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Foreign Perspective on the Russian Role in the Conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan

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Background

Following the Russo-Persian War of 1804-1813, Iran ceded a number of territories in the South Caucasus to the Russian Empire. Among them was an enclave that under the Kremlin rule came to be known as Nagorno Karabakh.¹ Armenians traditionally call it Artsakh. Christian Armenians and Turkic Azeris historically lived in this area—generally-speaking, in peace.

Following the Bolshevik Revolution, the Soviet government, not unlike its tsarist predecessor, controlled the people in the region as it did with all minorities within its borders—by keeping them divided. Thus, in July 1923, the Kremlin established the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast made up of an ethnic Armenian majority, but located within the Soviet Azerbaijan. As the Soviet Union was coming to collapse, in late 1980's, ethnic Armenians began to talk of Karabakh joining Armenia. In February 1988 Karabakh's parliament voted to join Armenia, and first violent clashes ensued, though they remained small and localized. In 1991, Armenia and Azerbaijan gained independence, and soon afterwards, in early 1992, the conflict grew into full-blown regional war.²

Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) created the Minsk Group, co-chaired by the US, France, and Russia, in March 1992 to advance a peace settlement. Moscow, for its part, played a role both in peace and war. The Kremlin supported both Armenia and Azerbaijan, and supplied both with weapons. Altogether fighting lasted six years, from 1988-1994. Reportedly, approximately 30,000 people died and a million became refugees. To put these numbers into context, at the time hostilities broke out, less than 100,000 people lived in Karabakh.³

In 1994, Moscow brokered a ceasefire that left Karabakh and several additional Azeri districts around Karabakh in Armenia, and occupied a buffer zone that linked Armenia with Karabakh. Moscow stationed Russian troops in Armenia in 1995 as part of a joint air defense system of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and in August 1997 the two countries signed an important treaty on friendship, cooperation, and mutual assistance. Over time, Russia gained far-reaching control of the country—militarily and economically. While Russia supported both Armenia and Azerbaijan, it was always closer to Armenia.

Over the years, both Armenia's and Azerbaijan's positions over Karabakh ossified. The Minsk Group continued ostensive efforts to resolve the conflict with no resolution to date. For Moscow, one of the co-chairs of the Minsk Group, keeping the conflict simmering helps to control the South Caucasus. From

¹ Nagorno, or "Nagorny," as it is pronounced in Russian, means mountainous. Karabakh, derived from Turkic and Persian, means "black garden," or "black vineyard," a word Georgian and Persian sources utilized in the 13th and 14th centuries when referring to this area.

² Brenda Shaffer, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/armenia/2014-05-03/nagorno-karabakh-after-crimea>

³ A useful book on Armenia and Azerbaijan is by Thomas deWaal, *The Black Garden, Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War*, New York University Press: New York, 2003

Moscow's perspective, as long as the conflict remains unresolved, there is reason for Russia to remain in the region. Armenia then cannot join the West. It remains politically isolated, with no one else to turn to but Russia. Indeed, Armenia's lack of normalization of relations with Turkey in particular prevents Armenia from leaving Moscow's orbit—such normalization would take Armenia out of its international isolation. Nor could Azerbaijan engage with the West and NATO in a more meaningful way than it has to date.

Both Armenia and Azerbaijan regularly violated the ceasefire since 1994. Yet in April 2016 the deadliest to date skirmish over Karabakh erupted and lasted four days before both sides announced a ceasefire. Dozens died and over three hundred wounded. After this incident, Armenia and Azerbaijan claimed both had casualties throughout the following year,⁴ while Moscow mediated several meetings between senior Armenian and Azeri officials regarding Karabakh, with no tangible results.⁵

Spring 2018: Armenia's Velvet Revolution

On March 31, Armenian parliamentarian Nikol Pashinyan began a small anti-government protest, entitled "My Step." It began in Gyumri, Armenia's second largest city and home to Russia's 102nd Military Base. The protest was only dozens-large, but by the time it reached Yerevan on April 13 it grew into the thousands. Protests continued daily until April 22,nd when Pashinyan entered brief talks with Armenian prime minister Serzh Sargsyan. The talks soon collapsed and the authorities arrested Pashinyan. However, they released him the next day and the soldiers joined the protests. Sargsyan resigned. "I was wrong," he said. These events came to be known as the Velvet Revolution.

To put these events into context, Sargsyan came to power in April 2008 amidst protests to what many in Armenia believed was a stolen election. At least ten people died as the result of the protests. Then, in December 2015, Armenia held a referendum that amended the country's constitution. The amendment granted Sargsyan power to become prime minister after serving two consecutive presidential terms. Many Armenians viewed the referendum as illegitimate, and passed amidst widespread irregularities for no other reason than for Sargsyan to remain in power beyond his second presidential term.⁶ On April 9, 2018, Sargsyan's second presidential term ended but he assumed role of prime minister, in accordance with the new constitution. This is the context in which Pashinyan began the anti-government protest.

