

# Rise of Militaristic Sentiment and Patriotic Discourses in Azerbaijan: An Analytic Review

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A sharp increase in tensions and massive military clashes in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone in April 2016 drew international attention to this “frozen” conflict, the negotiations for which are co-led by the West and Russia. This conflict and its escalations not only spur up tension and violence, but are also accompanied by significant ideological and discursive changes within the countries. They contribute to the growth of militaristic and revanchist sentiments within the societies. The goal of this review is to discuss the recent processes and internal discursive trends that have emerged in Azerbaijan as a result of these escalations and to trace the rise of militarist and mobilizing discourses.

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# Azerbaijan: The Situation After the 'April War'

## The 'April War' and the Economic Situation

The first round of devaluation of the national currency at the start of 2015 dealt a heavy economic blow to ordinary citizens in Azerbaijan. Nonetheless, the authorities did not renounce the plan of the first "European Games", spending a significant amount of money on the opening and closing ceremonies. The second round of devaluation in December 2015 caused social unrest in several cities of Azerbaijan where the economic situation is worse than in the capital. Spontaneous rallies took place in Agsu, Siazan, Lankaran, Fizuli, Agjabadi, and Quba (Abbasov 2016). To put down the unrest in some places, the internal troops and special forces were deployed using tear gas, rubber bullets, and pressure hoses (Khalilova 2016). The social media was swarmed with videos in which outraged citizens demanded that the brutality be stopped, end be put to corruption, and inflation be curbed (Protests Against Price Increase in Azerbaijan 2016). These challenges tested the durability of the authorities that felt an urgent necessity to re-legitimize their regime and restore their credibility.

The "April War" of 2016 proved very "useful" to this end. The patriotic rhetoric regained momentum with slogans such as "we will not give up a single inch of land", "we have liberated tens of thousands of hectares of land; we will also liberate the rest of the territories", "we have demonstrated courage and heroism in the battle of Lele Tepe, where we now hoist the same flag that was raised during the triumphal European games", and "the construction and restoration of the settlements on the front line is a sign that the Great Return to Karabakh has started" (Baxşəliyev and Cəfərli 2017). These slogans were to be repeated until all citizens internalized them.

This rhetoric gave an impetus to the already militarized official discourse and its "all or nothing" ideology. The militaristic propaganda targeted everyone, including elementary school students. Students dressed in military uniforms marched publicly repeating the popular slogan, "Our homeland is indivisible; our martyrs are immortal".

## **The Discourse of Unity ‘for the Sake of Victory’**

During the “April War”, government and most media reports denied major losses and called for unity for the sake of the Homeland. The liberation of the occupied territories was to be the main issue for each citizen. Both top government officials and numerous activists, voluntarily catering to the conflict, appealed to the public with these calls.

One such activist, publicist and poet Akhsin Yenisey, believes that the term “conflict” is damaging for national identity (Yenisey 2016). In his opinion, each nation, including Azerbaijanis, should have the right to go to war in order to develop its culture and take its place in history. And in April, according to Yenisey, people finally “remembered” this right. Referring to the role of intelligentsia, particularly writers, he stated that “they would be making a greater contribution to the common victory if they did not behave as women writing statements about humanity for getting ‘likes’” (Milli.az 2016).

In a similar spirit, even the opposition activists of both nationalistic and liberal camps marginalized all divergent voices, labeling them as national traitors. Justifying their support of the government with “objective reality” (“it is not the time right now”), they called for unity for the sake of a shared victory. Yet, the authorities did not embrace the opposition’s support, unwilling to share the halo of the guardian of national interests. Speeches about the “valiant victories” of the army in April 2016 were paralleled with accusations of the “cowardly and treacherous” policies of the early 1990s. The then authorities and current oppositionists were deemed responsible for the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh and the adjacent regions (Aliyev, Ilham Aliyev's Speech at a Meeting with a Group of Servicemen in Connection with the Anniversary of the April Victories of the Azerbaijani Army 2017).

## **The Effect from Suspending Military Operations**

Society reacted to the news of the advancement of Azerbaijani troops with great enthusiasm. The webpage of the Ministry of Defense and its Facebook page became popular resources and were “liked” by 100,000 people in a short period of time. After circulating the narrative of success in the April battles so widely, the news on the suspension of the military operations came on April 5, chilling the patriotic fervor. Discussions about the real losses and “the dubious games of the authorities” became popular.

