

## DOMESTIC DIMENSIONS OF ARMENIA'S FOREIGN POLICY: THE KARABAKH CONFLICT AND ARMENIA-TURKEY RELATIONS

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It is widely believed that foreign policy is an extension of domestic policy. But the opposite is also true: domestic policy can stem from foreign policy. This memo explores the interplay of domestic and foreign policy as they relate to two major issues in post-Soviet Armenia.

The first is the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. For two decades, this conflict has influenced the domestic development of independent Armenia, while its domestic repercussions have had a significant impact on Yerevan's approach to conflict resolution. This prompts two questions: What is the conflict's scope of influence on Armenian politics, political discourse, and elite formation? How do Armenian domestic politics and public opinion affect the country's position in regional politics and the conflict negotiation process?

The second concerns Armenian-Turkish relations, in particular the attempt of Turkey and Armenia to normalize ties via a two-year rapprochement project. This effort was launched in the summer of 2008 by the initiative of the Armenian president (with U.S. and EU support) and resulted in the signing of two Armenian-Turkish protocols in October 2009. However, the protocols were not ratified, primarily because Ankara put forward additional conditions, which led to Yerevan's suspension of the process in April 2010. It is important to understand the reaction of Armenian society toward the government's efforts to normalize ties with Turkey, as well as the ways in which social attitudes affected the diplomatic position of Armenia.

### **The Karabakh Factor in the Domestic Policy of Armenia**

A significant share of Armenia's current political elite consists of former activists of the Karabakh movement, former combatants, or individuals who come from Nagorno-Karabakh or other formerly Armenian-populated regions of Soviet Azerbaijan. The tremendous influence of the Karabakh issue over Armenian politics and development is

best illustrated by the careers of independent Armenia's first three presidents: Levon Ter-Petrosyan, Robert Kocharyan, and Serzh Sargsyan. All three played leading roles in the Karabakh movement.

The role of the "Karabakh guys" and ex-combatants in Armenia's political and economic life reached its peak in the last years of Ter-Petrosyan's presidency. It only began to decrease at the start of Robert Kocharyan's presidency, even though he himself is a Karabakh man. This may sound illogical, but it is not. As someone coming from Nagorno-Karabakh, Kocharyan did not receive enough support in Yerevan and needed to incorporate strong local actors into the bureaucracy and economic elite in the capital and provinces. From that point on, Armenia's political system was gradually demilitarized; in most offices, ex-combatants were replaced by a new generation of bureaucrats.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, the "Karabakh factor" has been losing prevalence in Armenia's political landscape. Armenian society and elites gradually began to pay less attention to the struggle for Nagorno-Karabakh as they took for granted that Armenia already "owns" Nagorno-Karabakh. In particular, authorities cannot mobilize a disgruntled electorate in their favor in the name of protecting something the country has already gained because society no longer perceives this to be a priority concern.<sup>2</sup>

Although the Karabakh issue has slipped down on Armenia's domestic political agenda, it remains the case that no other political issue is so instrumental for political actors in Armenia, whether in opposition or the ruling coalition. Depending on political circumstances, the authorities may take a hard line on conflict resolution while the opposition criticizes the official approach, or the opposition will label government attempts to demonstrate flexibility in negotiations as "betrayal." That said, almost total consensus exists within Armenian society concerning the overall vision of Nagorno-Karabakh's future. Very little depends on leaders' personal opinions. Moreover, ever since the 1990s it has been clear that Yerevan cannot make completely independent decisions with regard to the conflict. Nagorno-Karabakh is an important actor with a will of its own and has repeatedly rejected certain conflict settlement options proposed by mediators and acceptable to Armenia.

Consequently, it is highly improbable that Armenian policy on Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as on other major strategic priorities, will change as a result of domestic power shifts. It is superficial to speak of a divide within the Armenian political class on the issue. When it comes to Nagorno-Karabakh, there are no doves and hawks.

The past few years has only seen a preservation of this status quo, helped along by the 2008 Russia-Georgia war and ineffective Armenian-Azerbaijani presidential summits in Russia in June 2011 and January 2012. The latest rounds of negotiation have essentially focused on efforts to ease tensions on the front line, rather than call for major

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<sup>1</sup> See Alexander Iskandaryan, "Armenian between Autocracy and Polyarchy," *Pro et Contra* 15, 2-3, May – August 2011 (in Russian).

<sup>2</sup> For more on the subject, see Sergey Minasyan, "Armenia in Karabakh, Karabakh in Armenia: Living with a Conflict," *Identities, Ideologies & Institutions. A Decade of Insight into the Caucasus, 2001 – 2011* (Caucasus Institute, Yerevan), 2011, 144-145.

advances involving mutual compromise and concession. This has reduced the potency of the Karabakh issue and its significance in Armenian domestic discourse.

