

Stephan Rindlisbacher

*Center of Polish and Ukrainian Studies
European University Viadrina Frankfurt (Oder)¹*

ARMENIA AND NAGORNO-KARABAKH: THE HISTORY OF AN UNSETTLING RELATIONSHIP

■ INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2018, mass demonstrations shook Yerevan, the capital of Armenia. This public unrest led to the collapse of Serzh Sargsyan's government. Sargsyan was widely considered to be corrupted and utterly unfit to solve Armenia's economic problems. The new leader, Nikol Pashinyan, promised to usher in a new democratic era and planned to reform the country and foster its prosperity (Ishkanian 2018: 275 and 276). His government faced intricate structural challenges. Azerbaijan conquering Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 and the expulsion of its Armenian population are only one, high unemployment rates and brain-drain are other issues. The continuing hostility from Azerbaijan and the utter worthlessness of alliance with Russia (CSTO) put Pashinyan's government under severe distress (Łapaj-Kucharska, Miarka 2022: 701 and 702; Nikoghosyan, Ter-Matevosyan 2024).

This article provides a brief overview of Armenia's current challenges. It shows why there cannot be any easy way out. To understand this, we must go back to the beginning of the twentieth century. The international relevance of the Nagorno-Karabakh question has become pressing again since 2020. Compared to any other post-Soviet conflicts, this issue has the most devastating potential, as it involves not only the rising regional powers – Turkey and Iran – but also Russia and the EU, France in particular. Azerbaijan exports a large amount of fossil resources to Europe. Their constant exploitation and safe transport are key for diversifying Europe's energy imports and decoupling from Russia.

Sociologists like Georgi Derluguian, historians like Claire Mouradian but also journalists like Thomas De Waal and practitioners like Vladimir Kazimirov have already extensively studied the Armenian political field and the role national narratives play. Their studies reveal how the persistent economic stagnation and key political figures are product of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The former presidents Serzh

¹ rindlisbacher@europa-uni.de

Sargsyan and Robert Kocharyan, both originally from Nagorno-Karabakh, gained their initial political capital as militia leaders in the war against Azerbaijan and then as politicians within the de facto state (Antonyan 2016: 116–122; Minasyan, Mikaelian, Iskandaryan 2016: 113–115, 129). Distinguished historians like Ronald Suny, Arsène Saparov or Jeremy Smith have depicted how the genocide and the formation of the Soviet South Caucasus formed the Armenian national narratives (Suny 1993; Saparov 2015; Smith 2015). However, they often neglect to consider how certain interest groups exploit such narratives to create „groupness”. „Groupness” rather than „nation” should be in the researchers’ focus. This term describes the shared feelings of belonging to a certain group. As they depend on concrete contexts, such feelings are highly volatile: „It allows us to treat groupness as an event, as something that «happens» (...)” (Brubaker 2004: 12). Groupness may or may not crystallise into a national movement with an impact on politics. In the course of time, such a mobilisation can decline, and a national movement can disintegrate. Ethnopolitical entrepreneurs, i.e. nationalists, play a vital role, as they appeal to groupness to gain political legitimacy for themselves (Brubaker 2004: 11–13). Such processes can create self-sustaining feedback loops, after they have reached a certain tipping point (Kaufmann 2017: 16 and 17). In the Armenian case, certain factors – they will be expounded in depth later – have kept groupness on a constant elevated level.

This article attempts to synthesise the above-mentioned insights on the Armenian political field from a historical perspective. I focus on the Armenian groupness as it was the main driver within the whole conflict between 1988 and 2018. To be clear, this is not an attempt to blame a certain side for the conflict, but an essay to provide an insight into the complexity of the current powder-keg. Therefore, it focuses on the modes how certain interest groups could make use of national narratives to create and maintain Armenian groupness, how they have been caught by these narratives and how this creates opportunities for foreign intrusion. To handle these questions I, first, develop a short genealogy how these national narratives took shape. Then, I ask how ethnopolitical entrepreneurs used these narratives to strengthen groupness to gain political legitimacy. Finally, I examine the consequences for the field of power (Bourdieu 1984: 315–317) in Armenia and the opportunities for other powers like Turkey, Russia, Iran, France and particularly Azerbaijan to take advantage from Armenia’s precarious position.

