

Exploring the Factors Behind Peace Negotiations: Unraveling the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

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1 Introduction



Figure 1: Map of the Conflict Zone in a Regional Context, International Crisis Group

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, a protracted territorial dispute over the landlocked enclave between Armenia and Azerbaijan, has its roots in deep-seated ethnic and historical claims to the region. This enduring conflict has spanned over three decades, characterized by intermittent bouts of violence and countless attempts at ceasefires. Two and a half decades after the 1990s war for Nagorno-Karabakh's independence, the residents witnessed the first renewed outbreak of violence in 2016, with sporadic increases in hostilities in the years that followed.¹ Tensions reached a critical point in 2020 when Azerbaijan launched a 44-day assault on

¹ "Nagorno-Karabakh's Gathering War Clouds," *Crisis Group*, August 11, 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/nagorno-karabakh-azerbaijan/244-nagorno-karabakhs-gathering-war-clouds>.

Nagorno-Karabakh and parts of Armenia.² This assault, marked by the use of sophisticated military technology such as white phosphorus and Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones, resulted in the tragic loss of thousands of lives.³ Despite renewed attempts at mediation to agree to a peace treaty, violence surged again in 2022, when Azerbaijan initiated attacks three more attacks which culminated in Azerbaijan gaining military positions in Armenia proper.⁴ Shortly after, these attacks were followed by a ten-month-long blockade that cut off Karabakh's access to Armenia, its lifeline for vital resources, and starved the population of ethnic Armenians, ultimately leading to the exodus and displacement of all 120,000 people living there.⁵

Despite Armenia's commitment to reaching a peaceful resolution during negotiations over the years, Armenia made no concessions concerning Nagorno-Karabakh nor even the Armenian-occupied Azerbaijani territories that surrounded the territory, which it had control of ever since the 90's war, before the 44-Day War in 2020. Although transcripts of negotiation meetings are not available, it is generally known that Armenia has used the seven areas outside of Nagorno Karabakh that it has occupied since their victory in the 90's war as leverage to obtain concessions on either the direct unification of Nagorno Karabakh with Armenia or its

² "Averting a New War between Armenia and Azerbaijan," *Crisis Group*, January 30, 2023. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/nagorno-karabakh-conflict/266-averting-new-war-between-armenia-and-azerbaijan>.

³ Simon Maghakyan, "How Azerbaijan Weaponized Environmentalism to Justify Ethnic Cleansing," *TIME*, February 22, 2023, <https://time.com/6257467/armenia-azerbaijan-nagorno-karabakh-lachin-environment-icj/>.

⁴ "The pressing task of advancing peace talks in the South Caucasus," *Crisis Group*, February 14, 2023. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/nagorno-karabakh-conflict/pressing-task-advancing-peace-talks-south-caucasus>.

⁵ Gevorgian, Sophia, Emily Ekshian, and Center for Truth and Justice. "An Exodus Out of Indigenous Lands: Azerbaijan's Forced Displacement of the Ethnic Armenians From Nagorno-Karabakh." Center for Truth and Justice, December 2023, 5. https://www.cftjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Exodus_FinalV4.pdf.

independence.⁶ Political theorists may have expected Armenia to make concessions that might have avoided the violent expulsion of the Karabakh population and the extinction of the Nagorno-Karabakh entity. Widely accepted theories associated with international bargaining and the credible commitments literature of war resolution tell us that nations should be able to come to a resolution, particularly when third-party states are willing to enforce an agreement.⁷ Russia was the longstanding third-party security guarantor that seemingly fulfilled this requirement. The tragic end of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and the devastating toll of the number of lives lost, presents Armenia's case as an anomaly.

In a 2022 speech, Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan acknowledged that he should be faulted not for surrendering lands but for not surrendering them sooner, "And not doing all this is my real fault, and such a formulation of the accusation is not an attempt to alleviate the situation at all, but on the contrary, it aggravates it, because by surrendering, I might have saved thousands of lives, but by not surrendering, I actually became the author of decisions that resulted in thousands of victims."⁸

This presents a puzzle—the outcome of Nagorno-Karabakh's surrender to Azerbaijan was widely predicted, and yet Armenia did not offer major concessions at the bargaining table that might have precluded this terrible outcome. Understanding the factors that shaped Armenia's negotiation stance as the weaker party at the table could shed light on why states may not agree

⁶ Laurence, Broers, ed., "The Limits of Leadership: Elites and Societies in the Nagorny Karabakh Peace Process," *Accord*, no. 17 (2005). 27.

⁷ Walter, Barbara F., *Committing to Peace: The Successful Settlement of Civil Wars*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). 182.

⁸ Nikol Pashinyan, "Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's speech at the National Assembly during the discussion of the performance report of the Government Action Plan for 2021" (Yerevan, Armenia, April 13, 2022), <https://www.primeminister.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2022/04/13/Nikol-Pashinyan-Speech/#:~:text=I%20have%20said%20it%20many,of%20the%20internal%20political%20crisis.>

to compromises even when it is clear that this could lead to their complete loss. Not until after the 2020 War for Nagorno-Karabakh, when Azerbaijan took the land by force of arms, did Armenia ever change its stance regarding Karabakh, now conceding Azerbaijan jurisdiction over the land, but advocating for special rights for the citizens.⁹ Although Azerbaijan has not rejected the terms for special rights of ethnic Armenian citizens of Karabakh, one may wonder if such a compromise was offered earlier, before Armenia deployed its own troops to defend Karabakh and not forgo claim over the territory until after the war, if it could've prevented the loss of thousands of victims of the war and the humanitarian blockade placed by Azerbaijan. This project is an exploratory investigation to find an answer to why Armenia did not present more conciliatory offers to prevent the anticipated Azerbaijani onslaught on Karabakh from the end of the 2016 4-Day War until after Azerbaijan's military actions in the 44-Day War of 2020, when Azerbaijan took control of certain territories by force of arms. The explanation I have arrived at is rooted in Armenia's perception of Russia's role in the conflict and the assurances of support it received. However, in light of the conflict's outcome, it becomes apparent that Russia's commitment to these assurances was not as steadfast as Armenia had initially believed.

2 Background & Case Selection

2.1 Conflict History

From almost 189 BC to 387 AD, Nagorno-Karabakh, also known as Artsakh, was the tenth province of the Kingdom of Armenia.¹⁰ In 821, Karabakh was established as the

⁹ "Averting a New War Between Armenia and Azerbaijan | Crisis Group," January 30, 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/nagorno-karabakh-conflict/266-averting-new-war-between-armenia-and-azerbaijan>.

¹⁰ Gevorgian, Ekshian, and CFTJ, "An Exodus Out of Indigenous Lands."

Armenian principality of Khachen and proclaimed as the Kingdom of Artsakh by approximately 1000 AD.¹¹ Despite Turkic invasions in the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, it remained one of the final medieval eastern Armenian kingdoms and principalities to maintain its autonomy.

The war over Nagorno-Karabakh began in the late 1980s when the dissolution of the Soviet Union led to more contentious disagreement over the way the borders were drawn between the two nations during Soviet rule. During the beginnings of the USSR, the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic and the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic were formed, along with the designation of Nagorno Karabakh as an autonomous oblast, holding an ethnic majority of Armenians.¹² However, when the Bolsheviks' Caucasus Bureau reversed their decision to leave Nagorno-Karabakh to the Armenians during the drawing of the USSR borders, they created an island of Armenians in the land now considered Azerbaijan.¹³ In 1988, Nagorno-Karabakh's ethnic Armenian population demanded that the region, where it was then known as the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast, be moved from Soviet Azerbaijan to Armenia.¹⁴ The 1989-1994 war for the liberation of Artsakh was a victory for Armenia, with the signing of the Bishkek Protocol, a provisional ceasefire agreement, by the representatives of Armenia, Azerbaijan, the unrecognized Republic of Artsakh, and Russia on

¹¹ Hewsen, Robert H., and Christopher C. Salvatico, *Armenia: A Historical Atlas* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 102.

¹² Foreign Policy Research Institute, "A 'Frozen Conflict' Boils Over: Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023 and Future Implications - Foreign Policy Research Institute," n.d. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/01/a-frozen-conflict-boils-over-nagorno-karabakh-in-2023-and-future-implications/>.

¹³ Foreign Policy Research Institute, "A 'Frozen Conflict' Boils Over."

