

A Reply to Vicken Cheterian's Post-War Messages from Azerbaijan: A Critical Reading

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In his [article](#), Vicken Cheterian analyzes the political messages from Azerbaijan after the war and attempts to determine whether there has been a change in Azerbaijan's political discourse. The main question he poses is: "do we see the Azerbaijani authorities moving away from power politics aimed at imposing their will on the de facto state of Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as on Armenia, and moving towards diplomacy to resolve the 33-year long Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, or not?" Cheterian considers this question important in the light of Azerbaijan's emergence as a military victor and he discusses how this result affects the political and diplomatic spheres, as well as the impact of Azerbaijan's choices on the political situation in Armenia and the subsequent settlement of the conflict. He analyzes the positive, negative, and ambiguous messages given by Azerbaijan and discusses other unanswered questions. In this article, I will analyze Cheterian's claim about political trends in Azerbaijan, as well as the messages he described as negative and ambiguous. I will not discuss the positive messages.

Cheterian mentions positive messages from Azerbaijan, especially Aliyev's call for dialogue between the two countries' civil societies, but concludes that the dialogue would not take place if political pressure, and the arrests of opposition figures, journalists and human rights defenders continued in Azerbaijan. He claims that political tendencies in Azerbaijan are aimed at greater centralization of power rather than expanding the boundaries of democratic freedoms.

In fact, although it is too early for the dialogue we hope for, there are already [signs](#) that it has begun spontaneously between the two societies. After the war, discussions were held in various [independent](#) and [non-independent](#) forums, bringing together intellectuals and members of civil society from both sides. In addition, human rights activists from Azerbaijan [joined](#) the appeal addressed by Armenia to Aliyev on the release of captive Armenians. All this raises hopes that over time, communication between the two sides will expand.

As for the claim of political pressure and restriction of freedoms in Azerbaijan, I think that this issue needs to be assessed in light of the processes that have been taking place over the past three years. In 2018, Aliyev announced reforms, and since then some steps have been taken within the framework of those reforms. The Head of the Presidential Administration (Ramiz Mehtiyev) and the former oligarchic ministerial system have been completely removed from power and replaced by young Western-educated managerial ministers. As part of the same reform, a fight against corruption and bribery was declared, and about 10 heads of local executive bodies who were part of the old system were arrested on corruption charges. During this period, the process of dialogue with political parties was initiated by the government. Seven political parties, including the REAL party, which won one seat in the last parliamentary elections, were officially registered. The situation is also different in recent years due to political pressure. 52 political prisoners were released in 2019 and 38 in 2020. Of course, these facts do not mean that Azerbaijan has changed radically, but they can be an indication of a general trend.

I think it is important to note that this new trend serves two main purposes. The first is the need to reform the country's political system, which is stagnant and increasingly unpopular. I think the second goal is related to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The political trend of the last three years is aimed at neutralizing or weakening the arguments made by

the international community and Armenia against Azerbaijan concerning the latter's human rights records and authoritarianism. In other words, Azerbaijan wants to eliminate any arguments against the integration of Nagorno-Karabakh into Azerbaijan. To this end, Azerbaijan has been making policy changes in recent years to improve its image. I think that, especially after the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, we can expect a further expansion of political openness in Azerbaijan.

Cheterian then analyzes negative messages. He shows three main negative messages, which are about security, identity politics, and the 1915 Armenian Genocide.

As a negative message about security, Cheterian mentions the non-return of Armenian captives in Azerbaijan and the increase in Azerbaijan's military budget, which he believes could lead to the return of revanchist forces to power in Armenia. He further stresses that Azerbaijan has not discussed any special political status of Nagorno-Karabakh and that this policy could result in Azerbaijan's isolation at the international level.

The release of Armenian captives currently held in Azerbaijan may indeed be the ideal basis for peace. It is desirable that it happen as soon as possible. However, I think that finding a solution to the issue does not unilaterally depend on Azerbaijan. There must be an atmosphere of mutual trust and goodwill for the return of captives whom Armenia considers prisoners of war while some of them are considered terrorists by Azerbaijan. But some people [claim](#) that Armenia is sending its soldiers through the Lachin corridor to the territory of Azerbaijan – that is, to the separatist Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. Most importantly, Armenia refuses to give maps of landmines in Karabakh to Azerbaijan. (As an exception, 30 Armenian captives were handed over to Armenia in exchange for landmine maps of Aghdam, Fuzuli and Zangilan. These exchanges are not mentioned in Cheterian's article because they happened

after its publication). In this sense, I believe that Armenia must change its current policy, which does not allow for a constructive atmosphere necessary for the return of Armenian captives.

As another negative message, Cheterian points to an increase in Azerbaijan's military spending, which he says encourages Armenia to arm itself. As warring parties, Armenia and Azerbaijan have for years been in the [top ten](#) countries in terms of military spending relative to GDP. Azerbaijan's military spending has been [growing](#) steadily for years. The increase in military spending this year is due to the replacement of weapons used in the war and the establishment of new borders (with Iran and Armenia) in the territories recovered by Azerbaijan. Therefore, I do not think it is right to present this fact as a direct threat to Armenia.

Another negative message Cheterian mentions is that the Azerbaijani side does not want to discuss the status of Nagorno-Karabakh. According to him, this policy could lead to the isolation of Azerbaijan at the international level.

