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POLITICAL TRANSITIONS AND CONFLICTS IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

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From the Editorial Team

In this issue of the *Journal of Conflict Transformation: Caucasus Edition*, experts and analysts from the countries of the South Caucasus, Russia, and Turkey analyze the violent conflicts in the region and propose recommendations for various actors aiming to impact the conflict contexts.

While the previous two years were characterized by an escalation of armed confrontations in Turkey and Nagorno-Karabakh, 2018 was a period of relative calm for the war zones. The overall tensions, however, remain high, and the potential for violent conflicts to resume is ever present. The main events of 2018, which could have an impact on the dynamics of the conflicts in the South Caucasus, were connected with the internal political processes in Armenia and, to a lesser extent, Turkey and Georgia.

The most important events that opened a small window for progress in the Nagorno-Karabakh negotiations took place in Armenia. Since the publication of the 2017 hard-copy issue of the *Caucasus Edition*¹, the transition from the presidential to a parliamentary system in Armenia was accompanied by mass protests and acts of civil disobedience. The protest movement, organized by the K'aghak'aciakan Paymanagir (Civil Contract) opposition party and civil society groups, forced the incumbent president turned prime minister out of power.

The movement, known as Armenia's "Velvet Revolution," brought a government largely composed of young independent activists and journalists to power. With the parliamentary elections in Armenia

¹See "Visions and Strategies for Conflict Transformation: Dominant and Alternative Discourses on Gender, Militarism, and Peace Processes." The issue is available on the website of the *Caucasus Edition: Journal of Conflict Transformation* at www.caucasusedition.net. The *Caucasus Edition* is the analytical publication of the Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation.

scheduled for December 9, 2018, right as this issue is published, the new government led by former independent journalist Nikol Pashinyan will likely consolidate its power, bringing in another group of activists and journalists into the legislature.

While Armenia was transitioning to the parliamentary system and undergoing a process of democratization, Turkey moved in the opposite direction and became a presidential republic with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan consolidating power. Meanwhile, Georgia, which transitioned to the parliamentary system in 2012, has been engaged in a bitter struggle surrounding its last presidential election. The battle between the candidates representing the United National Movement and the one supported by the ruling Georgian Dream coalition became the proxy fight for power between former president Mikheil Saakashvili and the current informal leader of Georgia Bidzina Ivanishvili. Azerbaijan, Russia, and other countries of the region did not have similar dramatic developments observing and adjusting to the changes in their neighborhood.

What is the impact of these changes on the conflicts in the South Caucasus and its nationhood? The papers in this second hard-copy issue 2018² examine how the developments of 2017-2018 affect the conflict discourses and relationships between and among states and societies in this region.

This new issue, titled “Political Transitions and Conflicts in the South Caucasus,” is co-authored by researchers and analysts from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Russia, Turkey, and the United Kingdom.

The issue begins with three essays examining the influence of the external actors on the conflicts in the South Caucasus. Nina Caspersen of the University of York examines the policies of international actors towards de facto states of the South Caucasus, namely Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and South Ossetia. Sergey Markedonov of Russian

² The papers in this publication also appear online on the *Caucasus Edition* in English. Policy briefs summarizing the main arguments of the issue are also published online as well as in hard copies in Armenian, Azerbaijani, Georgian, Russian, and Turkish.

State University for the Humanities looks into Moscow's policies on the conflicts in the South Caucasus. Omer Turan of Bilgi University discusses the developments in Turkey and their implications for conflicts there and its neighborhood.

The second part of the issue presents three pairs of articles written by analysts from the countries directly affected by post-Soviet conflicts. Bakar Berekashvili of the Georgian-American University criticizes the hegemony of nationalist discourses in Georgia and the damage they have done to the country's development. Moscow's Higher School of Economics' Dmitry Dubrovskiy discusses the Russian-Georgian relations of the past decade.

Political scientists from Armenia and Azerbaijan author the next pair of articles. Mikael Zolyan and Lala Jumayeva look into political transitions in Armenia and Azerbaijan, respectively, in the past few years and their impact on the transformation of conflict discourses.

Concluding the issue is the pair of articles by two other analysts from Armenia and Azerbaijan. Anahit Shirinyan and Zaur Shiriyeu look specifically into the post-revolutionary period in Armenia and the new leadership's conflict-related discourse as well as the impact of these changes on the conflict-related discourse in Azerbaijan.

All of the articles conclude with policy recommendations for the local and international policy makers and the civil society actors invested in the transformation of the conflicts in the South Caucasus and its neighborhood. The recommendations for the last two pairs of articles are co-authored by Zolyan and Jumayeva and Shirinyan and Shiriyeu, respectively.

The editorial team and all authors express their deepest gratitude to the Foreign Ministry of Sweden for making this collaboration and publication possible.

Editorial Team: Sona Dilanyan, Philip Gamaghelyan, Sergey Romyansev, Pinar Sayan.

PART 1



Engagement with the South Caucasus de facto states: A viable strategy for conflict transformation?

Nina Caspersen

De facto states such as Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh are often described as the “places that don’t exist” on the map of sovereign states, and their lack of (widespread) international recognition constrains their external interactions. Yet no de facto state is completely isolated, and we find considerable variation when it comes to their levels of external engagement. Many de facto states benefit from international contacts, in the form of humanitarian aid, travel, educational exchanges, trade, and even some diplomatic links. Some de facto states also retain links with their de jure parent state, which may, for example, continue to provide medical treatment or other public services to the population of the contested territory. Such engagement is intended to help moderate popular attitudes in the de facto state, reduce the influence of patron states, and increase leverage over the authorities (Cooley & Mitchell 2010; Fischer 2010; De Waal 2017; Caspersen 2018).

The goal of conflict resolution or conflict prevention has also been the driving force behind engagement policies in the South Caucasus. The European Union’s “Non-Recognition and Engagement” policy for Abkhazia and South Ossetia was presented as part of the EU’s approach to “conflict resolution and confidence-building” (Fischer 2010, 1). Similarly, the Georgian Government launched its own engagement strategy with the stated aim of enabling the peaceful reintegration of the breakaway entities (Government of Georgia 2010, 1). In 2018, this was

followed by the “peace initiative,” a “Step to a Better Future,” which proposes the facilitation of trade across the dividing lines (Government of Georgia 2018). In the absence of actual settlement talks and increasing separation looming, continued links with the populations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are seen by both the EU and the Georgian Government as the best ways to preserve the prospect of eventual reintegration.

International links with Nagorno-Karabakh are much more limited, primarily due to Azerbaijan’s insistence on keeping the entity isolated. Contacts between Azerbaijan and Stepanakert are non-existent. Yet such links used to be more commonplace, and there have been calls for renewed engagement through both military and civilian confidence-building measures. These measures have primarily been proposed as a strategy for avoiding further escalation of the conflict and for bringing the parties back to the negotiating table (Paul and Sammut 2016, 2). Following the four days of military clashes in April 2016, James Warlick, the US Co-Chair of the Minsk Group, called for confidence-building measures (CBMs) to deter accidental flare-ups of violence, including the removal of snipers from the line of contact, the deployment of additional international observers, and new electronic equipment (Tarjimonyan 2017). However, CBMs have also been proposed as a precondition for a negotiated settlement. A recent report from International Alert (2018) argued that increased contacts across the conflict divide would help people start to envision peace and stop accepting the current state of affairs as normal. Paul and Sammut (2016, 3) argue that a negotiated settlement will not be sustainable unless “accompanied by CBMs of a civilian and military nature.” Trust must be built at all levels. Unlike the Georgian case, settlement talks do take place intermittently, but the parties have discussed the same broad principles for over a decade and appear no closer to a solution. One significant obstacle to the signing of a settlement, let alone its implementation, is the lack of trust between the parties.

Therefore, there appears to be a compelling argument for engaging with the South Caucasus de facto states as a form of confidence building. CBMs, which span both military and civilian contacts and dialogue, are widely seen as an effective way to move protracted conflicts closer to a negotiated settlement (Desjardins 2005). They are intended to give the

conflict parties reason to believe that promises will be honored (Behrendt 2011, 2). However, the effect of CBMs remains contested and cannot be analyzed apart from the wider conflict dynamics. Moreover, engagement with de facto states remains deeply controversial, especially in their parent states, which will often impose significant constraints on such contacts, if accepted at all. Following a brief overview of engagement with the three South Caucasus de facto states, this article analyses the opposition it has faced and the resulting constraints. It then discusses the likely effects on the stalled peace processes and examines options for rethinking and revitalizing the existing approach. The article concludes with a set of policy recommendations.

Engagement with the South Caucasus De Facto States

The EU launched its Non-recognition and Engagement policy for the Georgian breakaway territories in 2009. Shortly afterwards, the Georgian government adopted its own engagement strategy aimed at supporting those living in the breakaway regions with medical and education assistance (Government of Georgia 2010). Recently, with the proposal “A Step to a Better Future,” the Georgian government aims to extend this engagement to trade and invites businesses from South Ossetia and Abkhazia to apply in Georgia proper for an identification number, which would allow them to sell their products both in Georgian-controlled territory and abroad. The proposal would also allow them to apply for tax breaks and investment funds (International Crisis Group 2018; Government of Georgia 2018). Increased trade with the breakaway entities would also result from recent talks to open a trade corridor between Georgia and Russia, which passes through South Ossetia. Three corridors between Georgia and Russia were formally agreed in 2011, but only one, which does not pass through the breakaway entities, has so far been opened (International Crisis Group 2018, 14). There has also been talk of Abkhazia wanting to use the opportunities offered by Georgia’s free trade agreement with the EU, which came into effect in 2016. Confidential talks between EU officials and the Abkhaz de facto authorities have reportedly been held (International Crisis Group 2017, 18).

For both the Georgian government and international actors, the rationale behind the engagement policy is that it will de-isolate the de facto states

and strengthen more moderate voices, and thereby over time increase the prospect of reintegration. However, the engagement strategy often collides with Georgia's actions to further its non-recognition policy (International Crisis Group 2018, 2) and it is significantly constrained by its 2008 "Law on Occupied Territories." This law forbids any economic activity with Abkhazia and South Ossetia without the written authorization of the Georgian government and requires international organizations intending to work in the breakaway territories to coordinate closely with the Georgian authorities (De Waal 2017). Western allies have repeatedly encouraged Georgian leaders to soften the law, give international humanitarian organizations greater access to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and encourage trade and freedom of movement, but such reforms have faced severe domestic opposition (International Crisis Group 2018, 2).

The engagement policy also faces obstacles in the breakaway entities. For example, both entities have restrictive trade regulations that define goods from Georgian-controlled territories as "contraband" and also ban goods moving in the other direction. The only official exception is Abkhaz hazelnut exports, which was authorized by the de facto leadership in 2015 (International Crisis Group 2018, 5). The entities have also developed trade with the outside world, but they generally have to rely on intermediaries, usually Russian, which is cumbersome and expensive. A local economic analyst told the International Crisis Group, "Trade with the West is possible, but with too many headaches" (2018, 10). Although there are other examples of pragmatic acceptance of engagement, and some use of loopholes, the result is that the engagement with Abkhazia and South Ossetia is much more limited than what was envisaged ten years ago. South Ossetia, in particular, "has kept its border closed, and has strongly resisted almost all forms of interaction with the outside world" (De Waal 2017).

Most parent states are wary of engagement with their breakaway territories and try to limit international links. However, Azerbaijan goes further than most when it comes to preventing engagement with Nagorno-Karabakh. It rejects any form of international engagement, with the exception of some humanitarian work, such as the clearing of mines, and has taken strong measures to prevent it. Azerbaijan's prosecutor is reported, for example, to have launched an investigation

into foreign companies suspected of “illegal economic activities” in Karabakh (International Crisis Group 2017, 11). As a result, Nagorno-Karabakh has hardly any interactions with recognized states apart from its patron Armenia, and the entity’s international linkages largely consist of financial support and investments by the Armenian diaspora (Beacháin et al. 2016).

Baku’s refusal to accept engagement with Nagorno-Karabakh also extends to any links between Azerbaijan proper and the breakaway territory. The Line of Contact (LoC) is hermetically sealed and it is an offence for Azerbaijani citizens to travel to Nagorno-Karabakh, which is regarded as occupied territory. The Azerbaijani government also refuses to implement confidence-building measures along the LoC, fearing that this would cement the status quo (International Crisis Group 2017, 22). Yet, Baku’s position has not always been so rigid. For example, there used to be some contacts between NGOs based in Baku and Stepanakert. For example, in 1994 and 1995, the Karabakh NGO Helsinki Initiative 1992 was able to bring representatives of Azerbaijani NGOs to Stepanakert, and 11 members of Karabakhi NGOs went to Baku in 2011 to visit the Human Rights Centre of Azerbaijan (Kopecek, Hoch, and Baar 2016). Similarly, the Minsk Group Co-Chairs have in the past crossed the LoC on foot, which requires a certain amount of coordination between the sides and can therefore be considered a CBM (Paul and Sammut 2016).

There are, as mentioned above, calls for the reintroduction of such CBMs. Most of these suggestions have focused on military measures that are to avoid the accidental flare-up of violence, but there are also suggestions for non-military CBMs such as technical dialogue between the two sides and an increase in civil society contacts (Cavanaugh and Stares 2017). Moreover, the latest iteration of the Madrid Principles has been termed “Madrid lite,” as it reportedly papers over the issue of a future referendum on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh, and instead adopts a phased approach that begins with restoring transport communications in the region (De Waal 2018a), presumably including Nagorno-Karabakh. The hope is again that such contacts will build trust and make it easier for the parties to agree to a permanent settlement. However, even if Baku were to accept such links, and it would almost certainly ask for significant concessions in return, the Azerbaijani

government is likely to insist on important “red lines” when it comes to engagement with the de facto state. Moreover, such engagement will also face oppositions from other actors, and its effect on conflict resolution could therefore be more limited than is hoped.

Obstacles to Engagement with De Facto States

The most prominent and noticeable opposition to engagement comes from the de jure parent states. Parent states fear two related outcomes: “Creeping recognition” and the normalization of the de facto separation. They are worried that international interactions with the breakaway entity, or the sum of such interactions, could be seen to imply recognition of the de facto state and gradually create the conditions for this to happen. But they are also worried about what some term Taiwanization, or the consolidation of the status quo. This may not lead to international recognition in the short-term, but it will make reintegration harder to achieve. Even parent states that do accept the need for engaging with their breakaway territories will therefore usually insist on a number of conditions. For example, international engagement must go through the parent state or be subject to its explicit approval, and engagement with public institutions in the contested territories is severely constrained, if accepted at all (Caspersen 2018).

In Georgia, the opposition to engagement is almost entirely status-related. Engagement is intended to further the goal of restoring Georgia’s territorial integrity—and in the meantime prevent the international recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Coppieters 2018)—but there are fears that engagement could undermine this goal. For example, one of the obstacles to a South Ossetian trade corridor is a lack of agreement on which trade would be subject to “international monitoring.” The Georgian negotiators have insisted that trade between Georgian-controlled territory and South Ossetia is “domestic trade” and must therefore be exempt from such monitoring (International Crisis Group 2018, 15). Similarly, Georgia insists that all cargo that crosses the South Ossetian sections of the Russian border must pass through Georgian customs, or at least be registered online (International Crisis Group 2018, 15). Georgia cannot accept the creation of full-fledged customs posts by Tskinhvali or passport inspection by the de facto authorities (International Crisis Group 2018, 22). Anything that implies

the acceptance of an international border is a non-starter as this could bolster South Ossetia's claim to independence. Another concern relates to Russia's control over the de facto territories. For example, the widespread opposition to review the Law on Occupied Territories is in part based on a fear that Russia will exploit any softening of the law to reinforce its "occupation" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (International Crisis Group 2018, 27) and the Georgian opposition have alleged that engagement with the breakaway territories are concessions to Russia (De Waal 2017). Following the change in government in 2012, the law was amended and a renewed engagement strategy, including offers of direct dialogue with the de facto authorities, was tabled (Abramashvili and Koiava 2018, 76). However, little actual change in the Georgian policy materialized, partly due to growing Russian involvement in the entities, which resulted in a "reactive" approach (Abramashvili and Koiava 2018, 76). There has also been opposition to any measures that could be seen to result in capacity building in the breakaway territories and thereby consolidate the status quo. Such concerns extend to something as seemingly innocuous as EU-funded teacher training in Abkhazia.³ The fear is that such engagement will "cement de facto realities on the ground" and leave no incentives for the contested territories to reintegrate (Grono 2018). Concerns over capacity building are therefore ultimately about the final status of the contested territory.

Even so, there are few clear "red lines" when it comes to engagement, and pragmatism sometimes rules. Georgia has, for example, been prepared to introduce status-neutral options, including travel documents, to promote engagement. Moreover, in December 2017, Georgia unexpectedly signed its contract with the Swiss company that is to manage the South Ossetian trade corridor, even though an agreement had not been reached on the issue of passport and customs control. The Georgian Prime Minister said that this created space for the trade corridor to be used "in a force majeure situation." The Law on Occupied Territories can also be simplified in an emergency, and the International Crisis Group speculates that an emergency launch of the corridor could open the door to more permanent arrangements (International Crisis Group 2018, 17).

³ Author's personal communication in Brussels.

Such pragmatism is much harder to find in the case of Azerbaijan, which has been staunchly opposed to any measures that are seen to “prolong or strengthen the status quo, or extend the legitimacy of the de facto authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh” (Paul and Sammut 2016, 3). For example, President Aliyev stated that he would reject an incident investigating mechanism on the Line of Contact if it was meant to freeze the conflict (Paul and Sammut 2016, 3). This fear of cementing the status quo has led to an insistence that CBMs are conditional on progress in the peace talks (Grono 2018). Aliyev has made clear that an incident investigating mechanism would only be considered in the context of “positive dynamics in the negotiation process,” meaning that the withdrawal of Armenian forces from the districts surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh had to start first (Paul and Sammut 2016). In other conflicts involving de facto states, we see pragmatic departures from such policies, but Baku does not waver from its policy of complete isolation of Nagorno-Karabakh. This position is not static, but we have seen the neutral space in the conflict, and thereby the space for engagement, being squeezed over the years (Broers 2014). The small territorial gains made in the four days of fighting in 2016 have reignited hopes in Azerbaijan that the status quo can be broken, and the Azerbaijani government is even less likely to accept measures seen to consolidate the current situation.

While the strongest opposition to engagement usually comes from the parent states, the de facto states are not necessarily keen on such links either. Whereas the parent states are worried about creeping recognition, the de facto states tend to worry about creeping reintegration and the weakening of their de facto independence (Caspersen 2018).

Both Abkhazia and South Ossetia have an interest in increased engagement, which is viewed by the de facto authorities as a strategy for furthering the goal of international recognition (Royle 2016) and could help make up for the reduction in Russia’s financial support. Between 2012 and 2016, Russian inflows were estimated to have dropped by more than half (International Crisis Group 2018, 21). However, Abkhazia has been reluctant to accept the constraints on engagement imposed by Tbilisi. Anything that implies a hierarchical relationship or gives the parent state control over activities in the de facto state has been rejected. The Abkhaz authorities were, for example, quick to denounce the recent

trade proposal from the Georgian government, saying that no representative of the de facto leadership took part in discussions of the proposed package (International Crisis Group 2018, 27-8). Engagement with the EU is also met with skepticism. The Abkhaz foreign minister in 2011 argued that the EU's engagement strategy lacked substance and provided a cover for Georgia's reintegration strategy. He stated that Abkhazia would be ready for cooperation with Europe, but only if this cooperation was "not imposed on us through Georgia. We won't be establishing contacts with the European Union through Georgia" (Civil.ge 2011). These status-related obstacles also make it unlikely that the Abkhaz leadership will agree for the entity's residents and businesses to access Georgia's free-trade agreement with the EU, which would require local products to have Georgian certification of origin (International Crisis Group 2018, 18). As the International Crisis Group argues, "Abkhaz leaders would risk talks with Georgian officials over free trade with the EU only if they saw a real prospect for mechanisms that are genuinely status-neutral" (International Crisis Group 2018, 21). However, as I will argue below, what is regarded as "status-neutral" is far from static and varies from conflict to conflict.

Since Russia's recognition in 2008, South Ossetia has increasingly isolated itself and become almost completely dependent on its patron (De Waal 2017). In 2013, fences and barbed wire were erected along the de facto border, thereby further restricting Georgian-South Ossetian contacts (Abramashvili and Koiava 2018, 76). As a result, engagement with the entity has been extremely limited. However, South Ossetia lacks Abkhazia's natural resources and tourism industry, and the de facto authorities have recently shown a greater level of pragmatism when it comes to engagement with Georgia, especially when this does not involve any compromises on status. In 2017 the South Ossetian authorities tried to block a loophole that had enabled informal trade across the de facto border. However, these new restrictions were lifted when truck drivers retaliated with a series of boycotts that emptied South Ossetian markets. Later that year, a customs post was opened at the crossing (International Crisis Group 2018, 7).

In the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the Armenian side is usually supportive of confidence-building measures and often insists that such measures must be implemented before the substance of a future

settlement can be discussed (Grono 2018; Ghazanchyan 2017). Yet this support for CBMs depends on the specific form, and the Karabakh authorities would have several “red lines” if more extensive engagement was on the table. The Karabakh authorities argue that they have “called to eliminate the atmosphere of hostility and hatred in the region by a joint realization of minor projects of mutual benefit,” but they also emphasized that any conflict resolution initiatives must take into account “the realities in place”; in other words Karabakh’s de facto independence (Office of the Nagorno Karabakh Republic 2017). The Armenian position is that CBMs should ensure and entrench the continuation of the status quo (Paul and Sammut 2016, 3). They consequently rejected an Azerbaijani proposal for promoting relations between the Armenian Karabakh community and the Azerbaijani Karabakh community (Paul and Sammut 2016, 3). This form of CBM was based on the equal position of the two Karabakh communities and would likely have bypassed the de facto authorities. It clearly did not imply their equal status with the Azerbaijani government.

Engagement is viewed, by both sides, in an instrumental way: it is a means to promote each side’s preferred final status for the contested territory. The resulting obstacles are sometimes reinforced by patron state involvement. Patron state support affects the extent to which the de facto states need external links and consequently their willingness to accept the constrained form of engagement on offer (Caspersen 2018). However, it can also have a more direct effect on engagement. De Waal argues that growing Russian assertiveness has narrowed the space for EU engagement in Abkhazia and the role of international NGOs has also decreased (De Waal 2017; Beacháin et al. 2016). In the talks over a trade corridor through South Ossetia, Russia has rejected the demand for Georgia to exercise passport and customs control, since this could be seen as undermining Russia’s recognition of South Ossetia’s independence (International Crisis Group 2018, 15). However, when it comes to extending Georgia’s free-trade agreement to Abkhazia, Moscow reportedly sees this as too unrealistic and remote a prospect to warrant their concern (International Crisis Group 2018, 26). Engagement is therefore significantly constrained by opposition from the parent state, the de facto states, and possibly their patron. This could limit its effect as a conflict resolution devise.

