

Violence and Politics in Armenia-Azerbaijan Relations

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A paradoxical situation has emerged in the aftermath of the 2020 Second Karabakh War between Armenia and Azerbaijan. On the one hand, while Armenia lost the war, it quite oddly does not seek to avenge its losses. Instead, in its most recent elections, it elected the defeated leader Nikol Pashinyan once again, and aims to turn the page on the war while continuing its internal reforms towards democratization and fight against corruption. On the other hand, while Azerbaijan won the war, and should seemingly be satisfied with its gain, it continues to be not only aggressive, but also angry and vengeful. At the same time its internal situation has turned in a diametrically opposite direction to that of Armenia: more centralization and authoritarianism. This article will delineate the recent relationship between external violence and internal politics in the two countries, and how they refer back to principles of self-determination and territorial integrity of states.

In the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan achieved much more than what it had demanded during long negotiations with Armenia. Soon after the victory, Ilham Aliyev declared that the Karabakh conflict has been resolved. However, Armenian-Azerbaijani relations have failed to move from violence into diplomacy, where differences are resolved through negotiations and mutual compromises. This article argues that the inability to move from violence to diplomacy has to do with internal political paradoxes, rather than any practical problems confronted in the borderlands of Armenia-Azerbaijan.

Late Monday, September 12, 2022, the Azerbaijani army attacked Armenian territory along a large swathe stretching from east of Sevan/Goyche Lake to Kapan. It started with intense artillery shelling and drone strikes, and was followed by

ground attacks on numerous axes. Azerbaijani army achieved territorial gains ranging 4 kms east of Jermuk, at the price of hundreds of young soldiers dying; officially Armenia suffered 207 deaths, while Azerbaijan 77 deaths. The vast majority on both sides were soldiers. An initial Russian-mediated ceasefire did not hold. A second ceasefire arrangement negotiated by the Americans seems to be holding for the moment. This was the most violent episode between the two Caucasian republics since the ceasefire of November 9, 2020.

If we consider the political context, the recent violence is even more surprising: only two weeks earlier, on August 26, the Armenian side evacuated the strategic town of Lachin and a couple of villages, allowing Azerbaijani forces to enter those localities without a fight. Two years earlier, in the Second Karabakh War, launched by Azerbaijan on Nagorno Karabakh, Azerbaijan achieved more than its original goals during 26 years of negotiations. It had originally demanded the return of the seven provinces around Nagorno Karabakh and autonomy for Nagorno Karabakh. As a result of the 2020 war, however, Azerbaijan received all territories around Soviet-era Nagorno Karabakh that were occupied by Armenian forces during the first Karabakh war, plus the two regions of Nagorno Karabakh proper: Shushi/Shusha and Hadrut.

The latest massive attack again raises the specter of additional violence in Armenia-Azerbaijan relations, two neighboring countries locked in a conflict since the last years of the Soviet Union. This attack, however, was not the first on Armenia since the Second Karabakh War: six months after the November 9, 2020, ceasefire, Azerbaijan once again chose violence, invading and occupying parts of Armenia on May 12, 2021. Yet those successes, which again gained much more than Azerbaijani leader Ilham Aliyev initially demanded of Armenia before September 2020, were not enough to end the 30-year conflict. Why?

The attack on September 12, 2022 also undermined the earlier Azerbaijani official line about *territorial integrity* and *international law*. Listening to Aliyev's speeches over the last decade, we can detect a slide from a legalist discourse to a discourse emphasizing a primordial struggle between two ethnic groups. At least for the last ten years Aliyev has asserted that "we will return to our ancient lands – to Yerevan, Goyche and Zangezur."[\[1\]](#) So, if this conflict was not about *international law* and *territorial integrity*, then what was it about?