In turn, the political regime invested all available resources to create a consolidating discourse. Before April 2016, the central events in conflict commemoration were January 1990 and the Khojaly massacre of 1992. After April, the discourse of pride and triumph came to replace the discourse of tragic losses. Statements about high public solidarity, mass readiness for sacrifice, the heroic army, and the liberation of some parts of the occupied territories fed these discourses.

Numerous activists eagerly supported the authorities. Scientific and cultural institutions, the mass media, and bloggers joined the patriotic race. Their active participation in the construction of the new official discourse earned them the right to speak on behalf of the entire nation. This voluntary support was so widespread that it left the Organization for Karabakh Liberation (*Qarabağ Azadlıq Təşkilatı*), famous for its radical stands, in the shadow during and after the April events.

## **Popularizing the Mobilization Discourse Through the Education System**

The education system, working in close tandem with state administrative institutions and particularly local executive authorities, played an important role in the popularization of the official discourse. Events on military-patriotic education for primary school students increased in scale during the first two weeks of April 2016.

Mourning ceremonies organized in Baku accompanied the daunting funerals of soldiers and officers killed during the “April War”. Escorts with flags playing military songs convoyed the funeral processions of the deceased. School students and teachers greeted them along the funeral procession route.

Another way of mobilizing society was through mandatory “voluntary donations” in all state institutions for the fund in support of the Azerbaijani armed forces.

Borrowing terminology from other conflict contexts became an ideological novelty of the mobilization. Some articles referred to the “April War” as a “counterterrorism operation”. The usage of such terminology intended to portray the events as the purely internal affairs of Azerbaijan and to draw parallels with the Russian permanent “counterterrorist operation” and the Ukrainian “ATO” (antiterrorist operation).

## Deepening the Militaristic Discourse

The strengthening of the nationalistic and militaristic discourses in 2016 was directly proportional to the worsening of the socio-economic situation caused by the continuous devaluation of the Azerbaijani Manat. Protesting voices were drowned out both by repressions and public reprehension. Criminal cases were opened against the employees of Meydan TV's website for reports on the number of casualties during the April military actions that exceeded the official data by nearly three times. In March 2017, access to this and four other websites was blocked.

Yet another round of defamation of government opponents began. Critically minded people were framed as agents of anti-Azerbaijani external forces who were trying to destroy the positive image of Azerbaijan and its internal stability. In September 2016, President Ilham Aliyev delivered a speech in which he stated that Azerbaijan was among the strongest countries in the world and in contrast with most other countries, it was moving forward largely thanks to its internal resources. According to the president, "patriotism", "national values", and the "national spirit" played a special role in this rapid development. "However, there are anti-Azerbaijani forces that want to interfere in the internal affairs of the country and break the will of the Azerbaijani people". With a reference to the countries of the Middle East in widespread devastation and crisis, the president stated that the young people and teachers should know "this reality" caused by external forces, that external pressures on Azerbaijan were also growing due to the independent policy that the president was pursuing, and that he would continue this policy no matter what (Azertag.az 2016). At subsequent meetings, many such statements and declarations followed, disseminated through the mass media and social media. The aim has been to embed these ideas into routine discourses with every citizen internalizing them as their own thoughts.

## Creating New Images of Heroes

The public commemoration held for Chingiz Gurbanov, who died on the line of contact in Nagorno-Karabakh, became an instrument of the new official discourse. This case built on the tradition of personification of courage, heroism, and self-sacrifice in the name of the highest goal. Gurbanov died in December 2016, but his body was handed over to the Azerbaijani authorities only in February 2017. The very handover was framed as yet another victory over the

enemy. Aliyev personally received the parents and brother of the deceased and handed them the golden star of a national hero (Aliyev, Ilham Aliyev's Speech at a Meeting with Family Members of the National Hero Chingiz Gurbanov 2017). Aliyev also signed an order providing the financially strapped family of the martyr with a three-room apartment in Baku and land for the construction of a private house in their native Qusar district (Sputnik.az 2017). During the meeting with the family of the deceased, Aliyev stated, "We are proud of Chingiz. All of Azerbaijan is proud of Chingiz. This once again demonstrates that a citizen of Azerbaijan, Azerbaijani youth, and Azerbaijani soldiers will never resign themselves to the current situation". In this phrase, one can trace the main thesis summarizing the outcome of the "April War" –the trinity of "state-army-people". In turn, the state also appears in the form of a triad – "state-government-president".

