

The road to the Second Karabakh War: the role of ethno-centric narratives in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

Philip Gamaghelyan^a and Sergey Rumyantsev^b

^aKroc School of Peace Studies, University of San Diego, San Diego, CA, USA; ^bCenter for Independent Social Research (CISR), Berlin, Germany

ABSTRACT

On September 27, 2020, the three-decades-long Nagorno-Karabakh conflict erupted into war. During 44 days of organized violence that claimed thousands of lives, the political leadership of Armenia and Azerbaijan along with public intellectuals, journalists, artists and ordinary citizens, continually and publicly expressed pro-war sentiments and confidence in their victory. This article examines the strategies of Azerbaijani and Armenian political and intellectual elites and the formation of myths and conflict narratives that steadily led the two societies towards the Second Karabakh War. It further examines the post-war discursive developments that are working to set Armenia and Azerbaijan on the path to a new round of destructive confrontation.

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Introduction: “fighting for peace”

On September 27, 2020, the three-decades-long Nagorno-Karabakh conflict erupted into the Second Karabakh War. During the 44 days of organized violence that claimed thousands of lives, the political leadership of Armenia and Azerbaijan along with the public intellectuals, journalists, artists, and ordinary citizens, continually and publicly expressed pro-war sentiments and confidence in their victory (BBC News: Russian Service 2020b; *Bakinskii Rabochii* 2020; Trend.az 2020a; Novosti Armenia 2020a).

Azerbaijan on the one side and Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh¹ on the other engaged in an uncompromising fight for total victory, while simultaneously proclaiming their aim “to achieve a sustainable peace” (Novosti Armenia 2020b). The perception that peace can be achieved through a military victory over the adversary has long been central to their political discourse. In June 2018, while speaking at a military parade that marked the 100th anniversary of the Azerbaijani army, the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, spoke of both the military might and his peaceful intentions. He ended the speech with a paradoxical conclusion: “We want a peaceful settlement of the conflict, and the policy Azerbaijan is pursuing [i.e. the massive militarisation of the country] is a vivid evidence of that” (PRA 2018). Aliyev’s speech at the parade was in response to Armenia abandoning its long-standing defensive policy and adopting a “new war for new territories” doctrine, proclaimed several weeks prior by Armenia’s new defence minister, David

Tonoyan (MOD 2020). In June 2020, only three months before the start of the Second Karabakh War, the president of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic/Artsakh, Arafik Harutyunyan, similarly confirmed his adherence to militarization as a road towards “peace”. Without acknowledging the apparent internal contradiction, he proclaimed: “Artsakh and Armenia fully share approaches and efforts directed at achieving peace and preparing for war” (Novosti Armenia 2020b, par. 8).

In the years that preceded the new war, unwilling to compromise or negotiate with one another in good faith, the parties continually appealed to international institutions and to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Minsk Group of mediators² in particular, to compel the opposing side to accept their demands. Each government interpreted international law and the UN Security Council resolutions on Karabakh in their favour (Kazimirov 2004; UNSC 1993). Azerbaijan prioritized the principle of territorial integrity while Armenia focused on self-determination. The Azerbaijani government viewed mediators’ calls to rule out the use of force in the search for a solution as an indecisive and pro-Armenian position. The Armenian governments used these appeals to prolong the status quo.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, however, has always occupied a secondary role in the agenda of the European Union (EU), the United States, and key international institutions such as NATO and the UN. From among the great powers only Russia, striving to preserve its dominance in its “near abroad”, has had a sustained interest in the conflict. According to Laurence Broers, “one of the distinguishing features of the Armenian-Azerbaijani rivalry to date has been the inability of the parties to make their claims resonate with, and truly become proxies for, great power agendas” (Broers 2020a, par. 28).

Despite the absence of meaningful engagement by international actors with Nagorno-Karabakh, the bulk of analytical and scholarly literature on this conflict has been and continues to be geopolitical. This paper adopts an alternative lens and examines the strategies of political and intellectual elites in Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the formation of myths and conflict narratives that steadily led the two societies towards the Second Karabakh War. It further examines the post-war discursive developments that are working to set Armenia and Azerbaijan on the path to a new round of a destructive confrontation in the future.

Irreconcilable neighbours

Two hostile national projects, Armenian and Azerbaijani, took an irreconcilable stand as the sun set on the Soviet Union. In 1987–1988, ethno-nationalist discourses and historic narratives were utilized to justify the rights of Armenians and Azerbaijanis to the exclusive ownership of a single territory,³ an autonomous region of some 4,400 square kilometres within the territory of Azerbaijan SSR with a population in 1979 of 162,000 people, of which 123,000 identified as Armenians.⁴ The conflicting discourses carried the legacies of their imperial past: namely the rich, yet essentialist, historiographic and ethnographic traditions of the Soviet Union; of well-developed national academies of sciences that long served as the gatekeepers of ethno-nationalist ideology; of internalized primordialist interpretations of the concepts of nation and ethnicity; and finally, of myths of “historic territories” and “ancient nations” (Rumyantsev 2010, 2011, 2019).

