

Post-War Messages from Azerbaijan: A Critical Reading

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How can we read the political messages emerging from the Azerbaijani authorities in the post-2020-war period? Is there any shift in Azerbaijani political discourse, or do we rather find continuity with that of the pre-war period? And how do we contextualize and analyse change as well as continuity? In this attempt at discourse analysis, there is a second, more fundamental question, which could be summarized as: 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?

This debate is important for a number of reasons. First, Azerbaijan emerged as the military victor, and therefore we need to trace how this outcome is being translated into the political and diplomatic fields. Second, because Armenia has not only lost militarily, but has also turned inwards as parliamentary elections are scheduled for June 20. Finally, choices taken today by the Azerbaijani authorities might influence the political situation in Armenia, and largely define how the next chapter of this conflict will play out.

I will answer those questions in the following way. I will first make some remarks on the form of official communication

during the war and in the post-war period. Then I will move on to positive messages, their content and their limits. In the last part I will discuss messages that I qualify as negative issued by Azerbaijani authorities, as well as ambiguous, unanswered questions that need to be discussed, before ending with some concluding remarks.

Communication During the War and Afterwards: The Centrality of the Presidential Office

If we revisit the style of communication by Azerbaijani state representatives during the war, we see that the central role was played by President Ilham Aliyev and his presidential office. He not only delivered the political message, but operational military information. For example, information about the on-going operations, and especially military progress and the capture of new territories, was transmitted through Aliyev's Twitter account. Apart from him, we find presidential advisor Hikmet Hacıyev who was also active in delivering operational information.



Ilham Aliyev ✓ @presidentaz · 4 Oct 2020

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Сегодня от оккупации были освобождены села Кархулу, Шюкюрбейли, Черекен, Дашкесан, Хоровлу, Махмудлу, Джафарабад, Юхары Маралъян, Деджал. Да здравствует Азербайджанская армия! Карабах – это Азербайджан!



2K



2.2K



16.4K



Ilham Aliyev ✓ @presidentaz · 4 Oct 2020

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Today Karkhulu, Shukurbeyli, Cherekan, Dashkasan, Horovlu, Mahmudlu, Jafarabad, Yuxari Maralyan and Dejal settlements of the Jabrayil district have been liberated from occupation. Long live Azerbaijan's Army! Karabakh is Azerbaijan!



1.2K



3K



21K



Ilham Aliyev ✓ @presidentaz · 4 Oct 2020

...

Сегодня Азербайджанская армия освободила от оккупации город Джебраил и несколько сел района. Да здравствует Азербайджанская армия! Карабах – это Азербайджан!



2.5K



3.3K



24.8K



Ilham Aliyev ✓ @presidentaz · 4 Oct 2020

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Today Azerbaijan's Army has liberated from occupation the city of Jabrayil and several surrounding villages. Long live Azerbaijan's Army! Karabakh is Azerbaijan!



Hikmet Hajiyev @HikmetHajiyev · 30 Oct 2020

...

Photo of the Day. [#Armenia](#) fired Smerch missile. Alasgarli village of Tartar region. The missile will be decommissioned by ANAMA soon. Most likely and luckily it did not explode.



3.5K

4.8K

12.1K



This can be contrasted with the communication of the Armenian side during the war, where Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan commented mostly on political issues, while operational developments were left to the Ministry of Defence spokespersons to elaborate on.

The difference between the two styles of communication is political: Aliyev was communicating that he was personally in charge of the entire military operation, and collected the political benefits of the military outcome. He also took the risk – in case the military operations did not give the expected results – of destabilizing his own rule.

Now, after the war, we see communication even more concentrated in Aliyev's speeches: it is only Aliyev who transmits the political messages, while Hajiyev has been less active since the end of the war. Therefore, to understand the post-war messages issued by Azerbaijani authorities, it is necessary to concentrate on Aliyev and his social media account on Twitter. I will also consider two other milestones:

the first is the December 10, 2020 *Victory Parade* speech^[1], and the second is the April 13, 2021 speech at the ADA University conference entitled *New Vision for the South Caucasus*, followed by a long discussion.^[2]

From a communications perspective, this concentration of symbolic power in the person of the Azerbaijani president is contrasted with the figurative sharing of the military victory during the victory celebrations in Baku, on December 10, 2020. To celebrate victory, Aliyev was not alone on the podium, but shared it with his Turkish counterpart Erdogan. This symbolism needs further study, but it could signify growing Turkish influence inside Azerbaijan.

