The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Wary Armenians and Azerbaijanis Watch War From Moscow

By Marina Lapenkova-Maximova for AFP

November 04, 2020

The long-simmering conflict ignited again at the end of September. **Natalia Kolesnikova / AFP**

At a bustling produce market in southwest Moscow, Azerbaijani salesman Avas' fruit and vegetables kiosk is a few steps away from Armine's where she sells cheese from Armenia.

When Avas was 26 years old, conflict broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region and he was forced to leave his home.

The early 1990s war between the two ex-Soviet rivals killed around 30,000 people, displaced hundreds of thousands and left a legacy of hate and mistrust.

Since the long-simmering conflict ignited again at the end of September, both Armenian and Azeri sellers at the market in Moscow have been anxiously scrolling through news on their phones, pouring over images of devastation and homes destroyed by shelling.

Yet for Avas, whose stall stands next to Armenians who come from the region he fled, the

conflict at home has not inflamed tensions in Moscow.

"We are all like family here. Like during the Soviet Union, we eat together, chat and argue," says Avas, 50, wrinkles lining his face as he smiles.

Armine says the market vendors often exchange videos from the war, wondering together when it will end.

But lowering her voice, the 37-year-old saleswoman admits she sometimes wonders whether Azerbaijani colleagues are smiling at a video that made her cry.

Fighting over Karabakh between separatists and Azerbaijan's army has persisted for weeks despite repeated attempts by Russia, France and the United States to bring about a ceasefire.

Both Armine and Avas say they have relatives fighting in Karabakh.

Related article: Azerbaijan Says No Reason for Russia to Intervene Over Karabakh

'The community is in turmoil'

Karabakh's self-declared autonomy has not been recognized by governments including Armenia's and it remains part of Azerbaijan under international law.

"For the moment, all is calm. All day, every day our Armenians and Azerbaijanis watch the videos from their war, then they go for a smoke together," says Irina Kaputerko, a Russian saleswoman at the market.

Both Armenia and Azerbaijan have large diasporas in Russia, and when hostilities erupted over Karabakh in late September, the two communities of around two million each urged calm.

The call was not unwarranted.

In July, clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan spilled over into Moscow and Russia's second city Saint Petersburg, with dozens of people injured in street fights that left cars and restaurants damaged.

"We are doing everything to prevent these events from repeating themselves," Shamil Taguyev, head of the Azerbaijani diaspora in Moscow told AFP.

The Armenians are also "determined to prevent provocations," says Lusik Gukasyan, vice-president of the Union of Armenians in Russia, whose 2.5 million members nearly equal the entire population of Armenia.

"The community is in turmoil, but it is containing itself," Gukasyan says.

This determination to keep the peace has not stopped both sides from supporting their forces.

Both countries' embassies in Moscow are laden with flowers, portraits of victims and messages of support.

The diaspora groups have sent humanitarian aid, and volunteers are lining up on both sides to join the fight.

"Many worshipers have already asked for my blessing to go to war," says Gevork Vardanyan, an Armenian Christian priest in Moscow.

There are also a "large number of requests from Azerbaijanis ready to go and fight," Taguyev says, noting that for now Baku is turning down such offers.

Related article: ‘I Want to Join the Final Battle.’ Armenians in Russia Flock to Karabakh

'We are like family'

Djalil Bagirov, who has lived in Moscow for 25 years, says he is "ready to go and fight" the moment Azerbaijan puts out the call.

In his garage in the south-east of Moscow, conversations with his Azerbaijan colleagues are dominated by the war.

"But we change the subject when our Armenian mechanics come to work next door" to avoid aggravating tensions, he says.

The clashes over Karabakh, which have already claimed more than 1,300 lives, have also impacted daily life for the communities in Moscow.

"Weddings are postponed or go ahead in small groups," says Shamil Gurbanov, a member of the Azerbaijani community in the Moscow who runs several restaurants.

He was born in Karabakh in 1966 and has lived in Moscow for 33 years but his "soul is still in my birthplace," he told AFP.

Gurbanov says he believes in living together peacefully, giving as an example the number of mixed marriages between the communities.

"We have always lived and worked together here. Historically, we have the same mentality, the same Soviet past, the same cuisine," he says.

Gurbanov's 24-year-old daughter, Seva, says above all she wants the fighting to stop.

She emphasized that she doesn't care "who is right and who is wrong."

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/11/04/wary-armenians-and-azerbaijanis-watch-war-from-moscow-a71952