¹⁴ "Armenians Protest USSR's Refusal to Honor Nagorno-Karabakh Annexation Referendum, 1988," *Global Nonviolent Action Database*, n.d. <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/armenians-protest-ussr-s-refusal-honor-nagorno-karabakh-annexation-referendum-1988>.

May 5, 1994.¹⁵ The temporary peace brought hope that violence would not erupt between the two nations over Karabakh following the exhaustive war. This was backed by the presence of third-party mediation by Russia and the OSCE Minsk Group. Yet, there was always the looming threat that Azerbaijan would one day attack as it grew its military capabilities over the years while Armenia struggled with its post-Soviet recovery. Intermittent clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region began in 2008 and continued sporadically until 2020, resulting in significant casualties among both soldiers and civilians. The most significant escalation took place in 2016, when a full-scale conflict known as the Four-Day War erupted, resulting in the loss of nearly 100 lives from each side.¹⁶

On September 27, 2020, Azerbaijan began an immense, unprovoked military invasion of Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijan incessantly attacked Karabakh and the seven surrounding territories inhabited by 150,000 Armenians for 44 consecutive days, resulting in the loss of an estimated 4,000 Armenian lives.¹⁷ Most of these deaths were the result of Azerbaijan's heavy use of drone strikes and artillery strikes.¹⁸ Azerbaijan targeted churches, schools, hospitals, and even a maternity hospital.¹⁹ Azerbaijan benefited from the backing of military superpowers like Israel and Turkey, the latter of which is a member of NATO, while

¹⁵ Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russian Federation, "The Bishkek Protocol." *United Nations Peacemaker*, May 5, 1994. Accessed March 26, 2024. <https://peacemaker.un.org/armeniaazerbaijan-bishkekprotocol94>.

¹⁶ Jarosiewicz, Aleksandra, "The Four-Day War in Nagorno-Karabakh." *OSW Centre for Eastern Studies*, April 19, 2018. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2016-04-06/four-day-war-nagorno-karabakh>.

¹⁷ Pashinyan, Nikol, "Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's Speech at the National Assembly During the Discussion of the Performance Report of the Government Action Plan for 2021," April 13, 2022, <https://www.primeminister.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2022/04/13/Nikol-Pashinyan-Speech/>.

¹⁸ Gevorgian, Ekshian, and CFTJ, "An Exodus Out of Indigenous Lands."

¹⁹ Associated Press, "Azerbaijan Hits Maternity Hospital in Conflict With Armenia Over Nagorno-Karabakh." *USA Today*, October 29, 2020. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2020/10/29/azerbaijan-hits-hospital-dispute-armenia-over-nagorno-karabakh/6073536002/>.

Armenians, armed with antiquated and inferior Russian military weaponry and systems, attempted to defend themselves against the unexpected attack.²⁰ In the 2020 assault, significant areas of Nagorno-Karabakh were taken over by Azerbaijan both during and after the ceasefire. Russia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia signed the "Trilateral Statement," a cease-fire agreement, on November 9, 2020.²¹ According to the agreement, the Russian Federation peacekeeping personnel were to stay stationed in the conflict zone until 2025, with the option of an extension beyond that date.²² Nonetheless, Azerbaijan persisted in egregious transgressions of international law, such as extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention, and torture after the 2020 ceasefire.²³

By masquerading as "eco-activists" and setting up tent encampments on December 12, 2022, people of Azerbaijani descent—a mix of troops and civilians—effectively closed off the Lachin Corridor, the only road that connected Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.²⁴ The arrival of the “eco-activists” signaled the start of a nine-month blockade that trapped the 120,000 Armenian residents of Nagorno-Karabakh and cut off their access to goods and vital resources. During the blockade, Azerbaijan not only prevented the movement of people, but also frequently prevented the International Committee of the Red Cross from providing food

²⁰ Singh, Atul, “How Azerbaijan Found Victory, and Armenia Defeat, in Nagorno-Karabakh.” *Fair Observer*, January 6, 2024. <https://www.fairobserver.com/world-news/how-azerbaijan-found-victory-and-armenia-defeat-in-nagorno-karabakh/>.

²¹ President of Russia, “Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation,” November 10, 2020. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64384>.

²² President of Russia, “Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation.”

²³ Crisis Group, “Averting a New War between Armenia and Azerbaijan.”

²⁴ Freedom House. “War Deepens a Regional Divide.” *Freedom House*, n.d. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2023/war-deepens-regional-divide>.

and medication, highly rationed water, electricity, and internet access.²⁵ Azerbaijan disregarded the International Court of Justice's (ICJ) demands to allow travel across the Lachin corridor, as in the permanent case before the ICJ regarding the Application of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (Armenia v. Azerbaijan), the Court called for and reiterated that Azerbaijan "ensure the unimpeded movement of persons, vehicles, and cargo along the Lachin Corridor."²⁶ The “activists” were replaced in April by Azerbaijani governmental personnel when the government set up an unauthorized checkpoint on the corridor. While the war may have been anticipated, the blockade that ensued was unexpected and intensified the consequences endured by the Armenians. This raises further questions about the puzzle presented by Armenia's decision-making and the reasons behind its failure to make concessions, despite anticipating the possibility of escalation in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

2.2 Case Selection

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict offers a unique opportunity to closely observe both the internal and external pressures a nation faces in its peace proposal process. This depth of analysis enables an exploration of the intricate causal processes underlying territorial disputes. I include domestic politics, international alliances, and socio-cultural dynamics as the specified variables of interest to achieve these goals. Additionally, I have undertaken to highlight the 2016-2023

²⁵ Crisis Group, “New Troubles in Nagorno-Karabakh: Understanding the Lachin Corridor Crisis,” May 24, 2023. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/nagorno-karabakh-conflict/new-troubles-nagorno-karabakh-understanding-lachin-corridor-crisis>.

²⁶ International Court of Justice, “Summary of the Order of 22 February 2023,” n.d. <https://www.icj-cij.org/node/202558>.

period of the conflict, offering an exploration focused on the most violent uprisings since the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, and observing the impact of the 2018 Velvet Revolution in Armenia and subsequent regime change that led to a new direction in Armenia's approach to the conflict.

I believe that in studying this case, we can learn about what factors play significant roles in a negotiation process where third-party guarantors are involved but a lasting agreement nonetheless proves elusive. I will focus on the political leaders' motivations in the domestic decision-making process. For example, despite the involvement of third-party actors and various mediation efforts, conflicts such as Cyprus and Kashmir have defied enduring resolutions.^{27 28} The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is a case study to identify the factors impacting a country's offers at the negotiating table. It is a highly intricate and multi-dimensional conflict, encompassing historical, ethnic, and geopolitical dynamics. Moreover, the conflict's geographic location at the crossroads of Eastern Europe and Western Asia adds a layer of complexity, involving regional powers with varying interests and alliances, making it a microcosm of broader geopolitical dynamics. This aspect provides an opportunity to analyze the influence of external actors and the complexities of regional power dynamics on conflict resolution efforts.

By examining the change in the political actors' stances, I hope to identify the specific challenges, the internal and external pressures, that a nation faces in sketching out its conflict negotiation proposals.

²⁷ Sitalides, John, "A Cyprus Settlement: Pulling NATO Into the 21st Century." Wilson Center, May 2022. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/cyprus-settlement-pulling-nato-the-21st-century>.

²⁸ Behera, Navnita Chadha, "Kashmir: Redefining the U.S. Role." *Brookings*, October 30, 2002. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/kashmir-redefining-the-u-s-role/>.

3 Literature Review

In examining the factors contributing to Armenia's delayed compromises over Nagorno-Karabakh, it's important to consider prior scholars' insights. However, there is a gap in the literature that may be attributed to limited transparency regarding the government's reasoning behind its negotiation strategies. These factors hinder a comprehensive understanding of the negotiation process. In my analysis portion, I aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding Armenia's negotiation process over Nagorno-Karabakh beyond what currently exists in the literature.

