



ENC ANALYSIS



ARMENIA'S POPULIST FOREIGN POLICY-MAKING PROCESS BETWEEN 2018 AND 2020: NAVIGATING *VOLONTÉ GÉNÉRALE* AND WAR¹

DECEMBER 2022

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¹ This paper is the shortened version of the article titled "From 'revolution' to war: deciphering Armenia's populist foreign policy-making process", published by the *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Informa UK Limited, Taylor & Francis Group. DOI: [10.1080/14683857.2022.2111111](https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2022.2111111). The first version of the article was published as an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) and permission for reprint has been obtained from the copyright holders. © 2022 Vahram Ter-Matevosyan and Hovhannes Nikoghosyan.

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Introduction

For three weeks between April and May 2018, Armenia was in turmoil. Nikol Pashinyan, a journalist-turned-politician, led unprecedented public rallies, aiming to halt outgoing President Serzh Sargsyan's plans to become Armenia's next Prime Minister. After switching to the parliamentary system under the 2015 Constitutional amendments, Sargsyan's intention was largely perceived as an effort to continue his rule under a different title. Amid public protests, and contrary to his earlier pledge not to run for any leadership position, he was elected Prime Minister by the parliament on 17 April, just eight days after his second and final presidential term ended. However, in the face of mounting public pressure and civil disobedience, Sargsyan resigned after just six days in the new office. On 8 May 2018, the parliament, still dominated by the Republican Party of Armenia, bowed under the pressure of street protests and growing escalation on the frontline with Azerbaijan, elected Pashinyan as Prime Minister. Echoing Pashinyan's wording, many politicians and commentators dubbed the change of government as 'Velvet Revolution.'

After coming to office, Pashinyan formed his government composed of relatively young people with some experience in foreign-funded NGOs or international organizations but who mostly had never held public office. Moreover, the high popularity and populist style of governance of PM Pashinyan, coupled with little trust towards the bureaucracy, undermined the established *modus operandi* of the Armenian Government, however imperfect.

Foreign policy analysis is an interdisciplinary field of study, and from this standpoint, the art and craft of foreign policy-making in the former SU countries (except Russia) remain relatively under-researched and often misunderstood. Existing research is heavily influenced by reflections on domestic political conjunctures, unresolved territorial disputes, and geopolitical choices, rarely dealing with the roots of foreign policy-making and its institutional features. Addressing this gap becomes more pertinent given the deteriorating security environment and the persistence of authoritarian and populist regimes in the Caucasus and the wider region. A few notable exceptions notwithstanding (Ter-Matevosyan and Drnoian 2021; Gabrielyan et al. 2016), the bulk of the literature on Armenian foreign policy is devoted to the Karabakh conflict, EU/U.S./Russia competition, and wider regional security problems (Vasilyan 2017; Miarka and Łapaj-Kucharska 2021). The existing literature has rarely examined Armenia's foreign policy-making process, often due to a lack of deeper knowledge of both the legal-institutional framework and policy process and, more importantly, limited access to key decision-makers. The available scholarship on the Karabakh conflict, too, has seldom evaluated the impact of the foreign policy decision-making (FPDM) framework – namely the processes and personalities involved – on the peace process as a whole (Mkrtchyan 2007; Kolsto and Blakkisrud 2012; Broers 2019). It has been erroneously maintained that neither institutional nor domestic political factors affect the foreign policies of Armenia; instead, it is believed to be driven by successive presidents alone, ignoring the variety of political and social influences on the FPDM processes – ranging from coalition politics since 2003 to the impact of Armenian Diaspora organizations.

This article attempts to depart from this tradition. To this end, it discusses the leadership of PM Nikol Pashinyan and other government institutions (the National Security Council, in particular) in the foreign policy-making process of the turbulent 2018–2020 period. The central question to examine is: how has the foreign policy-making style of a populist leader

in Armenia affected the FPDM process, and what has been ‘the resultants’ of those processes? The main argument this research puts forward is that an anti-establishment, populist leader in a developing country like Armenia, which lacks strong public institutions and a resilient bureaucracy to check and balance the executive office, can sporadically replace the decision-making due process with his (or her) own will and preferences in response to changing domestic political needs. This incoherent process of foreign policy formulation, which is not synchronized across the relevant government bodies due to the strong anti-establishment sentiments of the populist leader, often results in disposable foreign policy moves, creates policy implementation gaps, and corrupts the process of decision-making as a whole.

The vehicle of inquiry will be two distinct yet inherently connected policies. The first is Armenia’s policy of positioning itself as a democratic nation on the international stage since the abrupt change of government in May 2018. The second is the relevant factors and influences shaping Armenia’s approach to the Karabakh conflict resolution process. The primary data for this research comes from more than two dozen semi-structured interviews with former and incumbent high-ranking officials in Armenia and the Nagorno Karabakh Republic, all conducted between December 2019 and May 2021. Statements and interviews of relevant government officials, the writings of other policy analysts and practitioners as well as news pieces have also been utilized.

After discussing the theoretical framework of the FPDM process and populist foreign policy-making, the article explores the decision-making units engaged in Armenia’s FPDM process. The article then lays out a three-level periodization of Pashinyan’s foreign policy behavior and the dynamics in the Karabakh peace process between 2018 and 2020.

Theoretical Framework

Analysis of FPDM processes and consensus-building patterns are important preconditions to understanding how foreign policy is formulated and enacted, keeping in mind the gaps between the two stages. There are a few known approaches to FPDM analysis, the most famous of which was put forward by Graham Allison in *Essence of Decision* (1971). However, theoretical models that include coalition-building (Hilsman et al. 1993) or bureaucratic bargaining among key government figures (Marsh 2014) during the FPDM process would be of limited utility in the Armenian case of 2018–2020 since the key participants in the process had neither bureaucratic experience nor political prowess to leverage the public office. Nor looking at the organizational process or the bureaucratic politics ‘cuts’ mentioned by Allison (1971) will help us better understand the decision-making patterns under the Pashinyan cabinet in 2018–2020 since the signature of his domestic politics – the anti-establishment and democratic invincibility narratives at home and abroad (Ter-Matevosyan and Nikoghosyan 2021) – significantly hindered the influence of intra- and inter-organizational forces on the FPDM processes. The populist rejection of ‘the establishment,’ both inside the bureaucracy and outside of it (including in Diaspora), prevented the emergence of overall policy cohesion and discipline on the bureaucratic level (Freedman 1976), thus giving a more prominent, unchallenged role to the chief executive. A powerful leader, as Hermann notes (2001), often leads to groupthink. Mintz and DeRouen (2010, 44) argue that groupthink is most likely in the absence of two factors: ‘an impartial leader who can tolerate dissent’ and ‘norms and procedures for decision making.’ ‘Groupthink provides’, according to them,

