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

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Abstract

This article analyzes the political trajectory of Armenia in the aftermath of the 2020 war, with particular attention to the ways in which military defeat reshaped state governance and foreign policy constraints. While the government led by Nikol Pashinyan succeeded in renewing its electoral mandate through the 2021 snap parliamentary elections, this outcome did not translate into political consolidation or social stabilization. Instead, the post-war period has been marked by persistent polarization, institutional fragility, and declining public trust. These challenges were intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, which amplified socioeconomic pressures and exposed deficiencies in crisis management and state communication. Against this backdrop, Armenia continues to face unresolved regional security dilemmas and a narrowing of strategic autonomy, particularly in its relationship with an increasingly assertive Russia.

Keywords: Postwar Armenia; Nagorno Karabakh conflict; political legitimacy; Russia; Armenian Turkish relations.

Introduction

The political transformation initiated by Armenia's 2018 Velvet Revolution generated widespread expectations of democratic renewal, improved governance, and enhanced national resilience. These hopes, however, proved difficult to sustain in the face of mounting structural vulnerabilities and external shocks. The 2020 war over Nagorno-Karabakh constituted a critical rupture, exposing weaknesses in decision-making processes, crisis communication, and institutional preparedness. The ceasefire agreement that ended the fighting came as a profound shock to society and triggered a crisis of political legitimacy, fueling polarization and prolonged public contestation of executive authority.

In the months following the war, demands for accountability and leadership change translated into sustained protests and political instability. Although Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan resigned under pressure in April 2021, his subsequent victory in the snap parliamentary elections restored formal authority without resolving the deeper legitimacy deficit produced by defeat. The electoral outcome stabilized the governing coalition but failed to alleviate the broader sense of uncertainty surrounding Armenia's political direction.

At the same time, the post-war environment coincided with a contraction of civic space. Emergency governance measures introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, later reinforced through martial law, resulted in expanded restrictions on media activity and public discourse. These developments were accompanied by the proliferation of hostile rhetoric,

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disinformation, and manipulative content, particularly across social media platforms, further eroding public trust and complicating state–society relations.

This study employs a qualitative analytical approach based on the synthesis of primary and secondary sources, including official government statements, election observation reports, legal documents, and assessments produced by international monitoring organizations and civil society groups. The article integrates publicly available data to examine patterns of governance under conditions of political and security stress. The temporal scope of the analysis spans the period from the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war through early 2024, allowing for the identification of both immediate post-war dynamics and longer-term structural tendencies.

1. Analytical Framework: Post-War Governance in Post-Revolutionary States

Armenia’s internal governance challenges have unfolded alongside growing external pressures. Relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey remain fraught, while reliance on Russia as a security guarantor has deepened amid unresolved regional tensions. These dynamics culminated in September 2023, when Azerbaijan’s military operation led to the mass displacement of more than 100,000 ethnic Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh into Armenia, underscoring the limits of existing security arrangements and Armenia’s constrained strategic position.

Despite rising dissatisfaction with political leadership, opposition forces have struggled to mobilize broad-based societal support capable of translating discontent into political change. As a result, the current government has remained in power while operating within an increasingly restrictive domestic and international environment. This paper examines the key characteristics of Armenia’s post-war political landscape, focusing on the interaction between legitimacy, governance under stress, and external dependency.

This article builds on existing analyses of Armenia’s post-war political crisis by advancing a broader interpretive framework for understanding governance under conditions of military defeat in post-revolutionary states. In addition to incorporating post-2022 developments, including heightened security dependence, expanded surveillance practices, and renewed regional instability, the paper shifts the analytical focus from descriptive political dynamics to the structural mechanisms through which legitimacy, information control, and external dependency interact. By situating Armenia’s experience within a comparative perspective on post-war governance, the article seeks to contribute to wider debates on political stabilization and consolidation in fragile post-revolutionary contexts.

Armenia’s post-war political condition can be situated within a broader category of post-revolutionary states confronting prolonged insecurity, unresolved conflict, and inherited institutional constraints. Political revolutions frequently disrupt elite configurations and

mobilize societal expectations, yet they do not automatically transform the administrative practices, informal power relations, or security-centered governance cultures shaped by earlier authoritarian or semi-authoritarian orders. These underlying structures often remain intact and become particularly consequential in periods of crisis.

