

Western Blind Spot in the South Caucasus: Chronicle of a War Foretold

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The Second Karabakh War showed how much it is the case that European and American diplomacy has declined to acknowledge new developments in the South Caucasus over the last quarter century. The European and American information media also failed to inform their readerships about the facts of the conflict and behind the conflict. This failure extends generally also to their experts and policy communities. The article analyses three of these failures: (1) the facile repetition that the conflict is based in religion, (2) the significance of Armenian prime minister Pashinyan's rejection of the Madrid Principles, and (3) the protestations that there was "no military solution." The inspection and criticism of the mass and specialized media must continue, in order to expose errors and old ways of thinking that harm the everyday lives and the futures of the peoples of the region. The Armenian leadership and political class, including the diaspora, must likewise cease to propagate unreal characterizations of the situation. These, sometimes willful, errors create false images of the realities on the ground, from which only mistaken actions can proceed.

Keywords: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh region, Western media, narrative, conflict



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Introduction

The Second Karabakh War has revealed the bankruptcy of the sort of grand strategic thinking, all too typical of so many influential European and American commentators and politicians, that still refuses to acknowledge new developments in the South Caucasus over the last quarter century and assumes an understanding of the interests of regional actors on the basis of the facile templates of old stereotypes.¹ The War has equally revealed errors, so chronic as to resemble biases, even on the part of those who are not “strategic thinkers” *per se*, but

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who should have more perceptive and balanced views thanks to their long-time, closer familiarity with the region. Many of these are journalists or members of the “policy community.”

Indeed, one largely unremarked characteristic of the Second Karabakh War—which remains, in fact, an enormous blind-spot—is how great was the failure of the European and American information media, both mass and elite, adequately to inform their readerships, both about the facts of the conflict and about the facts behind the conflict. This general subject is vast and under-researched, although systematic techniques exist

for developing it, based upon the comparative study of media systems. One recent article, barely the tip of iceberg, is indicative. It surveys a small number of academic conferences, panels, and so forth (which it puts under the category of “events”) where the Azerbaijani view is typically underrepresented if it is represented at all. In addition, it reviews briefly some works (and tweets) of selected reporters and commentators.²

The authors of that article establish the categories of “would-be journalists,” who “have failed to cover the situation in its entirety, only shedding light on one side of the conflict”; and of “‘experts’” who “actively [published] anti-Azerbaijani op-eds in various media outlets, ... openly carrying out one-sided, uninformed pieces spreading misleading anti-Azerbaijani narratives,” or who otherwise “participated in the information war, spreading anti-Azerbaijani sentiment and supporting [the] Armenian governmental position.” The article

1 Cutler, R.M., “The Second Karabakh War and Western Strategic Thinking,” The Russia File (blog), *The Kennan Institute, The Wilson Center*, January 5, 2011, available at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/second-karabakh-war-and-western-strategic-thinking> (accessed January 19, 2021).

2 The Greater Middle East, *Neglecting the Voice of Azerbaijan in the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict*, January 11, 2021, available at: <https://tgme.org/2021/01/neglecting-the-voice-of-azerbaijan/> (accessed January 19, 2021).

presents only a limited number of some of the worst examples, which nevertheless remain typical, in content if not in form, of the great majority of European and American press coverage and commentary.

In the present article, I take an approach that complements the one in that article. Rather than focusing my discussion on individual writers, I choose individual topic-themes.³ Analytically, it is possible to problematize further such research and to differentiate the topic of study according to readership-targeting, i.e., who are the people most likely to read and be influenced? Here, there are three categories: (1) the mass public, (2) the informed or educated public, and (3) the policy and political elites, including their advisors. Clearly, any press item may be directed at more than one readership, but usually there will be one that is its principal target.

The present article, owing to its brevity, does not distinguish explicitly among these different types of articles, but that may be implicitly evident to the reader. One of the difficulties of such a short study is that there are so many topic-themes that are candidates for analytical attention, and they are so interrelated with one another, that some of the exposition must be devoted simply to laying out some of the facts that are neglected.