3.1 Understanding Credible Commitments

A significant body of international relations theory asserts that the costs of war should be avoidable when enforceable compromises can be reached. Barbara Walter's *Committing to Peace: The Successful Settlement of Civil Wars*,²⁹ perhaps the best example of this approach, explores the dynamics of civil war settlements and the factors that contribute to their success. One of the key arguments put forward by Walter is the importance of "third-party guarantees" in strengthening credible commitments. She argues that the involvement of a neutral third party, such as a mediator or a peacekeeping force, can help to ensure that all parties feel secure in their commitments. Walter states, "Third-party guarantees can provide the necessary assurances to both sides that their interests will be protected and that the terms of the peace agreement will be upheld."²⁹ Furthermore, Walter discusses the concept of "linkage strategies" in the context of civil war settlements, asserting, "Linkage strategies can create a more comprehensive and

²⁹ Walter, *Committing to Peace*, 82.

sustainable peace by addressing the underlying causes of the conflict.”³⁰ Walter posits that the primary obstacle to peace in the aftermath of civil wars is not the inability to find mutually acceptable terms but rather the lack of trust in the adversaries' commitment to adhere to those terms. She explains that linking the implementation of peace agreements to other issues, such as economic development or political reform, can help to incentivize compliance and reduce the risk of recidivism.

Walter argues that the implementation phase of a peace settlement, often ignored by scholars, is the most difficult to navigate and the reason why so many civil war negotiations have failed. Walter states, "In fact, the more damage each of the parties believes it could suffer as a result of a cheating opponent, the less willing each will be to sign and implement a treaty."³¹

Most importantly, Walter emphasizes the role of "third-party guarantees" in strengthening credible commitments. She argues that the involvement of a neutral third party, such as a mediator or a peacekeeping force, can help to ensure that all parties feel secure in their commitments. Walter states, "Third-party guarantees can provide the necessary assurances to both sides that their interests will be protected and that the terms of the peace agreement will be upheld.”³²

3.2 Third-Party Mediators in the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict

In the case of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, there were existing third-party guarantors who had a stake in preventing an all-out war, the country taking the primary role as guarantor

³⁰ Walter, *Committing to Peace*, 115.

³¹ Walter, *Committing to Peace*, 20.

³² Walter, *Committing to Peace*, 82.

being Russia. Russia, France, and the United States, the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group, a mission established to mediate the conflict from 1992 to 2020, served as intermediaries attempting to facilitate dialogue and negotiations between the two warring parties. These third parties had the potential to influence the outcome of the conflict by applying diplomatic pressure, mediating peace talks, or providing military support. Despite their commitment to negotiation efforts, particularly efforts by Russia, the conflict persisted without a peace agreement. The Minsk Group has been deemed defunct since 2020 after the 44-Day War. Despite peace talks facilitated by these third parties initiated in late 2021 and the presence of Russian peacekeepers in the region, three more bouts of major fighting erupted in 2022.³³

In light of the substantial losses experienced during the conflict across the combat and the blockade which further exacerbated the humanitarian situation, the question arises again about why Armenia did not present conciliatory offers before the 2020 war to deter the anticipated Azerbaijani onslaught.

3.3 Existing Explanations

Of most relevance to this project, prior studies examining the stalemate in negotiations for Nagorno-Karabakh have highlighted the role of democracy, or lack thereof, in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Analysts have claimed that past leaders' control over the peace process was a major impediment to peace, emphasizing that the absence of democracy was the primary barrier to peace in both countries.³⁴ In a similar vein, Dr. Laurence Broers, head of Conciliation Resources'

³³ "Averting a New War between Armenia and Azerbaijan," *Crisis Group*.

³⁴ Caspersen, Nina, "Regimes and Peace Processes: Democratic (Non)Development in Armenia and Azerbaijan and Its Impact on the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict." *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 45, no. 1/2 (2012): 131. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48609667>.

Caucasus program, suggested that the two regimes have cultivated a culture of promoting militancy.³⁵ This culture emphasized the importance of military strength and unity in the face of external threats, and marginalized dissenting voices that advocated for peaceful solutions to conflicts, leaving little opportunity for the tough concessions required to resolve the Karabakh conflict. According to Broers, the only way to overcome this obstacle is via democracy, as only “democratic dividends”—which result from better state-society relations—can supply the means to resolve the current deadlock in the peace process.³⁶ Until 2018, Armenia was governed under authoritarian rule.³⁷ However, the Pashinyan regime's initiatives following the Velvet Revolution of 2018 to establish democracy in the country have prompted an ongoing transition towards a more democratic system in Armenia, and in 2023, Freedom House classified Armenia as a “Transitional” or “Hybrid Regime.”³⁸ This poses a weakness in the existing literature regarding the 2018 to 2020 era, in which Armenia did not make any formal concessions regarding Nagorno-Karabakh, yet it was no longer under authoritarian governance and the country was in the process of democratization.

3.3.1 Instability

The conflict's post-Velvet Revolution era, from 2018 and beyond, highlights the influence of political instability on the negotiation process as Armenia transitioned from a semi-presidential republic to a parliamentary republic. The Velvet Revolution was a peaceful protest

³⁵ Broers, “The Limits of Leadership: Elites and Societies in the Nagorny Karabakh Peace Process,” 11.

³⁶ Broers, “The Limits of Leadership: Elites and Societies in the Nagorny Karabakh Peace Process,” 11.

³⁷ Ohanyan, Anna and Kopalyan, Nerses, “How to Train Your Dragon,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 55, no. 1 (March 1, 2022): 24–51, <https://doi.org/10.1525/j.postcomstud.2022.55.1.24>.

³⁸ Freedom House, “Armenia,” *Freedom House*, n.d., <https://freedomhouse.org/country/armenia/nations-transit/2023>.

movement that brought down Armenia's authoritarian government and ushered in a new political era, with the new government promising sweeping domestic reforms, including reforms regarding the peace negotiation process in Karabakh.³⁹ Governance in Armenia was centralized under a single networked elite with Karabakh roots from 1998 until the country's Velvet Revolution in 2018. Those in this elite included Karabakh natives Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan, the second and third presidents of Armenia, who were instrumental in guiding Nagorno-Karabakh throughout the First Karabakh War.⁴⁰ The current literature does not discuss how the change in administration from the Karabakh-native elites to the current democratic governing party's interests impacted the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict directly. In 2018, the new government faced enormous challenges as it began to contemplate reforming an oligarchic system based on corruption, while still balancing Armenia's foreign-policy commitments and security concerns.

3.3.2 Culture & Ideology

Past scholars have attributed Armenia's reluctance to compromise to the fact that the conflict has been a source of national pride and identity for its citizens.⁴¹ Given these identity ties, some analysts say that the failure of both parties' leaderships to convince their respective

³⁹ Crisis Group, "'Velvet Revolution' Takes Armenia Into the Unknown," April 27, 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/armenia/velvet-revolution-takes-armenia-unknown>.

⁴⁰ Laurence Broers, "The Nagorno-Karabakh Republic: The Life and Death of an Unrecognized State," Eurasianet, February 7, 2024, <https://eurasianet.org/the-nagorno-karabakh-republic-the-life-and-death-of-an-unrecognized-state>.

⁴¹ Broers, "The Limits of Leadership: Elites and Societies in the Nagorny Karabakh Peace Process," 13.

publics to accept difficult concessions is a major factor in the lack of progress in the discussions.⁴²

In Armenia's political history, there also exists a prevailing notion that the opposition holds the capacity to mobilize against the government through control of the military. This belief underscores the dynamics of power and dissent within political systems, suggesting that opposition forces possess the potential to challenge and confront the ruling authority. Although there is a lack of literature examining this explanation for why Armenia may not have offered more conciliatory offers from 2018 and beyond, any attempt by the government to offer concessions that fell short of that goal would leave the government exposed to countermobilization by the opposition.

During the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, then-President of Armenia Levon Ter-Petrosyan faced difficulty reaching a ceasefire agreement due to concerns about potential domestic backlash resulting from the reactions of Karabakh leaders.⁴³ The concerns were more with his lack of a stable power base and his inadequate control over the army and power ministries, and when Ter-Petrosyan accepted a phased resolution to the Karabakh conflict following the war, it was, in fact, these forces who were able to remove him from power and reign in the twenty years where Karabakh-natives held the presidencies in Armenia.⁴⁴

After the 2016 attacks, Jirair Sefilian, the leader of an ultra-nationalist group in Armenia and a veteran of the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, reportedly called upon his former comrades-

⁴² Fariz Ismailzade, "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Current Trends and Future Scenarios Current Trends and Future Scenarios," *JSTOR*, 5, November 11, 2011, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep09790>.

⁴³ Caspersen, "Regimes and Peace Processes: Democratic (Non)Development in Armenia and Azerbaijan and Its Impact on the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict." 136.