Occasional anti-government protests erupted in Armenia since the 2015 referendum. Some experts in Russia warned -- at least three years prior to April 2018 --about the possibility that these protest may

⁴ "Nagorno-Karabakh violence: Worst clashes in decades kill dozens," *BBC*, April 3, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35949991>

"Armenian-Backed Separatists Say Three Soldiers Killed by Azeri Forces," *US News and World Report*, June 16, 2017. <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-06-16/armenian-backed-separatists-say-three-soldiers-killed-by-azeri-forces>

⁵ Denis Dyomkin, Christian Lowe, "Russia styles itself lead mediator in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict," *Reuters*, April 7, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nagorno-karabakh/russia-styles-itself-lead-mediator-in-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-idUSKCN0X41Y6>

⁶ "Armenia fraud claims mar referendum on constitution," *BBC*, December 7, 2015

These events also bore striking similarities to Russian President Vladimir Putin ostensibly taking on the role of Prime Minister between 2008-2012 with Dmitry Medvedev serving as the president; yet in reality, many in Russia viewed this switch as another method for Putin to hold onto the reins of power.

grow.⁷ So did Russia-watchers in the West.⁸ Thus, while previous protests in Armenia gained few followers, its Velvet revolution was both unprecedented and yet consistent with a growing trend of dissatisfaction of Armenians with their government, especially among the country's youth. These individuals were not traumatized by the terrors the Soviet Union and felt they had the right to demand a better government.

To show how far-reaching the Velvet Revolution has been and what precisely the revolution stood for, we can observe prominent Armenian political scientist Stepan Grigoryan's statements. In late July 2018, he said about the Revolution's aftermath, as reported by liberal-leaning RTVi, "Even in a sick dream, I could not have dreamt six months ago that laws in Armenia would begin to work for everyone...There are no people outside the law. [Former Armenian president] Robert Kocharyan was summoned as part of investigative actions, tomorrow they can call Serzh Sargsyan! And this is very important."⁹ Grigoryan is referring to Armenia's Special Investigative Service (SIS) charging Kocharyan, in late July, with illegal seizure of state power in March 2008. As part of Pashinyan's anti-corruption efforts, the committee began investigations of individuals in Sarkisian's formerly ruling Republican party, and Kocharyan was one of them.¹⁰

Meanwhile, May 2018 also marked the 100th anniversary of the declaration of independence of all three South Caucasian republics and all three held celebrations.

Armenia and Azerbaijan on Karabakh Post-Velvet Revolution

When it comes to Karabakh after the Velvet Revolution, Azerbaijan's president Aliiev said at a Ministers Cabinet Meeting, as reported by Kremlin controlled news outlets such as RIA Novosti, that he hopes for a "constructive" position on Karabakh from Armenia's new government and that it "doesn't repeat the mistakes" of the country's previous leadership. He didn't say what those mistakes are, but said that the "basis for the settlement of the conflict lies in the UN Security Council resolution, which demands the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Armenian forces from occupied territories." He added that Azerbaijan will continue to increase defense expenditures.¹¹

Pashinyan, for his part, said on May 9, during his visit to Stepanakert—historically Armenian leadership visits Karabakh on this date, "I am ready for negotiations on the Karabakh settlement within the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group. But I think that this negotiating format cannot be complete unless

⁷ Доклад "Минченко Консалтинг": "Оценка политических рисков в регионе Закавказья (Южного Кавказа)" August 19, 2015, http://www.minchenko.ru/analitika/analitika_56.html

⁸ Leonid Bershidsky "Kremlin Fears a Revolution in Armenia. Protests against a corrupt Russian-owned energy monopoly won't die down in Yerevan," Bloomberg, June 24, 2015, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2015-06-24/kremlin-fears-a-revolution-in-armenia>

⁹ "Десять лет спустя. Хроника событий, которые привели на допрос бывшего президента Армении," RTVi, July 26, 2018 <https://rtvi.com/stories/khronika-sobytyy-kotorye-priveli-na-dopros-byvshego-prezidenta-armenii/>

¹⁰ "Armenia charges ex-president Kocharyan, seeks his arrest," Reuters, July 26, 2018 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-armenia-kocharyan/armenia-charges-ex-president-kocharyan-seeks-his-arrest-idUSKBN1KG2Y6>

"Ex-Armenian President Robert Kocharian arrested," Deutsch-Welle, July 28, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/ex-armenian-president-robert-kocharian-arrested/a-44860220>

¹¹ <https://ria.ru/world/20180709/1524260958.html>

the immediate side of the conflict participates in it – Artsakh,”¹² Together, Aliev and Pashinyan’s statements show the different positions each country takes towards Karabakh—and these differences help explain why tensions continued to build in the months ahead.

Why Karabakh Matters to Moscow

The Karabakh conflict (along with other “frozen conflicts” in the post-Soviet space) is important for Moscow among other reasons, as a bargaining chip with the West on different issues. This has been one among persistent themes of Moscow’s relationship with the West, along with insistence to keep post-Soviet states in Moscow’s sphere of influence.