A Victory parade dedicated to Victory in the Patriotic War was held at the Azadlig Square, Baku

10 december 2020, 13:20



Positive Messages

For foreign policy purposes, in the aftermath of the war, it seemed reasonable to me to expect a new round of negotiations – secret or somewhat open – between the Azerbaijani and the Armenian governments. For internal policy purposes, on the contrary, it was reasonable to expect the continuation of

militaristic propaganda from the side of Azerbaijani leadership, pumping up nationalism and insisting on victory, to strengthen the current vertical power structure. Between those two pressures the question was how the Azerbaijani government was going to articulate its post-war policies, and when a new round of negotiations between the two governments would start?

Positive messages from Azerbaijani authorities started earlier than I expected. The most positive is the repetition by the Azerbaijani leadership and specifically Aliyev of not only “peace”, but phrases such as “sustainable peace”^[3] and “future reconciliation”^[4]. This presupposes a certain engagement from the side of Azerbaijan to agree to certain concessions to obtain not short-term privileges, but long-term stability with Armenia.

The other positive message concerns future economic cooperation. Recently Russian gas transited through Azerbaijan to be sent to Armenia.^[5] Moreover, there is talk about lifting all blockades, which would be a real boost for the economies of not only Armenia and Azerbaijan, but also that of eastern Turkey.

Aliyev’s third positive message is the call for dialogue between civil societies. This is not only good news for the Karabakh conflict and Armenia-Azerbaijan relations – it is also good news for Azerbaijan. For it is not possible to solve an ethno-territorial conflict, which by historic accident became the cornerstone of emerging national identities in independent Armenia and Azerbaijan, only by a political agreement between the two leaders. The participation of wider segments of the two societies in this process of moving away from the conflict to its resolution is crucial.^[6] On the other hand, it is not possible to have dialogue between Armenian and Azerbaijani civil societies if political pressure and the arrest of dissident thinkers, journalists and human rights

defenders continues in Azerbaijan. Here, foreign policy overlaps with internal policy, and I am less optimistic on this, because post-war political trends inside Azerbaijan are towards more centralization of power, rather than enlarging the margin of democratic freedoms.^[7]

Negative messages

The three major negative messages concern: security, identity politics, and the question of the 1915 Armenian Genocide.

First, the most negative of the messages from the Azerbaijani authorities is the continuation of holding some 200 Armenian soldiers in captivity– the prisoners of war or POWs – calling them *terrorists*^[8] and refusing to release them in spite of the November 9 agreement now six months old. All other positive gestures lose importance as long as the question of prisoners remains unresolved. Evidently, Azerbaijani authorities are keeping the POWs as bargaining chips. I do not know what the Azerbaijani authorities want in return, but for me the long-term damage of this policy is greater than any short-term benefits Azerbaijan may get.

The unresolved question of hostages is linked with the broader question of post-war security. Messages to the Armenian authorities – and to the de facto authorities of Nagorno-Karabakh – can be read as threats, rather than calls for negotiations among the conflict sides aiming at sustainable peace. For example: Aliyev has repeated that Armenia should not choose “revanche” after the 2020 war. He also warned third parties not to arm Armenia. But, at the same time, Azerbaijan has increased its own military spending by 16.3% for 2021, compared to 2020.^[9]



We aim for peace. Everything will depend on Armenian leadership's ability to adequately evaluate the present realities, come to proper conclusions and exclude the option of revanchist attempts.

If Azerbaijan does not want revanchist forces to come to power in Armenia, then its holding of POWs and increasing its own military spending are not the best way to achieve that aim. If Azerbaijan decides to rearm itself, it is rational to expect Armenia to do the same.

Politically, Azerbaijan maintains that the Karabakh conflict is over, and that there is nothing to discuss concerning the future status of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast.^[10] Contrary to this position, Armenian and Russian authorities, who are directly concerned with this issue, insist that the status of Nagorno-Karabakh still needs to be addressed. Moreover, the two other OSCE co-chairs – France and recently the US – have also insisted on the necessity for a political solution to the conflict. While it is evident that it is too early to talk about status and political regulation, Azerbaijan might find itself isolated internationally if it insists on not negotiating a political agreement.