Effect on Conflict Resolution and Possible Ways Forward

Isolation of the South Caucasus breakaway entities has impacted negatively on the prospect for conflict resolution, and even conflict prevention. It has fuelled radicalization on both sides (Gultekin et al. 2016) and increased the dependence on the de facto states on their external patrons. As International Alert argues, a lack of contact across the conflict divide “creates fertile ground for misperceptions, stereotypes and manipulation of emotions” (International Alert 2018, 8). Although this report found that respondents in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nagorno-Karabakh expressed a strong desire for peace, they had very different view of what this would entail, and it is hard to see how progress towards a settlement is possible without at least a minimum level of trust (International Alert 2018, 8). Without a policy of engagement only informal, often illicit, links are retained. These are unlikely to create trust and could even act as an additional obstacle to a settlement. The International Crisis Group argues that informal trade in the case of Georgia has not “improved ties or even opened fresh lines of communication between Georgian and Abkhaz or South Ossetian authorities.” Instead, it has fuelled corruption in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and vested interests have developed around the informal cross-boundary trade, thereby creating another obstacle to changing the status quo (International Crisis Group 2018, 8).

This does not mean that engagement will necessarily boost conflict resolution efforts, especially not in the short-term. Engagement with de facto states is constrained and this impacts negatively on the effectiveness of international programs. In its analysis of EU programs in Northern Cyprus, the European Court of Auditors found that their efficiency had “been significantly reduced because the TC [Turkish Cypriot] administration is not officially recognised internationally” (Coppieters 2018). George Kyris argues that the resulting imbalanced engagement actually hampers conflict resolution efforts (Kyris 2018). This assessment, which is focused on the case of Cyprus, seems to rely on a rather narrow conception of conflict resolution success: the signing of a settlement. There are clearly limits to what engagement can achieve. It is unlikely to significantly reduce the importance of a patron state that

provides a vital security guarantee. Since Russia's recognition in 2008, Abkhazia is more secure, and the influx of Russian money has also made it much better off, but the tradeoff has been increased international isolation and dependence on Russia. As an Abkhaz joke goes: "we used to have independence, now we have recognition" (De Waal 2018b). The Abkhaz elite do not want even closer integration with Russia but can "at best" only slow it down (De Waal 2018b). Engagement with Georgia and the wider international community could slow it down further, but would be unlikely to reverse it, at least in the short to medium term. More modest success criteria could be the gradual easing of tensions and the emergence of more moderate attitudes. Increased interactions and dialogue across the divide could, over time, make it possible to envision peace and accept it as "something of value" (International Alert 2018, 16).

The above analysis has also shown that there are significant obstacles to overcome if engagement is to be accepted by both sides and impact positively on conflict resolution efforts. However, these obstacles vary from case to case, and there is some room for maneuver. A fear of creeping recognition and of consolidating the status quo is shared by virtually all parent states, but some are more willing to engage than others. The same is true for the de facto states. As I have argued elsewhere, "there is no clear threshold beyond which the relationship between the parent state and the de facto state, or their relative position, is altered" (Caspersen 2018). If there is a willingness to engage, creative solutions can be found. For example, while the Cypriot government is unwilling to have any links with public institutions in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, they accept engagement with institutions that are deemed to have existed prior to the Turkish military intervention in 1974 (Caspersen 2018). Since the breakaway authorities did not create these institutions, engagement with them arguably does not imply recognition of the de facto state or acceptance of the legitimacy of its institutions. Similar, pragmatism is found in some de facto states. The Transnistrian authorities have, for example, been willing to sign on to Moldova's free-trade agreement with the EU.

It has been suggested that any agreement to extend the free-trade agreement to Abkhazia would have to be "status-neutral enough to work for the Abkhaz" (International Crisis Group 2018, 26), which

implies that we need to be creative, to think of ways to sidestep the issue of status. One example of such a status-neutral solution is the suggestion that Russia and Georgia could hire a private company to collect customs fees, thereby addressing a key status-related obstacle to trade through, and with, South Ossetia (International Crisis Group 2018, 24). While there is certainly merit to such solutions, and they can make it easier for both sides to accept engagement without facing a domestic backlash, examples from other conflicts also show that a very rigid reading of the consequences of non-recognition is not a given. Even if both sides take clear positions on the issue of status, there is still some room for maneuver, and solutions can only be found if there is a willingness to engage. Whether a policy is perceived as status-neutral depends to a large extent on perceptions and internal politics rather than international law (Caspersen 2018). For example, even with creative “status-neutral” solutions, the extension of a free-trade agreement to a de facto state could still be viewed as the acceptance of a hierarchical relationship, with potential status implications. But the Transnistrian example shows that this is not inevitable. Engagement is ultimately about political will and cannot, therefore, be separated from the wider conflict dynamics and the progress, or lack thereof, in any settlement talks.

Moreover, even if status-neutral solutions can be found, there is still the issue of capacity. Almost any engagement could be argued to help build capacity in the de facto states: educational exchanges lead to better educated citizens, trade helps the economy, and even limited confidence-building measures would need some administrative support and could therefore be said to increase skills in the contested territory. While this is not state-building in a “hard” sense, which has been argued to be illegal in case of collective non-recognition (Coppieters 2018), it could still be seen as consolidating the status quo and ultimately make the de facto separation harder to reverse. Such fears, rather than explicitly status-related concerns, have been behind Azerbaijan’s vehement opposition to engagement with Nagorno-Karabakh. Due to such concerns, it is often necessary to create an explicit link between engagement and settlement talks. In the case of Transnistria, the sequencing of engagement has also proved controversial. Progress on technical issues, which were discussed as part of a confidence-building

strategy, was only possible once the stalled settlement process restarted. We also saw progress on these technical issues (De Waal 2018c).

In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, it will be nearly impossible to overcome Azerbaijani resistance to engagement unless we see some movement in the settlement talks. If the two processes proceed in tandem, they could reinforce each other. Increased confidence would reduce the perceived stakes and result in greater willingness to accept uncertainty. This would facilitate the substantive talks that would, in turn, help foster dialogue and cooperation. However, such a self-reinforcing positive process seems highly unlikely in the present conflict dynamics. The process would have to be kick-started and improved rhetoric would help achieve this (Broers 2014). The effectiveness of CBMs in building trust very much depends on perceived intent, and bellicose rhetoric could undermine generous gestures (Behrendt 2012).

Policy Recommendations

While this article has argued that engagement with de facto states is severely constrained, it has also pointed to examples of pragmatism and loopholes. The Georgian and Azerbaijani governments share very similar status-related concerns, yet one has adopted an explicit and increasingly ambitious engagement policy, while the other is resisting even military confidence-building measures. Perceptions of engagement, and of supposedly status-neutral options, cannot be analyzed in isolation from the wider conflict dynamics and domestic constraints. This lack of objective “red lines” means that it may be possible to convince both sides that de-isolation is worthwhile. The following policy recommendations emerge from this analysis:

- The development of creative, status-neutral solutions would help “sell” engagement to the de facto authorities without necessarily alienating the parent state. Other conflicts involving de facto states provide useful examples.
- But what counts as “status-neutral” varies from conflict to conflict. Efforts should be made to encourage both parent and de facto states to interpret international status, and the constraints that follow from it, less restrictively. Parent states should be reassured that a commitment to non-recognition is

commensurable with extensive international engagement with their breakaway territories (Abramashvili and Koiava 2018).

- Confidence-building measures can to some extent be depoliticized by focusing on technical issues (Cavanaugh and Stares 2017), relying on non-state actors for their implementation, and locating meetings on neutral ground (Paul and Sammut 2016, 6-7). International Alert found that many of the people most directly affected by the Karabakh conflict expressed a readiness to meet people from “the other side,” and thus, such local peacebuilding potential should be utilized (International Alert 2018, 14).
- Depoliticized CBMs provide a useful first step that can create basis for more ambitious measures. Effective CBMs involve politically sensitive issues and are based on a “conscious buy-in to the need to build the other side’s confidence” (Behrendt 2011).
- Engagement will often have to be explicitly tied to settlement talks—as a first step in a phased approach or as a parallel but formally linked process. To avoid resistance from the de facto states or their patrons, this may have to be done without prejudging the final status, thus necessitating a level of “constructive ambiguity.”
- In the absence of settlement talks, the goal of engagement should still be explicit. For example, the avoidance of conflict escalation or improvement of relations.
- The toning down of rhetoric, on both sides, would help achieve these goals. Open media projects could help improve the dominant discourse (International Alert 2018, 15), but significant change would require buy-in by the top leadership.

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Russia and the conflicts in the South Caucasus: main approaches, problems, and prospects

Sergey Markedonov

South Caucasus: the conflict dynamics

In recent years the developments in the Middle East and in Ukraine pushed the political situation in the South Caucasus to the periphery of the international agenda. However, despite the reduced spotlight provided by experts and diplomats, this region continues to hold strategic importance.

The Caucasus is a unique bridge between Europe and Asia. This region is extremely important from the energy security standpoint. The Caucasus neighbors the Middle East, and some of the countries of the region share a border with Iran and Turkey who are key players in the ongoing Syrian conflict. It also constitutes a part of a larger Black Sea region where the two competing integration strategies clash (European Union and Eurasian Economic Union). Both Russia and the European Union (the latter went through a series of expansions in the 1990s and 2000s) view the South Caucasus region as its “close neighbor.” Russia’s situation in this regard is even more important since the North Caucasus, the territory of which is bigger than Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan together, is part of the Russian Federation.

Even though experts dealing with the post-soviet spaces currently pay less attention to the region due to ongoing military confrontation in

Donbas (Southeast of Ukraine), the conflicts in the Caucasus still remain relevant. Neither of the conflicts can be considered resolved if the concept of resolution implies an encompassing compromise among all the parties involved. The South Caucasus is the home to half of the de facto states currently existing in the post-Soviet space (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh). Two of them acquired limited recognition in August of 2008.

The situation in Nagorno-Karabakh is the most dangerous. November 2017 marked the tenth year since the “Madrid Principles,” which stipulate the main provisions of the peace settlement, were developed. In July 2009 the updated version of the “basic principles” was published and the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group (Russia, USA, and France) urged the conflicting parties to reach an agreement by following the implementation of these principles. However, during all this time the sides did not take even the minimum steps to implement the considerations proposed by the mediators to Baku and Yerevan. Thus, the updated “Madrid Principles” remain a “rhetorical figure,” rather than a functioning algorithm for achieving peace (Caucasian Knot 2016).

It would be wrong to characterize the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict as “frozen.” Every year, the number of violent incidents along the “contact line” increases. In April 2016, the most significant violation of the ceasefire regime since the indefinite Armistice Agreement (May 12, 1994)⁴ entered into force was registered. Lower scale military clashes happened in February, May, June, July, and October 2017 (OSCE 2018).

Tensions also exist along the internationally recognized Armenian-Azerbaijani border, which is outside of Nagorno-Karabakh’s “contact line.” Violent incidents routinely happen along that border as well. Since June 2018, information on the so-called “Nakhichevan operation” has been widely circulated. Azerbaijan refers to it as “the liberation of 11K hectares of land,” although the details led to contradictory assessments and interpretations in Baku and Yerevan (PRA 2016). In the summer of 2018, the number of incidents on the border of the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan and Armenia also increased (Rzaev 2018). This area, while less famous than the Nagorno-Karabakh “contact line,” nevertheless harbors even more risks.

⁴ See the text of the agreement: <http://vn.kazimirov.ru/doc10.htm> (in Russian).

Nagorno-Karabakh is not recognized as an independent state and the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan has not yet been questioned. Even if Baku launches military operations, direct military interference by any third party is highly unlikely (although there is no doubt about full diplomatic pressure from all sides). The situation can be very different with the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, which is not viewed as a disputed territory. In the case of an open confrontation between Baku and Yerevan, interference by the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), where Armenia holds membership, is rather inevitable. As a member of this integration structure, Armenia can rely on the help of Russia and other partners. However, there are significant issues regarding the unity among the CSTO members especially considering Kazakhstan's and Belarus' highly developed relations with Azerbaijan (including the military-technical ties). At the same time, the unfolding of a negative scenario around Nakhichevan can raise collisions inside the Eurasian integration projects that are actively supported by Moscow.

After the “velvet revolution” in Armenia, the negotiation process that already was not particularly effective, entered a stage of complete “stagnation.” The Armenian government’s positions represented by Nikol Pashinyan became more rigid. Statements on the necessity of involving the leadership of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) in the negotiations were made. Also, in fact, a precondition for returning to the negotiation table was set: Baku’s complete rejection of “military rhetoric.” Moreover, the negotiation process was labeled as “not an end in itself” (Sputnik 2018). Even though after the “velvet revolution” the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan met twice, the meeting of the heads of the states of the two countries is unlikely before the parliamentary elections in Armenia.

Compared to Nagorno-Karabakh the situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia is calmer. The conflicts in this part of the Caucasus region are more in line with the definition of “frozen” ones. While there are no violent incidents, detentions and arrests of the representatives of one of the conflicting parties by law enforcement representatives of the other party, unfortunately, became a usual practice (Caucasian Knot 2018).

With Russia’s recognition in 2008, Abkhazia and South Ossetia also acquired its military-political guarantees and social-economical support.

Despite the official rhetoric of re-establishment of the territorial integrity as the country's most important national priority, Georgia is not attempting a military solution to re-establish its jurisdiction over Sukhumi and Tskhinvali. At the same time, border demarcation on the part of South Ossetia that is supported by Moscow (known as "borderization") raises concerns in Tbilisi and in the West regarding Russia's advancement on the territory of Georgia proper. Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's choice toward the Russian Federation strengthens Tbilisi's ties with the US, NATO, and EU. The government led by the "Georgian Dream" not only did not revisit the pro-Western vector of policies adopted during Saakashvili period but also defined it more clearly. It was this government that initiated and later signed the Association Agreement with the European Union. In addition, in February 2017 Georgian citizens obtained a right for visa-free short-term travel to Schengen countries. Even though Tbilisi was not granted a NATO membership action plan (MAP), in September 2014 it received a substantial package of "enhanced partnership" with the North Atlantic Alliance.

Out of all the regions of the former Soviet Union, only the Caucasus has neighboring countries that do not have diplomatic relations with each other, namely between Armenia and Azerbaijan and Russia and Georgia. Armenia does not have diplomatic relations with Turkey as well. Armenia's both borders (with Azerbaijan and Turkey) are closed. At the same time, the implementation of the regional Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway project (the railway linked Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey) increased Armenia's isolation even more. Moreover, Nakhichevan remains Azerbaijan's exclave that is only accessible via air routes or through the territories of Iran and Turkey.

Thus, resolution of the conflicts in the Caucasus is important due to the following three factors. First, the settlement of status and border disputes will significantly enhance regional predictability, security, and stability. Second, positive dynamic in the South Caucasus will contribute to the convergence of the positions of the three Eurasian "giants": Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Third, it will lead to a reduced confrontation level between Russia and the West (at least in one of the directions).

Russia and the conflicts in the South Caucasus: evolution of approaches

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia played and still continues playing a significant role in the processes in the South Caucasus, and in particular, in the conflicts. Moscow sees the region as an especially important territory for its strategic interests because Russia itself is a Caucasus state. The Russian Caucasus is home to nine of Russia's regions, seven republics, and two areas/krais. Most of the open and latent conflicts in this part of the country are closely linked to the confrontation in former republics of the Soviet Transcaucasia.

In the current commentary in Western literature about Russia's policies in the South Caucasus, certain political emphases can be clearly identified. The attention usually is focused on three main plots:

- The confrontation between the West and Russia in the post-Soviet space where the Caucasus represents one of the battlefields of that confrontation (Hunter 2017, 304)
- Russian "revisionism" and Moscow's role in supporting South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Hill, Kirsic, and Moffatt 2015).
- Interpretation of the situation in the Caucasus in the context of Crimea's transition under Russian jurisdiction, as a result of which conflicts in the South Caucasus are studied either as prerequisites for Russia's actions in 2014 or as possible cases for the repetition of the "Crimean scenario" (Treisman 2016).

These approaches not only bring back the "cold war" discourse but also oversimplify the situation and ignore the substantial role that Russia has to play in the resolution of the conflicts in the Caucasus.

First of all, when talking about Russia's position, one should recognize that throughout the entire period after the collapse of the Soviet Union this position did not stay static. In the first years after the collapse, Russia played a decisive role in achieving ceasefire agreements for conflicts in South Ossetia (1992), Abkhazia (1993-1994), Nagorno-Karabakh (1994), ending the Georgian civil war (1993), and ensuring deployment of a peacekeeping operation in Georgia. It was Russia who formed the political-legal format of the peace process in these "hotspots." These are the 1992 Dagomys Agreement on South Ossetia,

1994 Moscow Accords on Abkhazia, and the Ceasefire Agreement of 1994 for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Moscow's role as the central mediator in the resolution of the Transcaucasian conflicts was recognized by the West and international organizations.

All the conflict parties in the Caucasus had different expectations from Russia. Georgia saw Moscow as a possible partner in the pursuit of restoration of its territorial integrity and as a party who is in the position of influencing Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's return under Tbilisi's jurisdiction. Separatist elites of Sukhumi and Tskhinvali had a different view. They hoped for Russia's support in their separation from Georgia. Yet while the goal of the Abkhazian movement was an independent nation state, the leaders of the South Ossetian movement never hid their goal of unification with North Ossetia under Russian leadership (as a subject within the Russian Federation). In many ways, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was the reason behind the development of the Armenian-Russian strategic union (primarily in the area of defense and security). On the other hand, Azerbaijan's diversified foreign policy with emphasis on special relations with Turkey also contributed to this. Both Baku and Yerevan saw rapprochement with Moscow as mutually exclusive.

All these diverse interests limited the opportunities for resolution of political conflicts. In fact, balancing between these diverse interests for so many years turned Moscow into the "freezer" of these conflicts without any substantial change in the prospects of their resolution. This situation pushed the states that directly suffered from the secessionist movements and lost control over their de jure territories to revise the unfavorable status quo. Here is where the "internationalization" of the conflicts in the South Caucasus took its roots. They started as a quest for foreign policy alternatives to the Moscow's privileged position. As a result, the countries of the region expressed more active interest in the involvement of the US, EU as a whole, and individual European countries, as well as Turkey and Iran in the resolution of these conflicts.

Throughout the entire post-soviet period, Russia's attitude towards the countries of the South Caucasus, as well as the unrecognized entities and the resolution of the conflicts, underwent significant transformation. Moscow, faced with the Chechen separatist challenge, initially

supported Tbilisi's intention on the restoration of the country's territorial integrity. After the start of the first anti-separatist⁵ campaign in Chechnya, Russia closed the border with Abkhazia along the Psou River on December 19, 1994. Later, on January 19, 1996, the Council of the Heads of States of CIS, with decisive role of Russia and Georgia, adopted a decision "On measures to resolve conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia," which announced the cease of any trade and economic, transport, financial, and other operations with the unrecognized republic. Moscow completely abandoned sanctions against Abkhazia only in April 2008. In 1997, the Russian Foreign Ministry offered Abkhazia a "common state" solution within the borders of the former Georgian USSR. Details of this solution were elaborated upon in the new "Protocol on Georgian-Abkhaz settlements." The successful "shuttle diplomacy" carried out by then Russian foreign minister Yevgeny Primakov lead to a personal meeting between Eduard Shevardnadze and Vladislav Ardzinba (Lakoba 2001).

Evolution of the Russian approach toward Georgia became visible only in 1998. This process was facilitated by several developments including Tbilisi's unilateral attempt to alter the status quo and regain control over Abkhazia⁶, change the Georgian government's position on the Chechen issue⁷, and develop relations between Georgia and NATO, which already started during Shevardnadze's period and became more salient after the "rose revolution" of 2003. This list also includes the expansion of contracts between Moscow and Sukhumi (the most sensitive issue for the Georgian side was and still is the issuance of Russian passports to Abkhazia residents).

The developments of May-August 2004, when Tbilisi tried to regain control over South Ossetia by force, became a watershed moment in the worsening of Russian-Georgian relations. The military escalation after twelve years of ceasefire, the negotiation process, and compromises

⁵ This is the term used by the author. The Caucasus Edition editorial team considers these events as the "First Chechen War."

⁶ These developments include the confrontation in the Gali district of Abkhazia in May 1998 and the attack of the Chechen field commander Ruslan Gelayev in the Kodori Gorge in October 2001 that was supported by Tbilisi.

⁷ For more details on this, see the author's previous work: (Markedonov 2010)..

made set back the resolution of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict and pre-determined the future “five-day war” in August 2008.⁸ To a large extent, these developments expedited Russia’s transition from the role of mediator of the peace process to the role of a security guarantor of these de facto entities. This process ended with the recognition of Abkhazia’s and South Ossetia’s independence, halting of diplomatic relations between Russia and Georgia and setting a precedent for the redrawing of inter-republic borders that the Eurasian newly independent states inherited from the Soviet period.

Russian-Azerbaijani relations followed a different trajectory. After the collapse for the Soviet Union for many years the most problematic country in the South Caucasus for Russia was Azerbaijan and not Georgia. Unlike in Georgia⁹, where Russia maintained a military presence until 2006, and where the border control officers patrolled the outer perimeter of the border until 1999, the last units of the Russian army left Azerbaijan in May 1993 (104th airborne division). Russia’s first president Boris Yeltsin never visited Baku in an official capacity. During the Chechen campaign, Azerbaijan took openly friendly stands towards Chechnya lead by Dudayev and Maskhadov (Izmodenov 2003). It was only in 2001 when Vladimir Putin visited Baku as the leader of the new Russia after the collapse of the USSR. This visit and then the bilateral agreement signed in 2002 moved Russian-Azerbaijani relations from the “freezing” point. Constructive relations were built (including a military-technical format) despite the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the strategic relations between Moscow and Yerevan, and Baku and Ankara. And now, both Armenia and Azerbaijan, despite the absence of even hints of reaching compromises on the Karabakh conflict, see Russia as an important mediator playing a special role in the peace process.

Consequently, the Kremlin’s dominant motivation in resolving conflicts is not a cover for some ideological program or a comprehensive geopolitical strategy but is a response to changing circumstances (changing of the status quo not in Russia’s favor, penetration of new players into the region, fear of losing its influence). At the same time,

⁸ For more details on this, see the author’s previous work: (Markedonov 2008).

⁹ Here the author means the core territory of Georgia minus Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Moscow does not initiate changes in the status quo: it rather responds to such attempts (as in the case of Georgia from 2004–2008). Moreover, the “Crimean precedent” did not become the basis for its actions in the South Caucasus, which has its own value. After 2014 Moscow did not use any of the scenarios that it tested in Crimea in any of the conflicts in this part of the post-Soviet space.

In between the status quo and revisionism

Russian leadership does not have a universal approach either to conflicts or to the de facto state of the South Caucasus. We can identify two fundamental positions that Russia has.

The first one can be defined as a revisionist position. Moscow recognizes the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and officially withdraws support for Georgia’s territorial integrity. The second position supports the current status quo and is made clear by the refusal to recognize the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) and establishing any types of contact with it except those that are within the mandate of the OSCE Minsk Group in which Russia is one of the co-chairs. Russia recognizes the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, while it is engaged in a strategic alliance with Armenia and is helping to work toward a settlement of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The 2016 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (in this regard this document repeats the provisions of the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept) stipulates that Russian priorities include “assisting the establishment of the Republic of Abkhazia and the Republic of South Ossetia as modern democratic States, strengthening their international positions, and ensuring reliable security and socioeconomic recovery” (MFA-RF 2016). During the normalization of relations with Tbilisi that started in 2012-2013, Moscow limited this process by drawing some “red lines.” Russia is not engaging in negotiations over the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In the Foreign Policy Concept document, Moscow expresses interest in “normalizing relations with Georgia in areas where the Georgian side is willing to do the same, with due consideration for the current political environment in the South Caucasus.” In practice, this means the current state of affairs that was established in the region after recognition of the independence of the two former autonomies of the Georgian SSR.