What is clear is that the general failure of European and American diplomacy to assist in putting an end to the recent fighting in eastern Azerbaijan grew out of just such a general view that failed to be cognizant of the actual situation in the South Caucasus. Any hope of participating constructively in peace-building following the end of the conflict situation must first recognize the facts now on the ground (and the past facts from which they developed) and the disastrous effect, now evident, of the Armenian diaspora's strategic worldview for Armenians who actually have to live in Armenia.

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³ One theme not addressed here, but about which books could be and probably will be written, is the politically sensitive issue of the destruction of cultural heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh region. The sensitivity is suggested by the fact that it took several days and a concerted effort by Azerbaijani diplomacy to get international media even to acknowledge the Armenian shelling of civilian neighborhoods in Ganja and elsewhere, even though the evidence was absolutely plain. For example, it is incontestable that, in the three hours leading up to first agreed ceasefire (noon local time on October 11), Armenian forces unleashed an unceasing barrage of fire on Azerbaijani positions, which did not stop; and in the night, about 2 a.m. local time, a civilian apartment building in Ganja, Azerbaijan's second largest city, was hit by an explosion. This was only the most egregious of such acts: Armenian forces had previously targeted the city and its civilian neighbourhoods at the beginning of the month, along with the city of Mingachevir, which hosts a dam, reservoir and the largest hydro-electric power generation facility in the country, originally commissioned in 1953 and modernized only two years ago. Yet the international media paid attention only when it became more convenient to pay attention than to ignore it.

A prime example: France's unforced error

Unforced errors by European and American actors regarding the recent hostilities are hardly limited to journalists and other analysts. The EU tried to keep a peripheral approach towards the conflict's resolution, limiting its rhetoric to supporting the diplomatic activities of the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs. Unlike in the cases of Ukraine and Georgia, the EU was not willing to name Armenia as the aggressor, but sought instead to maintain a "balance" between the terms "territorial integrity" and "self-determination."

France's recent discrediting of itself as a diplomatic interlocutor, however, is especially striking. The EU's diplomacy in the region has, as a whole, always tilted heavily in Armenia's favor, mainly because France is one of three co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group mediating between the conflicting parties.

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The most recent example of such bias is the recent vote by both houses of the French legislature, even after the conflict was over and the Armenian side had fully capitulated to Azerbaijani terms, to encourage the French government to "recognize" the separatist regime established by Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan.⁵ However, the most egregious own goal dates back to the very start of the hostilities in late September. In a public statement, France's President Emmanuel Macron blamed Turkey for "disinhibiting Azerbaijan regarding what would be a *reconquest of Nagorno-Karabakh, something that we would never accept*" (emphasis supplied). He added: that, "*I say to Armenia and to Armenians, that France will play its role,*" clearly meaning that he would exert efforts to prevent Azerbaijan's "reconquest."⁶

4 The Defense Post, *France Struggles to Retain Karabakh Sway After Armenia Defeat*, November 27, 2020, available at: <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2020/11/27/france-karabakh-armenia-defeat/> (accessed January 19, 2021).

5 The Armenian Mirror-Spectator, *French National Assembly Joins Senate to Call for Recognizing Independent 'Artsakh' Republic*, December 3, 2020, available at: <https://mirrorspectator.com/2020/12/03/french-national-assembly-joins-senate-to-call-for-recognizing-independent-artsakh-republic/> (accessed January 19, 2021).

6 Le Progrès, *Karabakh: Emmanuel Macron attacks Turkey* (translation from French), September 30, 2020, available at: <https://www.leprogres.fr/defense-guerre-conflit/2020/09/30/karabakh-emmanuel-macron-s-en-prendre-la-turquie> (accessed January 19, 2021).

This was a most remarkable declaration. Even more remarkable was the absence of analysis or contextual commentary pointing out that (1) the international community and the United Nations, through numerous Security Council Resolutions, had never failed to affirm that Nagorno-Karabakh region is an integral part of the internationally recognized territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan; and (2) Article 51 of the United Nations Charter empowered Azerbaijan to self-defence regarding its own territory. Most other Western diplomatic leaders, in fact, formally acted as if they recognized these points; by and large, they did not contradict those propositions.

