

Title: Political Transitions and Conflict Narratives in Post-Soviet Armenia

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Introduction

The year 2021 marks the 30th anniversary of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Consequently, it also marks the 30th anniversary of many violent protracted conflicts in its former territories. Most of these conflicts remain unresolved, periodically escalating into new cycles of violence that cause countless deaths, displace and otherwise disrupt the lives of ever-increasing numbers of people.

The most recent war in this post-Soviet space, the Second Karabakh War, took place in September through November of 2020 and, after 44 days, ended with the crushing defeat of Armenia and the introduction of a Russian peacekeeping force. In the months following the secession of hostilities, Armenia experienced a political crisis. Opposition parties, consisting primarily of representatives from former ruling regimes, demanded the resignation of prime-minister Nikol Pashinyan, who presided over the military defeat. Pashinyan, refused to concede enacting moves aimed at consolidating his power. The months following the war produced no introspection or reflection regarding the reasons for Armenia's three decades of perpetual conflict or the process of charting a path forward. Neither did these post-war months result in an active negotiation process, such as the one that followed the ceasefire agreement that ended the First Karabakh War in 1994. Instead the internal political space was filled with finger-pointing: the opposition blamed Pashinyan for toppling negotiations and for the inadequate preparation for and management of war. Pashinyan and his party worked to shift the blame back to former rulers and current opposition parties for decades of corruption and their willingness to negotiate around a set of proposals presumed to be unfavorable for the Armenian side.

While divided on domestic politics, both the government and the opposition developed a shared external conflict: Azerbaijan was seen as an existential treat and an eternal enemy with whom engagement was inconceivable. The security of Armenia and Armenians, consequently, was to be pursued not through negotiations and a peace process but instead through reliance on the support of third parties, particularly Russia.

For decades, the image of the former ruling regime, controlled by the leaders of the first and victorious Karabakh War, as the guarantor of Armenia's security, served as their main pillar of political legitimacy (Broers 2019, 167). Promoting an image of Azerbaijanis as an enemy and an existential threat, and cultivating that image through education, commemorations, museums, media, and cultural production were the central strategic elements within the process of legitimization. For a brief period following the Velvet Revolution in 2018 in which Pashinyan - who did not participate in the first war - ascended to power, that security paradigm looked destined to be broken. The Second Karabakh War of 2020, however, once again brought the image of Azerbaijanis as the enemy and Armenians as perpetual victims to the forefront of politics.

This article examines the series of political transitions that Soviet and post-Soviet Armenia underwent from the beginning of the 20th century and the evolution of the conflict narratives and counter narratives that accompanied these transitions. The political transitions serving as the background for this study include the transition from the Tsarist Empire to the "Affirmative Action Empire" in the 1920s; the attempted transition from the Soviet Union to liberal democracy in 1990s; and the transition away from liberal democracy to far right populism and authoritarianism in 2000s.

From Tsarist Empire to "Affirmative Action Empire"

The Soviet policies in the 1920s and 1930s and particularly the Nationalities Policy, worked to suppress imperial Russian nationalism while offering cultural and political autonomy to certain formerly suppressed ethnic minorities. These policies earned the Soviet Union the title of “affirmative action empire” (Suny & Martin, 2001). Progressive in its intent, the Nationalities Policy effectively institutionalized ethnicity, directly resulting in its emergence as the primary politically salient identity, after the ideological conflicts that dominated the early 20th century were sidelined with the consolidation of communism. The hierarchization of ethnicities- built into the structure of the Soviet empire in which titular groups with the status of Soviet Socialist Republics (SSR) institutionally dominated the rest- gradually became the main fault lines around which conflicts and grievances arose.

For a few decades, the repressive political apparatus and state-imposed ideology of the "brotherhood of nations" kept the conflicts contained. The “nations” referenced therein were those ethnic groups that received a respective status under the Nationalities Policy; they were designated as the autochthonic identities who were given the chance to awaken and flourish under communism after centuries of suppression by feudalism, capitalism, and imperialism of foreign rulers. In the Soviet years, the shared collective traumas and glories, particularly the trauma and the glory of the Great Patriotic War-or WWII- dominated the official memory space.

