

Territory versus Reform Success

WHY REFORMERS ARE BETTER POSITIONED IN GEORGIA THAN IN ARMENIA

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In both Armenia and Georgia, while neither state has achieved democratic consolidation, the role of public debate is especially salient and there is real public power in politics. A key factor in political decisionmaking has been the discussion of national identity and the role of unresolved ethnic and territorial conflicts in the interaction between government and the public. The evolution of the public's understanding of national identity amidst these conflicts, and its role as a key factor in legitimizing political authority, can empower as well as limit government leaders seeking change.

Here I examine how political discussions over the conflicts have intertwined with other political reform programs following the Armenian "Velvet" and Georgian "Rose" revolutions. Given the reality that success in some arenas (like anti-corruption reform) can diminish success in other arenas—for example, maintaining the political economics of contested territories—what will publics prioritize? Will they recognize the tradeoffs? My examination of public opinion polls, as well as lessons from previous governments in both countries, indicates that because Georgian nationalist identity is largely divorced from conflict outcomes, the leadership could make concessions there in order to achieve gains elsewhere. Public opinion in Armenia points in the opposite direction, meaning that new Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's efforts to cull corruption will face resistance if they appear to jeopardize Armenia's hold on Karabakh.

Identity and Legitimizing Founding Narratives

Variations in political conflict perceptions, state narratives, and constituent pressures are important to understand. Domestic political considerations play a key role during conflict negotiation, but also other policies tangle with conflict politics in less

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straightforward ways. In Georgia, counter-narratives about identity and governance may work against strict zero-sum framing of the conflicts, while Armenia has few such counter-narratives. Moreover, Armenia contains a larger number of organized constituency groups able to spoil concessionary opportunities, while Georgia lacks such organized pressures. These countervailing pressures mean that Georgia is relatively free from spoilers, its policymaking options broader, and the political environment more willing to countenance concessions.

Armenia's 2018 revolution and the subsequent reforms portend a difficult time for Yerevan and its new leadership; debates on Nagorno-Karabakh saturate almost every policy reform under consideration. Powerful constituencies exist to pressure the government at every turn. While there is real thirst for reform in Armenia, the proximate interests in maintaining the conflict status quo and protecting the Nagorno-Karabakh de facto government will likely hamstring meaningful reform.

For both Armenia and Georgia, there have been paths for understanding statehood in ethnic exclusivist contours, especially vis-à-vis conflict politics. The violence experienced by both countries in the 1990s promised to create lasting hostilities from an uncompromising nationalist discourse earned through the experience of war. Nonetheless, as the states developed, the role of Georgian and Armenian identity took different paths.

Georgian identity narratives veered toward religion and the role of Orthodoxy in society, relegating the territorial components of identity to the rhetorical background. This evolution achieves two things. First, it disentangles identity issues from most policy arenas, freeing the discussion from the existential rhetoric often associated with nationalism. Second, it creates a broader environment for political leaders to pursue policies not only about the territories with some innovation, but also releases those conflicts from being central to Georgian domestic political discourse.

Armenia's identity conversation centers on the existential need to maintain Nagorno-Karabakh as an independent and ethnic Armenian entity, as well as the righteous mission of liberating the Lachin Corridor that creates contiguity between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia. (Azerbaijani rhetoric on the same issue uses language of occupation.) The linkage of Nagorno-Karabakh to the legitimacy of the Armenian state is explicitly tied to the survival of Armenians, made particularly salient through references to the 1915 genocide.

These narrative contours were not forgone conclusions. For both ethnic Georgians and Armenians, the civilian tolls of the wars in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the war over Nagorno-Karabakh were devastating. Observers record instances of ethnic civilian Georgian victims of violence conducted by [ethnic Abkhaz](#) and [ethnic Ossetian](#) militias, as well as at the hands of external combatants. Likewise, ethnic Armenians point to their

civilian losses in the hands of ethnic Azerbaijani mobs in Sumgait or from indiscriminate shelling against Stepanakert. Fighting ensued between Armenian and Azerbaijani combatants, as well as Afghan mercenaries who [supported](#) the Azerbaijani cause, and Slavic militias who served both sides.