⁴⁴ Caspersen, "Regimes and Peace Processes: Democratic (Non)Development in Armenia and Azerbaijan and Its Impact on the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict." 136.

in-arms from the war to retake territories lost to Azerbaijan.⁴⁵ He was quoted saying, “OK, it is your responsibility as president of Armenia to be the guarantor of Armenian land. You do not do it, so I myself am ready to do it.”⁴⁶

Given that the political opposition, currently represented by the Republican Party of Armenia, has influenced presidents’ behaviors in the past, it is worth exploring if the threat of a military mobilization of the opposition may have constrained the current regime from offering concessions as well. Nonetheless, Armenian leadership regardless of party identification has rallied their sides around the goal that Armenia will achieve formal unification with Karabakh.

3.3.3 Russia’s Position on Karabakh

Alliances can limit a country's negotiating flexibility if the ally is unwilling to support compromise, but they can also embolden a country to avoid compromise, believing that their ally will back them regardless of their stance. Russia is often noted as one of the external forces impeding the peace process.⁴⁷ Russia has had a significant influence on Armenia both militarily and economically in the post-Soviet nation, establishing a substantial degree of reliance between Armenia and Russia by holding Russian military bases, several significant transportation and industrial projects, and businesses held by Russian state-controlled monopolies in Armenia.⁴⁸ In Russian political circles, it has been speculated that Armenia would be able to free itself from

⁴⁵ Glenn Ellis and Katerina Barushka, “Armenia: Divided Within?,” Al Jazeera, October 27, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/people-power/2016/10/27/armenia-divided-within>.

⁴⁶ Ellis and Barushka, “Armenia: Divided Within?”

⁴⁷ Ismailzade, “The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Current Trends and Future Scenarios Current Trends and Future Scenarios on JSTOR,” 6.

⁴⁸ Ismailzade, “The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Current Trends and Future Scenarios Current Trends and Future Scenarios,” 6.

Russian influence and further integrate into Euro-Atlantic frameworks if the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was resolved.⁴⁹ Thus, it is theorized that Russia may have been tying Armenia's hands in regard to their negotiating position and dragging the peace process in order to avoid losing influence in the region.

Armenia's alliance situation is complicated by the fact that Russia was not only its primary ally but also the most significant third-party mediator during peace negotiations and its long-time arms supplier.⁵⁰ Armenia is also a member of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, a military alliance of post-Soviet states established for the collective security of the six member-states, bound by the Collective Security Treaty.⁵¹ Key Article 4 states, "In the event of an act of aggression against any of the participating States, all other participating States will provide him with the necessary assistance, including military, and will also provide support at their disposal in exercising the right to collective defense in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter."⁵² Although there is a lack of explicit documentation that these promises by Russia to support Armenia may have been extended in the case of a full-blown war over Nagorno-Karabakh, analysts have hypothesized that this may have been a reason why Armenia may not have been tempted to offer concessions given its security guarantee.

⁴⁹ Ismailzade, "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Current Trends and Future Scenarios Current Trends and Future Scenarios," 6.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group, "Nagorno-Karabakh's Gathering War Clouds."

⁵¹ "Collective Security Treaty," May 15, 1992. https://en.odkb-csto.org/documents/documents/dogovor_o_kollektivnoy_bezopasnosti/#loaded.

⁵² "Collective Security Treaty."

3.4 Hypotheses

This study seeks to demonstrate the likelihood that Armenia's reservations about presenting more conciliatory proposals concerning Nagorno-Karabakh before a war occurred and attempting to fight the war were substantially influenced by its reliance on a security assurance from Russia, with the expectation of receiving greater support from Western powers during a time of war for the promotion of democracy against Azerbaijan's autocratic regime.

Hypothesis 1: The instability of the post-Velvet Revolution government led the government of Armenia to be uncompromising.

Hypothesis 2: The political culture of national factions led the government of Armenia to be uncompromising.

Hypothesis 3: The certainty of Russia's guarantees of its position in the Karabakh conflict led the government of Armenia to be uncompromising.

4 Research Methodology

4.1 Design

I performed this explorative study with an examination of the key rounds of negotiation for the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with particular attention to three factors identified in the hypotheses that may explain the Armenians' decisions. The dependent variable in this context refers to the specific content, details, or terms included in the proposals presented by Armenia during each key round of negotiation, ranging from formal agreements and treaties to policies and any other official recommendations submitted.

The research involved gathering data from various sources, including defense ministry reports, news articles, and firsthand accounts of politicians' speeches. I anticipated, however, that the availability and accessibility of this information may be influenced by the political climate of the regions involved, and thus have cross-referenced my data with data from the International Crisis Group (ICG), which has been tracking the conflict since 2015. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the conflict, academic libraries, reputable online databases, and scholarly publications related to the Nagorno-Karabakh issue were consulted. In addition to this, various materials, including articles, formal proposals, and relevant documents that shed light on the conflict's dynamics, were examined. To diversify and enhance the dataset, I also utilized Caucasus news sources, with attention to Western organizations or groups known for consistently providing reliable information on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. This comprehensive approach aims to ensure a thorough analysis of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the negotiation process surrounding it.

I focus on the 2016-2023 time period of the conflict, from the renewal of intense fighting with the 2016 Azerbaijani assault until the 2023 Azerbaijan victory. I observed the impact of the 2018 Velvet Revolution in Armenia and the subsequent regime change that led to a new approach in Armenia's approach to the conflict. I divided my study into three subsections: the old regime (2016-2017), post-Velvet Revolution and regime change (2018-2019), and the Second Karabakh War and its aftermath (2020).

4.2 The Evidence: Armenia's Position in Negotiations

1994-2016: Armenia's position during this period was largely focused on maintaining the ceasefire established in 1994, offering and advocating for the rights to self-determination of the

Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh. During this time, Armenia proposed to offer the seven Armenian-occupied territories of Azerbaijan gained in the 90's war, in exchange for the complete independence of Nagorno-Karabakh. The Minsk Group Co-Chairmanship, with its international mandate, was recognized by Armenia as the only agreed format for negotiations.

The Old Regime, Sargsyan's Presidency

2016: During the year, the Armenian Foreign Minister met with the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs on February 13 in Munich, on March 31 in Washington, on May 16 in Vienna, on June 2 in Paris, on June 20 in Saint-Petersburg, on September 20 in New York, and on December 8 in Hamburg.⁵³

In January 2016, the Co-Chairs of the Minsk Group issued a statement reiterating their mandate for negotiations and urging both parties to refrain from actions that could escalate tensions. However, from April 2-5, 2016, intense fighting broke out at the Karabakh border, killing 200.⁵⁴ The fighting, known as the Four-Day War, briefly came to a conclusion on April 5, 2016, when Russia assisted in mediating a cease-fire.⁵⁵ During a meeting with the Ambassadors of the OSCE Participating States, Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan threatened to recognize Nagorno-Karabakh's independence if tensions were to further escalate on the front lines.

In May 2016, at the Vienna Summit, Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev agreed to strengthen the shaky ceasefire and relaunch peace talks. The

⁵³ "MFA Annual Report 2016" (Yerevan, Armenia: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, 2017), 19, https://www.mfa.am/filemanager/annual%20report/mfa_annual_report_2016_am.pdf.

⁵⁴ Ariel Karlinsky and Orsola Torrisi, "The Casualties of War: An Excess Mortality Estimate of Lives Lost in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict," *Population Research and Policy Review* 42, no. 3 (May 10, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11113-023-09790-2>.

⁵⁵ "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: A Visual Explainer | Crisis Group," November 10, 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/nagorno-karabakh-conflict-visual-explainer>.

agreement highlighted the need for a peaceful resolution and reiterated that there could be no military solution to the conflict.⁵⁶ On June 20, 2016, one month later, Russian President Vladimir Putin held discussions in St. Petersburg with the leaders from Armenia and Azerbaijan.⁵⁷ According to a statement from the Kremlin, the two decided to carry on their negotiations, endeavor to improve the situation on the front, and create the necessary framework for consistent advancement in talks toward a political settlement of the conflict.⁵⁸

2017: The events surrounding the resolution of the conflict reflected a continued stalemate, with Armenia and Azerbaijan maintaining their positions without significant shifts. The OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs played an active role in facilitating negotiations and urging both sides to uphold the ceasefire and work towards a peaceful resolution. Five meetings were held between the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan on February 16 in Munich, on April 28 in Moscow, on July 11 in Brussels, on September 23 in New York, and on December 6 in Vienna.⁵⁹ Azerbaijan and Armenia's presidents held their first summit in over a year in Geneva in October.⁶⁰ Besides their agreement to take measures to intensify the negotiation process and to

⁵⁶ RFE/RL, "Armenia, Azerbaijan Presidents Meet in Vienna Over Nagorno-Karabakh," *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, May 16, 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-azerbaijan-presidents-to-meet-in-vienna-over-karabakh/27736636.html>.