Western political commentators and analysts, however, misinformed their publics, and in some cases their politicians, by failing even to mention these generally under-recognized facts. Even after Azerbaijan's military victory finally reminded them that this was the case, they tended to pass over in silence these fundamental aspects of international law as applied to the Second Karabakh War. Such blindness, in fact, long antedates the Second Karabakh War. Because of it, there was greater diplomatic surprise than necessary at the renewal of fighting in the Azerbaijani territories then occupied by Armenian forces. All this could have been foretold and, in fact, it was—for example, by Jirair Libardian, who was senior advisor to Armenia's President Levon Ter-Petrosyan from 1991 until the latter resigned in 1997.⁷

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More examples: Popular distortions and misapprehensions

The most scandalous error, marketed through the media even though few really appeared even to believe it, was, perhaps, the thoroughly discredited trope about Nagorno-Karabakh region (“Mountainous Karabakh”) being a “Christian–Muslim conflict.” This theme was more evident at the beginning of the conflict, when Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan himself played the religious card, implying that the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan was even “a clash of civilizations.”⁸ It seems that this theme dissipated over time as

7 Libardian, J. “A step, this time a big step, backwards,” *Aravot*, September 1, 2020, available at: <https://www.aravot-en.am/2020/09/01/263436/> (accessed January 19, 2021).

8 Pashinyan: “It is no longer merely the Karabakh issue, nor a security issue of the Armenian people. It is now an

more information (though not always of higher quality) about the militarization of the actual conflict became better emphasized. Nevertheless, a mere glance at the flood of press coverage reveals the durability of this facile distortion, as it reappeared in an “Explainer” in a major popular American magazine and in the editorial statement of a once-great national U.S. newspaper,⁹ as well as among the inside-the-Beltway commentariat who should certainly know better.¹⁰

I do not mean to criticize American reporting and commentary in particular, but there is just so much of it.¹¹ This error can be found in European coverage of the conflict as well. It is not clear how widely this was believed, and it was not necessarily a definition that motivated a large segment of the readership one way or another. But it indexes the laziness of Western coverage and the preference for the familiar over the unfamiliar, even if the familiar is wrong.

One of the worst and most irresponsible takes of this sort was by no less than a retired US Navy admiral and former NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe, who has now, however, passed to executive and

issue of international security, and today, the Armenian people are defending also international security, assuming what may be a new historic mission” (emphasis supplied). Quoted in official Armenian government (@armgov) tweet, which calls Armenia the “last remaining obstacle on the way of continued Turkish expansion towards the North, North East, and East,” 4:44AM, October 1, 2020, available at: <https://archive.is/FUbiO> (accessed January 19, 2021).

9 Blakemore, E. “How the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been shaped by past empires”, *National Geographic*, October 15, 2020, available at: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/2020/10/how-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-shaped-by-past-empires/>; The Christian Science Monitor, “In Nagorno-Karabakh ‘peace,’ a bitter conflict remains unresolved”, November 12, 2020, available at: <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/2020/1112/In-Nagorno-Karabakh-peace-a-bitter-conflict-remains-unresolved> (both sources accessed January 19, 2021).

