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# **Armenia in the Aftermath of the War: Between Changing Landscapes and Unchanging Problems**

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## Abstract

*This paper delves into the political landscape of post-war Armenia, focusing on both domestic and foreign policy implications of the 2020 war. While Nikol Pashinyan's government has not delivered its promises of bringing peace and prosperity to the country, Pashinyan managed to win the 2021 snap parliamentary elections. Nevertheless, the elections have not resolved Armenia's political crisis, one in which it has found itself since 2020. Combined with the war and its aftermath, the COVID-19 pandemic has also invited challenges, which resulted in an increased human toll, slowdown of economy, and deepened public anger and mistrust of the authorities. In effect, Armenia is faced with a myriad of challenges, ranging from unresolved issues with neighboring countries to the Armenian government's limited agency in terms of redefining relations with increasingly coercive Russia.*

**Keywords:** Post-war Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh war, Russia, Armenian-Turkish relations.

## Introduction

The hopes that the 2018 “Velvet Revolution” would bring prosperity and peace to Armenia shortly vanished, giving rise to a deep sense of disillusionment.

The 2020 ceasefire agreement, which took many by surprise, undermined the government's legitimacy, exacerbated political divisions, and brought new challenges many of which remain unaddressed. For opposition parties and society in general, the terms of the ceasefire called into question the position of the prime minister, who was presented as a traitor and whose resignation was demanded during the protests following the ceasefire agreement. The Prime Minister resigned in April 2021 after months of anti-government protests. Yet, he was re-appointed as a result of the snap parliamentary elections of June.

The war also resulted in a decrease in civil space and liberties. The restrictions implemented first under the COVID-19 pandemic state of emergency, and later by martial law, led to disproportionate or groundless restrictions of media operations in the country. Growing hate speech and manipulating news content, particularly on social media, turned to be one of the growing problems in Armenia.

Besides, Armenia keeps suffering the repercussions of troubled relations with neighboring Azerbaijan and Turkey, while remaining immensely dependent on coercive Russia.

The situation came to a head in September 2023, when over 100,000 ethnic Armenians, almost the entire Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh, fled for Armenia in the aftermath of Azerbaijan's military operation.

Nevertheless, despite growing public animosity towards Pashinyan's government, his

opposition has not been successful in terms of garnering broad public support. In effect, Pashinyan stays in office, while facing both domestic and foreign policy challenges. This paper specifically addresses the following question: What are the main features of post-war Armenia's political landscape?

## **1. The Aftermath of the 2020 War**

The year 2020 was a year of profound challenges for Armenia. After Pashinyan announced about the painful ceasefire agreement of November 9, masses of people stormed government and parliament buildings. Protesters accused the government of betrayal, labeling Pashinyan as 'traitor'. The public was unprepared for such an outcome as the authorities did not fully reveal information on the territorial concessions and defeats. Pashinyan's tweet (2020) from November 9<sup>th</sup>, in which he stated that the battle for Shushi was ongoing even after Armenian forces lost control over the city, is one of the examples of misguided information policy.

The defeat in the war unified former authorities and their supporters. They called the trilateral agreement an act of capitulation and even treason and issued an ultimatum for Pashinyan to step down by midnight. Ishkhan Saghatelyan, an opposition politician for the Armenian Revolutionary Federation party, announced the start of coordinated civil disobedience in a televised address after the deadline passed (Reuters, 2020).

The Helsinki Committee of Armenia, which monitored the right to assembly during the year, reported inconsistent enforcement of the restrictions by security forces. Some gatherings were allowed to proceed, some received verbal warnings, whereas others were dispersed by force. Major protests were held after a ceasefire was secured in November. The November demonstrations were marked by intense public anger as well as calls for the resignation of PM Pashinyan. On a few occasions, gatherings turned into riots (Freedom House, 2021).

In response to these demonstrations, the government has repeatedly argued that Azerbaijan's military might had left no other option. Not only Pashinyan did not resign, but he also blamed his predecessors for the defeat (PM Interviews and Press Conferences).

Following the post-ceasefire crisis, Pashinyan started to lose support, even within his own parliamentary group. Several MPs, including the head of the Deputy Prime Minister Office Varak Sisseryan, have resigned following Pashinyan's Facebook post on 15 November. In this message, the leader appeared to suggest that frontline Armenian troops should come to Yerevan to deal with the opposition. The post was seen as a call for civil conflict even though later Pashinyan explained that he has been misunderstood (Konarzewska, 2020).