Armenia's May 2012 parliamentary elections provided a clear recent example of how the "Karabakh factor" has lost its place in domestic discourse. A monitoring of campaign platforms and statements shows that the vast majority of differences among them concerned socioeconomic policy, human rights, democratization, and the effectiveness of state institutions. In matters of foreign and security policy, particularly on the issue of Karabakh, only slight tactical disagreements existed.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, a reduction in the significance and sensitivity of the Karabakh factor in domestic politics was probably a factor in the decision of Robert Kocharyan, who became president because of his role in the Karabakh movement, to refrain from openly reengaging in the political struggle. Although it is said that he backs Prosperous Armenia, the second-place finisher, Kocharyan was not actively involved either in the election campaign or in subsequent (failed) negotiations on the accession of Prosperous Armenia to the ruling coalition. The consolidation of political forces over the Karabakh issue does not outweigh other more urgent issues on the Armenian political agenda.

### **Domestic Reflections on Armenian-Turkish Rapprochement**

The question of Armenian-Turkish relations has traditionally provoked a strong reaction in Armenian society and diaspora. The signing of the Armenian-Turkish protocols in October 2009 led to a strong new wave of criticism in the media and general public.<sup>4</sup> However, the primary drivers of this adverse public reaction were not related directly to the contents of the Armenian-Turkish agreements.

One underappreciated factor affecting the perception of Armenian-Turkish relations in Armenian society is a kind of political infantilism widespread in Armenian society. This manifests itself as a lack of faith in one's country and a fear of playing grown-up "great games" in regional politics. In extreme form, this attitude has promoted a notion of an "international conspiracy" against Armenia, of which Armenian-Turkish rapprochement was supposedly a part. One possible reason for this infantilism is that relations with Turkey have traditionally been perceived in Armenian society in emotional terms, not as an issue that can be realistically and critically assessed in terms of political expedience. While the media covered the normalization process as it was underway, there were very few public debates on the subject; as analyst Hrant Mikaelyan noted, "In articles or interviews, stakeholders would express their own points of view and argue against those of their ideological opponents, sometimes imaginary ones."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Nina Iskandaryan, Tatev Sargsyan, and Hrant Mikaelian, "Parties' Pre-Election Promises," *Caucasus Institute Policy Brief* (Yerevan), May 2012 (in Russian).

<sup>4</sup> For more on the subject, see Alexander Iskandaryan and Sergey Minasyan, "Pragmatic Policies vs. Historical Constraints: Analyzing Armenia-Turkey Relations," *Caucasus Institute Research Papers 1* (Yerevan), January 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Hrant Mikaelyan, "Armenia and Armenians, Turkey and Turks in Armenian Media," *Caucasus Institute Policy Brief* (Yerevan), 2010, 6.

Although such public apprehensions seem irrational, clearly the burden of historical legacy continues to affect Armenian attitudes toward relations with Turkey. This is only natural for a nation heavily traumatized by the 1915 genocide. The existence of the diaspora has only amplified such sentiments, as the majority of Armenian communities outside the former Soviet Union consist of direct descendants of genocide survivors. The memory of the genocide is central to their identity, making them extremely distrustful of Turkey. Growing social pressure and opposition criticism pushed the Armenian government to toughen its stance on genocide and the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh, by becoming more actively involved in diaspora-led initiatives for genocide recognition and by placing more restrictive requirements on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh prescribed by conflict settlement plans.

The political infantilism so on display within Armenian society during the 2009-2010 rapprochement process was hardly a unique and unusual experience in the modern history of Armenia. For a country that has not enjoyed statehood for centuries, such kinds of phobias are not so rare. They also manifest themselves in public perceptions and evaluations of Armenian relations with Russia, the United States, Iran, and even Georgia.

However, this phenomenon did not reveal itself during the whole post-Soviet period as clearly as it did during the active phase of the Armenian-Turkish reconciliation efforts. The explanation lies with the excessively emotional perception of Turkey and Turks in Armenia's public and political spheres..

### **Conclusion**

It is often impossible to determine where foreign policy ends and domestic policy begins. In the case of Armenia, we are clearly dealing with a "common space," at least where the domestic and foreign policy dimensions of the Karabakh conflict and Armenian-Turkish relations are concerned. These two policy spheres are closely connected, and it is often impossible to draw a line between them.

The domestic dimension of the Karabakh conflict has some interesting features. As the most important issue on Armenia's foreign policy agenda, the Karabakh conflict is an effective tool for domestic political games. The opposition accuses the ruling coalition of a wide variety of putative crimes in this sphere, ranging from a readiness to surrender Karabakh to a lack of flexibility in negotiations. At the same time, there is little difference among various domestic players when it comes to the overall contours of Karabakh policy, even if neither the ruling coalition nor the opposition publicly admit this. The reason for the domestic consensus may well lie in the origins of Armenia's contemporary political elites, most of whom emerged during the war over Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia's elites can neither escape from their past nor ignore it in negotiations with Azerbaijan. External pressure (whether of Azerbaijan or international actors) is not sufficient for overcoming domestic resistance to a change in the status quo. The domestic dimension of the Karabakh problem not only restricts Armenia's Karabakh policy but also strengthens it, in the sense that it is based on a consensus of all domestic political players.

As for Armenian-Turkish rapprochement, what is most remarkable is how the normalization process affected Armenia's domestic discourse. It highlighted many aspects of political life, social attitudes, and phobias that are not directly connected to Armenia and Turkey, such as political infantilism and conspiracy theorizing. These are perhaps unexpected aspects of the interplay between domestic and foreign policy.

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