'safety and security for decision makers [. . .] if the situation at hand is a crisis or has moral overtones [. . .] because members rely on each other for support and validation' (ibid). Moreover, charismatic populist leaders are rarely concerned with such pathologies as groupthink since they claim to have different sources of legitimacy and self-evaluation of their historic and missionary roles, in contrast to 'establishment politicians.' From that perspective, it is almost impossible to understand Armenian policy-making, especially the FPDM, in the period between 2018 and 2020 without scrutinizing the tactics, moves, and initiatives of the Pashinyan administration under the lenses of populism.

Müller (2016), Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017), and others convincingly show that populism entails the rejection of establishment politicians, anti-pluralism, and claims of exclusive representation of the people's unified will – the *volonte generale*. All of this downplays political institutions and any need for political consensus-building. Destradi and Plagemann (2019) argue that populists are transforming foreign policy into a more centralized and personalized process, thereby impacting its style and conduct. How leaders channel the forces and impulses of populism into foreign policy and whether there is a 'populist foreign policy' at all are subject to academic debates, as there is not one coherent and all-inclusive description of how populist leaders shape foreign policy (Boucher and Thies 2019). Distinguishing between left- and right-wing populism by characterizing the right as concerned with the fight for national sovereignty against supra-national institutions, global governance, and immigrants; and the left as concerned with a critique of American power and neoliberalism may only scratch the surface of the issue at large. For example, in Europe, 'populist parties on the right and left see Russia as a useful ally against the dominance of the EU and the US' (Chryssogelos 2021, 15).

One thing that populist leaders do while in power is subordinate foreign policy to domestic political needs by constantly referencing 'the people.' It can occur at various stages: be that during the consolidation of power in the early stages of their tenure, when pursuing to preserve power when challenged, or re-energizing the domestic electorate when needed. Thus, one consensus that has emerged so far is that populist leaders want to be constantly in touch with their electorates and, therefore, often defy diplomatic channels, bureaucratic elites (or any elites), or both. Of course, after assuming executive power, populists also have to adapt their style to the limitations enshrined in laws and rules. Yet too often, they reject any due process, according to Muller, in order not to look like the 'illegitimate elite' against which they claim to defend 'the real people' (2016). When it comes to policy-making issues, this eventually charts a path to groupthink pathologies in the decision-making process – which is even more troublesome with leaders with little prior experience in the foreign policy field. Unwilling to solicit external expert support and unable or unwilling to build effective decision-making systems, they decry any limitations to fulfilling the 'people's will.' This leads to a second consensus, which suggests that populist leaders tend to formulate and advance simplistic solutions to complex foreign and security policy issues, a trait that makes them susceptible to changing (geo)political circumstances (Chryssogelos 2011).

In their desire to maintain the affection of the people, populists are always conscious of their public image. The image theory assumes that decision-makers accept or reject new goals and plans based on what they consider the right thing to do rather than what would maximize strategic objectives. The right thing to do is defined by the decision-makers values, ethics, beliefs and morals (Beach 1990). For populist leaders, 'right decisions' are also those that best resonate with their electorates, given that such leaders rely on a 'direct

affective relationship of mutual persecution, heroism, and martyrdom' vis-à-vis their voters (Wajner 2021). It is not uncommon for any leader to have blinders and biases stemming from their beliefs and past experiences. In his seminal study of bias and misperception, Robert Jervis (1976) famously argued that decision makers generally do not perceive the world accurately. Forman and Selly (2001) and Mintz and DeRouen (2010) provide extensive lists of biases in foreign policy making. These lists contain a number of the same biases that were consistently mentioned in the interviews with high-ranking officials conducted for this research, namely: focusing on short-term benefits rather than longer-term problems, overconfidence, over-estimating one's capabilities and underestimating rival's capabilities, ignoring critical information, and a lack of tracking and auditing of prior decisions and plans.

While acknowledging the heterogeneity of populism, four distinct pathologies in foreign policy-making can be identified across different populist movements: a) undermining the decision-making process by disregarding institutions (anti-establishment sentiment); b) discouraging dissent, which leads to groupthink (anti-pluralist identity); subordinating foreign affairs to domestic politics (constant campaigning); d) conducting ill-conceived foreign policy that few dare challenge from within (intolerance towards criticism). These observable patterns have not only contributed to diplomatic failures with international partners and made the 45-day war² inevitable but also hindered the bureaucracy's effective and efficient mobilization in the foreign policy domain. This article, therefore, explores and connects the macro- and micro-level factors in seeking causal explanations in FPDM processes in Armenia.

Institutional frameworks of the foreign policy decision-making process

Among Armenia's pressing foreign policy issues, the unresolved Karabakh (Artsakh) conflict stands out for its complex nature. Between 2016 and 2018, the conflict intensified. The four-day escalation on the Artsakh-Azerbaijan Line of Contact in April 2016, which became a precursor to the 2020 war, shook the status quo and intensified the negotiation process. Between April 2016 and April 2018, the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group (Russia, the U.S. and France) made more than 20 statements and the Presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan met three times, which indicates that Pashinyan inherited an intensive negotiation portfolio. Given his rapid rise to power, Pashinyan needed time to comprehend the intricacies of the previous conflict resolution proposals, review the glossary of the negotiation's history, and finally, think of new negotiation strategies and tactics. Against this backdrop, the role of political institutions, which should have been instrumental in helping him conceive and implement his foreign policy goals, was crucial. There are three key decision-making units that can potentially impact the FPDM process of an Armenian leader: the ruling majority (or coalition in 2003–2007, 2007–2012) in the parliament, the PM's office, and the National Security Council. This section sheds light on how these three have manifested themselves in recent years in Armenia. The discussion below also exhibits these agencies' structural and bureaucratic weaknesses that made them easily susceptible to the will of a new leader.