Numerous authorities, among them the Katholikos of the Armenian Apostolic Church and the President of Armenia, called for the resignation of the Prime Minister and for holding snap

parliamentary elections (BTI, 2022).

In addition, some Armenian opposition parties created a joint platform, the Armenian Salvation Movement, and nominated former Prime Minister Vazgen Manukyan as a candidate to head a transition government before snap elections (Ibid). However, this movement, mainly composed of former leaders, has been unable to mobilize large groups of the population.

The post-war crisis in Armenia and an alleged attempted coup in February 2021 led by the Chief of the General Staff of the Armenian Armed Forces triggered snap parliamentary elections in June 2021. The campaign was highly polarized and marred by violent rhetoric, with little substantive discussion of issues. At one rally, Pashinyan brandished a hammer, threatening to come after his opponents. Leaders of the two sides blamed each other for the defeat in Nagorno-Karabakh, and traded insults, describing each other as 'traitors', lunatics' and 'criminals' (EPRS, 2021). A record number of political parties and alliances have registered with the Central Electoral Commission (CEC), including those led by Armenia's first and second Presidents Levon Ter-Petrosyan and Robert Kocharyan. The results of voting have been surprising to many. Three parties gained seats in Parliament, with Pashinyan's Civil Contract Party winning a stable majority 71 seats with 53.9 percent of the vote. Though Pashinyan's win was contested by the opposition, the Constitutional Court upheld the election results (The Decision of the Constitutional Court of RA), and international observers considered the elections to be competitive and generally well-organized (OSCE PA, 2021).

After the elections, many imperative post-war issues remain unresolved, among them the issue of demarcation and delimitation of border with Azerbaijan, prisoners of war (POWs) and other captives, investigation of war crimes, etc.

The question of Armenian-Azerbaijani border demarcation and delimitation creates new risks for national security and territorial integrity. The territorial transfer left some Armenian villages exposed to new Azerbaijani military positions and risked the future of a major highway that weaves across the de jure border (Freedom House, 2021). Armenia and Azerbaijan have already signed a decree establishing a commission on border security and delimitation between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The first meeting of the heads of a joint commission took place on May 25 at the two countries' border in which "procedural and organizational issues relating to joint activities of the commissions" have been discussed (Azatutyun, 2022). In the post-war reality, this problem will surely be problematic. As Pashinyan himself admits, Azerbaijan is trying to somehow keep the military tension along the border for presenting hidden or open territorial claims against Armenia during the demarcation process.

Furthermore, Azerbaijan continues to hold an unknown number of Armenian soldiers and civilians in custody in blatant disregard to IHL and the November 9 ceasefire agreement. Reports of gross mistreatment and torture has exacerbated public anger at the government's failure to secure their return (Freedom House, 2021).

The trust in the government has also been challenged by the fact that no progress was made in investigating war crimes and other violations of international humanitarian law during the 2020 conflict and its aftermath (Amnesty International, 2022).

Another factor contributing to the lack of trust was the mismanagement of the pandemic by state authorities. In the aftermath of the mandatory lockdown, thousands of people in Armenia who work either abroad, or on a daily cash basis faced serious financial problems. In addition, like in several other countries, there has been a lack of strategic communication in the management of the COVID-19 outbreak in Armenia, due to which the public was unable to form an accurate perception of risk. The attributed "irresponsible behavior" of citizens was an example of this failed communication (Giebel, 2020). Although the Government has initiated a number of support measures to reduce the social impact of coronavirus, as to the results of the survey of the CRRC (2020), the overwhelming majority of respondents (65%) said that they and their family benefitted from none of the support measures undertaken by the Government (CRRC, 2020). Particularly, at the onset of the second wave of the pandemic the general attention shifted more to war crisis.

Moreover, according to the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression, the restrictions implemented under the COVID-19 pandemic state of emergency, and later by martial law, led to disproportionate or unfounded restrictions of media operations in the country (BTI, 2022).

Indeed, simulated, unauthentic, and manipulative news content has been a growing problem in Armenia. Since 2018, it has been particularly manifested in social media, as Prime Minister Pashinyan chose Facebook posts and livestreams as his main communication tool with society. Much of online public discourse has been concentrated on Facebook, although Twitter and Telegram use among Armenians increased during the 2020 war (Freedom House, 2021, p. 8). Prior to the war, in April 2019, Pashinyan ordered the National Security Service, Armenia's intelligence agency, to crack down on social media users who spread "fake news" about the government. This move was heavily criticized by the opposition parties and the country's human rights ombudsman as a threat to the freedom of expression (BTI, 2022). The problem became even more acute during the war and its aftermath. Seemingly, wartime restrictions on media coverage and risky conditions in war zones limit the opportunities of independent journalism (Freedom House, 2021, p. 19). As such, the State Unified Information System became the only

reliable source of information. However, after the ceasefire announcement, the skepticism toward the state information system has significantly grown.

