

Armenia in Crisis: How Did We Get Here and What's Next

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I first started working on this article on September 17. I was supposed to turn in a draft article about the high risk of Azerbaijan launching an offensive at Nagorno-Karabakh and next invading Armenia within a week. I told my editor we needed to publish the article as soon as possible because war could break out anytime. And it did. I was at work on September 19 when, at 1 pm, I refreshed my Facebook page, and the first news story I saw was that Azerbaijan had started indiscriminately shelling Stepanakert, the capital of the unrecognized Republic of Nagorno Karabakh (NK hereafter). I knew the possibility of this happening was very high as I have been obsessively following news from the beginning of the year. But some small part of me had hoped the negotiation process would avert this tragedy. It did not. In a span of two weeks, this article's focus changed from the possibility of war hanging over the region to Azerbaijan launching a massive offensive against NK to the mass exodus of NK Armenians from the region, which could only be described as ethnic cleansing, to the high risk that Azerbaijan is going to invade Armenia next. Therefore, this article is as messy as my feelings for the past two weeks. I would not have been able to finish this article if it was not for my belief that another war awaits us, and I need to bring attention to the facts on the ground.

During its latest offensive, Baku repeated its 2020 strategy: creating facts on the ground by military force, then directing its Western PR agencies to whitewash war crimes and state-sanctioned violence. [Baku is notorious for its so-called "caviar diplomacy," and sources reveal that it has funneled \\$2.9 billion into its lobbying efforts in Europe.](#) After Azerbaijan's latest assault, which came after months of starving the local population in a cruel blockade, more than 100,000 remaining Armenians were forcibly displaced from their ancestral homeland as Nagorno Karabakh's de facto authorities have been forced to disarm and disband. **This is ethnic cleansing.** There is no other way to describe it. While the Aliyev regime was the one that launched a full-scale offensive on NK and is guilty of numerous war crimes for which it will never answer because of Azerbaijan's geopolitical significance, Armenian governments – current and previous – bear a share of responsibility for their revisionist foreign and domestic policies that have brought us to this point in history and this specific outcome.

Armenia after the First NK War

Without going into too much details of the First NK War and how everything began, here are a few points on the NK Conflict to give those unfamiliar with the region some context. This is in no way a comprehensive introduction to the conflict as this article is more strictly about Armenia rather than the NK Conflict: it's just that it is hard to imagine today's Armenia without the latter.

Nagorno Karabakh was an autonomous region under Soviet Azerbaijan with a majority ethnic Armenian population. As the Soviet Union was collapsing in 1988, the NK Armenians demanded

unification with the Armenian state. As a result, in the late 1980s, communal violence broke out in both Armenia and Azerbaijan, forcing Armenians in Azerbaijan and Azerbaijanis in Armenia to flee their respective countries. The ground zero of the war was NK and its surrounding regions, as NK is an enclave inside Azerbaijan. From 1988 to 1994, Armenians and Azerbaijanis fought a bitter war until a ceasefire agreement was achieved in 1994.

The Armenian side emerged victorious from the First NK War, and for the past decades, the discourse around NK has been that our “glorious” army is why we have gained and maintained control over NK. This cheap imitation of the Israeli nation-army doctrine held sway in the public discourse as successive Armenian regimes failed to achieve an agreement over the region. For decades, the negotiation process was fruitless while its primary mediators, Russia, France, and the US, formerly known as the Mink Group co-chairs, pushed for their interests in the South Caucasus region, thwarting any progress. Hence, this region became a place for global and regional powers to score political points at the expense of the working people: Armenians and Azerbaijanis alike.

Since 1991, the NK Conflict has been central to Armenia’s domestic politics. A succession of Armenian governments drew their legitimacy from this issue. Any time the people would protest against the regime, the government would accuse them of destabilizing the country. I remember growing up hearing the saying, “The Turk sees this and is delighted [about perceived divisions in Armenia]” whenever the government wanted to silence its critics. We had to live a lie because the truth would make the “enemy” happy.

The revisionism in the Armenian education system was such that up until after the war, many people did not know the geography of NK or that NK and its surrounding regions were two different categories in the negotiation process, documented by many announcements, protocols, and principles that the previous governments signed under. The majority of the public was completely unaware of the decades-long negotiation process. It was blindsided to find out that what they called Artsakh included not only the former autonomous region (NKAO) but also the surrounding seven regions, whose almost entirely ethnic Azerbaijani population, over half a million people, had been expelled by the Armenian forces in 1992-93. The state rhetoric was that the surrounding seven regions were buffer or security zones between NK and Azerbaijan. Then again, in mainstream media, these lands were only ever referred to as liberated Armenian historical lands. Therefore, they served different purposes under different state narratives.

