

The Positions of Political Parties and Movements in Azerbaijan on the Resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

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Introduction

There are more than 50 political parties and movements in Azerbaijan. Fifteen political parties and one political coalition, representing seven parties, participated in the last parliamentary elections in November 2015. The ruling New Azerbaijan Party (*Yeni Azərbaycan Partiyası*, YAP) gained the majority of the votes and received 71 out of the 125 seats in the Parliament. Ten political parties¹ received one seat each, and the Civic Solidarity Party (*Vətəndaş Həmrəyli Partiyası*, VHP) received two seats in the Parliament². Independent candidates occupied the rest of the seats. (Cental Election Comission of the Republic of Azerbaijan n.d.) Azerbaijan is a one party dominant state, and the majority of the opposition parties are not represented in the Parliament.

The participation of the opposition in the political life has been more challenging for the last few years. A political coalition of several opposition parties, movements, and individuals emerged in the year of presidential elections in Azerbaijan in 2013 under the title of National Council (*Milli Şura*) (Azadliq.info 2013). Another coalition, called “125s Political Club” (*125-lər Siyasi Klubu*) was established in 2014 to run the candidacies of their members in the parliamentary elections in the following year. Overall, the passive political environment and the lack of possibilities for political activism have resulted in a public invisibility of the positions and programs of parties. Therefore, this paper looks at the positions on the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict of various political parties as well as movements, including the political opposition unrepresented in the Parliament in Azerbaijan.

¹ Motherland Party (*Ana Vətən Partiyası*), National Revival Movement Party (*Milli Dirçəliş Hərəkatı Partiyası*), Whole Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (*Bütöv Azərbaycan Xalq Cəbhəsi Partiyası*), Party for Democratic Reforms (*Azərbaycan Demokratik İslahatlar Partiyası*), Great Liberation Party (*Böyük Qurtuluş Partiyası*), Civic Unity Party (*Vətəndaş Birliyi Partiyası*), Azerbaijan Social Prosperity Party (*Azərbaycan Sosial Rifah Partiyası*), Social Democrat Party (*Sosial Demokrat Partiyası*), Azerbaijan Democratic Enlightenment Party (*Azərbaycan Demokratik Maarifçilik Partiyası*), and Unity Party (*Birlik Partiyası*).

² These ten parties and the VHP are formally considered opposition parties in the Parliament. Due to the similarity of agendas and narratives of the parliamentary opposition parties, we chose only the VHP for the study in this paper.

The analyzed parties are the ruling party – YAP, parliamentary opposition VHP and extra-parliamentary opposition National Council (*Milli Şura*) coalition, Musavat³ Party, Agh⁴ Party, Future Azerbaijan Party (*Gələcək Azərbaycan Partiyası*, GAP), Umid⁵ Party, Republican Alternative (*Respublikaçı Alternativ*, REAL) Party, Popular Front Party of Azerbaijan (*Azərbaycan Xalq Cəbhəsi Partiyası*, AXCP), Citizen and Development Party (*Vətəndaş və İnkişaf Partiyası*, VIP), Azerbaijan Democratic Party (*Azərbaycan Demokrat Partiyası*, ADP). In addition, two opposition movements – NIDA Civic Movement (*NİDA Vətəndaş Hərəkəti*) and National Idea Center youth movement (*Milli İdeya Mərkəzi gənclər hərəkəti*) have been analyzed. The main source according to which the positions have been teased out are the twelve expert-interviews conducted by the co-authors of this paper with the leaders and/or representatives of these parties and movements. In addition, the election programs as well as speeches and statements by the leaders and spokespeople of the parties and movements have also been analyzed.

Prioritization of Nagorno-Karabakh in the Agenda of the Parties and Movements

The interviews conducted for this paper have shown similar priorities in the agendas of some of the opposition political parties and movements. Improving human rights and restoring democracy and the rule of law in the country ranks first. Meanwhile, the ongoing ineffective peace negotiations over Nagorno-Karabakh ranks as the first security threat to the country by all studied opposition parties. As people directly or indirectly affected from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, including the IPDs and refugees, constitute very vulnerable social groups, all the political parties, including the ruling party, underline the

³ “*Musavat*” means “equality”.