For example, Russia foreign minister Sergei Lavrov alluded to this point in September 2017, when he referred to a June 2008 Moscow proposal for a new European security agreement which, according to experts would replace NATO and the OSCE.¹³ Lavrov said that if only the West agreed to Moscow’s proposed security framework in Europe, “many conflicts preserved in Europe would have been settled long ago...the Ukrainian crisis would not exist at all.”¹⁴

This context is important for understanding Moscow’s approach to Karabakh. Indeed, Putin’s advisor Sergey Glazyev said in October 2017, “if we want peace in the Caucasus, we need to integrate the entire Caucasus into the Eurasian Union”¹⁵ It is a sentiment he echoed from several years ago, when he wrote in *Russia in Global Affairs*, “An unbiased analysis reveals purely political motives behind the EU’s Eastern Partnership policy, aimed at blocking opportunities for former Soviet republics to participate in Eurasian economic integration with Russia.” Armenia is among those countries which are part of the EU Eastern Partnership. Glazyev added, “All ‘color’ revolutions inspired by the West in the post-Soviet space were rooted in frenzied Russophobia and aimed at preventing integration with Russia.”¹⁶

Another color Revolution?

The Velvet Revolution events share many similarities with other previous protests throughout the post-Soviet space that took place since early 2000’s. Yet the Armenian protest ostensibly had nothing to do with Russia. They were fundamentally about the Armenian government’s corruption. The protestors did not use pro-EU or anti-Kremlin slogans nor waive EU flags as the Ukrainians had done during Ukraine’s 2014 Maidan protests. Unlike the previous protests in the post-Soviet space, Armenia was not making any moves away from the Kremlin and closer to the West. Pashinyan publically went out of his way to show Moscow that he had no interest in Armenia leaving the Kremlin’s orbit. Soon after he became Prime Minister, Pashinyan said he hoped to meet Putin soon.

¹² <http://www.interfax.ru/world/611934>

¹³ The original text used to be published on the Kremlin.ru office site, yet is no longer available from there. However, the proposal was widely covered in the press. For instance, see the following article: “Russia Unveils Proposal For European Security Treaty,” RFE/RL, November 30, 2009, https://www.rferl.org/a/Russia_Unveils_Proposal_For_European_Security_Treaty/1891161.html

¹⁴ “Лавров: РФ при любом развитии событий с НАТО сможет отстоять свой суверенитет,” September 1, 2017, <http://tass.ru/politika/4523873>

¹⁵ “Советник Путина: Если мы хотим мира на Кавказе, надо весь Кавказ интегрировать в Евразийский союз.” October 6, 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yvuhPdxemCQ>

¹⁶ Sergey Glazyev, “Who Stands to Win? *Russia in Global Affairs*, December 27, 2013 <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Who-Stands-to-Win-16288>

Moscow's response to Armenia's revolution was uncharacteristically muted. Publically, Moscow did not accuse the US of another color revolution, as it had done in the past with protests throughout the post-Soviet space, in the Middle East, and within Russia itself.¹⁷ After Putin congratulated Sargsyan on April 17, on his assumption of his new role as prime minister,¹⁸ press coverage in Russia of Armenia's revolution was overall limited. Russia's only remaining independent newspaper, for example, did cover the protest, focusing especially on the role of the youth.¹⁹ But overall there were few reports.

Russian analysts offered a variety of explanations for Moscow's response to the Velvet Revolution. "It's not a colour revolution," said Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of the influential journal *Russia in Global Affairs* (with close ties to the Kremlin), "Everybody understands that the roots of this crisis in Armenia are domestic - unlike several previous cases in the post-Soviet space, where international presence was pretty clear."²⁰

Still, domestic causes historically did not stop Moscow from inventing Western interference— in Armenia and elsewhere.²¹ This casts doubt on the explanation that Moscow simply felt these were internal events. One possible explanation offered by Russian military analyst Pavel Baev is that the Kremlin was taken by surprise and didn't know how to react, and Syria may ultimately be part of the answer.²² Another explanation, offered in a Western press report by Reuters, whose reporter interviewed protest leaders close to Pashinyan, notes that Armenian protest leadership had high-level contacts with the Kremlin. Reuters found no evidence that Moscow actively involved itself in events, but by simply standing by, rather than helping Sargsyan as Moscow had done in Ukraine with Yanukovich, it was easier for the protestors to overthrow the government quickly and without bloodshed. Indeed, prior to resigning Sargsyan was in touch with Moscow. As Reuters described it, Moscow turned into a "de-facto kingmaker" of Armenia's revolution.²³

Ultimately, whatever the true reasons for Moscow's publically muted reaction, local sources suggest Moscow was indeed unhappy with the Velvet Revolution, and Moscow's steps after the revolution suggest that this was the case. Moreover, Pashinyan soon had a successful visit to the NATO summit in

¹⁷ Notably, this was Moscow's second similar response in recent years. Its first similar response was to protests in Iran in early 2018. Though these protests did not result in a revolution and change of government, unlike in Armenia, this is noteworthy as Putin had accused other protestors of being sponsored by the US even when they didn't result in a revolution.