Before the Second NK War in 2020, I, too, was deluded by post-Soviet nationalism, which had us all under what could only be described as hermeneutical injustice. Despite occasional escalations, as Azerbaijan was ramping up its military for decades – by 2010, Azerbaijan’s military budget exceeded Armenia’s entire state budget – the threat of war was never seriously considered by the wider Armenian society. Unlike now when we all are very much aware of it. During the Second NK War in 2020, Baku took control of most of the conflict zone, including the “seven surrounding regions.” In 2020, Azerbaijan also took over former NKAO territories and displaced over 40,000 Armenians from its Hadrut and Shushi regions.

Before the regime change in 2018, [when the so-called Velvet Revolution overthrew Serzh Sargsyan’s corrupt regime](#), governments treated state security and democracy as a zero-sum game (their proponents still do it). These governments were corrupt but not due to the Soviet legacy, as some literature has framed it, but as any other liberal democracy working in service of capitalism, implementing austerity and privatization could be, especially in the world-systems periphery. There is, of course, a certain Armenian, NK-related specificity to this “corruption.” While there are no in-depth studies (at least in Armenian) on the primitive accumulation that happened during the occupation of NK’s seven surrounding regions, I have heard oral stories from veterans of the First NK War about high-ranking military officials looting the homes of displaced Azerbaijani people,

especially the high-ranking former Soviet Azerbaijani officials. An in-depth study on how the Armenian political elite or the Armenian political capitalist class came to be after the collapse of the Soviet Union and how the natural and other resources of NK and its surrounding regions were integral pillars of their wealth and power is of utmost importance (this also applies to Azerbaijan and its political capitalist class but it is not in the scope of this article to cover it).

Another pillar of the Armenian political capitalists' existence is their close relationship with Russian political capitalists, which made them confident that they could hold onto not only NK but also its surrounding regions for as long as they wanted, boastfully declaring that the NK Conflict was resolved. In 2002, in exchange for its \$98 million debt, Armenia signed the Equity-for-Loans deal with Russia, which sold out most of its economic infrastructure to Russian capital for a closer military alliance with Moscow. This economic infrastructure included telecommunications, railways, electricity, and gas distribution networks. Meanwhile, the Armenian elites who signed the deal later became board members of the same Russian companies that bought Armenia's recently privatized Soviet infrastructure. The regime advertised the sale as foreign investments that would create new jobs during a recession economy. Needless to say, that did not happen.

Armenia: too small to matter

This region, and especially Armenia, has a complex geopolitical orientation. Armenia is often derogatorily referred to as part of Russia's backyard. Unlike Georgia and Azerbaijan, Armenia is too geopolitically insignificant for the West and Russia to have a conflict over. Some, however, have been tempted to categorize the 2018 regime change as a "color revolution," but the facts on the ground have always pointed to the fact that it was a genuine grassroots movement that overthrew a government that was illegally in power. Social movements are dynamic, and analyzing the protest participants and their leadership requires nuance. The protest leadership made sure not to say or do anything explicitly anti-Russian, strictly keeping the line that the protests were directed at domestic political elites. One of the reasons the name "Velvet Revolution" was chosen for the regime change was to avoid any associations with color revolutions.

While the current (Pashinyan) government argues that the regime change in 2018 was an actual revolution that ousted the oligarchic class that has been in charge of the country since 1998, since the beginning of the mass protests, it has been apparent to many that the protest leadership, and subsequently, this administration was, at best, center-right. This government has continuously promoted neoliberal ideology through its rhetoric and policies, much like its predecessors. From the PM saying that, for poor people, "poverty is in their heads" during the introduction of flat taxation in 2019 to his administration's close cooperation with certain oligarchs, it is clear that this government does not have a revolutionary track record. Other than failed prosecutions against a few highly visible political capitalists, such as former presidents Serzh Sargsyan and Robert Kocharyan, most of the oligarchs' wealth has remained untouched. Some even became MPs, and others, through cooperation with the government, enjoy tax breaks in industries they have monopolized while posing as philanthropists.

After coming to power, the current government has tried to continue the complementary foreign policy Armenia had before, balancing between Russia and the West. It would be an exaggeration to suggest that it has actively tried to sever its ties with Russia and pivot to the West when, in 2019, at Russia's request, it sent a noncombatant team to Syria, refused to vote against Russia at the UN after the invasion of Ukraine for which it was criticized both domestically and internationally; and then finally this year, the Armenian PM stood next to Putin during the Victory Day Parade.