⁴ “*Ağ*” means “white”.

⁵ “*Ümid*” means “hope”.

violation of the rights of those people as a result of the conflict (National Parliament of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2006).

Indeed, all the studied political parties and movements – both in power and in the opposition – possess somewhat similar approaches regarding the prioritization of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by focusing on the restoration of territorial integrity, the sovereignty of Azerbaijan as well as the rights of IDPs and refugees. The government justifies its internal hard policies as well as failures through over-prioritizing and putting issues related to Nagorno-Karabakh first in its agenda. Still, the opposition parties criticize the ruling party on this issue and there are also differences in the agendas they set for themselves.

Policies Regarding Relations with Armenia and the Resolution of the Nagorno- Karabakh Conflict

Gradual Transformation Towards Democracy and Peace

The conducted interviews have revealed that, given all options, most of parties and movements prefer the peaceful settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

The **NIDA** Civic Movement sees the resolution of the conflict only through peaceful means. They also condemn the escalations on the frontline and the killings of civilians and soldiers. Board Member of the NIDA Civic Movement Ulvi Hasanli explains his concerns: “In 2013, we were the co-organizers of the protest called ‘Stop the killings of soldiers’. We were demanding to put a stop to the deaths of soldiers in non-combat situations. We want to solve the conflict through peaceful ways” (Hasanli 2017). In a similar key, Chairman of the **Umid Party** Igbal Aghazade states, “I participated in the Karabakh war. Therefore, I

am so much in favor of the peaceful resolution because I know that war will not bring any good to our nations and in general to the South Caucasus region” (Aghazade 2017).

There are several scenarios and strategies presented by the opposition political parties and movements in terms of the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

The first suggested scenario is that **Armenia and Azerbaijan simultaneously develop their democracies, implement a pro-western foreign policy, sign the EU Association Agreement, and decrease the influence of Russia in the region**⁶. In this case, the parliamentary opposition VHP, as well as the Musavat Party, the AXCP, GAP, the Umid Party, and the NIDA Civic Movement believe that the conflict can be solved through mutual understanding and compromise.

Along these lined, Board Member of the **AXCP** Agil Maharramov states, “If both Armenia and Azerbaijan become democratic states and choose to integrate with the West, there will surely be more prospects for the peaceful settlement of the conflict. Public diplomacy and official negotiations will accelerate. At least, both governments will not accuse their opposition for being pro-Armenian or pro-Azerbaijani. Inveterate hostility among the two nations will be eliminated” (Maharramov 2017).

The Musavat party, prioritizing democratization and peace, has been involved in the Potsdam processes since 2009. In 2010, Chairman of the Musavat Party Isa Gambar, Chairman of the Armenian National Movement Aram Manukyan, Chairman of the parliamentary group of the Republican Party in Georgia David Berdzenishvili signed the Potsdam Declaration aiming to increase cooperation between their countries in order to find solutions to the on-going territorial and political conflicts in the region (Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom 2010). The agreement will come into action, if the involved political parties come to power in their respective countries and develop democracy in the region.

⁶ Similar results were revealed in the study under EU FP7 CASCADE GA No. 613354 in 2016 and described in the manuscript submitted by Leila Alieva and Bakhtiyar Aslanov (2017) titled “How autocracy impedes de-securitization, or why democracy matters: case of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict”.

Explaining the post-Potsdam agreement situation, Deputy Chairman of the **Musavat Party** Elman Fettah speaks about the necessity of simultaneous steps towards democracy and peace: “The change of the current political regime only in Armenia and its democratization will have a positive and negative impact on the conflict. However, it will not completely solve the conflict. For instance, if Armenia has a democratic political regime while the authoritarian regime continues in Azerbaijan, it will be a dangerous situation for the interests of Azerbaijan. Because in such a scenario, Armenia will always be one step forward in the official negotiation processes. Armenia will not have to worry about human rights or democracy issues” (Fettah 2017).

