

Stakes High as Medvedev Seeks to Tackle Karabakh Quandary

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The stakes are higher than ever before when President Dmitry Medvedev hosts talks about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with the presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia in Kazan on Friday.

Judging from a recent war of words in the South Caucasus, the risk that a smoldering dispute over the Armenian enclave on Azeri territory will erupt into open hostilities has risen to new heights.

Peace talks mediated by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, led by Russia, France and the United States in the so-called Minsk Group, have met little success since 1994, when Armenian separatists secured much of Nagorno-Karabakh and some surrounding territory. The conflict killed more than 30,000 people and displaced more than 1 million.

The Foreign Ministry said Thursday that it hoped the Kazan talks would provide a breakthrough. "This meeting will play a landmark role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict," the ministry said in a statement.

Clashes have worsened since 2008 around the mountainous enclave, and Baku, buoyed by surging oil profits — much of which has spent modernizing its armed forces — has recently stepped up its rhetoric.

Deputy Azeri Prime Minister Ali Gasanov warned earlier this week that if "Armenia continues to play games, Azerbaijan will free its territories by force," the news site Trend.az reported.

Baku is planning to hold a military parade on Sunday to "show the whole world the might of its army," Gasanov said.

Azeri officials have also threatened to shoot down any planes that try to land at the newly reconstructed airport in Nagorno-Karabakh's capital, Stepanakert. The airport had been closed since 1992.

A growing number of people in Baku believe that the permanent loss of Nagorno-Karabakh can only be averted by retaking the region through military force, analysts said.

"While each side's fundamental positions have not changed, the balance of strength has. Azerbaijan has become stronger, while Armenia is lagging behind," said Svante Cornell, director of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute in Stockholm.

Despite the difficult circumstances, Medvedev has committed himself to getting Presidents Serzh Sargsyan of Armenia and Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan to sign a "basic principles" agreement.

The agreement, forged by Russia, France and the United States in discussions over the past four years, stipulates that Nagorno-Karabakh's status will be determined in a referendum, that people who fled during the early 1990s hostilities will be allowed to return and that an international peacekeeping force will be deployed.

Both sides have not moved an inch in the past, with Azerbaijan insisting that Nagorno-Karabakh remain part of its territory, albeit with broad autonomy, while Armenia says the area must never return to Baku's control.

To make the atmosphere for Friday's talks as rewarding as possible, the Kremlin has moved its annual presidential horserace from Moscow to Kazan. If all goes well, the three leaders will join Tatarstan President Rustam Minnikhanov at the Kazan hippodrome on Friday night to watch a total of nine races, according to the hippodrome's [web site](#).

President Aliyev thanked the European Union for its support of the OSCE Minsk Group during a visit to Brussels on Thursday.

"We want a solution to the conflict to be found as soon as possible that will allow hundreds of thousands of Azeris to return home after our lands are liberated from occupation," he said at a news conference alongside EU President Herman van Rompuy, Azerbaijan's APA news agency reported.

President Sargsyan also was shoring up EU support this week, telling the Council of Europe on Wednesday: "I am going to Kazan in high spirits and in anticipation of a constructive dialogue," Armenian news reports said.

Analysts said the reality is that no side wants to let the situation get out of hand.

"Nobody is interested in a war, not Moscow, not the West, not Armenia nor Azerbaijan," said Alexander Krylov, a Caucasus expert at the Institute of the World Economy and International Relations.

Krylov said that while Azerbaijan has built up its military forces, it faces an incalculable risk in deploying them because Russia would almost certainly support Armenia. Moscow and Yerevan are allied in the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a post-Soviet security alliance, and Russia has a large military base in the Armenian town of Gyumri.

Azerbaijan also could not expect any foreign support, not even from Turkey, which has been the country's closest ally in the past and sided with Baku during the Nagorno-Karabakh hostilities in 1993.

Turkey wants stability in the region, and this is also Russia's interest, Krylov said, pointing out that Moscow faces enough trouble in its restive North Caucasus.

The United States and Europe also have vested economic interests in the energy-rich region. Washington, Brussels and Ankara have recently stepped up support for the Nabucco pipeline, which is supposed to pump Caspian gas, mainly from Azerbaijan, to Europe by 2017 by bypassing Russia.

The biggest hindrance for progress might be that Baku and Yerevan both expect Russia to exert pressure on the other side, Krylov said.

But paradoxically, a breakthrough at Friday's talks might just as well pose new dangers because any rapprochement is likely to be highly unpopular in both countries.

"Peace talks can be destabilizing because they are being opposed all across the political spectrum," Cornell said.

Under these circumstances, some are pinning their hopes on a completely new force in this long-standing conflict — music.

Despite the angry rhetoric emitting from Baku, anyone harboring any plans for war has been forced to postpone them after Azerbaijan won the Eurovision Song Contest in May, said Zurab Kananchev, an Azerbaijan expert at the Academy of Sciences' Oriental Institute. Baku will now host the pan-European television fest next year, and this could well influence the talks in Kazan, he said.

"The victory is a huge collateral for peace," Kananchev said. "500 million TV viewers and tens of thousands of visiting fans — basically all of Europe — will be coming to Baku."

Some Armenians are not so convinced.

"Maybe this event has some significance for the domestic situation in Azerbaijan, but it would be naive to think that it will make them stop the blackmail over Karabakh," Manvel Sargsyan, research director of the Armenian Center for National and International Studies in Yerevan, said in e-mailed comments.

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