The creators of conflict discourses, giving primacy to primordialist ethno-nationalist vocabulary, discursively transformed this contemporary conflict into a historical one

with roots in antiquity (Gamaghelyan and Rumyantsev 2013). The narrative of the conflict as rooted in history became ingrained and was adopted by policymakers. Invited to publicly discuss visions for peace during a February 2020 meeting in Munich, the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan, Nikol Pashinyan and Ilham Aliyev, instead used the opportunity to debate the merits of their competing historical claims over Karabakh (Munich Security Conference 2020). The event culminated in Pashinyan announcing his unilateral intent to replace the Basic Principles⁵, the basis for negotiations since 2007, with the “Munich principles” (Socor 2020), a maximalist wish-list that amounted to a rejection of the previous trajectory of the negotiations.

From the perspective of nationalism studies, conflicts framed in ethno-nationalist terms are in principle irresolvable (Brubaker 1998, 273, 280). The binary and ethnic framing empowers violent and nationalist extremes within societies, supplying them with inordinate power. Such framing, prevalent in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict context, marginalized potential peace constituencies and other affected groups, forcing them to either join one of the extremes or remain voiceless (Gamaghelyan 2017, 27, 129).

An alternative could involve reframing the conflict as a joint problem of de-colonizing the region and ensuring its long-term viability and sovereignty, a goal that could be achieved through sustained efforts to re-humanize each other and positively transform relations. Instead, the parties chose a Clausewitzian position, seeing wars as the norm of regional politics and an “act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfil our will” (Clausewitz 1984, 87). Entering the third decade of the twenty-first century, Azerbaijani and Armenian political regimes followed the logic of this nineteenth-century war theorist, and marched their societies into a second meat grinder in three decades. If the trend continues, the two societies might well find themselves proceeding towards a third.

We should fight with enemies, not agree with them!⁶

From the late 1980s, Armenian and Azerbaijani political and cultural elites infused the political and media discourses of both nations with chauvinism and enmity towards “the other”. By the mid-1990s, the discursive trap of hate and reification of one’s own side’s victimhood became the basis of what Volkan calls “chosen traumas” (Volkan 2001). Further, the ethnic cleansing of Armenians from territories controlled by Azerbaijan and Azerbaijanis from territories controlled by Armenians led to mutual isolation and prevented the emergence of grassroots practices of everyday peace and coexistence. The ceasefire agreement of 1994 was not followed by the establishment of an inter-societal dialogue, transitional justice and reconciliation efforts, or a joint, constructive quest for peace. Instead, Azerbaijan used the break to recover from political and economic devastation of the first war to prepare for victory in the next one, while Armenia worked to retain all territories conquered during the first war, while adapting to a state of permanent confrontation with its neighbour and economic isolation. Both remained convinced that the road towards sustainable peace lay through domination over the other.

Resources invested into the “future victory” far surpassed those invested into efforts for a peaceful settlement. In the 2000s, as the Armenian economy stabilized and Azerbaijan started receiving oil and gas revenues, the parties lavished billions on military

spending. From 2009 to 2018 “Azerbaijan’s military spending amounted to almost 24 billion dollars. Within the same period, Armenia spent a little over 4 billion dollars” (Butia 2019, par. 2). In recent years both countries have continuously ranked among the most militarized countries in the world on a per capita basis (BICC 2019). While oil-rich Azerbaijan spent more in absolute numbers, Armenia was leading in the percentage expended on defence compared to total national spending (Caucasian Knot 2020). Defence spending was only the most visible segment on a larger canvas of war preparation. Media, secondary education, academia, cinematography and other forms of art, were fully invested in the war effort. Research and textbooks, but also poems, novels, films and documentaries, theatrical performances, and musical performances continually de-humanized “the enemy” and heightened the level of patriotic emotion.

In comparison, peacebuilding efforts remained marginal. Even in 1994–2011, the most active phase of official negotiations, state actors never devised policies to re-humanize the other or prepare populations for peace. In the later years, with the official process deadlocked, peacebuilders were actively persecuted by the state in Azerbaijan and targeted by nationalist groups in Armenia.

