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Perceptions in Azerbaijan of the Impact of Revolutionary Changes in Armenia on the Nagorno-Karabakh Peace Process

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The paper will explore Azerbaijan's role in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace negotiations, looking at the approach to negotiations with the recently ousted Armenian government, and the interpretations and misinterpretations of the situation in post-revolutionary Armenia. The paper will explore and identify the changes in Azerbaijan's rhetoric, along with Baku's main expectations for the peace process, which will influence where the military option sits in Azerbaijan's policy. The paper, which will provide an outline of Baku's policy, will also set out recommendations to the sides in conflict. In order to gain a fair and objective assessment of the views of civil society, the author conducted a web-designed survey with thirty people who are working on Nagorno-Karabakh conflict-related issues.

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Introduction

Two years after the April war in 2016, both Azerbaijan and Armenia looked forward with expectations of consolidating power: the snap Presidential election in Azerbaijan and the election of the Prime Minister in Armenia, which also raised expectations that after the consolidation, the resumption of substantial bilateral talks would follow. The earlier signal of this expectation was the January 2018 meeting between the two foreign ministers, conducted in an atmosphere of goodwill. Both sides expressed willingness to plan the first OSCE-led fact-finding mission since 2010 and to support the work of the International Red Cross on detainees and missing persons. The most important part of the consolidation of power of the two countries' leadership is that the negotiations would not be affected by the shadow of elections, and that there were no expectations for a potentially disruptive change in government.

Escaping the shadow of the elections was seen as a good sign for the peace process by the Azerbaijani authorities and in expert circles, two years after the violent flare up that damaged the environment with significant implications for public discourse. In Azerbaijan, the post-April 2016 era created a new reality in terms of its impact on society and politics, and this continues to influence Baku's position in and expectations of negotiations: if there are no tangible results of official negotiations, the public will lose faith in diplomatic resolution and their support for a military solution would increase. This will mean that the next skirmishes will be far more devastating than the April 2016 ones.

The new period has its own problems. While Baku saw the continuation of Serzh Sargsyan's leadership as a good thing for dynamism in peace negotiations, there was little faith in the Armenian government due to the decades-long deadlock in negotiations. But Baku had a firm belief that the Armenian government would come to a genuine compromise with the help of a third-party intervention, especially Moscow's. Accordingly, Baku increased its interactions with Russia, pushing regional integration and bilateral talks to encourage Russian intervention. The negative aspect of the new leadership comes from the parliamentary system, which gives the new Prime Minister more room

for maneuver if he wants to block the peace process. Armenia's parliamentary system requires the consent of the coalition, which means any agreement can be spoiled regardless of external circumstances or events. The positive side of Serzh Sargsyan's premiership seemed that his Karabakh origins empowered him in de-facto Nagorno-Karabakh, and he had a strong influence on the military apparatus in Armenia, which was seen as an ideal combination for the implementation of peace. Some officials in Baku thought that he would encounter minimal resistance in Armenia, if a political deal were to be reached.

The Armenian protest movement and change in Armenia's government was unexpected for Azerbaijan, and there was no certainty around the implications for the peace negotiations, except that there would be a delay while the revolution played out. But the change, with a new young elite coming to power, sparked hope in many segments of the Azerbaijani public for genuine, result-oriented dialogue and negotiations.

The aim of this article is to assess the developments in post-revolutionary Armenia from the Azerbaijani perspective, looking at how the public and government perceive the developments. In order to improve the quality and objectivity of the research, the author created a web-designed survey for thirty members of expert and civil society groups, including government and pro-government experts and analysts. The responses have helped to shed light on the range of perceptions in play and how they understand the developments in Armenia and the impact on the peace process.

Azerbaijan and the peace process in the post-revolution period

Government and civil society perceptions of the Armenian Revolution

At the outset, the peaceful demonstrations in Armenia were understood by the Azerbaijani public as a small-scale reaction to Serzh Sargsyan's retention of power, and a side effect of the shift from a presidential to a parliamentary system. This assessment is based on views expressed by Azerbaijani experts and journalists. His growing unpopularity in

Armenia was not well understood in Azerbaijan and not seen as significant factor that could lead to the ouster of the government, in part because the notion of a public protest leading to peaceful political change is wholly unfamiliar in the Azerbaijani context. The Azerbaijani government and the expert community based their assessments on the protest leaders' background, deemed pro-Western due to their previous public/media assertions about Russia and their educational and professional backgrounds, thereby ignoring the core issue: the demand for Serzh Sargsyan's resignation. On this basis, the expert circles in Azerbaijan expected a kind of color revolution, in which Russia would interfere to protect its regional policy (Memmedov 2018a). Comparisons were made with the Georgian and Ukrainian revolutions of the early 2000s. It was also thought that the Sargsyan government would not leave easily.