¹⁸ "Телефонный разговор с Премьер-министром Армении Сержем Саргсяном," *Kremlin.ru*, April 17, 2018 <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57274>

¹⁹ "Они поступают так, как тридцать лет назад поступали мы," *Novaya Gazeta*, May 7, 2018,

<https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/05/07/76396-oni-postupayut-tak-kak-tridtsat-let-nazad-postupali-my>

²⁰ Rayhan Demytrie, "Why Armenia 'Velvet Revolution' won without a bullet fired,"

May 1, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43948181>

²¹ During late 2011—early 2012 protests in Russia, when the largest protests in Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union broke out initially over what many Russian citizens saw as fraudulent parliamentary election and later demanded Putin to step down, the protestors did not waive use pro-European or pro-American symbols.

²² Pavel Baev, "What explains Russia's uncharacteristic indifference to the revolution in Armenia?" *Brookings*, May 7, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/05/07/what-explains-russias-uncharacteristic-indifference-to-the-revolution-in-armenia/>

²³ Margarita Antidze, "How Russia played silent kingmaker in Armenia's revolution," *Reuters*, May 8, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-armenia-politics-russia-insight/how-russia-played-silent-kingmaker-in-armenias-revolution-idUSKBN1I92TE>

Brussels, which only added to Moscow's concerns. The Armenian government officially stated that one of the reasons for going to the summit was to "understand how Azerbaijan's army works."²⁴

Moscow Moves Closer to Azerbaijan

Moscow soon began showing dissatisfaction with the situation in Armenia by moving ostensibly closer to Azerbaijan politically and militarily.

At the end of June, a high-level Russian delegation, headed by influential Duma speaker Vyacheslav Volodin, came to Baku. Volodin praised the Azeri government, in particular its "correct," "consistent," or "constructive" position on the Karabakh conflict, depending on different Russian translations.²⁵ Only days afterwards, on July 1, a conference entitled "Azerbaijan. Russia's only ally in the Caucasus" was held in the Jojug Marjanli village of Azerbaijan's Jabrayil district which Azeri press described as "liberated from the Armenian occupation"²⁶ Such title alone sent a clear message to Yerevan. The conference received widespread coverage in Russian-language press, in the region and beyond, especially by key Kremlin propaganda outlets such as Sputnik. This broad coverage was unlikely accidental. Comments made by participants reveal Moscow's perspective on the developing situation in Armenia, and how it intended to handle it.

A number of prominent Russian figures attended the event, most notably the well-known International Eurasian Movement leader Alexander Dugin, pro-Kremlin Russian journalist Maksim Shevchenko, State Duma deputy chairman Dmitry Savelyev, assistant to the Speaker of the State Duma of Russia Vladislav Kalkhidov, and Russian community of Azerbaijan chairman Mikhail Zabelin.

Dugin is a Russian far right thinker who proclaims Russia as a Eurasian power with a special path. His influence appears to have waned in recent years. Still, according to a recent Western press report, his book is required reading in the Russian military for anyone ranked higher than a colonel.²⁷

"Recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh as a part of Azerbaijan is the official and single position of the Russian Federation. The entire world community believes the same," said Dugin in his conference-opening remarks²⁸ Karabakh, he said, is "an integral part of Azerbaijan, and the presence of Russian political figures on Karabakh ground shows that Russia at both the public and state level fully supports

²⁴ <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3688045>

²⁵ "Спикер Госдумы РФ: Азербайджан всегда занимал правильную и конструктивную позицию по Карабаху," <http://www.panarmenian.net/eng/news/257140/>
+ add'l source

²⁶ "Дугин: наш визит в Карабах - символ отношения российских интеллектуалов к этой проблеме," Sputnik, July 1, 2018, <https://ru.sputnik.az/karabakh/20180701/416011071/dugin-russia-karabax-vizit.html>
<https://ru.sputnik.az/karabakh/20180701/416011071/dugin-russia-karabax-vizit.html>

"Jojug Marjanli hosts 'Azerbaijan - Russia's only ally in Caucasus' conference," Trend.az, July 1, 2018, <https://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/2923494.html>

²⁷ Alan Gilbert, "The Far-Right Book Every Russian General Reads," *The Daily Beast*, February 27, 2018, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-far-right-book-every-russian-general-reads>

Aleksandr Dugin: 'We have our special Russian truth' - BBC Newsnight, October 28, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGunRKWtWBs>

²⁸ "Десант из Москвы в Карабахе," Vesti.az, July 9, 2018 <http://vesti.az/politika/desant-iz-moskvy-v-karabakhe-367974>

the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan.” Saveliev, whose statement perhaps had more clout than Dugin’s, went as far as to suggest that Karabakh should be returned to Azerbaijan.

Russian political scientist Valeriy Korovin, speaking at the conference, said that a pro-Russian Armenia became a “bone in the throat of the West,” and the recent revolution in Armenia was instigated by the West, just as it did in Ukraine and Georgia. “All talk about the special case of Armenia, and that the people came out to the streets against corruption — it’s nonsense. This is an American-prepared Maidan, and there is nothing special about this,” he said. He added, “Azerbaijan has become Russia’s only ally. And this is a fact. As for Georgia, it was the first to be captured by the Americans. At the moment, it is with Azerbaijan that Russia has the most strategic relations.”²⁹

Zabelin said that the Azerbaijani people have a deep historical memory. He remembers how, “together with the Russian people, they opposed fascism, and then Armenian aggression.” He also discussed how many Russians in the first years of the Karabakh war joined the ranks of the Azerbaijani army and fought for the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan.³⁰ The mention of fascism is important because the Russian and post-Soviet space societies haven’t healed from the traumas of World War II, and the Kremlin invokes fascism domestically to reinforce these traumas, and to rally support for its external interventions.