Military defeat introduces a compound challenge for post-revolutionary governance. Beyond its material and territorial consequences, it weakens executive credibility, intensifies polarization, and narrows the range of feasible policy choices. In response, governing authorities may increasingly rely on centralized decision-making, emergency legal frameworks, and securitized political discourse as mechanisms for managing uncertainty. Such measures do not necessarily signal an explicit rejection of pluralism, but they can gradually reconfigure the balance between authority and participation.

The Armenian case suggests a trajectory in which post-war governance exhibits features associated with partial authoritarian consolidation. Electoral competition and formal institutional procedures continue to operate, yet they coexist with expanded executive discretion, constrained media environments, and selective enforcement of legal norms. Rather than representing a decisive shift toward authoritarianism, this configuration reflects a process of adaptive stabilization in which governing practices prioritize control, predictability, and external alignment over institutional pluralization.

External security dependence further conditions this trajectory. Reliance on external guarantors reduces strategic flexibility and reinforces governance models oriented toward risk minimization. Political leadership operating within such constraints may favor policy continuity and external accommodation, limiting the scope for contestation and institutional reconfiguration. Over time, these dynamics can normalize governance practices that mirror pre-revolutionary patterns, even in the absence of overt repression or ideological authoritarianism.

From a comparative perspective, post-war post-revolutionary states occupy an intermediate space between fluid political contestation and institutional consolidation. Authority is maintained through procedural legitimacy, selective regulation of political space, and crisis management rather than through comprehensive ideological or coercive control. This form of governance is neither fully authoritarian nor openly transitional, but it exhibits a directional tendency toward consolidation under conditions of sustained insecurity.

Interpreting Armenia's post-war experience through this framework highlights the significance of structural pressures in shaping political outcomes. The interaction of military defeat, external dependence, and institutional inheritance constrains the range of viable governance strategies and encourages gradual centralization. While this trajectory does not

preclude future reconfiguration, it underscores how post-war recovery in post-revolutionary contexts can align more closely with stabilization and consolidation than with systemic transformation.

2.1 Post-War Crisis as a Legitimacy Shock

The aftermath of the 2020 war constituted not merely a political crisis, but a systemic legitimacy shock that reshaped the relationship between state authority and society. Military defeat undermined the symbolic foundations of executive power, exposed deficiencies in crisis governance, and intensified pre-existing polarization. In post-revolutionary contexts, such shocks are particularly destabilizing, as political authority rests heavily on expectations of accountability, competence, and protection rather than on entrenched institutional dominance. The post-war period in Armenia therefore unfolded as a struggle over legitimacy rather than a conventional contest over policy direction.

Crisis communication played a central role in shaping public reactions to the ceasefire agreement. The absence of timely, coherent, and transparent information regarding military developments and territorial outcomes contributed to public confusion and fueled perceptions of deception. In high-stakes security crises, information asymmetries between the state and society are often unavoidable; however, inconsistent messaging and delayed disclosure can accelerate the erosion of trust and amplify political contestation. In Armenia's case, communication failures during the final stages of the war became a catalyst for mass mobilization and the delegitimization of executive authority.

These dynamics became immediately visible in the public response that followed the announcement of the ceasefire agreement on November 9, 2020. Protesters accused the authorities of betraying national interests and publicly labeled the prime minister a traitor. A key driver of this reaction was the lack of timely and transparent information regarding the scale of territorial losses and military setbacks. Public confusion was further intensified by official communication failures, including a statement released by Pashinyan on November 9 indicating that fighting over Shushi was continuing despite the city having already fallen under Azerbaijani control. This episode highlighted serious shortcomings in the government's information policy during a critical moment (Pashinyan, 2020).

In the immediate aftermath of the defeat, representatives of former ruling elites and their political allies united in condemning the trilateral ceasefire agreement. They framed the document as an act of capitulation and, in some cases, as outright treason. An ultimatum was issued demanding the prime minister's resignation by midnight. When this deadline expired, Ishkhan Saghatlyan, a representative of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, appeared on

television to announce the initiation of coordinated civil disobedience actions (Reuters, 2020).