■ TRAUMAS FROM THE FIRST WORLD WAR

National symbols and the narratives related to them are ubiquitous in Armenia. A visitor inevitably faces them almost on every step. In the late 2010s, the picture of the forget-me-not flower was present in public space. It has been designed to commemorate the one-hundredth anniversary of the Armenian genocide in 2015. Foreigners also experience that locals ask if they know about the atrocities of 1915.

Despite harsh domestic political conflicts, there are signs of a strong „groupness” within the population of Armenia and the Armenian diaspora all around the world. The genocide and the Nagorno-Karabakh question appear today as two interconnected pillars in commemoration. Located in the First World War and its aftermath, they were produced and reproduced in the Soviet era. In the perestroika era, they became one of the many factors that led Soviet Union to collapse (Derluguian 2005: 187–190; Marutyan 2007: 100; Krzysztan 2021: 33).

The term „Armenian genocide” itself is problematic as it implies not only an analytical, but also a moral and legal stance. It is today widely used in the transnational political debate in Armenia as well as within the Armenian diaspora, but also in the scientific discourse to label the mass murders committed by Ottoman forces against the Armenian population in Anatolia after April 1915. The Ottoman leadership, the Committee of Unity and Progress, ordered these atrocities as a measure to get rid of an „unreliable” part of the population, as the Empire faced imminent collapse due to the Russian troops advancing in the East and the Entente invading Gallipoli in the West. During these in their scale unprecedented intentional atrocities of a modern state against its own subjects allegedly more than one million Armenians died. These horrors were a highly traumatic experience for those surviving. Later, it has become one of the central pillars of the national narrative among the Armenian diaspora and in the Soviet Armenia (Kieser, Schaller 2003; Bloxham 2005; De Waal 2015a; Suny 2015).

The beginning of the twentieth century was also a traumatic era for the Armenians living under Russian rule. Between 1904 and 1905, acts of interethnic violence between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, at that time labelled as „Tatars”, shook the South Caucasus (Peyrat 2020: 37–46). After the October Revolution in 1917 and the subsequent civil war, an independent Republic of Armenia formed in May 1918. However, this republic was confronted with unbearable challenges. On the one hand, it had no defined borders and on the other it was in a state of war with the Ottoman Empire. The regions of Nakhichevan (today Nakhchivan), Zangezur and Nagorno-Karabakh were particularly contested between Armenia and the newly formed Republic of Azerbaijan. The region was again the stage for ethnicised violence. The pogroms in Baku in 1918 and the massacre of Shushi/Shusha in 1920 were among the most horrible examples (Smith 2015: 11–13).

In December 1920, the Bolsheviks seized the opportunity to take over Armenia, suffering under a Turkish invasion. In the treaties of Moscow and Kars in 1921 between the government of Mustafa Kemal (later known as Atatürk) and the Soviets, the latter not only ceded the territories around Kars, but also stated that Nakhichevan will belong to Azerbaijan². Later, the Armenian side perceived these

² Russian text copies of the Kars treaty is stored at: http://hrono.ru/dokum/192_dok/19211013kars.php, accessed 25 August 2024.

concessions as a proof for the Soviet betrayal of Armenian interests (Hovannisian 1974–1996, 4: 379–398; Mouradian 1990: 34–37; Rindlisbacher 2024: 57–59).

With the rise of the Soviet power in the South Caucasus, the independent statehood of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia but also the open ethnicised violence came to an end. The Soviets accepted the existence of national defined republics as such. Hence, they were immediately confronted with a severe problem. These republics did not have any defined borders. The Kavburo, the intermediate organ of the Communist Party in the Caucasus region, took a large scale decision in the border issue, as it attached Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan and Zangezour to Armenia. Although many books and articles have been written on this topic, there is no sound explanation for the Kavburo's decision. In the decisive session on 5 July 1921, the Kavburo granted a special autonomous status to Nagorno-Karabakh within Azerbaijan. However, on the previous day, the members of the Kavburo had planned to give the region to Armenia (Saparov 2015: 110 and 111; Smith 2015: 18 and 19; Welt 2015: 718)³. In addition, Stalin, at this time people's commissar for nationality affairs, also attended these sessions. These are the ingredients for many conspiracy theories of shady intrigues behind the scenes. One of them blames the Georgian Bolsheviks for intervening. They allegedly argued that following only national-ethnographic rationales when bordering the South Caucasus would be detrimental for Georgia and could lead to the secession of Abkhazia and Adjara (Derluguian 2005: 186). Most of them ignore that Stalin, regardless of his later significance, was a rather minor figure in the party hierarchy in 1921. However, the lack of sources leads to such legends. They, however, omit that the Bolsheviks did not primarily think in national, but in economic categories. In their logic, the attachment of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan should bring national peace to the region and respect the existing economic ties, as it was much better connected with Baku than with Yerevan. Such economic reasoning also played a crucial role in other border issues within the Soviet state (Saparov 2015: 123; Rindlisbacher 2023: 58–60).