Thus, from Moscow's point of view, the South Caucasus consists of not three states (UN member states Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia), but five. Moscow builds its relationships with Abkhazia and South Ossetia based on bilateral agreements "On Strategic Partnership and Alliance" (signed on November 24, 2014) and "On Alliance and Integration" (signed on March 18, 2015). Even though both documents sealed Moscow's increasing military-political presence in both partly recognized republics (currently the South Ossetian army is integrated into Russian armed forces), they can hardly be regarded as new milestones. These agreements formalized the set up that emerged in August 2008 when Moscow became the guarantor of security, recovery, and social-economic development of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Along with a basic structure, these two agreements have their own peculiarities. These differences can be explained by a fundamental divergence of the two projects. While Abkhazia strives to maintain its statehood (with Russian military-political guarantees), South Ossetia views independence not as a final goal but as a transitional stage on the way to unification with North Ossetia within Russia. In the case of Abkhazia, the elite tries to emphasize its own preferences (Russian citizens do not have the right to receive Abkhaz citizenship but have access to land resources and real estate; the word "integration" was removed from the title of the agreement). The Abkhaz leadership subjected the document of alliance with Russia to a number of revisions.¹⁰

However, South Ossetia is interested in maximal integration with Russia, including unification with it (per Crimea's example). In July 2015, South Ossetian border guards (with the support of Russia) installed new border signs along the Khurvaleti-Orchosani line. As a result, a piece of the strategically important Baku-Supsa pipeline appeared under Tskhinvali's control. Currently, the South Ossetian border post is located just 450 meters from the all-Caucasian significant highway connecting Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Eastern Georgia with its Black Sea ports and Turkey (Gamtselidze 2015).

¹⁰ See the evolution of the drafts of the bilateral agreements between Russia and Abkhazia: <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/252874/>.

Russia consistently avoids raising the question of changing South Ossetia's current status and expanding the state by including a new federation subject. From 2014 to 2017, discussions in South Ossetia on a referendum on unification with Russia intensified. At the end of May 2016, the South Ossetian leadership decided to postpone the popular vote to take place after the presidential elections, which were held in April 2017. The leader of "United Ossetia" party Anatoly Bibilov (former chairperson of the parliament) won the elections. While he was consistently pushing forward the idea of unification of "two Ossetias" within the Russian Federation, Moscow didn't support this idea. The repeat of the "Crimea Scenario" did not happen. Bibilov himself actually halted the "unification project."

A series of electoral campaigns in Georgia during 2013-2016 significantly altered the political landscape within the country. After Mikhail Saakashvili's departure together with the United National Movement party, certain changes took place in Russian-Georgian relations. Nevertheless, they were (and still are) tactical and selective. The new Georgian leadership (represented by the Georgian Dream party) maintained their loyalty to the strategic approaches of the previous government: supporting and strengthening of integration with NATO and the European Union. However, the Georgian Dream team, unlike Saakashvili, made serious changes in its tactical approaches. The strategic goal of membership in NATO and the EU is viewed not through an open confrontation with Russia, but through a pragmatic approach to relations with Moscow. Some clear results of this approach are:

- Ending confrontational rhetoric and using Russia as a factor for domestic political mobilization by the Georgian authorities;
- Tbilisi's refusal to support the North Caucasian nationalist movements and a political alliance with them based on positioning Georgia as a "Caucasian alternative" to Russia;
- Declaration on readiness to cooperate on security issues; and
- Establishment of direct and regular dialogue between Georgian and Russian governments that is free from raising and discussing the status disputes over Abkhazia and South Ossetia (the meeting format between Georgy Karasin and Zurab Abashidze).

Russia opened its market for Georgian goods (alcohol, mineral water, citrus fruits) and eased the visa regime for Georgian cargo service providers (truck drivers). In early February 2017, Karasin and Abashidze made a statement expressing their readiness to return to the six-year-old treaty on opening trade corridors between the Russian Federation and Georgia through Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Previously, this document was part of the Russian-Georgian agreement on Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). Most likely this process will not be quick, because it affects the interests of not only Tbilisi and Moscow but also of Yerevan and Baku, as well as of partially recognized entities. However, the very fact of putting forward some constructive initiatives despite the existing differences is a positive signal.

Despite public support to Ukraine's territorial integrity and condemnation of "annexation of Crimea," official Tbilisi refused to "link" its policies to the crisis in Ukraine. However, the existence of such contradictions as the status of the two partially recognized republics and diverse foreign policy positions regarding the involvement of NATO and the EU in Caucasian affairs (the "red lines") quickly exhausted the primary agenda for normalizing relations between Russia and Georgia. Today, the only topic of possible future cooperation between the two countries in countering terrorism, especially taking into account the radicalization of the population in the Akhmeta district of Georgia (Pankisi) bordering Russia and the involvement of people from there in Jihadist movements in Syria and Iraq, primarily in the "Islamic State" (Charkviani 2015).

Moscow adopted another approach for Nagorno-Karabakh. NKR is not mentioned at all in the 2016 Foreign Policy Concept, either as an unrecognized entity or as a party to a conflict (while Transnistria is viewed as a party to a conflict with Moldova). Moscow is interested in maintaining a maximum balance between Yerevan and Baku (which is even more important after losing the leverage over Georgia in 2008). Unlike in the cases of Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-South Ossetian conflicts both parties to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict are interested in Russian mediation. For Armenia, who is actively involved in integration processes dominated by Russia (CSTO and EAEU), Russian mediation implies certain guarantees for non-resumption of full-scale hostilities. For Azerbaijan cooperation with Russia allows distancing from the West

who has very critical views of the internal political situation in the country (human rights issues, authoritarian regime). In 2016, Russia supported a constitutional referendum that extended the term of the presidential legislature from five to seven years and expanded the powers of the head of state. In February 2017, Russia also supported the appointment of President Ilham Aliyev's spouse Mehriban to the post of vice president. Therefore, the official position of the Russian Federation is an important factor in the international legitimization of political order in the Caspian state, which Baku appreciates.

The Russian-Azerbaijani bilateral partnership also has clear boundaries. Azerbaijan aims to be an independent player in the regional energy projects and be a partner with the West. Baku clearly and consistently supports Georgia's and Ukraine's territorial integrity. This Caspian state is not rushing to become part of Eurasian integration processes led by Moscow. In the meantime, Russia also tries to engage in an integration process that would not resemble CIS ("instrument for civilized divorce"). But until the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Armenia's and Azerbaijan's participation in the same integration structure can reduce the efficiency of the latter to a zero.

Thus, when building its policies towards the conflicts in the Caucasus, Russia avoids using uniform standards. It recognizes the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but at the same time tries to avoid a complete collapse of relations with Georgia (in this regard Vladimir Putin's statements on the necessity to ease or abolish the visa regime with Georgia are very illustrative) (RIA Novosti 2015). Moscow also balances between Baku and Yerevan in the process of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement while supporting its priority—a strategic alliance with Armenia.

Yet, Moscow's influence over Abkhaz and South Ossetian elites should not be exaggerated and explained exclusively by the military and financial support. Many internal processes have their own logic. As an example, in 2014 the leadership of Abkhazia changed as a result of mass protests; however, the opposition protests did not stop after the election of another leader, Raul Hajimba. In 2017, Anatoly Bibilov became the president of South Ossetia, while Vladimir Putin publicly showed his support for his main opponent, incumbent president Leonid Tibilov.

Russia and the West: Between confrontation and cooperation

The relationship between Russia and the West in this complicated region cannot be reduced to a confrontation model. We have a more diverse/mosaic pattern.

Currently, the main issue for competition (and confrontation) between Russia and the West on the post-Soviet space is Ukraine. Developments in this country and around it did not cancel the fact that Moscow, Brussels, and Washington have already clashed in the South Caucasus. And they currently have significantly fundamental differences. Moscow and Washington and Brussels have diverging views about conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Moscow views these two republics as newly independent states, while the US and EU insist on the maintaining of "Georgia's territorial integrity." In addition, the US and EU and several other countries use the term "occupied territories" when referencing Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In the strengthening of Russian military presence in the region and attempts to alter borders between republics, Washington and Brussels see Moscow's attempts to restore Soviet or imperial domination in Eurasia. After changing the status of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and, especially Crimea, the US is particularly concerned about the possible repeat of this experience in other parts of the post-Soviet space.

On July 29, 2011, the US Senate adopted a resolution in support of Georgia's "territorial integrity," which demanded Russia to stop the occupation (the authors of the resolution were Republican senator Lindsey Graham and Democratic senator Jeanne Shaheen) (WH 2010). Some European countries (Lithuania, Romania), the European Parliament, and NATO Parliament Assembly also recognized Russian "occupation" of Georgian territories.

However, the Western countries are not united around the issue of Georgia's membership in the North Atlantic Alliance. The US, Baltic states, Poland, and Romania insist on expediting the process. At the same time, the "locomotives" of European Integration Germany and France do not consider accession of a new member reasonable at least until the conflicts are resolved and all disputes between Tbilisi and

Moscow are settled. In this context, the regional visit of German Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel in August 2018 was illuminating. During this visit, Berlin sent an unambiguous signal: Georgia cannot count on Germany's support to join NATO. Meanwhile, Tbilisi's accession into the Alliance is totally unacceptable for Russia. For Moscow, such a move means the development of an extremely unfavorable strategic situation, especially in conflict zones.

Unlike the conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, Southeastern Ukraine, and the Balkans, the positions of Russia and the West virtually overlap regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Currently, the three co-chair countries of the Minsk Group (US, France, and Russia), despite their other differences, share consensus regarding the revised "Madrid Principles" as the foundation for the peace process. The West also supports Russia's individual peace initiative in Nagorno-Karabakh (the trilateral negotiation format Moscow-Baku-Yerevan). Even today, when relations between Moscow and Washington have reached their lowest level since the collapse of the USSR, American diplomats positively assess the role played by the Russian leadership both in the process of de-escalating the military confrontation and in supporting the negotiation process (Regnum 2017).

The Karabakh settlement remains, perhaps, the only relatively successful format of interaction of the United States and Russia in the post-Soviet space. Like Moscow, Washington also balances between different interest groups. On the one hand, the issues of energy security bring it closer to Baku. Yet on the other hand, the liberal views are closer to the positions of the Armenian lobby (the Nagorno-Karabakh movement is viewed as a response to Soviet national discriminatory policies) (Galstyan 2016). As for the European Union, Brussels does not officially have independent peacekeeping projects in Nagorno-Karabakh. France acts as the official representative of Brussels in the Minsk Group.

Russia, Iran, and Turkey: problems and contradictions

Turkey and Iran are other players in the South Caucasus besides the West and Russia. Their interests cannot be identified with the positions of Washington and Brussels or with Moscow's approaches. Turkey's interest in the Caucasus is determined by several factors. First of all, it has strong ties with Turkic-speaking Azerbaijan. Over the past quarter

century the two countries have become strategic allies. Turkey consistently supports Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and condemns the actions of Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh. The Turkish military is actively involved in the training and retraining of the Azerbaijani officers. From April 1993 to the present, Turkey has imposed a blockade on the land border with Armenia (about 300 km). This decision was made during the open military confrontation in Nagorno-Karabakh. During the period, when military escalation in Karabakh began in April 2016, only Turkey and Ukraine fully supported one of the conflicting parties—Baku. Furthermore, Turkey is not just a member of NATO, but a country with the second largest army in the Alliance (PRT 2016). However, its positions are different from those of the United States and France—the two co-chairs of the Minsk Group that are Ankara's military allies.

Common interests bring together Turkey and Georgia. Ankara consistently supports the territorial integrity of this country, participates in joint infrastructure and military-technical projects. The presence of the Abkhaz diaspora within Turkey, as well as the business contacts of Turkish citizens of Abkhazian descent with their historic homeland, make Ankara's policy more nuanced. The Turkish authorities do not prevent the organizations of the Abkhaz and North Caucasian diaspora from developing cultural and business contacts with Abkhazia. Russian-Turkish confrontation of 2015-2016 imposed its own adjustments, and Sukhumi, following Moscow, joined the sanctions against Ankara. Naturally, the improvement of Russian-Turkish bilateral relations was positively perceived by the Abkhaz side.

Iran also brings on its own approaches. For many years, the Islamic Republic consistently promoted its vision of a regional security system of conflict settlement in the South Caucasus. The vision implies the "3 + 3" format (Regnum 2003). The two triads are composed of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, as well as Iran, Russia, and Turkey. And although Iran is hostile to any Western presence in the region and is not ready to cooperate with the United States and the European Union in resolving conflicts in the South Caucasus, its position of being committed exclusively to diplomatic methods and opposing any military solution to the status quo deserves attention. In 2009, Iran's representative declared the country's unwillingness to recognize the

independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, thus supporting the territorial integrity of Georgia (FNA 2009). With Nagorno-Karabakh, the situation is rather paradoxical. While Russia and the West demonstrate a willingness to cooperate, Iran is critical of the implementation of the updated “Madrid Principles.” Tehran is uncomfortable with the resolution of the conflict in Karabakh, which would involve the deployment of international peacekeeping forces into the region (it does not matter under whose flag these forces will be deployed). Representatives of Tehran have always stated that there should be no external players in the region. Iran’s position regarding the “basic principles” of the conflict settlement does not coincide with the Russian approaches, although, like Russia, the Islamic Republic unequivocally opposes a military solution. In a paradoxical way, it brings Iran’s position closer to the opinion of the two “Western” co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group.

Recommendations

Currently, there are a few opportunities for resolving conflicts in the South Caucasus. The positions of all the parties involved do not have room for a compromise. Abkhazia and South Ossetia view Moscow’s recognition of their independence as a final decision, while Georgia sees this as a temporary occupation. The Armenian side understands the settlement as the self-determination of the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh, and not their reconciliation with the Azerbaijanis. Baku processes the restoration of territorial integrity (including by military means) without a broad discussion on the possible status of the disputed territory within a single country.

Today, conflicts in the Caucasus are influenced by external factors to a much greater degree. Among them are the confrontations between Russia and the West as well as the armed conflict in the Southeast of Ukraine and in Syria. As a result, the issues in the Caucasus become embedded in broader contexts. Their regional format is increasingly complemented by geopolitical considerations, which reduce the possibilities for reaching a compromise since the principle of “zero-sum games” becomes dominant.

Nevertheless, the search for a way out of the impasse, and at least, building structures to manage if not resolve the conflicts and minimize

additional risks, is possible. First of all, it is necessary to overcome the popular misconception that it cannot get worse. There are possible scenarios that can lead to a situation where the current relative turbulence can be replaced by a rough shakeup, including military escalation. For example, in the case of Georgia's expedited accession to NATO, it is possible that South Ossetia (and less likely Abkhazia) will be annexed to Russia like Crimea was. The growing number of incidents in Nagorno-Karabakh is fraught with the involvement of Russia, Turkey, Iran, and under certain circumstances, the United States and its European allies into the conflict, even via military means.

Today, all players involved in the Caucasian processes admit that conflict resolution is impossible without Moscow's participation. However, expectations of what Russia should do and the vision of the situation by its leadership are very different. It is unlikely that the Kremlin is ready for the "de-occupation" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which Tbilisi, as well as the US and its allies supporting Georgia, demand from Russia. At the same time, the West will not agree with the establishment of Russian dominance in the South Caucasus.

In this context, it is extremely important to start a general and substantive dialogue on European security issues, which would include consideration of the situation around Ukraine, the Caucasus, and the Black Sea region, with the participation of both the EU and NATO member states and Russia. Currently, without a minimal positive dynamic on this issue addressing the conflicts in the Caucasus is problematic. In this regard, it is vital to update the "inventory" of the interests of all players, define competitive goals and objectives, and try to develop a "roadmap" despite existing disputes over status issues.

The following recommendations towards issues in the Caucasus are put forward considering the current trends:

1. The collapse of the existing negotiation formats should be prevented: the Geneva talks on the situation in the Caucasus and negotiations on the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. These are extremely important as channels of communication between the conflict parties and other players involved in the peace process.

2. In the current context, the utmost aim is to have the joint oral agreement on the non-use of force in Abkhazia and South Ossetia supported by all parties of the Geneva talks. Based on this not legally binding agreement, it will be possible to develop a more detailed document in the future.
3. The work of separate working groups in the framework of the Geneva discussions on security and humanitarian issues should be intensified. It is necessary to minimize detentions and arrests and ensure the most convenient contacts between the populations on both sides of the conflict.
4. Practical content to European Union's "engagement without recognition" approach in relation to Abkhazia and South Ossetia should be added. It is important to identify areas where interaction between Sukhumi, Tskhinvali, Tbilisi, Moscow, the EU, and other players is possible despite the unresolved status issues.
5. Trilateral processes (negotiations between the presidents of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia) along with the existing diplomatic format (OSCE Minsk Group) should be activated. This (trilateral) format has already paid off in 2008-2012. This format managed to keep Yerevan and Baku from repeating the South Ossetian scenario and even reach mutual agreements on humanitarian issues, as well as come very close to compromise on "basic principles." In addition to increasing Russian participation, this format would allow Moscow to maintain cooperation with France and the United States, the two OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs interested in cooperating with Russia in this direction. Russia's effectiveness in this context would strengthen the confidence between Moscow and Washington and facilitate solving broader international issues.
6. Constructive relations between Russia and the new authorities in Armenia should be built in order to prevent the sharp polarization within this republic and the reevaluation of its relations with Russia and Eurasian integration. High-quality relations with the new cabinet are extremely important in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement. They will allow Yerevan to overcome the existing stagnation in the negotiations and return to a meaningful dialogue with Baku.

7. A special Russian-Armenian integration package should be developed as a bridge between the EU and the EAEU. While this topic directly is not related to the conflict settlement, such an “and-and” model and the rejection of the explicit choice between Moscow and Brussels is an important strategy when considering prospects of pragmatic relations between Russia and the West, or at least with the European Union.
8. Moscow’s policies towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the elites of which have different views about the prospects of their existence, should be diversified. At the same time, coordination of integration steps with Sukhum/i and Tskhinval/i should be conducted with a clear understanding that Russia has its own interests and reasons, and Moscow’s position cannot be that of a lobbyist for Abkhazia and South Ossetia (in this regard it would be useful to refrain from implementing “United Ossetia” plans per the Crimean model).
9. Areas of cooperation between Russia and Georgia that already have been tried and unite the positions of the parties despite the existing contradictions should be developed. This refers to the security issues on the North Caucasus border (especially countering radical Islamism). This is extremely important in the context of Pankisi, as well as the participation of immigrants from Georgia and the Russian North Caucasus in the Middle Eastern terrorist and extremist structures.
10. Pragmatic relations between Russia and the United States and its allies should be built to counter radical jihadism in the Middle East (considering the influence of the situation in this region on the Southern and Northern Caucasus).
11. Regular contacts should be established between NATO and Russia to exchange information on the military-political situation in the Caucasus. This model has been tested in Syria already. The possible risks during military exercises should be minimized.
12. Activate, and possibly, establish regular consultations between Moscow, Ankara, and Tehran on issues in the Caucasus. This format of cooperation already paid off in the Middle East. It seems that it could be tested in the South Caucasus as well.
13. A coordination mechanism should be established on security and cross-border cooperation in the framework of the Greater

Caucasus (including representatives of Georgia and Azerbaijan, which have a common border with the Russian Federation along Dagestan, Chechnya, and Ingushetia). The participants on the Russian side can include the staff of plenipotentiary representative in the North-Caucasian Federal District (North Caucasus Federal District) and representatives of the relevant departments of the Russian Foreign Ministry. Such experience already existed in the 1990s and the first half of the 2000s.

14. A coordinating expert-analytical structure should be created for the Greater Caucasus that would help facilitate interaction and exchange of information between experts working on the issues related to the South Caucasus and North Caucasus. It is extremely important to ensure regular interaction among expert structures dealing with Middle East issues, as well as counter-terrorism issues. This would improve the quality of expert support of practical recommendations on security, defense, and political development of the entire Greater Caucasus.

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Two Modalities of Foreign and Domestic Policies in Turkey: From Soft Power to War Rhetoric

Ömer Turan

In June 2018, the Turkish political system went through an unusually important double election for the presidency and parliament. With these elections, the shift from the parliamentarian to a presidential system was officially put into effect and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became the elected leader of the new system, with a cabinet fully detached from the legislature. In addition, 2018 has witnessed a Turkish-American diplomatic crisis and a currency crisis in Turkey. On the foreign policy level, Turkey is deeply embedded in the Syrian crisis. It has drifted away from its former EU membership bid and stopped acting as a regional actor providing stability. Turkey is no longer able to have strong diplomatic relationships with South Caucasus' governments and offer them some new perspectives to strengthen cooperation with each other. This article overviews how Erdoğan's new one-man foreign policy has replaced that of his own political party, AKP, indicating a significant shift from the earlier promise of "zero problem with neighbors" to a policy that sustains itself through war rhetoric. This article argues that Erdoğan attempts to replace the former AKP's more balanced policy with a new challenging alliance with Russia. The difficulty of this alliance has several layers, which will be discussed below.

This article, drawing on the critical International Relations literature and looking closely at the AKP's journey since its establishment in 2001,

emphasizes the impossibility of dividing the foreign and domestic policy perspectives. I name the AKP's particular way of connecting foreign and domestic policies as a certain modality, with a series of repercussions in both spheres. This is a moment in Turkish history, especially since the July 15 coup attempt in 2016, when "de-democratization" (Somer 2016), or in other words "exit from democracy" (Öktem and Akkoyunlu 2016), has a direct implication for rearranging international alliances, reinforcing Erdoğan's choice towards an alliance with Russia. Unlike in the AKP era, at least until 2011, when there was a commitment to democratic reforms and steps were taken toward the EU bid, in Erdoğan's "new Turkey," a regime where principles of rule of law and separation of powers have been severely damaged, European integration is no longer a feasible target. The prevailing authoritarianism in Turkey thus finds its natural counterpart in Putin's authoritarianism.

This article puts forward its argument in four sections. First, it focuses on the AKP's former policy characterized by a civilizationist approach and democratic reforms. Second, Erdoğan's war rhetoric is discussed within the context of new authoritarianism in Turkey. The third section sheds light on Turkey's rapprochement with Russia. The article concludes with an evaluation of prospects for the future and makes three recommendations. These three recommendations put the emphasis on responsibilities of European institutions at various levels, including the role of the ECHR of Council of Europe. In this sense, the article provides a panorama on how the former modality of the AKP in connecting foreign and domestic policies. Democratization, multilayered cooperation, and soft power have been replaced by a new modality that prioritizes securitization and military measures and does not have a democratization agenda.

The AKP's Former Foreign Policy

How can we make a periodization of the AKP-led foreign policy? Fethi Açıkel's (2016) periodization names the first period as "Islamic Liberalism." Between 2002 and 2009, by adhering to the idea of Islamic liberalism, the AKP followed a pro-EU perspective and initiated democratic reforms. This first period ended in Davos World Economic Forum in 2009, where Erdoğan had a clash with Shimon Peres over Gaza. For Açıkel, the second period, between 2009 and 2014, was marked by

pan-Islamist populism. It starts with the flotilla crisis with Israel in 2010 and the strengthening of ties with the Islamists in the Middle East. According to Açıkel, the third period that started in 2014 is “Islamic Nationalism.”

