Nationalities Papers, 2018
Vol. 46, No. 5, 844–860, https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2018.1438383

Routledge
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The Karabakh conflict and Armenia's failed transition

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(*Received 10 March 2017; accepted 6 September 2017*)

Despite its early promise, Armenia's transition to democracy has stalled. The literature on post-Communist transitions ascribes this outcome to the autocratic preferences of its first generation of leaders, and particularly the country's first president Levon Ter-Petrossian. I argue in this article that that literature depicts a profoundly distorted picture of the Armenian politics of the 1990s. The failure of Armenia's transition was primarily due to the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and the political processes it set in motion.

Keywords: democratic transitions; post-Communist transitions; Armenia; Nagorno-Karabakh; Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict; Levon Ter-Petrossian; Armenian National Movement

In the early 1990s, Western media often referred to Armenia as an "island of democracy" (Hiatt 1995; Sneider 1995). The country had an elected government; it was undergoing an impressive process of institution-building; its government succeeded in quickly neutralizing challengers in the form of militias and ensuring basic order; the parliament had become the preferred alternative to the street for hashing out political disagreements, as well as the initiator of a fertile period of legislative reforms (Defeis 1998). Just two decades later, Armenia is anything but a democracy. Elections are routinely falsified,[1] its human rights record is poor,[2] and its level of corruption is appalling (Stefes 2006). At best, the country's political system can be characterized as a hybrid regime (Diamond 2002), and even that is a euphemism.

Why did Armenia's early promise fail to materialize? I argue in this article that the answer can be found in the effects of the Karabagh conflict on Armenian politics. Thus far, attempts to explain Armenia's transition failure have either ignored the war completely or regarded it as a consequence, rather than a cause, of the failure of democracy in Armenia. The argument is made more controversial by the absence of a consensus in the literature on how war and democratic change are related. This article examines these controversies and explains why the Karabagh conflict resulted in the erosion of democracy in Armenia.

Historical overview

The Karabagh conflict erupted on 20 February 1988, when the legislative body of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast adopted an unprecedented resolution requesting

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https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2018.1438383 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the region's transfer from Azerbaijani to Armenian jurisdiction. Armenians in Armenia mobilized and began holding mass rallies in solidarity with their ethnic kin in Karabagh. Unifying Karabagh with Armenia had been a suppressed aspiration among Armenians ever since the Caucasus Bureau of the Communist Party made the region part of Azerbaijan in 1921, settling an earlier conflict between Armenians and Azeris over its status (Libaridian 1988, 34–37). Armenians had no choice but to live with this verdict, but they never reconciled with it. The issue was raised as soon as doing so stopped being dangerous following Stalin's death (Libaridian 1988, 42–46). It did not produce the desired outcome, however, as Moscow impressed upon the Armenians that the newfound tolerance of the Soviet state had limits. Gorbachev's *perestroika* made voicing such grievances possible again, and Armenians did not wait long before mobilizing to demand that Moscow "return" Karabagh to Armenia, drawing on a set of assumptions that underpinned the traditional Armenian nationalist narrative. First among them was the assumption that Armenians were in an existential struggle with Turks and their ethnic kin – the Azeris – who were united in their aim to annihilate Armenians, presumably evidenced by the doctrine of pan-Turkism.[3] Many Armenians saw the problem of Karabagh, and especially what they perceived as Baku's deliberate policy of altering Karabagh's demography,[4] in this light. Second, this narrative insisted that Karabagh belonged to Armenians as a matter of "historic justice," because Armenians were its original inhabitants and because Armenians had ruled the region in the past. Third, they combined the "historic justice" argument with the principle of self-determination. Fourth, the proponents of this narrative maintained that handing Karabagh to Armenians was in Russia's interests as well, because pan-Turkism was also a threat to Russia and because Armenians were Russia's natural allies against it.

None of this made the slightest impression on Moscow, of course. The state-controlled media attacked what was soon dubbed the "Karabagh movement" and described its participants as "extremists." Gorbachev issued a statement on 26 February, making it clear that border changes were not on Moscow's agenda and characterizing the Armenian demands as an affront to "socialist internationalism" ("Excerpts" 1988). Two days after Gorbachev's statement, Armenians living in the Azerbaijani city of Sumgait were subjected to a pogrom, which went on for two days without intervention from either the local police or Soviet interior troops. Armenians interpreted this not only as an act of violence committed by an Azeri mob, but as an attempt by Moscow to coerce Armenians into silence. The movement found itself in a deadlock, which became even more obvious when some of its leaders returned to Yerevan after a meeting with Gorbachev on 18 March and tried to convince the public to demobilize, arguing that Moscow needed time to look for solutions.