However, Russia's post-Soviet frozen conflicts policy meant it would not pick sides between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the NK Conflict. This was also because it was both countries' biggest arms

supplier. As long as the conflict was frozen and Armenia and Azerbaijan were buying arms from it, the Russian military-industrial complex was making a profit. Unlike Armenia, Azerbaijan's geopolitical options were and still are not so limited. With its oil reserves and powerful ally Turkey, it was able to break through Russia's influence. Between 2018 and 2022, Israel became Azerbaijan's second-largest arms supplier. During the Second NK War in 2020, the Israeli high-tech weapons gave the Azerbaijani military a significant advantage over the Armenian forces, fighting with Soviet time weapons, resulting in high casualties. Meanwhile, after the 2020 War, Armenia has tried to buy weapons from Russia amounting to \$200 million; however, Russia has not supplied the weapons and, according to rumors, refuses to give back the payment.

But in 2023, Moscow picked a side – Azerbaijan. This is not a result of the Armenian government being West-friendly, which is what Russia's propaganda channels claim. It is a cover for the fact that Azerbaijan, with the help of Turkey, is pushing Russia out of this region while its disastrous invasion of Ukraine weakens it. Thus, reorientation was the only option for the already geopolitically constrained Russia. Moscow wants a stake in the new economic plans the Turkish and Azerbaijani governments have for this region, namely an extraterritorial route through southern Armenia connecting Azerbaijan to its own exclave, the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic (and by extension to Turkey). This way, the already landlocked Armenia will lose its border with Iran.

What the future holds for the negotiations

Two issues between Armenia and Azerbaijan continue to be of concern in the context of Armenia-Azerbaijan state borders. The first is the already mentioned extraterritorial route Baku demands from Yerevan. According to the November 9, 2020, ceasefire agreement, Russia's security services should be in charge of the transit routes, including this extraterritorial route Azerbaijan and Turkey call the "Zangezur Corridor." This arrangement gives Russia a stake in the new order of the region. Azerbaijan and Turkey promote it as "uniting the Turkic world" and connecting Europe to Central Asia. The November 9 agreement also had provisions for opening of all economic and transport connections, which ironically would benefit landlocked Armenia the most. However, Azerbaijan has been exclusively talking about this one extraterritorial route, which shows it has no intention of opening other economic routes. Western analysts also see this route as a way to bypass Russia and its blockade of global supply chains. Russia, at Armenia's expense, has found a way to also benefit from this route that is supposedly against it. As [Broers puts it](#), "Ironically, it makes Russia a stakeholder in the 'Middle Corridor' that is promoted as an alternative to Russia's own 'Northern Route,' rendered obsolete by Western sanctions." The only regional player that is against the so-called corridor is Iran. But as Iran will not start a war to defend its border with Armenia, a deal could be made with Russia, which would be satisfactory to the Iranian government. Tehran is also worried about Armenia's recent so-called pivot to the West, and it has signaled that it would not like any changes in the status quo in the region.

The second issue is the delimitation and demarcation of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, which was not done due to the First NK War, and the two sides cannot agree on which maps to use for the delimitation. Azerbaijan has resorted to violent borderization over the past three years, invading Armenia once in May 2021 and again in September 2022. Due to the First NK War, only the Armenian side has civilians in the southern parts of the border. If Baku orchestrates another attack, they are at high risk of displacement. Many NK Armenians who have found refuge in southern Armenia could be displaced yet again. This border on the Armenian side is being monitored by a civilian mission the EU sent here at the beginning of the year. But this mission cannot effectively do its job when Azerbaijan does not allow them to monitor its side of the border, and there is no pressure from Brussels on Baku to let it do so. With Brussels's incredibly frustrating bureaucratic processes, this mission's only job is to save the EU's face after it declared Azerbaijan a reliable partner in supplying gas. It is worth noting that only 3% of the EU's total consumption is delivered

by Azerbaijan. Hence, the idea that the EU's inaction about NK being ethnically cleansed is purely a result of the EU's energy insecurity is slightly exaggerated.