In the online survey with Azerbaijani experts,²⁰ which included a set of multiple-choice questions, 50 percent of the expert and civil society community (subsequently referred to as the ECSC) expected that Russian pressure and intervention would cause the protest in Armenia to fail quickly. The second most popular prediction among respondents (46 percent) was that the Sargsyan government would resort to the use of force, enabling him to rapidly quell the demonstrations. Only 3 percent predicted that the protests would lead to a change of government.

²⁰ The survey was conducted online, with invitations sent to 30 members of the expert and civil society community who are writing and speaking about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the public domain. In addition, 10 experts/civil society members were invited to take part in the survey by snowball sampling via recommendations from the initial cohort. Of the total 40 people invited, 30 took part in the final survey. The survey consisted of 20 questions: 9 multiple choice, 4 open-ended questions, and 7 questions for selection among the options. The survey was conducted with Azerbaijani experts, both government and independent, between September 10-20, 2018.

What was your expectation when the events in Armenia led to the overthrow of Serzh Sargsyan’s government?	
The Sargsyan government will be able to easily demolish demonstrations by force	46%
Demonstrations will lead to a political crisis and necessitate extraordinary parliamentary elections.	1%
Demonstrations will result in revolution and the government will be overthrown	3%
Under Russia’s pressure, demonstrations will be stopped or fail	50%

Respondents were asked to identify the most surprising element of the Armenian Revolution; 50 percent said that it was Sargsyan’s rapid capitulation, which took place at the peak of the demonstrations on April 23. The second most surprising element was the fact that Russia did not intervene and did not show proper support for the Sargsyan government. The third most surprising factor was the large number of people who joined the demonstrations.

What was the most surprising factor in the demonstrations in Armenia? [multiple-choice question]	
Sargsyan easily leaving the prime minister’s post	50%
Russia’s passivity: it did not interfere in the events	30%
The growing numbers of demonstrators	6.7 %
Azerbaijan did not use military intervention using the “perfect timing”	3.3%
Other	10%

Government officials tried to refrain from speaking out publicly during the development of the protests, as their fate was unknown. But when the protests succeeded, some government officials applauded the demonstrators, characterizing the events as “protests [also] representing the softening attitudes toward Azerbaijan,” indicating that revolution will bring positive changes to Azerbaijani-Armenian relations (Kucera 2018). Before Sargsyan’s ouster the demonstrations were seen as a political crisis. Marginal voices in the media compared the situation to Azerbaijan’s political chaos in early 1993, and there were calls to begin a military intervention to liberate the Azerbaijani territories by force (Seyidaga 2018). Likewise, during the protests there were expectations and concerns in Armenia that Baku might take advantage of the chaos to stage a military intervention. The government’s reading of the situation was correct, understanding that any military intervention could be counterproductive and work to strengthen the hand of Serzh Sargsyan, and uniting the Armenian nation against a common enemy. Baku’s policy was to be transparent in terms of demonstrating its lack of interest in any escalation of tensions. The military leadership, during the course of events, specifically emphasized that “[our units] strictly adhere to the ceasefire regime and do not support escalation” (Sputnik 2018). At the same time, there was also speculation in Azerbaijani media about a potential provocation attempt from the Armenian side, if the Sargsyan government sought to distract the protesters (Memmedov 2018b).

When asked about the reason for non-intervention, the majority (70 percent) of survey respondents approved the Azerbaijani government policy. This was mainly because the ECSC saw that any military intervention would affect the revolutionary process in Armenia; Baku wanted the uprising to succeed. Moreover, this was an unexpected development for Baku, and it was not prepared. Among the respondents, 30 percent thought that Baku’s non-intervention policy was the right decision, because it could open the way for Moscow’s intervention, such as sending in its peacekeepers on the pretext of consolidating the ceasefire. The respondents opted that the Azerbaijani government would not risk military operations in Nagorno-Karabakh without Moscow’s consent or, at least, its neutrality. Another aspect of Moscow’s role is much more frequently referenced; experts cited the Russian authorities’ recommendations that Baku refrain from

intervening. The specific reference was to the Chief of the Foreign Intelligence Service of Russia, Sergei Naryshkin, who met with the Azerbaijani authorities on April 24, as reported by Turan news agency (Turan News Agency 2018). Following Sargsyan's ouster, the Azerbaijani government became much more outspoken about developments in Armenia and the implications for the peace process.

