

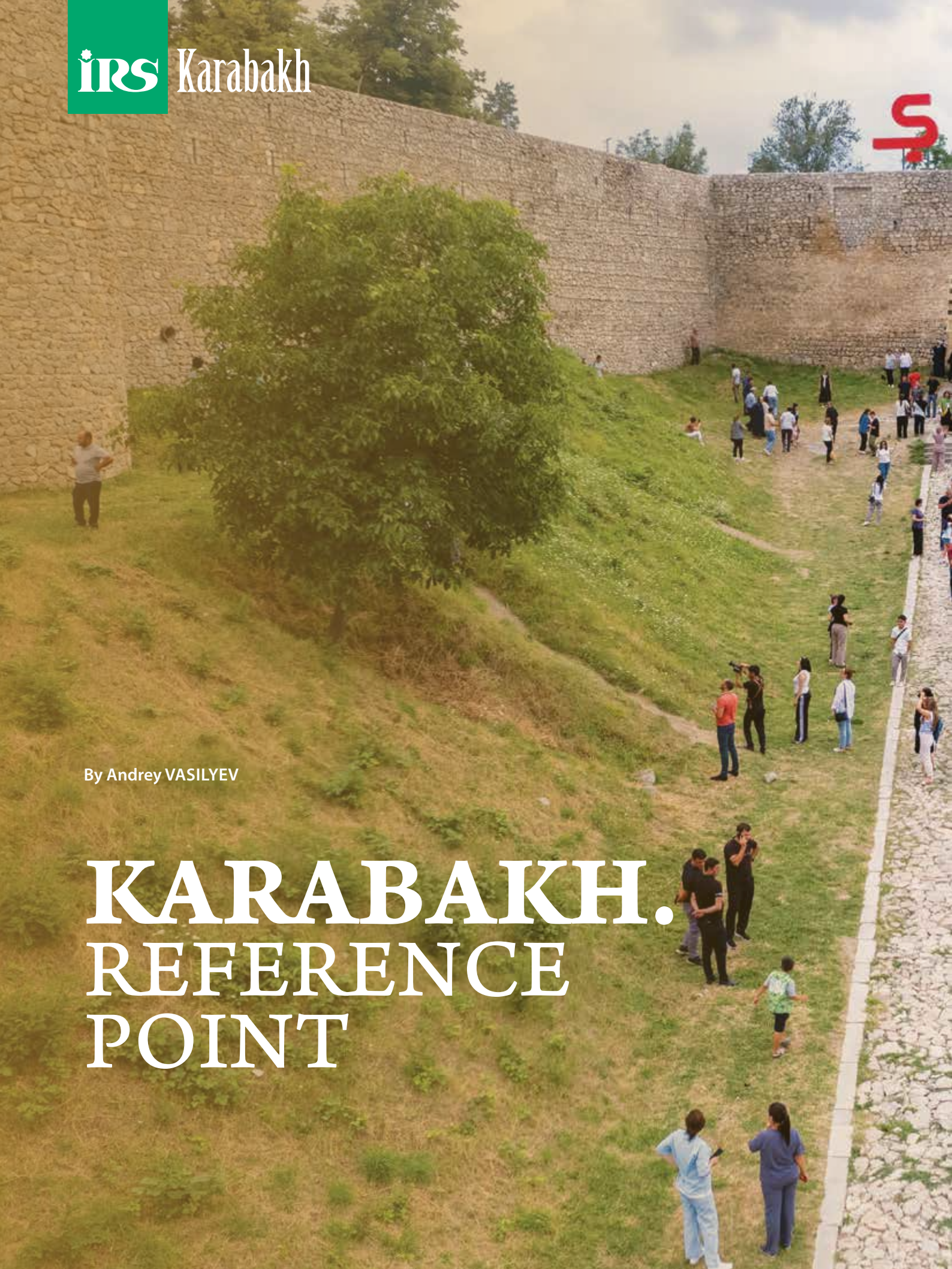


Karabakh



By Andrey VASILYEV

KARABAKH. REFERENCE POINT



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Only four years have passed since the Azerbaijani army liberated the Armenian-occupied Karabakh and East Zangezur, but the worn-down roads have already been replaced with multi-lane modern highways, hydroelectric power plants are already in operation, bringing light and heat to homes, there are two international airports, with a third expected to open soon. In Aghdam, called by journalists the Hiroshima of the 21st century, blocks of new houses rise one after another. Fuzuli, Kalbajar, Lachin, Jabrayil, Zangilan and Gubadli are being rebuilt from scratch. The amazing looking plants and factories produce the first goods, schools, hospitals and hotels are opening, trees are planted in squares and parks.