The pogrom in Sumgait and Moscow's hostile reaction struck heavy blows to a key assumption in the Armenian nationalist narrative, namely that Moscow was simultaneously Armenians' protector and the agent of their aspirations. Armenians began to reevaluate that assumption. The movement's strategy and leadership began to change accordingly. The first echelon of leaders, which had combined nationalism with allegiance to Moscow and Communism, was replaced by a generation of activists and intellectuals who rejected the traditional narrative, felt less loyal to Moscow, and thought that such loyalty was too high a price to pay for its protection or the illusory hopes that it would one day fulfill Armenians' revisionist aspirations. They abandoned the strategy of pleading with Moscow and adopted a more confrontational strategy. As part of that strategy, the new leadership embedded the Karabagh movement in the larger context of fighting to end the Communist Party's political monopoly and allied it with the liberal forces elsewhere in the Soviet Union. At the same time, the new leadership abandoned justifications of the Armenian demands based on "historic justice," the struggle against pan-Turkism, etc. It shifted the

https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2018.1438383 Published online by Cambridge University Press

focus exclusively to the right to self-determination and the existing Soviet laws. The year 1988 brought more rallies, strikes, and sit-ins. Under intense public pressure, the Armenian Supreme Soviet adopted a resolution responding affirmatively to Karabagh's demand for unification in June 1988. Moscow's reaction was to intensify criticism in the media, officially reject Armenian demands, increase interior troop presence in Armenia and Karabagh, and introduce a curfew in Yerevan. During this same year, Armenians living in parts of Azerbaijan who lived outside Karabagh were forced to flee to Armenia, while Azerbaijanis in Armenia were expelled to Azerbaijan.

Exploiting the fact that public attention was diverted by the earthquake that struck Armenia on 7 December 1988, Moscow decided to inflict a decisive blow against the movement by arresting its leaders. The strategy failed, however, and after a six-month detention, the arrested leaders were freed. The movement pressed on with renewed vigor, but at the same time, it was becoming increasingly obvious that its main goal – to extract a decision from the Soviet central government to change Karabagh's status – was a chimera. In a speech on 4 November 1989, one of the movement's leaders and Armenia's future president – Levon Ter-Petrossian – responded to the growing sense that the movement was not achieving what it had set out to achieve by enumerating a number of its successes (Ter-Petrossian 2006, 56–57). It was impossible to deny, however, that the goal of changing Karabagh's status had not only not been attained, but that it was unlikely to be. The movement's strategy and agenda started shifting once again as a result. Establishing a democratic system and striving to make the country independent became its new priorities.

This shift brought about an intensified assault on certain rigidly held assumptions of the traditional narrative. The assumption that Armenians were surrounded by incorrigible enemies (namely, Turkey and Azerbaijan) poised to annihilate them came under particular scrutiny as it was often used to thwart any thought of independence among Armenians. In what was the first major public attack on this assumption, the movement's governing body, the "Karabagh Committee," issued a statement on 24 June 1989, claiming that those who insisted on that assumption were doing Moscow's bidding and thwarting Armenia's aspirations for sovereignty.[5]

Another manifestation of the intensifying assault against the traditional narrative was the publication of an article by Rafael Ishkhanian (1991), who was an influential public intellectual with ties to the leadership of the movement. In the article, he argued that the worst calamities visited upon the Armenian people were the result of chasing unrealistic goals vis-à-vis the neighbors' and relying on third parties to achieve them. Such pursuits, he insisted, inevitably produced conflicts and subsequent disasters, followed by noise about injustice when the third parties failed to live up to Armenians' unrealistic expectations of support. Ishkhanian claimed that the demands for Karabagh and the disappointment caused by Russia's lack of support were a manifestation of this same failed approach. Ishkhanian argued that Armenians should shift their priorities to focus on rescuing their cultural identity (which he considered to be threatened by assimilation), cut their umbilical cord to Moscow, and strive for independence. He concluded that none of this would be possible if the disputes with the neighbors were not settled.

Ishkhanian's paper was a radical criticism of the traditional narrative. Indeed, he almost certainly went too far by attributing too much agency to Armenians and not enough to their adversaries when discussing various disastrous events of Armenian history. That, however, makes the warm reception of his article even more remarkable. The logic that underpins Ishkhanian's argument reflects what had already become the core of the doctrinal vision of the Karabagh movement, which by then had been renamed the Armenian National Movement (ANM). Around this time, the movement adopted a course toward

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independence, and began openly insisting that Armenia should strive to build normal relations with all of its neighbors. This was a clean break from the traditional narrative, affirmed in numerous statements and interviews of its leaders. Ter-Petrossian, who was elected chairman of the governing board of the ANM, and after ANM's assent to power, the Chairman of Armenia's Supreme Soviet, became the most prominent spokesman for this new doctrine. On 9 October 1990, he gave a lengthy interview to the official newspaper of the government in which he stated:

> One of the most important guarantees of any state's security, and perhaps the most important one, is that state's [normal] relations with the immediate neighbors. Without forgetting about our rights, we should be able to rise above emotions. When entering into and developing relationships, we should be able to think like a state and be guided by the society's interests. (Ter-Petrossian 2006, 136)

Several days later, on 22 October 1990, he repeated these statements in a speech to the Supreme Soviet. Then on 24 November 1999, during the second congress of the ANM, he criticized those subscribing to the notion that the ideology of the "Armenian cause"[6] should become the basis of independent Armenia's foreign policy and defended the goal of establishing normal relations with Turkey (Ter-Petrossian 2006, 161–163). Another prominent activist of the ANM, Ktrich Sardarian, who was a member of the parliament and the head of its Committee on Independent Statehood and National Policy, defended ANM's approach against those who argued that Armenia should refuse to recognize certain treaties that defined the status quo between the Soviet Union and Turkey ("Interview with Ktrich Sardarian" 1991). Similar arguments were made by other prominent leaders of the ANM (Galstyan 1991; Siradeghyan 2005).