Post-Revolutionary Armenia: Early Expectations and Perceptions

Serzh Sargsyan's resignation and the short period before the appointment of protest leader Nikol Pashinyan as Prime Minister of the minority government led some Azerbaijani experts to believe that sooner or later this development would bring positive change or influence to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution process (Mehdiyev 2018). These expert analyses influenced public understanding and perceptions of the new Armenian PM as a better leader for Azerbaijan in terms of readiness to engage on conflict resolution, which was reflected in social media discussions. The government welcomed the change in Armenia with the hope that the new government would be different, characterizing Nagorno-Karabakh policy under Serzh Sargsyan as "a purposeful policy that no progress could be achieved in the conflict, ultimately aimed at extending his power by keeping the Armenian people under the guise of war" (Ferhadoglu and Bayramova 2018). The Azerbaijani government's positive reaction also stemmed from fact that many members of the political elite saw little prospect of ever reaching a peace deal with the Sargsyan government after decades of interaction, especially after the escalation of April 2016, given that Yerevan had stepped back many times from the negotiations table. According to one government official, Sargsyan was not reliable: "what he said in the negotiations and what he presented to the Armenian society were contradictory."²¹

After Nikol Pashinyan's election as Prime Minister, Baku recognized that in the short term, the new premier would unlikely adopt a radically different position on Nagorno-Karabakh from that of his predecessor.

²¹ Interview with a senior Azerbaijani official, Baku, September 2018.

But the new Prime Minister's possible overture on conflict resolution was unknown; Baku tried to make projections based on his previous statements and political career. In 2008, he was with former Armenian president Levon Ter-Petrossian in an alliance against Sargsyan in the presidential election. The reference to Ter-Petrossian was promising for people supportive of compromise on conflict resolution, because he was forced to resign in 1998 due to his perceived openness to compromise. Therefore, the Azerbaijani media saw Ter-Petrossian as the "mastermind" of Pashinyan's political career, and Azerbaijanis understood that he would be different from Serzh Sargsyan, bringing an understanding that Armenian economic development is only possible through the "solution of conflict and return of occupied territories to Baku (Azərbaycan24 2018). However, the only similarity between Ter-Petrossian and Pashinyan is that both are defenders of the representation of Karabakh Armenians in the negotiation process. Few in Azerbaijan know that Ter-Petrossian criticized the Karabakh Armenians inside the Armenian government in 1998 for "their error [to decide] to deprive Karabakh of the status of being a party to the conflict, to throw Karabakh out of the format of negotiations" (Ter-Petrossian 2018, 115). In April 2016, Pashinyan shared a similar view: "Armenia should clearly state that it will not hold negotiations relating to the Karabakh issue in such formats where the Karabakh side will not participate" (Armenpress 2016). Even this statement, before Pashinyan's election, was interpreted in Azerbaijan in the domestic political context of Armenia: it was aimed at criticizing Sargsyan and accusing him of using the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to consolidate his power rather than work towards a solution.

This misperception dominated public and government thinking for a short time, even after Pashinyan paid his first visit to Nagorno-Karabakh in early May. His statements on the negotiations format—that the de-facto Nagorno-Karabakh authorities should return to the negotiating table and in time its international recognition should be ensured—were quite provocative but accepted as on par for the course in a prime minister's first days. As explained by former Foreign Minister of Azerbaijan, Tofiq Zulfugarov, "he [Pashinyan] had to make populist statements to strengthen his political influence and popular support" (Arka News Agency 2018; BBC Azerbaijan 2018).

Survey respondents seemed to have low expectations for Pashinyan's role in advancing the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement.

When Nikol Pashinyan was appointed Prime Minister, did you think that his policy towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict would differ from Serzh Sargsyan's?	
Yes	30%
No	70%

One point repeated by many respondents was that the participation of a new generation of Armenians in political life, creating a new political elite, could be promising and categorically different from the former regime. The new government came to power with the promise of improving the difficult social-economic situation in Armenia, which requires better regional engagement and rational foreign policy, and they believed that this would affect policy on relations with neighboring countries like Azerbaijan.