The second scenario is to **develop the democracy in Azerbaijan and improve human rights and the rule of law** in order to attract the support of international and local stakeholders. The parties and movements that favor this scenario think that this will give the upper hand to Azerbaijan in the negotiations and prove that it will protect its Armenian citizens and ensure their security and well-being. Leader of the **National Idea Center** youth movement Shehriyar Mecidzade notes that the majority of Armenian political leaders are ex-militants: “It is impossible to have negotiations with a military junta. Therefore, we have to develop our economy and democracy, attract and integrate Armenians living in Karabakh, and save them from the repressive regime” (Mecidzade 2017).

The third scenario is **political change and democratization of Russia**, resulting in a new global and regional order. Parties and movements favoring this scenario believe that the role of Russia will diminish significantly in the South Caucasus, and Armenia, losing its political and military ally, will opt for compromise in the negotiations. Chairman of **VIP** Ali Aliyev highlights the role of Russia: “The best way to solve the conflict is to bring together the two conflicting nations. Simultaneously, it is essential that Armenia is released from the bondage of Russia. It all depends on the weakening of Russia as a political power” (A. Aliyev 2017).

The Chairman of the **Umud Party** considers the role of Russia a substantial element in the resolution of the conflict. However, he does not believe that the democratization of Russia will ultimately solve the conflict: “The change of political regime in Russia might open new opportunities for resolution. For instance, the parties might solve the conflict through the use of force. Azerbaijan might liberate a large part of Karabakh. Nevertheless, it will not be a

fundamental way to solve the conflict. Moreover, Russia has large institutions and its foreign policy traditions do not change easily” (Aghazade 2017).

Stance on the Madrid Principles, the OSCE Minsk Group, and Russia’s Role

Almost all the examined opposition parties and movements believe that the current negotiations are ineffective. So far as the ruling YAP, carrying out the negotiations, blames Armenia for a non-constructive position (İsgəndərova 2016). While the prevailing view internally and internationally is that the Madrid Principles⁷ is by far the most feasible model for the resolution of the conflict, most of the opposition parties do not agree with all the principles and the compromise offered by the current government.

Particularly unacceptable for the REAL Party and the Agh Party is the possibility of the deployment of peacekeeping forces in Nagorno-Karabakh. As the **REAL Party** states in its main program, “We will try to establish the image of Azerbaijan as democratic state in the world, along with ensuring the strong and disciplined army in order to restore our territorial integrity, the matureness of our foreign policy. Moreover, we won’t let the deployment of peacekeeping forces of any foreign country in Karabakh and the conduction a referendum on separation of Karabakh from Azerbaijan be a subject of matter of Karabakh negotiations” (Republican Alternative Party n.d.). At the same time, the REAL Party has conducted an internal survey among its elites showing that 73.3 percent of the respondents opt for the peaceful resolution of the conflict. Similarly, Chairman of the **Agh Party** Tural Abbasli states, “We are providing a corridor in the Madrid Principles. There are also points about status and peacekeeping forces. If we agree on that, Russia will locate its peacekeeping forces on the border. [In that case] there will be a huge vulnerability that, with a small provocation, the Russian army will start military operations just like they did in Abkhazia” (Abbasli 2017).

In their critique of the Madrid Principles, Chairman of the **ADP** Sardar Jalaloglu and Chairman of **VIP** Ali Aliyev go further arguing that the Principles aim to

⁷ For the full text of the Madrid Principles, see (Madrid Principles – Full Text 2016).

give Karabakh to Armenia and fulfill the interests of Armenia (Jalaloghlu 2017) (A. Aliyev 2017).

Despite the disagreement on the Madrid Principles, the **REAL Party** believes that the OSCE Minsk Group format is feasible for the resolution of the conflict. Meanwhile most of the political opposition is critical about the position of the Minsk Group because of the unwillingness of the co-chair states to support the process as neutral mediators. The passive image of the OSCE Minsk Group and Russia's increasing influence in the region is not welcomed and appears as a large threat to the settlement of the conflict.