With the Minsk Group no more, a three-track negotiation process is happening between Armenia and Azerbaijan, led by Russia, the US, and the EU. This, for Armenia, is the worst-case scenario. It has to keep up with the solutions (i.e., demands) of three mediators, which, as you can only imagine, not only at certain points go against the interests of Armenia but are directly at odds with each other. For instance, in early 2022, Western mediators convinced the Pashinyan government that if he recognized Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, as in NK as part of Azerbaijan, they would help Armenia secure the rights of NK Armenians. So, in April 2022, he made a speech declaring that Armenia wanted only security guarantees for NK Armenians from Azerbaijan. But as there were too many negotiation tracks and too many regional powers trying to insert their self-interests into the conflict to sway Azerbaijan away from the West, Moscow offered Baku the ultimate deal – Nagorno Karabakh itself. Its peacekeepers stationed there since November 2020 did not take any measures to deter or stop the Azerbaijani offensive; according to Baku, they were informed about it beforehand. Meanwhile, the Western governments were all too happy to pretend they believed the Aliyev regime's blatant lies since it is being reported that a few hours before launching the attack, Aliyev assured Blinken that they would not attack NK.

Pashinyan government's new mission: survive another war

The public was optimistic about Pashinyan's government until domestic and international challenges showed how his reform-obsessed rhetoric was not meeting expectations. His government was elected in free and fair elections, so unlike his predecessors, he did not need the NK Conflict to legitimize his rule. Nevertheless, he did engage in populist rhetoric, notably when, in 2019, he said, "Artsakh is Armenia. The End." This was the beginning of the end. This and the idea that he could start the negotiation process from a new page were the early failures of the post-2018 government's diplomacy in preventing this outcome.

In 2020, when Azerbaijan launched a full-scale attack on NK, the current Armenian government went to war it could not possibly win due to the power asymmetry between the two armies. Still, it adopted a dangerous narrative that "a new war meant new territories conquered." As already stated, the public bought into the hyper-militarized and hypermasculine doctrine of the nation-army, so the support for the war was high throughout the 44 days it lasted. The voices against the war were very few; whoever dared to point out the incredibly dangerous rhetoric the government had adopted at the beginning of the war committed social suicide because they were endlessly harassed and called traitors and defeatists.

But Pashinyan survived the consequences of the disastrous 2020 War. The following year his government was reelected in a stunning turn of events. This was mainly due to two factors: first, Pashinyan promised to bring a new era of peace to Armenia, i.e., the end of the NK Conflict, which was a welcome decision albeit a late one. Second, the political capitalists from the previous governments were mobilizing against Pashinyan's government because they saw the domestic instability as an opening to come back to power through elections, i.e., weaponizing the NK Conflict once again. Pashinyan survived the consequences of the 2020 War not because he was popular but because the public did not see a suitable alternative to him and was scared of the previous government coming back to power.

Now, Pashinyan needs yet another internal or external enemy to legitimize his staying in power, although, in a truly democratic country, he would have resigned a long time ago due to the incompetence of his government. This time, he is rallying the public against Russia. Even though I'm not justifying Russia's actions vis-à-vis NK, a confrontation with Russia can cause more harm to

Armenia than good. For instance, Russia is still Armenia's main gas supplier, and it can easily throw Armenia into an energy crisis if it cuts the gas supply; it can make it harder for Armenia's export industries to sell their goods in Russia, and it can make life harder for Armenian migrant workers currently working in Russia. Finally, a direct confrontation with Russia means closing the door on diplomacy. Armenia cannot afford to alienate any of the mediators, mainly because it would only give Azerbaijan more trump cards.

It was inevitable that Russia would reorient itself geopolitically in the South Caucasus after its invasion of Ukraine weakened it. It abandoned the frozen conflicts doctrine in the case of NK when Azerbaijan, backed by Turkey, forced its hand. Russia still needs Armenia to stay relevant in this region. Azerbaijan got NK out of this latest offensive, effectively throwing Russian peacekeepers out of its internationally recognized territories. Hence, a weakened Russia sees Armenia, or rather Armenian territory, as its last stronghold in the region.

The Pashinyan government, however, is framing Russia's breach of trust as an attack on him and, therefore, on Armenia's sovereignty and democracy. He is framing his political survival as the survival of the republic. The strong anti-Russian sentiment the public harbors due to Russia sacrificing NK for its interests will only legitimize Pashinyan's framing of the next war as a war of independence. But if Moscow wanted regime change in Yerevan, it would have already happened, considering just how entrenched Russian capital is in Armenia's economy. I'd argue that Russian propagandists and officials have been so vocally against Pashinyan in order to create a façade concealing the fact that they would benefit if Pashinyan headed into another disastrous war. For Moscow to reassert its control over the region after Baku kicked it out of NK, it needs a more "willing" country to station its troops. With the high risk of Azerbaijan invading Armenia, Russia only needs to wait for its turn to play up its role as the exclusive deal broker in the region and station Russian armed forces on Armenian lands to do more "peacekeeping" or to serve the geopolitical and capital interests of Russian elites. What is a more convenient pretext for Russia's aspirations than another war between Armenia and Azerbaijan? As the saying goes, if Russia could choose sides between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the conflict, it would choose the conflict.