Another point was that being more democratic and more Western requires the new leadership to adopt a different rhetoric, which can bring more trust and sincerity to the negotiations. The supporters of this thinking tend to reference the fact that many people in the government have been working for years on peacemaking and they are knowledgeable, which can have a positive effect on the negotiating process.

However, the continuation of the new leadership's hardline rhetoric on conflict, later understood as a policy plan rather than declarative statements, changed the Azerbaijani leadership's thinking, and the military element then became a strong option. But the thinking was showing military strength not to trigger a new war but simply to signal that failure in negotiations would bring the conflict sides to war. Therefore, a small military movement happened on the international border of Armenia and Azerbaijan in the direction of Nakhchivan, far from the Line of Contact, and therefore not something that would trigger

a war. Azerbaijan's operation was conducted without military engagement and resulted in gains of between 10 and 15 square kilometers, more than the gains of the April 2016 war (Sanamyan 2018). The small military operation was conducted in Nakhchivan, where international borders have not been demarcated since the 1990s. Therefore, there are some Armenian military posts in Azerbaijani territory. Most of the time the sides referred to it as a "neutral zone" because of the distance between Azerbaijani and Armenian military points, and the fact that it never posed an immediate challenge to either side. But since the military operation, that distance has been reduced, and Azerbaijan announced in early June that this operation was linked to Nagorno-Karabakh. The Minister of Defense said that "now the Azerbaijani Army also controls the road leading to Lachin [corridor]" (Shirinov 2018). The Lachin corridor is a mountain pass within the de jure borders of Azerbaijan, which is controlled by the de facto authorities, forming the shortest route between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. The Goris-Stepanakert Highway passes through this region, and Azerbaijani military positions are just a few kilometers away.

Yerevan's reaction to the military operation was token because any confrontation was not in the interest of the new leadership, and the operation did not violate international borders. From the Azerbaijani side, experts saw the operation as a message to the new leadership that war is still on the table if the current rhetoric on Nagorno-Karabakh becomes policy, as reflected among survey respondents.

Perception of influences of Russia and the West in post-revolution Armenia

The first months of public interactions between Azerbaijani and Armenian officials did not lead to trust building for future engagement between the sides. However, the core belief among the elite is that the new leadership's attempts to boost Western engagement offer a dual-faceted opportunity: democratization and engagement with the EU, which will make them more open to conflict resolution. Western countries see Yerevan's sustainable development as contingent upon regional projects (such as energy and transport networks), and Armenian involvement in them is possible only after the solution to the

Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The other aspect of the opportunity is that Armenia's Western engagement seemed to rely on a narrative of "democratic Armenia vs. autocratic Azerbaijan" as a way of charming European leaders, which disappoints Baku and opens a way for Azerbaijan to challenge Yerevan's relationship with Russia. The latter thinking is based on the fact that since the change of government in Armenia, Baku has observed the deterioration of relations between Russia and Armenia, or at least mutual mistrust between these two strategic partners. Baku believes this could change Moscow's position towards Azerbaijan, making it more pro-Azerbaijani on Nagorno-Karabakh. Some Azerbaijani elite members believe that while the Armenian government will not make decisive changes to its foreign policy trajectory either in terms of Western integration or abandoning its commitment to the Russian-led military and economic blocs of which it is part, the new government's punitive action against Russian-linked politicians and oligarchs will force Moscow to punish Yerevan by giving Baku the green light for military action in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The perception of the Armenian government as pro-Western dominated the thinking in Baku, both in the media and the government. (Pressdent.az 2018). There is no substantial proof in the claim that the Armenian government is moving towards a pro-Western foreign policy trajectory, but the Azerbaijani mass public believes this based on the educational and professional backgrounds of some of the new government's members. However, the majority of survey respondents don't believe Western countries played a role in the street protests, as no substantial Western support was seen during the revolutionary process in Armenia. One respondent expressed the general sentiment: "It is hard to claim that the West has interest or played a role in the revolutionary process; just how quickly European leaders were to congratulate Serzh Sargsyan on his election as Prime Minister as the street protests began is enough to dismiss this argument."