Each government refused to acknowledge their own responsibility for the violence and chose to mourn only their own losses and grieve their own wounds, engaging in “reconfiguration of political space” (Brubaker 2009). From the early days of the conflict, Azerbaijan mastered the art of promoting myths denying or justifying the violent actions of its nationalists. In 1989, the renowned historian Ziya Bunyadov popularized a conspiracy theory alleging that the anti-Armenian pogroms in Sumgait in February 1988 were organized by Armenian, rather than Azerbaijani, nationalists. Using Stalin-era terminology, he suggested that nationalists from Soviet Armenia organized “debauchery” and “inflicted a heinous blow” to Azerbaijan’s industrial city (Bunyadov n.d.). With time that theory became widely accepted in Azerbaijan. During the 2020 war, the Chairman of the Azerbaijan Writers’ Union, Anar, spoke of the “hypocrisy” and “lack of principle” of the “historical enemy”. He wrote, in reference to the ethnic cleansings of Armenians in the 1980s and 1990s, that

[i]n response to the unprecedented brutal expulsion of Azerbaijanis from Armenia and as a result of the feeling of just indignation among our people fuelled by the terrible stories of refugees, certain excessive events occurred in Baku [in January 1990] against the Armenians. We do not deny them. We condemn them. As a result, the Armenians were forced to voluntarily leave Baku.

Notable in the text is the use of a euphemism “excessive events” to describe anti-Armenian pogroms, as well as the casual use of the oxymoron “Armenians were forced to voluntarily leave”.

In Armenia, conspiracy theories and the denial of the responsibility for violence have also been common. The mass killing of Azerbaijani civilians in Khojali in February 1992 has been routinely presented by Armenian politicians, academics, and journalists via conspiracy theories, suggesting that either the event has been falsified by Azerbaijanis or, if it took place, the Azerbaijanis themselves were the guilty party (Asbarez 2020; Novosti Armenia 2019). The mention of the displacement of Azerbaijanis and the violence against them has been a taboo. When the topic is addressed, authors and politicians resort to euphemisms and justifications, similar to the Azerbaijani discourse presented in

the previous paragraph. A ninth-grade history textbook draws a rhetorical distinction between the displacement of Armenians from Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijanis from Armenia: “... By organizing these historically unprecedented massacres in Sumgait, the Azerbaijani government intended to create awe and panic among the Karabakh Armenian population who would then be ethnically cleansed” (Barkhudaryan 2008, 113). The Sumgait and Baku pogroms are further described in the text as “vandalism”, “massacre”, “crime”, “violence”, and “mass deportations”. In the very same passage, the textbook refers to the parallel deportations of Azerbaijanis from Armenia as an “out-migration” that was organized by the Armenian side “under acceptable conditions”. This point is further reinforced in the “question and exercises” section that follows. “Can one equate the ‘deportations’ of Armenians from Azerbaijan with the ‘outmigration’ of Azerbaijanis from Armenia?” the textbook asks. The rhetorical suggestion is that some two hundred thousand Azerbaijanis voluntarily left their homes to become refugees (Gamaghelyan and Rumyantsev 2013, 179–180).

With time, the perpetual denial of one’s own responsibility for the conflict and indignation at the other’s, presumably unprovoked and innate, thirst for violence translated into rejection of any compromise at all. If in the early years of the conflict the Armenian side claimed the territory of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) and considered the seven surrounding districts of Azerbaijan controlled by Armenian armed forces at the signing of the 1994 ceasefire agreement a “buffer zone” and a “bargaining chip” that was to be returned to Azerbaijan under the right conditions, with time they were discursively transformed into “liberated territories” and were formally annexed by the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic in its 2017 constitution. The phrase “Aghdam [one of the aforementioned districts] is not our homeland”, pronounced in parliament by then defence minister and later president of Armenia, Serzh Sargsyan, led to widespread criticism and threats directed against him, highlighting the perils that any politician considering compromise might face (de Waal 2011, 7; Lragir.am 2011). The radicalization of positions and the rejection of compromise, while expedient for domestic politics, continually moved the region closer to war.

“Mistimed” revolution

The 2018 “Velvet Revolution” in Armenia was impressive in its successful execution but came at an inopportune time. It was impressive, in the sense that a handful of civil society leaders and opposition politicians with no history of governing, no resources, nor external support, and operating in an atmosphere of widespread political apathy instilled by two decades of authoritarian rule, managed to mobilize hundreds of thousands of citizens to engage in well-coordinated action that ousted the ruling regime. It was a revolution that relied on tactics of non-violent civil disobedience, reminiscent more of Czechoslovakia’s overthrow of communism in the late 1980s and the non-violent movements of the Arab Spring than the post-Soviet “colour revolutions” (Broers and Ohanyan 2020).

It came at an inopportune time, as it took place against the backdrop of a global retreat from liberal-democratic norms. The conspicuous absence of any Western support distinguished Armenia from the colour revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine. After assuming power, the former revolutionaries led by Pashinyan’s Civil Contract party and the parliamentary alliance “My Step”, touted this as an achievement and a testament to the truly

popular nature of their movement. They insisted that in the absence of any indebtedness to foreign powers they would be free to pave their own internal and foreign policy. They further signalled that, unlike Georgia and Ukraine, Armenia's democratization would not imply the acceleration of European integration processes and that the country would continue strengthening its alliance with Russia.