The government imposed several new restrictions on journalistic freedoms in 2021, including limiting the free movement of journalists in the parliament and in parts of the Syunik region. These measures have been widely criticized by local and international organizations, and local media organizations have called for an end to government obstruction of the media (Freedom House, 2022).

During the post-war period, there has also been a growing hate speech particularly on social media, which as former Ombudsman Arman Tatoyan aptly notes “has nothing to do with freedom of speech” (Public Radio of Armenia, 2021). Pro-government and opposition politicians have regularly accused each other of running troll factories to bully and discredit political rivals. On April 15, 2020, the Armenian parliament adopted amendments to the Criminal Code to criminalize public hate speech. According to the amendments, publicly calling for violence, threatening anyone’s life or health, and publicly justifying or inciting such violence, will be subject to penalties, from fines up to imprisonment (BTI, 2022).

On October 9, 2021, the Armenian Constitutional Court upheld recent legislation, which substantially increased the penalties for insulting individuals for their “public activities”. In effect, the law is consistent with measures that non-democratic governments resort to in order to silence dissent. Meanwhile, amongst the driving forces behind the 2018 Velvet Revolution was the Armenian people’s fervent desire to flourish in a more democratic country, where their political freedoms are protected. Thus, the Armenian authorities have provided the legislative ground for controlling the media narrative on politically sensitive issues.

Moreover, in late 2021, reports by Meta and Citizen Lab showed that Armenian authorities had paid for the use of Predator spyware (founded by the North Macedonian company Cytrox), which was used to target journalists, dissidents, and human rights activists across the country (Freedom House, 2023). Similarly, a joint investigation has revealed that at least twelve Armenian public figures and officials, including journalists and human rights defenders were targeted with NSO Group’s Pegasus spyware (Amnesty, 2023).

The political instability in Armenia further complicated following opposition parties’ rallies demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian in May -June 2022. As a result, hundreds ended up detained in anti-Government Protests (Radio Liberty, 2022).

Regarding safeguards against official corruption, in April 2021, the parliament adopted legislation providing for the creation of an anticorruption court. The government also established the Anti-Corruption Committee (ACC) - a new agency to investigate cases of corruption.

However, regardless of such developments, international bodies, including the UN Human Rights Committee (OHCHR) and the Council of Europe’s anticorruption monitoring unit, the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO), have found that serious shortcomings remain in the government’s anticorruption strategies; as of 2021, GRECO has deemed the Armenian government’s compliance with global corruption prevention standards unsatisfactory (Freedom House, 2022).

Lack of judicial independence remains of serious concern. On June 20, 2022, the former head of Armenia’s Supreme Judicial Council (SCJ), Ruben Vardazaryan released a secretly recorded conversation between him and two other men, Gagik Jhangiryan and Stepan Mikaelyan. The recording appears to show the government blackmailing him to resign to be replaced by a figure loyal to the prime minister (Mejlumyan, 2022). The case further undermined public trust in the judiciary. According to Freedom House (2022) “The courts face systemic political influence, and judicial institutions are undermined by corruption.” Moreover, judges reportedly feel pressure to work with prosecutors to convict defendants (Freedom House, 2022).

In effect, “There is a general consensus that the courts are still somehow devoted to the previous political regime, and that they suffer as much from lack of independence as from ongoing petty corruption” (BTI, 2022). The courts are widely perceived as corrupt, among the least trusted institutions in the country (BTI, 2022).

As it relates to civil society, notwithstanding the constrained political space, a vibrant civil society has evolved in Armenia over time. Yet, since the revolution, civil society has been “nationalized” in the sense that many leaders and activists moved to the ruling party “My Step” and into the government (BTI, 2022).

During the war and its aftermath, the Armenian civil society and the population in general have demonstrated a strong sense of solidarity and support towards persons displaced by the conflict, including by providing shelter and necessities to them. Such efforts were all the more outstanding as the population was also faced with the hardships caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Commissioner for Human Rights, 2021).