According to the conducted interviews, Russia's role in the region and its impact on the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is also widely criticized by most of the political opposition. The pro-Russia policy of the current Armenian government and its wide dependence on the military support of Russia results in concerns and disbelief in the resolution of the conflict. Moreover, Russia's perceived impact on stopping the so-called "April War" in 2016 has brought to widespread skepticism over its role among political elites.

Some of the political opposition parties and movements believe that Russia as a mediator is taking sides with Armenia favoring the latter's interests in the negotiations, resulting in ineffective and long-lasting processes. Representative of the **National Council** Ibrahim Ibrahimli, states, "De-facto, Russia has occupied Armenia and a few days ago, they established a joint army. Right now, the territories of Azerbaijan are under the occupation of that joint army. This action once again proves that Russia's role as a mediator in the Minsk Group is just a formality. Russia is not in the position to solve the conflict; instead, it motivates the existence of conflict and influences Armenia and Azerbaijan. It is a good leverage, and Moscow does not want to miss this leverage" (Ibrahimli 2017).

In a slight contrast with the opposition parties discussed above and as demonstrated by the interviews, the **Musavat** and **Umid** parties, the **AXCP**, **GAP**, and the parliamentary opposition **VHP** believe that the presence of Russia is convenient for the political regimes both in Armenia and Azerbaijan. They also believe that in its turn, the current situation is auspicious for Russia to keep its power over the South Caucasus by allying with the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan and supporting their existence in power. Since the

beginning of the conflict, Russia has often been deemed as the main culprit that also benefits from the continuation of the conflict. Improving democracy and the rule of law in Armenia and Azerbaijan alone are not seen as sufficient to fully solve the conflict either. Thus, these parties see both the democratization of Armenia and Azerbaijan and the change of political power in Russia as an essential breakpoint in the future settlement of the conflict.

Inevitableness of War as a Tool to Solve the Conflict vs. Compromise

All studied parties and movements unequivocally believe that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict should be solved with the guarantee of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. The seven regions around Nagorno-Karabakh should not be subject to negotiations, and they must be returned immediately. The current government established by the YAP claims that Azerbaijan reserves its right to restore the territorial integrity and the sovereignty of Azerbaijan, as well as the rights of the displaced people through either peace or war, even though Baku prefers to achieve a peaceful resolution over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Hasanov 2011).

The **National Council** presents a strong position that Nagorno-Karabakh is a part of Azerbaijan and should not have an autonomy, which also resembles the mainstream public opinion (Caucasus Research Resource Center 2013). Alternatively, the rest of the political parties see Nagorno-Karabakh as a part of Azerbaijan with a high degree of autonomy, mostly cultural autonomy, protecting the rights of ethnic Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh that are de-jure citizens of Azerbaijan.

In this regard, long-term negotiations and the current position of the government in the negotiations are not easily accepted among the opposition. In case of the continuation of such negotiations without outcomes, the studied parties and movements do not exclude the use of force and military operations as a last resort to restore Azerbaijan's territorial integrity.

The **AXCP** leader states, "We are in favor of solving the conflict through peaceful ways. However, not with the current 'frozen peace'. The ceasefire is always violated. Every day, a soldier is killed... If the Armenian government stays in the same position and does not step back in the negotiations, we will surely use force to bring back the territories" (Maharramov 2017). Similarly,

Secretary of Political Affairs at the **REAL Party** Azer Qasimli notes: “We will continue the negotiations with Armenia. However, if there are any ceasefire violations on the border, we will respond back seriously. We will do twice more than what the current government did in April 2016. We will move 10 kilometers forward, not 1-2 kilometers” (Qasimli 2017). **VIP** and the parliamentary opposition **VHP** support the idea of using force to accelerate the peace negotiations.

Obviously, the use of force as a tool to resolve the conflict is in the possible agenda of all popular political parties. Despite aiming to achieve peace and coexistence, all parties have a preference to strengthen the military, use military operations, and ensure the territorial integrity at some point. The lack of trust in the negotiations and public diplomacy, as well as the unpredictability of geopolitical changes, or at least political changes in Azerbaijan, allows the political opposition, with minor exceptions, to follow the narratives of the ruling party.