10 Rubin, M. “Israel’s Azerbaijan Mistake”, *The National Interest*, November 29, 2020, available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/israel%E2%80%99s-azerbaijan-mistake-173476/>; Davies, N.J.S. “How Can Americans Support Peace in Nagorno-Karabakh?”, *Foreign Policy in Focus*, October 15, 2020, available at: <https://fpif.org/how-can-americans-support-peace-in-nagorno-karabakh/>; Palmer, J. “Why Are Armenia and Azerbaijan Heading to War?”, *Foreign Policy*, 28 September 2020, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/28/why-are-armenia-azerbaijan-heading-to-war-nagorno-karabakh/>; Movesian, M. “Christian Armenia under Attack”, *First Things*, October 5, 2020, available at: <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2020/10/christian-armenia-under-attack/>; Cookman, L. “For Armenians Fleeing Nagorno-Karabakh, ‘Losing It Is Everything’”, *Foreign Policy*, November 20, 2020, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/20/armenians-fleeing-nagorno-karabakh-bitter-peace/>; Movesian, M. “Armenia’s Future”, *First Things*, December 11, 2020, available at: <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2020/12/armenias-future/> (accessed January 19, 2021); Rubin, M. “Biden shouldn’t rejoin UNESCO without serious reforms after Azerbaijan antics”, *Washington Examiner*, December 17, 2020, available at: <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/biden-shouldnt-rejoin-unesco-azerbaijan> (all sources accessed January 19, 2021).

11 Among the rare correctives are: Shafiyev, F. “Armenia-Azerbaijan Propaganda War and American Media Bias”, *Modern Diplomacy*, December 26, 2020, available at: <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2020/12/26/armenia-azerbaijan-propaganda-war-and-american-media-bias/>; Bin Ali, M. and Si Xing Theresa, Ch. “Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: A Religious Strife? – Analysis”, *Eurasia Review*, October 27, 2020, available at: <https://www.eurasiareview.com/27102020-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-a-religious-strife-analysis/>; Cutler, R.M. “Without Russian Aid to Armenia, Azerbaijan Has the Upper Hand in Nagorno-Karabakh”, *Foreign Policy*, October 9, 2020, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/09/russia-aid-armenia-azerbaijan-putin-nagorno-karabakh/>; Cutler, R.M. “What is behind the Nagorno-Karabakh flare-up? And how can it be resolved?”, *Al Jazeera English*, October 19, 2020, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/10/19/what-is-behind-the-nagorno-karabakh-flare-up/> (all sources accessed January 19, 2021).

counselling roles with The Carlyle Group and McLarty Associates (and who writes opinion columns for Bloomberg). “The Turks dislike the Armenians and support their fellow Muslims in Azerbaijan,” he wrote. Headlines for articles cannot be blamed on the authors, but the headline of his did not much exaggerate his argument, screaming, “War in the Caucasus will spread to Russia and Turkey.”¹² This was more likely the idea of Stavridis’s editor at Bloomberg Opinion, who wanted to sell the article to his subscribers. (It is always necessary to consider the role of editorial interventions in the interpretation of such sources.)

NGOs appear not so much to have fallen into the trap of calling the conflict a “religious conflict,” but their perceptions are often equally distorted in other ways. Just a few years ago, for example, in contrast to Stavridis’s catastrophism, a prominent transnational NGO with long experience of the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict hypothesized in mid-2018 that “improved Russia-Turkey relations might at least open opportunities to head off new outbreaks of violence in Nagorno-Karabakh.” Their argument lacked any reasoned motivation but merely extrapolated a sort of wishful thinking predicated upon the general warming of Russian–Turkish relations since 2016, even as it ascribed opposing interests to them. Not only did this NGO fail to explain why or how such cooperation might occur, but this sort of evaluation is also typical of the perspectives of the Great Powers (and those that would like to believe that they are great powers) that fail to attribute any autonomous agency to the South Caucasus states themselves.¹³

And yet the analytical characteristics of this NGO report were, under the guise of objectivity, subtly one-sided and tendentious. The examples are numerous, and here are only a few: (1) the “escalation” of the April 2016 military hostilities, was “facilitated by Baku’s beefed-up military capabilities,” rather than by Moscow’s policy of making low-interest “loans” to Yerevan for the purchase of Russian weapons systems at domestic Russian rather than international prices; (2) Yerevan’s motivation for its arms build-up was “mostly to deter another Azerbaijani offensive,” rather than, for example, “to secure its occupation of Azerbaijan’s internationally recognized territories”; (3) the failure of the Turkish–Armenian rapprochement in 2009 was

12 Stavridis, J. “War in the Caucasus will spread to Russia and Turkey”, *Japan Times*, October 4, 2020, available at: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2020/10/04/commentary/world-commentary/war-caucasus-russia-turkey> (accessed January 19, 2021).