After the war, the two countries' positions on the status quo were again polar opposites. Armenia still [officially](#) pursues the [independence](#) of Nagorno-Karabakh, and Azerbaijan responds that it will not even discuss any special political status for the territory. It was expected that the status options offered by Azerbaijan to Armenia in the pre-war negotiations, which Armenia did not accept, would not be discussed by Azerbaijan after the war. But I think this does not mean that there will be no special status at all. Once the countries reduce their aggressive rhetoric, the issue of status, like many other issues, will become clearer as communication and peace progress. It seems that Azerbaijan sees the real future status of Karabakhi Armenians (within the legal framework of Azerbaijan) similar to the status of Georgian Armenians – governance in the form of municipalities controlled by Armenians.

Cheterian then mentions the visits of Udis living in Azerbaijan to the churches in the liberated territories, and describes it as the “*weaponization*” of the Udi culture against the Armenians. Moreover, he claims that it threatens to destroy the Udi community. He also claims that the opening of the Military Trophy Park in Baku is “a huge problem” and that it invalidated the *international law arguments* which were “were used [by Azerbaijan] to justify launching military operations on September 27.”

I think that it is incorrect to present the restoration of the undeniable rights of the Udis of Azerbaijan to these religious and cultural monuments as the weaponization of their culture against the Armenians. It is more of a protection mechanism against Armenia’s policy of using religious and cultural monuments as a basis for territorial claims and occupation policies. Also, the transformation of the Khudavang (Dadivang) Church in Kalbajar into a place of worship for both Armenians and Udis, as Cheterian notes, can be a modern example of the historical and cultural symbiotic ties of the Caucasian peoples. It is not clear where Cheterian sees the threat of the destruction of the Udi community, especially in this context. During his visit to Gabala on May 15 this year, Aliyev [instructed](#) to repair two schools in the village where the Udis live, to study the Albanian alphabet and to publish books in that alphabet. The claim that the Udis are in danger of extinction is therefore unfounded.

As for the Military Trophy Park, this was not unequivocally welcomed in Azerbaijan either. In particular, the wax figures of the Armenian soldiers and helmets exhibited there were criticized. However, it should be noted that the Military Trophy Park does not consist only of these two components, and it is rather a museum of victory over 30 years of occupation. Moreover, the Park is not the main factor influencing the relations between the two countries, and if there is political will on both sides, it is possible to establish normal future relations. As for the impact of the Park on the younger

generation, unfortunately, it is already the third decade that new generations in both countries are growing up with the terrible reality of this war, which began with the occupation of Azerbaijani territories by Armenia, and their lives are affected by this brute fact. Compare the park to this reality and its possible negative effects seem greatly exaggerated.

Another point mentioned by Cheterian is the issue of the 1915 Genocide of the Ottoman Armenians. He considers Azerbaijan to be more denialist than Turkey with respect to the issue of the Armenian Genocide, and for comparison, he mentions Erdogan's position – his condolences to the descendants of the Ottoman Armenians and his letter to the Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul – which is more nuanced and diplomatic. However, I think that the position of Azerbaijan on this issue does not differ from the position of Turkey, which is almost the same. Both states officially see the 1915 events in the context of the post-World War I processes, and unequivocally deny the allegations of the Armenian Genocide. Erdogan's condolences to the descendants of the Ottoman Armenians and his letter to the Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul are a necessary part of Turkey's domestic policy, but in no way do they mean any [acceptance](#) of the genocide allegations by Turkey.

Before his conclusion, Cheterian also raises the issue of ambiguity. He writes that Azerbaijani officials say they consider Karabakhi Armenians to be Azerbaijani citizens, but Azerbaijan has not said anything about the return of the Armenian residents of Hadrut and Shusha to their homes after the war.

First of all, it is interesting that Cheterian mentions the return of Armenians who fled their homes as a result of last year's war, as well as Armenians who fled their homes as a result of the 1991-94 war, but does not mention Azerbaijani IDPs from Khojaly, Khankendi and other areas. As stated in the November 10 agreement, ensuring the right of return of the Karabakhi refugees and IDPs on both sides is one of the most

important issues. But I do not think that the issue still depends unilaterally on Azerbaijan. Even if Azerbaijan unilaterally appeals to Armenian refugees, it is not convincing that they will accept to live in Nagorno-Karabakh (in Hadrut and Shusha) under Azerbaijani jurisdiction in the current situation. At the same time, Azerbaijanis should have a right to return to their homes, but those territories are no longer under the control of Azerbaijan. The result is that, like all other issues, time and a peace agreement are needed for the return of the Karabakhi refugees and IDPs from both sides.

Although Cheterian sees some changes in Azerbaijan's official discourse during the six months since the war, he concludes that it has largely remained unchanged. Cheterian is right that on the one hand, the official rhetoric of Azerbaijan consistently calls for peace, but on the other hand, it retains its previous aggressive tone. This is not accidental, but the purposeful policy of the Azerbaijani side. That is, the change in Azerbaijan's rhetoric – the call for peace – is a genuine indication of Azerbaijan's interest in peace after the war and the restoration of relations with Armenia. The unchanging and aggressive rhetoric of Azerbaijan, however, is an adequate response to the hostile policy pursued by Armenia on certain issues (calls for Nagorno-Karabakh's independence, refusal to give the landmine maps). I believe that as relations and mutual understanding between the two countries are reached, the official rhetoric will change as a whole. To this end, the abovementioned hostile activities should be stopped, and the countries should respect each other's territorial integrity and sign a peace agreement.