Do you think that Western countries played a role in the revolutionary processes in Armenia?	
Yes	33.3%

No	66.7%

Most survey respondents see the deterioration of Yerevan-Moscow relations as an opportunity for Azerbaijan, which shows they are thinking along the same lines as the major media outlets and some members of government in Azerbaijan. They are organizing conferences with titles such as “The geopolitical Baku-Moscow axis: Azerbaijan is Russia’s only ally in the Caucasus,” and invites political analysts and opinion makers believed to be close to the Russian elite and can stimulate this thinking among Russian elites and media (Rustamov 2018). This is seen as a way to open up the so-called “opportunities.”

Would the deterioration of relations between Armenia and Russia create opportunities for Azerbaijan?	
Yes	60%
No	33%
Unsure	6.7%

Respondents identified that for the first time since 1991, the region has the potential to experience a new geopolitical reality, whereby Russia can change how it balances Baku and Yerevan, while supporting Yerevan most on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. For respondents, this means that Russia may demonstrate short-term neutrality toward Azerbaijan’s possible military operation in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone. Seeing Russia as instrumental for the military solution is a deep-rooted idea in Azerbaijan. However, many politicians oppose concessions to Russia, including joining the Russian-led military or economic blocs for the sake of having a small military operation in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone. The negative implication of this scenario is that, as respondents noted, it entails a kind of a “police role”

for Russia where both Baku and Moscow are aligned against Armenia for different reasons. For Moscow it serves to weaken the Armenian government; the military operation will strengthen the current opposition and the old regime. For Baku it's the return of its territories.

A chance for a change in rhetoric?

Azerbaijan's reaction to and impressions of Nikol Pashinyan's stance on conflict

The Armenian government's early announcement about the de facto Nagorno-Karabakh's representation in peace negotiations was perceived domestically as a required statement by Nikol Pashinyan in order to demonstrate to Armenians that he is ready to defend Armenian interests in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution process. President Aliyev responded that, "I hope that the new government of Armenia will not repeat the mistakes of Sargsyan regime, will hold a constructive position on the conflict's settlement" (AzerNews 2018). But Pashinyan's rhetoric became increasingly strong; he even added that the seven regions outside Nagorno-Karabakh are part of the de facto authorities' territory, and declared that "in the future Nagorno-Karabakh will have to become a fully-fledged part of the Armenian territory" (Solovyev 2018; Asbarez 2018).

The Azerbaijani side had expected an elaboration of the new Armenian government's vision on the conflict's solution, given that the meetings of the two Foreign Ministers went well. But there were growing populist statements that were assessed as unconstructive regarding the negotiations process. Previously, the Azerbaijani side saw these populist statements as necessary "for domestic reasons," such as showing that they would defend Yerevan's interests. Subsequently, Baku assessed the Armenian government's statement as "contradictory" when Pashinyan repeated that the de facto Nagorno-Karabakh's participation in the negotiations was necessary for the continuation of official negotiations. But Baku's red line was crossed when Pashinyan publically declared that the seven districts outside the former NKAO (Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast) are constitutionally part of de facto Nagorno-Karabakh. This was followed by increased support for a military solution as the only alternative. The return of the seven regions outside

the NKAO has always been what Baku expected from a peace agreement, and indeed it is also reflected in the Madrid Principles.

For the survey respondents, Pashinyan’s statement about the participation of Nagorno-Karabakh’s Armenians in the talks was interpreted in different ways. About 36.7 percent of respondents thought that the statement accurately reflected the new government’s thinking and strategy on conflict resolution. Another 30 percent thought that the new government was avoiding responsibility and official negotiations and therefore such bold statements were part of this strategy. And 33.3 percent thought that this was meant to show Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians that the new government was defending their interest as part of a trust building strategy.

Why do you think the Armenian government stated that Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians should be a party to the official negotiations?	
Avoiding taking responsibility for serious negotiations by making unacceptable demands, until the snap elections	30%
To gain the trust of Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians	33.3%
The new government’s conflict resolution strategy	36.7%

But when asked about the reason behind the new Armenian government’s tough rhetoric on the conflict resolution process, 80 percent answered that it was a temporary government strategy containing bold rhetoric in place up until the snap election. About 36.7 of respondents thought that it was aimed at gaining influence among Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians, while 16.7 thought that this was Pashinyan’s approach to conflict resolution. There is a correlation between the answers to these two questions: people believe that the new government is trying to build trust with Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians, and they see the tough statement as a temporary measure prior to the snap election.