These decisions, taken under a logic of economic utility, evoked a long-lasting opposition among the Armenian population, particularly in Nagorno-Karabakh itself. The Azerbaijani Bolsheviks showed only few efforts in the Karabakh issue, as it took them two years to install the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO). Its exact borders remained unclear, as the NKAO was initially not defined by geodetic points, but by the villages belonging to it (Saparov 2012: 312–317, 2015: 121, 162–165; Smith 2015: 20–22)⁴.

³ Protocols of the Caucasian Bureau (Kavburo) of the Russian Communist Party, 4 and 5 July 1921, in the *Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History* (hereafter RGASPI), *fond* (collection, hereafter f.) 85, *opis'* (inventory, hereafter op.) 18, *delo* (file, hereafter d.) 58, *listy* (pages, hereafter ll.) 17–18.

⁴ Table with all villages belonging to the NKAO, 1923, in: *National Archives of Armenia* (hereafter NAA), f. 113, op. 3, d. 116, l. 42.

■ THE MATRIX FOR NATIONAL NARRATIVES IN SOVIET ARMENIA

The effects of the genocide and the Nagorno-Karabakh question appeared only as two out of many problems the Bolsheviks in Armenia had to face during the 1920s (Mazower 2001: 21). Famines afflicted the region up to the mid of the 1920s. Armenia was the smallest of the three republics in the South Caucasus and had the lowest number of inhabitants. Despite this, it had to deal with many refugees arriving from the former Ottoman Empire and Greece. The absolute numbers of about 50,000 Armenian refugees arriving in the Republic Armenia after 1921⁵ may not seem high in absolute numbers, but this was a considerable challenge for a country in ruins with only 880,000 inhabitants in 1926 and the size of Belgium (Tsentral'noe statisticheskoe upravlenie 1928, 14: 128). Between 1922 and 1936, Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan were merged into a Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (TSFSR), as an administrative intermediate between Moscow and the republics. The constitution restricted the competences of the TSFSR. Foreign policy and military were prerogatives of the Union in Moscow, whereas justice, police, education, healthcare and culture were domains of the republics. What was left for the federal governance, were economic issues and the task to settle border conflicts between its member republics (Rindlisbacher 2025, chapter 5)⁶. The region had been devastated from the wars since 1914 and the means of communication and transport had to be re-established. The Armenian Republic benefited from federal transfers and economic development support (Suny 1993: 150 and 151). Pushed by Lavrentii Beria, the TSFSR was dissolved 14 years later during the constitutional reform in 1936 (Peyrat 2017: 550 and 551).

During the 1920s, the territories of the Soviet republics were still in flux. The exact border between Armenia and Azerbaijan had been object of a debate till 1929, when it was roughly defined by geodetic points. In the eyes of the Armenian political actors, it seemed still feasible to transfer Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia. For instance, in November 1945 Grigorii Arutyunov, the first secretary in Armenia, asked Stalin directly for a transfer of Nagorno-Karabakh. Arutyunov pointed to the national affiliation of the population and the close economic ties between the NKAO and Armenia. Though Stalin rebuffed his petition, Arutyunov kept insisting on this issue without facing repercussions (Lehmann 2012: 65–75).

After Stalin's death, the Soviet government tried silencing the Nagorno-Karabakh issue as well as the memory of the genocide. The Bolsheviks refused to promote particularistic commemoration of the atrocities as such „national deviation” threatened to enable political agency outside the party's control (Martin

⁵ This number is based on an internal report of the Transcaucasian government from 11 November 1927 to fund a suitable accommodation for these refugees, *Central Archive of Contemporary History of Georgia* (SUIC'A), Tbilisi, f. 617, op. 1, d. 1800, l. 34.

⁶ Constitution of the TSFSR: *Zarya Vostoka*, No. 197, 11 February 1923, 5.