Despite the revolutionaries' attempts to put on a brave face and celebrate the absence of meaningful attention or support for their movement from Western liberal democracies, this was hardly a blessing. Neither was it the revolutionaries' choice. On the contrary, all throughout the revolution they had actively sought Western support through appeals to embassies and international media. The absence of Western support, therefore, was not an intentional strategy but rather a symbol of the era in which the revolution took place.

The Baltic states that embarked on the path toward democratization in the 1990s – the era of the triumph of liberal democracy – received comprehensive political, military, financial, and institutional support. Stepping on the democratization path a decade later, Ukraine and Georgia did not receive the same level of military or political support. They missed the chance to join NATO and to become full-fledged members of the European Union, yet, thanks to the abiding commitment of Europe and the U.S. to further democratization processes, they could still count on considerable financial and institutional investment. Armenia, which attempted to once again set out on a liberal-democratic path, nearly three decades after its initial short-lived attempt in the early 1990s, doing so in the era of Trumpism and the global decline of the liberal international order, received little to no support. It is impossible, however, for a small post-colonial state to build a liberal democracy in a vacuum. For a revolutionary movement led by young and inexperienced activists in a state dominated by ultra-nationalist politics and surrounded by autocracies, such support was vital for any chance of success.

The outcome was as disheartening as it was predictable. Emboldened by their quick ascent to power and determined to preserve their domestic popularity in the absence of international support or alliances, the leader of the Velvet Revolution, Pashinyan, and his governing alliance embarked on what proved to be a series of superficial and populist PR steps such as show trials that came to replace meaningful and necessary institutional reforms. Both domestic and foreign policy-making lacked strategic or institutional thinking. Conflict policy grew increasingly aggressive towards Azerbaijan, but also Turkey, aimed at continually satisfying the nationalist fervour of domestic social media audiences rather than pursuing specific foreign policy goals.

Neither the success nor the downfall of the revolution was independent of the conflict dynamics surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh. The revolutionaries succeeded, in part, as a result of the previous government's inability to handle the escalation in the conflict zone in April 2016 (de Waal 2016); they failed in their quest to advance democracy when they failed to prevent the new war.

The rapid slide into a war

The slide began with the April 2016 escalation, which showed that the vast majority on both sides would support a new war. The escalation, which served as a “dress rehearsal” for the war of 2020, was not very successful for Azerbaijan as military advances to the north of Nagorno-Karabakh and around the city of Aghdam proved difficult. As a

result, in the autumn of 2020 Azerbaijan concentrated on achieving a breakthrough at the southern part of the contact line, along the Iranian border.

The 2016 escalation did not go well for Armenia either. For the first time in more than 20 years, it incurred significant human losses and a loss of territories. Its technical disadvantage vis-à-vis Azerbaijan was exposed. In response, the Armenian leadership under Sargsyan chose further militarization over the intensification of negotiations. It introduced a “nation-army” doctrine intended to involve the entire population in a permanent war effort (Hovhannisyan 2020).

The escalation impacted also domestic politics in Armenia. The Velvet Revolution succeeded largely as a result of the perceived unpreparedness of the Sargsyan government to adequately meet the challenges at the front-line. The already unpopular president lost his remaining pillar of legitimacy: the assertion that as one of the leaders of the First Karabakh War, he was best positioned to provide security. The revelations of corruption in the army ruptured the previous implicit contract that the regime would provide security in exchange for society’s tolerance of its poor governance (Broers 2019, 167).

Pashinyan, who benefited from Sargsyan’s downfall and headed the post-revolutionary government, initially made several public if vague calls for peace. Unlike his predecessors, his legitimacy was not grounded in his contributions to victory in the First Karabakh War, nor was he a product of the military or the security sector. The meetings between Pashinyan and Aliyev that followed, however, demonstrated that the parties were very far from a compromise. As Azerbaijan continued its preparations for war, Pashinyan, an inexperienced politician who was unfamiliar with the subtle rules of political etiquette and focused primarily on shoring up his domestic popularity, continually provoked Aliyev. Pashinyan’s (in)famous statement that “Karabakh is Armenia. Period!”, the announcement that Artsakh’s capital would be moved to Shusha/i and his participation in the inauguration of the Karabakh president in that symbolic city, elicited a particularly harsh reaction in Azerbaijan (Trend.az 2020b).

The July 2020 escalation along the northern edge of the Armenian and Azerbaijani border and the subsequent absence of de-escalation efforts all but ensured the arrival of the new war. The July clashes were disastrous for Azerbaijan, which incurred significant losses, including the death of a popular General, Polad Hashimov (Media.az 2020). Short-sightedly, the Armenian leadership chose not to de-escalate and display caution, but instead declared victory. Pashinyan organized a ceremony in which military honours and awards were presented to servicemen who had participated in the escalation and declared, “It is obvious and unequivocal that the reforms [in the army] were successful as evidenced by the July defensive operation. In fact, we proved that Armenia can achieve a military advantage through intellectual work, tactical and strategic innovations, without having to engage in an exhaustive arms race” (PM RA 2020, 19). He continued, “The victorious July battles demonstrated Armenia’s ability to meet its own security challenges” (PM RA 2020, par. 23).