Armenian and Azerbaijani Paradoxes

Before continuing our discussion on the role of violence in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, I would like to first discuss the recent paradoxes that have emerged in Armenia and Azerbaijan after the Second Karabakh War. In Armenia, after the defeat in the Second Karabakh War, everyone expected that Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan would lose power, and be replaced by a hard-liner, such as former Armenian president Robert Kocharyan. Yet, despite those expectations, we observe our Armenian political paradox: Pashinyan, who lost the latest episode in a conflict that has so played on Armenian national identity over the last thirty years, won a mandate in the June 2021 elections. Those elections took place through a democratic vote, and the broad choices were between continuing with a chaotic internal struggle for reforms and against corruption with a leader associated with the 2020 defeat in the Second Karabakh War, or bringing back a strongman associated with victory in the First Karabakh war, who promised to reverse the reforms and establish a strong state. Given the central role Karabakh played in the emergence of Armenian self-identification in the last three decades, most observers expected the latter after Pashinyan's loss in the Second Karabakh War, and yet we arrive at a paradox because somehow domestic politics and democratization outweighed those concerns.

After his reelection, Pashinyan promised an “era of peace,” even as Azerbaijani soldiers advanced into Armenian territories.[\[2\]](#) This new *peace plan* was clumsy, it did not explain how Armenia was going to achieve it, and Pashinyan did not explain how and why he changed his pre-war bellicose stance into that of a peacemaker. Yet the election results expressed a deeper societal demand for reform. Post-war developments in Armenia reveal that a majority of Armenians prefer the continuation of democratic reforms and struggle against corruption, even if under leadership that presided over Armenia’s defeat in the Second Karabakh War and the loss of Karabakh, a symbol of national-independence movement. Pashinyan, as a good populist, captured this mood according to which the old primordial national identity was being superseded by a more civic and cosmopolitan one.

To appreciate Armenian political developments in the post-2020 context, one must compare it with Azerbaijan in the context of the country’s defeat in the First Karabakh War in 1994. Even before the arrival of vast amounts of petrodollars, Azerbaijan had moved from internal instability towards a centralized autocracy, which yielded post-Soviet space’s first dynastic political system, in which power is passed from father to son by way of inconsequential elections.

The post-Second Karabakh War Azerbaijani position is even more paradoxical. By May 2021 it became clear that Azerbaijan, despite having earlier declared victory in the 2020 war, would oddly continue to use violence to pursue its aims in the conflict. After the May 2021 incursions, there were clashes in July and August, and Azerbaijan launched another incursion in November 2021 which led to seven fatalities on the Azerbaijani side, and six on the Armenian.[\[3\]](#) While in 2021 Azerbaijani attacks focused mostly on Armenia, in the last months of that year, there were numerous attacks on Karabakh as well. In March of this year, Azerbaijani forces entered Parukh/Farukh village, and further attacks on Karabakh took place in early August.[\[4\]](#)

Aliyev, who gained new legitimacy in the eyes of the Azerbaijani public as a result of the Second Karabakh War, could have chosen a different policy line after 2020, yet he chose more violence to coerce Armenia not into peace but into surrender, thus our Azerbaijani political paradox. What Azerbaijani authorities are asking for is no less than Armenia's capitulation, that is to say, unconditional control over Karabakh, plus a corridor in southern Armenia connecting mainland Azerbaijan with its landlocked exclave Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic (NAR). Without discussing security guarantees, Azerbaijani control over Karabakh means the destruction of the latter's political institutions, but also it means no less than the total ethnic cleansing of Karabakh Armenians. When Aliyev says that the current population of Nagorno Karabakh is "no more than 25.000," [\[5\]](#) it is a clear declaration of a desire to force Karabakh's Armenian population from their land.

Yet, there is another paradox born of Azerbaijan's paradoxical victorious war footing: despite his 2020 victory in the Second Karabakh War, Aliyev still remains vengeful. Even one of his military operations, the one that attacked Karabakh in August this year, was code-named "Revenge." [\[6\]](#) Aliyev says that he does not want *revanchist* forces to come to power in Armenia, but if one looks at what he does, it seems that he is working very hard for just that. His discourse is not one of a victorious statesman ready to turn the page, but a vengeful leader – just look at the trophy park in Baku, or the statues of iron fists representing Azerbaijani military might put up on every occasion, particularly in Karabakh. [\[7\]](#) Consciously or not, Azerbaijan is fighting democratization and reform in Armenia, causing a return of ethnic fears and ethnic hatred instead.