The ruling **YAP** aims to restore authority over all areas of its internationally recognized territories that are currently Armenia-controlled. According to the Basic Principles that the current government is negotiating on within the platform of the OSCE Minsk Group, as a very first step and sign of willingness of peace, Azerbaijan expects Armenian forces to withdraw from the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh. Then, a multinational peacekeeping mission is to be deployed to guarantee the security of Azerbaijanis returning and Armenians remaining in these areas. With peacekeepers on the ground, Armenian troops should also withdraw from the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, and Azerbaijanis who formerly lived there should be granted safe return (OSCE 2009).

Unlike the opposition parties, the incumbent government of **YAP** is offering a compromise on certain principles such as the deployment of a peacekeeping mission and the status of Nagorno-Karabakh. One important suggestion is to keep Armenian troops in the lands connecting Armenians to Armenia until international peacekeepers are on the ground. Azerbaijan requests the withdrawal of military forces of Armenia from the regions of Kalbajar and Lachin after five years following the return of all territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan’s control. Although, Azerbaijan refuses to grant Nagorno-Karabakh the right to secede, it is ready to grant this entity “the

highest degree of self-rule and autonomy” by arguing that this will be “less than independence but more than autonomy” (Rashidoghlu 2016).

Most of the political opposition disagrees with the current policy and the compromise offered by the government of Azerbaijan. In this regard, their positions present harsher and a more unambiguous approach to the resolution of the conflict, which is a waxing trend after the escalation in April 2016.

A New Status Quo and Disillusionment with War

The majority of the political parties, including the studied political opposition supported the government during the military operations in April 2016. The parties essentially supporting peace gradually changed their narratives and officially declared their support for war. They all demonstrated a neat trust in the willingness of the government of Azerbaijan to solve the conflict through ongoing operations in early April 2016. In this regard, the opposition parties were ready to stop their activities and stand by the president.

On April 2, 2016, Chairman of the **AXCP** Ali Karimli addressed the public and the supporters of the party: “In fact, if the aggressor – Armenia has violated the ceasefire, we want our territories to be freed. [...] Do not worry about the opposition. We are the political power who established the Azerbaijani state, fought for Karabakh, and sacrificed many soldiers. We are ready to support our army by any means. [...] We will stop criticizing the government’s military policy or any mistakes regarding the military development during the heavy operations on the frontline” (Karimli 2016). After the ceasefire agreement on April 5 and seeing the outcomes of the war, some opposition parties changed their narratives and started criticizing the defensiveness and unwillingness of the government to continue the war. Russia’s role in stopping the victory of the Azerbaijani army (that was the perception at that time) and the death of many soldiers came unexpected for both the public and the political opposition parties. Therefore, the initial trust in the actions of the government turned into total disbelief and cynicism (Azadliq.org 2016).

Assessing the motives of the escalation and de-escalation, some opposition parties and movements perceived the “April War” as a pre-planned action to support the political regime in Azerbaijan and increase their public popularity. Samir Asadli from the parliamentary opposition **VHP** states, “In the April war, many people died in vein. This is not success. It was a provocation of Russia. It

is not acceptable if a human being dies for such a minor so-called success” (Asadli 2017). The representative of the **National Council** highlights, “The April war proved that unless we are following the orders of Russia, we would have no good for people. We should either start war and free the territories or stop creating such kind of escalations” (Ibrahimli 2017).

Contrary to this position, the ruling YAP and the overwhelming majority of the parties represented in the Parliament (yet not studied in detail in this paper), believed that despite stopping the war, the “April War” has been a victory. President Ilham Aliyev, who is also the Chair of the ruling YAP later also stated, “The Azerbaijani Army showed the enemy where they belong. Today we have gained superiority. However, we are ready to restore the ceasefire, only in case the opposing party also follows the ceasefire. We do not want war. We would like the problem to be solved through peaceful ways” (I. Aliyev 2016).

Some opposition parties also started following a similar discourse and saying that the Azerbaijani army is strong enough to solve the conflict or influence the negotiations. Nevertheless, there was no serious improvements in the negotiations afterwards. VIP believes that they will give similar statements if escalations happen again: “We are the party who wants Ilham Aliyev to liberate those territories. If he is capable of it, we as opposition are ready to do our best to help him. As soon as the war starts, we are ready to support the government” (A. Aliyev 2017).