Each republic developed its own “national” variation of these two central themes: the national revival and shared trauma and glory. In Armenia the myth of constant struggle for survival against foreign conquerors was exemplified in the persona of David of Sasoon, a hero of the national epic *Sasna Tsrer*, or *Daredevils of Sasoon*, who drove Arab invaders out of Armenia. A monument to the hero dominated one of the central squares in Yerevan, the capital of Soviet Armenia; poems and children’s stories featuring him proliferated.

The theme of a heroic struggle against foreign invaders developed further during the Great Patriotic War. In 1943 Derenik Demirchian published *Vardananq*, a patriotic novel and instant classic dedicated to the legend of the 5th century self-sacrificial struggle of Vardan Mamikonian against foreign domination (Demirchyan 2012). According to the legend, Vardan refused to accept Persian rule and chose instead to sacrifice himself and a group of his followers in an uneven struggle against the overwhelming forces of the enemy. The image of the “hero” Vardan Mamikonian was juxtaposed to that of the “traitor” Vasak Siuni, a rival Armenian nobleman who chose to accept Persian rule. The name “Vasak” has since become synonymous with treason, while “Vardan” grew in popularity, a statue of his figure dominating another important square in the city. The national mythos surrounding the necessity of self-sacrifice in face of a militarily superior and more populous enemy transcended both the period of the Great Patriotic War and the Soviet Era, and gained further currency during the First Karabakh War.

If through 1960s the officially sanctioned “enemy” in the memory space were the empires of the past and the contemporary western bourgeoisie, in 1965 the Khrushchev government authorized the construction of the Armenian Genocide memorial, ushering a new enemy into the public space, defined within the context of a major and formerly suppressed narrative of collective trauma. The former alliance between the Soviet Union and Kemalist Turkey was fading in the rearview mirror; the latter had accepted membership in NATO and the Iron Curtain was drawn around the Araxes River. Turks, on the side of that Curtain, were now a sanctioned enemy. With Azerbaijanis commonly referred to in Armenia as “Turks,” the powerful symbolism of the genocide and the resulting collective trauma found a culprit in the immediate neighborhood, on the inner side of the Iron Curtain.

From the "Affirmative Action Empire" towards Liberal Democracy

The collapse of the Soviet Union released the newly independent states from the oppressive institutions of the communist regime. Yet the collapse also severed their ties with the institutions that had ensured the non-violent management of inter-ethnic conflicts. Discursively, the collapse of the Soviet Union meant the collapse of the ideologies of internationalism and the brotherhood of nations, and the increasing prevalence of ethno-nationalism, understood in primordialist terms and reinforced by studies of genetics inherited from Soviet academia. Georgian president Gamsakhurdia’s vision for Georgia as a nation belonging exclusively to ethnic Georgians (Goff and Siegelbaum 2019, 166) might have been extreme for an early post-Soviet leader, yet public intellectuals in the neighboring Armenia and Azerbaijan, advanced no less radical views.

After the initial wave of ethnic violence receded and ceasefire agreements were signed and Eduard Shevarnadze and Heydar Aliyev, former Soviet leaders ascended to power in Georgia and Azerbaijan respectively replacing ethno-nationalist leaders, a more inclusive concept of national identity was adopted. In these same years, Russian president Boris Yeltsin popularized the term *rossiyane* (citizens of the Russian Federation) replacing the ethnonym *russkiye* (Russians). By the mid-1990s, the militant ethno-nationalism of public intellectuals was mitigated by a political turn towards civic nationalism. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the widely accepted proclamation of the "End of History" (Fukuyama 1992) created a widespread assumption that the eventual arrival of liberal democracy was inevitable. Correspondingly, the establishment of normative regimes of human rights and perpetual peace (Kant 2007) would render the ethnic violence untenable and conflicts would be managed effectively through political institutions similar to those in Scotland and Quebec.

