the operation was launched as an anti-terrorist measure.[9] Azerbaijan's hosting of COP29, the UN's preeminent climate change conference, in November 2024 was criticized as a form of diplomatic whitewashing of the country's human rights abuses and the September 2023 military offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh.[10][11] Armenia, which had been on the list of potential host countries for COP29, had withdrawn its candidacy and promised to support Baku as host city as part of its peace deals and conditions for the release of selected POWs from Azerbaijan.[12][13]

Many media outlets outside of the Caucasus often cover the POW situation with a prematurely optimistic tone on the state of affairs between Armenia and Azerbaijan. On 13 December 2023, Armenia and Azerbaijan conducted a prisoner exchange with the release of 2 Azeri soldiers held since prior April and 32 Armenians (31 held since the 2020 war, 1 since the prior September offensive). In their reporting of the exchange, multiple outlets called it "a step towards normalisation" four months after the September military offensive and the end of the nine-month humanitarian crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh, which preceded it.[14][15][16]

However, many high-profile POWs have continued to face sham trials and abuse by authorities while the international community has been focused on the normalisation process. International observers who have attempted to attend trials for Armenian prisoners report being harassed, intimidated, and expelled from the courthouse by Azeri security guards.[17] Many other international officials, some of whom had been promised access to trials, have also reported being locked out of courtrooms.[18] The European Parliament has declared that the trials have been conducted with weak evidence and without external vetting due to the Azerbaijani government's strict control over the procedures.[19]

Where Have POWs Been in the "Normalization" Process?

In March of 2025, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) announced that it had been formally expelled from Azerbaijan.[20] The ICRC was one of the last remaining organizations with access to Armenian prisoners, and as the most recent round of trials has begun, their expulsion heightens concerns for Azerbaijan's intentions with them. The following stories are of three of the most high-profile POWs for whom the international community has some confirmation of their status.

Ruben Vardanyan

Former State Minister of the Republic of Artsakh, Ruben Vardanyan, has spent nearly 600 days in prison in Azerbaijan. He was among 23 other political prisoners arrested in September 2023 while fleeing with thousands of civilians towards Armenia.[21] During the preceding nine-month blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh, Vardanyan was one of the most outspoken activists in Western media. His January 2023 interview with BBC HARDTalk host Stephen Sackur, a show he appeared on to speak about the blockade, went viral for Sackur's suggestion that the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh either make a political deal with Azerbaijan to open the Lachin Corridor or flee the region altogether.[22] Genocide prevention activists criticised Sackur for ignoring the blockade's genocide by attrition, a slow-acting form of genocide committed through the restriction of food and other life-saving resources.[23] Since his arrest, Vardanyan's family has struggled to maintain contact with him and have often been ignored by Azeri authorities when requesting updates on his well-being. Vardanyan is being tried in the Baku Military Court on 42 charges, for which he faces a life sentence with little chance of parole or repeal.[24] According to the human rights watchdog Free Armenian Prisoners, Azeri prosecutors have falsified interrogation records of their interactions with Vardanyan and have punished him for refusing to sign them.[25]

In the early days of his trial, Vardanyan went on a month-long hunger strike, and he has appeared sickly and bruised in court.[26][27] The international community had been calling for the ICRC to visit Vardanyan in prison before their expulsion from the country in March.[28]

Vicken Euljekjian

Vicken Euljekjian, a dual citizen of Armenia and Lebanon, has been held prisoner since the 2020 Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. He and his friend, Maral Najarian, were on their way to Shushi to gather belongings they left behind on 10 November 2020, one day after the declared ceasefire, when Azeri police arrested them at a checkpoint outside the city.[29] Najarian had been told by guards that Euljekjian was going to be transferred to a Red Cross van, but the vehicle he was placed in was not appropriately marked. While Najarian was released after 120 days of captivity, Euljekjian was tried in an Azeri court and sentenced in June 2021 to a 20-year sentence on charges of terrorism, illegal border crossing, and participating in the 2020 war.[30] Armenian representatives at the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) contended that Euljekjian had not been granted access to a lawyer willing to fairly represent him in court and had been tortured into giving confessions which were later used as evidence against him.[31]