Second, Azerbaijan also has to change its discourse on the issue of cultural heritage. A lot has been said and written on this elsewhere, I will add only two ideas. I find it absurd to weaponise Caucasian-Albanian history and especially

contemporary Udi culture against Armenians in order to control Armenian monasteries in Karabakh. Anyone with the slightest knowledge of Caucasian Albanian history and culture knows that they were in a symbiotic relationship with Armenian history and culture. It is absurd to use this past of close collaboration, harmony, and continuity for modern-day politics. More important, the hardly 4,000 Udis that survive in Azerbaijan are a living relic of the Caucasian Albanian culture that once flourished in today's Azerbaijani territories. By using them in political struggles threatens to deform and even destroy the Udi community. The protection of Udis and similar minority communities is the responsibility of the state.

The strange, racist^[11] Military Trophy Park recently opened in Baku is a huge problem. Not only is it a problem for Armenians who see it, it is a PR disaster for Azerbaijan externally because it shows how hollow all arguments about "international law"^[12] – that were used to justify launching military operations on September 27 – have been and that this conflict is one of primordial ethnic identities. Mostly, it is a disaster for educating young Azerbaijanis. What is the message of this enterprise to the children and students that will visit? That war is the solution, instead of developing a culture of conflict resolution?





The third point is the question of the 1915 Genocide of Ottoman Armenians. Some of my European liberal colleagues, not

only Azerbaijanis, are reluctant to discuss links between the 1915 Armenian Genocide and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. They fear that such a link will serve to justify crimes committed by the Armenian military during the Karabakh war, by referring to the genocide.

In the past, I was also reluctant to make such a link, but later research showed the existence of a very strong one. And surprisingly, it is not Armenia making this link, as Armenia has tried to separate Armenia-Turkey relations from the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict (although it has failed). It is rather the Turkish (since 1991), and then the Azerbaijani authorities (since the March 20, 1998 *Genocide Law*).^[13] This fear of using the genocide for political dividends is clear from a declaration made by Hajiyev: "Armenia and the Armenian lobby made the so-called Armenian genocide an object of political speculation. They are trying to conceal the crimes committed by Armenians in the South Caucasus and other regions."^[14]

This denial poses two types of problems to Azerbaijan. First, politically Azerbaijan is the most hard-line denialist country, even more than Turkey. See for example Hajiyev's recent declaration on April 23 of this year, where he qualified the 1915 events as "a fake Armenian genocide".^[15] In comparison, even since April 23, 2014, the Turkish leader Erdogan is much more nuanced and diplomatic. He sends his condolences to the descendants of the Ottoman Armenians. Even this year, Erdogan sent a letter to the Istanbul Armenian Patriarch, in which he concludes by saying: "I once again remember with respect the Ottoman Armenians whom we lost during the First World War, share the grief of their relatives".^[16]

Erdoğan sends letter to Armenian Patriarch, offers condolences over 1915 massacre

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on April 24 sent a message to Armenian Patriarch Sahak Maşalyan, offering his condolences to the descendants of Armenians who were killed by the Ottoman Army in 1915. "I remember with respect the Ottoman Armenians, who lost their lives under the harsh conditions of the First World War, and offer my condolences to their grandchildren," Erdoğan said in his message.

Saturday April 24 2021 08:42 pm



Erdoğan shakes hands with Armenian Patriarch Sahak Maşalyan at the Presidential Complex in Jan 2020 in this file photo.

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Second, but more important, Azerbaijan and its intellectuals who support hard-line denialism, are today cut-off from developments within Turkish intellectual circles. The Turkish liberal intelligentsia, as well as the Kurdish intelligentsia, understand that the question of the recognition of the 1915 genocide of Armenians (as well as the exterminations of Assyrians and Pontic Greeks) is a precondition for democratization and the rule of law in Turkey. Today, most doctoral students in Western universities working on the genocide are ethnic Turks and Kurds, much more than ethnic Armenians.