Public Opinion and Identity Narratives

Recent public opinion polls reveal different paths of exclusive ethnic understandings of territory taken in [Armenia](#) and [Georgia](#). In both contexts, there are an array of combatants and perpetrators of violence against civilians. The Armenians have identified the Azerbaijani community as their primary adversary in the war, while the Georgians blame the Russians.

A 2011 study of Georgian Abkhazian IDP attitudes has [shown](#) that most do not consider the conflict an issue for the local actors (Abkhaz and Georgians in Abkhazia), and the vast majority has favorable views toward the Abkhaz (82 percent willing to be friends). In contrast, a nationwide 2009 poll [reported](#) that only 30 percent of Armenians surveyed approved of friendship with Azerbaijanis; the number of those supporting doing business with Azerbaijanis [declined](#) from 34 percent in 2009 to 18 percent in 2015. The unevenness of the survey pools is telling for the comparison. Amongst those in Georgia most likely to harbor ill will toward the Abkhaz, i.e., those who fled their homes due to violence, few identify ethnic Abkhaz as enemies. Rather, they are more likely to blame the Russians (35 percent) or local elite competition (33 percent). The pool in Armenia was nationally representative so it was not limited to those most likely to be hostile and included potential moderates. Even so, few reported feeling comfortable interacting with ethnic Azerbaijanis.

In both Georgia and Armenia, these public sentiments matter because they provide cues to political elites about the thresholds of acceptable public discourse. Armenian leaders have faced public reprobation for suggesting the sorts of compromise positions that have been commonplace in the Georgian dialogue. Former Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrosyan resigned following outrage at his decision to make concessions to Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. Serzh Sargsyan, likewise, faced challenges from disgruntled veterans when rumors flew that he was [considering](#) relinquishing the territories of the Lachin corridor in negotiations over a Nagorno-Karabakh settlement. Until recently, all the chief executives of Armenia joined politics in Karabakh before moving to Yerevan.

In a more proximate political discussion, the Karabakh issue was [raised](#) by an ally of newly installed Pashinyan, MP candidate Sasun Mikaelyan, at a campaign rally, when he said that the “success of the people’s protests this spring [2018] was more important” than the Nagorno-Karabakh war. This comment elicited immediate criticism of Mikaelyan from the Nagorno-Karabakh de facto leadership for undermining the

sacrifices of the Armenian combatants; others expanded their criticism to Pashinyan to warn him that the citizens of Nagorno-Karabakh “are indignant with your behavior and demand from you to know your place and where your powers end.” This back and forth provides the dangers of even mentioning Nagorno-Karabakh outside the accepted single narrative. That Mikaelyan is also a veteran of the conflict himself gave him no quarter from criticism.

In Georgia, although some national actors worked to keep the conflict in Abkhazia in the central public domain, they struggled against counter-narratives of pragmatism. Georgian elites have not paid the prices for failure in the conflict areas that the Armenian leadership has faced. Although Zviad Gamsakhurdia, president during the 1990s war in South Ossetia, was ousted in a coup, it was for his poor leadership and authoritarian tendencies rather than military failure. Eduard Shevardnadze was elected in 1995 following the 1994 ceasefire in Abkhazia. While Mikhail Saakashvili’s party lost in 2012, four years after defeat in the 2008 war, the political opposition gained power from its message against presidential abuse of power and corruption rather than recriminations over the defeat in war. All ruling executives in Georgia, from Gamsakhurdia to the current Georgian Dream leadership, have made compromise overtures to the leadership of South Ossetia and Abkhazia without punishment from voters.

Constituencies

The presence or absence of various stakeholder constituencies interacts with these founding narratives. Armenia and Georgia have sufficient media and assembly protections such that empowered interest groups have emerged. While the regimes permit pressure groups to emerge and act, they also open up space for groups with counter-narratives that work against the construction of a hegemonic ethnic and territorial narrative.