In the first period, a peculiar fusion of domestic and international affairs based on an Islamic identity gave the founders of the AKP, formerly (less moderate) Islamist politicians, the opportunity to make claims with reference to this identity. Their new formula was based on a civilizational identity and the idea of dialogue among civilizations, opening for the AKP new grounds for foreign relations prioritizing peace and cooperation (Adak and Turan 2016). The party program of 2001 envisaged Turkey as an element of stability in the region where it is situated, with its democracy, economy, and attitude of respect for human rights. Before the general elections in 2002, the AKP’s first campaign promoted the idea of universality of human rights, the Copenhagen criteria, freedom of thought and expression, and economic liberalism. With the vision of Ahmet Davutoğlu, the AKP internalized the EU membership bid, within the dialogue among civilizations framework. In 2005, this was converted into an alliance of civilizations discourse, which indicated to the AKP’s supporters and allies in the Middle East that the EU bid did not necessarily mean a weaker Islamic identity in Turkey; on the contrary, the EU would accept Turkey with full membership thanks to its Islamic identity. Davutoğlu also championed the perspective of “zero problems with neighbors.” Although the AKP’s civilizational foreign policy was explicitly based on a non-secular logic, it was welcomed by several European politicians and opinion leaders as it was a new mindset, helping Turkey improve its relations with the neighboring countries as well as the EU. The AKP government was pleased to position itself as a government able to talk to every government in its region (including Tel Aviv until 2008 and Yerevan until 2010). This specific modality also had a vision about achieving a high level of soft power within the region and beyond. In the AKP’s vision, soft power included an eagerness to play third party roles in the management and resolution of regional conflicts (Benli Antunışık 2008). Exporting Turkish TV series, especially to Arab countries to show Turkish lifestyle as desirable, and opening schools affiliated with Gülenist networks abroad were taken as influential tools of soft power. As a Muslim

preacher, Fethullah Gülen supported the idea of inter-faith dialogue. In the following years, however, it became evident that the Gülenist sponsorship of soft power was truly paradoxical, as the alliance with the Gülen network later appeared as the main weakness of the AKP.

Despite its promises, the AKP's civilizationist vision failed to have a consistent plan for different cases of the popular uprisings in the Middle East. Put differently, the civilizationist vision was too idealistic, and eventually the AKP government was unable to find a consistent balance between its civilizational ethos and concrete interests. Ziya Öniş (2012) observed this inconsistency with Libya and Egypt. While in the context of Libya the AKP government hesitated to support the uprising due to Turkish business investments, they immediately supported the protestors in Cairo where there was no Turkish investment. In addition to the crisis with Israel, Ankara was no longer able to talk to several other governments in the region by 2011. This was the first major shortcoming of the civilizationist foreign policy of the AKP.

The second shortcoming was related to the crisis in Syria. The core of any civilizationist argument is attributing coherence to a large unit at the expense of denying the inner diversities and tensions. The Syrian crisis made visible that the Islamic civilizational identity is not inclusive enough to embrace Shia faith and the Kurds with a secular orientation. From 2012, the AKP government chose to support one specific side in Syria's civil war, and this choice was made based on the denominational identity. Some observers named this choice as Sunnification of Turkish foreign policy (İdiz 2013). With this perspective, the AKP government did not hesitate to support radical Islamist groups, who are fighting against the Assad regime. Formerly, the AKP government was proud with its dialogue capacity with every government in the region. And during the Syrian crisis, they considered radical Islamist groups as their dialogue partners. Even when the Mosul consulate of Turkey was captured by ISIS, the Turkish government considered these radical groups within their dialogue network and supposed that the AKP leaders had a persuasive power over them. All in all, despite these contradictions in relation to recent developments in the Middle East, foreign policy had a certain level of consistency on a macro level, especially compared to the aftermath of the upcoming shift based on Erdoğan's whimsical style.

Erdoğan's War Rhetoric and Authoritarianism

The shift from “pan-Islamist populism” towards “Islamic nationalism” on a foreign policy level corresponds to the decline in democracy on the domestic level. In this shift, an important milestone was the Gezi Park resistance in 2013 and the AKP government's brutal response by using police violence as a key leverage. During the Gezi Park occupation and in its aftermath, Erdoğan solidified an “us versus them” discourse. In March 2014, Erdoğan declared that he was leading Turkey's “second War of Independence” (Hamid 2017). If this was a new War of Independence, who was the enemy? In Erdoğan's political rhetoric the enemy was defined in a rather ambiguous way, by mixing all kinds of conspiracy theories with some facts. “The enemy” in his rhetoric implied the Gülenist network, the West in a broad sense, the Gezi Park resisters, “the domestic admirers of the West” (Erdoğan's description of advocates of EU-oriented policies), and an amalgam of all of these. With the suppression of the media, restriction of freedoms, and growing intolerance of opposition, by 2015 the AKP became an authoritarian-hegemonic party, blurring the dividing lines between party and state (Somer 2016).

This de-democratization period was consolidated by the decline of the AKP as an institution. Especially after the rise of the conflict with Gülen's network, starting in 2014 with the large-scale corruption investigation targeting the AKP government and culminating in the coup attempt in 2016 mainly led by this network, Erdoğan reorganized the party with low-profile entourage loyal to his leadership. The strong figures were excluded from the party and the political scene, including former President Abdullah Gül, former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, former Minister of Foreign Affairs (also former chief EU negotiator) Ali Babacan, the leading founding figure of the party Bülent Arınç, as well as Efkan Ala and Yalçın Akdoğan, who represented the AKP government during the Kurdish peace process. The exclusion of Davutoğlu and the broken alliance with Gülen consolidated the abandonment of soft power. Another facet of the AKP's decline is that it lost the majority in the parliament as a result of the June 2018 elections (Cizre 2018) and had to make an electoral alliance with the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), which means drifting even further away from a peaceful resolution to the Kurdish conflict.

At this point a nuanced analysis of de-democratization is needed, emphasizing the direct relevance of the developments in the Kurdish conflict. In 2013-2015, the AKP government initiated a peace process, attempting to resolve the Kurdish armed conflict between the security forces and the PKK. With the fall of the peace process in 2015, Erdoğan returned to a strict militarist logic. Among several reasons for the failure of the peace process, the developments in Rojava within the context of the Syrian crisis fuelled more and more mistrust between the main parties of the Kurdish peace process. Ankara chose to avoid antagonistic relations with ISIS for a long time, while the PYD was defending Rojava against ISIS. The return to the militarist logic meant an unprecedented urban war in Kurdish provinces in Southeastern Turkey, including military operations and clashes between security forces and the PKK-affiliated militants carried out under round-the-clock and open-ended curfews (Hakyemez 2017). While a Human Rights Foundation of Turkey (TİHV 2016) report details the human cost, the report by the Office of the UN Higher Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) is particularly revealing in terms of depicting how the urban landscape was damaged and even totally annihilated in some localities. The urban war dominated the second half of 2015 and the early months of 2016. The war rhetoric and concrete violence totally occupied the political sphere.

Another factor in Turkey's de-democratization was the putsch in July 2015 organized mainly by Gülen-network affiliated soldiers, leading to the death of 248 resisters. Although the putschists failed to take the control, the repercussion of the coup attempt was paradoxical. Under normal circumstances, when a civilian government takes over putschists, what is expected as a result is not usually the rise of militarism. In this case, however, even before the coup attempt, when the political sphere in Turkey had not been geared towards a stabilized democracy due to the escalating violence in the civilian urban sphere in the Kurdish provinces, the coup attempt furthered the on-going de-democratization process during the state of emergency period from July 20, 2016 to July 18, 2018, allowing the government to restrict the freedoms and rights of the citizens and turn the parliament into a non-functional institution through the Turkish-style presidential system.

During these two years, a "state of emergency-type government" model was implemented, which contributed to the institutionalization of

undemocratic practices. As I have discussed elsewhere (Turan 2019), four characteristics define the state of emergency-type government. First, the system is based on powerful leadership, underestimating even the ruling political party. The system excludes strong political figures from the party and turns the state apparatus into a tool working for the advantage primarily of the leader and also of his party. Second, the state of emergency-type government is based on emergency decrees with the force of law (*kanun hükmünde kararname*), bypassing the parliament and any checks and balances mechanism. The decrees published by the prime ministry essentially involve decisions on behalf of the judicial apparatus, especially evident in the decisions on dismissal of more than 100,000 public servants and academics (Amnesty International 2017). Although the current constitution orders that the decrees be exclusively related to issues of the state of emergency and that their effect be limited to the duration of the state of emergency, the state of emergency-type government issued decrees with permanent effect that are not directly related to the state of emergency. Third, the state of emergency-type government underestimates principles of democracy and European standards for freedom and human rights. Fourth, the emergency-type government justifies itself with the existence of a war atmosphere. Not only every decision of the government, but also each characteristic of the new government style, namely the need for a strong leadership and prompt decision-making, is justified with the extraordinary conditions enforced by a war context. Many dissenting voices were put into jail, including hundreds of Kurdish political figures, most notably the HDP co-leaders Figen Yüksekdağ and Selahattin Demirtaş. In order to make permanent some characteristics of the state of emergency-type government, the AKP held a constitutional referendum in April 2017 although it was highly problematic to do it under the state of emergency as noted in the report by the Venice Commission of Council of Europe (2017). The result was a tiny margin of victory for Erdoğan and his dream project of presidentialism, which constitutionalized a one-man system, jeopardizing legislative and judicial independence.

Within this new rising authoritarianism in Turkey, the AKP government preferred to restrict what had been normalized during the earlier period of democratic reforms and the peace process. For instance, the government intervened in the public commemoration of the Armenian

Genocide. For the last 10 years, these commemorations had been organized by a limited number of activists, but in 2018 policemen did not allow the activists to display the banner with the word genocide in Sultanahmet Square in İstanbul, and eventually members of the Human Rights Association opted to cancel the event. By the same token, the perspective towards normalization with Armenia has been silenced since the rise of authoritarianism in Turkey. On several occasions, AKP governments with the second modality of linking domestic and foreign policy expressed that their priority in the South Caucasus is Azerbaijan and a trilateral cooperation between Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey especially in the areas of economy, transportation, and energy (Gamaghelyan and Sayan 2018). And since the June 2018 election, the AKP does not have the majority in the parliament, and thus it depends on the support of the nationalist party, the MHP. This makes any political opening with Armenia in the short term very unlikely (Gamaghelyan and Sayan 2018).

Turkey's Challenging Rapprochement with Russia

Erdoğan's new foreign policy perspective was developing while Turkey was undergoing a process of de-democratization. Improving relations with Russia is central to this perspective. When Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu visited Moscow at the end of August 2018, he declared that Russia is a strategic partner for Turkey, with deepening and multi-layered cooperation. This statement summarized Ankara's effort to search for a new diplomacy venue, rather than depicting the actual situation.

Although the two leaders, Erdoğan and Putin, have similar political visions and personal acquaintance, the Turkish-Russian relations have never been without tension. Turkey has been a member of NATO since the early 1950s, and a hidden tension between NATO's sphere of influence and Russia has existed. In War of August and in 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea, Turkey took sides with Georgia and Ukraine, respectively. Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, these two countries in the same region, one an old super-power dreaming about a revival and the other a medium-sized power with an over-ambitious leader, have been in adverse camps. Russia is openly supporting the Assad regime, and Turkey stopped talking to Damascus in 2011 and

began supporting the rebellious groups. In November 2015, when Turkish Air Forces downed a Russian fighter jet, the peak point of crisis between the two countries was reached. The Russian response was sanctions on Turkish export and tourism and turning the Syrian airspace into a no-fly zone for the Turkish Air Force. However, right after the coup attempt, Erdoğan made his first international visit to St. Petersburg in August 2016, and this bilateral summit opened a new chapter. The ground for rapprochement was ready when Erdoğan had penned a letter to Putin, expressing regret for the fighter jet incident (Walker and Rankin 2016). When Erdoğan arrived in St. Petersburg, he was under the pressure of Western leaders voicing their concern about a possible re-enforcement of the death penalty. Under these circumstances, Putin's support, which does not involve any conditionality based on human rights issues, was a relief for Erdoğan. This visit brought concrete results: the leaders agreed to speed up the nuclear power plant construction in Akkuyu, increase the budget for TurkStream natural gas pipeline, enhance cooperation in the defense industry, and, in order to avoid conflict in the Syrian context, establish a mechanism for bringing soldiers, diplomats, and intelligence service staff (Özcan et al. 2017).

Right after Erdoğan's visit to St. Petersburg, Turkey started military operation "Euphrates Shield" in the Kurdish region of Rojava, in northern Syria, in alliance with the rebel Free Syrian Army (FSA). This was the first concrete result of rapprochement with Russia, and it gave two opportunities to Ankara: an attack against ISIS and blocking any possible unification of the Kurdish cantons, Afrin and Rojava, governed by the PYD. Turkish troops first brought the border town of Jarablus under control, then entered Al Bab, an ISIS stronghold. That was an important moment for the AKP government, whose policy is in visible tension with the US policy towards Rojava, and now thanks to Russia's approval, Turkey appropriated a military leverage in the zone. Within this context, Erdoğan voiced a contentious suggestion, arguing that "The EU at all costs" is a wrong formula and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization could function as an alternative plan to supersede Turkey's EU membership bid (Hürriyet Daily News 2016).

If Erdoğan's statement on Shanghai Five was a symbolic gesture, Turkey's talks with Russia to purchase S-400 surface-to-air missile batteries pointed to a much more concrete policy shift. This investment

of \$2.5 billion marks a major shift in Turkish foreign policy and the national defense framework, simply because the system cannot be integrated into NATO's military architecture (Gumrukcu and Toksabay 2017). This indicates a major difference between the former AKP's foreign policy and Erdoğan's new maneuvers, parallel with his authoritarian rule. The former policy was more consistent and based on a framework of ideas, whereas the latter is not concerned about consistency. The current government aims to proceed with the purchase of F-35A stealth fighters from the US, as a NATO member, although the US Senate voted for a clause in the 2019 defense budget blocking the transfer of aircrafts to Turkey. It is obvious that Erdoğan's efforts to mix F-35s and Russia's S-400 air defense system further escalate the tension between the two governments.

Another important indicator of Turkish-Russian rapprochement was the Astana Talks, a summit between Russia, Iran and Turkey in October 2017. The main idea of these talks was to establish four "de-escalation zones" in Syria, observed by Russia, Turkey, and Iran to calm the conflict situation. Idlib province was accepted as one of the "de-escalation zones," with more than one million civilians and rebel factions dominated by Hay'et Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), under Turkish observation. As of September 2018, three out of these four zones are under control of the Syrian government. In August 2018, during the summit for BRICS country leaders held in Johannesburg, Erdoğan arrived as a guest from a non-member state. And he put forward another alternative to EU membership, stating that he would be happy to see Turkey as a member and suggested a new acronym for the organization: BRICST.

While analyzing the Russo-Turkish rapprochement, similar trajectories in the domestic political careers of Putin and Erdoğan need to be noted. At the beginning of the 2000s, both leaders enjoyed support of the West and they assumed the role of initiating neoliberal reforms in their countries. Then, both of them converted themselves into a role of "challenger" of the West (Birdal 2017). Both leaders have a high record of repressing the media freedom and opposition in their countries (Öney 2017). In the context of challenging the West, the tension between Turkey and the US escalated drastically in August 2018. It was related to an American citizen, Pastor Andrew Brunson, who had been detained since October 2016, on charges of espionage and links to terror organizations

(implausibly, both to the Gülenist network and the PKK). In August, during Brunson's second year in detention, Trump severed his tone towards Ankara, and the US government declared sanctions against Turkish Justice Minister Abdulhamit Gul and Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu for playing leading roles in Brunson's detention. Fueled by this crisis, in August 2018, the Turkish lira crashed, enduring a significant loss in its value. It would be a mistake to assume the Brunson crisis as the only reason for the currency crash. More importantly, several market players (in Turkey and abroad) have started to see Erdoğan's one-man ruling style as a source of risk. When Erdoğan met international investors in London in May 2018, he voiced his utterly irrational idea that low interest rates deliver low inflation in such a way that suggests the investors knew it all wrong. On a regular basis, Erdoğan states that interest rates are the "mother of all evil." Investors have interpreted these messages as a sign of incompetency in Turkey's economic administration. For *Financial Times*, the result of Erdoğan's London meeting was that "Investors lose their appetite for Turkey" (Financial Times 2018). Following his electoral victory, Erdoğan appointed his son-in-law as the Minister of Finance and Treasury, becoming a further message to market players about the absence of a sound economic perspective as well as of a checks and balances mechanism. On top of this continual decline, the crisis with the US on the Brunson case further weakened the value of the Turkish lira. In total, the Turkish lira lost 37 percent of its dollar value since January 2018 (Wheatley 2018). In addition to the problems caused by the second modality of linking domestic and foreign policy, with a gradually weakening economy, Turkey's ability to contribute to regional stability in the South Caucasus has become more limited.

Obviously, no economic crisis or a currency crash cannot be understood by focusing only on the level of politicians' discourse. What needs to be remembered is that the AKP government pursued the policy of limiting the interest rates as much as possible and having high exchange rates. This policy has its limitations in the medium run. But Erdoğan once again devised his war rhetoric. In mid-August, he stated that "The West is waging economic war on Turkey." For him, the fall of the Turkish lira's value necessitated a national struggle comparable to Turkey's war of independence against Western powers (Erdoğan 2018a). He described

the situation as an “economic assassination attempt” and an “external attack.” He also labeled rating agencies as “impostors” and “racketeers.” In other words, he did not accept the fact that global markets have their own logic, and that it is futile to have a discursive clash against them. Moreover, this is a very good case illustrating how Erdoğan utilized the economic crisis, caused mainly by his own wrong policy to demonize the western world and thus reinforce the general political orientation away from the EU and US.

Erdoğan have recently penned two op-ed essays for the American press, which provide further evidence for Turkey’s search to recalibrate the international partnership framework, which is hardly consistent. In his op-ed to *New York Times*, Erdoğan (2018a) addresses the White House and states that Washington must give up on the misguided notion that the Turkish-American relationship can be asymmetrical and must come to terms with the fact that Turkey has alternatives. A month later, in the *Wall Street Journal*, Erdoğan made a call to the international community and to the US, to understand their responsibility for the resolution of the crisis in Idlib, by tacitly accepting the indispensability of a more balanced foreign policy vision. In this essay, Erdoğan emphasized the obligation of the West to prevent a “humanitarian disaster,” together with Turkey’s partners in the Astana peace process—Russia and Iran—which are also responsible for the same target. In a way, he was accepting the fact that without having a fine-tuned balance between the West and Russia, it would not be possible for Turkey to claim its foreign policy perspective in a convincing way (Erdoğan, 2018b).

Prospects for the Future

The overall picture presented in this article demonstrates that, since 2002, the AKP government has had two modalities of bridging domestic and foreign policy. The first modality was the civilizationist foreign policy vision, which was coupled with democratic reform agenda on the domestic level. As of 2018, the first modality has been replaced. The new modality is a search for positioning Turkey within BRICS or even Shanghai Five, and this foreign policy vision is coupled with the shift to a presidential system on the domestic level, a system of “one strong man.” The analysis put forward here does not argue for the priority of foreign policy level over the domestic one, nor does it attribute a

determining power of foreign policy on the domestic issues. The analysis of these two modalities offered here indicates that during the AKP period in Turkey, the preferences of the governing party and its leader in terms of foreign and domestic policies are not separable. And how these two are bridged to make a totality is an indication of Turkey's inner stability and its capacity to provide regional stability. It is important to emphasize that the second modality corresponds to the current de-democratization path for Turkey, where the "state of emergency-type government" is normalized with constitutional amendments. The first modality had a more or less consistent framework; however, regarding the second modality the situation is different. The second is based on a consistently rising authoritarianism on the domestic level; yet when it comes to the foreign policy it fails to have a consistent plan. Erdoğan-style foreign policy attempts to purchase S-400 missiles from Russia and F-35 stealth fighters from the US at the same time, or to have a joint plan with Russia about the future of Syria, although Turkey and Syria do not have a common understanding about which groups are to be labeled as terrorist. The second modality also aims to show some progress on the EU relations, but without taking the necessary steps for a comprehensive European integration of Turkey. This inconsistent foreign policy vision disables Turkey's already limited chance to contribute towards regional stability.

What is then the impact of this new modality led by Erdoğan on the South Caucasus? First of all, with the second modality, Turkey is much more preoccupied with its internal agenda. In this sense, regional stability and the South Caucasus corresponds simply to an absence in Turkey's agenda. In the early 2000s, the US predicted that without achieving a normalization process between Ankara and Yerevan, there would be little hope to achieve a solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Then, the US government initiated a track-two diplomacy process. Although public opinion in Armenia and in the diaspora expressed doubts about this dialogue channel, which failed to achieve a concrete outcome, it was still an important attempt in bringing some former diplomats and experts from Armenia and Turkey to the same table. As of 2018, this formula still holds validity: normalization between Ankara and Yerevan would significantly contribute to de-escalating the tension in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. As Ankara gets closer to

Russia and intensifies the authoritarian ruling style domestically, there is no realistic hope for normalization with Yerevan and the initiation of a positive contribution to regional stability in the South Caucasus. Moreover, the ties between Ankara and Baku are not limited to ethnic identity, but also to energy and trade, which make these two countries strong allies in the realm of realpolitik.

When it comes to prospects for the future, although the “state of emergency-type government” and one-man ruling style seem powerful today in Turkey, international observers in the Caucasus and Europe need to note that this authoritarian phase in Turkish politics is not a viable path in the long run. Today’s economic crisis in Turkey is only one of the reasons for a sustainability issue for the *à la turca* authoritarianism. Equally important, the current constitutionalized authoritarianism lacks institutional basis, which will turn out to be the major problem for the sustainability of this ruling style. Within this framework, this article concludes by making three recommendations.

First, the European institutions need to take the de-democratization of Turkey seriously, together with their responsibility of taking action towards re-democratization. Their first responsibility is not to reduce Turkey to a country with which to negotiate only about the issue of refugees. The European institutions should openly address Turkey’s de-democratization as a serious problem, and they need to show that disregarding basic principles of freedom and rule of law will bring certain costs and consequences for Ankara. The motion recently accepted by the European Parliament to pursue unprecedented disciplinary action against Hungary for violating the EU’s core values, should be taken as benchmark. After the motion against Hungary in September 2018, the European Parliament decided in October to cut financial support to Turkey by €70 million. The aid was supposed to be paid under the condition that Turkey make improvements on the rule of law, democracy, human rights, and freedom of press. Significantly, the AKP government preferred not to turn this decision into a new crisis between Ankara and the EU. This shows that current actions taken by the European institutions do not necessarily lead to new tensions and hence further isolationism of Erdoğan’s government, which is necessary to tackle the de-democratization issue.

Second, the European institutions need to find innovative methods to engage with the regions outside of its borders. This new perspective has to include more direct engagement with the Middle East and the Caucasus and hence should give Erdoğan the message that the only viable option for Turkey to overcome its current crisis is bridging its domestic and foreign policy perspectives in a reasonable manner, which means undoing the war rhetoric.