When Pashinyan came to power, it was expected that the new government would closely cooperate with civil society groups having field-specific expertise. Still, the government often failed to properly check or discuss ideas with local experts or researchers before taking action, something which is indispensable to effectively taking country characteristics into account (BTI, 2022).

As to international rankings for post-war period, the results are rather surprising.

According to 2021 report issued by Freedom House, “the political crisis that followed the Second Karabakh War poses extraordinary challenges for democratic progress in 2021, including security risks along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, low public trust in the current government, economic strain, and the toll of the COVID-19 pandemic (Freedom House, 2021)”. Interestingly, just a year later Armenia improved its position in international rankings, moving from authoritarian to hybrid regime (Freedom House, 2022). Positive score improvements have been traced in national democratic governance, electoral process and judicial framework, whereas there has been a decline in independent media rating. Still, it is mentioned that such regimes may be democratic in the minimal sense that they feature regular, competitive elections, but their dysfunctional institutions are unable to deliver the definitive components of a liberal democracy.

## 2. Bound to Be Pro-Russian?

Pashinyan’s critical statements on the Kremlin, following the Russian peacekeepers’ tacit approval of Azerbaijan’s military operation in September 2023, led many to believe that Armenia would redefine relations with Russia. Yet the reality is more complex. Before coming to power, Pashinyan positioned himself more as a pro-Western politician. He even initiated in parliament a bill on Armenia’s withdrawal from the EAEU.

Yet, once in government, Pashinyan performed a complete *volte face* on his attitude to the EAEU and Armenian-Russian partnerships. At the very beginning of his premiership, at his first meeting with the Russian president, Pashinyan said, “I can assure you that in Armenia there is a consensus, and nobody has ever doubted the importance of the strategic nature of Armenian-Russian relations” (The Moscow Times, 2018).

He went further, confirming Armenia’s commitment to deepening its integration into the EAEU on the grounds that this was advantageous for the country, even proposing organizational structures to enable the transition (Prime Minister, 2018).

The change in Pashinyan’s dialogue has been dramatic indeed, negating any suggestion that the shift in power in Armenia would bring revision to Armenian-Russian relations and that Armenia would resign its membership of the Russia-led EAEU. Since, despite this, Pashinyan has avowed that there will be no U-turns in Armenia’s foreign policy and that the status of Russia as an “indispensable ally” would remain uncontested. In fact, Armenia would seek further rapprochement with its “big brother.” Thus, the same Pashinyan who had raised the issue of withdrawal from the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) would later suggest deploying Russian peacekeepers across Nagorno Karabakh rather than the



Scandinavian peacekeepers proposed by U.S. President Donald Trump (Armenpress, 2021).

Going even further, Pashinyan proposed that Russian border guards should be deployed along the entire Armenia-Azerbaijan border (Kucera, 2021).

These statements are all very different from the avowed anti-Russian narratives voiced by Pashinyan when he was the leader of the opposition whose fame and backing came from his pro-Western stance. Arguably, when in the job and forming his foreign strategy, Pashinyan found that structural constraints outweighed his beliefs. His action has provided material backing for contentions from some commentators that Armenia's pro-Russian policy is an unsurprising consequence of its geographic location and material weakness, leaving it vulnerable to Russian coercive policies. This is consistent with structural realism's expectation of moderation from poor and weak states because great powers will punish reckless behavior (Waltz, 1979). Yet, material forces alone fall short in explaining Armenia's pro-Russian stances, given that pro-Russian narratives have been deeply ingrained and positively correlated with anti-Turkish sentiments in Armenian political thinking.

Overall, Pashinyan has followed exactly the same line as his predecessor and has continued to support even the most controversial Russian foreign action. This has included sending troops to help squash anti-government demonstrations in Kazakhstan (Hetq, 2022).

Armenia's leadership has got itself into a position where it has little or no agency over the Kremlin's foreign policy agenda and certainly cannot oppose it. Thus, it is hardly surprising that Russia is still treated as an indispensable ally despite Moscow's multiple stabs in Armenia's back.

### **3. Troubled Neighborhood**

The future role of Russia in the region to some extent depends on the recent process of normalization of the Armenian-Turkish relations - one of the several attempts since Armenia regained its independence. As Poghosyan (2022) argues, it will open a new horizon for Turkey to increase its influence in the region and better compete with Russia.