Chief editor of *National Defense* magazine³¹Igor Korotchenko highlighted the importance of Russia’s military relationship with Azerbaijan. “We carefully follow the process of building of Azerbaijan’s army. Russia supplies Azerbaijan with weapons and it is interested in strengthening the army of your country,” he said, and added, “However, we are concerned about the activation of Washington in the region. Let it be heard: we don’t need Uncle Sam here. Russia must cover Azerbaijan’s airspace, and it can become the guarantor of an independent and stable country in this prosperous corner of the South Caucasus.”³²

Korotchenko didn’t think Pashinyan would turn away from Moscow, as it would have catastrophic consequences for Armenia, even as this government, which is described as “populist”, is full of incompetent people and people of “questionable backgrounds.” Pashinyan in his view came to power as a result of a coup, which wasn’t without US interference—“otherwise why would the US need to keep such a large diplomatic corp in Yerevan,” but ultimately the Armenian people have to live with this government and Moscow is interested in stability in Armenia.³³

Dugin, too, underscored the “rapid rapprochement between Russia and Azerbaijan, which is the restoration of historical justice. Azerbaijan is Russia’s main partner in the South Caucasus.” Armenia he said is “also our friend and partner. But this friendship and partnership can in no way be considered as directed against Azerbaijan.” Dugin also highlighted the wider geostrategic role of Russia’s relationship with Azerbaijan. “Baku plays a key role in Russia’s relations with Turkey and Iran. We are strategic partners, both with the Turks, and with the Iranians. Together we are building our common policy on

²⁹ “Валерий Коровин: «Американцы захватили Армению,” Haqqin.Az July 1, 2018, <https://haqqin.az/news/131613>

³⁰ “Валерий Коровин: «Американцы захватили Армению,” Haqqin.Az July 1, 2018, <https://haqqin.az/news/131613>

³¹Национальная оборона magazine homepage: <http://www.oborona.ru/>

³² “Валерий Коровин: «Американцы захватили Армению,” Haqqin.Az July 1, 2018, <https://haqqin.az/news/131613>

³³ “Валерий Коровин: «Американцы захватили Армению,” Haqqin.Az July 1, 2018, <https://haqqin.az/news/131613>

Syria. And if earlier it was only about the unions of Russia with these countries, now it is a question of the place of Baku in these unions. And I believe that this is the central place,” said Dugin.³⁴

Upon the conference’s conclusion, the participants, as Sputnik described it, “visited the line of contact with Nagorno-Karabakh.” They climbed on top of Leletepa, the control of which was established by Azerbaijan after the April 2016 military operations.³⁵

Not surprisingly, the Armenian government reacted negatively to the conference, though it was careful not to antagonize the Kremlin. The Armenian embassy to Russia issued a statement that Saveliev’s comments threatened a peaceful resolution of the Karabakh conflict.³⁶ Armenian Foreign Affairs Minister Zograb Mnatsakyan said, “This [the conference] is a negative phenomenon.” At the same time, he noted, according to Sputnik, that Armenia is consistently developing relations with Russia, and Pashinyan had already met twice with Putin. “[I]n this sense there is a positive dynamic,” he said, and referring to the conference, “What’s happening in parallel in no way can be welcomed.”³⁷

The reaction within the Armenian public was more direct. Armenian analyst Tigran Khzmalyan wrote an article in Kasparov.ru, founded by Russia’s world chess champion and human right and opposition leader Garry Kasparov. His article helps shed light on Moscow’s intentions towards Armenia and Azerbaijan. “The new Armenian government and the majority of the Armenian people,” writes Khzmalyan, “are under not the slightest illusion about the role and true intentions of the Kremlin in the region, especially after the long history where Russia has used the war and threat of war over Karabakh as a means of keeping the Armenians in line.” Khzmalyan believes Moscow is looking to create brief -- say three or four days -- armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Karabakh, which would give Azerbaijan a chance to seize territory. Armenia then would call Moscow for help. Moscow would bring Russian “peacekeepers,” securing an additional military foothold, gain recognition for preventing a major conflict and at the same time hold leverage over both Armenia and Azerbaijan.³⁸

Khzmalyan said these reasons give cause for concern to the Armenian government and its people: Russia’s historic “tradition” of aggression following major international sporting events, such as this year’s World Cup, and “ever increasing signs of preparations for just such an outcome.”