Third, taking the current authoritarianism in Turkey seriously, the European institutions need to act on various levels, including strengthening the ties with the NGOs in Turkey. The responsibility is not limited to the EU—the Council of Europe’s share is equally important, if not more. The ECHR has recently decided not to have a judgment on the Turkish government’s dismissal of public servants under the post-coup attempt state of emergency, by stating that the domestic remedies are not yet exhausted. This decision is not compatible with the Court’s procedure as long as it takes the domestic commission of government, an explicitly administrative body, as a legal process. With this perspective, the ECHR opted not to guide the Turkish government to act in accordance with the rule of law and other European principles. All the European institutions, and above all, the ECHR, need to consider how Turkey will go beyond the “state of emergency-type government.” And reminding Ankara of the principles already undersigned by Turkey will be a strong start for this purpose.

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PART 2



Nationalism and Hegemony in Post-Communist Georgia

Bakar Berekashvili

Introduction: Prelude for Georgian Nationalism

Georgian nationalism is a modern political and cultural project that embodies both liberal and conservative elements. The liberal narrative of Georgian nationalism is focused on the idea of sovereignty and statehood, and the trauma of the Soviet past. The liberal narrative of Georgian nationalism is, therefore, also an anti-Soviet narrative. The conservative narrative of Georgian nationalism, on the other hand, attempts to preserve what is labeled as “traditional values” and is not explicitly an anti-Soviet project. This narrative mostly presents itself as a “protector” paradigm for Georgia from foreign “alien” cultures. Moreover, nationalist ideology is part of the repertoire of all cultural and political elites who are involved in a struggle for power.¹¹

Georgian philosopher Zaza Shatirishvili (2009) identifies three national narratives of modern Georgia. According to him, the first narrative is a “classical” one that is “the history as well as story of the salvation and rescue of the Georgian nation despite invasions and imperial aggression over the ages” (Shatirishvili 2009, 391). The second narrative is related to the Rose Revolution, “narrating the birth of the new nation and ‘the mighty Georgian state’ from Shevardnadze’s chaos” (Shatirishvili 2009, 392). And the third narrative is a religious one, which claims that Eastern

¹¹ Nationalistic ideology based on the elements of victimization and traumatic past are the principal mechanisms for Georgian liberal political elites. Conservative elites are more focused on idealization of traditional cultural narratives.

Orthodoxy is a “genetically inherited religion” for Georgians (Shatirishvili 2009, 392).

Shatirishvili argues that all three narratives are linked with the Russian factor: “It must also be stressed that, in general, ‘the Russian argument’ (a specific version of conspiracy theory rhetoric) determines all three narratives: intelligentsia is ‘Russian’, authority and ‘new’ intellectuals are ‘Bolsheviks’ and the Church is also ‘Russian’, i.e. a branch of the Russian Church” (Shatirishvili 2009, 393). It could be argued that contemporary narratives of Georgian nationalism are mostly based on anti-Russian sentiments, especially observed in the nationalist narratives of Georgia’s liberal cultural and political circles. The church, on the other hand, remains reluctant to take an anti-Russian stance or support such narratives.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the first wave of Georgian nationalism began with the political rule of Zviad Gamsakhurdia. His nationalist discourse was based on anti-Russian rhetoric, on anti-Abkhaz and anti-Ossetian rhetoric, and on the superiority of the Georgian ethno-nation. Considering this, his ideological stance and rhetoric also threatened the Abkhaz and Ossetian populations and provoked greater waves of separatist sentiments in both areas of Georgia. Thus, the separation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia could perhaps be seen as one of the first consequences of post-soviet Georgian nationalism led by president Gamsakhurdia. Therefore, it is no wonder that the birth of post-soviet Georgian nationalism began with the powerful ideological and cultural process of constructing an enemy image of almost all ethnic groups inside of Georgia and nations neighboring Georgia. Among these, the Russian, Abkhaz, and Ossetian factors were a key focus.

Gamsakhurdia’s nationalist regime collapsed in 1992 as a result of the civil war. The era of his successor, Eduard Shevardnadze, was a silent era in the contemporary history of Georgian nationalism. Although Shevardnadze deconstructed the powerful wave of romanticized ethnic nationalism pursued by Gamsakhurdia, it still did not help in restoring Georgia’s control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Shevardnadze could not play any role to transform the conflict.

The second and most powerful wave of post-communist Georgian nationalism was celebrated in the era of the Rose Revolution. The rhetorical-ideological habitus of Georgia's Rose Revolution was explicitly anti-Russian from the very beginning, but this rhetoric was radicalized after the war of 2008. In post-war Georgia, anti-Russian sentiments were intensively reproduced by the political and cultural institutions, and the reproduction of the Russian enemy image became the principal task of the ruling class.¹² This was a particular ideological and manipulative project organized by Saakashvili's neoliberal system. However, while demonizing Russians, Georgia's neoliberal government simultaneously conducted negotiations with Russian business companies and operators to attract Russian capital to Georgian market. Therefore, in this way, the anti-Russian sentiments of Saakashvili's nationalistic narratives was a populist project that aimed to strengthen the power of the dominant system.

Nationalism in Georgia after the War of 2008

Although the Rose revolution was organized by pro-Western liberal political and cultural elites, at the time the perception of Russia as an enemy was still vague. While Mikheil Saakashvili initially argued about the necessity of good relations with Russia shortly after the Revolution, the civic elites who came to power opted for a principally anti-Russian rhetoric.

At the very beginning, Saakashvili criticized Shevardnadze's inability to normalize relations with Russia. However, as soon as his social legitimacy and popularity started to decrease, Saakashvili himself gradually adopted an anti-Russian rhetoric. Prior to the August 2008 War, Saakashvili organized powerful anti-Russian propaganda by deploying the rhetorical tool of equating today's Russia with the Soviet Union. For example, the Soviet Occupation museum that was opened in spring of 2006 was the imitation of the institutional practice of decommunization and anti-Russian sentiments popular in the Baltic

¹² Here and henceforth, by "ruling class," I mean an alliance of political, financial, military, and cultural elites.

states.¹³ Swedish sociologist Göran Therborn wrote: “In May 2006 the Museum of National History, at the top of Rustaveli Avenue, announced a permanent exhibition on the ‘Soviet Occupation’—an idea of Baltic provenance—which Saakashvili had hastily taken over three months before it opened, financing it from the ‘presidential fund’. Inexplicably closed soon after for ‘restoration’, the museum is now open only to special guests of the President, such as his Polish and Ukrainian counterparts” (Therborn 2007, 79). To put it simply, Saakashvili organized powerful anti-Russian (anti-communist) rhetoric in Georgia by engaging international political actors involved in the construction of the enemy image of Russia (and of communists) in their own countries.

The August 2008 war deepened the process of constructing an enemy image and using it against the opponents of the regime. Particularly, the Russian factor became a major criterion for discrediting rivals in all fields. For example, the ruling class considered itself and President Saakashvili as the only pro-Western political force, and thus, resistance against such power was declared as resistance against national interests. Politicians, intellectuals, academics, and civic activists who resisted neoliberal autocracy were declared Kremlin spies and collaborators of the enemy’s secret services. Georgian democracy, already deeply challenged by right-wing radicalism, became more compromised by this process of oppression and marginalization of political and intellectual opposition.

Persecution and marginalization of the regime’s opponents by using this method of labeling the ideological opposition as spies of the Kremlin in post-soviet Georgia has its traditions rooted in the system of Gamsakhurdia. Saakashvili’s system imitated this anti-democratic practice in a more extreme way. The media, which considered itself as free and independent, was voluntarily tasked with the role of anti-Russian and thus, of anti-opposition propaganda. The goal of such propaganda in the media was to indoctrinate Georgian society with anti-opposition sentiments by accusing the opposition forces in pro-Russian orientation. The pro-governmental scholars and civic elites were regularly hosted in the formally independent media controlled by the

¹³ See for example the discussion on demolition of Soviet monuments in Estonia as a symbolic struggle against the Soviets: (Myers 2007).

government with the sole purpose of legitimizing the dominant governmental discourse on Russia and on the pro-Russian opposition. Considering this, the cultural elites of Rose Revolution practically imitated methods of Soviet intelligentsia, which legitimized the ideological discourses produced by the Soviet political apparatus.

Anti-Russian propaganda and the construction of an enemy image were also embedded into cultural and educational institutions. As I have argued elsewhere, the liberal and right-wing professors who supported the Rose Revolution have established stronger neoliberal ideological control over the academic field (Berekashvili 2017). Through this process, university professors and the academic community were swiftly assigned the role of missionaries of anti-Russian propaganda.¹⁴ The construction of enemy image of Russia also presented various ideals and values, including leftism, in an explicitly negative way. More precisely, socialism and all kinds of leftist ideologies were perceived as exclusively Russian phenomena, and Russia itself was equated with the Soviet Union. Therefore, in this context, new academic elites took the role of exorcists, to expulse “Russian devils” (which mean socialists, communists, and all sorts of leftists) from Georgian cultural and political life. Consequently, the construction of the enemy image was not simply concentrated on the demonization of Russia, but it was also deeply rooted in demonization of all ideological categories, apart from liberal democracy and neoliberalism.¹⁵

Interestingly, while the ruling class (alliance of government, civic elites, and financial elites) passionately promoted anti-Russian propaganda in the media and public life, Russian capital was welcomed by the government to acquire important economic and financial resources. More precisely, Russian financial companies and business operators

14 The regime controlled universities, but one of the most important instruments in the toolbox for career making was loyalty to the ideology of the government.

15 More specifically, academic disciplines in Georgia such as social and political studies are focused on marginalizing all social and political ideas other than neoliberalism. In this context, the Russian factor plays a key role as liberal or ultraliberal ideological categories are perceived as anti-Russian ideals. This process began in the era of the Rose Revolution and still continues to dominate Georgia’s cultural and academic life.

received political support from the government to implement their business activities as part of the Georgian economy. For instance, in the spring of 2012, the Minister of Internal Affairs, Vano Merabishvili, stated that “money has no smell” and that the “Russian investments are welcomed” (Civil.ge 2012).

Anti-Russian sentiments in post-war Georgia encapsulated Abkhazian and South Ossetian fears towards Georgian nationalism, and it made them look towards Russia as principal guarantor of their independence and right for self-determination. The conflict and misunderstanding between Georgians and Abkhazians as well as Ossetians deepened even more. In particular, Abkhazia and South Ossetia perceived Georgia as a historic enemy that oppressed their cultures and people, while Georgia considered Russia the greatest historic enemy that punished Georgia for its social, political, and cultural resistance against Russian domination. And in this context, Abkhazia and South Ossetia were perceived as an important part of this “inquisition.”

Although Saakashvili’s political rule collapsed after the parliamentary elections in autumn of 2012, the legacy of anti-Russian sentiments and the enemy image still shadows today’s political and cultural life in Georgia. Moreover, political parties compete in labeling each other “pro-Russian.” The former ruling party, United National Movement, accuses the current ruling party Georgian Dream of pro-Russian orientation. Conversely, Georgian Dream accused United National Movement and Saakashvili for playing the Kremlin’s cards. In this way, pro-Russian accusations still remain a major practice of political debates in contemporary Georgian media. Furthermore, the agenda of mainstream Georgian media is also deeply focused on “detection” or “identification” of the pro-Russian orientation of Georgian politicians even though they refuse to identify as being pro-Russian.

For instance, in August of 2018, presidential candidate Salome Zurbishvili stated that the war in August of 2008 was launched by Georgia. She also underlined that “A small country like Georgia cannot afford to be provoked: when you are a small country, you have to be smarter than your enemies” (Civil.ge 2018a). Zurbishvili’s statement was condemned by the opposition who accused her of being pro-Russian and betraying Georgia’s national interests. In another statement,

Zurabishvili argued that “We bombed our population, no president has the right to do it,” and she also added, “I want the territorial integrity of this country and I want that no president of this country bomb its territory and citizens” (ipn.ge 2018). Here again, furious by this statement of “traitor,” the Georgian liberal community (NGO elites, some young scholars and pro-liberal activists) on social networks labeled her as a “traitor of the nation” and “spy of the Kremlin.” This discourse has been common in the media supportive of Saakashvili and his party. For example, Nika Gvaramia, the General Director of Rustavi 2 TV station said, “I consider Zurabishvili a traitor and a great threat to our homeland, and yes, fighting against the country’s traitors is exactly what I will do, be it at Rustavi 2 or elsewhere.” (Civil.ge 2018b). The fact that Zurabishvili does not usually hesitate to be critical of Russia did not stop her from being portrayed by the mainstream media and opposition parties as a pro-Russian personality.

Talking about Georgia’s responsibility in the August 2008 war is not something that Zurabishvili “invented.” The report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia established by the EU in December 2008 underlined that “Open hostilities began with a large-scale Georgian military operation against the town of Tskhinvali and the surrounded areas, launched in the night of 7 to 8 August 2008.” The report also emphasized that the Russian response was “initially defensive, and legal, but quickly broke international law when it escalated into air bombing attacks and an invasion putting into Georgia well beyond South Ossetia” (Telegraph 2009).

Expression of support for normalization of relations with Russia is also considered the “language of a traitor.” The language of normalization is strictly stigmatized by the dominant class (those who influence formation of political and public opinion) and by the mainstream media who interprets this as an encouragement to “collaborate with the enemy.”

Civic and cultural elites, or in other words the “auditors” of Georgian democracy, are also involved in the construction of an enemy image of Russia by deploying anti-Russian rhetoric with references to ethnic and historical-anthropological speculations. For example, in his diary blog

published for Radio Liberty, Georgian NGO technocrat and human rights lawyer Giorgi Mshvenieradze quoted Georgian novelist Mikheil Javakhishvili (1880-1937) who once claimed that European culture filtered in Moscow and Petrograd “includes Mongol poison, not holy drink of West” (Radio Liberty 2018). The construction of the enemy image also involved presenting Russia as a historic enemy of “European civilization,” which also conflicts with Georgia as a historic part of the same “civilization.”

Therefore, contemporary Georgian civic elites are engaged in a wider, manipulative and ideological campaign spreading the message that if Georgians want to prove that they are true Europeans then they must resist Russia, which is a true enemy of European culture and civilization. Thus, in this way, pro-Western sympathy of Georgian civil society elites is mostly conditioned by cultural hate of Russia. At the same time, the pro-Western orientation and anti-Russian sentiments greatly contribute to the formation of class identity of contemporary Georgian civil society whose ideological habitus is based on cultural liberalism and on neoliberal imaginations of state and politics. Consequently, the role of Georgian civil society in the process of construction of the enemy image of Russia is significant as it serves for class interests of post-communist liberal and neoliberal elites.

Although the goal of Georgia’s liberal political and cultural elites is to impose and expand extreme anti-Russian sentiments in Georgian society, many ordinary Georgians neglect the politics of anti-Russian sentiments. In particular, a part of Georgian society believes that a strong Russia is necessary to balance western influences, and moreover, many Georgians also believe that the dissolution of the Soviet Union had a negative impact on Georgia (Pew Research Center 2017).¹⁶ However, many Georgians, especially young people, are influenced by anti-Russian discourses, particularly urban young people trained by neoliberal cultural elites at various pedagogical institutions.

¹⁶According to an opinion poll conducted by Pew Research Center, 52% of Georgians are in favor of a strong Russia, while 69% are in favor of Western powers. Also, 42% of Georgians consider the collapse of the Soviet Union as a bad thing for Georgia. However, according to the poll, this argument is supported mostly by older people.

Ghosts of Russian Propaganda

Although Georgia is considered a successful model of democratic transformation in the post-soviet space, it is still difficult to call Georgian democracy a “success story.” In the era of post-communist transition, Georgia could not manage to aggregate relevant social requisites necessary for democracy, such as economic growth and urbanization. Additionally, poverty and an economic crisis permanently threatens Georgia’s democratic future well-being, and a certain standard of life is essential for a democratic system to function. Nevertheless, considering Georgia’s pro-Atlantic aspirations and formal institutionalization of democratic culture, local and global elites mostly refer to Georgia as a democratic country. However, the elite perceives Russia as the biggest threat to Georgian democracy today. This narrative is especially backed and expanded by liberal politicians and think tanks trapped in a Cold War mentality where they see global (and local politics) in black and white, where the dark power is Russia and the white one is the US. This position is regularly emphasized by President Margvelashvili, who accused Russia of having “dark plans” against Georgian democracy and development, and he underlined that “our response to this position is the following: we will not impede Georgia’s development, nor advancement of democracy, nor the EU and NATO integration” (President.gov.ge 2018).

Furthermore, similar to Margvelashvili, pro-liberal Georgian think tanks also identify Russia as well as pro-Russian forces to be threats to Georgia’s democratic transformation, even though such forces are marginal and they have no influence over mainstream media and public opinion. For example, the author of one of the policy briefs prepared by the Georgian Institute of Politics, a liberal think tank based in Tbilisi, argues that one of the main obstacles for democratic reforms in Georgia is “the strengthening of anti-reformist forces, which are supported by Russia and feel stronger due to the current fatigue in the process of Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic integration” (Lebanidze 2016, 3). Among other obstacles, the author also names insufficient attempts of Western actors to democratize Georgia and the lack of political culture. The

author does not examine economic development and other relevant factors as crucial requirements for Georgia's democratic future. Instead, similar to other liberal experts, he attempts to accuse the "other," in particular Russia for threatening Georgian democracy.

To summarize, what mostly disturbs Georgian democracy is an impoverished society and life in total despair. Georgian political and cultural elites are reluctant to face the real challenge of Georgian democracy and they try to hunt for external conditions, for enemies of Georgia's "flourishing" democracy. Sadly, this is a mistake historically committed by many nations when the problem is stemming from the inside. Obviously, in this way, the real enemy of Georgian democracy is endemic poverty and demoralization of society, unemployment, and growing social inequality, all of which make individuals anti-democratic and vulnerable to look for strongman in politics who will play on the emotions of hopeless individuals.

Conclusion

As we saw, contemporary nationalist discourses concentrating on a secular, Westernized Georgia are mostly propelled by anti-Russian sentiments led by liberal elites. Moreover, since liberal nationalism is a relatively alien phenomenon for Georgia, it's high on the agenda of the liberal class to indoctrinate citizens with liberal nationalism narratives. In this way, the principal objective of liberal elites is to deconstruct traces of ethnic nationalism in Georgia and overall politics of "Georgianization" of Georgia that started in the Soviet era.

Therefore, minority protection and de-idealization of Georgian nationalistic traditions are the main focus of today's liberal political and cultural class in Georgia. Although campaigning against hate speech towards any nationalities is an important part of liberal rhetoric in Georgia, hate speech against Russians is not included in the list of liberal heresies. As was expected, ideological and ethical conflict between ethnic nationalists and liberal ones in Georgia ended up with an identity

crisis in the country. In other words, both camps, supporters of liberal and ethnic nationalisms, employ respective narratives for their own purposes. While liberal nationalists argue that they are true pro-Westerners due to their standpoint, ethnic nationalists also argue that they are true pro-Europeans, by making reference to the current conservative and populist uprising in the EU. Therefore, in this context, ironically, liberal (secular) and ethnic nationalists are engaged in competition to prove their pro-Western stances.

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Russia and Georgia 2008-2018 – Escapism for the Sake of Peace?

Dmitry Dubrovskiy

Russian nationalism, foreign policy, and the ‘Georgian question’

The process of political transformation of Russian foreign policy – which can be described with the lofty metaphor “getting off the knees” – also means the development of a foreign policy “independent of the West.” This policy can be tracked through a series of conflicts in the post-Soviet space in which Russia either was one of the main active protagonists or had some other level of involvement.

In this sense, the conflict in Georgia was extremely important. According to many experts and researchers, this conflict became a turning point for a very serious transformation of Russia’s foreign policy. Jeffrey Mankoff argues that the armed conflict between Russian and Georgian armies, while short and relatively small in scale compared with other conflicts in the post-Soviet space, carries importance for at least two main reasons. First of all, the Western countries became “more reluctant to challenge Russia’s leading role in the post-Soviet space” (Mankoff 2011, 267). Secondly, Russia became “increasingly conscious of the limits of its power in the [CIS] region, as well as of the need to make itself a more attractive partner for its neighbors” (Mankoff 2011, 260-261).

This situation is dramatically different from the time of Boris Yeltsin’s presidency when Russia tried to play a more balanced role in the post-Soviet space and attempted to find a balance between its own interests

and those of other countries. The events in Georgia in 2008 support both of Mankoff's arguments. However, the domestic policy implemented at the end of 2010 allows viewing the events in Georgia as a turning point for the domestic political transformation of the Russian ruling regime.

First of all, in 2008 Russian nationalism was at a historically critical period (Verkhovskiy 2016, 75-77). The vector of this transformation can be identified as a shift in Russian ideology of nationalism from ethnic to imperial. Modern Russian nationalism comfortably fits with the concept of "Pax Russiana," which is the main guiding force of the foreign policy conducted by the current Russian regime. This is the main reason why the events in Georgia did not generate much interest and were perceived as a demonstration of the policy of Russian dominance in the region. The events that followed not only deepened the divide inside the nationalistic groups in Russia but also seriously undermined their political positions when these policies and agendas became largely associated with the ruling regime.

In this situation, nationalists were positioned as opposition. For example, they organized rallies on Manezhnaya Square (Manage Square) in 2010 and actively participated in the movement against election fraud in 2011-2012. However, these were the last serious political actions made by Russian nationalists that were visible as a political opposition. After the "Russian Spring"—the events that led to the annexation of Crimea and war in Donbass—the national movement took another hit. First of all, Russian nationalists split in their approach to the "Ukraine issue." The majority took up arms to fight alongside the "people's republics," and a smaller number took the side of the "white brothers." In essence, this was the defeat of "ethnic nationalism" in a clash with "ethnic imperialism," since the majority of Russian nationalists chose the "Russian Spring." This choice required even more active cooperation with the Russian government who organized and supported the "Russian Spring" in Ukraine (Verkhovskiy 2016, 98-100).

Russian nationalists showed little or no reaction to the development in Georgia. Their active involvement in the Abkhaz war of 1992-1993 was the last significant activity in the Georgian context. Even at that time, the unique trait of ethnic xenophobia of Russian nationalists was the perception of a "threat" to Russia that was coming not from Georgia, but

Central Asia, particular from the people of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In general, Russian nationalists, who came a long way from being street hooligans in the 1990s to holding seats in the Duma and Kremlin, have largely ignored Georgia's military-political crisis in 2008, as for them it was not connected with the challenges of "Russian culture and identity."

Moreover, some of the nationalists, including several in Georgia, tried to present the situation as a result of a Western conspiracy against "traditional values" that are allegedly unique to the people of Russia and Georgia. This is why the Russian-Georgian war should be conceptualized as a war provoked by the Western Saakashvili government against friendly Russia, or as Malkhaz Gubashvili, the "chairman of the public commission on Georgian-Russian settlement," said, an "attack by the West on the traditional values" (Davtyan 2009). This position fits perfectly into the overall pattern of Russian policy of "protection of traditional values" that views it as being under constant pressure from "unfriendly external (aka Western) forces" (Dubrovskiy and Quenoy 2018).

The positive aspect of this formula is that the Georgian population, and Georgia as a whole country, are perceived as victims of a "Western conspiracy" – the American imperialism that "plays off fraternal nations against each other" (Agapov and Vershinina, 2010, 115). Saakashvili's presidency fits into this narrative. Interestingly enough, after his defeat in the elections, both Saakashvili as well as Georgia disappeared from discussions in the Russian media space. This, however, did not include media outlets and experts specializing and covering the Caucasus as a region.