Moscow wants to trade with Baku and Ankara over Armenian territories and economic routes. Considering Armenia's weak position, those in charge of its government would not be Moscow's highest priority. Meanwhile, the so-called geopolitical pivot to the West this government has been touting is a widely miscalculated move about which even Western officials have openly questioned this government. The West will not guarantee the security of Armenia, so there are no deterrents against Azerbaijan. The current confrontation with Russia is only in Pashinyan's interest, not Armenia's. He is making a bet on a third party – right now, the West – instead of directly engaging with the country's immediate neighbors and opponents to reduce the possibility of war. Because of this short-sighted foreign policy, Armenia can become a place for geopolitical proxy wars, and no state survives a proxy war.

Some reflections for the future

Armenia's future is uncertain, and it would be premature to make conclusive predictions. However, based on the assessment of the current geopolitical situation and where the conflict sides and stakeholders stand, it is clear that Armenia finds itself between a rock and a hard place where its choices are limited by forces far greater than itself. The Armenian government hammers the point that a peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan is imminent. However, it is obvious that they only say this because they are terrified of Baku abandoning the Brussels and Washington-led processes just as it did with the OSCE Minsk Group. It is possible that if pushed too hard by either Washington or Brussels or both, for example, if sanctions are imposed on Azerbaijani elites, Baku will completely abandon the talks mediated by the West and closely cooperate with Russia to get a

better deal from Moscow. Baku has already made such a step after the NK takeover. On October 5, there was supposed to be a meeting between the Armenian PM and Azerbaijani President mediated by France, Germany, and the EU at the European Political Community summit in Granada, Spain. Aliyev pulled out of it at the last minute, citing “biased,” “pro-Armenian” sentiments expressed by the mediators. The only two countries Baku is concerned with are Russia and Turkey.

Another alarming issue is tensions in Armenia’s domestic affairs. With over 100,000 displaced people, of which every third is a child, Armenia’s already poor socioeconomic conditions will worsen. Western governments have already pledged financial aid to Armenia. So far, they are not huge sums and are nothing more than pocket change for them. There will not be a Big Push by the West simply because Armenia’s future is volatile and geopolitically insignificant.

The future for NK Armenians remains uncertain. While I am not afraid of protests sponsored and organized by the previous regime satellites since they never gained massive traction among the general public, I fear societal divisions nonetheless. Displaced people have lost their homes, livelihoods, and sense of security. Some have joined anti-government protests, and their anger and frustration at this government are valid. After all, this government’s failed foreign policy has brought them to this outcome. But as I wrote, these protests are poorly attended as most locals associate the protest leadership with previous governments, i.e., oligarchs. I fear that this government’s media channels only fuel such social divisions with media reports that paint NK Armenians as violent and entitled. This results in ugly conflicts around the country that can harm the integration process of the displaced.

What happens next remains to be seen. However, political uncertainty and economic deprivation can serve as an opening for right-wing ideologies and parties to prosper and find solid constituencies. I fear that the humanitarian catastrophe that is the ethnic cleansing of NK, the complete displacement and dispossession of its people, will be weaponized by different groups seeking political legitimacy, which can only deepen the crisis in Armenia. If last month’s poor turnout during Yerevan’s mayoral elections is any indicator, the electorate is tired of Pashinyan as well as his opposition parties. A disenfranchised electorate but a highly politicized public can be a breeding ground for conspiratorial thinking and anti-intellectualism. It could give rise to militarism, ethnonationalism, and various stripes of right-wing ideologies. This would only harm Armenia’s working class and its progressive movements, destroying whatever little legacy there is left of the 2018 mass movement that was explicitly against oligarchs and the rule of the political capitalist class.

Sona Baldrian is a Yerevan-based independent researcher whose main research areas are social movements in Armenia from feminist and Marxist perspectives. Through her Armenian women’s movement work, Sona has been closely involved in feminist consciousness-raising initiatives and documenting the movement through oral history and archival work. Her master’s thesis focused on the mass anti-regime protests that swept over Armenia in the Spring of 2018. By assuming there were collective actions from above and below – meaning the ruling elites and the protest participants – Sona examined how the ruling elites shaped the political economy of Armenia, which made mass collective action from below a possibility.

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