13 International Crisis Group, “Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus”, Report No. 250 / Europe & Central Asia (Brussels: International Crisis Group, June 28, 2018), available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/250-russia-and-turkey-black-sea-and-south-caucasus> (accessed January 19, 2021).

due to Turkey’s insistence that the occupied territories around the Nagorno-Karabakh region should be returned to Azerbaijani control—failing to mention that this was an important element of the Madrid Principles, to which Armenia had formally agreed. The enumeration could be continued.

When these misrepresentations are not willful, they arise from disregarding the local players on the ground, treating them as objects rather than subjects. It was clear in 2020 that Russia and Turkey, the two regional powers, were effective precisely because they recognized and respected the autonomy of the two combatant sides. Distant observers like Stavridis write as if they are blinded by patterns from the past, or worse still patterns from other regions unthinkingly projected onto the South Caucasus. One result of this lack of focus on present-day realities—whether at the international, the regional, or the subnational level—is to vitiate the development of mutually cooperative non-zero-sum approaches to the real problems that affect people living in the region on the ground.

What Europeans and Americans still don’t understand about the Madrid Principles

Azerbaijan was patient for over a generation. With Armenia, it subscribed to the Madrid Principles for a settlement, proposed by the Minsk Group more than a decade ago. It is of interest to review that those principles called for: (1) returning the seven occupied districts

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around Nagorno-Karabakh region to Azerbaijani control, (2) giving Nagorno-Karabakh region an interim status that would provide “guarantees for security and self-governance,” (3) linking it with Armenia by a corridor, (4) determining its final legal status “through a legally binding expression of will,” (5) returning all refugees and displaced people to their former places of residence, and (6) putting in place a peacekeeping operation.¹⁴

Under Russian mediation, the so-called “Kazan formula” was in 2011 adjoined to the Madrid Principles. Under it, Armenia would return five occupied districts to Azerbaijan at first, later followed by the last two

¹⁴ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, “Statement by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair countries,” July 10, 2009, available at: <https://www.osce.org/mg/51152> (accessed January 19, 2021).

(Lachyn and Kelbajar, which border Armenia proper). Azerbaijan would, in return, lift its economic blockade of Armenia. Agreements on economic and humanitarian cooperation and demilitarization would be signed, and peacekeepers would be deployed.

The Azerbaijani military operation accomplished most of these objectives of the Madrid Principles. Armenia could have acted to implement the Principles over the years, but instead it acted so as to give every reason to believe that there was never any intention to evacuate the seven occupied districts of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev has declared that the region will, at most, share a cultural autonomy with about 30,000 ethnic Armenians living mostly in Baku and Ganja, but that it will have no autonomous administrative status.

All these facts are pertinent to the present discussion, because *they are also passed over mostly in silence* by Western commentary. And while Western press correspondents made occasional reports about how even political opposition inside Azerbaijan had unified behind President Ilham Aliyev, nowhere—not even among Western news correspondents based in Yerevan—was there any discussion of the domestic political situation in Armenia. It is therefore proper to review that situation briefly here. It is, therefore, pertinent to summarize the facts that contextualize Armenian state behaviour.

The country's current prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan, came to power, as a result of regime change, in what resembled a “velvet revolution,” in May 2018. He was initially conciliatory toward Azerbaijan and gave the impression that he was ready to discuss difficult issues; but that never happened. For, when he failed to come through on promises made to the Armenian electorate (which, if realized, would have mitigated Armenia's isolation and moderated its heavy dependence on Russia), Pashinyan became himself a victim of Armenian domestic politics. His impulsiveness did not help, as when he put on trial a personal friend of Russia's President Vladimir Putin, the former President of Armenia Robert Kocharyan (for “overthrowing the constitutional order of Armenia”), as well as his country's former Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan (for embezzlement), who had jailed Pashinyan in 2009 and was Kocharyan's hand-picked successor.