The first unit under analysis is the unicameral National Assembly of Armenia, which can have both institutional and political influence on the FPDM. Institutionally, under the 2015 Constitutional amendments, the role of the parliament includes the adoption of

Government programmes following general elections (Article 146.2), the right to ratify, suspend or annul international treaties (Article 116), declare war and peace (Article 118) as well as cancel Martial or Emergency decrees adopted by the Government (Articles 119–120). The Parliament may adopt statements and resolutions on foreign policy matters (Article 103); invite Government members to hearings in the Standing Committees or ad hoc hearings in the full house, as well as through parliamentary diplomacy. Historically, the National Assembly of Armenia has had a relatively modest role in foreign policy-making. Since Armenia's January 2001 accession to the Council of Europe and the emergence of international parliamentary organizations (OSCE PA, NATO PA, Euronest, Armenia-EU, CSTO PA, etc.), the work of delegations has been closely assisted by the Foreign Ministry and followed the Government narratives, even by non-ruling-party MPs in matters of national security. The application of the D'Hondt method in the Armenian legislature with the 2016 Electoral Code reinforced the role of the political opposition and increased their participation in international delegations. As a result, some outlier voices became more vocal, even though the Foreign Ministry and President's – Prime Minister's after April 2018 – office have maintained a strong influence over parliamentarians by their voluntary acquiescence.

Neither the ruling Civil Contract party nor the My Step faction parliamentarians (2019–2021) have been active in institutional or organizational memberships with inter-national partisan organizations or inter-parliamentary platforms (such as the RPA did in the European People's Party). The role of the majority My Step faction MPs in parliamentary diplomacy had been to market the 'democratic revolution' of 2018, whereas their role in the public-political space was limited to echoing the anti-establishment narratives of the political leader. Especially since January 2019, My Step-driven parliamentary diplomacy had lacked initiative and visibility on international platforms, which dramatically affected parliament's ability to activate any international goodwill during the 45-day war. Of course, the travel restrictions due to COVID-19 in 2020 also affected the potential of earning new friends for the newly groomed parliamentarians. PM Pashinyan often held extended off-the-record sessions with his parliamentary majority faction to guide legislative initiatives and brief them on the Karabakh peace process. This was mainly done to ensure party-wide alignment and was not meant to delve into the subject matter of ongoing negotiations. By Fall 2019, according to some participants, these sessions on foreign policy, and Nagorno Karabakh in particular, became a mere formality. Everyone could talk, but little to nothing was being considered by Pashinyan. The MPs, therefore, more often opted to stay silent and sit idle (Personal communication with two former MPs 2021).

The staff of the President has traditionally had closer access to the leader's ear, which, especially in 2010–2018, created tacit tensions between the President's Office and the Foreign Ministry. One factor contributing to these tensions was the 2010 Presidential Decree, which assigned his office the role of monitoring and supervising the work of embassies and consulates abroad (Ter-Matevosyan and Drnoian 2021). The tenures of all three Armenian Presidents until 2018, with a few and short exceptions, featured a powerful cohort of gatekeepers, which made the office of the Chief Executive a unique steering committee for the draft decisions developed in the parliament or the government.

In contrast, with only singular exceptions who continued to serve till December 2018, PM Pashinyan chose to encircle himself 'with doers and not thinkers' (with a few

exceptions who continued to serve until December 2018), which created a perilous groupthink dynamic around the Prime Minister. His lack of experience in foreign and national security policy could have been partially compensated for through the appointment of experienced and knowledgeable people to the inner circle; however, Pashinyan's decision-making patterns and distrust of outsiders played an outsized role in making strategic choices. All of the foreign policy advisers Pashinyan had in 2018 were gone by October 2019 except for Hrachya Taschyan, who allegedly served as political communications liaison with his peer in the Azerbaijani President's office. Tashchyan, too, was laid off in December 2021 (News.am 1 December 2021).

The National Security Council is the third unit that can influence decision-making processes. Established in December 1991, this body has traditionally been tailored to the needs of the incumbent leader and, for decades, did not have permanent staff or powers of inter-agency policy coordination. Given the importance of this unit as an inter-agency policy coordination framework, a short history of the development of the NSC is due. According to numerous leading authors in the field, 'leadership style affects the way advisory systems are structured' (Mintz and Wayne 2016; Hermann and Preston 1994; Hermann and Margaret 2001), and this is very much the case with the NSC of Armenia since its establishment.

Each of Armenia's four leaders, depending on their personality and management styles, has adopted varying approaches to utilizing the NSC in their policy-making process. Between 1992 and 1994, it was instrumental for Levon Ter-Petrosyan, Armenia's first President, who used this platform to formally build consensus among key stakeholders on various aspects of the war and diplomacy. Between 1994 and 2008, the role of the NSC as an institution declined, with a few exceptions; for example, the fateful meeting of the NSC in January 1998, when Ter-Petrosyan was confronted by the Prime Minister, the Minister of Defence, and the Minister of National Security and Internal affairs. The disagreement between them and Ter-Petrosyan over the Karabakh conflict resolution led to the President's resignation a month later. President Robert Kocharyan (1998–2008), in turn, largely disregarded the NSC and preferred regular sessions with key Ministers, either one-on-one or in small groups (Personal communication with a former high-ranking Armenian official 2020). President Serzh Sargsyan (2008–2018), having been a long-time Secretary of the NSC and playing a leading role in the adoption of the 2007 National Security Strategy, considered the National Security Council his bailiwick. However, despite sizable budgetary allocations for a more institutionalized NSC and a deliberate policy to transform it into an important constitutional body (Article 55.6 of the 2005 Constitution), the NSC's policy impact remained marginal. This was partly because of NSC Secretary Arthur Baghdasaryan's political ambitions that this body became overly politicized. The NSC sessions became more institutionalized in the second term of President Sargsyan. Various statutory members of the NSC recalled different issues relevant to their ministries that had been in whole or in part deliberated within the NSC between 2015 and 2018. Most of those discussed sought inter-agency consensus-building among various powerful ministries.