In April 2017, amendments on the law about military situations were accepted. The amendments allow increased civic and political limitations during a military situation. In such a situation, the mass media will be censored and under surveillance. Additionally, all public meetings, street gatherings, protests will be prohibited (State Security Service of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2017). The amendments clearly legitimize the position of the government during war situations by giving them more possibilities, limiting the activities of civic and political groups. Growing wary of this scenario, **GAP** leader Aghasif Shakiroglu states, “If similar escalations happen again, we will first analyze the situation. We will see if those operations aim to postpone the 2018 presidential [elections] through war-related imitations. If there are military operations on the threshold of the 2018 elections, we will give a different reaction than we did in April 2016. Because, the government again can free one hill and postpone elections for an unknown period” (Shakiroglu 2017).

The current positions of the political parties on the use of force is largely motivated by April 2016. Despite the limitations to the activities of the political opposition, there is a shared consent among the **Agh Party**, **VIP**, and the **ADP** to follow a similar track and position in case of another escalation. Whereas, some opposition parties such as the **AXCP**, **GAP**, and the **Musavat Party** are more cautious about further events and believe that they can push the government to be accountable and influence public opinion in order to prevent similar ineffective military operations from happening.

Impact of Normalization of Turkey-Armenia Relations

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is the clashing point and the reason why Turkey closed its border with Armenia in the early 1990s. In addition, Azerbaijan and Turkey are close strategic partners in the region.

As discussed in the previous sections, most of the parties and movements in Azerbaijan believe that Armenia greatly depends on Russia and its colonial policy. This injects disbelief in the parties and movements regarding the success of the rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia. However, there are a few different approaches regarding the normalization of Turkey-Armenia relations and its impact on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict amongst the political parties and movements in Azerbaijan.

First of all, some political parties and movements, including the **REAL Party**, the **AXCP**, the **NIDA Civic Movement**, the **ADP**, and **GAP** assume that the restoration of political, economic, humanitarian, and other relations between Armenia and Turkey would enable Armenia to get out of the sphere of influence and dependency from Russia to some extent. **This in turn could positively impact the peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict since Turkey would be able to exert more soft power on Armenia.** In this logic, building strong economic, political, and other relations between stakeholders of these two countries could gradually eliminate the influence of negative memories between people and could bring these two nations to a consensus on different irreconcilable and uncompromising issues. However, these parties and movements claim that Russia unfortunately did not let the sides successfully finalize the normalization process by exerting influence through

Azerbaijan and other leverages. The **REAL Party** notes, “The government of Azerbaijan did not approach this event in a positive way. Russia managed to stop this process via the hands of Azerbaijan... However, this would have positively impacted the peaceful resolution of [the] Nagorno-Karabakh [conflict]” (Qasimli 2017).

However, there are some political parties and movements, such as the ruling **YAP**, the parliamentary opposition **VHP**, as well as **VIP**, the **Umid Party**, the **National Council**, the **Agh Party**, and the **National Idea Center** youth movement, that are totally against any kind of rapprochement process between Turkey and Armenia before achieving a final resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In their view, **the restoration of relations between Turkey and Armenia would negatively impact the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict**. By condemning the current government of Turkey for their policies on this issue in 2009-2010, these parties and movements expect any government in Turkey to support the isolation policy of Azerbaijan towards Armenia until the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is settled. The representative of the **National Council** emphasizes, “Turkey and Azerbaijan should act together on all the issues, not only on this one. Normalization might only be brought to the agenda after the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Economic and other types of relations can be built after the return of the occupied territories of Azerbaijan” (Ibrahimli 2017). In a different key, the **Agh Party** claims that all the parties and civil society representatives should support and not criticize Turkey, even though, Ankara made a mistake on this issue in the past (Abbasli 2017).