In Azerbaijan, the July escalation and its losses triggered acts of public disobedience, including storming and breaking into the parliament building. Thousands of young people gathered in the centre of Baku, demanding war. Soon after, the authorities would oblige and satisfy their deadly wish: a wish that the authorities themselves had long cultivated.

In the summer of 2020, in the region’s already unstable environment and inviting a further escalation, Pashinyan, the president of Armenia Armen Sargsyan, and the

Armenian foreign ministry all proclaimed that they consider the Treaty of Sèvres a valid document and effectively laid territorial claims on Turkey (Aravot 2020; Armenpress 2020b; Mkrтчyаn 2020). This provocation was far from the sole reason why, on September 27, 2020, Turkey would break with its decades-long policy of staying on the sidelines of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and interfere politically and militarily on the side of Azerbaijan. But it certainly added fuel to the fire.

Additionally, the pandemic and the resulting economic difficulties in Azerbaijan and Turkey, the withdrawal of the U.S. as a balancing actor in the South Caucasus under the Trump presidency and particularly during the 2020 US election crisis, and the strained relations between the Russian leadership and Pashinyan all created an explosive mix. Throughout 2020, the ground grew increasingly fertile for an Azerbaijani offensive supported by Turkey.

Special ties⁷

In 1988, the Armenians of the NKAO petitioned Moscow to transfer the region from Soviet Azerbaijan to Soviet Armenia, where this idea was supported by the “Unification” (“Miatsum”) movement. Soon after, the Azerbaijani nationalists mobilized into a rival campaign under the slogan “Karabakh is ours!” (“Qarabag bizimdir”) (de Waal 2003). In both Soviet republics, national administrative, cultural, and scientific elites supported the nationalist demands. Political and cultural representatives of the two republics travelled to the imperial capital with demands for “justice”, only to discover that the Soviet leadership and institutions were unprepared to face the challenge.

Decades have since passed, yet both parties remained convinced that the keys to the resolution of the conflict were still held in the Kremlin.⁸ The popular Azerbaijani narrative aimed at preserving national dignity had maintained that Azerbaijan lost the First Karabakh War to mighty Russia, rather than Armenia. The narrative further maintained that Armenia had remained under Moscow’s patronage throughout the post-Soviet years and that Moscow, if it wished, could order Armenia to fulfil Azerbaijani demands and resolve the conflict. Therefore, even though the primary “enemy image” in Azerbaijan has been reserved for the collective image of Armenians, Russia and “the Russians” have held in it an “honourable second place” (Rumyantsev 2011).

Importantly, through the years, the Russian leadership had made a number of attempts to pressure Armenia to compromise. The latest effort led by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov came in 2016, shortly after the April escalation. Known informally as the “Lavrov Plan”, the proposal was a variation of the Madrid Principles, the main document on the negotiating table, and would give Russia considerable leverage over the conflict parties thanks to the introduction of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh. The de facto rejection of the Lavrov plan first by Sargsyan and later Pashinyan governments, highlighted the limits of Moscow’s influence over Yerevan (Broers 2020b). Even after a month of heavy losses in fall 2020, neither the Armenian elites nor the population seemed ready to compromise. According to the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, it was impossible to stop them with calls from Moscow (President of Russia 2020). “... You, the Armenian people, are the winners”, Pashinyan proclaimed, a month into the fighting and on the verge of capitulation. “Go and claim your victory, stand up and construct your victory!” (Zartonkmedia.com 2020).

Russia played an important role in the Armenian narrative of the conflict as well. As an Armenian ally, Russia was expected to view Azerbaijan as an unfriendly country, and help resolve the conflict in favour of Armenia. The Armenian leaders and society at large have long been concerned about the relationship between Putin and Heydar, and later Ilham, Aliyev, and the supply of Russian weapons to Azerbaijan. The 2018 Velvet Revolution put a strain on Moscow's relationship with Yerevan and brought it even closer to the reliably authoritarian Baku. Before coming to power, a number of government officials and parliamentarians of Pashinyan's My Step Alliance had advocated for closer ties with the West and criticized Russia. They had regarded the former metropolis as the successor to the empire, hindering democratization and rapprochement between Armenia and the European Union. After coming to power, the same people reversed their position on Russia advocating for alliance, but rejected the compromises with Azerbaijan, refusing to see that the continuation of the conflict presents an obstacle to their democratic aspirations (*Aravot* 2020). During the war, they urged Russia to interfere in support of Armenia. The new regime underestimated Moscow's relationship with Azerbaijan and Turkey and its preference for maintaining the role of a power broker in the South Caucasus.