The question, however, became: how could the ANM's new doctrine be reconciled with the continuing demand to change Karabagh's status? The first explicit indication that the ANM's thinking on Karabagh might have been undergoing shifts is also visible in Ishkhanian's article. He anticipated that his argument might clash with the demand for a change in Karabagh's status. Referring to the first generation of the Karabagh movement's leaders, he writes:

> I have proposed that on the question of [Karabagh] the Committee enter into direct negotiations with Azerbaijan. They tell me, "Azerbaijan will not relinquish." "But," I tell them, "isn't it true that Moscow will not give either?" *Negotiating with Baku will at least lighten this extremely painful enmity, and then it is possible that better conditions can be created for the Armenians of* [*Karabagh*]. (Ishkhanian 1991, 37, emphasis mine)

After the ANM assumed power, its position on Karabagh went through an even more notable change. The new government insisted that the authorities in Moscow should restore previously suspended local organs of power in Karabagh so that both Baku and Moscow could negotiate with them, rather than with Armenia. The new government insisted simultaneously that the conflict was about the rights of Karabagh Armenians, and that, therefore, the conflict was between Karabagh and Azerbaijan, not between Armenia and Azerbaijan. It claimed, finally, that Armenia was willing to accept any compromise acceptable to Karabagh Armenians, but insisted that Armenia would not stand idly by if Karabagh Armenians were threatened with ethnic cleansing.

In the meantime, the course toward independence opened a new fissure, this time within the ANM. Although the ANM defined itself in opposition to both the old nationalist narrative and Communist totalitarianism, a liberal-democratic system was not the default prospect for all of its members. One of the prominent leaders of the ANM – Vazgen Manoukian – who was a staunch supporter of independence and a critic of Communist rule as well as certain aspects of the traditional narrative, became an outspoken opponent

https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2018.1438383 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of a democratic future for Armenia. Those in favor of such a future argued that Armenia should strive to become a "normal" state wherein the state's role would be confined to providing basic security from external and internal predation, a social safety net, and an environment in which the citizens can seek self-actualization in their own ways. They argued that the state should have no mission beyond that, or rather that whatever mission it had should reflect the society's preferences. They further rejected anxieties popular at the time that Armenians were politically fragmented, arguing that such fragmentation was normal, and that the only thing the society should agree on was a constitution. Finally, the proponents of the "normal state" idea insisted that Armenia should be the state of its citizens, regardless of their ethnic origins, subscribing to a civic definition of nationhood and rejecting the notion that Armenians living all over the world should somehow be integrated into a single polity (Libaridian 1999, 84–90; Astourian 2000, 17–42; Ter-Petrossian 2006, 400, 588).

On every one of these issues, Manoukian and his supporters disagreed. They insisted that a state without a special mission was not worth having and that democracy was dangerous because the Armenian society was not sufficiently developed and sophisticated to be able to handle it properly. Manoukian argued further that Armenians, by virtue of their dispersion around the world, could not be a "normal" nation, and that, therefore, they should be a "global" one, which did entail a vague notion of ethnically defined rights for Armenians who lived in the diaspora and an ethnic definition of citizenship.

Here is perhaps the most revealing of Manoukian's statements about the dangers of democracy and a state without a mission:

> Given our people's long history of statelessness, of being partitioned between different empires and the adjustment of different segments to the customs and mentalities of different empires, we have lost much of the common unwritten rules. For that reason, democracy on a grand scale can be deadly to our people; it can lead to atomization and it can cut off the precarious links of mutual responsibilities that tie us together. It is very important to us to revive our national traditions, religious traditions, and morality. The boundaries of our democracy will be determined by those factors. Otherwise we would constitute a mob, not a nation. ("Four Questions to Vazgen Manoukian" 1991, 46)

And here is another, where Manoukian champions the idea of a state with a mission and explains his concept of the "global nation:"

> We are a global nation, and our problems are also global. For centuries we, Armenians, have tried to organize, to create certain structures, to influence the politics of the entire world, and to find our place in it. That effort has not been successful, because we have lacked a core. Only an independent state can become that core. An independent state is not only for our prosperity, but for serving as that core, which will help Armenians everywhere to come together. We must create global structures. Every Armenian in every corner of the world must realize that he has a debt to his homeland, to his nation. There is something mysterious in the fact that destiny has taken him someplace else. Our nation is different from other nations. We have a debt to pay, a mission to carry out, and for that we need an independent state. ("We Are a Global Nation" 1990)

These differences eventually led to an open confrontation, which the liberals won, which split the ANM, and which led to Manoukian's resignation as prime minister. The liberals' victory was sealed on 16 October 1991, when Ter-Petrossian – the chief spokesmen for the ANM's liberal wing – was elected president of Armenia with 83% of the vote.