By comparing the December clashes that claimed Gurbanov's life with the April fighting, Aliyev stated the thesis on the crushing victory of Azerbaijani troops: "The Azerbaijani army dealt them a blow they still can't recover from. The April fighting shook not only the Armenian army but also the Armenian state. [...] Panic and anxiety has taken over Armenian society to this day". The President concluded his speech by expressing confidence that Chingiz would continue to live in the hearts of all Azerbaijanis, and that his name will be immortalized (Aliyev, Ilham Aliyev's Speech at a Meeting with Family Members of the National Hero Chingiz Gurbanov 2017).

## **Further Strengthening Personal Power**

The authorities continued to strengthen their positions through the referendum of September 2016, which expanded the powers of the president. The presidential term increased to seven years. The head of the state gained the right to dissolve parliament and call for extraordinary presidential elections. The constitutional changes abolished the minimum age requirement of 35 for presidential candidates and introduced the posts of vice-presidents and first vice-president, which was assumed by Aliyev's wife, Mehriban Aliyeva. She would become the head of state in case of his early resignation.

On April 3, 2017, at a meeting with a group of officers and soldiers wounded during the April fighting, Mehriban Aliyeva referred to the trinity of "nation-army-state". She expressed her admiration for the mothers of the deceased heroes, who even in that grave moment found strength to be proud that their sons became martyrs for the Homeland (First Vice-President Mehriban Aliyeva



Meets with the Soldiers and Officers of the Azerbaijani Army Wounded During the April Fights 2017). In turn, public statements made by the relatives of the deceased have become part of state events on military-patriotic education, especially with the participation of the youth, including schoolchildren.

However, in general, the tone of the first vice-president's speech was much softer than the sharp and expressive speeches of the president. Aliyev's speech delivered during his visit to the strategic height of Lele Tepe, which was captured during the April fighting, was labeled the "Lele Tepe manifesto" by the mass media. In an attempt to show strength, the president said, "The April battles should go into military textbooks. [...] The Azerbaijani army is invincible. The Azerbaijani army can accomplish any task. There is not a single military target on the occupied territories and in Nagorno-Karabakh today that we would not be able to destroy. At present, the Azerbaijani army is among the strongest armies. We know this; the people of Azerbaijan and the whole world know this. [...] In January 1994, a successful operation was carried out in the district of Fizuli, which resulted in the liberation of 22 villages from the occupiers. [...] The Lele Tepe operation is a symbol of our heroism. Lele Tepe has gone down in history. If the Armenian armed forces do not draw the right conclusions from the April battles, there will be many more successful operations similar to Lele Tepe in the future" (Aliyev, Ilham Aliyev's Speech During a Scrutiny Visit of Operational Conditions at the Command Post Located on the Front Line 2016).

Experts called this speech a message not only to Armenia, but also to the OSCE Minsk Group with its "unconstructive" stance on Nagorno-Karabakh. The April fighting was described as the last warning after which Azerbaijan has the right to and must reclaim the occupied territories by force. These intentions were supposed to be manifested in the military exercises with the participation of 60,000 people, taking place at the time of the statements (Cebhe.info 2016).

## **Jojug Marjanli—A New Site of Memory**

On January 24, 2017, President Aliyev signed two milestone orders. In accordance with the order "on the 25th anniversary of the Khojaly genocide", commemorative events were more large-scale than in previous years (Aliyev, The Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan in Regard to the 25th Anniversary of the Khojaly Genocide 2017). In Baku 40,000 people marched in memory of the Khojaly tragedy victims (A National March Takes Place in Baku for the 25th Anniversary of the Khojaly Genocide 2017). However, another

order “On measures to restore the Jabrayil District’s Jojug Marjanli village, liberated from the Armenian occupation” played a more significant role on the ideological forefront (Aliyev, *The Order of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Measures to Restore the Village of Jojug Marjanli of Jabrail District, Liberated from the Occupation* 2017). The preamble of the order notes that the successful military operation made it possible for people to live in the village safely, and the authorities were creating conditions for their return to their historical homeland (since 1994, due to a constant threat of shelling, only one family had been living in the village). To this end, the president ordered that funds be allocated for the construction of 50 houses and relevant infrastructure including medical and educational facilities. On February 10, the president signed an additional order on the construction of a highway stretching nine kilometers leading to the village (Aliyev, *The Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Additional Measures for the Highway Construction* 2017). These orders quickly become topics of wide discussions.

