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## Armenia's Velvet Revolution in the Discourse of the Azerbaijani Elite

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### Abstract

This article examines the discourse of the Azerbaijani elite surrounding Armenia's "velvet revolution" in the spring of 2018, focusing on the implications of its potential emulation in Azerbaijan as well as on the management of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The article shows that the Armenian revolution has had no impact on protest activity in Azerbaijan due to structural constraints on collective action and the lack of a common frame of reference. In addition, the events in Armenia were mainly viewed in Azerbaijan through the prism of Karabakh. Even though this event revealed an initial moderate softening of the Azerbaijani government's stance, the unexpectedly hardline position taken by the new Armenian leader prompted Azerbaijan to adopt a more hawkish position. This, in turn, has led both sides to revert to the usual cycle of the discursive zero-sum game. While this suggests that ethnic discourses are not completely immutable, if a peaceful resolution is valued, it will require a more fundamental change in the ideologies of the current political actors and in their underlying nationalist master frames. Given the present setup of political forces in both Armenia and Azerbaijan, where exclusionary versions of nationalist ideologies prevail, this does not seem to be a possibility in the near future.

### Introduction

What has been the reaction of Azerbaijani government officials and public figures to the protests in Armenia? The springtime protests in Armenia (April 13–May 8, 2018) and their interpretation by Azerbaijani government and opposition leaders present an interesting opportunity to look at the construction and reproduction of perceptions of Armenia in Azerbaijan by key government officials, opposition leaders, and public figures.<sup>1</sup> In the analysis that follows, I examine two aspects of the Azerbaijani elite's discourse concerning Armenia's "velvet revolution": the possibility of its emulation in Azerbaijan (a contagion effect) and its influence on the Karabakh discourse.

Regarding the failure of the protest to spread, Armenia's protests had no effect on political mobilization in Azerbaijan for two reasons: structural obstacles to collective action mobilization (e.g., closed political opportunity structures, the weakness of civil society, and the marginalization of opposition parties) and lack of appeal. Empowered by oil wealth, Azerbaijani state elites established tough institutional barriers for civil society activities. For opposition political groups and independent NGOs, operating under such restrictive conditions has become a daunting challenge. Survey results reveal extremely low rates of membership in civic asso-

ciations, trade unions and political parties in Azerbaijan (Guliyev 2018).

Second, the Armenian velvet revolution lacked the cognitive frame of reference that is crucial to "making events in another country seem relevant to events in one's own country" (Hale 2013, 345). Despite sharing slogans criticizing corruption and the reign of oligarchs, the opposition leaders in Azerbaijan chose to forgo appeals to common problems. Instead, their narratives tended to emphasize the topic of Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) and geopolitical power games. On the issue of Karabakh, both Azerbaijan and Armenia were actively engaged in framing.<sup>2</sup> During the initial stage of the protest cycle, while still within the nationalist frame of reference, Azerbaijani government elites and pro-government media seemingly relaxed their traditionally hardline posture, avoided characterizing Nikol Pashinyan in negative terms, and devoted a great deal of attention to the deposed former president, Serzh Sargsyan. However, as soon as the newly elected Prime Minister Pashinyan revealed his extremely nationalistic views regarding Karabakh that revived the "Miatsum" [unification of NK with Armenia] agenda (Abrahamyan 2018), Azerbaijan hardened its stance as well. This suggests that both sides failed to escape the trap of symbolic politics, since neither side has demonstrated the capacity to moderate their policy positions toward the opposite side.

1 The actors whose views are included here represent a fairly diverse spectrum of Azerbaijani elite (government officials, key opposition leaders, opinion-shapers, and various media sources). The extent to which these views are representative (or not) of the broader Azerbaijani "public" remains an empirical question.

2 Framing can be defined as "the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders or observers" by various actors (Snow and Benford 1992, 136).

## Armenia's "Velvet Revolution": No Contagion in Sight

Although the peaceful revolt in Armenia caught Azerbaijanis by surprise, it was clear from the onset that it would have no effect on neighboring Azerbaijan. In the popular "color revolutions" model, mass protests tend to cluster across time and space in "regime change cascades" (Hale 2013). The Arab uprisings provide ample evidence that protest spreads through demonstration or contagion effects. The velvet revolution in Armenia, however, was not contagious and did not spread beyond the borders of Armenia. One obvious reason for the lack of appeal is the image of Armenia in Azerbaijan as an enemy state and the lack of a common frame of reference despite the occasional lament that some Azerbaijanis were watching the protests in Armenia "with jealousy and hope" (Adilgizi 2018). Because of the low appeal of the "Armenian revolutionary model" and the weak organizational capacities of pro-democracy forces, the Azerbaijani elite's discourse has largely been concerned with the implications of the events in Armenia for the fate of Karabakh.