2001: 356–362). Facing this neglect, Armenian intellectuals organised informal commemoration. On 24 April 1965, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the atrocities, they arranged a mass demonstration on the Lenin Square (today Republic Square), in the centre of Yerevan. Tens of thousands of citizens rallied and commemorated together. This mass happening, tolerated by the Communist Party, was a striking performance of the Armenian groupness. The Armenian party under its then first secretary Yakov Zabyan decided to enter into discussion with the crowd and make concessions. Moscow was not at all pleased; however, a large monument commemorating the genocide on Tsitsernakaberd – a hill slightly outside the centre of Yerevan – could be built (Suny 1993: 227 and 228; Lehmann 2012: 291 and 292; Saparov 2018: 874–879).

In the 1970s, discontent from Armenia kept troubling the Soviet government. In this time, Moscow was planning a revision of the Soviet constitution. Activists from Armenia took this opportunity and sent petitions, asking for a re-evaluation of the territorial belonging of the NKAO. Though the Soviet authorities rebuffed these petitions again, Armenian politicians and intellectuals kept insisting on this issue (Lehmann 2012: 358 and 359; Hasanli 2020: 420–424). In the 1970s, Armenian nationalists were allegedly involved in terrorist attacks against the Soviet government. On 8 January 1977, three explosions shook the centre of Moscow. The National United Party was blamed. Soviet press censorship silenced these attacks, and the Soviet judges convicted the perpetrators secretly (Payaslian 2007: 186).

In the mid of the 1980s, the antagonisms between the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis have not eased at all. Many Armenians in the NKAO saw themselves marginalised by the Azerbaijani government (Saparov 2015: 164 and 165; Hasanli 2020: 406–419). Until 1986, the communist ideology, the censorship and the KGB had publicly silenced these tensions. Then, the policies of perestroika and glasnost introduced under Mikhail Gorbachev opened up a space for expressing such grievances (Saparov 2015: 164 and 165). The Karabakh movement stood at the beginning of the eruption of the nationality issues in the Soviet Union. In February 1988, even before the national movements in the Baltics took momentum, a grass-root movement initiated by public intellectuals like Silva Kaputikyan, Levon Ter-Petrosyan or Vazgen Manukyan initiated a mass mobilisation in Armenia and the NKAO, demanding a revision of the territorial status-quo (Derluguian 2005: 174 and 175). Gorbachev's administration was not at all sympathetic to such demands. A transfer of the NKAO could appear as Pandora's Box triggering a myriad of other territorial conflicts in the Union, such as in Crimea or Abkhazia. Although prominent intellectuals like Andrei Sakharov supported the Armenian territorial claims, Moscow rebuffed it again, as it had done for almost seventy years (De Waal 2013: 67; Rindlisbacher 2025, chapter 6). However, this time something crucial has changed. The pogrom in Sumgait on 27 February 1988 marked the beginning of a deadly escalation. In this town near Baku, Armenian residents were attacked with

an exceptional brutality. During the massacre the Azerbaijani police forces failed to intervene. The exact number of victims has not been established; at least twenty-eight Armenians were killed (Suny 1993: 199–201; De Waal 2013: 40 and 41).

From a historical perspective, the Sumgait pogrom appears to be a decisive tipping point. It had a highly mobilising effect on the Armenians, as it triggered the collective memory of the genocide. Exploited by ethnopolitical entrepreneurs it became a driver for a positive feedback loop around which the Armenian groupness further crystallised. The Soviet government tried, on the one hand, to mitigate the events in the media, but the news spread all around the Union. On the other, the Soviet government presented a plan for economic development and declared a state of emergency in the NKAO (Marutyan 2007: 90–95; De Waal 2013: 68 and 69). However, Moscow's dithering behaviour after the Sumgait pogrom and the slow investigation, led to a further strengthening of the Armenian groupness (Manutscharjan 2009a: 38).

The national movement then institutionalised itself in the Karabakh Committee that gained supremacy within the Armenian field of power after 28 February 1988. As in other parts of the USSR (Derluguian 2005: 166–218), ethnopolitical entrepreneurs like Levon Ter-Petrosyan were able to establish a new political legitimacy. Confronted with this pressure group, the Supreme Soviet of Armenia, still controlled by the Communist Party, declared unilaterally the (re-)unification of NKAO with Armenia in June 1988. On the other side, the Azerbaijani government declared an economic blockade of the NKAO. This escalation was going along with mass deportation of Armenians living in Azerbaijan and Azerbaijanis living in Armenia. Many were now convinced not to step back in the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. There should be no „second genocide”; even if this meant going to war (Mouradian 1990: 434 and 435; Manutscharjan 2009a: 58–61; De Waal 2013: 56–58).