But no matter how large-scale the new buildings might be, they are still unable to hide the “signs of trouble” lurking at every step. What now looks like gullies and ravines washed out by spring rains are actually trenches and anti-tank ditches that once marked the border between life and death. Gentle hills overgrown with lush grass are Armenian pillboxes silenced forever. The deep pits with weeds grown to a man’s height at their bottom are former tank caponiers. In general, the red signposts saying “MINED” stick out everywhere: it is better not to go off the track checked by sappers.

Besides, the territory returned to Azerbaijan in September last year wasn’t particularly serene. The remnants of the puppet state became a springboard for endless armed provocations. In violation of the Statement signed on November 10, 2020, Armenian saboteurs mined roads, artillerymen fired on the territory of Azerbaijan and separatist weapons arsenals were actively replenished in the hope of a quick revenge. Here is what was found in them: 77,000 automatic rifles, carbines, hand machine guns and pistols; 235 grenade launchers; 112 cannons and howitzers; 58 anti-tank installations; 124 air defense installations; 92 armored vehicles; 142 army trucks; 23 trailers; nine auxiliary vehicles; 1,700 rockets; 5,177 howitzer and cannon shells; 31,771 anti-aircraft artillery shells, 12,806 mortar shells; 5,880 grenades; 3,068 hand grenades; 2,009,970 rounds of ammunition; and 5,778 pieces of other ammunition. Even according to rough estimates, the value of the weapons and ammunition confiscated during the anti-terror operation amounted to more than \$1 billion.

The Armenian army was never going to leave the part of Karabakh that remained under its control, while Yerevan kept inventing new reasons to maintain the status quo with regard to the separatist enclave.

On September 9, 2023, the parliament of the unrecognized republic elected a new so-called president,



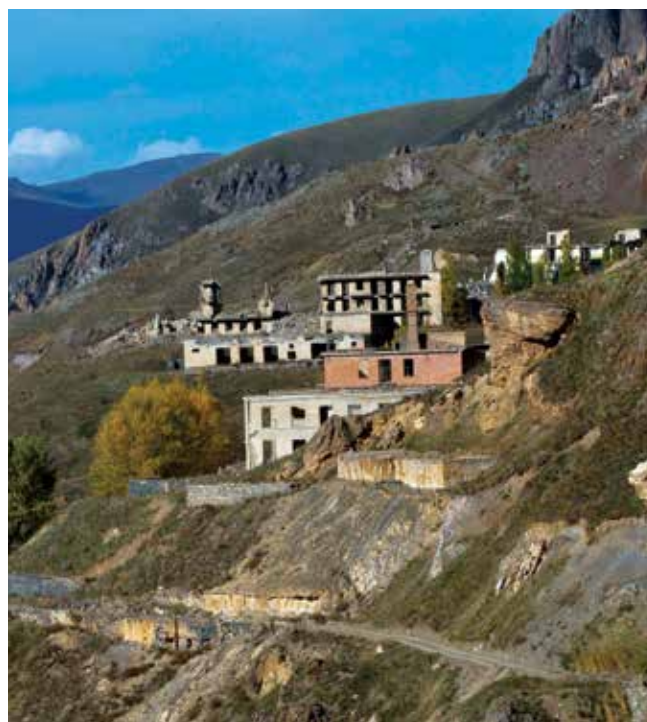
which Baku treated as a retreat from the Prague Accords of 2022 on the recognition of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. And then followed a new series of Armenian acts of terror in Karabakh. Civilians returning to their homes were killed yet again... And President Ilham Aliyev ordered the launch of an anti-terror operation.

Well-armed but completely demoralized, the army of the puppet entity did not put up any serious resistance. The regular units of the Armenian Armed Forces also laid down their arms. The cancerous tumor, which had been poisoning everything around them with chauvinistic contagion for decades, was over with in a matter of hours. The full stop was put in the liberation of Karabakh and East Zangezur from Armenian occupation. Now it was necessary to rebuild what the occupiers had destroyed.

Khankendi was once a prosperous place. However, no traces of its former comfort remained after the years of occupation. The town abandoned by the Armenians resembled a dormitory, where people cared only about the appearance of its front entrance. Examples of this attitude could be seen at every step. A broken window was boarded up with plywood. No-one thought of fixing a door that had been torn off its hinges, it was just set aside. A burst water pipe was wrapped in wire rags. They seemed to care only about living through the day

and what happened next was not of any concern. The town behind the central square resembled slums for the homeless.