During this turbulent period, the Helsinki Committee of Armenia monitored the implementation of restrictions related to public assembly. Its findings pointed to uneven enforcement by security forces. While some demonstrations were allowed to proceed or were met with verbal warnings, others were dispersed using force. Protests continued throughout November following the ceasefire agreement and were characterized by heightened anger and persistent demands for Pashinyan's resignation. In several instances, these demonstrations escalated into riots (Freedom House, 2021).

The government responded by repeatedly asserting that Azerbaijan's military superiority left Armenia with no viable alternative but to accept the ceasefire terms. Pashinyan refused to resign and instead placed responsibility for the defeat on previous administrations (PM Interviews and Press Conferences). Nevertheless, the prolonged political crisis gradually weakened his support base, including within his own parliamentary faction. A number of members of parliament stepped down after Pashinyan published a Facebook post on November 15 that appeared to suggest deploying frontline troops to Yerevan to confront opposition forces. Although the prime minister later claimed that his remarks had been misinterpreted, the post was widely perceived as an implicit endorsement of internal confrontation (Konarzewska, 2020).

Calls for the prime minister's resignation and for early parliamentary elections were voiced by a wide range of actors, including the Catholicos of the Armenian Apostolic Church and the President of Armenia (BTI, 2022). At the same time, several opposition parties formed a joint political platform known as the Armenian Salvation Movement and put forward former prime minister Vazgen Manukyan as a candidate to lead a transitional government prior to snap elections. Despite these efforts, the movement, which was largely composed of figures associated with previous political leadership, failed to attract broad public support (Ibid).

2.2 Emergency Governance and Selective Enforcement

As the legitimacy crisis persisted, governance increasingly relied on emergency measures and selective enforcement practices aimed at maintaining order rather than restoring political consensus. Restrictions on public assembly, uneven policing of demonstrations, and heightened security responses reflected attempts to manage instability in the absence of broad societal trust. In fragile post-crisis environments, such practices often substitute institutional authority with coercive or discretionary mechanisms, reshaping state–society relations without resolving underlying sources of contention.

The postwar political crisis, combined with an alleged attempted coup in February 2021

involving the Chief of the General Staff of the Armenian Armed Forces, ultimately paved the way for snap parliamentary elections held in June 2021.

The electoral campaign unfolded in an atmosphere of extreme polarization, with heightened hostility and limited attention to programmatic platforms. During the campaign, political rhetoric intensified, with confrontational symbolism and personal attacks replacing substantive policy debate (EPRS, 2021). Although a record number of parties and electoral alliances registered with the Central Electoral Commission, including those led by Armenia's first and second presidents Levon Ter Petrosyan and Robert Kocharyan, only three political forces ultimately entered parliament. The Civil Contract Party secured a commanding majority, winning 71 seats with 53.9 percent of the vote. While opposition parties challenged the results, the Constitutional Court confirmed their validity, and international observers assessed the elections as competitive and generally well organized (OSCE PA, 2021; Decision of the Constitutional Court of RA).

While the electoral outcome restored formal governing authority, it did not resolve the deeper legitimacy deficit produced by military defeat and prolonged crisis. The elections functioned as a mechanism of political stabilization rather than societal reconciliation, allowing institutional continuity without addressing the structural drivers of polarization and mistrust. This form of conditional stabilization shaped the trajectory of post-war governance and constrained the range of subsequent policy responses.

Outstanding issues included border demarcation and delimitation with Azerbaijan, the fate of prisoners of war and civilian captives, and the investigation of alleged war crimes. The demarcation process introduced new risks to Armenia's security and territorial integrity, as territorial adjustments exposed several villages to nearby Azerbaijani military positions and jeopardized the functionality of a major highway crossing the *de jure* border (Freedom House, 2021). Armenia and Azerbaijan later established a joint commission on border security and delimitation, with the first meeting of its leadership held on May 25 at the border, where procedural and organizational matters were discussed (Azatutyun, 2022). In the postwar setting, these issues continued to generate tension, with Pashinyan acknowledging that Azerbaijan sought to maintain military pressure in order to advance overt or covert territorial claims during the demarcation process.