The public discourse in Armenia followed a similar trajectory. Initially saturated with the ethno-nationalist fervor of public intellectuals, by the mid-1990s it was infused with the concepts of human rights and civic nationalism, influenced by the political elite. Mirroring Yeltsin’s use of *rossiyane*, a civic term *hayastanciner* (citizens or residents of Armenia) was introduced to replace the ethnonym *hayer* (Armenians). Academic works, documentaries, and cultural productions promoting the rights of ethnic minorities became common.¹

Following victory in the First Karabakh War, the government tried to deemphasize the image of Armenia as a victim and advance instead the discourse of collective glory. David of Sasoon and Vardan Mamikonian retained their status among the nation’s heroes, with narrative emphasis shifting to highlight the vindication of their struggles and sacrifices via the

¹<https://jinafilm.net>

establishment of an independent and victorious Armenian state, one that was able to vanquish its enemies after centuries of struggle. New and victorious heroes were elevated to occupy a central place in the nationalist narrative. These included a Soviet era Marshall, Baghramyan, whose WWII achievements were overshadowed by the attention given to his ancestry. Baghramyan himself was born in Yelisavetpol, or modern-day Ganja, Azerbaijan. His ancestors, however, were reportedly from village of Maghavuz in Nagorno-Karabakh, a detail that was assigned an outsized importance as Armenian and Azerbaijani academics entered the race to prove the prevalence of their side's heritage in the history of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Other victorious heroes of post-Soviet Armenia included Monte Melkonyan, an Armenian-American revolutionary of internationalist Marxist orientation celebrated for his achievements as a unit commander during the Nagorno-Karabakh war, and Garegin Nzhdeh, an ultra-nationalist and key political and military leader of the First Republic of Armenia from 1918-1920, and later the symbol of post-Soviet Armenia's Republican Party led by the third president Serzh Sargsyan.

Internally, there were attempts made to build civic identity and promote the values of human rights and democracy. Until the war of 2020, these attempts were questioned only by marginal far-right movements and the occasional public intellectual. Women's rights, LGBT rights, Yezidi and other ethnic minority rights were advanced under the conceptual flag of "we are all Armenians in a civic sense and we all have equal rights".

The rights of Azerbaijanis, however, were always relegated to a separate category. The deportation of Azerbaijanis from Soviet Armenia in 1940s and late-1980s was a self-imposed taboo among historians and public intellectuals policed through peer pressure. The mention of any responsibility for the violence of the Armenian side in the first Karabakh war could immediately ostracized an academic or an activist who would break ranks.

While formally the political and intellectual elites would authenticate the equal rights of Azerbaijanis, in practice, the discourse of rights did not extend to include Azerbaijanis, as they gradually replaced the Turks as the primary enemy. The Azerbaijani anti-hero gradually acquired rather detailed characteristics, and with time even a "face." Following the 2004 nighttime axe murder of an Armenian officer, Gurgen Margaryan, by an Azerbaijani officer, Ramil Safarov, during NATO trainings in Bucharest, a series of satirical cartoons in Armenia popularized a caricatured version of Safarov, as well as a caricatured version of the Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev as generic and murderous "Azerbaijanis."

From Liberal Democracy and Civic Nationalism to Far-Right Populism and Authoritarianism

The end of history never arrived. Liberal democracy in most of the post-Soviet space was never established. By the 2010s, far from being the sole or dominant force, it was fighting for its life even within the long-established liberal democracies of the world. The defeat of Georgia, undergoing democratization, in the August 2008 war and the perceived weakness of support from the U.S. and European Union played into the hands of authoritarians in the post-Soviet space who argued that democratization was a luxury and a weakness that countries in state of perpetual war cannot afford. Strengthening this argument was the Russian takeover of Crimea and the war in Donbas that followed Ukraine's attempts to democratize, and later Armenia's defeat in the 2020 war, two years after its democratic revolution, at the hands of authoritarian Azerbaijan.

The vacuum created by the retreating liberal democratic discourse of civic nationalism and human rights was once again filled with ethno-nationalist rhetoric. The post-Soviet states that registered democratic breakthroughs, namely Georgia and Ukraine, embraced ultra-nationalist discourses on a level comparable to, and often exceeding, that seen in the more authoritarian nations of Azerbaijan and Russia. The turn to ethno-nationalism in this new era had additional characteristics of ethno-religious conservatism that sought to exclude from the ranks of the national community not only ethnic minorities, but also all potential “domestic enemies” and external “others.” These included migrants, the LGBTQ community and their advocates, feminists, civil society, peacebuilders, and pro-democracy activists.