These squalor houses were mostly inhabited by Lebanese and Syrian Armenians who had fled to Karabakh,





a foreign country, from wars and economic ruin in their own countries. Lured by the promises of Yerevan emissaries about generous material support, low taxes, employment, free apartments, houses and plots of land, they started moving to the new “Armenian paradise” with their families starting from the 1990s. According

to the most modest estimates, there were over 20,000 “recruits”. However, it wasn’t before long when the “newcomers” discovered that they had fallen out of the frying pan into the fire. No preferential treatment was awaiting them and the most realistic prospect was a transfer into cannon fodder for yet another armed provocation against Azerbaijan.



But the militarization of the region was now over. Life was being put onto new rails. The territory cleansed from the remnants of occupying gangs was learning to live according to peacetime laws. The pace of economic and social changes, which had long become habitual for other regions of Azerbaijan, was gaining momentum. The to-do list was fairly long. It included both everyday concerns and plans for a more distant future. The priorities included the establishment of water and electricity supply, the cleaning of the city from garbage and municipal waste, the operation of

medical institutions, the provision of medicines, food, the repair and restoration of the housing fund - in other words, the day-to-day issues of the city's existence the Armenian leaders, too concerned with their personal income, were not interested in addressing.

The occupiers had so thoroughly "cleansed" Karabakh from all signs of civilized life that everything here had to be started from scratch. It should be acknowledged that a lot was accomplished in four years, but the areas liberated in September 2024 had to be literally rebuilt. This, however, did not deter Azerbaijanis. They worked hard, persistently, with great dedication, day after day, month after month, exceeding all norms and plans. Every hundred meters of a new highway, every kilometer of an electric main were a feat committed on a daily basis for the sake of the Motherland and for the future of their country.

The transformations laid out by President Ilham Aliyev in Karabakh and East Zangezur were colossal in volume, required huge expenses, were fraught with a lot of risks and, according to some foreign experts, could last for decades, especially since the head of state proposed a radical plan to rebuild the region, rightly believing that, taking into account the natural and economic opportunities of the region, it would be more reasonable to build anew rather than trying to repair the irreparable thanks to the the occupiers' efforts.

The first area to start, of course, was with the transportation infrastructure, which was in a deplorable sight at the end of 2020. The President's plan included trunk highways, dozens of kilometers of tunnels under mountain ranges, reliable bridges, three international airports, new railway lines, terminals and bus stations. The region returned to Azerbaijan had to be connected with the rest of the country.



It is indicative that the Victory Road was the first-born of the new road network. Azerbaijani engineering troops laid it through the mountain steps in a matter of days in order to be in time to provide assistance to the special forces that stormed Shusha. In the course of its improvement, seven tunnels were broken through. This highway was soon followed by other roads. The Barda-Aghdam, Fuzuli-Hadrut, Talish-Tapgaragoyunlu-Gashalti, Gubadli-Eyvazli, Ahmadbayli - Fuzuli - Shusha, Khudaferin-Gubadli-Lachin, Shukurbayli - Jabrayil-Hadrut, Gubadli-Mahmadlu - Yaziduzu - Armenian border roads are already in operation.







Railways play an important part in the transportation network. By the end of 2022, a 110-kilometer Gora-diz-Aghband railway line had been completely cleared of mines. Nine stations are envisaged on it. A year ago, the Barda-Aghdam railway (47.1 kilometers) started operating with four stations allocated to it - Barda, Kocharli, Tazakand and Aghdam. The feasibility study for the railway branch to Khankendi is also being prepared.

In 2021, Fuzuli International Airport was built in eight months (world record). It is capable of receiving aircraft of any type. On October 20, 2022, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev and President of the Republic of Türkiye Recep Tayyip Erdogan inaugurated Zangilan International Airport, while Lachin International Airport will be put into operation in 2025.

More recently, on February 14, 2021, the head of state opened the first hydroelectric power plant on the territory liberated from Armenian occupation - on the Hakari River. It has a capacity of 8 megawatts. A whole network of hydroelectric power plants with a capacity of 270 MW has already been put into operation in Karabakh and East Zangezur now. By September 2024, they generated 492 million kilowatt-hours of zero-emission electricity. The region was flexing its energy muscles, as each new power plant, transmission line and substation expanded its industrial potential. The construction of cities and villages was going faster, agro-parks were being established, enterprises and technology parks were emerging.