Before April 2018, the NSC had been only an advisory body to the President. The 2015 Constitutional amendments renamed it into Security Council – hereafter (N)SC – and made it a decision-making body by limiting its powers to determining 'the main directions of the defence policy' under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister (Articles 152, 155). During Pashinyan's premiership, the frequency of the (N)SC meetings has increased partly due to the legal requirement and partly due to his willingness to share ownership of and

responsibility for the most important decisions. The (N)SC has become a ‘security cabinet’ of Pashinyan’s most trusted allies where a wider scope of issues was decided, formally or not (Personal communication with a former high-ranking Armenian official June 2021). To some, (N)SC meetings were only a PR stunt (non-statutory attendees were often invited, such as the President, Catholicos of All Armenians, Speaker of the Parliament, etc.); to others inside the process, they have meant shouldering shared responsibility for decisions. At the end of the day, ‘the NSC has turned into a responsibility-sharing mechanism based on discussions where Pashinyan would steer the process to a conclusion of his own liking’ (Personal Communication with a former member of the (N)SC, July 2020). Pashinyan’s (N)SC meetings often were day-long, informal gatherings and usually went beyond the formally adopted agenda items (Personal communication with former Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh NSC members, December 2019 – July 2021). In these sessions, Pashinyan ensured that everyone contributed to the deliberation but made sure that participants clearly understood what the ‘acceptable’ positions could be (Personal communication with a former NSC staffer June 2020).

Three periods of Pashinyan’s foreign policy

The period between the rise of Pashinyan to power in May 2018 and the beginning of Azerbaijan’s full-blown military assault against Nagorno Karabakh in September 2020 requires a clearer periodization to better understand the impact of the four pathologies of the FPDM process incurred by a populist leader, mentioned earlier in this paper. The 26 months leading to the war started with an overwhelming sense of euphoria, later morphed into more realist perspectives on world affairs, which, however, failed to transform into statesmanship. These are also the three stages of the maturing of the new decision-makers who assumed power on a popular wave but only gradually began grasping the weight of their responsibilities and the complexity of issues under their purview.

The euphoria

The period from May to December 2018 entailed adapting to the new role and building relations with foreign leaders, accompanied by consolidating power through snap parliamentary elections in December 2018. In this period, Pashinyan was determined to translate his domestic legitimacy and purported democratic credentials into foreign policy gains. Foreign travel itineraries, meetings, and, not least, the Francophonie Summit in Armenia in October 2018 were marketed domestically as unquestionable evidence of his successful foreign policy.

The 2018 mass protests were about democratization and social justice, which left little room for foreign policy, an area where there has been only marginal divergence between mainstream political leaders in the Armenian electoral processes since 1998. As the leader of the 2018 popular movement and long-time opposition politician, Pashinyan took pains to emphasize that ‘the Velvet Revolution had no geopolitical context’ (Aysor.am 19 April 2018), in contrast to the popular movements in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004–2005, 2013–14) that quickly gained pro-Western and anti-Russian geopolitical consequences. Nevertheless, the protest leaders declared their intention to build relations with the external world ‘from more sovereign positions’ (MFA 2020), consistent with their track

record in opposition and civil society organizations. Many commentators found his emphasis on advancing democratic values not sufficiently convincing. In reality, as one of them claims, Pashinyan has advanced “nationalist narrative rather than a democratic one” (Sahakyan 2022, 95). Oddly, some insiders of the new power corridors later flagged that the revolutionaries, in fact, ‘actively sought Western support through appeals to embassies and international media,’ albeit unsuccessfully (Gamaghelyan and Rumyantsev 2021, 6). Then-chief EU diplomat in Armenia, Piotr Switalski, opined in his memoirs that the new elite had little to no understanding of how to communicate their needs with foreign diplomats and their governments (2020, 86–87).

‘The non-violent, velvet people’s revolution’ has become the core of Pashinyan’s talking points. On different occasions – until the Summer of 2020 – he relished the chance to present Armenia’s renewed identity and was demanding from the Armenian diplomats to adopt such narratives in their work. Addressing Armenia’s diplomats in 2019, Pashinyan urged them to instrumentalize the ‘non-violent, velvet, people’s revolution, which was an event of global significance’ (Prime Minister of Armenia 27 August 2019). The words of the Speaker of Parliament at the Fifth Congress of the Civil Contract Party in 2019 summarized the mood inside the team: ‘Today Armenia is a bulwark of democracy in the world. Yes, not the U.S., not Europe [but Armenia]’ (Mirzoyan 16 June 2019). In May 2020, when presenting the government’s annual report to the Parliament, Pashinyan reiterated: ‘We shape Armenia’s foreign policy *from scratch*’ [emphasis added] (Tert.am 16 May 2020) – a wording that vividly characterizes his aspirations as a populist leader.

Despite these assertions, Pashinyan was adamant about continuity in foreign policy. This is not because he lacked the mandate; his approval rating was skyrocketing (IRI 2018). Instead, he needed more time to calibrate his policy priorities. In any case, Western diplomats offered the new regime a ‘grace period refraining from open criticism’ (Switalski 2020, 138) to allow the new leadership to get used to their new offices and responsibilities. In some ways, learning was fast: defying his track record of voting against Armenia’s membership in the Russia-led EEU and blaming Russia for the April 2016 war (Tin.am 26 March 2018), Pashinyan spoke in favour of ‘further deepening relations with Russia’ (Pashinyan 9 May 2018).

One of the first assignments Pashinyan gave to the new Foreign Minister, Zohrab Mnatsakanian, was to expedite his official encounters with leaders in Moscow, Paris, Brussels, Berlin, and Washington. This proactive self-positioning by Pashinyan was meant to reinvent and advance Armenia’s new democratic image but also de-legitimize occasional domestic criticism about the lack of foreign policy credentials. It was believed that this new, democratic Armenia would finally build more worthy alliances and pursue new relationships with traditional partners.³ The state propaganda reinforced the belief that ‘the whole world is with us now’ at every level of communication. When in December 2018, *The Economist* named Armenia the ‘Country of the Year,’ it echoed the government’s narrative of New Armenia (i.e., something opposed to the old Armenia, where the former, corrupt establishment ruled) and served as yet another boost to the regime’s sense of self-righteousness.