At the same time, Azerbaijan continued to hold an unspecified number of Armenian soldiers and civilians in custody in violation of international humanitarian law and the November 9 ceasefire agreement. Reports detailing mistreatment and torture further intensified public frustration with the government's inability to secure their release (Freedom House, 2021).

Confidence in state institutions was also weakened by the absence of tangible progress in investigating war crimes and other violations of international humanitarian law committed during the 2020 conflict and its aftermath (Amnesty International, 2022).

2.3 Governance Saturation

The post-war crisis unfolded alongside multiple, overlapping governance challenges, creating conditions of institutional saturation in which state capacity was stretched across security, political, and public health domains simultaneously. In such contexts, policy failures are often experienced cumulatively rather than individually, reinforcing perceptions of systemic incompetence and accelerating the erosion of institutional credibility.

The handling of the COVID 19 pandemic further undermined public trust. Following mandatory lockdown measures, many Armenians who relied on daily cash income or worked abroad experienced severe financial hardship. As observed in several other countries, inadequate strategic communication by authorities prevented the population from developing an accurate understanding of health risks. Officials frequently attributed rising infection rates to irresponsible behavior by citizens rather than to policy shortcomings (Giebel, 2020). Although the government introduced various social support programs, survey data revealed that 65 percent of respondents reported receiving no benefit from these measures (CRRC, 2020). During the emergence of the second wave of the pandemic, public attention increasingly shifted away from health concerns toward the unresolved war related crisis.

According to the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression, emergency measures introduced during the pandemic and later reinforced under martial law led to disproportionate and often unjustified restrictions on media activity (BTI, 2022). Manipulative and unauthentic information proliferated, particularly across social media platforms. Since 2018, political discourse has been heavily concentrated on Facebook, reflecting the prime minister's preference for posts and livestreams as primary communication tools, although Twitter and Telegram usage also increased during the war (Freedom House, 2021, p. 8). Even before the conflict, in April 2019, Pashinyan instructed the National Security Service to pursue social media users accused of spreading false information about the government, a move criticized by opposition parties and the human rights ombudsman as a threat to freedom of expression (BTI, 2022). These concerns deepened during the war, as restrictions on media access and the dangers associated with reporting from conflict zones further constrained independent journalism (Freedom House, 2021, p. 19). Consequently, the State Unified Information System emerged as the primary source of official information, although public skepticism toward it increased markedly following the ceasefire announcement.

In 2021, authorities introduced additional restrictions affecting journalistic activity, including limitations on reporters' movement within parliament and access to certain areas of the Syunik region. These measures prompted criticism from domestic and international organizations, while Armenian media outlets publicly called on the government to end interference with press freedom (Freedom House, 2022).

The postwar period was also characterized by a visible increase in hate speech, particularly on social media platforms. Former Human Rights Defender Arman Tatoyan emphasized that such practices bore no relation to the legitimate exercise of freedom of expression (Public Radio of Armenia, 2021). Political figures from both the governing party and the opposition accused one another of operating coordinated online networks designed to intimidate and discredit opponents. In response to growing concern, the Armenian parliament adopted amendments to the Criminal Code on April 15, 2020, criminalizing public hate speech. These provisions introduced penalties ranging from fines to imprisonment for acts such as inciting violence, issuing threats to life or health, or publicly justifying violent conduct (BTI, 2022).

Additional legal changes were introduced in October 2021, when the Constitutional Court upheld legislation that substantially increased penalties for insulting individuals based on their public activities. Such measures resemble instruments frequently employed by illiberal governments to suppress dissent. This trajectory contrasts sharply with the aspirations that animated the 2018 Velvet Revolution, during which large segments of Armenian society sought a political system grounded in democratic norms and protected civil liberties. Instead, the evolving legal framework has increasingly enabled state control over media narratives on politically sensitive issues.

Concerns related to surveillance practices intensified toward the end of 2021. Investigations conducted by Meta and Citizen Lab revealed that Armenian authorities had financed the use of Predator spyware developed by the North Macedonian company Cytrox, which was deployed against journalists, political opponents, and human rights defenders (Freedom House, 2023). In a related development, a joint investigation determined that at least twelve Armenian officials and public figures, including representatives of the media and civil society, had been targeted using Pegasus spyware produced by NSO Group (Amnesty, 2023).