In Armenia, several constituencies apply pressure to maintain attention on Karabakh and ensure satisfactory elite decisions. A critical force for policing of political messages comes from the veterans of the war in Nagorno-Karabakh, from which several groups have formed. The largest of these is the Yerkrpah Union of Volunteers, whose founding mission was to keep the war spirit alive amidst the stalemated conditions and help integrate war veterans into society. Yerkrpah [played](#) a role in the resignation of Ter-Petrosian in 1998 and flirted with demanding Kocharian’s resignation following the October 1999 parliamentary shootings. Serzh Sargsyan maintained close relations with the organization and has, after his resignation as prime minister last year, been [considered](#) as a potential president of the organization.

There are other veteran groups and they do not always speak with the same voice as Yerkrpah. In 2016, a group calling themselves the Daredevils of Sassoun took over a

police station and held some officers hostage. They [demanded](#) Sargsyan's resignation, protesting what they termed a "defeatist" stance on Karabakh. An important precursor to the hostage taking was a set of leaks from the Russian press of Moscow's [pressuring](#) the Armenians to make concessions to come to a peace agreement in Karabakh. Others have criticized the government's inability to support its soldiers during the 2016 Four Day War, [contending](#) that government financial mismanagement contributed to Armenian losses. These organizations act not only to apply pressure on the government with regard to funding and policy, but also act as guarantors of state legitimacy through maintenance of Karabakh as an Armenian entity.

In Georgia, there are few organizations that work on behalf of IDPs, and their messages are not geared toward maintaining a militarized capability and energy regarding return, but rather on securing humanitarian resources. The Abkhaz Government-in-Exile, once a dynamic institution in Georgia, is a shell of its former self. Even at its heyday, it struggled to compete with less dogmatic voices regarding policy toward Abkhazia. With regard to South Ossetia, a government-in-exile was initiated in 2006 and led by former South Ossetian Defense Minister Dmitry Sanakoev (now based in Georgian-administered territory). Far from maintaining a wartime stance, Sanakoev joined all Georgian stakeholders in [pledging](#) a principle of a non-use of force in recent talks in Geneva.

Overlapping Policies and Governance Possibilities in Post-Revolutionary Politics

The Georgian narrative of statehood and territory enjoys more openness to conflict policymaking than Armenia's territorial understanding permits. The consistent salience of Karabakh in Armenian politics and the presence of constituencies to police political messaging create narrow parameters for policy innovation. These circumstances differ from the Georgian context during the Rose revolution where Saakashvili could be outspoken in the broad concessions he was willing to offer the Abkhaz and the Ossetians to resolve the conflicts in those territories even before he was first elected as president in 2004.

Following the Velvet revolution, Pashinyan's options are even more limited. His promise of the eradication of corruption faces a serious obstacle as it must navigate commitments and economic obligations to Nagorno-Karabakh. A strict adherence to anti-corruption and accountable state sovereignty could endanger the interests of powerful other parties who benefit from opacity and protected vested interests. It will be difficult to reconcile these conflicts in a way that satisfies all stakeholders, especially in the medium and long-term. Indeed, that the Nagorno-Karabakh leadership is drawing sharp distinctions between the power of the Velvet revolution and the importance of the Nagorno-Karabakh war indicates they, too, feel this pressure.

Furthermore, the Nagorno-Karabakh budget relies on both domestic revenues and outside support to govern. While it proclaims economic growth, the government runs a deficit. Inside Karabakh, the largest employer is the Vallex Mining Company, which mines copper and gold, and has invested heavily in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh natural resources. The company [operates](#) in a mosaic of offshore companies, making its clear ownership opaque, and past government regulation is sparse. While further investigations will determine the extent of collusion between Vallex and government actors, the status quo of Nagorno-Karabakh is of a war footing with little effort to ensure transparency and resist state capture by entrenched interests.

Given these realities, Pashinyan will undoubtedly face decisions about the extent of anti-corruption measures he will take if it leads to perceived or real detriment in Nagorno-Karabakh. It could be that a success in one arena of reform may lead to negative outcomes in others. Given Nagorno-Karabakh's importance to the Armenian national experiment, this will be a significant test not only for Pashinyan, but also for the Armenian public.