⁵⁷ Emil Danielyan, "Russia Vows More Karabakh Peace Efforts," «Free Europe/Freedom Radio Station, August 10, 2016, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/27913481.html>.

⁵⁸ "Meeting With Serzh Sargsyan and Ilham Aliyev," President of Russia, June 20, 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/110/events/52189>.

⁵⁹ "MFA Annual Report 2017" (Yerevan, Armenia: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, 2018), 14, https://www.mfa.am/filemanager/annual%20report/MFA_Annual_Report_2017.pdf.

⁶⁰ International Crisis Group, "NK Timeline."

take additional steps to reduce tensions on the Line of Contact at that summit, progress in the negotiations process was limited in 2017.

Leaders from both countries, including Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, reiterated their nations' positions, emphasizing their unwillingness to compromise on key issues. In September 2017, at the UN General Assembly, President Sargsyan reaffirmed Armenia's position that the Republic of Artsakh [Nagorno-Karabakh] should not have a lower status than it currently enjoys and that its future should be decided by its people with the guarantee of security.⁶¹ This statement underscored Armenia's commitment to the rights and security of the Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh. The annual Geneva Summit in October and OSCE meetings echoed sentiments from the meetings of the past, that the negotiation process must be intensified, but major agreements or concessions were not made.⁶²

Sergey Lavrov, the foreign minister of Russia, emphasized that "two or three key issues" that are necessary for a complete conclusion remain unresolved between Armenia and Azerbaijan.⁶³ Lavrov pointed out that the parties are still a long way from harmonizing their positions on these important issues during a joint news conference with their colleague from Azerbaijan. After meeting in Brussels, Elmar Mammadyarov, the foreign minister of Azerbaijan, and Edward Nalbandian, the foreign minister of Armenia, decided to take a closer look at the

⁶¹ "MFA Annual Report 2017," 15.

⁶² "MFA Annual Report 2017," 16.

⁶³ International Crisis Group, "NK Timeline," Data set (International Crisis Group, November 9, 2023), <https://github.com/CrisisGroup/nk-data-repo/blob/main/timeline-of-events/nk-timeline.csv>.

OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs' proposal for a high-level presidential summit on Nagorno-Karabakh.⁶⁴

A notable event in 2017 outside of the negotiations process was Russia lending Armenia \$100 million to purchase Russian weapons.

Post-Velvet Revolution, An Opening to a Potential Agreement

April 2018: From April to May 2018, the Velvet Revolution in Armenia led to the ousting of President Sargsyan and the establishment of a new democratic regime, which offered promising prospects for the country's future and peace prospects for Nagorno-Karabakh. = In July, President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan attributed the change in leadership in Armenia to his strong stance in relations with the country and the escalation of conflict in April 2016, "I do hope that the new government of Armenia does not repeat the mistakes of the criminal regime, takes a constructive position on the conflict, the conflict is resolved soon and the territorial integrity of our country is restored."⁶⁵ In August, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan called for a peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and demanded the return of the de facto authorities to the negotiation table.⁶⁶ Addressing the Armenian people, he said, "If I see that there is an option that needs discussing, I will come to you and give you the details of it, after which you will decide whether to accept the settlement or not."⁶⁷ Armenia began to engage in negotiations

⁶⁴ "Meeting of Edward Nalbandian and Elmar Mammadyarov, Foreign Ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan," mfa.am, July 11, 2017, <https://www.mfa.am/en/press-releases/2017/07/11/arm-az/7352>.

⁶⁵ Ilham Aliyev, "Opening Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the Cabinet of Ministers Dedicated to Results of Socio-economic Development in First Half of 2018 and Future Objectives," President of Azerbaijan, July 18, 2018, <https://president.az/en/articles/view/29539>.

⁶⁶ Nikol Pashinyan, "Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's Speech at Rally Dedicated to 100 Days in Office," The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, August 17, 2018, <https://www.primeminister.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2018/08/17/Nikol-Pashinyan-100-day-rally/>.

and meetings to establish peace and create a favorable environment for the population in Nagorno-Karabakh again following the pause after the Velvet Revolution, and these efforts included the routine meetings between officials, agreements on humanitarian measures, and commitments to reduce tensions along the line of contact.⁶⁸

In 2018, the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group convened in Brussels on July 11, in New York on September 26, in Yerevan on October 29, and in Milan on December 5.⁶⁹ The Foreign Ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan met four times, on January 18 in Krakow, on July 11 in Brussels, on September 26 in New York, and on December 5 in Milan. The OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs facilitated discussions between Armenia's Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian and Azerbaijan's Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov, resulting in an agreement in principle on expanding the OSCE office staff. During the reporting period, two unofficial meetings between the Prime Minister of Armenia and the President of Azerbaijan also occurred.⁷⁰

Nonetheless, the new Armenian leadership's stance on the conflict did not suggest concessions but included demands for the return of Nagorno-Karabakh's leadership to the negotiation table.⁷¹ The Minsk Group Co-Chairs continued to engage with both sides, calling for trust-building measures and a peaceful resolution. The international community, including

⁶⁷ Pashinyan, "Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's Speech at Rally Dedicated to 100 Days in Office."

⁶⁸ International Crisis Group, "NK Timeline."

⁶⁹ "MFA Annual Report 2018" (Yerevan, Armenia: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, 2019), 13, https://www.mfa.am/filemanager/annual%20report/MFA_Annual_Report_2018.pdf.

⁷⁰ "MFA Annual Report 2018," 14.

⁷¹ Marine Kharatyan, "Armenia Hopes for Nagorno-Karabakh's Return to the Negotiating Table," *OC Media*, January 17, 2020, <https://oc-media.org/features/armenia-hopes-for-nagorno-karabakh-s-return-to-the-negotiating-table/>.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and former U.S. national security advisor John Bolton, expressed support for the peace process. Throughout these developments, both Armenia and Azerbaijan maintained their positions on key issues.⁷²

2019: The OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs (including Russia), and international actors like the U.S. Senate and the European Council, remained involved in mediating the talks and hosting meetings with the nations’ representatives without any formal agreements or proposals being produced. A major sticking point in the negotiation process in 2019 was who represented the Nagorno-Karabakh region in talks, as Pashinyan advocated for the involvement of the de facto representatives of Karabakh, but Azerbaijan refused to include them.⁷³ Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan reminded the public during a trip to Germany in February that he is unable to negotiate on behalf of Nagorno-Karabakh because "they did not give me their vote of confidence" and "they did not participate in Armenia's elections."⁷⁴ Across the OSCE meetings that occurred on February 20, May 27, October 10 and October 29, both sides continued to express the redundant sentiment from the years prior of their commitment to peace talks.⁷⁵

During a visit to the U.S. in March, Armenia’s Defense Minister Davit Tonoyan stated that it was no longer feasible to return territory in order to maintain peace, "I declare that the formula ‘territories for peace’ will no longer exist, and we will reformulate it as ‘new war – new

⁷² International Crisis Group, “NK Timeline.”

⁷³ “MFA Annual Report 2019” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, 2020), 15, https://www.mfa.am/filemanager/annual%20report/MFA_Annual_Report_2019.pdf.

⁷⁴ International Crisis Group, “NK Timeline.”

⁷⁵ “MFA Annual Report 2019” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, 2020), 15, https://www.mfa.am/filemanager/annual%20report/MFA_Annual_Report_2019.pdf.

territories," he declared, suggesting military offensives were more likely to be taken instead of concessions.⁷⁶

Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan's stance regarding a hesitancy toward offering concessions was reaffirmed, as he stated that Azerbaijan should make the initial announcement of any compromises while on a visit to Iran, "We will not answer that question until Azerbaijan has answered it clearly," he stated.⁷⁷ "Azerbaijan should first answer that question because Azerbaijan undermines the peace process on a daily basis by threatening us with war."⁷⁸ Pashinyan's claim of "Karabakh is Armenia" was countered by Aliyev's assertion of "Karabakh is Azerbaijan," underscoring the territorial and identity issues at the core of the dispute.^{79 80}

The Second Karabakh War

2020: In October 2020, Armenia participated in negotiations in Geneva, Switzerland, and Moscow, Russia, to discuss the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. These meetings aimed to find a peaceful resolution and reduce tensions in the region.⁸¹ Once again, Armenia's position during

⁷⁶ Joshua Kucera, "After Peace Negotiations, Threats of War Break Out Between Armenia and Azerbaijan," Eurasianet, April 1, 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/after-peace-negotiations-threats-of-war-break-out-between-armenia-and-azerbaijan>.