As will be discussed further, NK has been the common frame of reference for both government and opposition reactions to the events in Armenia. "Whatever happens in Armenia in terms of who comes to power does not bother me, what does bother me however is the fate of Nagorno-Karabakh in the background of political developments there", commented prominent public figure Aslan Ismayilov (April 23, 2018).

Not expecting any imminent change in leadership, Azerbaijani opposition leaders, who have found themselves having to operate in an environment of increasingly unfavorable political opportunity structures, refrained from attempts to mobilize party members and sympathizers for similar protests in Baku. The democratizing potential of the Armenian protests for Azerbaijan was mentioned by only two notable public figures. Amid the protests in Yerevan, Ali Karimli, the chairman of the Popular Front Party of Azerbaijan (PFPA) commented that the Armenian protests are a step toward democratization that will pull Armenia out of the Russian orbit of influence (Karimli, April 22, 2018). While Armenia's democratization gives it an advantage over Azerbaijan in improving its international image, it nevertheless is compatible with Azerbaijan's long-term strategic interests since Armenia's democratic progress will motivate Azerbaijan to democratize as well, the PFPA leader speculated. In his vision, the eventual transition to democracy in both countries is presented as a historical victory of both peoples over Russian imperialism. On the other hand, Western integration is expected to lead to the resolution of the Karabakh conflict without armed

conflict (Karimli, April 22, 2018). However, such a resolution must still fit "within the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan". At the same time, Karimli calls Sargsyan the "Khojaly criminal" ["Xocalı canisi"] who "has blood on his hands—and it is a pity we could not punish him" (Karimli, April 22, 2018). On May 8, when Pashinyan was voted in as Prime Minister, Karimli remarked that on this day that symbolically coincides with the capture of Shusha by Armenian forces, "Armenians scored another success by electing a people's candidate as their new prime minister and improving their country's democratic image" (Karimli, May 8, 2018). It should be evident that the democratic image gained by Armenia, "the invader/aggressor state" ["işğalçı dövlət"], is a much stronger weapon against Azerbaijanis than any Iskander ballistic missiles [referring to Russia's supply of missiles to Armenia] (Karimli, May 8, 2018).

Similar to Karimli, Ismayilov links the Karabakh resolution to the values of Western liberal democracy—the rule of law in this case. The dismissal of Sargsyan shows the world that unlike Azerbaijan, Armenia is governed by rules that give it an advantage, he claimed (Ismayilov, April 23, 2018). If Armenia manages to break out of its dependence on Russia and succeeds in implementing reforms, Azerbaijan may end up losing Karabakh since the whole world will be on Armenia's side in recognizing Nagorno-Karabakh as an independent state. Armenia's integration with the West is also positive, as it will help democratize Azerbaijan as well (Ismayilov, April 26, 2018; Ismayilov, May 8, 2018).

Another opposition leader, Arif Hajili, the chairman of the Musavat Party, took a more hardline position noting that while Armenia's change in government was a positive step, much depends on the nature of a newly elected government. If Armenia's new government complies with liberal-democratic norms and international law, this will benefit both Armenia and the region as a whole. However, "if one Russian puppet ["Rusiya vassalı"] is replaced by another Russian puppet" this, of course, will perpetuate the existing status quo (Hajili, April 24, 2018). This sentiment was followed later by an even more negative outlook:

"Pashinyan's statement to continue Armenia's occupation policy and seeking protection from Putin...shows that Armenia will remain as a 'slave' country [of Russia] ['kölə olaraq qalacaq'] ...By continuing to pursue the miserable ['miskin'] 'Great Armenia' and 'genocide' ideology it will lag behind and will be an obstacle to the development of the region, and first and foremost, Azerbaijan" (Hajili, May 14, 2018).