Like every populist leader, Pashinyan had always consciously nurtured his public image – be that with an ‘angry look’ at Belarusian leader, Lukashenko, advertised on his family-owned news website *Haykakan Zhamanak* (ArmTimes, 6 December 2018), or a photo-op with U.S. President Donald Trump in the margins of the NATO Summit (Kucera 2018). In other words, Pashinyan’s foreign policy behaviour was fully subordinated to domestic political needs. It was situational and did not follow any particular mission or clearly articulated strategic objective. In a way, this was understandable: the public opinion

surveys conducted by IRI during that period showed that the Armenian population predominantly expected the new government to perform in the socio-economic domain, not on foreign and security policy matters (IRI 2019). The EU Ambassador later wrote that the new government's self-positioning was quite unconvincing: 'a country like Armenia cannot assume *a priori* that it earns the support and esteem of its partners by default; effort is required' (Switalski 2020, 88).

Despite hopes, Pashinyan's first foreign encounters yielded no tangible results. His first trip to Brussels, as part of the NATO Summit in July of 2018, showed the new Prime Minister the difficulties of translating democratic credentials into international relations. Frustrated, he convened an unplanned press conference for the accompanying Armenian journalists at the Brussels airport and declared that sovereign Armenia should no longer 'ask for help' from anyone and that the international community (and Europe in particular) must now decide for themselves how to convert their verbal support into material assistance. Following the meeting with the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, the insiders of the new regime began talking about shattered illusions. Two years later, the EU Ambassador wrote in his memoirs that the West turned a blind eye to Pashinyan's first mistakes, hoping that Yerevan would turn to the West given that the revolution, in his view, swept away all the legitimate pro-Russian leaders in Armenia (Switalski 2020).

Neither did the U.S. show any interest in supporting Armenia, despite the efforts from the government and Armenian lobbying groups. The American isolationism during Donald Trump's tenure offered little hope for Armenia. The tough confrontation between the White House and Congress has weakened the traditional ability of the Armenian Caucus and lobbyists to influence the executive branch and its decisions. In February 2019, after Armenia decided to send deminers to Syria as part of a Russian-led operation, the prospect of a positive agenda with the U.S. diminished significantly.

Following his initial encounters with the Russian leader Vladimir Putin in May 2018 (Nikoghosyan 2018) and European leaders in Brussels, Pashinyan turned to Armenia's most acute security problem: the smouldering conflict in Nagorno Karabakh. Prior to 2018, Pashinyan chose to have limited exposure to foreign policy or the Karabakh conflict. Retrospectively, he made one significant statement at the rally during the Sasna Tsrer's terrorist attack on the State Protection Service in July 2016 (Yerevan Today, 23 July 2016), where he labeled any compromise deal with Azerbaijan an 'unacceptable capitulation' so long as the latter maintains its bellicose rhetoric against Armenia.

In contrast to continuity on other dimensions, the new government's initial posture on the Karabakh conflict reintroduced a bygone element: strong insistence, almost a precondition, on ensuring participation of Nagorno Karabakh at the negotiation table. Citing an impasse in the peace process, in his inaugural press conference convened in the capital of Nagorno Karabakh the next day after he was elected Prime Minister, Pashinyan tried to leverage his democratic credentials, which, in his view, the deposed regime lacked, for returning Stepanakert to the peace process. To the surprise and disapproval of all three co-chair countries (Personal Communication with a Western diplomat, October 2020), he supported his suggestion with a two-fold argument: (a) his democratic legitimacy derived from Armenia, not from Nagorno Karabakh, and (b) there was a need for democratic representation of Nagorno Karabakh around the table. This was perhaps indicative of the belief that democratic credentials would win new Armenia many advantages over authoritarian Azerbaijan. However, other statements in the same press conference were meant to echo other popular narratives too and hardly exhibited any coherent policy position. For example, he called for negotiations, urged Baku 'to

recognize the right of self-determination of the people of Nagorno Karabakh,' and then declared the need for 'international recognition of the Nagorno Karabakh Republic and [its] government' (Pashinyan 21 May 2020).

In one of the first (N)SC sessions after assuming power, Pashinyan, after allegedly familiarizing himself with 'the Karabakh folder' inherited from the previous regime, presented his understanding of the current state of the peace process and asked his closest allies directly: 'Do you agree with the package we inherited?' Everyone answered negative, concerned that doing otherwise would look like being a loyalist of the deposed regime. According to two high-ranking officials with knowledge of the matter, 'nobody wanted to shoulder any responsibility' as they hoped to continue freezing the conflict while they were in power (Personal communication with a former (N)SC staffer, June 2020 and (N)SC member, July 2020). Finally, according to the interviewees, no one wanted to do something that 'the street' did not care about, nor rallied in the streets for in April–May 2018.

Soon more incoherent moves emerged. One of those, which Pashinyan repeatedly shared on different platforms, was the following: 'any version of the settlement of the Karabakh issue should be acceptable for the people of Armenia, for the people of Nagorno Karabakh, and for the people of Azerbaijan' (Prime Minister of Armenia 11 April 2019). Occasionally, the Armenian Diaspora was also included in this list, which caused frustration among the Western diplomats engaged in the peace process (Personal communication with a former OSCE diplomat November 2020). He never elaborated on his position's essentials, nor did he clarify the means to achieve it. This is a conventional populist approach to foreign policy-making: the leader has no function other than voicing the '*volonte generale*.' In a similar populist vein, on 17 August 2018, during the rally at Republic Square in Yerevan dedicated to his first 100 days in office, he assured his tens of thousands of supporters gathered there of the following:

' . . . the Karabakh conflict is to be resolved by the people's will and not by the government. Should the talks result in a settlement that I would personally consider to be a good option, let no one think that I will sign any confidential paper or take any secret action. If I see that there is an option that needs discussing, I will come to you and give you the details of it, after which you will decide whether to accept the settlement or not. You are surely the supreme authority in the country, and you will have the final say on the matter at hand.' (Prime Minister of Armenia 17 August 2018).

Despite clear signs of problems brewing (such as Azerbaijani military advancement from Nakhijevan, denied at the time), and with no attempts made to restart meaningful negotiations, Pashinyan continued to count on his democratic invincibility (Ter-Matevosyan and Nikoghosyan 2021), implying that the world would not allow a war against a democratic country. 'Any attempt to resolve this conflict by military means is an attack against democracy, human rights, and peace,' Pashinyan often repeated (Prime Minister of Armenia 11–12 July 2018) until September 2020.

