

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

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

This publication has been produced in the framework of the project “Joint Platform for Realistic Peace in the South Caucasus” of the Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation in partnership with the Center for Independent Social Research – Berlin.

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The project “Joint Platform for Realistic Peace in the South Caucasus” is funded by ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen) / Funding program zivik with resources provided by the German Federal Foreign Office.



Federal Foreign Office

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Armenia: After the ‘Four-Day War’

The Case of the ‘Azerbaijani Apples’, the ‘Four-Day War’, and Radicalization in Society

In April 2017, a scandal gripped Armenia. It came to light that apples from Azerbaijan were sold in numerous locations across Armenia, leading to a storm in the Armenian media and social networks (Muradyan 2017). Commentators fumed over the fact that Azerbaijani products were imported into Armenia, arguing that by buying them, Armenian customers were subsidizing the enemy’s army. Some also claimed that the apples may have presented a health hazard.

The very fact that this issue gained such prominence is a sign of a changed climate in Armenia regarding the perception of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. There have been some reports about Azerbaijani products being sold in Armenia in the past, as was the case with Azerbaijani garlic in 2011 (Mkrtchyan 2011), but these did not produce a major scandal. In fact, there is no legal requirement in Armenia prohibiting the import of Azerbaijani products (Bbc.com 2017), but this did not stop the scandal from unfolding.

The change in perceptions had been happening slowly as the incidents on the line of contact and the Armenia-Azerbaijan border intensified during the last several years. However, the main catalyzer that changed the way many Armenians looked at the conflict was the escalation in April 2016, which in Armenia is often referred to as the “four-day war”. The aftermath of the hostilities saw a patriotic mobilization and hardening of attitudes toward the other side of the conflict. Yet while the society’s dominant position after the “four-day war” has hardened, the escalation also led to a more active discussion in Armenia over the necessity of compromise, even though today this discourse remains marginal compared to the dominant “patriotic” discourse.

From the April Escalation to the July Events: Impact on Politics and Society

The April 2016 hostilities led to a “patriotic” mobilization and consolidation, and initially, the government was the beneficiary of this trend. Immediately after the “four-day war”, an Armenian opposition leader, former President Levon Ter-Petrosyan, initiated a meeting with current President Serzh Sargsyan, which was perceived as a sign of support by the opposition for the government during difficult times (Armenianow.com 2016). However, in the mid-term or long-term perspective, the effects of the April events on Armenia’s political system are more complicated. Although the hostilities gave rise to a consolidation around the government in the short term, the legitimacy of Armenia’s ruling elite may be undermined in the long term.

For over two decades the Nagorno-Karabakh issue was an important source of legitimacy for the ruling elite. The social contract, which existed between Armenian elites and society, was based on the argument that, despite all the internal problems, the government had been successful in providing security, avoiding large-scale war, and maintaining a status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh, considered to be favorable for Armenia. Against this background, any significant internal change, such as a change of government through election or “a colored revolution”, would be an unacceptable security risk since war could break out. In the absence of any significant socio-economic achievements or democratic progress, this narrative served to legitimize the claim of the ruling elite for maintaining power.

However, ironically, even though the April events undermined one of the arguments that helped to legitimize the government, they showed that the prospects of renewed hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh were realistic. Therefore, from the point of view of some opposition forces, the government, as faulty as it was, was the only force able to organize and lead Armenia in case of a renewed war. Hence, there was a need to put aside differences and consolidate around the government. This sentiment was aired several times by Ter-Petrosyan and other opposition figures. And this influenced the behavior of the opposition. Although Armenian opposition leaders would denounce the government as “illegitimate”, “oligarchic”, “kleptocratic”, and even “tatar-mongolian” (Abrahamyan 2007), the opposition’s rhetoric significantly softened in the aftermath of the April war. Even during the election campaign for the 2017 parliamentary elections, most opposition parties refrained from

such attacks on the ruling government. Moreover, when the official election results were announced, the largest opposition block, “Yelq” (“Way Out”), not only did not call for protests, but, in a development almost unprecedented in Armenian politics, accepted the results of the election as legitimate, even though electoral violations, particularly vote buying, were reported (Aljazeera.com 2017).

However, while formal opposition political forces may have softened their stance toward the government, it does not necessarily reflect the attitude of the wider layers of Armenian society. In fact, in the medium-term perspective, the April war has actually undermined the government’s legitimacy. The “four-day war” showed that the high level of corruption and shortage of budget assets were affecting Armenia’s security. Moreover, the questionable, from the Armenian point of view, position of Russia and other Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) allies in the context of the conflict, also undermined the trust toward the Armenian government’s foreign policy. Finally, in the aftermath of the “four-day war”, the negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan intensified, and rumors surfaced about a certain agreement draft, often called “Lavrov’s plan”, which included concessions on the Armenian side (Kommersant.ru 2016). The readiness of the government to make concessions in the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, if true, would have contradicted the narrative of the ruling elite being the only guarantor of Nagorno-Karabakh’s current status and security.