Housing construction gained particular momentum. Aghdam, Fuzuli, Jabrayil, Kalbajar, Lachin, Gubadli, Sugovushan, Khankendi were built up. Economic specialization required no less attention. According to President Ilham Aliyev's plan, Aghdam will concentrate on the production of construction materials, fruit and vegetable preserves, meat and dairy products, wines, fodder, fertilizer. In the short term, Jabrayil will become a logistics and trade center, Shusha will become a center of culture and tourism, Kalbajar will become a mining and tourism center, and Fuzuli will specialize in processing agricultural products from surrounding farms. Lachin and Kalbajar will be engaged in green energy production, logistics and tourism, while Gubadli will specialize in the production of industrial goods and agricultural processing. In Khankendi, Karabakh University will admit its first students this year.

Shusha, the cultural capital of Azerbaijan, is being transformed. The city is being built up according to a special plan. Its old part, mostly dating back to the







18-19th centuries, has been left untouched. Only restorers are working here. Visitors to Shusha can see the house-museum of great singer Bulbul and the Mehm-andarovs' estate. The blocks of standard housing built in the latter half of the 20th century are to be knocked down. Modern houses, residential complexes, office and administrative buildings will be built in their place.

On May 10, 2023, the President of Azerbaijan opened a five-star hotel and congress center complex with 154 hotel rooms and a conference hall in Shusha. The Art Gallery and Creative Center and the Shusha branch of the National Carpet Museum have become operational. Restoration of the ancient mosques of Yukhari Govhar Agha and Saatli has been completed. In the fall of 2023, Yasaman hotel received its first guests.

Of course, cities are first on the list of "growth points" due to their functions. They are assigned the role of economic bridgeheads, from which the agricultural development of lands in the region is already unfolding. As planned by the President of Azerbaijan, only "green" and "smart" technologies are to be used.



The construction of Aghali-II settlement in Zangilan district on the site of a village destroyed by the Armenians was a pilot project. This work started in the spring of 2021. By the fall, most of the 200 planned one- and two-story cottages were already in place along the streets leading away from the central estate.

The construction of villages has begun in other parts of Karabakh as well. New houses, schools, kindergartens, shops and clubs are under construction. At a meeting with residents of Talish village of Tartar district on March 18, 2023, President Ilham Aliyev said, "Today, we are building and creating a new life. We are building and creating here, in Talish village, in Sugovushan settlement, in Hadrut, Shusha and all other liberated lands. Armenia had ruined these lands, plundered them. For 30 years, it had been destroying everything stone by stone, selling it in the markets both in Armenia and in its neighboring country. But we are building and creating".

The list of what has already been built and is under construction in Karabakh and East Zangezur now is fairly long. But the territory is enormous, and these islands of life on it are tens of kilometers apart. But they will





soon merge, be connected with each other by wheat fields, orchards, farms, irrigation canals, good roads and railway lines. Work is going on everywhere. The rubble is being cleared away and construction is in full swing.

By the end of 2024, housing will be ready for more than 20,000 Azerbaijanis finally returning home.

There are many changes, and only the blind will not notice them. Their vector is obvious and directly opposite to what the preparations in the separatists' camp were aimed at for three years before until September 2023. They stockpiled weapons, stored ammunition, equipped saboteurs and planned to destroy and plunder again.

Speaking at the Forum "Karabakh: Returning Home after 30 Years. Achievements and Difficulties" on October 6, 2023, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev said, "We should have a guarantee that there will be no more war between the two countries, that Armenia fully accepts the situation and that they are sincere about the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. They should forget about the former 'Nagorno-Karabakh Republic' and approach the issues of border delimitation constructively. This is what peace is about."

The road to peace is never easy. More often than not, in order to pass it, one has to make considerable sacrifices. They should not be forgotten. The people of Azerbaijan paid dearly for the right to live and work peacefully on their land. And even if the land liberated from occupation will change so that no traces of the misfortunes that befell it can be found in just a few years, the





pain of losses and suffering will live in people's memory for a long time. But it is much more important that the people of Armenia, who brought so much grief to their neighbors, remember it. Sooner or later, the blindness

will go away. The laws of development are inexorable. They can't be changed by any wild propaganda or nationalistic theories. Enlightenment will come anyway. And it will be the best guarantee of lasting peace. 🍀









