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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Terzyan, A., & Galstyan, N. (2015). The Portrayal of "The Other" in Foreign Policy Discourse and Public Consciousness in Armenia (2008-present). *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, 77, 2-6. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-90315-3>

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## The Portrayal of “The Other” in Foreign Policy Discourse and Public Consciousness in Armenia (2008–present)

By Aram Terzyan and Narek Galstyan, Yerevan

### Abstract:

Conventional wisdom posits that the evocation of “the other” in a state’s foreign policy discourse is indicative of the core characteristics of its foreign policy identity. “The other” is largely deemed to be a symbol in the definition of who “we” are—our identity. A discourse analysis of Armenia’s President Serzh Sargsyan’s conceptions of “the other,” coupled with public opinion surveys, sheds light on major ups and downs that the convoluted relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey have undergone since 2008. Evidence indicates that Sargsyan’s determination to break the deadlock was not reciprocated by Azerbaijan and Turkey. The latter stepped back from its commitment to establishing unconditional relations with Armenia coupled with Baku’s upgraded bellicose policy towards Armenia. All this led Armenia’s president to toughen his position toward them, which found vivid expression in Armenia’s foreign policy discourse. Moreover, the tough resonated with Armenian society and further cemented negative social attitudes towards Azerbaijan and Turkey.

### The Portrayal of Turkey in Serzh Sargsyan’s Foreign Policy Discourse

The very outset of Serzh Sargsyan’s presidency coincided with large-scale geopolitical exigencies in the South Caucasus given the deterioration of Russian–Georgian relations which ultimately escalated into a “five day” devastating war in August 2008. The unfreezing of “frozen” conflicts sent ripples of apprehension through Armenia regarding the likelihood of instability “spill-over” into the country.

To mitigate possible risks, Sargsyan expressed determination to move beyond deep-rooted hostilities and identify an ingenious recipe for peaceful co-existence with Azerbaijan and Turkey. To this end, the president placed a special emphasis on redefining Armenia’s general and foreign policy identities, a process deemed to be absolutely essential to achieving a breakthrough in regional cooperation: “We should formulate and define a new Armenian identity. An identity which should become our beacon in the new century...”<sup>1</sup> The call implicitly pointed to the necessity to resolve Armenian–Turkish disputes and turn the page on long-stalled thorny relations. The notions of “zero-problems with neighbours” and “rhythmic diplomacy” adopted by Ankara seemed to reflect Turkey’s new take, particularly on normalization of Armenian–Turkish relations previously perceived as a “red line” issue. This tendency received further impetus from Ankara’s proposal (in 2008) on the establishment of a “Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform.” The new developments

found their expression in Sargsyan’s foreign policy discourse, which was characterized by a strong emphasis on the notions of a united Caucasus and Armenian–Turkish rapprochement.

To bring these visions to fruition, Sargsyan made a crucial step by inviting the Turkish president to visit Armenia on September 6, 2008, to watch the World Cup qualifying match between Armenia and Turkey. Abdullah Gül’s historic visit to Yerevan coupled with President Sargsyan’s commitment to establishing diplomatic relations with Turkey without setting pre-conditions seemed to challenge the status-quo profoundly.

Regrettably, the optimistic rhetoric did not translate into reality. Shortly after signing the protocols on the establishment and development of diplomatic relations between Armenia and Turkey, the latter stepped back from its commitment to establishing relations with Armenia without preconditions. Witnessing Ankara’s deficit of political will to achieve a breakthrough, Sargsyan repeatedly expressed his deep disappointment. The disillusion inexorably led Armenia’s president to toughen his position *vis-à-vis* Turkey: “The policy of ‘zero problems’ with the neighbours yielded zero results. It is happening because Turkey is trying to solve all problems with the neighbours at the expense of the neighbours.”<sup>2</sup> The glimmers of hope pinned on Turkey’s fundamental transformation and launch of a new policy toward Armenia rapidly vanished, recalling bitter memories about the Ottoman yoke. Turkey’s about face had deep repercussions with Armenian society, reinforcing fears that Turkey’s imperial nature has in fact remained

1 Speech delivered by President Serzh Sargsyan in The United States at the official reception hosted by the Embassy of Armenia to the US, Permanent Mission of Armenia to the United Nations and leading Armenian–American Organizations, 24.09.2008, <<http://www.president.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2008/09/24/news-18/>>.