In the long-term, the current Azerbaijani position is a rear-guard fight. I am optimistic that here we will make progress, let me give two reasons: first, because of the influence of Turkish intellectual debate on Azerbaijan; and more important because there is a new generation of Azerbaijani intellectuals with radical and critical attitudes towards current hegemonic discourses.

Ambiguities

There are also ambiguities in the current position of Azerbaijan. For example, Azerbaijani officials say that Karabakh Armenians are citizens of Azerbaijan, so they enjoy the same rights as others. But not a single word has been said about the return of ethnic Armenians to their homes and villages, for example in Hadrut or Shushi/Shusha following the 2020 war, not to mention the ethnic Armenian refugees of the 1991-1994 war.

Conclusion

Six months after the 2020 war, we see more continuity than change in official discourse. But there has been some change. Whatever choices Azerbaijan makes today, in the next weeks and months they will influence political developments in Armenia. In this pre-electoral period Azerbaijan will either strengthen pro-conflict resolution arguments by taking positive steps, or will give support to hard-line arguments inside Armenia. To have a positive influence on Armenian politics, Azerbaijan should immediately release the prisoners of war, bring UNESCO in and ensure the protection of Armenian cultural heritage, and invite Hadrut Armenians to return to their homes. Leave the debate concerning the genocide to Turkey and the Armenians.

To colleagues in Azerbaijan, I will address this concluding message. We all have our ethnic, religious, and political identities, whatever they might be. But we also have something that unites us: our professions and our pride in our professionalism. As social scientists, as students of diplomacy and IR, history and sociology, we cannot replace politicians who are in charge of making decisions, and bear the responsibilities of war or peace. But we can do something else, for which we are responsible, which is producing ideas and arguments. When you study this (or any other) conflict, try to consider the *other side as well*, their fears, their hopes, and their arguments. Only then we can take a step away from the conflict cycle of the last 30 years.

[1] <https://en.president.az/articles/48788>

[2] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2TYG8zmGBms>

[3] <https://en.president.az/articles/50738>

[4] Ilham Aliyev Speech, at New Vision For South Caucasus: Post-Conflict Development and Cooperation, Baku, April 13, 2021, Min : 17 :30

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2TYG8zmGBms>

[5]

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-17/armenians-to-get-gas-via-azerbaijan-for-first-time-in-30-years>

[6] I have argued this earlier, see: Vicken Cheterian, "Karabakh Conflict After Kosovo: No Way Out?" *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 40, Issue 5, 2013, pp. 703-720: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/nationalities-papers/article/abs/karabakh-conflict-after-kosovo-no-way-out/766CA140B4937FF313B1A49CE87408BE>

[7]

<https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-azerbaijans-authoritarianism-and-bakus-military-trophies-park>

[8]

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/akgdgk/armenia-azerbaijan-prisoners-of-war-nagorno-karabakh>

[9] <https://www.azernews.az/nation/174144.html>

Relative to GDP, Azerbaijan has the 6th highest military spending globally at 5.4%. See SIPRI: https://sipri.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/fs_2104_milex_0.pdf

[10] I have argued this in more detail:
<https://bakuresearchinstitute.org/en/is-the-political-status-of-nagorno-karabakh-that-important/>

[11] One of the two artists had the following to say: "We tried to create the most realistic images. We usually try to do something beautiful. But now it was the other way around. It was a long and difficult process. We gave them hooked noses, flat heads and other features."
<https://oc-media.org/opinions/opinion-on-the-apologists-of-bakus-military-trophy-park/>

[12] <https://mfa.gov.az/en/news/7288/view>

[13] For a detailed discussion: Vicken Cheterian, The Uses and Abuses of History : Genocide and the Making of the Karabakh Conflict, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 70, Issue 6, 2018, 884 - 903.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09668136.2018.1489634>

[14] https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Hikmat_Hajiyev_We_consider_the_US_House_of_Representatives_resolution_on_so_called_quotArmenian_genocide_quot_as_biased_and_unfair-1349893?

[15] https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Hikmat_Hajiyev_We_would_like_to_hope_that_the_US_Administration_will_not_make_a_historic_mistake-1763689

[16] <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/speeches-statements/558/127694/the-message-president-recep-tayyip-erdogan-sent-to-armenian-patriarch-of-turkey-reverend-sahak-masalyan>