In the fall of 1991, Armenia became independent, led by a government committed to democratic rule, a program of market reforms, normalized relations with Turkey, and a compromise solution in Karabagh. Implementing these plans, however, proved difficult as the conflict in Karabagh escalated in the winter of 1991–1992[7] and as Turkey made a

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strategic decision to link its relations to Armenia to the state of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. In solidarity with Azerbaijan, it refused to establish diplomatic relations and imposed a blockade on Armenia. The war, the blockades by Azerbaijan and Turkey, the unreliability of the communications through Georgia, and the limited value of the access to Iran only exacerbated the already catastrophic situation of the Armenian economy, which was particularly vulnerable to the painful effects of transition, [8] and which was additionally burdened by refugees and the consequences of the 1988 earthquake. The Armenian economy shrank by a staggering 42% in 1992, which soured the political atmosphere in the country and the atmosphere was further poisoned by the fact that the main oppositional parties refused to recognize the legitimacy of the new government and the president, even though the fairness of the elections was not in doubt.

Still, Armenia remained on the path to reform throughout the violent phase of the Karabagh conflict, which ended in May 1994 with a cease-fire, but no political settlement. The reforms continued after the cease-fire, but there were unmistakable signs of malaise. The popularity of the government had sagged, as might be expected of any government that had to oversee such a massive transformation under trying circumstances. The ruling party had lost its earlier coherence and energy, having attracted a cohort of opportunists. The opposition, meanwhile, began transgressing certain boundaries, which it had refrained from transgressing during the war. Most dangerously, the war had created, empowered, and emboldened a military establishment, which began acting as an "internal opposition," diverging from Ter-Petrossian on the need for a compromise solution to the Karabagh conflict, and which had little enthusiasm for Ter-Petrossian's vision of building a "normal" (i.e. liberal) state. The war had preoccupied them, but soon after the cease-fire, they began showing signs that they were going to become a political factor. The most important of those signs was the creation of a veterans' organization called Yerkrapah,[9] which was ostensibly tasked with caring for the welfare of the veterans. It became a powerful political organization, however, directly under the control of Vazgen Sargsyan – the Defense Minister. Even though Yerkrapah defined itself as apolitical, 17 of its members entered the parliament following the elections of 1995 and formed a separate faction, even if allied with the ruling party. The leadership of the military, Yerkrapah, and the leadership of Karabagh, which for all intents and purposes was part of the military establishment, formed an informal coalition in Armenian politics dubbed the "Karabagh party" by Gerard Libaridian (1999, 90–96). This coalition's differences with Ter-Petrossian were not aired publically for the time being, but they were there. Vano Siradeghyan, who was one of the most influential leaders of the ANM and served as Interior Minister in 1992–1996, even alleged in 2002 that representatives of the "Karabagh party" had approached him in the winter of 1994–1995 with a proposal to remove Ter-Petrossian from office "temporarily" so that they could try the hardline approach (Harutyunyan 2005, 15–20).

Ter-Petrossian was able to contain this coalition for a while, but it became more difficult after the 1996 presidential elections. He won, but it was a narrow victory; the elections were criticized by international observers and they prompted a major crisis, as the opposition violently contested the outcome. Shortly after the elections, two key members of the liberal wing of the government left their posts. The Prime Minister Hrant Bagratyan resigned, while Siradeghyan left the post of the Interior Minister and was appointed to the less-consequential post of mayor of Yerevan. Bagratyan was replaced by Armen Sargsyan – a technocrat who was Armenia's ambassador to Great Britain at the time. After a few months of fairly inconsequential tenure, however, he resigned due to illness. Robert Kocharyan, who was the President of Karabagh at the time – and a very prominent member of the "Karabagh party" – replaced him. The Interior Ministry, meanwhile, was merged with the Ministry of

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National Security and put under the leadership of Serge Sargsyan – another prominent member of the "Karabagh party."[10] Shortly thereafter, Libaridian, who was Ter-Petrossian's chief Karabagh negotiator and another prominent liberal in the administration, also resigned. He insisted that his resignation was due to personal reasons, but he had serious conflicts with Karabagh's leadership, which was an open secret.

After the dust settled, it was obvious that the balance of power inside the government had shifted decisively in favor of the "Karabagh party." Despite that fact, Ter-Petrossian endorsed a plan for resolving the Karabagh conflict in 1997, which had been negotiated with the help of Russian, American, and French mediators. Ter-Petrossian published a lengthy article detailing his arguments in favor of the plan (Ter-Petrossian 2018: 35060), which triggered an intense public debate. He had triggered debates before, but this one was different because Karabagh's leadership and powerful members of his own administration – Kocharyan, Serge Sargsyan, and Vazgen Sargsyan most importantly – came out in open opposition to Ter-Petrossian's endorsement of the plan, with the Yerkrapah faction in the parliament also defecting from the ruling coalition. That led to a serious political crisis, which was diffused by Ter-Petrossian's resignation on 3 February 1998. The few remaining liberals in the government resigned with him.