Khamalyan observed that the movement of Russian units on the ground is similar to those during 2016, prior to major clashes. “Then and now, Moscow is bringing Russian forces to points it considers most important on the Karabakh front, he says—the Mardakert district and in Goradiz on the Iranian border.” These are most important, he says, because north-south pipelines could flow between Russia and Iran

³⁴ “Дугин: наш визит в Карабах - символ отношения российских интеллектуалов к этой проблеме,” July 1, 2018, <https://ru.sputnik.az/karabakh/20180701/416011071/dugin-russia-karabax-vizit.html>

³⁵ “Глава МИД Армении прокомментировал заявления российских экспертов в Баку,” Sputnik, July 7, 2018 <https://ru.armeniasputnik.am/politics/20180707/13100229/glava-mid-armenii-osudil-zayavleniya-rossijskih-ehkspertov-v-baku.html>

³⁶ “ ‘Каждое слово – выстрел’: посольство Армении о заявлении Савельева в Азербайджан,” Sputnik, July 3, 2018, <https://ru.armeniasputnik.am/politics/20180703/13014513/posolstvo-armenii-o-zayavlenii-saveleva-v-azerbajdzhane.html>

³⁷ “Глава МИД Армении прокомментировал заявления российских экспертов в Баку,” Sputnik, July 7, 2018 <https://ru.armeniasputnik.am/politics/20180707/13100229/glava-mid-armenii-osudil-zayavleniya-rossijskih-ehkspertov-v-baku.html>

³⁸ Tigran Kzmalyan, “Горячее лето 2018 года,” Kasparov.ru, July 13, 2018, kasparov.ru/material.php?id=5B48AE073DB99

through these areas. Given Russia's growing role in the Middle East this is especially important according to Khamalyan.³⁹

Other Russian language press reports indicated that the situation escalated in northwestern Nakhchivan, an Azerbaijani enclave, close to Armenia's border. Azerbaijan held military exercises there. This situation, according to well-known Russian Caucasus expert Sergei Markedonov, risked an escalation directly on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border.⁴⁰ One English-language press article suggested Azerbaijan may have been trying to take advantage of instability during Armenian protests to put more pressure on Yerevan. However, according to the article, it's hard to imagine they could have done so without Moscow's approval.⁴¹

The publically reported reaction to the conference in Moscow is also noteworthy. Speaking at a famous talk show "Evening with Vladimir Solovyev" on Rossiya-1 leading TV, a leading propaganda channel in Russia, Russian parliamentarian and Middle East expert Semyon Bogdasarov said that deputy Dmitry Saveliev should be kicked out of his party for his remarks that Karabakh should be returned to Azerbaijan. "Destroy him, drive him out, he's the enemy of the Russian Federation," boomed Bogasarov.⁴² Bogdasarov is a pro-Armenian Russian parliamentarian who in late 2015 defended Russia's Syria intervention on the same show, claiming, "if there was no Syria, there would be no Russia."⁴³

Russian Military Exercises in Armenia

As Moscow moved closer to Azerbaijan it also grew more active in Armenia. On July 17, Moscow carried out unannounced military exercises in the Armenian village of Panik. The exercises scared local residents, who documented their encounter with the Russian soldiers on video. A Russian military official ended up apologizing for the unannounced exercises.⁴⁴ Russian press reports, though, didn't necessarily mention that these exercises were unannounced.⁴⁵

Despite reliance on Russia for security, many in Armenia have been resentful of Russia's military presence in their country. Following the Velvet Revolution, several Russian-language regional sites reprinted an article without a byline, entitled "Riot in Gyumri: Why does Armenia need Russian parasites

³⁹ Tigran Kzmalyan, "Горячее лето 2018 года, Kasparov.ru, July 13, 2018, kasparov.ru/material.php?id=5B48AE073DB99

⁴⁰ <http://newsarmenia.am/news/politics/markedonov-napisal-ob-opasnosti-ekskalatsii-v-nakhichevane-dlya-erevana-baku-i-moskvy/>

⁴¹ <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/azerbaijan-asserts-power-south-caucasus/>

⁴² "Изгоните Савельева за заявления в Азербайджане" - Багдасаров обратился к Жириновскому," July 7, 2018 <https://ru.armeniasputnik.am/politics/20180704/13039682/video-bagdasarov-upreknul-zhirinovskogo.html>

⁴³ The original video in Russian appears to no longer be available, but please see the following article for a reference to this video: Anna Borshchevskaya, "Russia's Syria Propaganda," November 11, 2015, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/annaborshchevskaya/2015/11/11/russias-syria-propaganda/#1d26c9595aea>

⁴⁴ The original Facebook video is no longer available online, but this article describes the incident: Joshua Kucera, "Unannounced Russian military exercises in Armenia panic residents," July 18, 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/s/unannounced-russian-military-exercises-in-armenia-panic-residents>

⁴⁵ <http://vzglyad.az/news/113597/Российская-армия-проводит-учения-в-Армении.html>

in epaulets? ⁴⁶ Other outlets, including Azeri ones, quickly reprinted the article and U-Tube ran an audio of this article with pictures of protests against Russian “occupation” in Armenia.

According to the article, the question of whether Armenia needed Russian troops within its borders existed since 1992. Many, according to the article, understood that the presence of Russian troops closes the door to NATO and the West for Europe, but at the time felt there was no other choice in the face of aggression from Azerbaijan. Yet, the article continues, following a mass murder episode in Gyumri in January 2015, and the fact that Russia “openly ignored Azerbaijan’s aggression against the Armenian government in April 2016,” the society, the article goes, increasingly raised questions about Russian military presence in Armenia. “We already know the answers to some of the questions,” the article states, “these [Russian] troops are more needed not by Armenia, but by Russia, which, thanks to this, retains its military and political presence in the region. And the Russian military protects not us, but their own interests, which in recent years run counter to the national interests of Armenia.”