Pashinyan became his own hostage, trapped by the irredentist nationalist rhetoric that he had to espouse in order to survive in domestic politics; and this led him to disaster in the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, specifically in Nagorno-Karabakh region. As in a vicious circle, that

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political development further strengthened the already strong populist and militarist sentiment in Armenian society. Perhaps the culmination of this irrationality (before the actual war itself started) was Pashinyan’s articulation of territorial claims against Turkey. This occurred through his public comments on the 1920 “Treaty of Sèvres,” which never entered into force and was replaced by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne.

The Treaty of Sèvres had been the Allies’ attempt, after World War I, to liquidate the Ottoman Empire and distribute its territories; in that division, Armenia

would have received lands now part of Turkey, in its northeast. In August 2020, barely a month before military hostilities would break out, Pashinyan, celebrating the centenary of the Treaty of Sèvres, qualified its terms as “historical fact” and called them “historical justice.” This signified that, as head of government, he was claiming, for the Armenian state, lands that have been part of Turkey for 100 years.¹⁵

In early August 2019, in a speech in Khankendi, Pashinyan declared that “Nagorno-Karabakh is Armenia, and that is all.” In words akin to a verbal annexation, he declared that the territories were part of Armenia itself.¹⁶ No Armenian politician had said that since the war in the early 1990s, first, because it was political dynamite (since the territory was internationally recognized to be part of Azerbaijan), and second, because Armenia sought to maintain the fig leaf of “independence” of the so-called “Nagorno-Karabakh Republic” from Armenia proper.

Because Western observers appeared to pay no attention at all to this series of declarations and acts, and because they may have lacked even the background to understand them had they paid attention, they failed to appreciate that Pashinyan’s declaration, and his proposition of seven new conditions for negotiations with Azerbaijan, represented a

15 Moreover, this declaration followed, by just under a year and a half, the declaration to the Armenian community in New York by his defense minister Davit Tonoyan, regarding Azerbaijani land: “As the minister of defense, I announce that this [old] format, territories [in exchange] for peace, I have rephrased it. We are doing the opposite—a new war for new territories.” Just over a year later, in July–August 2020, came the attacks in Azerbaijan’s northwest Tovuz region, 100 miles from Nagorno-Karabakh region, which had been peaceful for over 26 years. Lragir.am, We Do the Opposite – New War for New Territories: Minister Tonoyan’s Tough Statement, March 30, 2019, available at: <https://www.lragir.am/en/2019/03/30/71511> (accessed January 19, 2021).

16 Kucera, J. “Pashinyan calls for unification between Armenia and Karabakh,” *Eurasianet*, August 6, 2019, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/pashinyan-calls-for-unification-between-armenia-and-karabakh> (accessed January 19, 2021). This citation of Kucera is not an endorsement of his work; indeed, his reporting and interpretation are typically among the most tendentious of long-time writers on the region. In this case he cites the Russian-language Azerbaijani news site Haqqin.az, so that he is not obliged himself to say (although the uncritical citation amounts to endorsement) that Pashinyan is “more radical and intransigent” than Kocharyan even had been, indeed, “unhinged and categorical.”

rejection of the OSCE Mink Group-proposed Madrid Principles, according to which the territories' final status would be the product of negotiations. They equally failed to note that this was the first Armenian government that failed to pay the Madrid Principles at least lip-service.

As negotiations languished over the years, Azerbaijan periodically warned that the use of force would be a last resort if the peace process was exhausted; but no one took Baku seriously.

They further failed to understand that, whereas the Madrid Principles called for the eventual participation of both the Armenian and the (ethnically cleansed) Azerbaijani communities of the Nagorno-Karabakh region in those negotiations, Pashinyan now demanded that Armenian representatives from the region should participate on an equal basis with Armenia and Azerbaijan themselves, and without their ethnic Azerbaijani counterparts.¹⁷ They were therefore incapable of understanding the significance of Pashinyan's subsequent overt rejection of the Madrid Principles, as represented by his proposing seven new conditions for negotiations with Azerbaijan.