In September 2018, Pashinyan formally agreed with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in Dushanbe to reduce tensions on the frontline and re-establish direct lines of communication between Yerevan and Baku, which had existed in the early 1990s and early 2000s. The OSCE MG Co-Chairs hailed this as a confidence-building measure (OSCE 2018), but apparently, each party had different intentions towards this deal. While Pashinyan sought to minimize the number of casualties in ceasefire violations so that he would not suffer domestically, Azerbaijan began building more fortifications and new infrastructure on the Line of Contact while the Armenian forces were ordered to hold fire

(Personal communication with an NSC member in Stepanakert, December 2019). Neither the communication between security chiefs nor the contact between political emissaries were ever publicized, giving birth to certain political speculations reinforced after the 2020 war (Vanetsyan 18 June 2021). Government officials in Stepanakert were left in the dark about the content of direct communications (Personal communication with a senior MFA official in Stepanakert, December 2019), despite Pashinyan's public assurances that he had been the first leader in Yerevan who both regularly briefed the leadership in Stepanakert, and ensured maximum publicity of the peace process (Civilnet 2020). Since July 2018, some prominent politicians in Stepanakert have begun occasionally calling for the conclusion of the mutual defence pact with Armenia due to uncertainties about the new leader holding the reins of power in Yerevan (Baghryan 2018; Deputy Speaker of the Artsakh Parliament. 17 July 2018).

To silence opposition critique and speculations about the flaws in foreign policy and the peace process, Pashinyan adopted two narratives: first, redirecting criticism to the old regime by accusing them of 'becoming the torchers of the new war' (Azatutyun Radio 1 December 2018) and threatening them with prosecution for high treason; and second, by waving the electoral legitimacy card every time the opposition voiced concerns over the pace of the peace process. One example of the latter strategy is Pashinyan's abandoning pursuit of the establishment of the incident investigation mechanisms agreed upon in May 2016 in Vienna (Joint Statement 2016), which former President Sargsyan considered his hard-won diplomatic success (Armenpress 19 August 2020) and was believed to be 'a straightjacket' on Azerbaijan in negotiations (Personal communication with an MFA official in Stepanakert December 2019). The Armenian Foreign Ministry attempted to return to pushing for the investigation mechanisms following the skirmishes in July 2020 along the international border near Tavush/Tovuz, but the OSCE MG Co-Chairmen had already gotten comfortable with Yerevan's dropping this demand and were hesitant to reintroduce it (Personal communication Interview with a former OSCE diplomat November 2020).

Down to earth

In 2019, the new Government gradually began to realize that preaching democratic credentials alone would not be enough in foreign policy. Following the snap parliamentary elections in December 2018, where Pashinyan secured a 70% majority, the peace process with Azerbaijan – both under OSCE MG and direct communication lines – intensified, beginning with a four-hour conversation on the ministerial level in Paris in January 2019 (MFA 16 January 2019), followed by an informal Aliyev-Pashinyan meeting in Davos, Switzerland in the same month, however not under the auspices of the OSCE MG Co-Chairs (Hetq 22 January 2019). The speculations about new windows of opportunities in the peace process intensified, too, fuelled by experts, journalists, and politicians. In a closed meeting with Armenian journalists in November 2018, Pashinyan acknowledged that he, too, was being hinted at 'window of opportunities' by foreign leaders, who cited his legitimacy in Armenia as a 'dealmaker' (Harutyunyan 9 December 2020). Another example was an article released by the Carnegie Endowment, which encouraged Pashinyan to remove the *siloviki* in Nagorno Karabakh and push through painful compromises to advance the peace process (Jennings 2019).

On 9 March 2019, the OSCE MG Co-Chairs issued a statement outlining the principles and elements of the proposals on the table, which arguably had not changed since April–

May 2018 (OSCE 9 March 2019). Those assertions were again reiterated on the occasion of the presidential elections in Nagorno Karabakh in 2020 (OSCE 31 March 2020), as well as after the July 2020 skirmishes on the international border (OSCE 24 July 2020). Essentially, the co-chairs were calling for continuing the peace process on the basis of documents negotiated in 2009–2012 but also denounced putting preconditions for future talks, such as Pashinyan's drive to include the Nagorno Karabakh government at the table before any documents were signed between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Although foreign policy, especially conflict resolution, was not on the laundry list of the new government, they had to enter a more formal process under pressure from the OSCE MG Co-Chairing countries and Azerbaijan. Ahead of the meeting with Aliyev under the auspices of the OSCE MG Co-Chairs, on 12 March 2019, Pashinyan convened a joint session of the Security Councils of Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh in Stepanakert. Reiterating his previous claim that he had neither mandate nor legitimacy to represent the people of Artsakh, PM Pashinyan and Artsakh President Bako Sahakyan traded public statements to manifest the acquiescence of the Artsakh government for representing them in negotiations. According to two participants in the joint session, the essence of the discussion after the cameras were turned off had little to do with Karabakh (Personal communication with two NSC members between December 2019 and July 2020).

Following the Pashinyan-Aliyev meeting in Vienna on 29 March 2019 and the foreign ministers' meeting in Moscow on April 15 – a pivotal phase in the peace process – Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov tabled his updated proposals to the parties, which embodied a 'step-by-step' resolution. Lavrov, however, chose to make it public only a year later (Azatutyun Radio 22 April 2020). Armenia did not rush to respond officially, and many interpreted Pashinyan's declaration at the Stepanakert rally in August 2019 that 'Artsakh is Armenia, period!' (Prime Minister of Armenia 5 August 2019) as a bold 'no, thank you.' This now-famous Stepanakert statement was not a spontaneous emotional utterance but was in Pashinyan's script, according to two Armenian (N)SC members. Arthur Vanetsyan, then director of Armenia's National Security Service, warned Pashinyan 'not to use *that* language' so as not to jeopardize the peace process (Vanetsyan 1 November 2021). Pashinyan underestimated the risks, defying at least two (N)SC members advising against the move, and preferred to feed the domestic nationalist narratives (Personal communication with two NSC members June and July 2020). Weeks later, the Armenian MFA made several attempts, by sporadic engagement with outside policy experts, to find ways to scale down the importance of this statement. Pashinyan's statement in Stepanakert was also against the long-held position of Armenia, which championed Karabakh's right to self-determination. Aliyev immediately leveraged this to allege that Armenia lacked constructivism in the negotiations. Rhetorically, this turned the tables in the peace process. Aliyev capitalized on this at Putin's annual Valdai Conference address in October 2019 (Azatutyun Radio 4 October 2019). Yet, these changing dynamics did not keep Pashinyan from using populist rhetoric. Moreover, the newly elected President of Nagorno Karabakh, Arayik Harutyunyan, reiterated this slogan in his inauguration address in May 2020 (Harutyunyan 21 May 2020). One experienced government official engaged in this controversy emotionally quipped that the new government members 'did not understand what a state is' and often did not appreciate the weight of their own words (Personal communication with a former NSC member July 2020).

