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# Karabakh Discourses in Armenia Following the Velvet Revolution

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**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"<sup>22</sup> 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).

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<sup>22</sup> 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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