Most political actors and commentators in Azerbaijan view regime change in the post-Soviet space as an out-

come of a kind of geopolitical maneuvering in which Russia plays a key role. Simplistically, it is assumed that countries are moving along some sort of unidimensional geopolitical continuum where the democratic West and authoritarian Russia are perceived to be polar opposites. This type of discourse is fraught with flaws and simplistic assumptions. For example, the causal logic in Karimli's geopolitical schemata [More democracy ► Pro-Western Orientation/Exit Russian Sphere of Influence ► More peace] is built on a geopolitical script that does not lend itself easily to empirical testing. "Geopolitics", as Hans Morgenthau (1948, 116) once noted, is "a pseudoscience erecting the factor of geography into an absolute that is supposed to determine the power, and hence the fate of nations".

### The Azerbaijan–Armenia Relationship as a Symbolic Politics Trap

Azerbaijan and Armenia view each other with mutual suspicion, distrust and hatred rooted in extremely nationalist ideologies (Kaufman 1998). Some scholars (e.g., Gamaghelyan 2010) argue that the protracted ethnic conflict and nationalist propaganda on both sides have normalized mutual animosity and ethnic stereotypes in the collective memories of the Azerbaijani and Armenian people at a deep psychological level. According to Gamaghelyan (2010, 39–40), the proliferation of radical nationalist rhetoric on both sides is a major obstacle to reconciliation:

"The current Armenian and Azerbaijani governments have risen to power on radical nationalistic slogans with mutually exclusive claims to deliver Nagorno-Karabakh to their respective constituencies. Every politician who takes a moderate stand and tries to improve relations is inevitably stamped as a traitor... This war of rhetoric, produced mostly for internal consumption, forces the leaders on both sides to adopt an increasingly radical stance vis-à-vis the other side. It widens the gap between the positions of the two parties and leaves little room for a solution. Even worse, the rhetoric penetrates the media and educational institutions, gradually transforming them into propaganda machines. Entire generations have been raised on this propaganda during the 20 years of conflict. It has intensified the feeling of mutual mistrust and hatred, while elevating the mutually exclusive myths of Nagorno-Karabakh to such a level that no politician can suggest any concession without producing public outrage."

The April War in 2016 served as a catalyst for the intensification of nationalist rhetoric in both countries (Kucera

2017). This perpetuates the situation in which both sides view the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as a zero-sum game. Since each side "perceive[s] possessing Nagorno-Karabakh as a cornerstone of their national identity" (Gahramanova 2010, 142), the prevailing conception of national identity in both countries is largely ethnicized and exclusionary. In this conception, outgroups are seen as a threat to the existence or coherence of their respective communities.

Ethnic symbols and myths become critical components of the sense of national identity that becomes an obstacle to peace. According to symbolic politics theory (Kaufman 2006, 202), ethnic hostility propagated by political actors can create a "symbolic politics trap" in which "once a leader has aroused chauvinist emotions to gain or keep power, he and his successors may be unable to calm those emotions later". Based on interviews with Azerbaijani elite, one scholar notes a similar dynamic in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict:

"As long as there is mutual distrust and hatred between the Azerbaijanis and Armenians, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict will continue to remain as a clash not only between two states, but also between two nations" (Tokluoglu 2011, 1241).

When the protests in Armenia began, Pashinyan, the leader of the anti-Sargsyan movement, refrained from invoking the Karabakh debate. Meanwhile, the Azerbaijani government discourse was targeting Sargsyan by pointing to the thin support for his regime (using negative terms such as "clan" or "mafia") and to his "misguided" policies toward the Karabakh conflict. For the first several weeks, the Azerbaijani elite's discourse generally avoided commenting on Pashinyan and was rather positive about the changes in Armenia ["The ouster of Sargsyan was in itself a positive step no matter who comes to replace him"]. However, just weeks after Pashinyan assumed office (May 8) and started incorporating nationalist elements in his public statements, his hard-line stance radicalized the Azerbaijani elite's discourse that reverted to its regular framing of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as a zero-sum game.

Although the Armenian protests were fueled by the long-standing popular discontent with President Serzh Sargsyan's plans to stay in power as prime minister and the cronyism of the oligarchic system he created, they were also partly a reaction to the so-called Four-Day War in April 2016. Ending with serious casualties and the Azerbaijani army's recapture of Jojug Marjanli village in the Armenian-occupied Jabrayil region, the April war has been celebrated in Azerbaijan as a "great victory" that embellished the "glorious history" of Azerbaijan (Azertac, April 18, 2018). In Armenia, the loss

of territory to Azerbaijan was associated with the inadequacy of the existing economic structure and leakage of public funds to corruption. According to a *New York Times* reporter:

“Many protesters [in Armenia] mentioned a watershed moment from two years ago, after a four-day war started by neighboring Azerbaijan...The oligarchs had sold the population on the idea that poverty and poor roads were among the sacrifices necessary to build a strong army. Then Armenia lost territory in the 2016 war, and there were reports that soldiers lacked basic items like bullets and medical kits” (MacFarquhar, May 19, 2018).