2 Statement by President Serzh Sargsyan at the Extended Meeting Held at the RA Ministry of Defense 15.01.2013, <<http://www.president.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2013/01/15/President-Serzh-Sargsyan-speech-session-Ministry-of-Defense/>>.

unchanged. Sargsyan's discourse expressed this idea clearly when he branded Turkey's regional policy a vivid manifestation of a "New Ottomanism."

"To hell with ratification." This crude phrase, which President Sargsyan delivered to Ankara at the 69<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly on September 24, 2014, is indicative of the ups and downs that his position towards Turkey has undergone throughout his tenure. Unsurprisingly, on February 16, 2015, President Sargsyan sent an official letter to the Chairman of the National Assembly Galust Sahakyan in order to recall the Armenia–Turkey protocols from parliament.<sup>3</sup>

In essence, Sargsyan's initial attempts at redefining Armenia's foreign policy identity to bring it in line with Armenian–Turkish rapprochement proved futile. Turkey's ambivalent policy towards Armenia inevitably led Sargsyan to rethink his initial optimistic takes on Armenian–Turkish rapprochement. Subsequently, the terms "Ottoman," "destructive," "belligerent" and "unreliable" became the core characteristics of Turkey in Sargsyan's foreign policy discourse.

### The Evocation of Azerbaijan in Sargsyan's Foreign Policy Discourse

From the very outset of his presidency, Sargsyan invariably stressed the necessity of displaying political will to achieve a breakthrough in Armenia's hostile relationship with Azerbaijan. Sargsyan has consistently emphasized that Azerbaijan's anti-Armenian bellicose propaganda coupled with the full-blown arms race doom the initiatives of regional cooperation and conflict settlement to failure. This disappointment particularly applies to the EU's peace-oriented Eastern Partnership. Sargsyan questioned outright the viability of its regional cooperation component, asserting that Azerbaijan's resolve to extort unilateral concessions from Armenia render it meaningless. In his view, there is no common ground between Armenia and Azerbaijan because of the latter's belligerent and uncompromising policy.

Nevertheless, unlike his predecessor, Sargsyan has utterly rejected the identity-based notions of ethnic incompatibility between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. He has made a clear distinction between the Azerbaijani state and society, expressing a hope that the people of Azerbaijan, or a significant percent of them, do not endorse state-run Armenophobic propaganda: "I am confident that our peoples will have a better future than the one contemplated by some leaders who preach hatred and war... I do not consider the people of Azerbaijan to

be the enemy of the Armenian people. We are capable of respectfully resolving our disagreements and peacefully co-existing as neighbours."<sup>4</sup>

Sargsyan has fiercely criticized speculations about the religious nature of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, asserting that any attempt to provide the dispute with a religious motivation is not constructive.

Interestingly, Sargsyan has tended to question Azerbaijan's European identity. It follows that Azerbaijan has largely misperceived the essence of European integration, viewing Europe as merely a convenient market for selling oil and gas.<sup>5</sup> This argument is supported by Azerbaijan's and Turkey's policies toward the blockade of Armenia, which in fact have nothing to do with the core characteristics of European identity.

In Sargsyan's view there are substantial divergences between the characteristics of "the other" and European identity. The latter is unequivocally associated with a peaceful, free and democratic path of development. Unsurprisingly, in Sargsyan's foreign policy discourse, Azerbaijan is largely associated with the terms "non-democratic," "belligerent," "bellicose," "destructive," "Armenophobic", etc (see Table 1).