Both the fact and the manner of Ter-Petrossian's departure signaled a major retreat from the path of democratization. Matters were made worse by the fact that the subsequent presidential elections, which made Kocharyan the chief executive of the country, failed to inspire confidence (ODIHR 1998).[11] The takeover of the military establishment and its political allies consisting of assorted old-school nationalists seemed complete. This was not the end of the road, however. Somewhat unexpectedly, Kocharyan had to face a formidable opponent, who succeeded in mobilizing the public against him and the coalition he represented. The opponent was Karen Demirchyan, who had been Armenia's Communist-era boss in 1974–1998. He was able to tap into people's nostalgia for the "good old days" and their discontent with what Kocharyan represented. Sensing both the danger of completely ignoring the public discontent and a political opportunity, Vazgen Sargsyan, who had been the kingmaker for Kocharyan, decided to team up with Demirchyan for the upcoming parliamentary elections in 1999. The political parties they led won the elections, which were judged as free and fair, and which produced a political reality characterized by a split in the hardliner coalition and the emergence of different centers of power organized around Kocharyan, Vazgen Sargsyan, and Demirchyan checking and balancing each other. This was true in terms of both their informal political statures and the formal positions they assumed following the elections.[12] The hope that the process of transition might be reinvigorated, however, was crushed on 27 October 1999, when a group of terrorists burst into the hall of the National Assembly where Vazgen Sargsyan was addressing the parliament and assassinated him, Demirchyan, and seven other people. Kocharyan came under suspicion and intense pressure from the supporters of the assassinated leaders, but not only did he succeed in surviving that pressure, he was able to neutralize his opponents and consolidate all power into his hands within a matter of months. This *was* the end of the road for Armenia's democratic transition.

In the years that followed, Kocharyan methodically concentrated all economic and political power. The public, meanwhile, periodically mobilized to demand the restoration of democracy. Vazgen Sargsyan's brother Aram and Demirchyan's son Stepan formed an oppositional alliance prior to the presidential elections of 2003, where Stepan ran as the opposition's main candidate against Kocharyan. The elections were widely regarded as less than credible (ODIHR 2003), which did not prevent Kocharyan from staying on as president. Subsequent protests were suppressed by force. The regime faced another, even more

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formidable challenge in 2008, when, after a decade of hiatus, Ter-Petrossian returned to politics and ran as the opposition's candidate for president against then-Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan, who was the candidate of the incumbent regime.[13] These elections were falsified as well (ODIHR 2008). The regime again cracked down on protesters after the elections, which this time resulted in the deaths of 10 people. The parliamentary elections of 2012, the presidential elections of 2013, and the referendum on adopting a new constitution in 2015 were widely criticized as lacking credibility as well, having firmly established Armenia as a country where elections are little more than meaningless shows, and where public protests are ignored or met with force when they cannot be ignored.

The dominant narrative of Armenia's failed transition

As the preceding discussion suggests, I regard the political processes set off by the Karabagh conflict as the root cause of Armenia's transition failure. That claim is in sharp contrast with the narrative that has formed in the "transitology" literature and dominated the conversation on what it was that derailed Armenia's transition. Before explaining why exactly the Karabagh conflict had that effect, therefore, I should discuss that dominant narrative and explain why I find it wanting.

The outlook on post-Communist transitions has gone through two phases. The first was characterized by teleological optimism as societies in Eastern Europe and the former USSR began to abandon Communism. That optimism rested on the naïve liberal belief that democracy and properly functioning markets were natural social equilibria. They were expected to take hold once the exogenous constraints imposed by Communism were removed. Very quickly, however, it became apparent that the fall of Communism might at best have been a necessary condition for democracy and properly functioning markets as the transitional trajectories of different post-Communist countries began to diverge. Attempts to explain that divergence ushered in the second phase. Some of these attempts focused on fateful institutional choices, particularly on the choice between presidential and parliamentary systems, with several scholars arguing that presidential systems made transitions susceptible to reversals (Linz 1990, 1994; Stepan and Skach 1993). Others insisted that reversals were not due to institutional "mistakes" but deliberate ideological and political choices (Fish 2001; McFaul 2002). A related argument drew attention to the density of ties with the West and the West's corresponding ability or inability to influence the behaviors of particular transitional governments (Levitsky and Way 2010). Finally, some scholars dismissed the entire idea that what was taking place in certain parts of the post-Communist space was a transition. They argued in particular that many in the West had confused mass politics and certain trappings of democracy like elections and parliaments with real democracy. They insisted that mass mobilizations in some post-Communist states were inspired by exclusionary, illiberal nationalism, and that the institutions of democracy merely provided a cover for the politics of patronage, which is what replaced Communism (Snyder 2000; Hale 2015).

Armenia features prominently in this literature as a case of failed transition. Regardless of the particular logic different contributors to that literature favor for explaining transition failure in general, they uniformly focus on Ter-Petrossian's behavior and outsized role when discussing Armenia, portraying him not as a defeated leader of liberalism in Armenia and a political casualty of the country's retreat from democracy, as I have done, but as the main agent of that retreat. The portrait they paint is that of an autocratic, illiberal nationalist, who persecuted his political opponents, went after the media, falsified elections, and entrenched corruption and patronage (Dudwick 1997; Astourian 2000;

https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2018.1438383 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Snyder 2000, 230–231; Fish 2001, 73, 220; Levitsky and Way 2010, 210; Hale 2015, 228). Even applications of the argument that the adoption of a presidential system may have predisposed Armenia to democratic erosion insist that Armenia's adoption of such a system was endogenous to Ter-Petrossian's drive to amass more power (Dudwick 1997, 93; Astourian 2000, 2–4). The American media which is one of the main sources for the academic writings summarized above, is even more committed to this portrait (LeVine 1996; Bremmer and Welt 1997; Spencer 1997; "A Democracy Loses Its Way" 1998; "Dark Days in Armenia" 2008).