This somewhat inexplicable war footing points to a domestic political paradox in Azerbaijani society. Azerbaijani public opinion continues to be characterized by palpable rage, even after victory in the 2020 Second Karabakh War. The best

observation of this was offered in an MA thesis by Sevinj Huseynova, the evocative title of which is: “Why do the Winners of a War Become Angry? Identity Crisis in the Aftermath of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War”. The study attributes this anger to *peace anxiety*, which the thesis defines as the gap between the official bellicose discourse of Azerbaijani leadership and public anticipation of peace.[\[8\]](#)

I would argue that the Azerbaijani public is, despite the victory, disappointed by the results of the 2020 war, independent of the continuous official discourse and acts of Azerbaijani leadership, or what the Armenian side has done or said. It has more to do with the internal contradictions of Azerbaijani public opinion, and its expectations from the war itself. While Azerbaijani public strongly supported the 2020 war in the name of liberating the occupied lands and the return of internally displaced peoples (IDPs), it had deeper emotional anticipations of *liberation* in the aftermath of victory. This liberation was understood on a symbolic level. Liberation represented not only territorial gains by Azerbaijan, but also a hope for the amelioration of economic and political difficulties in everyday life, especially the easing of the internal political situation. While the war brought victory to Azerbaijan, it did not bring relaxation to the country's tense internal politics: before 2020, Azerbaijan already had one of the worst media freedom rankings in the world, yet an even more restrictive media law was passed in December 2021;[\[9\]](#) the persecution of political dissidents has continued and even increased.[\[10\]](#) On the other hand, a feeling of injustice continues, as the land and mining rights in the territories gained from the Armenian side have been redistributed to individuals close to power circles in Baku.[\[11\]](#) Azerbaijani society is witnessing social tensions, one of the most evident being a wave of suicides among army veterans, often because of socio-economic difficulties.[\[12\]](#) State control over society has increased, and border crossings into neighboring countries remains closed to citizens under

the pretext of the pandemic. The 2020 Azerbaijani victory did not bring more freedom to Azerbaijanis, but rather it strengthened the autocracy of the Aliyev dynasty.[\[13\]](#) It is this paradox within Azerbaijan that is the source of current anger and frustration, rather than something done by the hated *Armenian enemy*.

The Azerbaijani paradoxes therefore are the result of a military victory that has failed to achieve Azerbaijani elites and the public's desires of it. For the public, it failed to ease economic and political conditions and failed to turn the page on the conflict and move on. Despite victory, the public has only become more anxious and confused, while the ruling elite more angry, vengeful and authoritarian.

Self-Determination versus Territorial Integrity

Democracy has structural conditions, for which the oil-and-gas-based Azerbaijani economy is not supportive. This was, to some degree, also the case of Armenia in the last two decades, during which the Armenian state budget and the upper class were dependent on mineral exports. Simultaneously, the diversification of Armenia's economy, and the rapid development of the digital sector have created social conditions for a more open, pluralist, and cosmopolitan worldview, in difference to the earlier primordial nationalism. Pashinyan's policies, albeit chaotic and at times contradictory, reflect this evolution in Armenia.

But there is another dimension that favors democratization in Armenia and authoritarianism in Azerbaijan. That is the value system around which the modern national movement emerged in these two formerly Soviet entities. The popular movements in both Armenia and Azerbaijan that led to national independence share the Karabakh question as their cornerstone – yet they share it qualitatively differently: Armenian nationalists favor individual and group freedoms, while Azerbaijani nationalists favor state centralization and coercion. “Self-

determination is inextricable from democracy”, as it concerns “any group of individuals within a defined territory which desire to govern itself more independently”.[\[14\]](#) Self-determination gives the opportunity to individuals and collectives to be active politically and influence their political system. It was through this principle that Armenia, Azerbaijan, and all the former Soviet republics became sovereign, independent states. Territorial integrity privileges the state, strengthens centralization at the cost of various forms of local self-rule, autonomy, and the rights of sub-state entities, including the individual.[\[15\]](#)

Azerbaijan in its sociological composition is a diverse country, with multiple ethnic groups, languages, and religions. While most of those various groups seemingly accept the centralizing rule of Aliyev, ethnic Armenians within Azerbaijan could not even if they wanted to: since the emergence of the Karabakh conflict in 1988, Armenians have become the essential other of Azerbaijani self-identity.[\[16\]](#) The continuous attempts by Azerbaijani leadership to keep Nagorno Karabakh within Azerbaijan unleashed violence which has continued now for 34 years. Since ethnic Armenians have become an essential other, Azerbaijani territorial integrity can only be maintained through mass violence.

