

BOOK REVIEW:

Armenia and Azerbaijan: Anatomy of a Rivalry (authored by Laurence Broers)

reviewed by Gulshan Pashayeva



**Review of “*Armenia and Azerbaijan: Anatomy of a Rivalry*”
book authored by Laurence Broers.**

By Dr. Gulshan Pashayeva

Armenia and Azerbaijan: Anatomy of a Rivalry, Laurence Broers,
(Edinburgh University Press, 1st edition, September 1, 2019; 352 pp.)

This book is a product of Dr. Laurence Broers’s experience as a practitioner of Armenian–Azerbaijani peace-building initiatives gained while he worked for the London-based peace-building organization, Conciliation Resources (2005–2015).

The monograph contains an overview of historical, territorial and mediation perspectives and aims to be interpretive and analytical without offering ‘a new chronicle or history of the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh’ (p.8).

Each of its nine chapters is devoted to a specific issue, such as a review of the various explanations for the outbreak of the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict in and around the Nagorno-Karabakh region of the latter country in 1988–1994; different traditions of the concept of ‘homeland’ in 20th century Armenian and Azerbaijani geopolitical cultures; the geopolitical visions accumulating around the Karabakh region from the late 1980s to the present; the multiple types and theatres of, and motives for, forced displacement, both in the late 1980s and during the 1992–1994 war; the relationship between the rivalry and the regime types in Armenia and Azerbaijan; the truncated power asymmetry between Armenia and Azerbaijan; the international diffusion of the Armenian–Azerbaijani rivalry and its implications for that rivalry’s stability and longevity; the evolution of the unrecognized reality developed in Nagorno-Karabakh since the 1994 ceasefire; and the OSCE-mediated peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

According to Broers, the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict in and around the Nagorno-Karabakh region presents an entirely different picture to other Eurasian conflicts dating from the 1990s. Taking this conflict’s outlier status, he examines it through two conceptual frameworks: first, through the lens of critical geopolitics (pp. 8–10), and then reframing the conflict as ‘rivalry’ (pp. 10–16).

Looking through the prism of geopolitical cultures, the author labels the current narrative in Armenia ‘augmented Armenia’,

which is based on the indivisibility of Armenia with the occupied Nagorno-Karabakh region and the adjacent districts of Azerbaijan (pp. 98–104). This differs from the ‘compliant Armenia’ narrative of the 1990s (pp. 94–98), according to which the occupied Azerbaijani districts adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh region were considered a bargaining chip during negotiations with Azerbaijan. It was envisaged that they, or some of them, would have to be returned to Azerbaijan on securing Armenian demands (p. 98). In contrast, Broers proposes that ‘wide Azerbaijanism’ has been dominating in Azerbaijan since the mid-2000s; this presupposes that Armenia is an imperial project located on historic Azerbaijani lands (pp. 105, 114–120). It replaced the ‘Azerbaijanism’ narrative of the Heyday Aliyev era, which concentrated on Azerbaijan’s internationally recognized borders (pp. 112–114) and, in turn, took over from the ‘Greater Azerbaijan’ concept that had risen through the efforts of the Azerbaijani Popular Front (pp. 60–64).

In reframing this conflict as an enduring rivalry, the author aims to avoid the ‘dichotomies of “war/peace” and “hot/cold conflict”’ and shift ‘the analysis from an event-centred focus on war to a process-driven focus on the sustainability of rivalry’ (p. 11). When touching upon the core set of territorial issues and their violent contestation in 1988–1994, he refers to this case as the ‘Armenian–Azerbaijani *conflict*’. However, Broers talks about the Armenian–Azerbaijani *rivalry* when referring to broader competitive dynamics building up between Armenia and Azerbaijan since then (p. 12). He thinks that ‘the Armenian–Azerbaijani enduring rivalry cannot be understood through single-factor analysis. Rather, its persistence needs to be explained by the convergence of international, strategic, domestic and leadership factors’ (p. 308).

The author goes on to explain the special role that Russia plays, both as ‘an aspiring regional hegemon and a global entrepreneur of authoritarian conflict management’ that ‘is embedded within the deep structure of the rivalry because of the power asymmetry’ and is ‘a key stakeholder in the tactical consensus with Euro-Atlantic partners on deterring renewed Armenian–Azerbaijani war’ (p. 309). Broers also thinks that the regional policy landscape regarding this territorial conflict is highly fractured: ‘There are inconsistent approaches by both Russia, which recognizes some – but not other – de facto states as independent states, and by the Euro-Atlantic powers, which enact sanctions in support of some parent states – but not others’ (p. 310).