Nevertheless, the Russian-Georgian conflict in South Ossetia was a serious shake-up for the region and had a significant impact on the transformation of Russian foreign policy in the post-Soviet space. This conflict was largely predetermined by Russia's previous policy towards Georgia. Apparently, even back at that point, Georgia was not considered the country that fit into the integration projects developed by Russia for the post-Soviet spaces (Novikova, Burkov, and Meshcheryakov 2015).

Changes in the attitude towards "compatriots" and uniqueness as well as peculiarities of the citizenship legislation made it easier to provide

Russian citizenship to Georgian citizens in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, this policy was not developed to support the minority ethnic Russian population living in these republics. Nevertheless, by the beginning of 2002, nearly the entire adult population in Abkhazia and two-thirds of the South Ossetian population held Russian citizenship. This situation created serious grounds for intervening militarily in the conflicts of these entities with the Georgian government, because at this point, the “protection of Russian citizens” was at stake.

Moving further, Russia immediately labeled the conflict in Tskhinvali as “genocide” and the Prosecutor General’s office filed a case against Georgia on the “act of genocide” because the official discourse talked about “thousands of victims among the Ossetian population” (Caucasian Knot 2018). An investigation undertaken by Human Rights Watch showed the total number of civilian casualties to be about a hundred people, which was the result of the disproportionate use of military force against the non-military population, but it did not constitute genocide (Denber and Rone 2008). Despite this, appeals to the principles of international law, which allegedly were violated by the Georgian side only, have been central to the discussion on this conflict and its consequences.

Nevertheless, the conflict itself, Russia’s behavior, and future developments demonstrated an important change in the logic of foreign policy implementation. More specifically it showed that Russia is ready to sacrifice its economic interests and good relations with full-fledged democracies in order to establish political dominance over post-Soviet countries, or, as in case of Georgia, at least on part of their territory.

Russia did everything to provoke Georgia to launch this failed military campaign and the practical outcome of the conflict was Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This step made the establishment of any type of friendly relations between Russia and Georgia practically impossible. However, this decision also had another consequence. From Russia’s point of view, this would guarantee Georgia’s inadmissibility to NATO, which Moscow viewed very negatively considering that Russia views the expansion of the block as a completely anti-Russian project. Since the post-Soviet space is perceived as a “zone of special Russian interests,” Georgia’s accession to NATO

would have been perceived as a serious defeat on the Caucasus front. Many political analysts believe that the calm and largely cold reaction to Russia's actions towards Georgia shifted the perception of the political elite about the limits of possible actions in the post-Soviet space and paved the way for Crimea's annexation in 2014.

The political consequences of the conflict in the relations between the two countries included severance of diplomatic relations, closing of the embassies, and the unilateral introduction of the visa regime for Georgian citizens. However, Georgia decided not to implement this last measure. Direct air communication was halted in 2006 due to an espionage scandal, and most of the other types of communications ceased to exist. Only in 2012, the political dialogue began to show some signs of life due to the new government's appointment of Abashidze as a special representative for relations with Russia. This ensured at least a protocol of ongoing consultations in Geneva. However, the entire process stopped at the stage of "agreed to negotiate." The initial demands of the Russian side to recognize the de facto governments of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as parties to the negotiation process and to abolish the law "On occupied territories" introduced by Georgia for those who "ignore the principles of territorial integrity of Georgia" resulted in a deadlock.

As a result, Georgia was excluded from the integration process that Russia tried to initiate in the post-Soviet space. The analysis of Russian experts that support the official policy on the post-Soviet space shows that the main focus of the policy on the territory of the former USSR is the development of Eurasian Economic Community and Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) including Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan. It is very indicative that experts also include countries in this list that "demonstrate loyalty towards Russia and are connected with it via treaties and agreements," such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Novikova, Burkov, and Meshcheryakov 2015). Between 2014 and 2015, the Kremlin signed treaties with both territories in order to protect them from "Georgian aggression" as both documents officially stipulate (President of Russia 2014). It is important to note that the agreement signed between Russia and South Ossetia goes beyond military assistance and economic partnership and, in fact,

prepares grounds for the actual integration of the unrecognized republic into the Russian Federation (President of Russia 2015).

Russia's policy towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia differ from one another, and that is reflected in the language of the signed agreements. According to official data Russia has invested about \$500 million in the Abkhaz economy and about \$650 million in South Ossetia, mainly through the Russian budget. This disproportion is mainly noticeable when comparing the territory and population of the two entities (according to the 2011 census¹⁷ 240,000 people lived in Abkhazia, and 55,000 people lived in South Ossetia per 2015 census data¹⁸). Thus, in the last decade Russia has invested \$2,000 per capita in Abkhazia and \$13,000 in South Ossetia. It is not surprising given that South Ossetia only survives due to subsidies from the Russian budget. Abkhazia capitalizes on its geographical position and leveraging the "Soviet traditions" and survives on tourism, mainly from Russia. In 2016, for example, about one million Russian tourists vacationed in Abkhazia, but in 2017, due to the annexation of Crimea and intensification of Russian policies to attract tourists there, the number of Russian tourists in Abkhazia dropped by 30 percent (Gazeta.Ru 2018).

Thus, Russia de facto controls Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In essence, South Ossetia is another region of Russia. Interestingly enough, with all the complexity of the political situation, economic relations between Russia and Georgia did not suffer as could have been expected. Even during Saakashvili's presidency, when anti-Russian invectives were an obligatory part of the official political discourse of the Georgian authorities, Russian investors actively invested in Georgia and did not seem to notice the political tensions between the countries. Two Georgian authors determined that Russians invested heavily in the

¹⁷ Novosti.Ge. 2011. В Абхазии опубликованы результаты переписи населения

[Census Results Published in Abkhazia]. December 29, 2011. <http://novost.ge/2011/12/29/в-абхазии-опубликованы-результаты-переписи-населения>.

¹⁸ Republic. 2016. "South Ossetia: Facts and Figures. (The publication "The results of the population census of the Republic of South Ossetia 2015" is released)." December 29, 2016. <http://respublikarso.org/elections/1498-yuzhnaya-osetiya-v-cifrah-i-faktah-vyshel-sbornik-itogi-perepisi-naseleniya-respubliki-yuzhnaya-osetiya-2015-goda.html>.

construction and energy sectors in Georgia (Dzvelishvili and Kupreishvili 2015). Remittances from around 800,000 Georgians who permanently reside in Russia and transfer about \$700 million to Georgia annually (2014 data) also form an important part of the Georgian economy (Dzvelishvili and Kupreishvili 2015). This financial flow is comparable to the amount of combined aid that the US and EU provide to Georgia. And finally, a smart move on Saakashvili's part not to introduce a visa regime for Russian citizens as a countermeasure has led to a steady increase in the number of Russian tourists entering Georgia every year—in 2017 1.5 million people visited. Thus, economic ties remain fairly stable and independent of political differences.

A research study conducted by Levada-Center showed that the level of support from Russian citizens for Russia's actions remains at the same high level, despite the fact that the main anti-Georgia propaganda on state television channels took place in 2008, after which the state-controlled media simply stopped showing interest (Levada-Center 2018). A survey conducted by the center showed that Russian citizens perceive their own country in this conflict as a peacemaker that "has done everything to avoid conflict," and these perceptions remained largely unchanged throughout the past 10 years. Whereas in August 2008 about 70 percent of respondents agreed that Russia did all to avoid conflict, in July 2018 about 60 percent kept the same position. About 22 percent of respondents (16 percent in 2008) think that Russia was involved in the conflict because of Georgian provocation, and only 4 percent believe that Russia created a conflict to achieve certain geopolitical goals (Levada-Center 2018).

It can be concluded that the crisis of the Russian-Georgian relations that dates back to the mid-2000s is reflected, primarily, in the asymmetry between the level of political contacts on the one hand and active economic interaction on the other. The current situation raises questions about how stable such a system is and how the situation in the political sphere needs to be changed radically, and whether or not this change is necessary.

Russia in Georgia's public-political space

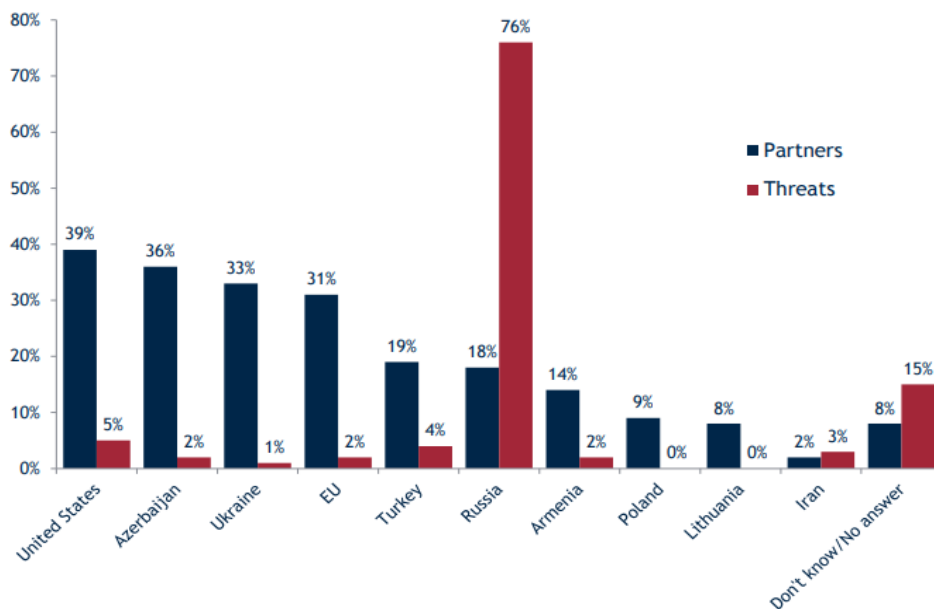
One of the main problems appears to stem from the clash of two political narratives—the Russian imperial nationalism and the Georgian liberal

nationalism. Unlike imperial nationalism, the democratic international community views liberal nationalism as an acceptable form of nationalism. However, its extreme popularity in Georgia had its own impact on the development of the conflict situation. It is expected that direct interference into the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, direct support for separatism, and the military confrontation brought about a perception of Russia as an aggressor and enemy of Georgian independence. It has to be emphasized that both sides accurately identify this conflict as political. This favorably distinguishes the rhetoric of the Russian side, when, at the height of the 2006 crisis, Russia not only seriously violated the principles of international human rights law, by deporting thousands of Russian citizens of Georgian origin, but also significantly ethnicized the conflict, which led to a surge in xenophobia and discrimination against ethnic Georgians in Russia (Human Rights Watch 2007).

The clash between Russian and Georgian narratives happened not only in the political arena but also within the context of the political history of the 20th century, which was tragic for both the Russian and Georgian peoples. Nevertheless, the Tbilisi-based museum dedicated to the Soviet occupation portrays Georgia and its people as victims of the Soviet (and in this context Russian) regime, without any attempt to assess internal support provided to Bolsheviks and the weakness of national democracy (Shatirishvili 2009). However, the Russian historical narrative is in direct conflict with the Georgian one, justifying the Bolshevik aggression in Georgia in 1920 at modern multimedia exhibitions such as “Russia is My History.”

And finally, the question of the role of Russian language and culture in the relations of the two countries has a special importance. Once very

Which of these countries do you consider to be the most important partners for and biggest threats to Georgia?



high, the level of teaching the Russian language in Georgia has expectedly dropped following the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, once Russian tourism became an important part of the Georgian economy (up to 7 percent of GDP in 2016), the Russian language was reintroduced in Georgia as a second foreign language. The routine interaction between Russian and Georgian citizens in Georgia is peaceful and friendly; however, recent studies in political sociology show that most Georgians see Russia as its main threat (International Republic Institute 2015).

Source: International Republican Institute, 2015

Most Georgian citizens agree that Russian aggression against Georgia continues to the present day. The most recent sociological survey conducted by National Democratic Institute confirms the same pattern: the majority of the population sees Russia as the main threat (Thornton and Turmanidze 2017). In addition to the challenges of territorial integrity, respondents point out Russian propaganda as a main threat.

However, one-third of the population does not agree with this. It is indicative that the highest percentage of those who consider Russian propaganda to be a problem is among people with higher education – 60 percent. The general attitude towards Russia can be characterized in two ways. On the one hand, the majority considers Russia a serious threat, considering its military activity and support of the separatists. On the other hand, real economic ties, a large number of tourists, and personal daily contacts reduce the level of domestic xenophobia, leaving it at the level of political and ideological confrontation between the Russian and Georgian authorities.

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Recommendations

Dmitry Dubrovskiy

Since Russian goals and strategy in Georgia are in direct contradiction with the logic and developmental goals of Georgian statehood, it is only logical that issues related to Georgia's territorial integrity in the relations of the two countries should not be touched. In essence, any discussion of these issues in the current context will most likely exacerbate the conflict rather than provide avenues for resolution (Haindrava, Sushentsov, and Silaev 2014). Domestic development of ethnic nationalism, whether conservative as in Russia, or liberal as in Georgia, is dangerous, not only because of the possible ethnicization of the Georgian-Russian conflict, but especially because of the need to expand the scope of identity politics in Georgia, which seems to be excessively limited by ethnocultural boundaries. This is especially important in order for the Georgian state to win the loyalty of ethnic minorities, many of whom, according to National Democratic Institute and International Republic Institute polls, differ significantly from the majority of the population in their attitudes towards the Georgian state. Perhaps, federalization of Georgia—by amending the Constitution—could significantly change the situation related to the territories currently not controlled by Georgia. This recommendation is put forward not only for the Georgian government but more importantly for international donors.

Currently, the European Union is faced with the challenge of liberal nationalism quickly transforming into illiberal democracies, primarily in Poland, Hungary, and Austria. In this regard, perhaps it would make sense to review a positive attitude towards liberal nationalism and view it as a source of serious problems not only in Georgia but also Europe. Since the EU, unlike the US, is less irritable to Russia, it can (and in some cases already has) become a conflict mediator (Firchova Grono 2010). Since today's overall political environment is not conducive for the

resolution of the Georgian-Russian conflict, the focus should be on small steps to build on existing cultural, economic, and educational ties.

Economy

Georgia's exclusion from the Eurasian integration process does not mean that the country cannot benefit from economic cooperation with Russia. As mentioned above in this article, the main directions of such cooperation currently are construction, energy, and tourism. Due to the Western sanctions against Russia, the possible risks of this cooperation that certain Russian businessmen or companies could end up on the sanctions list and the potential fallout should be assessed. However, sanctions against Western food products imposed by Russia open up the potential for expanding the Russian market of agricultural products from Georgia. There is also great potential for cooperation in the areas of geo-mining and public transportation.

The active development of Russian tourism requires matching steps on the Georgian side. First of all, the number of border crossing points can be increased, of course, with careful consideration of security issues. Currently, tourists traveling to Georgia in personal vehicles complain about long lines at the border-crossing points. Also, the necessary language support for tourists should be provided: currently, at many tourist locations materials and information in the Russian language are not available. Since direct air traffic between Russia and Georgia has been restored, perhaps another step could be financial support for the Georgian air carrier to ensure lower ticket costs from Russia, which would lead to more tourists (currently, the cost of a ticket from central Russia to Georgia is about the same as a ticket to a European country). It is also possible to promote a summer charter flight system, especially to Batumi. Furthermore, permission to fly to Sukhumi from Georgia could help strengthen the ties between Abkhazia and Georgia.

Mass media and education

One of the important components of the political conflict between Russia and Georgia is the use of ethnic categories. As a result, the conflict is being framed as "ethnocultural," where one ethnocultural community—the "Russians"—oppose another ethnocultural community—the "Georgians." However, this conflict appears to be completely political,

as is the conflict of the center with the regions (Abkhazia and South Ossetia). By removing the ethnic component from the language of conflict description in both conflicts, it will be possible to concentrate on the political aspect of these conflicts. At the same time, rejection of ethnic categories will devalue the positions of ethnic conservatives on both sides of the conflict. It is equally important to delegitimize the language of liberal nationalism in Georgia, which jeopardizes the development of a more comprehensive framework of common Georgian identity that includes ethnic minorities with the same rights as the “ethnic majority.” Currently, this is not the case in Georgia, and as the polls show the ethnic minorities are extremely concerned with the growth of Georgian nationalism (Thornton and Turmanidze 2017). In this regard, it is important to review and revisit the educational system, which taps into historical as well as ethnic and cultural narratives for the development of Georgia’s new common identity. For example, instead of equating the victimization of Georgians by the Soviet regime with victimization at the hands of Russians, both national communities can be described as victims of the Soviets, and, at the same time, contributors to the creation of Soviet-style authoritarianism.

The Russian language and its development are officially recognized as one of Russia’s foreign policy priorities. This factor could help support educational projects in the Russian language in Georgia mainly in the areas of common culture and memory.

Georgian Orthodox Church

The Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (ROC-MP) and the Georgian Orthodox Church had strong ties throughout history. Even the political conflict between these countries was unable to sever this union. Despite the fact that the Georgian Church did not support the ROC-MP in the conflict around the establishment of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Church, their cooperation has a high potential, primarily in the development of humanitarian projects, for example, in Abkhazia.

The Poverty of Militarism: The 'Velvet Revolution' and the Defeat of Militarist Quasi-Ideology in Armenia

Mikayel Zolyan

In the last years before the Armenian “velvet revolution,” the ruling elite of Armenia suffered from a severe lack of legitimacy and public trust. The government tried to fill this vacuum by resorting to a militarist quasi-ideology, represented by the so-called “nation-army” concept. Under the pretext of national mobilization, this concept advocated consolidation of society around the political leadership. However, the unpopularity of the ruling elite and widespread corruption undermined the efficiency of the use of the “nation-army” concept for legitimization of the existing system, paving the way for the “velvet revolution.” Of course, while the defeat of “nation-army” militarism is certainly good news for both Armenia and the whole region, it would be premature to expect immediate advances in the solution of the Karabakh conflict. However, in the long run, Armenia’s change of government creates an opportunity for new approaches, which, in perspective, could lead to progress in peaceful conflict transformation.

‘You Don’t Change Horses in Midstream’

For decades one of the biggest problems both for the political elite and the political system in Armenia has been the lack of political legitimacy. The democratic facade of the political system contrasted the practice of widespread election manipulations. Accusations of stolen elections, often followed by mass protests and a violent crackdown on the opposition, have plagued the Armenian government since the mid-1990s. While in each specific case the degree and nature of the violations may have varied, the overall trend was obvious: not a single time in the history of post-Soviet Armenia has the

government been changed through elections. The rules of the game have been set in such a way that the incumbent government was winning all the national elections in the country, ensuring the survival of the political elite, but also depriving it of the trust of the population and eroding its legitimacy.

Obviously, disputed elections are a common feature of many authoritarian or hybrid regimes. Political regimes that lack legal-democratic legitimacy often compensate for it with other types and sources of legitimacy, which may include charismatic leadership, influential ideology, and economic prosperity. Armenia's ruling elite had none of these sources of legitimacy at its service. Instead, it exploited another common tool for compensating the lack of democratic legitimacy: external conflict. For many governments around the world, external conflict, which can be exploited to consolidate against external enemies, has been indispensable in securing support or the passive acceptance of societies that otherwise would have been reluctant to accept their governments as legitimate. For both Azerbaijan and Armenia, the conflict has served as a tool for political elites to consolidate their support and marginalize competitors.

The argument, which is best summarized by the proverbial Russian expression "you don't change horses in midstream" has been a part of the discourse of the Armenian ruling elites since the early 1990s, as has been the case with many post-Soviet governments. In 2018, it was once again used by the ruling elite to justify the prolongation of Serzh Sargsyan's power. Thus, a few weeks before the "velvet revolution," ruling Republican Party MP Gevorg Kostanyan argued that "during war you don't change the commander—that's it," citing the Karabakh conflict and Sargsyan's position as the chief commander (Kirakosyan 2018). For Armenia's ruling elite the strength of the Karabakh factor was based not just on the possibility of a war at any minute, but also on the perception that the Armenian side emerged as a victor from the conflict in the 1990s. Hence, the argument went, while there may be problems in the economy, corruption, lack of jobs, and inequality, Armenia's rulers at least achieved success on the Karabakh issue. Thus, the ruling elite took credit both for the current status of Nagorno-Karabakh and for the relative peace, which continues in spite of the numerous incidents on the line of contact.

The April War and the Erosion of the Serzh Sargsyan Government's Legitimacy

The government's potential to use the Karabakh factor as the basis for its legitimacy was severely limited by the events in April 2016—the so-called

“four-day war.” The April events showed that Sargsyan’s government’s ability to guarantee peace in Karabakh through a combination of military and diplomatic measures was exaggerated. Neither the existence of a strong military force, nor Armenia’s alliance with Russia and membership in organizations like CSTO, stopped the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh from escalating in April. Also, cases of corruption and mismanagement in the army were revealed, which influenced the performance of the military in the “four-day war.” The government itself confirmed this perception in the aftermath of the “four-day war” by firing several important officials (Tovmasyan 2016).

One aspect of the events of April 2016 seems all the more important today: a widespread volunteer movement, as well as a relief effort, taking place outside of the government institutions, mostly through grassroots initiatives. Men volunteered to serve in the military, while citizens all over the country collected food, clothes, and hygiene items in order to send this aid to the troops and civilians who had suffered as a result of the fighting. A lot of this mobilization took place outside of the government structures, which also led to the eroding of the “security argument” used by the government to ensure its legitimacy. As one of the observers of this process, Raffi Elliott-ian argued “solidarity with the military does not mean approval of the state” (Elliott-ian 2016). While the majority in society did not question the need for consolidation, it was the government’s ability to lead such consolidation that was increasingly under doubt. In retrospect, we can see how this erosion led to the tectonic shift in Armenian politics two years later.

However, while all of this is clear in hindsight, the immediate effects of the April events have been somewhat different. In its immediate aftermath, the government benefited from the patriotic consolidation, as even some of its harshest critics toned down their rhetoric and called for a pan-national consolidation around the government. This consolidation, however, did not last long, and the effect described above manifested in the events of July 2016, when a militant group calling itself “Sasna Tsrer” (“the Madmen of Sasoon”) attacked and captured a police station. Though the group’s actions were clearly illegal, and moreover, violent, a large part of the public sided with the gunmen rather than with the government. While the violent nature of the group’s action prevented large numbers from joining them, the overall mood in society showed that the support of the current government was at an extremely low point. Several thousand supporters marched in the street, many politicians and intellectuals either expressed support for the gunmen, or took a middle road, disapproving of their methods, but supported the idea of protesting against the government. The government’s position on the crisis

had relatively little public support, especially as there were cases of police brutality against protesters. The fact that a group of radical militants could perform a violent action against the law enforcement, and be treated by a significant part of the public as heroes, showed how deep the crisis of legitimacy was that the Armenian government faced (Zolyan 2016).

'Nation-army' – Militarism as a Quasi-Ideology

With the defeat of the Sasna Tsrer, and the subsequent appointment of a new government under Karen Karapetyan, it seemed that Serzh Sargsyan's government managed to regain control of the internal political dynamic. This trend was confirmed by the confident victory of the Republican Party in the April 2017 election, even though it was marred by accusations of vote buying and antagonizing voters. It seemed that Sargsyan's government had absorbed the harm that had been done to its legitimacy by the April war and was set to reproduce itself through the constitutional reform process, which had been set in motion by the constitutional referendum in 2015.