The four most important pieces of evidence cited to corroborate this narrative are the alleged persecution of the ARF, the shutting down of several newspapers in 1995, the alleged unfairness of the parliamentary elections of 1995, and the alleged falsification of the results of the 1996 elections. Let us begin with the evidence of the persecution of the ARF. In 1994, the Armenian government accused the ARF of harboring a terrorist organization called "Dro," which had engaged in assassinations and drug trafficking, and suspended the party's activities. The party, in addition, operated in violation of the Armenian law prohibiting political organizations from being governed and financed from abroad. Dudwick characterizes the suspension of the party as "the government's attack on the ARF," but perplexingly makes no claim that the charges against it were false. Indeed, she writes: "The ARF does have a history of terrorism, and highly placed American officials as well as some opposition activists believe in the truth of at least some of the charges against Dro" (Dudwick 1997, 88–89). Yet she insists on describing it as political persecution, and so do others, similarly failing to contest the government's charges.

What about the restrictions on the media? The media in question were the ARF newspapers, which were suspended together with the party. Newspapers equally or even more critical of the government that were not affiliated with the ARF continued to function, which should at least raise some questions about the claim that Ter-Petrossian was putting restrictions on the media as such. Partially derivative of the criticisms of the suspension of the ARF were also the criticisms of the 1995 parliamentary elections. Specifically, the observer mission of the Helsinki Committee of the US Congress criticized the elections as "free, but not fair," citing the suspension of the ARF as an attempt to limit competition (Commission 1995, 1). The mission's report, however, did not address the charges against the ARF. It simply asserted that limiting competition was the motive, and this assessment became a reference point for any future mention of these elections. Dudwick (1997, 95–96) offers additional criticisms of these elections, which consist of describing a couple of allegations regarding supervised voting in the military and dirty fighting between two candidates in one town. In fact, if we ignore Dudwick's tone and focus only on the facts she has provided, the only possible conclusion is that these elections were remarkably clean, especially for a country ravaged by war, poverty, an extreme level of political polarization, and with an embryonic, resource-starved apparatus for conducting elections.

The most strident criticisms of Ter-Petrossian and his administration have been directed at the 1996 presidential elections, which most Western observers identify as the event that signified the end of Armenia's experiment with democracy. These elections are typically described as "stolen," "rigged," or "manipulated" with the degree of confidence and outrage that is usually reserved for cases where the scale of alleged fraud is massive and the evidence incontrovertible. What one finds after close scrutiny, however, is that these descriptions rest on a single claim in the report of the ODIHR observer mission. The claim was about a discrepancy in the number of voters "who signed and received ballots and the number of voter coupons." The report then stated that the discrepancy was quite

https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2018.1438383 Published online by Cambridge University Press

close to the margin of votes that allowed Ter-Petrossian to declare victory without a run-off, which "raised questions about the integrity of the election process," and "could even question the results" (Osborne 1996).

Here is what is missing from the report and most subsequent discussions of the 1996 elections. The discrepancy in question was an arithmetic error the electoral commission of the city of Yerevan had made adding up the results, which entailed no changes in the existing numbers reported by precincts. Observers were provided with a written explanation of the error (Bezirjian 1996), which they found satisfactory initially. Subsequently, however, without contesting that explanation, the observers reverted to the position that is reflected in statements cited above. In the meantime, Vazgen Manoukian, who was the opposition's main candidate, incited his supporters to attack the building of the National Assembly. They obliged, kidnaping and assaulting the Chairman and Deputy Chairman of the National Assembly in the process. It was in response to this attack that the government mobilized the riot police, dispersed the crowd, and arrested some of the leaders of the opposition, which the dominant narrative cites as yet another example of persecuting the opposition and proof of Armenia's turn away from democracy. The dominant narrative, in sum, is based on a flimsy empirical foundation. At the very least, the available evidence does not justify the overly confident and high-decibel claims about Ter-Petrossian having stolen elections, persecuted the opposition, and subverted Armenia's progress towards democracy as a consequence.

The question, then, is why such a narrative would emerge and become so dominant. In my view, it was the result of the confluence of three factors. First, the Western observers, especially journalists, writing about Armenia at the time knew virtually nothing about the country's politics, actors, internal conflicts, and debates. They compensated for that lack of knowledge by relying on clichés, popular templates, and generalizations that were, in fact, ill-suited for understanding what was taking place there. For example, to this day, Western newspapers refer to the conflict in Karabagh as a conflict between Christian Armenians and Muslim Azerbaijanis, despite the demonstrable fact that religion played no part in that conflict whatsoever.[14] Another tendency was to see Armenian nationalism as a monolith and to depict it as an illiberal force, since the implicit identification of nationalism with its organic, exclusionary, and aggressive version is common among Western journalists, especially when the nationalists in question are not "our sons of bitches." For many of them, it was also natural to grant the opposition a presumption of innocence, while assuming that the government was guilty until proven innocent – often a good assumption, but not always. They assumed further that the most important cleavage in Armenian politics was that dividing the government and the opposition, when it was really the one dividing the liberals and their opponents inside, as well as outside the government, especially in the period following the 1994 cease-fire. Finally, they assumed malign intent where the lack of state capacity was a better explanation. These problematic assumptions then contaminated many of the academic writings on Armenia.