While Pashinyan was hailing identical visions with the Nagorno Karabakh elite for conflict resolution in February 2020 (The PM of Armenia 22 February 2020), the latter group was less generous off-the-record, alleging that 'Yerevan's approaches are not

comprehensible to the mediators in the first place' (Personal communication with a Nagorno Karabakh diplomat, Stepanakert, December 2019). Since mid-2019, the political-military leadership of Nagorno Karabakh could no longer hide their frustration that a new leader in Yerevan sidelined them but could do little given Pashinyan's popularity in Armenia as well as in Nagorno Karabakh. Moreover, statements about the deteriorating security environment on the frontline were muted by government propaganda in Yerevan. This frustration was best reflected in Nagorno Karabakh's NSC Secretary Vitali Balasanyan's comment to the media on 9 May 2019, literally behind Pashinyan's back: 'Where is the Prime Minister [Pashinyan]? Ask him about the peace process *as it is he negotiating in elevators [not us]*' [emphasis added] (Balasanyan 9 May 2019).⁴ Some government officials in Stepanakert opined that when Pashinyan went to Nagorno Karabakh in August 2019, he had two main messages to the local elite: first, that there was no progress in the peace process in sight, and second, he had successfully consolidated power in Yerevan over the past year and he can twist the process any way he likes (Personal communication with two NSC members December 2019).

This second phase ended in Bratislava in December 2019 when Armenia and Azerbaijan exchanged fire in the OSCE Ministerial (MFA 5 December 2019). Misreading the Trump-era rules of international politics, still believing in his 'democratic invincibility' and its potential to shield against well-armed authoritarian Azerbaijan, Pashinyan went on stagewith Aliyev at the Munich Security Conference in February 2020 and exposed the total collapse of anything resembling a peace process. The Munich debate, unprecedented in its nature and unclear in its goals, demonstrated that Pashinyan was neither versed in the complex history of Nagorno Karabakh and the peace process nor could he – coupled with an English language disadvantage – clearly articulate his visions on the prospects of conflict resolution. Apart from showcasing his oft-reiterated approach of seeking to satisfy all the parties involved and reminding about his invention of 'conducting micro-revolutions in the negotiations,' his and Aliyev's performance put the existing gap, including on the personal level, between the two leaders on display. Hours later, Pashinyan published a six-point 'Munich Principles,' outlining his negotiating position in the talks (Azatutyun Radio 16 February 2020), again breaking with the various iterations of the Madrid Principles put on the table by the OSCE MG Co-Chairs since 2007.

Recipe for disaster

With official explanations referring to the COVID-19 pandemic, OSCE CiO Personal Representative Andrzej Kasprzyk's office aborted regular monitoring visits to the Line of Contact since March 2020. Thus, the co-chairs placed the burden of non-resumption of hostilities on the parties and their 'direct communication links' (OSCE 19 March 2020). With active engineering works dating back to May 2018, Azerbaijan had continuously built new reinforcements and continued to acquire new, state-of-the-art arms from Russia, Israel, Turkey and elsewhere (SIPRI 2021). Until at least May 2020, when many voices in the Armenian domestic political landscape had already sounded the alarm bells of the forthcoming war, Pashinyan stayed loyal to his own iteration of a 'Solomonic solution' (Personal communication with a former OSCE diplomat, November 2020) to the conflict: any resolutions to the conflict should satisfy the peoples of Armenia, Nagorno Karabakh and Azerbaijan.

The July 2020 incident on the international border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, hailed and celebrated as a victory by Pashinyan, secured no serious international

condemnation of Azerbaijan or support for Armenia. Moreover, Turkey, a member of the OSCE MG, openly endorsed Azerbaijan. Worse, qualifying the incident as ‘a serious breach of the ceasefire,’ the OSCE MG Co-Chairs condemned the rhetoric on both sides and, in particular, the efforts ‘to [unilaterally] establish new “conditions” or changes to the settlement process format,’ in reference to Pashinyan’s long-standing calls to engage Nagorno Karabakh authorities (OSCE 24 July 2020). This was yet another shift in the peace process dynamics. Until this point, it was commonly believed that Azerbaijan consistently lacked a constructive approach; now, it was both sides. Pashinyan was left on his own and continued boasting (BBC, 14 August 2020).

On 10 August, Armenia’s President and PM issued statements on the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Sèvres, which further deepened the standoff with Turkey. They both hailed the 1920 treaty, saying it ‘still remains a powerful document’ (The President of RA 10 August 2020), and it ‘is a historical fact [. . .] and remains so to this day’ (Prime Minister of Armenia 10 August 2020). Turkey, which considers the Sèvres treaty an attempt to partition the remains of the Ottoman Empire, harshly criticized both statements, urging the Armenian government ‘to make up [its] mind’ (Sevr Anlaşması’nın August 2020). As one former Deputy Minister (2018–2020) in Pashinyan’s Government quipped in an interview, ‘the Government already knew that Azerbaijan [was] actively preparing for war [. . .]. There was ample intelligence and knowledge that the war was imminent at the time,’ yet it chose not to undertake any preparatory work either in the military or civilian matters (Ghaplanyan 8 April 2022), which was a recipe for disaster. There are all the indications to claim that the Armenian Government did not believe Azerbaijan would unleash a full-scale war, nor that Turkey would become part of that war, as the ‘My Step’ governing alliance faction head argued after the July skirmishes (Armenpress 27 July 2020). At any rate, by the Summer 2020, no one was left in Pashinyan’s immediate circle to challenge the already cemented groupthink dynamic in the government decision-making processes. The war would begin in a month, yet he was decorating an excessive number of military servicemen at Sardarapat, the memorial dedicated to the historic 1918 victory over the Ottoman army, adding that ‘[Armenia proved to have] an efficient and intelligent army with a decisive influence in the region’ (Prime Minister of Armenia 28 August 2020). Despite all the alarm bells in the weeks leading to the 45-day war, the high-ranking officials of the new elite would still pose for PR stunts for domestic consumption in defiance of calls by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairmen and threats by Azerbaijan.⁵ These manifestations were in stark contrast with Artsakh President Arayik Harutyunyan’s statement on September 2, who ruled out any negotiation agenda and called to ‘prepare for war’ – although in a way that at the time seemed yet another rhetorical exercise (Azatutyun Radio 2 September 2020).