As negotiations languished over the years, Azerbaijan periodically warned that the use of force would be a last resort if the peace process was exhausted; but no one took Baku seriously. This resort to force finally occurred after Armenia overtly and unilaterally rejected the Madrid Principles and provoked armed clashes at the front line. Even after the hostilities began, Western diplomats and spokesmen were insisting that "there is no military solution to the conflict."¹⁸ This false estimation of the situation was based in ignorance, wishful thinking and, probably half-consciously, embarrassment at their inability to do anything about the facts being established on the ground. Of course, there was a military solution, and Azerbaijan implemented it.

17 Jafarova, E. "'Velvet Populism' Ends Decade-Long Discussion Of The Madrid Principles," *Eurasia Review*, September 18, 2020, available at: <https://www.eurasiareview.com/18092020-velvet-populism-ends-decade-long-discussion-of-the-madrid-principles-oped/> (accessed January 19, 2021).

18 The examples are myriad, from both official, semi-official, and unofficial sources: on the Iranian side, Fars News Agency, *Official: No Military Solution for Nagorno-Karabakh Issue*, October 7, 2020, available at: <https://www.farsnews.ir/en/news/13990716000815/Official-N-Military-Slin-fr-Nagr-Karabakh-Isse>; the Canadian foreign minister, quoted in Levon Sevunts, "'Stay out' of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Canada tells Turkey," *Radio Canada International*, October 9, 2020, available at: <https://www.rcinet.ca/en/2020/10/09/stay-out-of-the-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-canada-tells-turkey/>; the Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman, quoted: "Zakharova: There is no military solution to the conflict in Karabakh, and Moscow does not agree with Ankara on this issue," *Sputnik*, November 9, 2020, available at: <https://archive.is/wip/pVTnM>; US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, quoted in Reuters Staff, *Pompeo urges Armenia, Azerbaijan to cease hostilities*, October 27, 2020, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-armenia-azerbaijan-usa-idUSKBN27C215>; the US Mission to the OSCE, "Statement regarding the Conflict In and Around Nagorno-Karabakh," October 29, 2020, available at: <https://osce.usmission.gov/statement-regarding-the-conflict-in-and-around-nagorno-karabakh/>; retired US Ambassador Carey Cavanagh, "There is no military solution for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict," *Al Jazeera English*, October 19, 2020, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/10/19/there-is-no-military-solution-for-the-nagorno-karabakh-conflict> (all sources accessed January 19, 2021); uncountable other examples also exist in non-English languages.

The way forward

What can we conclude from these circumstances? First, the previously-mentioned article on The Greater Middle East website observes that “the exclusion and marginalization” of Azerbaijani views and experience only “creates more obstacles towards reaching peace within the region.” J. Libardian has emphasized the blind alley into which successive Yerevan regimes have led themselves. Without overtly accusing the Armenian diaspora of malign influence, he describes, how the Armenian government behaviour “relie[d] on dreams rather than hard facts” and “started by the conclusion that corresponded to our dreams, and then asked only those questions that confirmed our conclusions.” In perhaps the most acute indictment, he diagnoses: “We adjust political strategy to our wishes, to what will make us feel good about ourselves rather than take into consideration the simple facts that collectively make up the reality around us.”¹⁹

As Libardian explains, in the Armenian worldview, the defeat appears catastrophic and world-historical. Yet it occurred because this worldview, self-contained and divorced from reality, and encouraged by a diaspora that need not suffer its consequences,²⁰ blinded Armenian politics and society to the actual changes in the region and the world over the last

Armenian society had failed to understand that 30 years made a difference for Azerbaijan. It was as if the entire Armenian political class believed that Azerbaijan was still in the midst of a civil war, with a weak central government having poor diplomatic outreach

25 years: the rise of Azerbaijani state power, the shift of Russian sentiment, and the powerlessness of that diaspora when push came to shove. This worldview, Libardian wrote, still imprisons Armenian society, which remains unable to recognize how or why the defeat occurred, and incapable even of formulating questions that might lead to real answers.