“This is the beginning of great events. The president once again demonstrated a strong will to reclaim our occupied lands” said Ali Akhmedov, the Deputy Prime Minister and executive secretary of the ruling New Azerbaijan Party (*Yeni Azərbaycan Partiyası, YAP*) (*The Order of the President of Azerbaijan on the Restoration of the Village of Jojug Marjanli is a Historic Decision* 2017). According to military expert Uzeir Jafarov, this order shed light on the “Armenian lies that they will reclaim the lost lands”, and now they accepted that construction and restoration could be done in Shusha and Khankendi as well (Apa.az 2017). The president himself commenting on this order once again noted that Nagorno-Karabakh would never gain independence, and Azerbaijan would never allow a second Armenian state to be created on its territory (Apa.az 2017).

Political scientist Gabil Huseynli thinks that the order created panic in Armenia and that many Armenians believe that if Azerbaijan was able to reclaim Jojug Marjanli, it would be able to reclaim Khankendi/Stepanakert and Shushi/Shusha. Furthermore, thanks to the president’s efforts, the village would become a model: “The return has just started and will continue until Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity is restored” (Apa.az 2017). The expert noted the historical importance of the order, stating “Probably, Jojug Marjanli will be mentioned in history books as the first sign of return to the native lands”. Even though the construction has just started, the restoration is labeled as the “Great

Return to Karabakh”, and the single family who lived in the village for the past 23 years is used as an example of the Azerbaijani nation’s courage and love for its land (Hüseynli 2017).

This order, as indicated in its preamble, is viewed in close conjunction with the April 2016 events and is aimed at strengthening the president’s positive image. The spin of the “April War” as a glorious victory adds yet another virtue to the president’s list—the laurels of a “victorious leader”, similar to his father. The April operation is presented just as much of a glorious page in Azerbaijani history as the operation to liberate Horadiz in 1994 (Jojug Marjanli: Azerbaijan Has Taken the First Step for a Great Return 2017). Deputy Prime Minister Ali Hasanov’s statement also stands out: “... Sooner or later Azerbaijan will reclaim its land, and very soon President Ilham Aliyev will turn Karabakh into a prosperous place” (Baxşəliyev 2017).

The presidential decree of January 2017 targeted external audiences as well. In February 2017, the heads of foreign diplomatic missions were taken on a trip to Jojug Marjanli to witness the vandalism committed by Armenians during the six months of occupation of the village in 1993-1994 and also to see Azerbaijan’s strong desire to reclaim the occupied territories. Rashad Bakhshaliyev, the author of the article “Jojug Marjanli is Now in the Center of World Attention” published in the newspaper *Azerbaijan*, the official organ of the Azerbaijani Parliament, believes that the January order is a laudable response to everyone who doubted the “Concept of the Great Return of Azerbaijan” (Baxşəliyev 2017). The presidential decree of January 2017 was the first official document of this “concept”.

## The New Consensus

After the “April War”, a new social consensus was reached. Each member of society must understand that the “main problem is Karabakh”, and multiple government agents contribute to this conviction. From now on, expressions of pride for the “heroism and self-sacrifice” of their sons by the relatives of the deceased and wishes that “the rest of the courageous sons of the nation reach the heights of glorious death for their homeland” will be mandatory elements of public rituals.

Isolated protests spur up only when power abuse and injustice by the authorities directly affects a segment of the population. These protests are purely local and are not supported by most citizens. Society as a whole

responds positively to this new official ideology. The Nagorno-Karabakh problem has shifted away public attention from poverty and corruption to the need for unity between the authorities and society.

The April events opened a new era. A new myth that is built on triumph rather than mourning has taken a stronghold in the official discourse. New memorials have been established—Lele Tepe, Jojug Marjanli, and others. New commemoration ceremonies are directed not at distant but rather recent events to which all citizens of the country were “eyewitnesses”. This new discourse, albeit imposed by the authorities, finds mass support also from the grassroots, especially among the national intelligentsia.

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# Acronyms and Abbreviations

OSCE – Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe



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