The fate of old political elites in Armenia was sealed by a natural disaster. On 7 December 1988, an earthquake shook the northern part of Armenia with its epicentre in Spitak near Leninakan (today Gyumri). The number of victims is not clear, but at least 25,000 people, mostly Armenians, died, many more became homeless (Doose 2018: 926). Respect for Gorbachev's government fell to an absolute zero, as the Soviet aid for the victims was perceived too slow and bureaucratic. Due to the Soviet government's inability to maintain political legitimacy, to provide humanitarian aid and to manage the disaster combined with its unwillingness to use military force to settle the boiling territorial conflict, it lost control over Armenia. The national movement stepped into this political vacuum. Its supporters won the elections to the Armenian Supreme Soviet in summer 1990 (Minasyan, Mikaelian, Iskandaryan 2016: 42–44). The newly formed Armenian government declared to secede from the Union on 23 August 1990. At the same time, militias began to organise themselves to „protect” the Armenian population in the Republic and in the NKAO. During the collapse of Soviet structures, all

sides began to prepare for war. In the following months, the initiatives of the new Russian government under Boris Yeltsin failed to find a political settlement. After the dissolution of the USSR on 25 December 1991, two of its former republics were at war with each other (Doose 2018: 938 and 939).

■ SORCERER'S APPRENTICES AND THE FORCES OF ARMENIAN NATIONALISM

Though Turkey has blocked the border to Armenia since 1993 and the economy was in a desperate situation, Armenian forces gained upper hand in Nagorno-Karabakh and were able to conquer the areas between Armenia and the former NKAO, the so called Lachin corridor. The Armenian militias forced the Azerbaijan and Kurdish population in the occupied territories to flee. The Azerbaijani town of Aghdam had inhabited 28,000 people in 1989. As Armenian troops occupied it, they first compelled the remaining residents to leave and then they destroyed the buildings and the infrastructure. During the war, Armenian militias committed several atrocities, as they murdered, for instance, the inhabitants of the village Khojaly in 1992 (De Waal 2013: 182–185). On the Armenian side, these militias were not easy to control as almost every political party equipped its militia, as e.g. the Dashnaksutyun, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation did. As they were in opposition to the ruling National Movement, they posed a vital threat to the Ter-Petrosyan government. Subsequently the Armenian government banned the Dashnaksutyun after the war ended in 1995 and dissolved their militias (Minasyan, Mikaelian, Iskandaryan 2016: 111 and 112).

The war from 1991 to 1994 had a deep impact on the Armenian society. Not only the hardships following the collapse of the Soviet Union shook the economy, but also the high public spending on the war effort. The diaspora organisations mobilised donations from abroad. Although Azerbaijan had more advantages in weaponry and better access to the markets, the Armenian side won this war due to its better organisational, logistic and strategic skills. They had the nimbus of having better warriors (De Waal 2013: 175 and 176; Kogan 2015: 5 and 6).

After the armistice in 1994, the Armenian side played a double game, as the government in Yerevan did not recognise the government of Nagorno-Karabakh in Stepanakert officially. In recognising Nagorno-Karabakh as a part of Azerbaijan, the Armenian government avoided providing further reasons for its international isolation (Manutscharjan 2009a: 41 and 42). Apart from this, the governments in Stepanakert and Yerevan were intricately connected on the personal as well as on the economical level⁷. For the ethnopolitical entrepreneurs from Nagorno-Karabakh the war appeared

⁷ For instance, regular consultations between the two governments took place and they publicly declared their close bilateral cooperation, available at: <http://www.gov.am/en/news/item/9244/>, accessed 25 August 2024.

as a golden opportunity to accumulate prestige, as, for instance, Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan did. Kocharyan had been the first prime minister and then president of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (Artsakh) until he was appointed as Armenian prime minister. After leading the army of the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians from 1991 until 1993, Sargsyan was then appointed as Armenian minister of defence.