⁷⁷ Nikol Pashinyan, "Nikol Pashinyan Meets With Armenian Community Representatives in Iran," The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, February 27, 2019, <https://www.primeminister.am/en/press-release/item/2019/02/27/Nikol-Pashinyan-meets-with-Armenian-community/>.

⁷⁸ Pashinyan, "Nikol Pashinyan Meets With Armenian Community Representatives in Iran."

⁷⁹ Joshua Kucera, "Pashinyan Calls for Unification Between Armenia and Karabakh," Eurasianet, August 6, 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/pashinyan-calls-for-unification-between-armenia-and-karabakh>.

⁸⁰ International Crisis Group, "NK Timeline."

⁸¹ "MFA Annual Report 2020" (Yerevan, Armenia: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, 2021), 6, https://www.mfa.am/filemanager/annual%20report/MFA_Annual_Report_2020.pdf.

these negotiations reflected its commitment to a peaceful resolution and the security of the Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh.⁸² While these negotiations stalled, the reality of the balance of forces was changing. The comparative portions of the economic and military forces of Armenia and Azerbaijan was changing prior to 2020.⁸³

2020 was marked by the COVID-19 pandemic and the 44-Day War beginning in September. Early in the year, Armenia and Azerbaijan engaged in talks over Nagorno-Karabakh, discussing confidence-building measures and settlement processes, with the OSCE Co-Chairs continuing their repeated calls of the need for compromise for a lasting peace.⁸⁴ The nations' leaders held a public debate at the Munich Security Conference, clashing over Nagorno-Karabakh. Once the pandemic began, the OSCE suspended monitoring, eventually holding online meetings.⁸⁵

The 44-Day War commenced in September, and resulted in casualties and a failed ceasefire, leading to a Russian-mediated agreement for peacekeepers and territorial changes. Azerbaijan displayed military prowess, and local clashes continued, with detainees exchanged later in December.

4.3 Discussion

Every year, joint statements between the Armenian and Azerbaijani Presidents would affirm their commitment to intensify the negotiation process and take additional steps to reduce

⁸² “MFA Annual Report 2020,” 7.

⁸³ Ece Toksabay, “Turkish arms sales to Azerbaijan surged before Nagorno-Karabakh fighting,” *Reuters*, October 14, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN26Z237/>.

⁸⁴ “MFA Annual Report 2020,” 7.

⁸⁵ International Crisis Group, “NK Timeline.”

tensions on the Line of Contact. However, these commitments were rarely followed by actual intensification of negotiations, often limited to agreeing to a ceasefire when violence erupted. I examined the Republic of Armenia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Reports from the 2016 Four-Day War to the 2020 44-Day War and identified the dates when the Foreign Ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan met under the supervision of the OSCE Minsk Group to discuss moving towards formal negotiations for a settlement.

Typically, after each meeting either a Press Release/Statement by the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group, or a Joint Statement by the Foreign Ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan and the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group, was released. These statements were vague and did not reveal talks about specific proposals or offers, and so commentators concluded that no viable offers of concessions were on the table. Several speeches were made during this period which would reaffirm Armenia's position, that Nagorno-Karabakh "has never been part of independent Azerbaijan, and therefore the attempts of its annexation to that particular state framework cannot be justified," and that "exercise of the right to self-determination by the people of Artsakh is of existential significance".⁸⁶

Between the Four-Day War in 2016 and the 44-Day War in 2020, on several occasions the Armenian government indicated that its stance on Nagorno-Karabakh had remained unchanged. This includes the 2017 speech by then-President Serzh Sargsyan at the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly and the Armenian Foreign Minister's speech at the 26th OSCE Ministerial meeting in 2019. In the latter, the Foreign Minister echoes that,

⁸⁶ Sargsyan, Serzh, "Working Visit of President Serzh Sargsyan to the United States of America," September 19, 2017, <https://www.president.am/en/foreign-visits/item/2017/09/19/President-Serzh-Sargsyan-working-visit-to-the-USA/>.

“The inalienable right of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh to self-determination represents a fundamental principle and foundation for the peaceful resolution. The recognition of this principle not to be limited in the scope of determination for the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh must be clearly and unequivocally accepted. The term ‘without limitation’ also implies the right of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh to maintain and determine a status outside the jurisdiction, sovereignty or territorial integrity of Azerbaijan”.⁸⁷ Even after the Velvet Revolution and the initiation of democratization for Armenia, the leader of the new democratic regime, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, reaffirmed that Armenia’s position on Nagorno-Karabakh was the same, “Artsakh [Nagorno-Karabakh] is Armenia, period.”⁸⁸

After the 44-Day War, Armenia's stance on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh went largely unchanged over the years, reaffirming that Armenia was committed to negotiating a peace settlement during most all organized meetings with the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs and speeches by the leadership and foreign ministers, but unwilling to offer concessions of Nagorno-Karabakh. On the battlefield, Armenia continued defensive strategy, maintaining its positions and employing military responses when Azerbaijan would test the front lines. Yet, the 44-day war in 2020 demonstrated that the military capacities of the Armenian army were no match to those of the Azerbaijani military. Despite Azerbaijan’s looming threats of taking Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding regions by force over the years, and the presence of third parties (OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs) to mediate a peace agreement, Armenia did not present more

⁸⁷ Zohrab Mnatsakanyan, “Statement by Zohrab Mnatsakanyan, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia at the 26th Meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council in Bratislava” (Bratislava, Slovakia, December 5, 2019), https://www.mfa.am/en/speeches/2019/12/05/fm_remarks_osce_26/9996;

⁸⁸ “Press Release: Nikol Pashinyan Attends Opening of 7th Pan-Armenian Summer Games,” The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, August 6, 2019, <https://www.primeminister.am/en/press-release/item/2019/08/06/Opening-of-7th-Pan-Armenian-Summer-Games/>.

conciliatory offers before the major Azerbaijani assault in 2020, and suffered the loss of thousands.

In the aftermath of the 2020 attacks, Azerbaijan regained control over Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding regions formerly under Armenian control. Armenia recognized Azerbaijan's jurisdiction over the disputed territory but continues to insist on special rights and guarantees for the area's ethnic Armenian residents. This shift in stance, while a departure from previous positions, was far too late.

Despite the presence of external guarantors, after the 1990s ceasefire, there was no agreement until Azerbaijan resolved it by force of arms. This highlights the puzzle of how a conflict mediated by third-party security guarantors ended so tragically and leads one to consider what internal and external factors led the nation to suffer the worst outcome possible.

Hypothesis 1 states that the decisions made regarding the negotiations were driven by the dominant political party's concern for its own vulnerable position in domestic politics. Given that the new regime, Pashinyan's "Civil Contract Party" was attempting to democratize Armenia after twenty years of rule under oligarchic and corrupt leaders, it is possible that the regime's attempt to maintain power may explain why Armenia did not present more conciliatory offers before the final Azerbaijani assault in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Not surrendering the lands could have potentially kept the current party in power by appealing to nationalist sentiments within the population. The decision to hold onto Nagorno-Karabakh despite pressure to surrender could have been framed as a courageous stance to protect Armenian sovereignty and national pride. This narrative might have resonated with segments of the population who prioritize territorial integrity and view concessions as capitulation. Additionally, the government's refusal to surrender could have portrayed them as strong leaders willing to defend Armenian interests

against external threats. This image of strength and determination could have rallied public support, especially during times of crisis. Furthermore, maintaining control over Nagorno-Karabakh could have been seen as a way to preserve the government's legitimacy and authority, as surrendering territory could have been interpreted as a sign of weakness or incompetence.

Moreover, the decision not to concede territory could have galvanized support from nationalist factions and military circles, who may have opposed any concessions to Azerbaijan and created backlash. Hypothesis 2 states that by aligning with these influential groups, the government could have avoided violence from domestic backlash.