Table 1: *The Portrayal of "the Other" under Serzh Sargsyan's Presidency (2008–Present)*

The Other	Discourse
Azerbaijan (elite)	Armenophobic; Bellicose; Belligerent; Non-democratic; Destructive, (uncommitted to a negotiated outcome to the conflict), Non-European (misperceived the essence of European identity)
Turkey (elite)	Unreliable; Imperial (referring to New Ottomanism); Obstacle to Armenia's European integration; Belligerent and destructive

### The Image of the Enemy in Public Consciousness

Evidence indicates that the public perception of Turkey and Azerbaijan does not differ considerably from the official position: Armenians perceive both countries as the coun-

3 Serzh Sargsyan Recalls Armenia–Turkey Protocols, 16.02.2015, <[http://civilnet.am/2015/02/16/serzh-sargsyan-recalls-armenia-turkey-protocols/#.VOhbh\\_msWS0](http://civilnet.am/2015/02/16/serzh-sargsyan-recalls-armenia-turkey-protocols/#.VOhbh_msWS0)>.

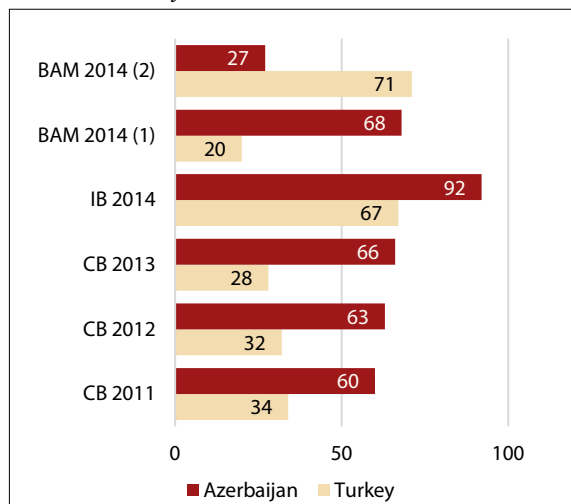
4 Statement of Serzh Sargsyan the President of the Republic of Armenia in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 02.10.2013, <<http://www.president.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2013/10/02/President-Serzh-Sargsyan-participated-at-the-session-of-the-PACE-speech/>>.

5 Remarks of the President of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan at the Joint Press Conference with the President of Slovenia Danilo Turk, 13.04.2011, <<http://www.president.am/en/interviews-and-press-conferences/item/2011/04/13/news-65/>>.

try's main enemies. However, the public assessment of the degree of "hostility" of Azerbaijan is higher than that of Turkey. But given the possibility of multiple answers ("Integration Barometer" (IB), "Barometr.am" (BAM)), "indexes of hostility" for these countries are higher and closer, while when respondents are allowed to choose only one answer ("Caucasus Barometer" (CB)), the majority brands Azerbaijan as the country's main enemy. Figure 1, based on the CB survey (2011–2013), indicates that only Azerbaijan is considered by more than half of respondents as Armenia's enemy. Results of IB (2014) show that with the possibility of simultaneous multiple answers, Azerbaijan is again "ahead of" Turkey. However, in this case, the overwhelming majority considers both countries as hostile to Armenia. The BAM survey also shows that Azerbaijan is the most hostile country (first answer); the second position is occupied by Turkey. Moreover, according to the study "Armenia–Turkey" (2014), 77% of respondents believe that Turkey pursues a hostile policy towards Armenia, and 82% of respondents believe that Turkey cannot be trusted. Interestingly, Azerbaijan and Turkey are considered hostile countries towards Armenia by an absolute majority (or higher) of all age, education, gender, and settlement groups.