What factors made Pashinyan adopt this tough and unacceptable [to Baku] rhetoric on the conflict? [multiple-choice question]	
A temporary policy up until the snap election	80%
Aimed to gain influence among the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians	36.7%
Nikol Pashinyan's real thinking behind conflict resolution	16.7%

Azerbaijan's clearest and boldest announcement came from President Aliyev at the beginning of September, indicating that the window of opportunity is closing, saying that, "the Azerbaijani side has concluded that Pashinyan is trying to break off the negotiations by any means possible. In this case, Armenia and especially Pashinyan are fully responsible." (Trend.Az 2018). Among survey respondents, 56 percent thought that the Azerbaijani side's reaction was appropriate and satisfactory.

Survey respondents see several options regarding how to react to the Armenian government's statements about the participation of Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians in official negotiations. The two options got 37.2 percent support from respondents: the first was strengthening the institutional and human capacity of Nagorno-Karabakh Azerbaijanis and proposing their participation in negotiations with Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians. The second was informing international organizations that Armenia was halting the negotiations, which would lead to war. The remaining 25.6 percent of respondents thought that the threat of military action would be relevant for the Armenian government.

How should Azerbaijan react to the Armenian government’s position that Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians should be a party in the negotiations? [multiple-choice question]	
Nagorno-Karabakh Azerbaijanis should be able to take part in negotiations with Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians	37.2%
Azerbaijan should raise the issue [Armenia’s claims about Nagorno-Karabakh’s participation] with the international organizations agenda and ask them to react.	37.2 %
There should be a clear message that a military option is on the table	25.6%

New reality: more stable communication?

By the end of the September, the most surprising element was the first short meeting between the Azerbaijani and Armenian leaders in Dushanbe on September 28, during which both sides formulated and agreed upon several points. One was the control of the ceasefire regime and its mutual respect by both parties, and second was the opening of the “operative channel.” The latter is pending clarification, but this channel shall complement the official negotiation process. It can potentially support talks between the Foreign Ministers and leaders. It can also help build trust and provide an opportunity for an honest exchange on key issues without fear of the top-level negotiation process falling apart.

This preliminary agreement was perceived by Azerbaijan as evidence that the Armenian government was setting aside its demand that the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians participate in negotiations, and as confirmation that both sides would respect the format of official talks between Baku and Yerevan (Ahmadoglu 2018). However, the mechanism for controlling and operating the ceasefire regime has not been fully articulated by the sides; in the 2000s it took the form of a hotline between the two Ministers of Defense. The same applies to the operative channel; this shall be complement official negotiations, but its tasks and mechanisms are unconfirmed.

Although this mechanism could increase trust between the parties, the key element will be respect for the agreements, especially the ceasefire regime. Approximately 70 percent of survey respondents said they believe that Pashinyan cannot fully control the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians, which is critical to the sustainability of the ceasefire agreement.

Do you think that Nikol Pashinyan's orders are fully respected in de facto Nagorno-Karabakh?	
Yes	30%
No	70%

Also, in the short term, it seems that Azerbaijan expects Armenia to take further tangible steps. Among survey respondents, 40 percent indicated that symbolic moves should be taken by both countries, like the release of detainees, and 26.7 percent indicated that there should be efforts to prepare the population for peace through political statements and building a strategy to ensure that Armenia understands that compromise is necessary for conflict resolution. Another 10 percent of respondents thought that the Armenian government should stop making contradictory statements about conflict resolution, and the remaining 23.3 percent offered different recommendations. The most common was that the Armenian government should reveal a realistic vision for a peace plan, with de-occupation a first step.

What's next?

The first five months of interactions between the post-revolutionary Armenian government and the Azerbaijani side were complex: they raised and then reduced the hopes among the Azerbaijani public for change. The most important element, despite the ups and downs, misperceptions, and contradictory statements, is that the new Armenian government has the capacity to lead the way toward the conflict's solution. This is because the majority of the public and the leadership in Baku believe that the previous Armenian government benefited from the

legacy of the Karabakh war, whereas the new leadership is more open and has officials who bring experience in peace building. There is an opportunity for building trust in order to move forward on conflict resolution.

The two sides reached an impressive preliminary agreement on the ceasefire regime and operative channel, but they also reached the limit of mutual misunderstandings. Any further contradictory moves or developments that damage the fragile trust could be devastating. In the near future, especially after the snap elections in Armenia, it is important for the Azerbaijani side to see that the Armenian government has a vision for peace. Articulating a plan to prepare the Armenian public for peace is necessary to reassure Azerbaijani society.

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