For nearly three decades, the dominant nationalist and militarist discourses in Armenia that advanced the rhetoric of a genetic enmity, permanent war, and the nation-army were confronted and mitigated by counter-discourses of human rights, democratization, and the necessity of peace. The Velvet Revolution and the ascent to power of civil society figures and former peacebuilders showed the limits of the latter in the Armenian society.

The 2018 “Velvet Revolution” in Armenia was as impressive in its successful execution as it was mistimed. Impressive, in the sense that a handful of civil society leaders and opposition politicians armed with discourses of democracy and non-violence and 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 mobilise 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 of the non-violent movements of the Arab Spring than the post-Soviet “colour revolutions” (Ohanyan and Broers 2021). Mistimed, as it took place against the backdrop of a global retreat of liberal-democratic norms. The conspicuous absence of any Western support distinguished Armenia from the colour revolutions of Georgia and Ukraine. After assuming power, the former revolutionaries led by Pashinyan’s Civic Contract party and the parliamentary My Step alliance, touted this as an achievement and a testament to the true popular nature of their movement. They insisted that in 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 democratisation would not imply the acceleration of the 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.

Armenia, which attempted to set out on the liberal-democratic path nearly three decades later than the Baltic States, doing so in the era of Trumpism and the global decline of neoliberalism, 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 and intending to mainstream the counter-discourses of peace and

democracy in a state dominated by ultra-nationalist political discourses and surrounded by autocracies, such support would be 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.

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 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 the 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. That made the marginality of the peace discourse only more apparent. The new government, despite the presence in its ranks of numerous former peacebuilders, was not able to articulate a coherent vision for peace. Moreover, once confronted by nationalist voices, it immediately retreated and adapted a radical nationalist stance moving much further away from the discourse of peace than any of their predecessors, revising their enmity with Turkey and issuing territorial demands in addition to the effective rejection of negotiations with Azerbaijan. Pashinyan's conflict policy grew increasingly aggressive towards Azerbaijan, but also Turkey (Mkrtchyan, 2020), aimed at continually satisfying the nationalist fervour of domestic social media audiences rather than pursuing any foreign policy goals. The war soon followed.

In the aftermath of the loss in the 2020 war, Armenia entered a period of political crisis. Armenia's political stability was not the only collateral damage. The war also dealt a blow to the prospects of Armenia's democratisation, and to the concept of democratization itself. Pashinyan's anti-democratic turn became explicit in the aftermath of the war when My Step alliance, enjoying the parliamentary super-majority, refused to lift the 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 the domestic dissent and political opposition.

In a reversal of fortunes for democracy and democratisation, which till 2020 has been the primary rallying cry for most post-Soviet political movements through 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, were to blame for the war and Armenia's defeat (ARKA 2020).

To date, the ethno-nationalist discourses proved to be a popular and effective method of power consolidation. Following the Second Karabakh War, the militaristic and revanchist nationalisms received a new and powerful impetus. This does not need to be the norm. Today,

the war among the EU 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 discourses of peaceful transformation absent, the societies engaged in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict have been subsumed in three decades of radicalisation, transforming into violent and militarised states non-amenable to democratisation 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 normalisation of relations, and the long-term peaceful coexistence of Armenians and Azerbaijanis in the South Caucasus would require a sustained and strategic investment into the transformation of discourses of conflict and the nation.

Conclusions

For 30 years, the exclusivist ethno-nationalist narratives have been central to nation-building across the former Soviet Union and in Armenia specifically. In the era of “End of History” that followed the secession of violence in the mid-1990s, the international normative regimes and the prospects of liberal peace acted as a counter-discourse espoused by the emergent civil society. The later retreat of liberal democratic paradigm, the failure of liberal peace strategies to deliver results, and the series of military defeats by countries that fought for democratic breakthroughs at the hands of their authoritarian neighbors deepened the dominant position of the ethno-nationalist discourses and further marginalized the counter-discourses of peace.

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