Finally, Hypothesis 3 suggests that the decision to maintain an uncompromising stance might have stemmed from an overestimation of the military support Russia would offer in the event of a significant military mobilization.

5 Analysis: Why Armenia's Stance Remained Unchanged

Hypothesis 1

After Armenia's peaceful revolution in April 2018, there was hope that the new government would fundamentally change the balance of power in the post-Soviet Union. The domestic political landscape in Armenia underwent a significant shift as the new government, led by Nikol Pashinyan, came to power with a mandate for reform and a promise to tackle corruption which plagued the nation since its independence in 1991, which may have limited its ability to make concessions on a protracted and complex issue as Nagorno-Karabakh. This regime change also created a degree of ideological clash with autocratic Azerbaijan, as it is possible that the Pashinyan government's democratic leanings may have contributed to a hardening of positions.

A significant shift in domestic policy for the Armenian government was its change in pre-revolutionary oligarchic leadership to one that embraces democratic representation emphasizing that elected officials derive their legitimacy from the people they represent. Ensuring the participation of the population of whom peace negotiations over Nagorno-Karabakh would directly impact, the administration felt that Armenia should not negotiate on behalf of Nagorno-Karabakh, and the leaders of Nagorno-Karabakh should be involved in all aspects of negotiations as an independent actor. This was a deterrent from the status quo that prior administrations had set, where either the President or Foreign Ministers of Armenia were always the leaders at the negotiation table, implying that Armenia's goal was to achieve independence for Nagorno-Karabakh as its own republic. By maintaining the unresolved nature of the conflict through maintaining its commitment to peace settlements without major concession offers, while redirecting their foreign policy efforts to strengthen their diplomatic ties to the West, he might have believed that he was avoiding a potentially worse outcome and that Western forces would help in the event of war. Armenia, as a democracy, strived for negotiation and consensus-building in its approach to the conflict (marked by its constant reiteration of its commitment to a peaceful resolution). Armenia's democratic approach prioritized inclusive political behavior, aiming to involve various stakeholders from its Western friends (France, U.S.) in the negotiation process and seek consensus among them.

It is reasonable to believe Pashinyan underestimated Azerbaijan's military capabilities, leading to unnecessary military casualties. After the 44-Day War, many criticized Pashinyan for accepting unfavorable ceasefire terms, and ceding territory and strategic towns to Azerbaijan. They argue he could have secured better outcomes with stronger resistance or international

mediation. Critics also allege Pashinyan's administration inadequately prepared Armenian forces, leading to equipment deficiencies and logistical shortcomings.

The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War and its aftermath undoubtedly dealt a significant blow to the Armenian government, raising questions about potential political motives behind the conflict's outcome. However, asserting that the war was solely a "political ploy" designed to undermine the opposition's political advantage and maintain the leading faction's power in the Armenian government through a secret desire to lose control of Artsakh is improbable for several other reasons. Firstly, Nagorno-Karabakh holds immense historical and cultural significance for Armenians, and losing control would have sparked widespread public outrage and severely damaged the government's legitimacy. Secondly, the loss of Artsakh would weaken Armenia's overall security posture, potentially emboldening Azerbaijan to make further territorial claims on Armenia proper. Lastly, losing control could further solidify Russia's influence in the region and limit Armenia's options for forging closer ties with the West. The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War was a complex and tragic event with far-reaching consequences, and while the conflict undeniably had a significant impact on Armenian politics, attributing it solely to a political ploy to undermine the opposition is an oversimplification. The war was rooted in a multitude of factors, and the Armenian government faced a difficult and unenviable situation.

In his statements, Pashinyan explains that he initially struggled to convince himself of the necessity of surrendering lands, highlighting the difficulty in accepting the reality of the situation. He attributes this struggle to the long-standing narrative in Armenian society that sacrifices were made for the freedom of Artsakh, leading to a belief in the invincibility of the Armenian army. Additionally, he notes the geopolitical complexities and uncertainties surrounding the potential surrender, citing global geopolitical trends and the likelihood of

regional instability following such an action, “I could not convince myself, because when I was getting acquainted with the negotiation documents, I realized that Serzh Sargsyan did not exaggerate anything when saying that Armenia was ready to abandon the 7 regions [surrounding NK], but each time Azerbaijan made new demands and that Azerbaijan's expectations were unrealistic and unacceptable to us.” Pashinyan claims that the reason why Armenia fought the war was because he struggled to accept the idea of surrendering territories. After all, it would mean admitting that after 30 years of struggle, declaring NK a state had been a facade and the institutional establishment of the state had utterly failed. He found it difficult to admit this to himself and could not announce such a decision to the people.

There was always a worry that if Nagorno-Karabakh was surrendered to Azerbaijan, it would leave Armenia-proper vulnerable to Azerbaijan’s attack. This is now a reality with border skirmishes at the Armenia-Azerbaijan occurring from time to time. However, had Pashinyan surrendered the lands before the war, it could have helped keep the current party in power by potentially avoiding the significant losses and protests in backlash that followed the war. If the government had made the decision to surrender earlier, it might have been able to frame the decision as a strategic move to avoid further bloodshed and protect Armenian lives. This could have garnered support from the population, especially those tired of the conflict and seeking peace.

Hypothesis 2

There is some evidence to support the hypothesis that the Armenian government did not make concessions because it feared backlash from the opposition and its allies. Armenia’s domestic politics revolve around the rivalry between two main political factions, the Civil

Contract Party (current administration) and branches of the right-wing Republican Party of Armenia (former administrations). The latter ruled before the Velvet Revolution from 1998 to 2018, and the former ruled since 2018. Despite the expected differences between the government and the opposition, they share common perspectives on critical national matters such as territorial integrity, and until the 2020 war, Armenia had yet to change its long-standing position concerning the control of the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

Some emphasize domestic political constraints Pashinyan faced, arguing he couldn't mobilize fully without risking internal instability. They point to public fatigue with the conflict and potential backlash from hardliners. Others argue Pashinyan aimed to preserve key strategic assets and Armenian lives by stopping the war before further territorial losses, given the potential for a wider conflict involving regional powers like Turkey, who armed Azerbaijan, and devastating consequences.

The war undoubtedly weakened the Civil Contract Party and bolstered the opposition's criticism. Former President Robert Kocharyan, who previously led the country during the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, accused the current government of incompetence and betrayal. Any perceived concessions on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue would have been politically costly, potentially leading to a loss of public support and political instability. In remaining in a stalemate during the right-wing administrations, the blame for the secession of Nagorno-Karabakh landed on the new democratic administration that took the power away from the opposition. It is possible that there was encouragement from the opposition to fight the war in Nagorno-Karabakh as the former leaders knew that the loss that the county would take would make room for them to be remembered as the party that did not lose Nagorno-Karabakh, and consequently was better

suites to be in government; this tactic, if it was in fact the strategy employed by the opposition, failed however.

In 2021 Armenia went into a political crisis, which involved a purported military coup attempt led by Chief of the General Staff of the Armenian Armed Forces Onik Gasparian and other high-ranking military officers against Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's government, allegedly conspired by the opposition forces. Pashinyan accused Gasparian and 40 others of attempting a coup following their publication of a statement on 25 February 2021 calling for his resignation. In the infamous 2022 speech where Pashinyan discussed his shortcomings in the 44-Day War, he criticized actors within the army for prioritizing political agendas over national security concerns, suggesting that some forces were more focused on internal political dynamics than on external threats:

“It should be noted that the opposition, whose former leader admitted that during the war he called on the generals to point their rifles at the Armenian government building instead of at the enemy, finally achieved its goal and it turned out that there are forces in the army that are more interested not in what is happening at the border, but what is happening at the Republic Square, Baghramyan Avenue, Melik-Adamyan Street.”⁸⁹

Thus, Pashinyan may have reasoned that attempting to preemptively resolve the conflict could lead to unintended consequences, such as an escalation of violence or a loss of control over the situation. The opposition may have limited the government's ability to make concessions or to give up lands in an attempt to find peace. The opposition may have underestimated how much public support they had, given that Armenia held snap parliamentary elections in 2021 to allow

⁸⁹ Pashinyan, “Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s Speech at the National Assembly during the Discussion of the Performance Report of the Government Action Plan for 2021.”

the Armenian people to decide which party is better fit for governance, and Pashinyan's party won over 50% of the vote of.⁹⁰ Nonetheless, the government did not know the strength of the opposition in the snap elections and did not know whether concessions could increase their strength.