However, a comparison of the results of CB (2010) and "Armenia–Turkey" (2014) indicates certain changes

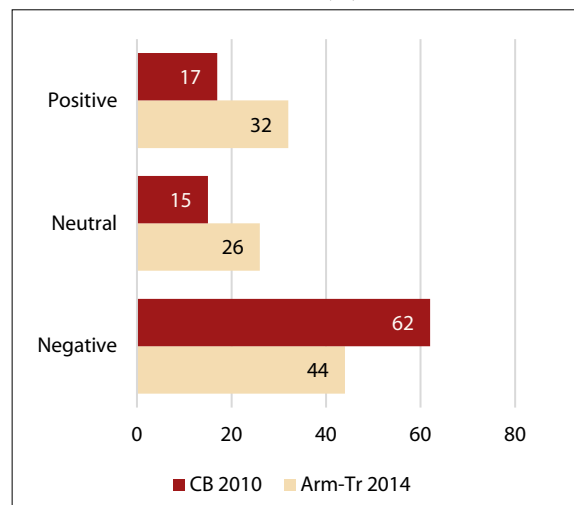
Figure 1: Which Country is Currently Armenia's Main Enemy? (%)



Source: The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. 2011–2013 "Caucasus Barometer Armenia". Retrieved through ODA <<http://caucasusbarometer.org>>, accessed on 22 July 2015; EDB Integration Barometer 2014. Analytical summary. EDB Centre for Integration Studies—2014, at <[http://leabr.org/general/upload/CII%20-%20izdania/2014/Barometr-2014/EDB\\_Centre\\_Report\\_25\\_Analytical\\_Summary\\_Eng.pdf](http://leabr.org/general/upload/CII%20-%20izdania/2014/Barometr-2014/EDB_Centre_Report_25_Analytical_Summary_Eng.pdf)>, accessed on 22 July 2015; Ovker en Hayasti "tshnaminern" ou "barek-amnery", Barometer.am, 25 November 2014, at <<http://www.barometer.am/news/real-politics/20141125/76/>>, 22 July, 2015

in public perceptions: 1. the number of those who believe that Turks have a positive attitude towards Armenians rose nearly twice, 2. the number of respondents who believe that Turks are neutral to them increased about 10%, and 3. the number who are convinced that Turks hold negative attitudes towards Armenians decreased almost 20% (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: The Turkish Population's General Attitude Towards Armenians (%)



Source: The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. 2010 "Caucasus Barometer Armenia". Retrieved through ODA <<http://caucasusbarometer.org>>, accessed on 22 July 2015; "Towards a Shared Vision of Normalization of Armenian-Turkish Relations". Draft Report. Support to the Armenia-Turkey Normalisation Process, April, 2015, at <<http://armenia-turkey.net/files/2015-04/Fz4FCtdugbjOyHgrJqNOF22KU.pdf>>

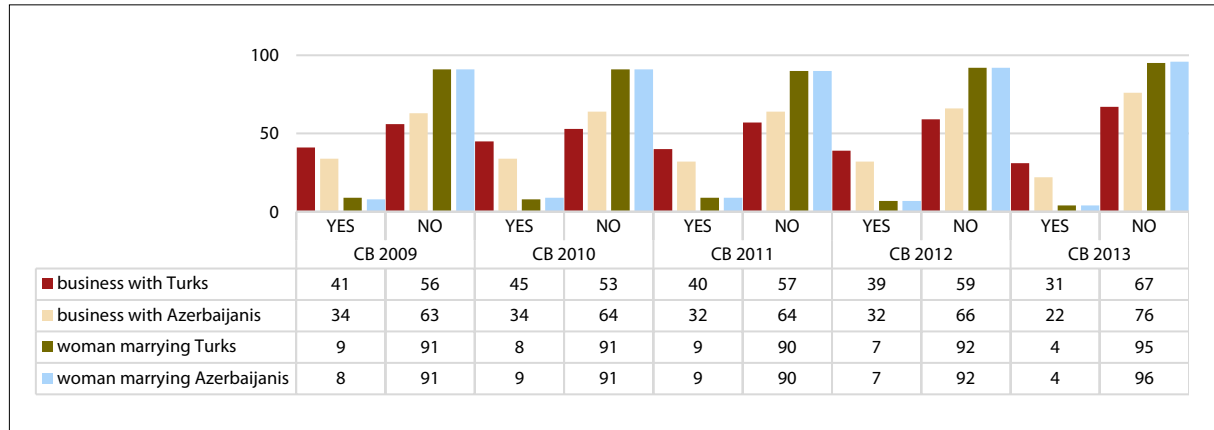
Another indicator of the deep-rooted mistrust of Azerbaijanis and Turks is that the "enemy image" in Armenia's society has both political and social dimensions. CB survey (2009–2013) shows that a stable absolute majority of respondents does not endorse business undertakings with Azerbaijanis and Turks, and a stable majority opposes marriages with them (see Figure 3 overleaf). It is noteworthy that Azerbaijanis and Turks are the only nations with which the majority of respondents disapprove of business dealings.