There is a third approach to this topic in Azerbaijan, which is mainly supported by the **Musavat Party** adherents. This party assumes that **the restoration of relations between Turkey and Armenia would have neither a positive nor a negative impact over the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict**. In line with its initial position discussed above, it believes that the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict only depends on the spread of democracy in Armenia and Azerbaijan. A peaceful resolution is realistic only if both countries improve and respect democratic values in their respective countries (Fettah 2017).

Conclusion

Complications of the political environment and the one party dominance in Azerbaijan affects the roles and positions of the political parties and movements on the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The lack of participation of the political parties, particularly the political opposition in the conflict resolution and peace-building processes, results with the limitation of alternative agendas on the resolution of the conflict. Simultaneously, it forces the political parties to see their roles as an actor only after becoming a ruling party and gaining power to act.

According to the conducted study, almost all political parties and movements prioritize the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as a main element of foreign policy. Whereas, in contrast to the ideas of the ruling party, most of the political opposition believe that the development of foreign policy is highly depended on internal policy. Thus, the studied opposition parties and movements assume that the democratization and liberalization of Azerbaijan and its neighboring states will positively influence the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Second, they do not isolate the Nagorno-Karabakh issue from all other foreign policy issues. The development of a good image of Azerbaijan in the western world (unlike the policy of balance between the east and the west that the current government is leading) will bring more benefits to its capacity to solve the conflict. In this regard, the majority of them are in favor of diminishing the Russian influence, eliminating its soft and hard power in the South Caucasus. It is also visible that the willingness to join the EU and fully integrate into the West is not seen as a salvation in relation to conflict resolution either.

Contrary to the ruling party, the political opposition disqualifies the role of the OSCE Minsk Group and criticizes the ineffectiveness of its mediation processes. Russia's role is seen as the main obstacle in the relations with Armenia. Therefore, contrary to the position of the ruling party, the common discourse among some of the studied opposition parties and movements is that the normalization of Turkey-Armenia relations would increase the influence of Turkey and simultaneously decrease the impact of Russia in Armenia. In their logic, this would impact positively the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. However, the other part of the opposition parties and movements

objects to the normalization process and believes it will be against the interests of Azerbaijan. Thus, most parties and movements believe that the normalization process between Armenia and Turkey would affect the settlement of the conflict in one way or another. Only the Musavat Party, with their more compromising agenda on the conflict, considers the Turkey-Armenia normalization process intransitive to Azerbaijan-Armenia relations.

Following the narratives of the ruling party, all parties and movements support the idea of peaceful coexistence after the resolution of the conflict within the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. However, not all of them are ready to compromise on the issues that the incumbent government is currently ready to compromise on. Some political opposition fundamentally rejects to compromise on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh. By disagreeing with the status of “highest autonomy to Nagorno-Karabakh” currently displayed by the government of Azerbaijan in the negotiations, the parties accept the discussions about a cultural autonomy only after the return of the seven regions around Nagorno-Karabakh.

The persistency of the political parties to solve the conflict through a hard-power diplomacy and less compromise is more visible and common after the April 2016 escalations. Unlike their initial position in April 2016, the popular political opposition parties, such as GAP, the AXCP, and the Musavat Party, are critical about the effectiveness of such military operations. Nevertheless, they also believe that the use of force in conflict resolution is not excluded. These parties also question the frankness of the government in terms of solving the conflict by use of force and consider escalations as a supportive tool for the ruling party to remain in power. However, the majority of the political parties still have trust in the military strategy and military strength of the government and believe that they will support the government again if similar attempts of military operations happen. In this regard, the amendments on the law on military situations and the legitimization of giving all power and decision-making functions to the government during such escalations has been accepted easily and without much objection.

Finally, the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is the ultimate goal for all parties. There is surely willingness to resolve the conflict, but there is also a lack of participation and trusted dialogue on the issue. If the political environment in Azerbaijan changes and the political opposition gains opportunities to influence the decision making on the settlement of the conflict,

with their current agendas, no crucial changes are expected to happen. However, if such changes take place, more internal open dialogue will bring about democratic and fair decisions, increase political will, and assist the development of alternative agendas for the peaceful resolution of the conflict.

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