At the end of the 1990s, this „Karabakh clan” and its political arm, the Republican Party, were able to get access to the most prestigious positions in the Armenian establishment. Though the first president of Armenia, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, had also gained his political capital in the Karabakh Committee, i.e. in the civic structures, he was willing to find a compromise with Azerbaijan and Turkey. In 1998, he officially announced a plan for a peace agreement, omitting guarantees for the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians. This led immediately to his downfall. Moreover, during the 1999 parliament assault Vazgen Sargsyan, at that time prime minister, and Karen Demirchian, the head of the National Assembly, were assassinated. This further strengthened and enabled the rise of Kocharyan’s Republican Party (Manutscharjan 2009a: 52 and 53). After 1999, there was a political consensus that the rights of the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians to self-determination were non-negotiable (De Waal 2015b: 132 and 133; Broers 2019: 175 and 176). This was the core of the deadlock within Armenia: politicians were aware of the hardships related to the international isolation, but on the one hand, they profited from this situation economically and on the other, they built their political legitimacy on these nationalistic narratives (Antonyan 2016: 166–168). This provided the political background for the „Karabakh clan” to convert military prestige into the political and economic influence and thus dominate the field of power. In the 2010s, Serzh Sargsyan was commonly known to be the „first oligarch” of the country (Antonyan 2016: 117–120; Minasyan, Mikaelian, Iskandaryan 2016: 112 and 113; Miarka 2021: 1192 and 1193).

In the era of Armenian rule over Nagorno-Karabakh, the population shrank from around 190,000 in 1989 to 145,000 in 2015⁸. This demographic decline was not only due to the expulsion of the Azerbaijani population, but also due to the economic stagnation. Many young people left the region to study or work in Yerevan or abroad. In this sense, Nagorno-Karabakh lost much of its mobilising appeal. Some, mostly prominently and internationally well-connected intellectuals in Yerevan, began to see it as a burden.

The economic stagnation of Armenia since the end of the war in 1994 was one of the driving forces that led to the downfall of Serzh Sargsyan and his cronies in 2018. The new government under Nikol Pashayan promised to bring economic prosperity

⁸ Demographic data from the last Soviet census in 1989: https://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng89_reg1.php; and the last census in the Artsakh Republic in 2015: https://web.archive.org/web/20180731153437/http://stat-nkr.am/files/publications/2016/Mardahamar_2015_rus/MAS_2/5_2-1_189_190.pdf, accessed 25 August 2024.

by positioning the country closer to the West. Nagorno-Karabakh and its status became a secondary issue. At the beginning of 2020, it seemed that the Armenian political discourse became increasingly pragmatic and forward-looking (Féron, Baser 2023: 394 and 395; Nikoghosyan, Ter-Matevosyan 2023: 212).

■ OPPORTUNITIES FOR FOREIGN INTRUSION

Although Turkey, Iran, Russia, the EU and the United States have certain stakes in the South Caucasus their involvement there is very limited (De Waal 2015b: 133). There is an imbalance of power between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Currently Azerbaijan's standing is better on almost every level than that of Armenia. Relying on large oil and gas resources, the Azerbaijani government under the Aliyev dynasty seeks equidistance to all other powers, except for special relations with Turkey (Babajev 2009: 81–83; Hovsepian, Tonoyan 2024: 642 and 643). Azerbaijan tries to balance between the West and Russia, profiting from both sides. On the Nagorno-Karabakh issue the official Azerbaijani position has been firm since 1991. According to Baku, Nagorno-Karabakh is a part of Azerbaijan. After bringing the whole territory under its control again in 2023, it „encouraged” all Armenian inhabitants to leave for Armenia⁹. Now, the Azerbaijani government openly claims a corridor that would connect the enclave Nakhchivan with the Azerbaijani mainland, i.e. parts of the Syunik Marz province in the South of Armenia (Saparov 2023: 195 and 196).

Compared to Armenia, Azerbaijan has a greater geopolitical leverage in the region. Baku closed all Russian military bases after the dissolution of the USSR. Notwithstanding some fluctuations, the relations between Russia and Georgia have been tense since 1991 due to the Russian support for South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the Russian military bases in Armenia are the last ones in the South Caucasus that are under a firm legal umbrella. Turkey is supporting Azerbaijan as an allied Turk nation. Therefore, it has ceased all diplomatic relations and trade with Armenia since 1993. Only in 2023, the Turkish and the Armenian governments announced the opening of their borders, but it is unclear if this plan will ever come into force (Sahakyan 2023: 873 and 874; Papazian 2024: 327).