The so-called concept of "nation-army" was put forward by Sargsyan's team in this setting, more specifically by his former chief of administration turned minister of defense, Vigen Sargsyan. Up to the very moment that the Sargsyans' lost power, there was never any official document detailing the essence of the "nation-army" concept. There were several legal initiatives that were considered a part of the "nation-army" policies, some of which created huge public outcry. These included the creation of a foundation for the victims of the fighting, which was to be financed by a level tax of 1000 AMD (of about 2 Euro) put on all Armenian citizens. There was also the initiative of abolishing the right to deferment for university students, which led to student protests (Kupfer 2017).

There were also some initiatives that were generally well or neutrally accepted, such as the initiatives "I am" and "I have the honor," which introduced alternative schemes for attracting additional recruits to the military. These programs envisaged the following, as described by Armenian political analyst Anna Pambukhchyan:

"'I am' was offering financial reimbursement (around 10 thousand USD) for an additional year of military service to the two years of the compulsory military service. The money would be paid by the state at the end of the contract. The second program was called 'I have the honor' and was offering academic deferment for 3 years of military service instead of compulsory two as an

officer. In both cases the soldiers would serve on the borderline” (Pambukhchyan 2018).

However, there were also concerns with those programs voiced mostly by experts and civil society. “CSOs have criticized both programs because they could be attractive only for the soldiers from financially insecure families, hence the soldiers standing on the borderline would be mostly from poor families” (Pambukhchyan 2018).

The most widespread part of the “nation-army” concept was the increased use of military/militarist rhetoric in the government propaganda. Members of the government and pro-government bloggers widely used the rhetoric of “nation-army” in their communication. They stressed the constant threat of war and the need to unite and consolidate against the enemy, and made it obvious that such consolidation needed to take place around the chief commander of the nation, Serzh Sargsyan. While Sargsyan avoided saying that he planned to stay in power as prime minister after the end of his presidential term, he said that he was planning to “continue playing a role in providing security for Armenia” (Azatutyun 2017). As late as April 20, 2018—three days before his resignation— Sargsyan said in an interview with Shant TV company that the resolution of the Karabakh conflict would not be left “to the next generations” (Regnum 2018). Some analysts interpreted that as a declaration that he would not step down before the conflict is resolved—in other words he would never step down (Dubnov 2018).

Thus, the rhetoric of “nation-army” provided an ideological justification to Sargsyan’s regime in order to legitimize its continued existence. Militarist rhetoric was used not just to glorify the current government, and to call the people to obey it unconditionally, but also to marginalize and demonize opposition and civil society. Thus, during the discussions in parliament regarding the abolition of the deferment for university students, he accused opposition MPs Ararat Mirzoyan and Edmon Marukyan of not having served in the army (Aysor 2017). Earlier, Vigen Sargsyan also sharply rebuked another oppositional politician, Zaruhi Postanjyan, who opposed his suggestion to collect an extra tax to finance the medical treatment of wounded soldiers, stating that only his good education prevented him from using profanity to address her, who, according to Sargsyan, was guilty of “taking political selfies on the tribune of the National Assembly” (Panorama 2016).

This rhetoric was echoed by other members of the establishment close to Vigen Sargsyan. Among them an especially romantic and creative image of the “anti-national” and “anti-army” efforts of the opposition and civil society was

painted by Republican MP and former popular singer Shushan Petrosyan. For an unknown reason she especially singled out the Eurasia Partnership Foundation, a leading Armenian civil society player, which had not been carrying out any projects directly related to the military sphere. She was quoted as saying that “when you are standing on the ground of your country and you feel that you the continuation of it, and you have blossomed, no Soros, no Eurasia Partnership Foundation, nothing else can stop you” (Aravot 2018).

The Nation vs. ‘the Nation-army’ Concept: the ‘Velvet Revolution’ and What Comes Next

By Spring 2018 it seemed that the “nation-army” concept had helped the government to achieve its objective—provide a quasi-ideological legitimization to prolong President Serzh Sargsyan’s power. And then came April of 2018. Sargsyan’s government was swept away by the wave of mass protests that crossed along various layers of Armenia’s society. The military mostly remained neutral throughout most of the “velvet revolution,” with the exception of an episode in the morning of April 23, the day of Sargsyan’s resignation, when soldiers from the regiment of Armenian peacekeepers joined the protests, unarmed but in uniform (Al Jazeera 2018). If Sargsyan’s government had hopes that the military would come to their aid, these were clearly misplaced: the “velvet revolution” showed that “the nation-army” concept had failed to inspire the military, just as it failed to inspire the civilian public. When on May 2, Pashinyan was asked by a Russian journalist whether the government would use force against his movement, he replied that “if they bring the army to Yerevan, all the soldiers will join us, all 100 percent of them, I guarantee you this, and we shall close the streets not by cars, but by tanks” (Kommersant 2018). Throughout the “velvet revolution” period pro-government media was full of reports of increasing concentration of Azerbaijani forces on the line of contact; however, these failed to reduce the level of “revolutionary activity” of Pashinyan’s supporters.

So why did the militarist quasi-ideology of “nation-army” fail to produce the effect desired by Serzh Sargsyan’s government? Why did all the discourse of “nation-army,” “security,” and “supreme commander” fail to convince Armenian society that the continuation of Sargsyan’s rule was necessary to ensure Armenia’s security? Part of the explanation is that the concept of “nation-army” came from an already discredited ruling elite, compromised by corruption, election fraud, and violent suppression of dissent, particularly the events of March 1 2008, which was the bloodiest episode in the internal politics of Armenia. Throughout the 10 years of Sargsyan’s rule the socio-economic

conditions remained dire, as Armenia never really recovered after the crisis of 2008-2009. All this meant that Sargsyan and his team had a serious problem of trust.

Even though they won the election of 2017 (arguably through voter bribery and use of administrative resources), the 2017 CRRC poll suggested that the trust toward them remained extremely low, at only 18 percent for Sargsyan (Asbarez 2018) According to the same poll, the trust for the army as an institution was, however, dramatically higher, with 51 percent of the population "fully trusting" it and an additional 26 percent "rather trusting than not," putting the military, together with the Armenian Apostolic Church, in the position of the most trusted institutions in Armenia (Asbarez 2018). These numbers once again helped to explain the rationale for the "nation-army" concept: to transfer the legitimacy that the military still enjoyed in the eyes of the Armenian population to the political regime: it was a smart strategy, but it did not work.

Another question is what the defeat of "nation-army" ideology means for the future of Armenia and the region, particularly the perspectives of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. One should be cautious about making quick conclusions. On the one hand, the defeat of the militarist rhetoric is good news for the whole region, as it can potentially contribute to the general cooling off of passions in the zone of conflict. However, the very logic of conflict is dictating its own rhetoric. Moreover, the internal situation in Armenia demands that the new government will be hard pressed to show that it is not weaker in any way than the previous government. Pashinyan himself, who in the past has been an ally of Levon Ter-Petrosyan, has struggled to shrug off the image of a "defeatist," which has been associated with Ter-Petrosyan in the past, and which Pashinyan's rivals tried to project on him. Besides, Pashinyan's government is more sensitive to the public mood inside Armenia than the previous regime was, since the new government gets its legitimacy from popular support, rather than from the support by the state apparatus or recognition by the international players, as was the case with the previous government. And, obviously, the public mood in Armenia has been significantly hardened during the last years. In the coming years, Pashinyan's position will reflect this public mood.

So, while the new Armenian government has abandoned the ideological concept of "nation-army," it does not necessarily mean that the conflict resolution is significantly closer. In fact, if some observers have had hopes concerning "an authoritarian peace," these hopes will probably no longer be

attainable, even though, in my personal view, these hopes were never realistic. Whatever changes have happened in Armenia, they will hardly bring about a change of dynamic in the conflict, including the rhetoric, unless they are echoed by the Azerbaijani government. On the contrary, a leader like Pashinyan, who stresses his popular legitimacy, will have more incentive to react strongly to possible militant rhetoric from the other side than Serzh Sargsyan, who draw support from the state apparatus and could sometimes be dismissive of public opinion.

However, having said all that, there are also grounds for optimism in terms of peaceful conflict transformation. A detailed analysis of the discourse of the new government on the Karabakh issue is outside the scope of this paper, but, together with “tough” statements, one can also see “peace-oriented” language in some statements. In the long run, the defeat of the militarist rhetoric and quasi-ideology can have a benign effect on the perspectives of peaceful transformation if the rejection of militancy takes place on both sides of the conflict. Armenia’s new political elite, which emerged as a result of a peaceful revolution; which is to a high extent comprised of former opposition and civil society activists; and which claims democracy and human rights as its highest values and non-violence as the underlying principle of organizing life in “New Armenia,” is significantly more prone to peaceful conflict resolution than the former elite. It is important that today all sides of the conflict realize this opportunity and take small steps in the direction of de-escalation of the conflict. While significant progress in the resolution still remains unlikely in the short term, today we are dealing with a unique possibility in breaking the pattern of spiraling escalation that has been developing in the latest years, as each side felt that it had to respond to the actions of the other side, leading to more militancy in rhetoric and more violence on the line of contact. Unfortunately, this possibility, which has emerged as a result of the recent changes in Armenia, is not going to last very long, so it needs to be used now.

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Discourses of War and Peace within the Context of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: The Case of Azerbaijan

Lala Jumayeva

Introduction

Armenia and Azerbaijan, as sides to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, have committed themselves to the process of negotiating a settlement. Despite the lack of progress at the negotiation table for the last 26 years, exacerbated frustrations and the situation on the ground became increasingly tense, but the sides still remain at the negotiation table. Hence, hypothetically, in order to find a mutually acceptable formula and settle the dispute along with the officially conducted peace talks at the top level, the sides should also adhere to the conflict transformation process through various peace-building activities on the grassroots level. Particularly, transformation of relationships as a crucial component of the whole settlement process lies at the heart of further diminution of tensions within the conflict context that could foster the peace process.

Lederach, well-known for his contributions to the fields of conflict transformation and peacebuilding, emphasizes the crucial meaning of conflict's relational aspects and states that absence of good relationships between groups may cause a conflict, and after the violence is ceased this factor remains an important barrier to peacebuilding efforts (Lederach 1997). If there is no possibility to influence the relationship between the conflict parties within a transformational framework, it will

be much harder to do that during the settlement process because peace is achieved not via peace agreements (that can, actually, be forced) but via peacefully transformed minds, beliefs, and attitudes that may last forever. Consequently, the official discourses in Armenia and Azerbaijan about the opposite side impacts the relationship between the two societies. Notably, the rhetoric adhered forms the misperceptions of the respective societies about each other. This fact causes the growth of mistrust between the Armenians and Azerbaijanis, whereas building trust is one of the most important components of the conflict settlement process since it determines the security concerns of the opposite side. In order to build peace, grassroots-level dialogue programs and reconsideration of relationships should be initiated not only between the two communities of Nagorno-Karabakh, but also between the societies of Armenia and Azerbaijan. This process should be carried out or supported by the two governments, which will make more effort on the propagation of pro-peace discourse within their countries rather than pro-war rhetoric the way it is done today.

This article sheds light on the existing discourses of war and peace in Azerbaijan within the framework of the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process. The research covers mainly the recent developments taken place in Azerbaijan from the period of July 2017 to July 2018. The concept of the “pro-war discourse” (“pro-war rhetoric,” “bellicose rhetoric”) is defined as the art of speaking in an attitude that hopes for actual war whereas the notion of the “pro-peace discourse” (“peace rhetoric”) is defined as the art of speaking in an attitude that hopes for actual peace. The paper analyses the existing pro-war and pro-peace discourses in the speeches of high-level Azerbaijani government officials. Furthermore, the article briefly discusses the ongoing militarization process in Azerbaijan, which in itself is part of the pro-war discourse and its actual and possible impacts on the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process.

Army building becomes a key target for Azerbaijan

One of the factors that influences the Nagorno-Karabakh negotiation process, and may in the future derail the peace talks, is the bellicose rhetoric utilized by the Armenian and Azerbaijani officials. Both governments constantly adhere to pro-war discourse and stress the readiness of their military forces to defeat the opposing side in the event

the war resumes. Such rhetoric contributes to the escalation of tensions among the societies, thus resulting in an increase of mutual mistrust and animosity. An aggrieved character of Azerbaijan's stance in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the level of economic development of Azerbaijan in the region, and a constant increase in the country's military budget make the Azerbaijani government feel more comfortable. And most importantly, the government finds it correct to adhere to the usage of antagonistic language towards Armenia.

The constant build-up of military power in Azerbaijan is a factor that both triggers the government's adherence to bellicose rhetoric and affects Armenia's security dilemma. Armenia, in turn, feels a necessity to respond to the ongoing militarization process. This bilateral military mobilization has become a vicious circle that is first and foremost used by third parties (such as Russia, the US, and Iran) for their own agenda, and it negatively impacts the ongoing peace talks by creating mistrust between the sides. From within the environment in which the conflict is embedded, Azerbaijan continued to build up its military strength in 2017–2018 and was in 53rd place out of 136 countries on the list of a global military power ranking—Global Firepower (Hasanov 2018). The military expenditure of Azerbaijan has increased 15 times since 2003 (Aliyev 2018b) and reached \$1.6 billion in 2018, which exceeds the military budget of Armenia (\$512 million) several times (Defense-aerospace.com 2017). Apart from a regular increase in Azerbaijan's military budget on an annual basis, the reason for the military expenditure's rise in 2018 was a national parade dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the establishment of both the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic and the Azerbaijani armed forces celebrated on May 28 and June 26, respectively. The military parade received particular attention from the government and society, and was more than just a celebration of a centenary of Azerbaijan's armed forces as advertised. It was more of a flashy demonstration of the strength of Azerbaijani military power, statehood, and nation. The parade hosted approximately 4,000 military and defence personnel from various Azerbaijani institutions and a special unit of the Armed forces of Turkey that carried out a military performance (Trend 2018a). Both parades in Baku received great interest and were highly cheered and broadcasted on social media. Even though such events usually aim at raising a spirit of patriotism within the

population, this year's parade was also a demonstration of the growth of Azerbaijan's military power, which can be used against the Armenian side in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, particularly after the war in April 2016.

During the military parade the president in his speech noted that "army building" was the key target of the country, justifying this aim with the failure of international institutions to enforce peace in the region via the mechanisms of international law which, consequently, had made the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh problem by means of force the right policy to implement (Aliyev 2018b). Aliyev, further escalating the rhetoric, stressed that "The enemy must know that it does not have a single military or strategic facility the Azerbaijani army could not destroy. All military facilities, all of the enemy's strategically important sites can be destroyed by the Azerbaijani army" (Aliyev 2018b). These messages per se can be regarded as a military threat to Armenia. Additionally, such statements have a harsh character, particularly when taken into account the extent to which such messages claim to represent a popular opinion in Azerbaijan. Though, due to the lack of inter-societal dialogue to discuss the viewpoints in society about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, there is no data available to support this statement. Hence, the ongoing militarization process strengthens the military capability of Azerbaijan and, consequently, encourages high-level officials to make pro-war claims even though such language contradicts the government's official stance that it was committed to the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict through peace talks.

A constant build-up of military power in Armenia and Azerbaijan: a vicious circle ever to end?

An antagonistic rhetoric makes the opposite side (both the Armenian and the de-facto Nagorno-Karabakh authorities) more cautious in their analysis and estimation of the situation around the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process. The threat coming from Azerbaijan on a continuous basis creates a situation of uncertainty and hesitation in its commitment to settle the conflict by diplomatic efforts. Consequently, such rhetoric prevents the development of trust and makes the goodwill gestures impossible. Particularly, after the April war in 2016 the Armenian side

acknowledged the seriousness of such a threat and racked up its own antagonistic rhetoric and militarization. Hence, this was one of the reasons for a widespread speculation about the upcoming attack planned by the Azerbaijani side during the “velvet revolution” in Armenia in the spring of 2018. Among the Armenian elite, mainly the representatives of Sargsyan’s former government, there was a fear that Azerbaijan could have used the momentum and resume military activities on the frontline.

Though for the period of July 2017 to July 2018, the continuous violation of the ceasefire on the frontline by both conflict parties continued to create tensions between the two countries not only on a political but also at grassroots levels. Notably, such grassroots-level confrontations occur when the conflict stops being only a military one and, thereby, impacts the daily lives of ordinary people. The fact that Azerbaijan has been in a state of an ongoing military conflict for the last 28 years (since 1990) has not affected the daily routine outside of the immediate conflict zone and those displaced since the cease-fire was established much until an *unexpected* incident happens. The killing of two-year-old Zehra and her grandmother in the village of Alakhanli, in the Fizuli district, by Armenian military forces in July 2017 became one such experience. While the news was widely covered by the international media such as *BBC News* (BBC News 2017) and *The Washington Times* (Murinson 2017) it triggered a strong reaction from the Azerbaijani population in the social media, which, once again, mirrored the wave of animosity and hatred at the level of national identity. The Azerbaijani government assessed this act as an Armenian provocation and heavily condemned the attack of combatants on the frontline, while the president described this event as “a military crime which demonstrates Armenian fascism” (Trend 2017).

The change of power in Armenia to foster or hinder the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process?

Yet, one of the most provocative remarks ever made by President Aliyev became his statement at the inauguration ceremony in April 2018 when he claimed that not only Nagorno-Karabakh but also the territory of the contemporary Armenian Republic was historical land of Azerbaijan and

advised referring to archival documents for validation (Aliyev 2018a). According to the mainstream media discourse in Azerbaijan, the first Armenian Republic of 1918 was established on historical Azerbaijani lands (FrontNews International 2018; Trend 2018b). Certainly, by making such a statement, which was mainly for an internal audience, the Azerbaijani government did not intend to threaten the sovereignty of the Armenian Republic; however, in Armenia it was understood as a threat to its sovereignty. Later in the same month, the Azerbaijani government hoped for a constructive change in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process as a result of the political processes happening in Armenia after the presidential elections.

An unexpected change of political power in Armenia through the “velvet revolution” took the Azerbaijani government by surprise. There have been a number of statements by local and international (mainly Russian) experts, such as Markov (AzerNews 2018a), Sobhani (AzerNews 2018b), and Tropinin (Shirinov 2018b) on the opportunities this power change could have provided for the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, hoping that Pashinyan’s stance on the ways of the dispute’s settlement would be different from Sargsyan’s.

Another interesting point was the fact that the Azerbaijani government restrained from any adverse or bellicose rhetoric towards Armenia within the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict during and right after the revolution. Yet, as was mentioned above, there were concerns in Armenia that Azerbaijan could use the momentum and resume war in Karabakh. However, after the new government in Armenia revealed its stance on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, demanding that the de-facto Nagorno-Karabakh authorities be included in the negotiation process, Baku doubted that there would be much of a substantial change in terms of the peace process.

In May 2018, the Azerbaijani government initiated military actions on the Armenian-Nakhichevani¹⁹ border. Yet, this case to a certain extent keeps its vagueness since neither side provided convincing information on the activities carried out on the border. On May 20, the Azerbaijani

¹⁹ In Azerbaijan, the Autonomous Republic is known as Nakhchivan. In Armenian, it is known as Nakhichevan (CE Editorial Team).

Defense Ministry reported the death of an Azerbaijani soldier at the Armenian-Nakhichevani border calling it yet another provocation from the Armenian side. The Armenian Defense Ministry laid the responsibility on the Azerbaijani side, claiming that the reason for the casualty was due to "... active engineering works at certain sections of the border with Armenia" (TASS 2018). By the end of May, the local media circulated information that the Azerbaijani army conducted a counter-offensive operation ("Gunnut operation") and liberated "the village of Gunnut in Sharur region and strategic heights of Khunut (2,065 meters), Gizilgaya (1,683 meters), and Mehridag (1,869 meters), located around the village" (Shirinov 2018c).

However, a month later it was revealed that this, actually, was a military operation planned ahead. On July 7, the Turkish channel TRT World aired a program dedicated to the Gunnut operation during which it was clearly stated that "Azerbaijani military officials say they have long been preparing a special operation to retake the land held by Armenian forces and so launched the operation in Nakhchivan. Over 200 Azerbaijani special forces stormed Armenian military positions in this area and recaptured over 110 square kilometers of territory that was once occupied by Armenians" (AzerNews 2018c).

Interestingly, this military operation remained a secret for about a month. On June 20, the Minister of Defense of Azerbaijan, in his press conference with the local mass media representatives, stated that the information about the military operations at the Armenian-Nakhichevani border were not disclosed due to the political situation in Armenia because Sargsyan would have apparently used this information in order to distract the attention of the Armenian population from the political chaos within the country (REAL TV 2018). Hence, the military activities launched at the Armenian-Nakhichevani border were made public on May 15 only upon the completion of the Armenian "velvet revolution" on May 8. While this event was presented as a glory in Azerbaijan, its brightness was soon darkened by claims of certain local experts that the so-called "liberated" territories had been in the neutral zone which was neither under Armenian nor Azerbaijani control (AzadliqRadiosu 2018). Apparently, while the Azerbaijani military forces launched the operation, they were acting within the neutral

territory and were not liberating lands from Armenia, which is why Sargsyan could not use this, and overall there was no reaction from Armenia. Hence, little information disseminated in Azerbaijani media reflected the truth.

An effective peace process—yet another challenge to be addressed

Regardless of the detrimental developments that occurred within the context of the existing discourse on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, there has also been constructive progress. One of the main indicators of the process of a peaceful settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is the ongoing negotiations between the dispute sides. Since the April war in 2016, the relations between the two governments remained very tense and the presidents did not meet between June 2016 and October 2017. Hence, as a result of number of meetings between the respective ministers of foreign affairs of Armenia and Azerbaijan the presidents, finally, met on October 16, 2017 in Geneva, where they agreed to intensify the peace process and decrease the tensions on the frontline. These renewed talks were assessed by the OSCE as a demonstration of a sign of goodwill from both sides.

Yet another encouraging development of the passing year was the Azerbaijani government's readiness to continue support for the peacebuilding activities between the two communities of the Nagorno-Karabakh region. This fact was highlighted at the meeting of the Azerbaijani Minister of Foreign Affairs Elmar Mammadyarov with the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus Toivo Klaar, where the minister noted the significance of the dialogue between the Armenian and Azerbaijani communities of Nagorno-Karabakh and stressed Azerbaijan's support (AzerNews 2017). Furthermore, this message was also announced at the winter session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) in Strasbourg on January 26 by Azerbaijani MP Rovshan Rzayev, who stressed the importance of the restoration of "lost trust" between the two communities by correctly adding that this process per se could positively influence and foster the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process (Zeynalova 2018). Another statement was made by Jeyhun Mammadov, the senior consultant of the

presidential administration, about the security of Armenians currently residing in Azerbaijan who emphasized the lack of a "...conflict between Azerbaijanis and Armenians residing in the country" (Shirinov 2018a; Shirinov 2018b). Consequently, even though the Azerbaijani government adhered to bellicose rhetoric more often, it leaves some room for the expression of the goodwill within the context of the peacebuilding activities as part of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement process. Such pro-peace rhetoric should be practiced more often by government officials and the media should pay more attention to the circulation of such news to restore that constructive approach to the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process.

Conclusion

Both the existing pro-war discourse as well as the ongoing militarization process in both countries negatively affect the already complicated Nagorno-Karabakh conflict peace talks. The dangerous rhetoric of the past few years, particularly, reduces the chances for the soonest resolution of the dispute as it diminishes trust and confidence in the possibility of a peaceful approach and urges both sides to prepare for combat operations in case the war resumes. Both governments, taking into account the current situation in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, particularly after the power change in Armenia, should put more effort into continuing the peace talks and demonstrate a more constructive approach in settling the dispute.