True to this role, at the same time, Russia did not interfere on Armenia's behalf in Nagorno-Karabakh, but it did help Armenia to avoid a more painful defeat. Without Russia standing by its CSTO obligations guaranteeing the security of the Republic of Armenia itself, it is highly likely that the war would cross the internationally recognized border and Azerbaijan, with Turkish support, could give in to the temptation to create a land corridor through Zangezur (southern Armenia) with Nakhichevan.⁹

Despite the initial appearance that Moscow was outplayed by Baku and Ankara it was Russia, in the end, which played the role of the peacemaker and benefitted considerably by reasserting itself as the main power broker in the region, sidelining the West, and stationing its military in the internationally recognized territory of Azerbaijan. Unlike in the other conflicts in the former Soviet Union, Moscow achieved all this without direct participation in violence or casualties among its military personnel, with the exception of one downed helicopter and casualties that occurred in the process of demining (BBC News: Russian Service 2020a; 2020c). This, however, could change in the coming years since Russian troops are now on the ground.

End of a battle but not the war

After the cessation of hostilities in November 2020, Azerbaijan's leadership was quick to assert that the conflict had ended. On December 12, 2020, at a meeting with the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs Aliyev announced, "Azerbaijan has resolved the conflict, which lasted nearly 30 years. We achieved it by force and political means. I agree with President Putin, one of the heads of the co-chair countries, that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has already become history" (*AzerTac* 2020b, par. 3). Putin himself was more cautious in his assessment, expressing only "hope" for the end of the "bloody conflict" (*President of Russia* 2020).

According to Broers, the document signed on November 9, 2020, by Russia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia is a ceasefire declaration and not a peace treaty (Broers 2020c). With time, the losing party can rebuild its strength and mobilize for revenge. Yet the winning parties, in the past Armenia and currently Azerbaijan, have been overconfident that they

can maintain the advantage achieved through military means indefinitely. In 2020, Armenia paid a high price for its overconfidence. Post-2020 Azerbaijan looks set to play the same gambit.

Since the start of the war, even many former critics of the Aliyev regime have been praising the government and its investment in the military. Similarly, in Armenia only a few had been objecting to massive military investments. Indignation came only with the realization that the resources spent on the army did not translate into the desired result. The prevalence of militarist discourses that followed the war of 2020 and the scarcity of voices that advocate for normalization and reconciliation point to the danger of a new cycle of the arms race and violence. The populations of both countries seem poised to continue accepting massive investments in the military-industrial complex, authoritarianism, and the neglect of education and social spheres, in the name of a future victory.

Success in the 2020 war will result in strengthening of the Azerbaijani army as an institution. Unlike Armenia, until now people in military uniform did not carry significant influence in Azerbaijani politics and society. The army carried the mark of the defeat in the 1990s. A military career was not regarded as prestigious, being instead reserved for those from the poorest regions and underprivileged families. The successful *revanche* has changed this equation. Officers and generals have now acquired a powerful symbolic resource as victorious heroes. Their weight and presence in the public space will increase.

Further, the 2020 war also underlined the growing importance of religion as a factor. The Armenian authorities worked hard to paint the conflict as a religious struggle, building an image of Armenia as an outpost of Christianity on the border with the Muslim world. Further, the Armenian government expended considerable, albeit unsuccessful, efforts attempting to frame its conflict with the majority Muslim-populated Azerbaijan, as a “war on terror”, in a barely-veiled appeal to George W. Bush-era rhetoric (Ghazanchyan 2020). A number of European media outlets accepted and channelled this view and framed the conflict as one between Christians and Muslims (HayFanat 2020; Higgins 2020). Azerbaijan, in turn, played up its image as a multi-ethnic and poly-confessional country with a regime committed to tolerance, in contrast to mono-ethnic Armenia. In parallel, Azerbaijan also appealed to its “fraternal” relations with the Muslim world. A narrative of barbarous Armenians who turn mosques into pigsties was an important component of mobilization (AzerTac 2020a).

The 2020 war exposed the deep roots of nationalism and militarism in both societies. The Pashinyan government that initially raised hopes for democratization and conflict resolution governed less through sound policy and more through provocative nationalist sound-bites on social media, and was unable or unwilling to negotiate and handle a crisis. The commitment to democracy – the main pillar of its legitimacy – proved shallow. Hours after the start of violence in late September, 2020, Pashinyan’s My Step parliamentary alliance adopted martial law, limiting most democratic rights and freedoms. Days later, in early October, the law was further compounded by restrictions on freedom of speech banning all criticism of the government and prohibiting the dissemination of information that would “question the defensibility of Armenia or Karabakh/Artsakh” (News.am 2020). Having effectively outlawed all information that would expose defeat unfolding on the front line, the Pashinyan government used state propaganda to temporarily consolidate the society and insist that a victory was near. On November 9, the public’s euphoria in anticipation of an imminent victory was replaced by shock when

Pashinyan, who had publicly made a promise not to sign any document on Karabakh without consulting the public, revealed that he had secretly signed a ceasefire declaration that acknowledged a substantial loss of territory held by Armenian forces for nearly three decades.