Iran also tried to make use of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict to strengthen its influence in the South Caucasus. Thereby, the Iranian government under the command of Ali Khamenei shifted several times between the two sides. Since Heydar Aliyev came again to power in 1993, his government had a strong secular approach and rejected Iranian appeals to common history and Shia-tradition and opted for closer relations with Turkey and thereby for an access to the western

⁹ On the deportation of the Armenian population from Nagorno-Karabakh: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/oct/02/nagorno-karabakhs-tragedy-has-echoes-of-europes-dark-past-but-a-remedy-lies-in-europe-too>, accessed 25 August 2024.

markets. As it perceives Turkey as the main opponent competing for influence in the South Caucasus, the Iranian government has sought closer relations with Armenia (Manutscharjan 2009b).

From the Armenian point of view, the close economic ties with Iran are vital. Confronted with a blockade in the west and in the east and besides connections to Georgia in the north, the trade corridor to Iran via Meghri is key for the survival of the Armenian economy. This is also why the Armenian government did not apply sanctions taken against Iranian atomic programme between 2005 and 2016, as this would have evoked an economic disaster. Armenia is today an attractive place for Iranian tourists and for Iranian investments. From this perspective, the current situation in the South Caucasus appears as an asset to Iranian foreign policy (Manutscharjan 2009b: 192–195).

The EU has a major interest in the oil and gas resources in Azerbaijan and their safe transfer via Georgia to Turkey. The Baku-Tiflis-Ceyhan-Pipeline has been finished in 2006. The Baku–Tbilisi–Akhalkalaki–Kars railway was inaugurated in 2017 and opened for passenger transportation in May 2018. The Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline has been operational since 2018. A coalition of the Turkish, the Georgian and the Azerbaijani governments pushed these projects. From the perspective of EU countries, they ensure and ease the transport of resources from Azerbaijan and Central Asia to Europe. Moreover, these transport lines are outside of a possible Russian interference. For Azerbaijan, they guarantee a steady income on the one side, and the economic isolation of Armenia on the other¹⁰. In the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, the EU followed a dilatational stance, referring to the OSCE Minsk Group format that had been a dead end since the armistice in 1994 (Łapaj-Kucharska, Miarka 2022: 701).

The tide began to shift decisively against Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh after Azerbaijan attacked the Armenian positions in summer 2020. In less than a month, Azerbaijan could bring most territories around the populated core of Nagorno-Karabakh, i.e. the former NKOA, under its control. Only a Russian intervention could stop the Azerbaijani operation. However, Nagorno-Karabakh was then encircled by Azerbaijani troops. Russian forces were tasked to guarantee the security of the population in Nagorno-Karabakh. Notwithstanding these guarantees, the Azerbaijani government began a blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh, forcing to starve the Armenian population¹¹.

¹⁰ Vladimir Socor, *Interest Growing All-Round in Trans-Anatolia Pipeline Project*, „Eurasia Daily Monitor”, 9 April 2012, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/interest-growing-all-round-in-trans-anatolia-pipeline-project/>; Nailia Bagirova, *Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey launch ‘Silk Road’ rail link*, 30 October 2017, Reuters, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/azerbaijan-railway/azerbaijan-georgia-turkey-launch-silk-road-rail-link-idUSL8N1N52XR>, all accessed 25 August 2024.

¹¹ Luke Harding, *‘They want us to die in the streets’. Inside the Nagorno-Karabakh blockade*, 22 August 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/22/inside-nagorno-karabakh-blockade-armenia-azerbaijan>, accessed 25 August 2024.

Despite losing the 2020 war against Azerbaijan, Pashinyan was re-elected prime minister in June 2021. He promised to continue his reformist policies. Nonetheless, the path dependencies laid down by his predecessors pose severe challenges. The reaction of his government to the multiple crises appeared „chaotic” and created friction in Armenian society and diaspora (Féron, Baser 2023: 394 and 395; Nikoghosyan, Ter-Matevosyan 2023: 221 and 222).