The heavy military defeat during the 45-day war, the ensuing uncertainty around Nagorno Karabakh’s future status, the occupation of Shoushi and Hadrut, unprecedented security challenges for the people of Karabakh, the unclear future and mandate of the Russian peacekeeping forces in Karabakh, the ambiguous future of unknown numbers of Armenian prisoners of war in Azerbaijan whom Baku refuses to release in contravention of the 9 November trilateral ceasefire statement (President of Russia 10 November 2020), problems with opening regional transportation routes, and issues of delimitation and demarcation of the borders have all plunged Armenia into a deep and continuous political turmoil.

Conclusion

A strongman, with an overwhelming popular approval rating and lacking checks and balances, has become a stress test for Armenia's state institutions. None of the key decision-making units discussed above could resist the pressures and eventually folded. However, this article by no means attributes all the calamities that befell Armenia in 2020 solely to Pashinyan and his foreign policy. His populist style in FPDM processes has exposed and deepened enduring institutional weaknesses and structural constraints of Armenia's foreign and security policy that have persisted since the 1990s. With his contradictory statements, zigzagging rhetoric and deeds, and populist assertions for short-term political gains concerning the Karabakh conflict, Pashinyan deepened the long-existing (geo)political and institutional rifts. His team's chronic incompetence and the subordination of foreign policy to domestic political goals have deteriorated the quality of decision-making. No new initiative that would leverage the post-2018 image of Armenia with any of the main partners had been launched, while the geopolitical realities continued to severely affect Armenia, as ever before. In turn, Azerbaijan exploited Armenia's domestic political upheavals, unprecedented societal polarization and, securing unequivocal support from Turkey to attack Karabakh, leveraged its newly acquired geopolitical, military, and strategic edge.

Currently, the Armenian Government operates near the absence of internal dissent in foreign policy decision-making processes, which is only a natural outcome of populist-style and anti-pluralist governance. All four main pathologies cited in the beginning were manifestly present in the Armenian foreign and security policy decision-making process in 2018–2020. Disregarding institutions and espousing anti-establishment sentiments, instilling groupthink in closed-group deliberations, showing limited tolerance towards any criticism, and subordinating foreign affairs to domestic political needs all resulted in an ill-conceived policy formulation process, low-efficiency diplomatic engagements during the war and did not allow to recover following the defeat in the war.

Pashinyan's populist tendency to bend foreign policy to the requirements of domestic policy prevented Armenia's new authorities from adequately addressing the country's main foreign policy challenge: the resolution of the Karabakh conflict. Pashinyan's Karabakh policy started with the idea of engaging the elected representatives of Nagorno Karabakh in the formal peace process from the pre-negotiation stage, which was in defiance of the former internal understanding in the OSCE co-chair-led process. Impulsive and vindictive, Pashinyan ended up being unwilling to solicit any advice from former negotiators due to his anti-establishment identity. His government, after holding the reins of power for 26 months, approached September 2020 with complete conviction that since 2018 Armenia had earned the sympathy of the world, which would be enough protection in a troublesome region of the South Caucasus. The 45-day war proved otherwise. His unforced and repetitive mistakes have ultimately allowed Azerbaijan to proceed with the decades-long threats to cut the Gordian knot without much international criticism for the brazen war of aggression.

Notes

1. Following the tradition launched by Graham Allison in the seminal 'Essence of Decision' (1971), in foreign policy analysis terms it is mostly preferred to speak about 'resultants' of the decision-making process, rather than 'decisions', as often

bureaucratic process does not yield clear-cut decisions, but less coherent ideas about further action.

2. The 2020 war in Artsakh/Karabakh has been referred differently: '44-day war,' 'Six-week war,' 'Patriotic war,' 'Azerbaijani aggression against Armenia and Artsakh,' etc. The article uses '45-day war' for the following three reasons. The war started on September 27 and finished on November 10 which makes 45 days. The Azerbaijani side quickly coined it a '44-day war' aiming to coincide the final day of the war, when the city of Shoushi came under its complete control, with the National Flag Day, celebrated on November 9th. The trilateral ceasefire statement signed by Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia, in the final hours of November 9th, entered into force in the early hours of November 10th which, again, makes it 45 days since September 27th.
3. The recall and criminal prosecution of the CSTO Secretary General Yuri Khachaturov in July 2018 was presented as a bold move to advance the image of 'democratic invincibility.' Armenia's Special Investigative Service charged Khachaturov, whom Armenia nominated in April 2017 to lead Russia-led security alliance, for 'subverting public order' during the March 1–2, 2008 crackdown on opposition protesters (where Pashinyan was among key leaders).
4. Pashinyan's meeting with Aliyev in Dushanbe was widely covered in the media. The moment the two leaders came out from an elevator, was seen the very moment, when they agreed to reduce the tensions. Opposition was quick to coin the encounter as 'elevator diplomacy.'
5. For example, then-Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly Alen Simonyan (incumbent Speaker since August 2021) on 23 September 2020 published a photo from Aghdam with caption: 'Aghdam is my homeland.' <https://www.auroranews.am/index.php/news/2020-09-23-aghdamy-im-hayreniqn-e-alen-simonyan> Same narrative was published by then- Minister of Territorial Administration Suren Papikyan in December 2019 (incumbent Minister of Defence since November 2021). <https://hraparak.am/post/cea42c77d95be0d4eab1bc072ca7a111>

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