The full picture of the defeat that soon emerged, the disorderly and speedy withdrawal of the Armenian forces and civilians from the previously occupied districts of Azerbaijan around the former NKAO, and the inability of the government to negotiate the return of all the prisoners of war, led to a political crisis. While Pashinyan managed to retain power and is still in office as of this writing, largely due to the even greater unpopularity of Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan, two former presidents turned opposition leaders, his rule has been severely weakened and legitimacy shaken. In a far cry from the days when he personally led a movement of hundreds of thousands of Armenians to the streets, Pashinyan and the rest of the leadership required heavy security to move around the country to avoid physical assault (Armenpress 2020a).

Armenia's political stability was not the only collateral damage. The war also dealt a blow to the prospects of Armenia's democratization. Pashinyan's anti-democratic tendencies were already visible prior to the war. Having ascended to power with the promise to reform corrupt institutions he instead took control of the security apparatus and subjected his political opponents to show trials. In a symbolic retreat from his revolutionary rhetoric, in August 2020 Pashinyan, who only two years prior enjoyed the support of pro-democracy movements around the world, congratulated Lukashenko with his re-election to the sixth presidential term just as the people of Belarus were fighting for their lives and freedoms in the streets following a fraudulent election (Mediamax 2020). Pashinyan's anti-democratic turn became explicit in the aftermath of the war when the My Step alliance, enjoying a parliamentary super-majority, refused to lift martial law and maintained the dictatorial restrictions on freedom of speech and other liberties (TASS 2020). With the war in the rear-view mirror, martial law had no target except domestic dissent and political opposition.

In a reversal of fortunes for democracy and democratization, which until 2020 was the primary rallying cry for most post-Soviet political movements throughout the past three decades, the Armenian opposition also rejected democracy, advocating for authoritarian rule and even a dictatorship. The "lesson learned" from the 2020 front-line fiasco, according to leading opposition figures, was that democracy itself, rather than the incompetent leadership of Pashinyan, was to blame for the war and Armenia's defeat (ARKA 2020).

Meanwhile, for the first time in the post-Soviet era, the Azerbaijani leadership has achieved a high degree of social solidarity. All opposition parties and organizations, including the Popular Front, Musavat, ReAl, and National Council, expressed their full support for the war. The citizens acquired a shared emotional experience of "making history". The government received the stamp of approval from its most vicious critics. The emotion of solidarity was summed up by one of Aliyev's political opponents, a former political prisoner, now living in exile in France, Zahid Ganimat: "When we are talking about homeland, the rest is trifles" (Ganimat 2020). Khadija Ismail, an independent journalist known for her anti-corruption investigations for which she was sent to prison, appealed to the civil society actors through her Facebook page. Ismail wrote, "Any attempt to sanction the Azerbaijani government or Turkey in relation to the war in Karabakh should be strongly condemned by Azerbaijani civil society" (Ismayil 2020).

The authoritarian government and the civil society it long persecuted were united in the name of homeland. The definition of homeland, consequently, has been reduced to a military victory for the soil, not values or the rights or lives of its people. By supporting a war the government waged, both the opposition and civil society contributed to the creation of a new source and reserve of legitimacy for authoritarianism. Further, while the opposition and civil society criticized the regime in Russia for its authoritarianism and imperialist nationalism, the majority of them did not express misgivings about the no less authoritarian and imperialist politics of Turkey, and enthusiastically embraced ultra-right pan-Turkism.

The attitudes of opposition and civil society towards other international actors were also formed primarily through the prism of nationalist values. France, which houses a large Armenian diaspora, has been the recipient of the harshest criticism and in Azerbaijan is considered unworthy to hold the position of co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group. Emmanuel Macron was sharply criticized on oppositional social media and official mass media alike for his perceived support of Armenia.

The nationalistic attitudes and de-humanization of the “other” were prevalent even among the segment of the civil society professionally engaged in peacebuilding. The visible majority of them, though certainly not all, adopted militaristic-patriotic positions and supported violence both during the April 2016 escalation and again in 2020. From the perspective of autumn 2020, the April escalation was a dress rehearsal in more than one respect. It tested military and political fault-lines, and it also exposed the extent of enmity and radicalization within two societies, including among peacebuilders. The widespread support for the war and popular rejection of compromise throughout the three decades of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict illustrates that the continual radicalization of the societies is suitable for maintaining perpetual war, but not conducive to compromise.