Euljekjian's detainment is also symbolic of the religious-based violence that many Armenian Christians have faced in Azerbaijan. Euljekjian's family noticed that the distinctive cross tattoo on his wrist had been burned and disfigured during his initial detainment, which is believed to be a tactic committed by Azeri prison guards to erase it off his skin.[32] Testimonies collected by the Center for Truth and Justice also assert that he had, on numerous occasions, been blindfolded and subjected to mock executions as a form of psychological torture.[33] Most recently, Euljekjian has been on a hunger strike in protest of Azeri authorities denying him the right to speak to his wife Linda.[34] His family is gravely concerned for his mental health, as he reported his suicidal ideation to the ICRC in January.[35]

Alexander Yeghiazaryan

The status of former soldier Alexander Yeghiazaryan is the most secretive of the three detailed stories. Azerbaijan has outright denied his status as a POW and has instead labelled him as "missing in action." [36] The Center for Truth and Justice, which has been following Yeghiazaryan's case closely, reported that his last known contact was with his brother in October 2020.[37] Approximately one year later, video evidence surfaced on Telegram of Yeghiazaryan and three other POWs being tortured in captivity.



Ruben Vardanyan. Source: Aurora Humanitarian Initiative

The other three POWs were later identified as Gegham Elibekyan, Tigran Khachatryan, and Artur Stepanyan; of this group of four, all have been released except for Yeghiazaryan.[38] Since his capture, repatriated Armenian servicemen at various points in time have reported seeing Yeghiazaryan alive in Baku.[39]

Conclusion

The wealth of testimonies by repatriated prisoners and the families of the incarcerated highlight the continuing consequences of Azerbaijan's September 2023 offensive. Despite rulings by the International Court of Justice to allow for the repatriation of civilians back to Nagorno-Karabakh, the ongoing political situation in Azerbaijan emphasises the concerns of many Armenians that they would not feel safe inside Azerbaijan.[40][41]

The normalisation process between Armenia and Azerbaijan has yet to usher in a period of lasting peace and cooperation. Even after the conditions for normalisation were debated upon and agreed by Armenia, Azerbaijan, and their international mediators, accusations of border skirmishes and ceasefire violations have threatened to derail the process over the course of several months.[42][43] Similarly, the timing of the ICRC's expulsion from Azerbaijan aligned with the acceptance of the conditions for open relations, thereby establishing a conflict of intentions between the on-paper path for diplomacy and the lack of political transparency. Most concerning is the lack of open coverage on the continuation of the mistreatment of POWs. Azerbaijan sits at a unique intersection of geopolitics, between its relative obscurity in mainstream media coverage and its historical relations with Türkiye, Russia, and Israel and new strategic pull in Syria.[44][45][46] Without significant pushback against its current human rights crisis, this establishes a trend of impunity for human rights violations, not only in Azerbaijan and against Armenian POWs but elsewhere in the world without the permeation of global attention. Larger conflicts with wider media coverage have opened the conversation on the prevalence of

genocidal ideologies, presenting a chance to discuss and address identity-based abuse against POWs as a unique human rights violation.

Recommendations

- Azerbaijan should immediately reinstate the International Committee of the Red Cross to allow contact with prisoners and independently verify their safety and well-being. The ICRC's peer organisations should support their mission in the region and call for their return to Azerbaijan.
- International legal and humanitarian law organisations should become more proactive in the ongoing legal processes in Azerbaijan and pressure the Azeri judicial system to appoint foreign attorneys to defendants.
- Raising light to the overall human rights situation in Azerbaijan, including Armenian POWs and native-born dissidents serving lengthy prison sentences, should involve multinational cooperation from genocide prevention organisations, legal bodies, watch groups, and government officials tasked with monitoring international human rights violations. Therefore, relevant bodies should seek out opportunities to raise the South Caucasus issue in human rights-focused working groups and reach out to peer organisations to assist in supporting each other's initiatives for POWs in the South Caucasus.

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