### The Karabakh Discourse

At the onset of the mass protests, Nikol Pashinyan's stance on Nagorno-Karabakh was unclear and remained so until his remarks during his campaign in the first week of May and leading up to his election as prime minister on May 8. His avoidance of nationalist rhetoric was perceived in Baku as a sign that with the new leader in Yerevan Armenia might soften its position on Karabakh.

On May 2, Pashinyan made his first public statement on NK saying: “Long live the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, which should become an inseparable part of the Republic of Armenia!” (as quoted in De Waal 2018a; also see Tonoyan, May 2, 2018; Abrahamyan 2018). Pashinyan's remarks as prime minister indicated continuity in the Armenian stance on Karabakh. He asserted Nagorno-Karabakh's right to self-determination and international recognition and proclaimed that “mutual concessions would be possible only after recognition of the right of the Nagorno-Karabakh people to self-determination” (BBC Monitoring, May 1, 2018; Reuters, May 9, 2018).

The dramatic outcome of the Armenian protests caught Azerbaijani elites by surprise. Amid mass protests in Yerevan on April 13, the official state newspaper “*Azərbaycan Qəzeti*” [hereafter AQ] was still busy covering the electoral victory of the incumbent president Ilham Aliyev, with only a few lines mentioning the start of protests in Yerevan (AQ, April 13, 2018). One of the first reactions that appeared in media reports was an article published on April 17 with the telling title “Armenian People Do Not Want to See the Sargsyan Clan in Power” (AQ, April 17, 2018a). This was followed by another article warning about the possibility of a civil war in Armenia (AQ, April 17, 2018b).

Much of Azerbaijani media reporting on pro-government websites such as *Trend.az* and *1News.az* portrayed Sargsyan's rule as the regime of the “Karabakh clan”, whose government ruined the Armenian econ-

omy. Sargsyan is also implicated in his direct role in military actions in Karabakh and was therefore viewed by Azerbaijani elites as a particularly tough negotiator and uncompromising figure. In the wake of Sargsyan's resignation (April 23), some Azerbaijani officials suggested that the former president of Armenia should be brought to justice at an international tribunal for his personal criminal responsibility in the mass killings of Azerbaijani civilians in the town of Khojaly (*Trend.az*, April 25, 2018). Another Russian-language web news site *1News.az* ran an article with the title “The End of the Karabakh mafia clan” and later publishing an interview with an expert who opined that Armenia faces an “existential problem”: it is landlocked and has closed borders to the east and west, and it cannot develop if excluded from the regional transportation-logistic networks (*1News.az*, April 23, 2018). Armenia's only viable alternative, the expert suggests, is to come to terms with Azerbaijan's territorial integrity (*1News.az*, April 27, 2018).

After Sargsyan's resignation on April 23, the Azerbaijani government continued to carefully craft its public response. The foreign ministry issued a statement expressing their readiness to work with “sensible forces” [“sağlam quvvələr”] within Armenia (AQ, April 24, 2018). Again after Pashinyan's election as prime minister, the ministry restated its hope that the new Armenian government “will not repeat the mistakes of the previous government” (AQ, May 9, 2018). This view persisted through mid-May, as there was still uncertainty regarding Armenia's internal power play (AQ, May 16, 2018). The first sign of a return to the usual opinions was an article published on May 17 that referred to Pashinyan's May 14 meeting with Putin in Sochi, in which Armenia's new leader emphasized “the allied strategic relations between Armenia and Russia” (*Kremlin.ru*, May 14, 2018; also see Asbarez, May 14, 2018). By the time Pashinyan got elected as prime minister and his Karabakh statements became widely reported in the news media, Azerbaijan's cautious, conciliatory position was replaced by a more negative outlook in which Pashinyan is depicted as a populist and a demagogue (*1News.az*, May 11, 2018). If in the initial stages, the Azerbaijani press portrayed Pashinyan as “the leader of opposition forces”, now he is referred to as “a street minister” [“küçə naziri”], his political program was dubbed “populist”, and Pashinyan's Karabakh policy was said to be no different from Sargsyan's policy (AQ, May 17, 2018; *Kaspi.az*, June 7, 2018). More importantly, Armenia was still considered an “outpost-satellite of Russia” [“Ermənistan əvvəlki kimi Rusiyanın forpost-vassalıdır”] (AQ, May 17, 2018).