While Armenian government officials, including its president, have in the past affirmed their support for a compromise within the framework of the Madrid principles (Sargsyan 2013) in the international arena, they rarely attempted to explain that position to the Armenian population. On the contrary, the official discourse remained within the limits of “official patriotism”, underlining the fact that Nagorno-Karabakh has de facto independence, which would be defended by the strength of the Armenian army, if necessary. The need for concessions, which any compromise would entail, simply did not fit into this official discourse. In the aftermath of the April events, there were several attempts by various government figures, such as Vice-Chair of the National Assembly Hermine Naghdalyan, to articulate the need for concessions, but such statements were met with strong criticism among political circles, the media, and social networks (Martirosyan 2016).

This process of erosion of the government’s legitimacy, related to its readiness for concessions, manifested itself most strongly in the events of July 2016, when

a group of armed men, named “Sasna Tsrer” (“the Daredevils of Sassoun”, after the Armenian epic) seized a police station for about two weeks. The gunmen, among them several war veterans and members of the “Founding Parliament” opposition movement, hoped that their action would spark a mass uprising and lead to the deposing of the government. A mass uprising failed to materialize. However, first hundreds and then thousands of activists went to the streets in support of the “Sasna Tsrer”. While some politicians and members of intelligentsia, including former President Levon Ter-Petrosyan, condemned the “Sasna Tsrer” action, others openly supported them, or at least condemned the government for the situation in the country that had led to the uprising (Zolyan, *The Daredevils of Sasun: Why an Armed Incident Triggered a Political Crisis in Armenia* 2016).

Of course, this attempted armed rebellion was not solely related to the presumed government concessions over Nagorno-Karabakh. The gunmen and their supporters identified internal factors to explain their actions, citing the need to get rid of the illegitimate oligarchic government. However, considerations related to presumed concessions played a key role in their actions as well as in the support they received from a segment of society (De Waal 2016). Coincidentally, since the “Sasna Tsrer” action, government officials and members of the ruling party have mostly refrained from discussing the need for concessions and compromise in Nagorno-Karabakh.

In Search of a Solution: ‘Nation-Army’ or Compromise?

The “Sasna Tsrer” action showed the ruling elite that in order to maintain their position they needed to make some changes to their policies. Mostly, these amounted to personal changes in the upper echelons of power, with the arrival of a new energetic prime minister, Karen Karapetyan, a former GazProm executive. Many Armenians hoped that Karapetyan would revive the economy and bring order into government structures (Zolyan, “Éminence Grise” and “Efficient Manager”: Why Armenia is Getting a New Prime Minister 2016). Changes happened also in the armed forces: immediately after the April war several high-level officials were fired (Ren.tv 2016), and eventually the minister of defense and the head of the general staff of the armed forces also lost their positions (lin.am 2016). It is early to say to what extent these changes have helped the Armenian economy, but indeed Karapetyan helped the Republican

Party win the 2017 parliamentary elections, and to a degree, overcome the crisis of legitimacy that had led to the “Sasna Tsrer” action.

However, changes were not confined to the matters of socio-economic policy. In what seems to be a direct response to the April 2016 events, the Armenian government proclaimed that it would be transforming society into a “nation-army” aimed at increasing the defense abilities of Armenia (Grigoryan 2016). Until now, however, the “nation-army” program has received little substance, as the only concrete step was the introduction of a new tax to maintain a foundation that would provide support to the families of killed soldiers (Khachaturyan 2016). This initiative was heavily criticized by the opposition and independent media, but it was adopted by the parliament, and the opposition to it was denounced as “unpatriotic” by recently appointed Minister of Defense Vigen Sargsyan. The program is unlikely to bring about significant transformations within Armenia’s armed forces, but the “nation-army” rhetoric is likely to remain for a long time, as it helps the government regain the legitimacy shaken as a result of the April 2016 events.

Finally, although the April 2016 events generally brought about “patriotic” mobilization and a hardening of attitudes toward the conflict, they also catalyzed new discussion about the possible resolution of the conflict. Ter-Petrosyan was the most vocal voice within this discourse. Not only did Ter-Petrosyan defend the need for compromise, as he had done numerous times before, but he also made it the key message in the 2017 parliamentary elections campaign. However, as the election results show, this discourse remains largely marginal in Armenian society: the Armenian National Congress-People’s Party of Armenia bloc received only 1.5 percent of the vote, the lowest result a political force led by Ter-Petrosyan has ever shown in any elections. Ter-Petrosyan, however, must have known what he was doing: after the election, he said that he hardly expected a different result, given the fact that Armenia is an autocracy (Zolyan 2017). Arguably, Ter-Petrosyan, realizing that his party had few chances to get into parliament, decided to use the opportunity provided by the electoral campaign to defend his views on the necessity for compromise in the Nagorno-Karabakh issue.

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