Finally, the article points out that Armenia has to spend a lot of resources maintaining the Russian military. An illustrative example is Russia refusing to fix a road that needed repairs after the Russian military drove heavy military equipment over it. Given the recent events of the Velvet Revolution even the Armenian government is increasingly questioning the Russian presence.⁴⁷

The article didn’t go unnoticed. The Caucasian Knot published an article by a commentator who questions whether the article was an isolated view or one prevalent in Armenia. The author also says that Armenia needs Russia far more than Russia needs Armenia, that the article is likely “fake news,” but still warrants discussion, and referred to Armenians in the article as “elves,” most likely meaning “internet trolls.”⁴⁸

Russian Arms Sales to Armenia and Azerbaijan

In addition to providing Armenia security guarantees, Russia historically has been the main arms supplier to both Armenia and Azerbaijan, which placed Moscow in a position of a power broker between the two countries. This remains the case today. When it comes to Armenia, Moscow often provides Yerevan long-term credit on weaponry, since Armenia often lacks funds. To give an example, in 2015, Moscow granted Yerevan a \$200 million credit to purchase advanced Russian weaponry. In July of this year, press reports indicated that Moscow completed its deliveries, which included Smerch multiple missile launchers, Igla-S surface-to-air missile systems and missiles, and Avtobaza-M ground-based radio reconnaissance systems.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ “Зачем Армении русские дармоеды в погонах?” Armenianreport.com, July 7, 2018.

<http://armenianreport.com/pubs/191721/>

“БУНТ в Гюмри: Зачем Армении русские дармоеды в погонах? – НЕНАВИСТЬ,” July 9, 2018,

<http://www.vesti.az/v-mire/bunt-v-gyumri-zachem-armenii-russkie-darmoedy-v-pogonakh-nenavist-367903>

“ГЮМРИ: От кого они нас защищают и защищают ли вообще?,” July 9, 2018

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xN3_O-MobU

⁴⁷ “Зачем Армении русские дармоеды в погонах?” Armenianreport.com, July 7, 2018.

<http://armenianreport.com/pubs/191721/>

⁴⁸ BERG..man Tbilisi, “Зачем Армении русские дармодеды.” Вопрос серьезно стоит в Армении или это одинокий выкрик?” Kavkazkiy Uzel, July 9, 2018. <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/blogs/378/posts/33755>

⁴⁹ <http://www.ntv.ru/novosti/2050661/>

<https://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=3041091>

Virtually concurrently, Russian RIA Novosti published an article stating that Yerevan is in advanced stages of negotiations to obtain Russia's SU-30 SM fighter jets. The article also linked to Pashinayn's Facebook page, posting a selfie of himself inside a SU-30 jet, which he said is already in Armenia.⁵⁰ In addition, only a few months earlier, in March, press reports indicated Moscow will deliver weapons to Armenia in 2018 as part of a separate \$100 million credit agreement concluded in October 2017.⁵¹

Moscow's arms dealings raised concerns among both sides regarding who Moscow supports more. In April 2016, Moscow provided Armenia with Iskander (SS-26 Stone) short-range, mobile ballistic missile systems, which raised concerns in Azerbaijan. Baku then began looking for other weaponry suppliers, to have options in addition to Moscow.⁵² In June this year, press reports indicated that Azerbaijan received Polonez⁵³ multiple rocket launch system from Belarus, Turkish high precision cruise missiles,⁵⁴ and Israeli-made air and missile defense system.⁵⁵ Baku also reportedly showcased Bell-412 helicopters during a military parade on the Day of Armed Forces which also coincided with the centennial celebration.⁵⁶ Bell reportedly was the first non-Soviet or Russian-made helicopter displayed in military parades in Azerbaijan.⁵⁷ Kavkazskiy Uzel interviewed several regional analysts who interpreted the display of weaponry during the parade as a demonstration for war readiness in Karabakh.⁵⁸ Some Russian analysts also suggested that preparations for war shouldn't be ruled out.⁵⁹

Military Build-up and Bellicose Rhetoric in Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan meanwhile held large-scale military exercises in March and July of this year, according to press reports.⁶⁰ Sputnik described them ambiguously, raising the question of whether they are about "saber-rattling," and noting that events in the Middle East tend to echo in Karabakh, and the "stand-off" between the West and Russia in Syria may have similar effects.⁶¹

⁵⁰ Leonid Nersisyan, "Армения приобретёт многоцелевые российские истребители Су-30СМ," RIA Novosti, June 17, 2018, <https://regnum.ru/news/2432592.html>

⁵¹ <http://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/5077097>

⁵² Aleksey Nikolskiy, " 'Искандеры' доехали до Армении," Vedomosti, September 18, 2016 <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2016/09/19/657501-iskanderi-doehali-armenii>
Rashid Shirinov "Azerbaijani MP: Armenia's Iskander missiles threat whole Europe," Azerinews.az, May 30, 2017, <https://www.azernews.az/aggression/113953.html>