Taken together, these developments indicate a shift toward governance practices centered on information management, surveillance, and legal regulation of political space. Rather than constituting a comprehensive authoritarian transformation, this pattern reflects adaptive stabilization under conditions of insecurity, where control mechanisms expand incrementally in response to perceived threats to political order.

Persistent political instability also hindered opposition mobilization in the spring of 2022, when several parties organized demonstrations demanding Pashinyan's resignation. These protests resulted in the detention of hundreds of participants during anti government rallies held between May and June (Radio Liberty, 2022).

In the area of anti corruption policy, parliament adopted legislation in April 2021 establishing a specialized anti corruption court and creating the Anti Corruption Committee as an investigative body. Despite these institutional initiatives, international monitoring organizations continued to identify serious shortcomings in Armenia's anti corruption framework. Both the United Nations Human Rights Committee and the Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption concluded that governmental strategies remained insufficient, and GRECO classified Armenia's compliance with international corruption prevention standards as unsatisfactory as of 2021 (Freedom House, 2022).

Judicial independence has remained a persistent concern. In June 2022, Ruben Vardazaryan, former head of the Supreme Judicial Council, released a covert audio recording involving senior officials Gagik Jhangiryan and Stepan Mikaelyan. The recording appeared to reveal efforts to pressure him into resigning so that he could be replaced by an individual aligned with the prime minister, further undermining confidence in the judiciary (Mejlumyan, 2022). According to Freedom House, courts in Armenia continue to function under systemic political influence and are weakened by corruption, while judges reportedly face pressure to cooperate with prosecutors in securing convictions (Freedom House, 2022). Analysts similarly observe that the judiciary remains closely associated with the previous political order and is affected by limited independence and persistent low-level corruption (BTI, 2022). As a result, courts are widely perceived as among the least trusted institutions in the country (BTI, 2022).

Despite constraints on political space, Armenia has retained an active civil society sector. Following the revolution, however, many prominent activists and civil society leaders entered government positions or joined the ruling My Step alliance, a phenomenon often described as the nationalization of civil society (BTI, 2022). During the war and its aftermath, civil society organizations and ordinary citizens demonstrated significant solidarity with displaced populations by providing shelter and essential assistance. These efforts were particularly notable given the additional challenges posed by the COVID 19 pandemic (Commissioner for Human Rights, 2021).

Expectations that the new government would engage systematically with civil society experts were only partially realized. In practice, authorities frequently failed to consult local specialists prior to implementing policies, reducing reform effectiveness and limiting sensitivity

to country specific conditions (BTI, 2022).

International evaluations of Armenia’s postwar democratic development present a mixed assessment. In its 2021 report, Freedom House noted that the political crisis following the Second Karabakh War created significant constraints on governance performance, institutional resilience, and public trust (Freedom House, 2021). In Freedom House’s Nations in Transit assessment, Armenia was categorized as an “authoritarian regime” in the 2021 edition and as a “hybrid regime” in the 2022 edition, reflecting changes in the organization’s composite scoring across categories (Freedom House, 2021- 2022). According to Freedom in the World, Armenia was classified as “Partly Free” with a score of 54/100 in both the 2023 and 2024 editions, reflecting ongoing constraints on political rights and civil liberties, including challenges related to assembly, judicial independence, and governance (Freedom House 2023–24).

Table 1. Core Challenges Shaping Armenia’s Postwar Political Environment

| Domain | Main Problems | Observed Consequences |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
| Political legitimacy | Loss of trust following the 2020 war, prolonged polarization, contested authority of executive leadership | Persistent political instability, weak consolidation of power, strained state society relations |
| Governance and institutions | Emergency governance, weak crisis communication, limited policy consultation | Declining confidence in institutions, ineffective responses to overlapping crises |
| Media and civic space | Restrictions on journalistic activity, spread of disinformation and hate speech | Narrowed civic space, increased control over public narratives |
| Security and borders | Unresolved border demarcation, continued military pressure from Azerbaijan, unresolved prisoner issues | Heightened insecurity, exposure of border communities, sustained public anxiety |
| Justice and rule of law | Political influence over courts, corruption, limited judicial independence | Low trust in judiciary, weak accountability mechanisms |
| Foreign policy dependency | Heavy reliance on Russian security guarantees, limited strategic autonomy | Constrained foreign policy choices, vulnerability to external pressure |
| Humanitarian impact | Mass displacement from Nagorno Karabakh, pandemic related socioeconomic hardship | Increased strain on social services, growing societal vulnerability |