Of course, academic experts themselves were not always innocent victims of this failure of the marketplace of information and ideas. Many of them too readily accepted information that seemed to fit their theoretical arguments. Snyder (2000) and Hale (2015), for example, were too easily convinced by stories consistent with their theories of clan politics even though they were discussing a highly urban, industrialized, and educated society, where the urban intelligentsia was actually the most important political class in the late 1980s and early 1990s.[15] Many scholars have uncritically accepted information that was simply begging to be checked. Dudwick (1997, 71), for example, writes the following about her "data" and sources:

https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2018.1438383 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> Many of the people I interviewed alleged to serious corruption and wrongdoing on the part of government officials and leaders. I have no way of confirming or disconfirming such allegations and rumors. Nevertheless, I have repeated many of their allegations in this chapter because their prevalence demonstrates the general discontent and public cynicism which characterize the political atmosphere in contemporary Armenia, in the same way many respondents' desire for anonymity attests to their fear of speaking openly on certain topics.

Dudwick essentially concedes that recording rumors was her method of collecting evidence. Yet it has become the standard reference for most academic texts discussing the Armenian politics of the 1990s.

Second, Ter-Petrossian did not see the divisions between the West and Russia as an opportunity to jump on the West's bandwagon. He was not hostile to the West, by any means. Indeed, as I have pointed out, he was one of the leading critics of the traditional nationalist narrative and that narrative's postulate that Armenia could survive only as a strategic extension of Russia. He advocated normalization of relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan in part because he saw it as a way for Armenia to shed the role of a Russian garrison. The war in Karabagh and Turkey's menacing posture, however, forced him to seek a close strategic relationship with Russia at a time when the USA and Russia were resuming geopolitical competition in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. The problem was only compounded by the fact that Azerbaijani oil had begun to attract considerable Western interest. Ter-Petrossian found himself on the "wrong" side of these geopolitical divisions, and it did not matter that he tried very hard to maintain a balance between the West and Russia.[16] The fact that Ter-Petrossian was a liberal only added to the problem because the very idea that a state governed by a liberal president could have interests that diverged from those of the West must have been a source of cognitive dissonance for a typical Western academic or journalist. Portraying Ter-Petrossian as an autocrat was a good way to correct that dissonance.[17]

Third, Ter-Petrossian had become a target for the politically organized and most vocal segments of the Armenian diaspora, because of his policy of trying to normalize the relations with Turkey and refusing to make recognition of the Armenian genocide an item on Armenia's foreign policy agenda. This amounted to rejecting much of what gave meaning to the Armenian activism, if not the Armenian identity, in the diaspora, which became a source of extreme hostility toward Ter-Petrossian among its elites. But these elites, especially in the USA, knew that criticizing Ter-Petrossian for the "offense" of trying to normalize the relations with Turkey was not the most promising PR approach. They complained about Ter-Petrossian's alleged dictatorial tendencies and violations of human rights instead, calculating correctly that such rhetoric would have a more receptive audience.

The Karabagh war and its consequences for democracy in Armenia

I have argued that the Karabagh war and the concomitant strengthening of a coalition of hardliners organized around the country's military establishment were the causes of Armenia's transition failure. Why the war *necessarily* produced de-democratization, however, should not be considered an uncontroversial claim, because the theoretical literature does not provide an uncontested answer to the question of how war affects democracy in general.

Three schools of thought comprise the debate generated by that question, one insisting that war, in fact, spurs democratic change, another insisting that war is dangerous for democracy, and a third arguing that there is no consistent relationship. According to the first school, at least in modern times, when wars began to require an extreme degree of societal mobilization as they became particularly costly and mass armies became the

https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2018.1438383 Published online by Cambridge University Press

norm, states were forced to make concessions to their societies. Democracy, in a way, became "payback" for the sacrifices modern states had to demand of their societies. Charles Tilly (1992, 83) explains:

> With a nation in arms, a state's extractive power rose enormously, as did the claims of citizens on their state. Although a call to defend the fatherland stimulated extraordinary support for the efforts of war, reliance on mass conscription, confiscatory taxation, and conversion of production to the ends of war made any state vulnerable to popular resistance, and answerable to popular demands, as never before.

The right to vote and various extensions of it in Europe have often followed wars. Wars are also antecedents of important social reforms, such as the improvements of workers' rights in Europe, desegregation of US armed forces and the GI Bill after WWII, etc. (Andreski 1954, chs. 9–11).

Opponents argue that wars shift the balance of power between the state and society in the state's favor, as they necessitate an improved capacity for resource extraction and increased executive authority for making quick, and often unpopular, decisions without worrying about democratic checks and balances. Wars usually strengthen the military and the national security bureaucracy, which are not the most democratic parts of any state apparatus. Finally, war (or the threat of war) affects the trade-off between liberty and security in favor of the latter, creates a psychological disposition toward unity, and makes it difficult to distinguish dissenters from traitors (Hintze 1975; Dolman 2004). The third school, meanwhile, insists that war's effects on democracy are indeterminate and that they vary depending on interactions with other variables, such as intensity, outcomes, the level of socioeconomic development of the society at war, etc. I am persuaded by the latter argument. I also think that it is the most promising approach for understanding how the Karabagh war affected Armenia's democratic development.