The relations between Russia and Armenia are complicated. On the one hand, Russia is Armenia’s only formal ally; on the other Russia also maintains good relations with Azerbaijan. Its army guaranteed the 2020 ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh (Miarka 2021: 839). However, this relation became even more alienated when Russia started its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The Armenian government refused to support the „special military operation” and became a safe haven for Russian émigrés. Many well-educated people from Russia settled down in Yerevan¹². Publicly, Putin and Pashinyan do not even hide the fact that they do not like each other¹³. As Azerbaijan occupied some territories internationally considered as Armenian in 2022, Russia refused to intervene in the scope of the CSTO. This made the alliance between Armenia and Russia utterly worthless¹⁴.

Without any larger opposition from Russia, Azerbaijan could reopen hostilities in September 2023, leading to the almost instant collapse of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic and all its 145,000 inhabitants leaving for Armenia. Under the current government of Ilham Aliyev, they saw no perspectives of living under Azerbaijani rule (Sahakyan 2023: 873–875). Thus, since September 2023, the Armenian government tried to resettle the refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh within Armenia, particularly in its border regions. The government provides subsidies and helps the refugees to find new jobs¹⁵.

After Russia’s failure to provide any meaningful assistance, France started to support Armenia against any territorial claims from Azerbaijan. On the one hand, this can be seen as a part of France’s larger strategy to counter Turkey’s power projection in the Mediterranean, for instance in Libya, Greece and in Cyprus¹⁶.

¹² Shaun Walker, *Russian émigrés fleeing Putin’s war find freedom in the cafes of Armenia*, 25 August 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/13/russia-émigrés-putin-war-ukraine-armenia>, accessed 5 May 2024.

¹³ Daniel Boffey, *Putin’s grip on regional allies loosens again after Armenia snub*, 22 November 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/25/putinsgrip-regional-allies-loosen-again-after-armenia-snob-csto-summit>, accessed 25 August 2024.

¹⁴ Shaun Walker, *Former Soviet states eye opportunities as Russia struggles in Ukraine*, 14 September 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/14/former-soviet-states-eye-opportunities-as-russia-suffers-ukraine-rout>, accessed 25 August 2024.

¹⁵ Press release of the Armenian government, 15 March 2024, <https://www.gov.am/en/news/item/10503/>, accessed 25 August 2024.

¹⁶ Elise Vincent, *La France et l’Arménie concrétisent leur coopération de défense*, „Le Monde”, 25 February 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2024/02/25/la-france-et-l-armenie-concretisent-leur-cooperation-de-defense_6218466_3210.html, accessed 25 August 2024.

This rivalry among the NATO members, Turkey and France, could further disunity within the western alliance. On the other hand, there is an important diaspora in France lobbying for support to Armenia¹⁷.

■ CONCLUSIONS

The discourse revolving around the genocide and the status of Nagorno-Karabakh could mobilise Armenian groupness and thus decisively influenced the field of power after 1988. Until 2018, they have been the main drivers in Armenian politics, but due to economic and social stagnation they lost a lot of their appeal. The rise of Nikol Pashinyan was a sign that the Armenian society has changed. Economic issues and a further rapprochement towards the West became the main priorities. However, Azerbaijan took the initiative when it reconquered Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 and 2023. Aliyev's claims for a corridor to Nakhchivan as well as Russia's war against Ukraine put Armenia in an impossible position. Against its will, the country could become the epicentre of a large-scale regional war.

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¹⁷ *Arménie. Tensions entre l'État et la 'Grande diaspora'*, Radio France, 7 November 2023, www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/cultures-monde/armenie-tensions-entre-l-etat-et-la-grande-diaspora-1846814, accessed 25 August 2024.

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Stephan Rindlisbacher

ARMENIA AND NAGORNO-KARABAKH: THE HISTORY OF AN UNSETTLING RELATIONSHIP

The Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict has been a visible constant on the international stage since 1988. On the Armenian side, the commemoration of the genocide of 1915 and the Soviet decision to attach Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan in 1921 appeared to be the main drivers to produce and reproduce „groupness”. Whereas Armenian nationalist narratives had first been silenced and then mitigated during the Soviet era, they have become decisive since the dissolution of the USSR. Armenian ethnopolitical entrepreneurs exploited them to establish a new political legitimacy. With the wars in 2020 and 2023, the tide turned in favour of Azerbaijan, as it managed to reconquer Nagorno-Karabakh and expel its Armenian population. Now, Azerbaijan appears as the main driver of the conflict when it utters claims for a corridor to Nakhchivan through the Armenian territory.

Keywords: Armenia; Nagorno-Karabakh conflict; Azerbaijan; South Caucasus