3.1 Bound to Be Pro-Russian?

Armenia’s post-war foreign policy orientation is best understood as the outcome of structural constraint rather than ideological alignment or leadership preference. Military defeat, unresolved security dilemmas, and limited strategic alternatives have reinforced a condition of external dependence that significantly narrows the range of viable foreign policy choices. In such contexts, alignment with a dominant security partner functions less as a strategic

commitment than as a mechanism for managing vulnerability under conditions of acute asymmetry.

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's critical statements directed at the Kremlin after the limited response of Russian peacekeepers to Azerbaijan's military operation in September 2023 initially raised expectations that Armenia might reassess its strategic relationship with Russia. These expectations, however, proved difficult to sustain. Prior to assuming office, Pashinyan cultivated a political image associated with Western oriented reformism and even introduced a parliamentary initiative advocating Armenia's withdrawal from the Eurasian Economic Union.

Upon entering government, this position shifted in a decisive manner. During his first meeting with the Russian president at the beginning of his premiership, Pashinyan publicly emphasized that Armenian Russian relations enjoyed broad domestic consensus and had never been fundamentally questioned (The Moscow Times, 2018). He subsequently reaffirmed Armenia's commitment to deepening its participation in the Eurasian Economic Union, arguing that closer integration aligned with national interests and proposing institutional mechanisms to support that process (Primeminister, 2018).

This evolution in discourse and policy undermined assumptions that the change in leadership would result in a departure from Moscow centered foreign policy orientation or lead to Armenia's withdrawal from the Russia led Eurasian Economic Union. On the contrary, Pashinyan repeatedly asserted that Armenia's foreign policy direction would remain unchanged and that Russia would continue to serve as an indispensable ally. He further described Russia as Armenia's primary security partner and endorsed closer strategic coordination. In this context, the same political figure who had once questioned Armenia's membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization later supported the deployment of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno Karabakh, rejecting the alternative Scandinavian peacekeeping initiative proposed by United States President Donald Trump (Armenpress, 2021).

Pashinyan also advanced the idea that Russian border guards should be deployed along the entire Armenia Azerbaijan border, underscoring the depth of Armenia's reliance on Russian security infrastructure (Kucera, 2021). These positions contrast with the rhetoric that characterized Pashinyan's political profile during the opposition period, when his appeal was associated with a more Western-oriented agenda.

3.2 Security Dependence and Limited Autonomy

Post-war security dependence has imposed durable limits on Armenia's foreign policy autonomy. Reliance on external security guarantees reduces the feasibility of rapid realignment and discourages experimentation with alternative partnerships. In this setting, foreign policy

continuity emerges not from consensus or ideological commitment, but from the absence of credible exit options. Governing elites retain formal agency in decision-making, yet the strategic content of policy remains tightly constrained by asymmetric power relations and unresolved regional threats.

This trajectory lends support to interpretations suggesting that Armenia's alignment with Russia is driven less by leadership ideology than by structural vulnerability. Geographic exposure and limited material resources increase Armenia's susceptibility to pressure from a dominant regional power. Such behavior corresponds with the expectations of structural realism, which posits that weaker states tend to pursue cautious and accommodating strategies in their relations with great powers capable of imposing significant costs for defiance (Waltz, 1979). At the same time, material constraints alone do not fully explain Armenia's orientation toward Russia, as pro Russian narratives remain deeply embedded in domestic political discourse and are frequently intertwined with persistent anti Turkish sentiments. Under these conditions, foreign policy behavior reflects risk avoidance and accommodation rather than strategic realignment.