Thus, the book mainly focuses on the specific features of the Armenian–Azerbaijani rivalry, which the author considers ‘neither frozen nor pliable, by the standards of some enduring rivalries’ and that ‘may still be relatively “young”’ (p. 316). Broers also makes sound judgments on various issues. For example, he suggests that the ‘bookending of references to a dispute between “mainly Christian Armenia” and “mostly Muslim Azerbaijan”’ in Western media has not accurately conveyed the nature of Armenian–Azerbaijani cultural differences (p. 40). However, some factual errors are also present in the book. For example, the date of the occupation of the Zangilan district of Azerbaijan, which the author states was the winter of 1993–94 (p. 38), is misleading, as this district was occupied by Armenian forces on 29 October 1993.

In our opinion, this book is rather more theoretical than practical and argues that something ‘is true’ – that it is truly the case. The author makes several generalizations which are not convincing and perhaps need further elaboration.

In the first place, it seems rather questionable to describe the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict as an enduring ‘rivalry’. This is a new term that been used in connection with this conflict by the author for the first time and, despite the fact that he tries to persuade the reader that this new reading of the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict is reasonable and relevant, the truth is it comes up short.

One of the important reasons contributing to the author’s understanding of, and presenting this conflict as, a rivalry between Armenia and Azerbaijan may perhaps be his faulty assumption that Nagorno-Karabakh is a ‘disputed territory’ between the two states (p. 1). However, if the author had truly assumed that this territory is an integral part of the internationally recognized territory of Azerbaijan, as Abkhazia and South Ossetia are of Georgia, Transnistria is of Moldova and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol are of Ukraine, then there would be no need to differentiate this conflict from other post-Soviet territorial conflicts and frame it as an enduring rivalry. In addition, seemingly, Broers also does not distinguish Azerbaijan’s host-state and Armenia’s kin-state status in this conflict. However, it is apparent that, without Armenia’s close involvement as a kin state from the outset, this conflict could not have had such impact and longevity. If Armenia could come to a settlement with Azerbaijan – compromising or withdrawing its territorial claims, as did other kin-states such as Sweden,

Austria, and the Republic of Ireland in the cases of the Åland Islands, South Tyrol, and Northern Ireland, respectively – then this conflict could be solved very easily.

At the same time, we are inclined to think that the rationale behind the author's decision to refer to this case dually (p. 12) as the 'Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict' (1988–1994) and 'Armenian–Azerbaijani rivalry' (1994–present) is based on the assumption that this conflict has already achieved its end and can be set aside without further resolution. However, the recent outbreak of violence that happened in the Tovuz district of Azerbaijan along the international border between Armenia and Azerbaijan on 12–16 July 2020 proves, once more, the dangerous, destructive potential of this unresolved conflict.

Furthermore, the consideration of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict as a significant exception to the competitive geopolitics of post-Soviet Eurasia also seems unconvincing. According to the author, this case is less common among the other conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia or Transnistria compared with those between India and Pakistan or the Arab states and Israel. Relying on six distinguishing features, he differentiates the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict in and around Nagorno-Karabakh region from the other conflicts in post-Soviet Eurasia. Let us take a closer look at some of these features.

First, the author underlines that this conflict was 'the first territorial dispute to appear in the Soviet Union's twilight years', at the beginning of 1988 (pp. 5–6). However, other ethno-territorial conflicts in Georgia¹ and Moldova² started almost simultaneously at the end of the 1980s. Thus, both the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict in and around Nagorno-Karabakh region and the conflicts in South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Transnistria broke out before the dissolution of the Soviet Union; these were directly related to the late 1980s Gorbachov reforms of *glasnost*

1 Sammut, D. and Cvetkovski, N. "The Georgia—South Ossetia Conflict," *Confidence Building Matters*, No. 6, VERTIC, London, March 1996, p.10. Available at: http://www.vertic.org/media/Archived_Publications/Matters/Confidence_Building_Matters_No6.pdf; Stewart, S. "The Role of the United Nations in the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict," *JEMIE Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, Issue 2, 2003, p. 7. Available at: https://www.ecmi.de/fileadmin/redakteure/publications/JEMIE_Datens%C3%A4tze/Stewart_SC_final.pdf (Accessed 6 August 2020)

2 Vacaru, C. "Resolution mechanisms of the Transnistrian conflict", *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review*, 6(4), 2006, p. 906. Available at: <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-56253-8> (Accessed 6 August 2020)

and *perestroika*. They triggered the emergence of national movements in the respective Union Republics, which eventually led to the collapse of the USSR.