Conclusion: when the gun is loaded

The future of the two societies has been compromised as a result of the enmity generated by the continually radicalizing positions of the leaders. Resources that could have been invested in social and economic projects, education or health care were spent on an arms race. Dashed opportunities and chances for democratization and regional integration became collateral damage. The leaders of the 2018 Velvet Revolution in Armenia had briefly argued that ‘security vs. democracy’ was a false dichotomy instrumentalized by Azerbaijani and Armenian autocrats to consolidate their power. Though the victory was conditioned primarily by Azerbaijan’s much larger oil-fuelled economy rather than domestic politics, the Armenian opposition blamed Pashinyan’s fiasco in the 2020 war on democracy, making it a wounded ideal. Blaming democratization is an intentional misrepresentation of correlation as causation. In the post-independence years, the South Caucasus has been home to numerous wars under both democratic and authoritarian leaders. The decades of authoritarian rule by Kocharyan and Sargsyan in Armenia and the Aliyevs in Azerbaijan turned discussion of compromise into a taboo, transformed the countries into two of the most militarized societies in the world, and built an image of the other as a mortal enemy to be destroyed rather than coexisted with, moving the region towards a new devastating war.

Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War and the presentation of its results as the unequivocal success of Aliyev's authoritarian regime have compromised the already fragile position of peacebuilders and advocates for democracy not only in the South Caucasus, but in the larger post-Soviet space. The war generated particular interest in Ukraine, where those who support solving the conflict there through militarization and coercion of the residents of the eastern provinces became entrenched in their positions. A "loaded gun" has hardly ever compelled anyone to compromise. It is only good for shooting.

Should Armenia and Azerbaijan continue on their paths of further militarization and discursive warfare, understanding and compromise will remain out of reach. The two conflicting societies continue to live in the past, in a world of romantic nationalism, where death for the homeland, conceptualized as a specific territory, is seen as the ultimate form of civic action.

The war proved to be a popular and effective method of consolidating the ethno-national community. Militaristic and revanchist nationalisms received a new and powerful impetus. This does not need to be the norm. Today, war among European Union member states is not viewed as a legitimate method of resolving disputes, in spite of their long history of mutual violence. In the post-Soviet space, however, wars gained newfound legitimacy. Borders were, and continue to remain, changeable and precarious. The stability of political regimes and the sovereignty and viability of entire states are in question. With peaceful transformation strategies absent from the political agenda, the societies engaged in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict have been subsumed in three decades of radicalization, transforming into violent and militarized states non-amenable to democratization and presenting an existential threat to themselves, their populations, and the entire region.

Following the 2020 war, Gerard Libaridian, a Nagorno-Karabakh negotiator in the 1990s, noted that if there is a new war in the future, it will be a war for the entire South Caucasus, even though Karabakh might serve as the excuse (CivilNet 2021). The prevention of future violence, a normalization of relations, and the long-term peaceful coexistence of Armenians and Azerbaijanis in the South Caucasus requires a sustained and strategic investment into the transformation of relations, starting from efforts towards mutual re-humanization.

Notes

1. Nagorno-Karabakh is the disputed territory at the center of conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan known as the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic/Artsakh in Armenia.
2. The OSCE Minsk Group was created in 1992 by the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), later renamed into the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), to lead the mediation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. It has been co-chaired since 1997 by representatives of France, Russia, and the US.
3. In 1988, scientists from the Academy of Sciences of the Armenian SSR published a brochure on "historical rights" to the region (see Khudaverdayan, Konstantin (1988)). Igrar Aliyev of the Academy of Sciences of the Azerbaijan SSR published his response in 1989. (See Aliyev 1989). Many more publications bringing science to the service of the two ethno-nationalist projects followed.
4. According to the 1979 Soviet census.

5. The Basic Principles, also known as Madrid Principles, presented to Armenia and Azerbaijan by the Mink Group Co-chairs, called, inter alia, for: return of the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani control; an interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh providing guarantees for security and self-governance; a corridor linking Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh; future determination of the final legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh through a legally binding expression of will; the right of all internally displaced persons and refugees to return to their former places of residence; and international security guarantees that would include a peacekeeping operation. For more information see Statement by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair countries, L'Aquila, 10 July 2009: <https://www.osce.org/mg/51152>. Accessed on May 11, 2021.
6. A quote by Joseph Stalin. We should fight with enemies, not agree with them [с врагами нужно биться, а не соглашаться!] (Kuvshinov 2008. *И.В.Сталин. Цитаты* [I. V. Stalin: Quotes]. http://lib.ru/MEMUARY/STALIN/stalin_cite.txt_with-big-pictures.html).
7. Vladimir Putin's description of Russia's relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan (See: President of Russia. 2020. Заседание дискуссионного клуба «Валдай» [The session of "Valday" discussion club] October 22, 2020. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64261>.)
8. For more on the Russian perspective of the conflict see Markedonov (2018).
9. A month after the war, at a meeting in Baku with the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs Ilham Aliyev argued, "[d]uring the war, I said that we have no intentions to occupy Armenian territory, though, as you can imagine we had all the opportunities to do it and still have, but we don't have these intentions" (PRA 2020, par. 3).

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