In practice, Pashinyan has largely maintained the foreign policy trajectory established by his predecessors, including support for controversial Russian actions beyond Armenia's borders. A notable illustration of this continuity was Armenia's participation in the Collective Security Treaty Organization mission deployed to assist in suppressing anti government protests in Kazakhstan (Hetq, 2022). As a result, Armenia's leadership has operated within a narrow margin of autonomy in shaping foreign policy independently of Moscow's preferences. This limited agency helps explain why Russia continues to be viewed as an indispensable partner despite repeated developments that have undermined Armenian interests.

Taken together, these dynamics illustrate a condition of agency without autonomy in Armenia's post-war foreign policy. While political leadership continues to articulate preferences and engage in diplomatic signaling, the underlying structure of security dependence circumscribes meaningful deviation from established alignments. This constrained posture has shaped Armenia's regional engagement and conditioned its approach to neighboring states, including efforts to normalize relations with Turkey.

4.1 Troubled Neighborhood

Armenia's efforts to normalize relations with Turkey unfold within a highly constrained regional environment shaped by military defeat, external security dependence, and unresolved conflict. Rather than constituting a strategic reorientation, normalization functions as a limited diplomatic instrument aimed at managing isolation and reducing vulnerability without altering

the core security architecture. This context fundamentally conditions both the scope and the prospects of Armenian–Turkish engagement.

Russia’s prospective role in the South Caucasus is also influenced by renewed efforts to normalize relations between Armenia and Turkey, a process that has been attempted repeatedly since Armenia regained independence. As Poghosyan observes, renewed diplomatic engagement between Yerevan and Ankara could create opportunities for Turkey to expand its regional influence and potentially challenge Russia’s dominant position in the region (Poghosyan, 2022). On August 29, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan declared that Turkey was prepared to pursue normalization with Armenia on the basis of good neighborly relations and mutual recognition of territorial integrity, expressing hope that Armenia’s leadership would respond constructively (Azatutyun, 2021).

These overtures are notable given Turkey’s direct role in supporting Azerbaijan during its military campaign against Nagorno Karabakh, including allegations concerning the transfer of mercenaries. Such allegations have been raised not only by Armenian officials and international media outlets, but also by the European Parliament (EP report, 2020). In December 2021, Armenia and Turkey announced the appointment of special representatives to oversee the normalization process and signaled the possible resumption of charter flights. Formal negotiations began on January 14, 2022, when Ruben Rubinyan and Serdar Kılıç met in Moscow. Preparatory steps for this dialogue had been taken earlier, in mid 2021, when the Armenian government articulated a broader vision of peace in the South Caucasus and normalization with both Azerbaijan and Turkey (Poghosyan, 2022).

During their initial meeting in Moscow, the special representatives exchanged preliminary views and agreed to continue negotiations aimed at achieving full normalization without preconditions (MFA of the RA). Subsequent rounds of talks held in Vienna reaffirmed this objective. At the same time, public statements by Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu suggesting the existence of agreements on border clarifications were later rejected by the Armenian Foreign Ministry, which denied that any such discussions had occurred (News.am, 2022).

4.2 Normalization Without Leverage

The pursuit of normalization without preconditions reflects both continuity in Armenian foreign policy and the limits of Armenia’s bargaining position in the post-war environment. This approach seeks to decouple diplomatic engagement from unresolved historical and political disputes, including the recognition of the Armenian genocide and progress on the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. However, the absence of leverage, combined with asymmetric power

relations and Turkey's close coordination with Azerbaijan, constrains Armenia's capacity to shape the agenda or influence outcomes. As a result, diplomatic engagement prioritizes symbolic progress and confidence-building over the substantive resolution of underlying disputes, while Armenian officials continue to emphasize that the imposition of unilateral conditions by Turkey would undermine the normalization process (Giragosian and Aydıntaşbaş, 2022).

However, the absence of leverage, combined with asymmetric power relations and Turkey's close coordination with Azerbaijan, constrains Armenia's capacity to shape the agenda or influence outcomes. As a result, diplomatic engagement proceeds in a manner that prioritizes symbolic progress and confidence-building over substantive resolution of underlying disputes.