Nevertheless, in the case of marriages, they are no exceptions: at least an absolute majority of the respondents does not approve of marriage with representatives of any other nationality. However, in this case, the Azerbaijanis and Turks have the most negative rating.

### Public Attitudes toward the Normalization of Relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan

Armenia's citizens are sceptical about the likelihood that their country will be able to normalize relations with Turkey. This attitude becomes evident when consider-

Figure 3: Approval of... (%)



Source: The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. 2009–2013 “Caucasus Barometer Armenia”. Retrieved through ODA <<http://caucasusbarometer.org>>, accessed on 22 July 2015

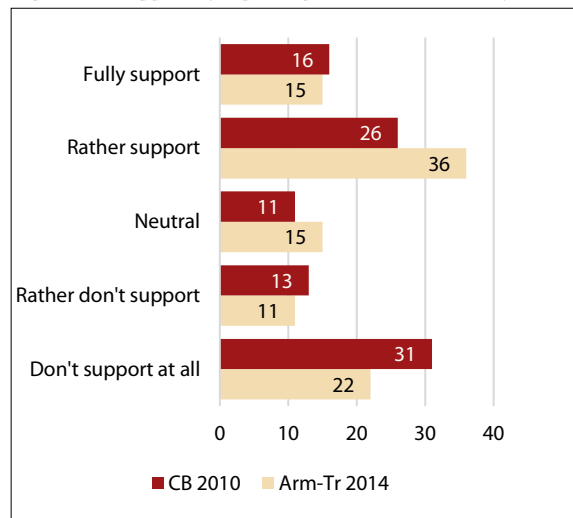
ing the results of quantitative surveys on certain issues. Although it is well-known that Turkey itself unilaterally closed its border with Armenia in 1993, the number of those opposing the opening of the Armenian–Turkish border in Armenia has increased over the last five years. Comparing the results of the CB (2010) and “Armenia–Turkey,” the number of those who oppose opening the border by meeting Turkish preconditions almost doubled, reaching 88%, but the number of supporters of the borders’ opening without these preconditions has increased by almost 10%, reaching 51% in 2014 (See Figure 4). This tendency persists even though in 2010 around 50% of respondents tended to believe that the opening of borders would have a positive impact on the Armenian economy, while 60% also believed that doing so would engender negative effects on Armenia’s national security.

Interestingly, 44% of respondents in Yerevan are not aware of the Armenian–Turkish protocols on the normalization and establishment of diplomatic relations (2009). Yet nearly 40% believe that it is necessary to denounce these protocols whereas the adoption of these protocols (unilateral or after the ratification by Turkey) is endorsed only 16% of respondents (BAM).

Public attitudes towards the issue of compensation by Turkey for the Armenian Genocide, once Turkey recognizes this genocide, is noteworthy. According to BAM (2014), the vast majority of respondents from the capital Yerevan are convinced that Armenia should demand from Turkey all kinds of compensation. Efforts to seek territorial claims occupy the second position (30%). The relevance of territorial claims (after recognition of the Genocide) is also supported by the study “Armenia–Turkey.” Distrust towards Turkey and Azerbaijan is also expressed in terms of resolving the Karabakh conflict. According to CB 2011, almost 70% of respondents tended to

oppose any Turkish involvement in a Karabakh settlement, and only 8% approved of a small role for this country.