Azerbaijan was not alone in privileging the territorial principle by marginalizing individual rights: while Armenia under its first president saw the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as a struggle for people’s self-determination, it nevertheless did not do enough to recognize as well the right of Azerbaijanis also suffering from the conflict, especially the rights of those who were forced to abandon their homes and villages in the seven districts outside Nagorno Karabakh, when they were overrun by Armenian forces. With time, the Armenian narrative became even more contradictory under Armenia’s third leader Serzh Sargsyan: under him, not only Nagorno Karabakh but also the seven Azerbaijani provinces under Armenian control were transformed into *historic Armenian lands*. The

narrative metamorphosed from rights of a given population, to a primordialist discourse of ethnic antagonism. This radicalization was conditioned by increasing militarization and threats of war from Azerbaijan, yet it made the resolution of the conflict politically even more difficult, and gave justification for the Second Karabakh War.

Violence can be narrated in two ways: by looking at it in its globality to condemn it (a position that favors diplomacy), or selectively in order to justify more violence. In three decades of Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, violence has been narrated only selectively, to construct a victimhood narrative and create a situation of *us against them*. When one narrates the pogroms of Sumgait-Kirovabad-Baku but ignores or denies the massacre in Khojaly or the destruction of Aghdam, he/she does not support conflict resolution. Similarly, when one underlines the deportation of civilians from Kalbajar but ignores the deportations from Getashen village or Shahumyan district or the massacre in Maragha village (its former name was Margushevan), again one lays the grounds for future violence. To move away from violence into diplomacy, there is a need to reject violence in principle because resolution of conflict can only be achieved through understanding of mutual suffering and discussion in political terms of how the differences between the two neighboring peoples can be resolved.

Like Generals Fighting the Previous War

Azerbaijan's relentless military attacks on Armenia, its construction of new military bases and expensive infrastructure such as roads, tunnels, and airports in areas close to the western borders, all give the impression that Azerbaijan is obsessed with war and unable to imagine the future outside of a war footing. In the meanwhile, not only is Azerbaijan changing in its demographic composition, but also its social challenges will not be overcome by nationalist rhetoric. Funded by a toxic product that is putting the planet

in danger, Azerbaijan looks stuck in the past, without statesmen capable of looking towards a different future. With Azerbaijan victorious in the Second Karabakh War, ethnic symbolism has lost its earlier attraction for mass mobilization. The gap between an official rhetoric of ethnic antagonism, and popular expectations of internal reforms will only increase with time.

The continuous conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan has opened the doors for the intervention of foreign powers, from Russia to Turkey, Israel to Iran, and its continuation might invite the intervention of the US as well as illustrated by the visit of a US delegation headed by Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Armenia on September 18, 2022. Those interventions will only come at the cost of the independence and sovereignty of local actors. Moreover, the three regional powers surrounding the South Caucasus are going through upheavals: Putin's authoritarian edifice is crumbling, Iran is in the middle of yet another uprising, and Erdogan's rule in Turkey is showing fatigue and decline.

The massive attack on September 12-13 changed the mood in Armenia. Spontaneous demonstrations took place in Yerevan and Stepanakert/Khankendi against Pashinyan's contradictory speech about possibly signing "a paper."[\[17\]](#) The continuous military pressure on Armenia is building up a new momentum, will lead to a reaction from the Armenian side. The sudden increase of the Armenian military spending to 1.2 billion USD exemplifies this shift.[\[18\]](#) Forcing Armenia to capitulate will not bring peace to the South Caucasus but might succeed in keeping the region hostage to violence and ethnic hatred, and further consolidate authoritarianism. The project of ethnic cleansing of Karabakh Armenians can only happen with another cycle of mass violence.

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