Prior to the current negotiations, the most significant attempt at Armenian Turkish reconciliation took place in 2008 and 2009, a period commonly described as football diplomacy. This initiative culminated in the signing of the Zurich Protocols on October 10, 2009, which envisioned the opening of the border and the establishment of joint commissions to address bilateral and historical issues. These efforts ultimately stalled after Turkey introduced additional conditions related to the withdrawal of Armenian forces from Nagorno Karabakh. Even after the subsequent withdrawal of Armenian forces, prospects for normalization have remained uncertain, as Turkey and Azerbaijan have continued to advance further demands toward Armenia (Dermoyan, 2022).

The persistence of these limitations suggests that Armenian–Turkish normalization remains contingent rather than transformative. Historical precedents, post-war power asymmetries, and the continued linkage between bilateral relations and the Nagorno Karabakh conflict reduce the likelihood that normalization will generate durable regional reconfiguration. Instead, it functions as a supplementary diplomatic channel within a broader framework of constrained post-war governance.

5. Implications for Post-War Governance and Regional Order

The patterns identified in Armenia's post-war political trajectory carry implications that extend beyond the immediate dynamics of domestic crisis management. One central consequence is the narrowing of the policy space available to governing authorities. Under conditions of sustained insecurity and external dependence, political decision-making becomes oriented toward minimizing risk rather than expanding options. This orientation limits the scope for institutional recalibration and reinforces reliance on existing arrangements, even when those arrangements generate dissatisfaction or fail to deliver anticipated outcomes.

At the domestic level, the persistence of unresolved tensions between formal authority and

public trust constrains the effectiveness of governance tools that rely primarily on procedural legitimacy. Elections and institutional continuity may preserve governability, but they do not necessarily translate into renewed confidence in state institutions. Over time, this disconnect encourages incremental reliance on regulatory, legal, and informational instruments to manage dissent and uncertainty, reshaping political practice without producing a decisive shift in regime type.

At the regional level, constrained autonomy reduces the capacity of diplomatic engagement to function as a substitute for security realignment. Initiatives aimed at normalizing relations with neighboring states operate within tight margins defined by asymmetric power relations and unresolved conflicts. As a result, diplomacy serves primarily as a means of mitigating isolation and signaling restraint rather than as a vehicle for altering the underlying balance of power or security architecture.

Taken together, these implications point to a form of post-war stabilization that is durable but limited. Political order is maintained through adaptation and accommodation rather than through comprehensive transformation. This condition does not preclude future change, but it highlights the structural difficulties faced by post-revolutionary states seeking to recalibrate governance and regional positioning in the aftermath of military defeat.

Conclusion

This study has examined Armenia's post-war political condition not as an isolated national episode, but as an expression of broader constraints that shape governance in states emerging from revolutionary change under conditions of unresolved conflict. Rather than producing a clear rupture or directional transition, the post-2020 period reveals a political environment characterized by adaptation, containment, and strategic caution. Governance practices have evolved in response to uncertainty and vulnerability, privileging manageability over experimentation and continuity over reconfiguration.

The Armenian case underscores the limits of electoral and procedural mechanisms as instruments for recalibrating political authority after military defeat. While such mechanisms may restore functional governance, they do not automatically reconstruct legitimacy or recalibrate the relationship between the state and society. In the absence of institutional depth and strategic flexibility, political systems remain exposed to recurring stress, even when overt instability is temporarily contained.

At the same time, the analysis highlights how external constraints intersect with domestic governance choices in ways that narrow the horizon of political possibility. Security asymmetries and regional power dynamics do not simply influence foreign policy alignment; they shape internal political practices by reinforcing risk-averse decision-making and

discouraging deviation from established patterns. This interaction complicates efforts to pursue meaningful recalibration without incurring prohibitive costs.

Viewed through this lens, Armenia's post-war experience illustrates a condition of constrained stabilization rather than transformation. Political order is maintained through incremental adjustment rather than structural renewal, producing a system that is resilient in form but limited in scope. Recognizing this condition is essential for understanding not only Armenia's current trajectory, but also the challenges faced by post-revolutionary states navigating the aftermath of conflict in environments marked by persistent insecurity and limited alternatives.

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