Figure 4: Support of Opening Border with Turkey (%)



Source: The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. 2010 “Caucasus Barometer Armenia”. Retrieved through ODA <<http://caucasusbarometer.org>>, accessed on 22 July 2015; “Towards a Shared Vision of Normalization of Armenian–Turkish Relations”. Draft Report. Support to the Armenia–Turkey Normalisation Process, April, 2015, at <<http://armenia-turkey.net/files/2015-04/Fz4FCtdugbjOyHgrJqNOF22KU.pdf>>

It is noteworthy that while the absolute majority of respondents from Armenia and Azerbaijan consider a negotiated outcome to the Karabakh conflict settlement more likely, however, unlike Armenians, Azerbaijanis are less inclined to rule out the possibility of a new military conflict (see Figure 5 overleaf).

## Conclusion

To sum up it is worth noting that President Sargsyan's discourse *vis-à-vis* Azerbaijan and Turkey has undergone considerable changes throughout his tenure. Huge disappointment in expectations for reconciling with Turkey led Sargsyan to toughen his positions, which shifted from optimistic to critical. The latter was precipitated by Azerbaijan's bellicose propaganda coupled with its belligerent policy towards Armenia, as well as Turkey's abrupt withdrawal from its commitment to unconditionally establishing diplomatic relations.

Public attitudes towards Turkey and Azerbaijan do not differ significantly from Armenia's official position.

Yet, the public is somewhat more critical and straightforward. All the examined quantitative studies clearly indicate the public considers both countries as Armenia's main enemies. These countries are perceived as hostile to Armenia, and there is a deep and total mistrust of Turks and Azerbaijanis. This way of thinking has not changed significantly during the last five years, even throughout the process of Armenian–Turkish alleged rapprochement—often branded as “football diplomacy.” Moreover, the majority of the Armenian population currently does not support the initiative for reconciliation.

### About the Authors

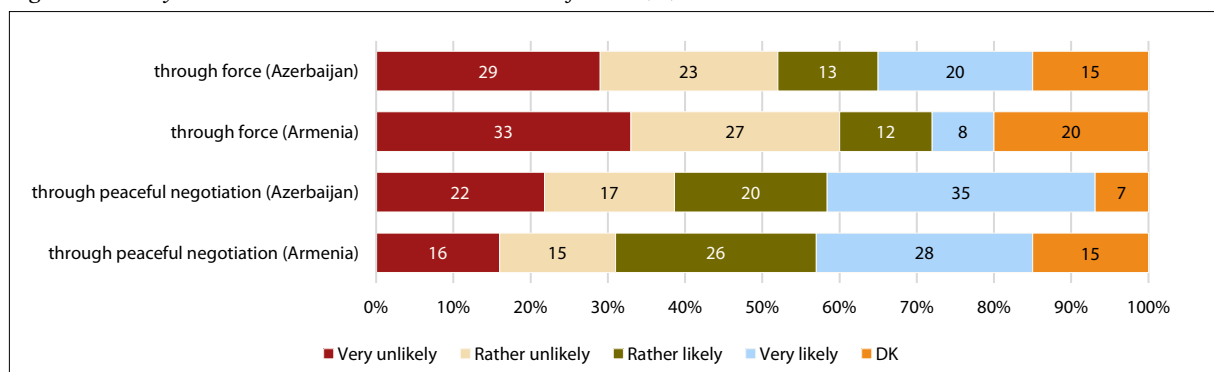
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### Further Reading

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Figure 5: Likely to Find a Solution to the Karabakh Conflict ... (%)



Source: The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. 2013 “Caucasus Barometer Regional Dataset”. Retrieved through ODA <<http://caucasusbarometer.org>>, accessed on 22 July 2015