Second, Broers indicates that, in contrast to other post-Soviet territorial conflicts, which ended in standoffs between secessionist entities and the internationally recognized states, the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict has an atypical structure; it became embedded at the interstate level between Armenia and Azerbaijan and is not directly associated with the unrecognized entity set up by Armenia in the occupied territories of the Republic of Azerbaijan. According to the author, such a situation makes it difficult for international organizations to take sides between two member-states and alleviates the pressures on an unrecognized entity (p. 6). However, in our opinion, the current conflicts in Georgia and the Ukraine have similar characteristics to the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict. Russia’s military intervention and, later, recognition of the self-declared ‘independences’ of the Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia in August 2008,³ as well as the annexation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol in February 2014, along with Russia’s continued destabilization of the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine,⁴ have transformed these conflicts from intrastate to interstate conflicts. Moreover, although the international organizations were able to impose sanctions on Russia because of its armed aggression against Ukraine, a similar approach has not, so far, been implemented with respect to Armenia’s armed aggression against Azerbaijan.

Third, there is a discrepancy in the author’s argument in regard to Russia’s atypical role (pp. 6–7). According to Broers, although Russia brokered ceasefire agreements and inserted Russian-led peacekeeping forces into the post-war context in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria, it was not able to deploy Russian peacekeepers in the conflict area between the armed forces of Armenia and Azerbaijan, despite introducing a ceasefire in the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict. However, an important point is that, after the August 2008 war and unilateral withdrawal of Georgia

3 Reliefweb.int, “Georgia: State Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement through Cooperation”, 27 January 2010, p.3. Available at: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/7BB542FC48439241492576ED0012729F-Full_Report.pdf (Accessed 6 August 2020)

4 Mfa.gov.ua, “10 facts you should know about Russian military aggression against Ukraine”, 19 December 2019, Available at: <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/10-facts-you-should-know-about-russian-military-aggression-against-ukraine> (Accessed 6 August 2020)

from the Moscow agreement on a ceasefire and the separation of forces, Russia is no longer involved in peacekeeping operations in the conflicts in Georgia. According to the ‘Law on Occupied Territories’ adopted by the Georgian Parliament in 2008, a new legal regime applies to the Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia⁵.

Finally, the comments on the idiosyncratic nature of the conflict’s mediation structure seem rather incomplete. Although, according to Broers, the OSCE’s Minsk Group Co-chairs of France, Russia and the United States have been locked in geopolitical competition in Georgia, Ukraine and the Middle East, but cooperate and generate ‘what is perhaps the sole moment of consensus between Armenia and Azerbaijan today’ (p. 7), it is wrong to overstate the role of cooperation among the Minsk Group Co-chairs; especially as the conflict still remains unresolved. At the same time, although they more than once declared that the status quo is unacceptable, they have focused their efforts on preventing an escalation of the conflict, rather than on searching for a resolution. Therefore, it is unsurprising that, in his interview on 9 July 2020, President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, while giving a broad insight into the settlement process for the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, condemned the OSCE Minsk Group for its inaction on Armenia’s illegal occupation of Azerbaijani lands.

We would also like to take note of the author’s point about the ‘wide Azerbaijanism’ that has ostensibly been rooted in Azerbaijan since the mid-2000s.

According to the author, ‘wide Azerbaijanism’ is the meeting point of two previously subdued geographies made relevant by both sovereignty and the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict (p. 116). The first is related to the notion of Azerbaijani khanates appearing north and south of the Aras River after 1747; these are reframed as precursors of modern Azerbaijani statehood in contemporary Azerbaijani scholarship. The second building block of ‘wide Azerbaijanism’ is associated with the notion of western Azerbaijan, specifically ‘a wide-ranging fetishization of the Erivan (Irevan) khanate as a historically Azerbaijani entity’ (p. 117). At the same time, the author assumes that ‘wide Azerbaijanism’ replaced the ‘Azerbaijanism’ narrative

⁵ Reliefweb.int, “Georgia: State Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement through Cooperation”, 27 January 2010, p.4. Available at: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/7BB542FC48439241492576ED0012729F-Full_Report.pdf (Accessed 6 August 2020)

of the Heydar Aliyev era that concentrated on Azerbaijan's internationally recognized borders (pp. 112–114).

In our opinion, there are two different perspectives that should be distinguished from one another in this context. From the political perspective, Azerbaijan has never laid official claim to the internationally recognized territory of Armenia; an approach that, so far, has never been reciprocated. Moreover, according to existing historical perspectives, Armenians did not constitute an ethno-demographic majority in the territory of modern Armenia and used to live alongside a substantial Muslim population in the 19th and 20th centuries. Thus, even when Azerbaijan refers to Armenia as a part of historical 'western Azerbaijan', this merely points out that, until the end of the 1980s, there was a substantial Azerbaijani minority living on those territories. This population subsequently was forced out of their native lands owing to the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict in and around the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan and, therefore, it is obvious that they believe that they will return home one day. It is wrong to assume that, currently, 'the theatre of contested space is shifted from Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia itself' (p. 118). Azerbaijan has never mixed historical and political perspectives, whereas Armenia's greatest mistake is precisely this.