Partisan sentiment is diffused throughout Armenian society, he observes, making strategic thinking impossible, thus trapping it in an ideological hall of mirrors. He is clearly correct that Armenian society

19 Libardian, J. “What Happened and Why: Six Theses,” *The Armenian Mirror-Spectator*, November 24, 2020, available at: <https://mirrorspectator.com/2020/11/24/what-happened-and-why-six-theses/> (accessed January 19, 2021); see also his interview by G. Atanesian, “Mnogie dumali, chto voina – eto zabava: Zhirair Liparitian o porazhenii Armenii i budushchem Karabakha,” *BBC News Russian Service*, November 30, 2020, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-55132269> (accessed January 19, 2021). A recent interview is by T. Rowley, “Salvage: a conversation on Nagorno-Karabakh,” *openDemocracy*, December 8, 2020, available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/salvage-conversation-nagorno-karabakh/> (accessed January 19, 2021).

20 Collard, R. “The Armenian Diaspora Is Giving Armenia an Edge in Nagorno-Karabakh,” *Foreign Policy*, October 17, 2020, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/17/armenia-diaspora-nagorno-karabakh-azerbaijan> (accessed January 19, 2021).

had failed to understand that 30 years made a difference for Azerbaijan. It was as if the entire Armenian political class believed that Azerbaijan was still in the midst of a civil war, with a weak central government having poor diplomatic outreach and few English speakers, and a newly established defence ministry disposing of few weapons. Clearly, that was not the case, and it should not have been necessary to lose a war catastrophically in order to learn the lesson: if it is yet learnt.

How to exit this dead-end? Many supposedly wise international diplomatic observers, not excluding NGOs and some governments, insist either on a return to the Minsk Group forum, which has lost all credibility, as explained above; or on some other multilateralized settlement.²¹ Interlocutors are all well and good, and external guarantees may be necessary in the long run, but the only real way out of this dead-end for the Armenian political class is “reality therapy.”²²

The best thing that any interlocutor could do, rather than passing messages back and forth between Baku and Yerevan, would be gently to insist on, and to facilitate, the Armenian leadership beginning to speak directly with the Azerbaijani leadership, rather than relying on intermediaries. These two peoples are neighbours who have intermingled and intermarried for centuries, and they will still be living with each other after all the interlocutors have gone home.

Beyond the practical work of post-war rehabilitation of the land and peoples at the present moment, the best thing that external powers can do is to promote this face-to-face and bilateral cooperation between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and between their leaders and their political executives in particular. The two sides must engage in practical cooperation on all levels. It is natural to begin with the smallest steps, such as cooperation on border delimitation and demarcation, which is, in fact, now occurring. Azerbaijan and Turkey, both separately and together, have made many concrete offers to the Armenian leadership for economic cooperation over the last 15-20 years.

It is up to the Armenian leadership and political class to decide whether or not to engage in this reality therapy. The alternative is the perpetuation

21 International Crisis Group, “Improving Prospects for Peace after the Nagorno-Karabakh War,” Briefing No. 91 / Europe & Central Asia (Brussels: International Crisis Group, December 22, 2020), available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/nagorno-karabakh-conflict/b91-improving-prospects-peace-after-nagorno-karabakh-war> (accessed January 19, 2021).

22 Cutler, R.M. “Looking Beyond Armenia’s Defeat in Nagorno-Karabakh,” *Central Asia–Caucasus Analyst*, December 7, 2020, available at: <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13652-looking-beyond-armenias-defeat-in-nagorno-karabakh.html> (accessed January 19, 2021).

of the impoverishment and suffering of the Armenian people inside Armenia, in which the influential diaspora, however, do not share. At the same time, experts must continue the inspection and criticism of the mass and specialized media in order to expose errors and old ways of thinking that harm the everyday lives and the futures of the peoples in the region by creating false images of the real situation on the ground, from which only mistaken actions can proceed.