On August 29, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated that Turkey was ready to normalize relations with Armenia based on "neighborliness and mutual recognition of territorial integrity". He also expressed hope that the actions of Armenia's new government would be constructive as the region needed new approaches (Azatutyun, 2021). Weirdly, this call for constructive approach is being made by the leader of the country, which directly supported Azerbaijan in its military offensive against the people of Nagorno-Karabakh, including the transfer of mercenaries to Azerbaijan. This has been asserted not only by the Armenian authorities and a number of international periodicals, but also by the European Parliament (EP

report, 2020).

In December 2021, Armenia and Turkey announced the appointment of Special Representatives for the normalization of relations and the possibility of resuming charter flights. The normalization process was officially launched on January 14, 2022 when Special Representatives, Ruben Rubinyan and Serdar Kılıç, met in Moscow. The groundwork for this meeting began in mid-2021, when the Armenian government proposed the idea of peace in the South Caucasus and normalizing relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey (Poghosyan, 2022). During the Moscow meeting, the special representatives exchanged their initial views on the settlement process through the Armenia-Turkey dialogue. The parties agreed to continue negotiations for a full settlement without preconditions (MFA of the RA). During the second and third meetings both held in Vienna, the Special Representatives confirmed that the goal of the negotiations is to achieve full normalization between Armenia and Turkey and reiterated their agreement to continue the process without preconditions. Earlier Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu announced the existence of agreements on "border clarifications". However, the Armenian Foreign Ministry denied any such agreement or discussion of the issue (News.am, 2022).

The ‘no preconditions’ policy is a rare illustration of foreign policy continuity inherited from the previous Armenian authorities. It consists of removing any direct linkage between normalization efforts and other long-standing issues, including Turkey’s acknowledgement of the Armenian genocide and progress on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Armenia has expected Turkey to take a reciprocal stance and has made it clear that any demands or prerequisites imposed by Turkey on Armenia would derail the process between the countries (Giragosian and Aydintaşbaş, 2022).

Prior to 2021, Armenia and Turkey last tried to normalize relations in 2008-2009 in what was named “football diplomacy.” The culmination of “football diplomacy” was the signing of the Zurich Protocols on October 10, 2009, by the foreign affairs ministers of Armenia and Turkey. By signing the Zurich protocols, Armenia and Turkey were agreeing to open the border two months after the protocols would be ratified. Furthermore, the participants agreed to construct a working group chaired by the two countries, which would work toward creating an intergovernmental commission. The protocols also included a clause on creating a joint commission which would address historical issues between the two countries by examining historical documents and archives. However, the preconditions were later imposed on Armenia. Just weeks after the signing of Protocol Erdogan announced that Turkey could not take positive steps toward Armenia unless ethnic Armenian armed forces withdrew from Nagorno-Karabakh

(Dermoyan, 2022). Even after the Armenian forces withdrawal the normalization of the bilateral relations is still up in the air, with Turkey and Azerbaijan coming up with new demands towards Armenia.

### **Conclusion**

The 2020 war and its aftermath, combined with the adversities produced by the pandemic caused a tragic death toll, a slowdown in the political and economic developments, undermined government's legitimacy, and exacerbated the pre-existing divisions amongst central political powers and the general public. Furthermore, the government's failure to secure the return of POWs, the lack of progress in the investigation of war crimes, and the mismanagement of the pandemic, have all contributed to public anger and mistrust of the authorities.

It has not been uncommon for Pashinyan's government to resort to authoritarian tactics, as evidenced by its efforts at restricting the freedom of expression. The very fact that the Armenian authorities paid for the use of Predator spyware to target journalists, dissidents, and human rights activists are of serious concern.

Similarly, lack of judicial independence and persisting corruption further hinder democracy promotion in war-torn Armenia.

Overall, political instability after the 2020 disastrous war with Azerbaijan increased disappointment amongst Armenian civil society. During the war and its aftermath, the Armenian civil society and the population in general have demonstrated a strong sense of solidarity and support to those affected by the war. Still, there is no close cooperation with civil society groups having field-specific expertise, which is of notional importance for addressing post-war issues.

Beyond this, Armenia remains immensely dependent on Russia. Despite Pashinyan's critical statements on Russian policies, Armenia has little agency to withstand the Kremlin's coercion and keeps remaining in the orbit of the Russian influence.

The political configuration of the region is also contingent upon on the normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations. Although the process is ongoing based on 'no preconditions' policy, the previous experience of Turkey making last-minute demands does not allow for much confidence in the success of this process. In effect, along with domestic challenges, Armenia further suffers the repercussions of its troubled neighborhood.

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