This was in part a reaction to Pashinyan's change in position, reviving the idea that Nagorno-Karabakh

should be incorporated into Armenia or recognized as an independent state (Abrahamyan 2018). One expert noted that as Pashinyan's rhetoric got tougher, "the initial optimism faded" (Shiriyev 2018).

## Conclusion

This case suggests that while leadership changes may temper the bellicose rhetoric, it is very hard to change the underpinnings of symbolic nationalism as a dominant master frame. As De Waal (2018b) pointed out, Pashinyan is being forced to play the nationalist card: "Pashinyan and his comrades will not want to sound conciliatory on this issue for fear of having their patriotic credentials questioned." Pashinyan's nationalistic rhetoric regarding Karabakh undermined his appeal and only served to incite a reciprocal flurry of nationalistic rhetoric by Azerbaijani politicians, government and opposition alike. While ethnic conflict is generally viewed as a symbolic trap with immutable identities, this event suggests that in times of crisis, ideological scripts can be manipulated

at least on the margins. On the other hand, it is clear that escaping from the symbolic politics trap would require that political forces on both sides discard extreme nationalism as the master framework for ideological discourse. For example, despite minor differences, all major political leaders in Azerbaijan were virtually unanimous in supporting the government's military campaign during the April 2016 war (Aslanov and Samedzade 2017). A 2017 study shows that Armenian political forces pronounced vague designs for NK resolution (e.g., the readiness for "mutual concessions with a reservation"), and opposition parties tended to maintain "a tougher stance" than the then ruling Republican Party (HKK) (Galstyan 2017). As has become clear, Pashinyan's rhetoric does not seem to be a radical departure from previous governments. Given the current setup of political forces in both Armenia and Azerbaijan, where nationalist ideologies prevail and alternative narratives are marginalized in the ruling and opposition parties, this does not seem to be plausible in the near future.

### *About the Author*

Farid Guliyev is an independent scholar specializing in the political economy of natural resources and post-communist politics.

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## What Georgians think about the Armenian Revolution

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### Abstract

Armenia’s “velvet revolution” will hardly have any direct impact on Georgia or on the state of Georgian–Armenian relations. However, the events that unfolded in their neighboring country fascinated and amazed the Georgians, even though they did not yet understand the significance of the events. The two countries share important similarities, and both use the other as a point of reference. Many Georgians compared the unfolding events in Armenia with their own “Rose Revolution” in 2003, as well as the two Ukrainian revolutions—the “Orange” and Euromaidan, in 2004 and 2014, respectively. Those revolutions mark critical points in the histories of these countries, albeit in different respects. How can Armenia change, and if it does, how will Georgians view those changes? I will discuss those questions from two perspectives: that of regional balance of power and that of the development of democratic institutions.

### “What’s the Point of a Revolution if the Geopolitical Orientation Doesn’t Change?”

Georgians instinctually examine the unfolding events in their region through a geopolitical lens. Armenia is a pro-Russian country, and it is a member of the Russia-led Eurasian Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). This contrasts with Georgia, which aspires to EU and NATO membership. When Georgians began to discuss Armenian events, the first question was: Will the Armenian Revolution change the country’s external orientation? Aren’t true democratic revolutionaries supposed to be pro-Western? If not, what is the point of replacing Serzh Sargsyan with someone else?

It took time to eliminate that misunderstanding. Indeed, the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine was trig-

gered by opposition to Russian domination, but not all similar events are about geopolitics. Georgia’s Rose Revolution was not about foreign policy, although it propelled a group of strongly pro-Western reformers to power. Their predecessor, Eduard Shevardnadze, was pro-Western as well; indeed, he was the man who made a formal bid for Georgia to join NATO. (Peuch 2002)

Geopolitical alignments are rooted in fundamental choices made by societies, and such alignments tend to survive even the most dramatic political changes. The Georgians and Armenians made such fateful choices in the twilight of the Soviet Union when broad protest movements in both countries picked quite different priorities. Georgians invested everything into the idea of independence, which made Russia their adversary and made the West an imagined or real ally. This