⁵³ Азербайджан закупил белорусский «Полонез» https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_D4EDtRms8
<https://defence-blog.com/missiles/azerbaijan-received-newest-polonez-multiple-rocket-launch-system-from-belarus.html>

⁵⁴ <https://defence-blog.com/aviation/azerbaijan-received-turkish-high-precision-cruise-missiles.html>

⁵⁵ <https://defence-blog.com/army/azerbaijani-military-displays-israel-made-air-missile-defence-system.html>

⁵⁶ "В Баку прошел торжественный военный парад по случаю 100-летия Вооруженных сил Азербайджана. На военном параде присутствовал Президент Азербайджана, Верховный главнокомандующий Ильхам Алиев," June 26, 2018 <https://video.azertag.az/ru/video/64512>

⁵⁷ <https://defence-blog.com/aviation/azerbaijan-showcase-recently-received-bell-412-helicopters-military-parade.html>

⁵⁸ «Парад в Баку обозначил готовность Азербайджана к войне за Нагорный Карабах,» Kavkazskiy Uzel, June 27, 2018 <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/322234/>

⁵⁹ <https://eodaily.com/ru/news/2018/03/20/eksperty-ucheniya-azerbaydzhana-podgotovka-k-voyne-v-karabahe>

⁶⁰ <https://mod.gov.az/en/news/azerbaijan-army-to-conduct-large-scale-exercises-21900.html>

<https://www.azernews.az/nation/134423.html>
<https://ria.ru/world/20180309/1516042688.html>

⁶¹ <https://ru.armeniasputnik.am/analytics/20180420/11566544/ucheniya-azerbaijan-peregovori-karabakh.html>

Soon afterwards, speaking first at the opening of a new military town in the village Pirekeshkul Absheron district, and then at the military parade, according to Russian language press reports, Aliiev said that Karabakh is a “primordially-Armenian territory.” He also said that Armenia ignores international resolutions on occupation of this territory, adding that the stronger Baku gets, the closer the resolution of the conflict.⁶² He added that while Azerbaijan wants a peaceful resolution to the conflict, but “won’t accept the territorial occupation, the opponent has to understand that there is no military and strategic object that the Azerbaijani army couldn’t destroy.” Lenta.ru used the following headline reporting these same remarks, “Aliiev gets ready to destroy Armenian infrastructure in Karabakh.”⁶³

“And the settlement of the conflict is very simple,” continued Aliiev, “The territorial integrity of Azerbaijan should be restored,” he said. The message of the land being primordially Azerbaijani he voiced before, at least in earlier months.⁶⁴ Soon after the parade, Baku announced additional large-scale exercises in early July.⁶⁵ The Armenian government interpreted these as either preparation for an offensive in Karabakh, or associated with waiting for an offensive from the Armenian side.⁶⁶

Conclusion

Anna Mkrtchyan, an Armenian analyst writing on the situation in Karabakh in July, observes that an “escalation of the situation” over Karabakh is only a matter of time—a view point that she says has been “actively discussed again in recent days.”⁶⁷

Speaking on July 31, Russia Foreign Minister Lavrov expressed “concern” about the situation in Armenia, and runs “counter to the recent statements by the new leadership of Armenia ‘about the lack of intention to arrange’ the persecution of their predecessors for political reasons,” as reported by Kremlin-controlled TASS.⁶⁸ Senior Russian officials often express concern prior to an intervention—indeed, such was the case in Ukraine, Georgia, and Syria. Furthermore, the situation between Armenia and Azerbaijan is already tense on its own, and an escalation without Moscow’s intervention is highly possible. In the context of Moscow’s history of controlling Armenia and Azerbaijan and manipulating the security situation to fit its purposes, Lavrov’s comment is another reminder that Moscow is likely to continue to use the Armenia –Azerbaijan struggle over Karabakh, however it may pan out in the months ahead, to pursue its own interests.

⁶² https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2017/01/23/n_9596747.shtml

<http://www.militarynews.ru/story.asp?rid=1&nid=484643>

⁶³ “Азербайджан приготовился уничтожить армянскую инфраструктуру в Карабахе,” Lenta.ru, June 26, 2018 <https://lenta.ru/news/2018/06/26/qarabag/>

⁶⁴ Алиев: Сегодняшняя территория Армении — исконно азербайджанские земли Rosbalt, March 20, 2018 <http://www.rosbalt.ru/world/2018/03/20/1690011.html>

⁶⁵ Азербайджан анонсировал учения с использованием ракет и авиации Kavkazskiy Uzel, June 28, 2018 <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/322305/>

⁶⁶ В Минобороны Армении прокомментировали масштабные военные учения в Азербайджане Rosbalt, July 3, 2018 <http://www.rosbalt.ru/world/2018/07/03/1714798.html>

⁶⁷ Анна Mkrtchyan, “Нынешний этап переговоров по Карабаху: тупик или передислокация перед «рестартом» “ July 5, 2018 <https://www.panorama.am/ru/news/2018/07/05/Этап-переговоров-по-Карабаху-тупик/1973845>

⁶⁸ “Лавров: ситуация в Армении вызывает озабоченность у России,” TASS, July 31, 2018, <http://tass.ru/politika/5417800>