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Recommendations

Lala Jumayeva and Mikael Zolyan

The recent change of the government in Armenia presents a unique chance for “restarting” the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process.

To policy makers in Armenia and Azerbaijan

The governments of both sides of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict should improve the negotiating climate by moderating their militarist and antagonistic rhetoric and eliminating hate speech and hostile discourses. The Armenian and Azerbaijani leaderships should strive to increase the transparency of the peace process and ensure the inclusion of the societies in the peace process through various dialogue programs. While progress in the negotiations may seem unlikely in the short term, a change of rhetoric, and, subsequently, a change of the atmosphere around the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process, can be gradually advanced.

More specifically, the governments should

- Capitalize on the “restart” opportunity to advance the peace process on official and unofficial levels;
- Stop further military build-up;
- Limit/decrease/eliminate bellicose rhetoric from government officials;
- Advance alternative discourse to militarist and pro-war discourses in the media;
- Create a joint council of Armenian and Azerbaijani journalists that will develop a code of ethics for covering the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict;
- Initiate a meeting of the first ladies of Azerbaijan and Armenia and encourage the collaboration of women’s groups, including

those representing the Azerbaijani and Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh communities;

- Engage in and encourage environmental cooperation.

To the European Union

- In their dialogue with the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan, the EU should encourage the Armenian and Azerbaijani officials to drop the aggressive militaristic rhetoric and shift toward a more constructive language, free of hate speech and threats of violence.
- The European Union should further promote and advocate for conflict transformation measures in its dialogue with the Armenian and Azerbaijani governments.
- To help build the local peace constituency, donor agencies should consider decentralizing funding allocated for the realization of the peacebuilding initiatives and expand the number of organizations from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone involved in the process.
- In order to support the NK peace process the EU should implement more focused peace-building activities. The following projects can be implemented within the framework of the Eastern partnership (EaP) program:
 - The activities of the EPNK should be continued;
 - The peacebuilding activities should be strengthened via implementation of vocational (professional) exchange trips both to Armenia and Azerbaijan where an exchange of ideas, knowledge, experience and culture could be provided. The aim of these trips will be adding a non-political dimension to the peace process.

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

Zaur Shiriyev*

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.

* Zaur Shiriyev is International Crisis Group's Europe Fellow. This article was commissioned before the author joined the International Crisis Group staff, and the topic of the article has been changed due to the developments in Armenia. The opinions here are the author's own and do not represent ICG's official position.

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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Karabakh Discourses in Armenia Following the Velvet Revolution

Anahit Shirinyan

The question as to what changes Armenia's Velvet Revolution may be bearing for the peace process around Nagorno-Karabakh is trending among the South Caucasus watchers. The new Armenian government is ready to discuss mutual compromises, but suggests that Azerbaijan shelf its war rhetoric first. While Yerevan could exercise a more nuanced rhetoric without changing Armenia's traditional stance on the conflict, it would be ill-informed to deem the change of government per se as a watershed for possible changes in the peace process. The current conflict narrative is still under the heavy influence of the four-day war of April 2016, and so the security dilemma still prevails. The Armenian government could foster a healthier culture of discourses in Armenia and initiate small gestures to help build trust, were these steps reciprocated by Azerbaijan. Only then could the Velvet Revolution prove an opportunity for a negotiated solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Introduction

Although Armenia's Velvet Revolution had a domestic focus, the emergence of a leadership that has come into power on a democratic platform holds repercussions for the foreign policy in general and for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in particular. The new Armenian government is primarily preoccupied with domestic issues and snap parliamentary elections expected to take place in December 2018. And even among the foreign policy topics, Nagorno-Karabakh is not high on

the agenda. It is therefore too early to speak of the new government's approach to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as there is no coherent policy in place, and once it takes shape, it is unlikely to change Armenia's traditional stance on the conflict. However, some subtle differences are already visible, such as a view of security that does not focus on the military component only, or a more nuanced rhetoric on the conflict. More distinctions are likely to transpire in the already existing multiple discourses in Armenia. Differentiation may be necessary for Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's inner circle, the old bureaucracy, and other forces that position or can potentially position themselves in opposition to the government. The new opposition is likely to adopt harsher rhetoric and use the Nagorno-Karabakh issue as a trump card against the government. Such contention could divert the government's position toward a more defensive posturing.

But the conflict's own dynamics will be influencing the new government's position and discourses more than anything else. The current conflict discourse is still under the influence of the four-day war of April 2016. That slide down to war has further aggravated the conflict's security dilemma. The prior tacit understanding that the conflict should be based on some form of compromise within "territories in exchange for status" formula has been challenged. Azerbaijan has been trying to move the logic of the talks to a "territories in exchange for peace" formula by employing use of force and threat of war (Shirinyan 2016). The agreements reached in Vienna in May 2016 and in Geneva in October 2017 on confidence building measures and continuation of talks have not been implemented. The Azerbaijani government has been impatient for what it calls "substantive talks," under which it understands withdrawal of Armenian forces from territories around the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) while avoiding discussing Nagorno-Karabakh's status. Baku also wants to be able to use force as a means of pressure, and so is against installation of ceasefire monitoring and other confidence building measures in the conflict zone.

Armenia holds that it is impossible to go back to business as usual and pretend there was no war in April 2016. It insists on confidence building measures first and maintains that the question of status should be discussed in parallel with the question of withdrawal. Over the last year, Azerbaijan's Nakhijevan enclave has been undergoing a military build-

up, threatening to potentially turn into a new clash-point, this time involving Armenia's internationally recognized territory.

Some repercussions from the Revolution

As Armenians took to the streets in April 2018 to protest against Serzh Sargsyan's move from the president's to the prime minister's office, the overall military-political situation around Nagorno-Karabakh remained tense. Amidst continuing protests throughout Armenia, the Nagorno-Karabakh army published video footages of Azerbaijani military build-up along the Line of Contact. These reports prompted an OSCE call to the parties to refrain from accumulating heavy equipment in the frontline "at this delicate time" (USC Institute of Armenian Studies 2018). The reports, however, did not affect the behavior of the protesters and their leaders even though the ruling Republican Party of Armenia tried to use the military build-up in domestic dynamics.

The revolution broke the security-democracy dichotomy in Armenia. The previously held notion that Armenia cannot be a fully-fledged democracy and needs centralized power because of threats to its security has been challenged. In fact, following the four-day war in April 2016, the dominating discourse turned to corruption as the major threat to Armenia's national security and the legitimacy deficit of consecutive Armenian administrations eating away at the country's international standing. The growing popularity of these discourses challenged the narrative that Serzh Sargsyan, himself a Karabakh war veteran, was the only one who could ensure security and therefore was the irreplaceable leader, something that his close circle used to justify his continuous grip over power.

The Azerbaijani government and public alike watched happenings in Armenia with cautious interest. For Baku, repercussions were certainly connected with how the change of power in Armenia could possibly affect Armenian positions on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Official and analytic circles in Azerbaijan have long held the misperception that Armenia's stance on Nagorno-Karabakh was determined by the personal stakes of Serzh Sargsyan and his predecessor, Robert Kocharyan, both being originally from Nagorno-Karabakh (Turan.az 2018; Trend.az 2018). It is only logical then that Baku would see some merit in the rise of a new, more liberal leader like Nikol Pashinyan, who

they thought could soften Armenia's stance without having to soften Azerbaijan's (Aliyev 2018).

Concerns over what a new leader in Armenia who is not from Nagorno-Karabakh might mean for Yerevan's position have been present inside Nagorno-Karabakh. Nikol Pashinyan's trip to Nagorno-Karabakh on May 9, 2018, only a day after the Armenian National Assembly voted him in as Prime Minister, was meant to reassure the Nagorno-Karabakh leadership and public that Armenia's stance has not changed.

The Armenian revolution may have symbolically closed the 30-year-long historical cycle that emerged with Armenian protests back in 1988. The new government represents a new generation that is mostly not connected with the war veterans who came into power following Armenia's independence and built their legacy on the discourse of victory in the Nagorno-Karabakh war. However, when "rejecting"²² Serzh Sargsyan, the revolutionaries were also rejecting the system that has, among other things, misused the Karabakh cause and compromised the original ideas of freedom, democracy, and human rights at the core of the 1988 movement and subsequent Armenian independence.

A new rhetoric?

Since coming into power in May 2018, Armenia's Pashinyan has made a number of announcements that offer a glimpse into his policy, and that most probably will comprise Armenia's updated position over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

1. Karabakh should be at the negotiations table: Pashinyan has argued a few times that he can only speak on behalf of Armenia at the negotiations; the people of Karabakh do not participate in Armenia's elections, and they should be represented by their own elected representatives (Arka.am 2018). Pashinyan has further challenged the Azerbaijani leadership in its unwillingness to talk to Nagorno-Karabakh directly, suggesting that Azerbaijan wants the territory without the people (Primeminister.am 2018).

²² The revolution's primary slogan was "Make a step, reject Serzh."

2. Compromise is possible: Pashinyan stated that he is ready to compromise, but only after Azerbaijan drops its military rhetoric and acknowledges the Karabakh people's right to self-determination (Armenpress 2018a).
3. The people's voice will be key in the final solution on Nagorno-Karabakh: Pashinyan also stated during rallies that he will not sign any deals without talking to the people of Armenia, and that even if he reaches what he deems as a fair deal at a negotiation table, he will ask the people to decide whether or not it is an acceptable solution (The Armenian Weekly 2018), assumedly through a referendum.
4. Pashinyan called his recently conscripted son's placement to serve at a Karabakh frontline a "peacemaking action." Pashinyan suggested that his son being at the frontline means he does not want war. He went on to challenge Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev, suggesting that had he done the same with his own son, he would be indicating that he had a personal stake in peace (Echo Moskvi 2018).

These points are hardly new, and have been voiced in various forms by previous Armenian administrations. However, they had not been central to the official position the way they are now, which has given rise to interpretation that Armenia is toughening its position (Abrahamyan 2018). In essence, however, the legitimacy of these discourses are revitalized by virtue of the Velvet Revolution, the very logic of it and the value system on which it rests. Pashinyan has come into power on the back of popular protests which were a realization of direct democracy. He has emphasized the "power belongs to the people" discourse since. The ability for the population of Nagorno-Karabakh to decide its own fate, as well as a critical peace deal to which Armenia's citizenry has a say, are within the logic of the revolution and the new system that the revolutionary government has pledged to build. It is hard to argue, for example, against the point that Nagorno-Karabakh should have a say in its own future. As much as that point might be interpreted as uncomfortable for the peace process, dealing with it sooner than later has its merit.

Pashinyan's announcements on Karabakh so far are emblematic of his overall straightforward approach in politics, which may clash with the

logic of “constructive ambiguity” that the OSCE peace process has adopted. That ambiguity, reflected in the Madrid Principles, was meant to keep the talking floor open and allow compromise on issues other than the status of Nagorno-Karabakh, which remains the top point of contention. Instead, it has allowed the parties to juggle with the principles in a non-committal manner, while Azerbaijan has used threat of war and use of force hoping to cherry pick from among the principles. Furthermore, Pashinyan has shown keenness to “democratize” the peace process, through not only reiterating that people are to have the final say, but also directly reporting on the details of his encounters with Aliyev to the public in live video broadcasts. This goes counter to the hitherto closed and exclusive nature of the talks when only a handful of officials from both sides know of the detailed contents of the negotiations.

The peace process overall might also have to cope with the now-different level of popular legitimacy of governments in Armenia and Azerbaijan. The question as to how much democracy in these countries can affect the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process has remained open with two contradictory narratives. On the one hand, given that a solution to the conflict implies painful concessions for both sides, one narrative has seen merit in the centralized nature of power in these countries. The logic is that leaders who rule with an iron fist can “sell” painful concessions better than democratic ones who depend on the votes of the people. Another long-held narrative has been that Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders are not interested in solving the conflict because it serves as a source of legitimacy for them to ensure regime continuity. Some went further to conclude that only having democratic systems on both sides can lead to a solution. With the change of power in Armenia, these old narratives are now challenged.

Pashinyan’s suggestion that speaking of any concessions is premature in the context of threats of war is also a clearer articulation of an old, contentious point in the Armenian stance. Past Armenian leaders have spoken of concessions in the form of withdrawal of Armenian forces from the territories around the former NKAO in exchange for Azerbaijan recognizing the rights of self-determination of the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians and accepting whatever eventuality that may imply for the status of the territory. The latest such case occurred immediately

following the April 2016 war, when Sargsyan unveiled that Armenia was ready to withdraw from five territories and leave the final decision on the status to a later stage, per the “Kazan plan” of 2011. Baku rejected the deal, suggesting that the possibility of Nagorno-Karabakh’s independence was unacceptable (Shirinyan 2016). No clear articulation of what Azerbaijan is ready to concede on its part has been heard so far, even though the issue of status is being discussed at the peace talks.

If Azerbaijan is not able to articulate its share of compromises, then the Armenian side will have no incentive to continue being the only one speaking of concessions. With growing threats and use of force, Yerevan has increasingly demanded clearer commitments regarding the status issue. The notion of an interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh is part of the “constructive ambiguity.” It is meant to allow Azerbaijan to take some time and prepare for its part of the difficult deal. However, Yerevan sees that Baku will not use that time for its purpose: Azerbaijan has hoped that its use of force and the threat of war can bring about the Armenian withdrawal without committing to the issue of status.

This conceptual clash between the straightforward approach of Armenia’s new government and the ambiguity in the current peace process is likely to remain.

Recent trends post-Revolution

Following the uprising in Armenia, two parallel trends in the conflict’s dynamics have been observed: an escalation and attempts to find common grounds for dialogue.

Already in May, both rhetoric and action escalated. Affected with the tension was the border between Armenia and Nakhijevan as Azerbaijan’s president Ilham Aliyev visited Nakhijevan on May 16 and made threats against Armenia (Trend.az 2018). On May 18, Armenia’s Defense Minister Davit Tonoyan and Foreign Minister Zohrab Mnatsakanyan visited the border region near Nakhijevan, reportedly to observe the situation (Hetq.am 2018). Skirmishes were reported soon after in what looked like the Azerbaijani side moving its positions forward in the no-man’s land (OC Media 2018) and claiming a major victory in a PR move (Kucera 2018b). This renewed tension in Nakhijevan highlighted the emergence of a potential new flashpoint

between Armenia and Azerbaijan that has been building up over a year (Abrahamyan 2017).

In the months that followed, Azerbaijan heightened its rhetoric, a military parade was held in Baku on June 26, and large-scale military exercises on July 2-6 staged the Azerbaijani takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh (Kucera 2018a). In July, Tonoyan threatened Azerbaijan by stating that it should not think that only it is capable of military escalation and that the Armenian side would employ “punitive responsive measures” (EADaily 2018). Then the Nagorno-Karabakh Army Chief Levon Mnatsakanyan threatened that the Karabakh forces could strike the Azerbaijani hydro power plant Mingachevir “in the event of necessity” (PanARMENIAN 2018), which in turn prompted veiled threats from Baku to target the Metsamor nuclear power plant in Armenia (Azvision 2018).

Armenia held its own military drills on September 11-14, which simulated a wartime scenario involving all state agencies and a hypothetical declaration of war on Azerbaijan (Armenpress 2018b). Immediately afterwards, Azerbaijan announced new drills (Report.az 2018). These instances demonstrate a tendency on both sides to flex muscles and reassert standing grounds following the change of power in Armenia. But they also point to how military rhetoric and action can trigger a dangerous chain of reactions that can in turn lead to serious escalation.

The impression among Armenian analytic circles is that Azerbaijan has been trying to take advantage of the whirlwind of domestic developments in Armenia. On the one hand this has been reflected in escalating rhetoric and action in apparent attempts to put pressure on the new government while it is distracted with domestic challenges. On the other hand, Baku has tried to use the relative tension in the relations between Armenia and Russia to win Moscow’s sympathies. Even though the Velvet Revolution has not challenged the basic parameters of Armenia’s foreign policy, it has caused a readjustment in relations with Russia. The uprising came unexpectedly for Moscow, which has watched the rise of a young generation of politicians with a democratic and anti-corruption agenda with unease (Atanesian 2018b). Moscow’s cautious suspicion towards the Pashinyan government in Armenia was

used in Azerbaijan in a few PR moves, such as harboring Russian experts who frame the uprising in Armenia as an “orange scenario” (Paralel.az 2018) or speculating about a possibility of Azerbaijan becoming a CSTO member (Markedonov 2018). These were seen in Armenia as attempts by Azerbaijan to build new points of convergence with Moscow, thereby hoping to sour relations between Armenia and Russia. Meanwhile, Armenia’s old guard has been trying to use the Russia card against the new government and, assumedly, to score points in Moscow’s eyes. Major Republican Party MPs have been arguing that Pashinyan’s foreign policies are jeopardizing relations with Russia (Aravot.am 2018a, 2018b), while former president Robert Kocharyan, who is now facing criminal charges, has speculated that the new government is trying to reverse Armenia’s geopolitical alignment (Kommersant.ru 2018). The discourse of the Armenia-Russia fallout is being actively circulated through a number of media outlets that Kocharyan allegedly acquired. Similarly, opposition circles have used the political-military tension following the uprising to employ alarmist rhetoric vis-à-vis alleged government inaction anticipating the dangers of war (Atanesian 2018a) and have dubbed Pashinyan’s approaches to the Karabakh settlement as “contradictory” and “potentially catastrophic” (Aravot.am 2018b).

Although the rhetoric from Pashinyan and defense officials in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh primarily has been the restatement of their readiness to answer decisively if there is a new war, Armenian diplomatic circles have been more selective in responding to antagonistic rhetoric from Azerbaijani officials, often leaving them unanswered. This is a nuanced departure from the previously held practice when similar rhetoric from Azerbaijan would generate an answer from either government or pro-government analytic circles which have now lost ground in Armenia.

In parallel, some intentional pro-peace or goodwill gestures can also be observed. On July 24, 2018, at a meeting with female leaders at the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, Armenia’s first lady Anna Hakobyan announced a “Women for Peace” initiative. The initiative is meant to encourage female voices to advocate against war and for the peaceful solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In her speech Hakobyan made statements that humanize the other side and draw on the

similarities of Armenian and Azerbaijani soldiers (News.am 2018). On September 15, around 40 mothers who lost their sons in hostilities on the Armenian side announced they would back Hakobyan's initiative and called on mothers on the Azerbaijani side to join their campaign for peace (Simonian 2018). The initiative continued in early October, as Hakobyan and Russian female cultural and political leaders visited Nagorno-Karabakh to make another call (Novaya Gazeta 2018). Azerbaijan, however, has been skeptical of this initiative.

On the sidelines of the Commonwealth of Independence States summit in Dushanbe on September 28, Pashinyan and Aliyev had an informal conversation and reached a gentlemen's agreement to reduce tension on the frontline and establish a direct communication channel between the two sides. They also reiterated their commitment to the peaceful settlement of the conflict (Panorama.am 2018). No major escalation at the frontlines has been reported since.

Conclusion

After Armenia's Velvet Revolution, two parallel processes around the conflict have been observed. One is the escalation of the war rhetoric and tension on the Line of Contact and in Armenia-Azerbaijan border regions in Tavush and near Nakhijevan. With a new government in Yerevan, Armenia and Azerbaijan are reasserting their military and rhetorical posturing vis-à-vis each other. A parallel, positive messaging process can also be observed. Armenia's first lady has aimed at building bridges between Armenian and Azerbaijani women to advocate the discourse of peace through her "Women for Peace" initiative. Although the Azerbaijani side has been skeptical of this gesture so far, the initiative is potentially helping the Armenian public overcome the misconception that gestures of goodwill are a sign of weakness. A point to build on is the gentlemen's agreement reached between Pashinyan and Aliyev to reduce tension and open a line of communication between the sides. This process can help create a more constructive environment for talks if the sides demonstrate political will to uphold them. However, there is also a reason to be skeptical as past agreements on confidence building have not been implemented. In order for the Velvet Revolution to prove an opportunity for the peace process, both sides would need to have an input towards that end.

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Recommendations

Anahit Shirinyan and Zaur Shiriyev

The two sides have reached an important agreement on reducing tension and opening a channel of communication that is already operating. This consensus is based on a verbal agreement, and failing to adhere to it would damage the fragile mutual trust. Below are a few recommendations that could facilitate healthier discourses and a more conducive environment overall.

To the government of Azerbaijan and Armenia

Rhetoric, communication, and public debates

Messages are not geared only to domestic audiences. Any populist, bellicose rhetoric targeting domestic audiences also reaches the other side and creates a negative image of the other. Moreover, it may generate responses not only in rhetorical forms but also in the form of actions and overreactions where the snowball-effect escalation is likely. The sides should therefore refrain from employing hardline and war rhetoric.

In October, two new Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokespersons, who are both women, were appointed in Azerbaijan and Armenia. This is a fresh opportunity to introduce a more nuanced rhetoric overall when commenting on issues related to the conflict. The two sides should explore ways of increasing engagement with their media and encouraging better cooperation with online and traditional media agencies.

The two sides should differentiate between society and government. The sides, considering that mutual “messaging” is inevitable, should ensure that “warning messages” do not target people—the Armenians and Azerbaijanis as a whole. Similarly, the sides should refrain from using language that dehumanizes the other.

Given that the sides may be at different thinking “frequencies,” the possibility that rhetoric and action will be misinterpreted is high. For example, what may be intended as a gesture of goodwill might be interpreted as condescending or a mere PR stunt by the other side. It is therefore crucial that messages and discourses are formulated clearly, and the risks of misinterpretation are measured and avoided.

The sides should combat misinformation by refuting it in a timely and operative manner, and not allow it to stir more antagonism and enmity.

The sides should start opening up public debates on what is discussed at the negotiations table. Each side should not expect talk of compromises if they are not debating compromises at home.

Mutual Symbolic Gestures

The merit of small symbolic gestures should not be underestimated, and gestures of goodwill should be accepted as such. Such gestures could be allowing mutual visits to sites of memory or maintaining each other’s graves situated in their respective territories. Public diplomacy activities will also help build trust and create a more conducive atmosphere.

Both societies are eager to see tangible results, such as the implementation of the 2014 Paris agreement on the solution of problems related to prisoners of war, hostages, and missing persons. The release of detainees and hostages from both sides would be welcomed. Both sides are open to this in theory, as reflected in the Vienna statement in May 2016, which reiterated support for the work of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The modalities—how to improve and support ICRC’s work—are necessary. This can bring tangible results on a small scale and help transform the human face of the conflict.

Although there is skepticism in Azerbaijan towards the Armenian first lady’s “Women for Peace” initiative, there could be merit in exploring its possibilities. The Armenian side could in turn explore ways of being more proactive in reaching out to Azerbaijani mothers. This initiative can transform from being a women-led peace campaign into participation at the negotiations table and peacebuilding.

To the media and opinion makers

Media and opinion makers should be mindful that they are generating discourses and therefore are responsible for the language and tone they

use when covering the conflict. They should refrain from comments that dehumanize the other.

To the international community and international donors

The international community and mediators could help advocate these recommendations among respective parties and encourage change of tone and rhetoric as well as give a green light to public diplomacy initiatives at the highest level. The latter, in particular, would ensure there are no official or unofficial obstructions for such initiatives.

International donors could support trainings for media representatives on conflict transformation and conflict-related vocabulary to promote more sensitive messaging in the media outlets of the two countries.

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