Hypothesis 3

Armenia's ability to count on Russian defense of the status quo over Karabakh encouraged the Armenian government to become uncompromising only until the Velvet Revolution. In terms of international alliances, Armenia's largest ally has historically been Russia, but since the Velvet Revolution in 2018, Armenia has sought to build closer ties with the West. The diplomatic efforts made towards strengthening ties with the U.S., France, and the EU reflect this westward orientation.⁹¹ Historically, Armenia had stronger relations with Russia due to a range of political as well as historical factors being a post-Soviet republic. Despite the westward expansion in diplomatic efforts, the Republic of Armenia has relied heavily on Russian support and strategic cooperation to influence the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement, especially the Armenian military's heavy reliance on Russian-made weapons. This allegiance also enabled the Russians to retain a heavy military presence with peacekeeping forces. During the 2020 war, after the second ceasefire tracking, Russia participated with a large peacekeeping group in the region to monitor and enforce the ceasefire. Its activity as a mediator in post-USSR space occasionally causes issues of overlapping geopolitical interests, which can be used by

⁹⁰ Guardian Staff Reporter, "Armenian PM Wins Snap Election as Rival Alleges Fraud," *The Guardian*, June 21, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/21/armenian-pm-claims-victory-parliamentary-election-rival-alleges>.

⁹¹International Crisis Group, "NK Timeline."

Armenia to get benefits without following Russia’s lead and provide the opportunity for Armenia to expand its foreign policy efforts.⁹²

Armenia is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a military cooperation agreement implemented by the post-Soviet states. Despite its lack of tangible effect in this particular case, its membership in it made the conflict a subject of apparent priority for Russia among a cluster of its interests. The mutual defense obligations are only enforced when a member state comes under direct attack from an external party. Although territory adjacent to Armenia is not covered by this agreement, and Russian action could have only followed the mobilization of large Armenian forces near their own border, when it came time when Armenia’s borders were under threat, the CSTO members, including Russia, did not act in accordance to their agreements. By 2024, Pashinyan has voiced dissatisfaction with Armenia's longstanding relationship with Russia, indicating that Armenia might no longer depend on Russia to meet its defense requirements.⁹³ In the 2022 speech, Pashinyan is also quoted saying, “Please do not rely on us [the international community], not because we do not want to help you, but because we can not help you.”⁹⁴

Initially, Armenia was under the impression that Russia would provide the needed resources to fight a war, whether it was an expectation of solely supplying arms or both arms and soldiers given that Russia had already been Armenia’s arms supplier. The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War exposed the significant military imbalance between Armenia and Azerbaijan;

⁹² Marianna Muravyeva, “Conservative Jurisprudence and the Russian State,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 69, no. 8 (September 14, 2017): 1145–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2017.1377504>.

⁹³ Reuters, “Armenia Freezes Participation in Russia-led Security Bloc - Prime Minister,” *Reuters*, February 23, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/armenia-freezes-participation-russia-led-security-bloc-prime-minister-2024-02-23/>.

⁹⁴ Pashinyan, “Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s Speech at the National Assembly During the Discussion of the Performance Report of the Government Action Plan for 2021.”

Armenia could not withstand the Azerbaijani attacks, as they were using Russian semi-automatic weapons while the Azerbaijanis fought this war with UAVs and white phosphorus in addition to their ground forces. Azerbaijan had been steadily modernizing its military with advanced weaponry, while Armenia relied heavily on Soviet-era equipment. The difference in their strength in forces was undeniably tipped in Azerbaijan's favor.

Given the CSTO commitments and longstanding history as an ally, it is understandable if Armenia believed Russia would send aid if a war broke out as they were their only ally which seemed highly likely to do so. It is plausible if there was an expectation to send troops so the number of forces could at least be balanced and maintain the stalemate status of the conflict. However, this did not happen. This may have been due to the possibility that direct military intervention by Russia could have escalated the conflict and drawn in other regional powers like Turkey. Russia might have preferred to avoid getting embroiled in a wider war.

The notion that Armenia was under the impression that it had Russia as an ally in this war is further reinforced by the Ambassador of Armenia to the United States. In March of 2024 during a meeting/discussion with H.E. Lilit Makunts, Ambassador of the Republic of Armenia to the USA, Armenia stated that currently there is a consensus on the need for Armenia to diversify its foreign policy and build stronger alliances to navigate the complex geopolitical landscape effectively, as Armenia felt completely alone during the war. Additionally, she affirmed that the belief that Russia would provide security was once considered a guarantee, but this assumption proved unreliable when the interests of their strategic partners diverged. It is understood that countries prioritize their national security interests, and if a nation relies entirely on one partner, it becomes obligated to heed their demands. Armenia needed to maintain its relationship with Russia to secure any security guarantees they knew they had, like military equipment, or a

chance of having reinforcements if a war broke out. They might have avoided actions that could have angered Russia, fearing jeopardizing their security lifeline.

Armenia may have gone forward with the war rather than immediately surrender Nagorno-Karabakh because they thought they had a fighting chance with Russia's support under the CSTO pact and their arms deal. This does not explain, however, why Armenia did not surrender the lands and stop fighting sooner once they realized that Russia would not help beyond mediating ceasefires and employing "peacekeeping missions." After the European Union Brussels summit in 2021, Pashinyan clarified that the simultaneous withdrawal of troops was never a precondition for Armenia. He emphasized the need for a secure and stable environment for a normal delimitation process, which he believes is lacking along the current Armenian-Azerbaijani border. Thus, when the fighting started, Armenia may have been reluctant to surrender the lands without a concrete plan for ensuring the security and stability of the region.

Whether Armenia employed a strategy of "letting go" of Nagorno-Karabakh to achieve domestic political goals is unlikely. This strategy would be a potential parallel with Mikhail Gorbachev's approach in the Soviet Union; just as Gorbachev may have viewed letting go of the Eastern Bloc as necessary for internal democratization, it may appear that the Armenian government could have seen relinquishing control of Nagorno-Karabakh as a way to weaken Russia's influence and pursue a more independent path, but the Soviet Union and Armenia face vastly different historical, political, and social contexts, making a direct comparison problematic. Additionally, there's no concrete evidence suggesting the Armenian government deliberately aimed to lose control of Nagorno-Karabakh given that they attempted to fight the war. Furthermore, even if the Armenian government entertained such a strategy, the war's outcome significantly backfired. Instead of weakening Russia's influence, it arguably strengthened it due

to Russia's role in the ceasefire agreement. Additionally, losing control of Nagorno-Karabakh sparked immense public outrage and weakened the government's position.

6 Findings & Conclusion: Armenia's lack of conciliatory offers

In hindsight, Armenia could have offered to surrender the lands surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh or the territory itself before the 2020 war with the condition that the Armenian citizens could have special rights and protections. Although doing so would reverse the victory of the First Nagorno-Karabakh war and cause much backlash from the Armenian people, the looming threats by Azerbaijan of a military advancement, as well as the years they spent investing in their military technology capabilities, meant a war was coming if concessions were not going to be made at the negotiating table. Armenia was at a disadvantage in terms of its military capabilities and international allies, which is why it is a wonder that concessions were not made given the credible threats (demonstrated by various border skirmishes over the years) to prevent the loss of thousands of lives. It is possible that Armenia may have been willing to surrender Nagorno-Karabakh once the 2020 war began, but required Russia's mediation for the brokering of a ceasefire. The lack of details about the conversations between Russia and Armenia during the 44-Day War leaves room for speculation that Russia allowed the war to prolong before interfering, potentially because of its preoccupation with its invasion of Ukraine, or potentially because it wanted Armenia to suffer a loss great enough to be forced to give up the lands after 30 years of advocating for Nagorno-Karabakh to be its own state as punishment for turning its diplomatic efforts away from Russia and toward the West.

Given the sentiments by the Ambassador of Armenia to the United States and the Prime Minister, it appears that it was an overestimated reliance on Russia that boasted Armenia's

confidence to remain uncompromising in the frozen conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh. Given that Armenia was evidently weak in comparison to the Azerbaijani military, it is only reasonable to assume that Armenia did not believe it was completely alone in this battle and expected that it had one ally, Russia, who would defend Karabakh against the Azerbaijani military.

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