There were many variables that interacted with the Karabagh war to hinder Armenia's democratic transition, but I focus on what I think were the four most important ones. The first was the outcome of the war. The Armenian side prevailed, which had several important political consequences. First, it immensely increased the prestige and power of the military, especially since such an outcome was difficult to predict *ex ante*, given the Armenian side's inferiority in terms of manpower and economic resources. Second, victorious outcomes often have the effect of hardening the winning sides' bargaining positions (Labs 1997; Goemans 2000). The Armenian military, the hardliner coalition organized around it, and also large segments of the Armenian society did not escape this effect. Ter-Petrossian and his allies tried to resist this trend, but failed. Third, victories *can* actually have the effect of removing the rationale for keeping a strong military if they are total and if they have resulted in decisively removing a threat. However, situations where a state has won, but not decisively, may actually be the worst of all worlds, and that was precisely the outcome of the Karabagh war. All it did was encourage further militarization.[18]

The second variable was the nature of the military that fought the Karabagh war. It was not a professional military. Some professional officers who had been part of the Soviet Army's officer corps joined the Armenian armed forces, but the military was mainly composed of and dominated by volunteers. Even in most professional militaries, the ethos of being non-political is not always well-entrenched. In non-professional, volunteer ones such an ethos is never adhered to, and the Armenian military was not an exception. Indeed, it was led by passionately political men.

The third variable was the political environment, which proved to be a weak safeguard against the "Karabagh party." In a normally functioning democratic society, oppositions are unlikely to support military *coups d'etat* even if they have sharp disagreements with the

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government and the military's criticisms of the government coincide with theirs, because preserving the constitutional order takes priority over policy disagreements. This mindset was not yet a part of Armenia's political culture when the "Karabagh party" decided to challenge Ter-Petrossian in what was, in essence, a *coup d'etat*. Indeed, the opposition did not merely fail to distinguish between a government it opposed and the constitutional order, it refused to accept the legitimacy of the new political order itself. This is partly why they were glad to side with the "Karabagh party," because the latter did not just disagree with Ter-Petrossian on policy. The disagreements were more fundamental. Ter-Petrossian (2006, 661) said as much in his resignation address to the nation:

> I find it necessary to point out that the question of Karabagh in the crisis of power was merely an excuse. The problem is deeper, and it has to do with the foundational principles of our state and the alternatives between war and peace.[19]

The fourth, and final, variable was Armenia's dramatic economic decline. One of the most robust findings in the study of democracy is that, while countries can transition from authoritarian rule to democracy at any level of socioeconomic development, only countries above a certain threshold are able to make democracy immune to reversals (Przeworski and Limongi 1997). Armenia suffered not just an economic decline in the early 1990s, but something akin to demodernization, as its industrial, knowledge-based economy crumbled. The segment of the population engaged in that economy either migrated or was alienated from the ANM, shrinking not only its social base, but the social base for liberalism and a democratic political order. It is true that the war was not the only factor responsible for that decline, but it contributed to that decline mightily. Armenia's poverty had another effect. Writing about the military's extreme empowerment in Armenia, Levon Zourabian (2000), who served as Ter-Petrossian's spokesman in the 1990s, writes:

> The financing of the war was a matter of immense difficulty with the expenses often exceeding the available resources of the state by a wide margin. To deal with this problem, the military and related institutions established control over certain areas of the economy, which was tolerated by the civilian authorities despite the obvious dangers of graft such a system entailed. In a situation, when the democratic institutions of the young country were unable to meet the challenges of national security within the nascent legal framework, these challenges forced the state to grant special privileges to the military.

Conclusion

Armenia went through epochal political and ideological changes in the late 1980s and early 1990s, ridding itself not only of what had remained of Communist dogmas, but also subjecting certain cherished assumptions of Armenian nationalism, which had informed the political discourse in the country and the diaspora alike for a very long time, to a stern examination. The most important of these assumptions had to do with Armenia's relations with its neighbors and the vision for the future of the Armenian state. For decades, Armenians had been told by their nationalist intelligentsia and Communist apparatchiks that the nation was surrounded by enemies who were looking for an opportunity to finish what was left unfinished in 1915, and that the Soviet army was the only thing standing in their path. The same nationalists had also perpetuated revanchist aspirations about restoring Armenian sovereignty over the historic homeland, linking those aspirations to the chimerical hope that Russia would eventually resume its policy of expansion toward the Mediterranean.

A generation of intellectuals who came of age in the 1970s and 1980s first timidly, then openly challenged these assumptions and the entire nationalist narrative that they rested

https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2018.1438383 Published online by Cambridge University Press

upon. They saw the decaying, corrupt, assimilationist Soviet Union as a more urgent threat to Armenians' future and set out to create an alternative set of aspirations, which included independence, peace with neighbors, and development as a normal, democratic country. This message was received with overwhelming support by the public. The Karabagh conflict, however, undermined these aspirations and hopes, simultaneously relegitimizing elements of the traditional narrative and empowering an activist military establishment, which succeeded in unseating a liberal president. This was the path of Armenia's transition failure.

Much of the Western scholarship has completely missed these epochal changes in Armenian politics in the late 1980s and early 1990s and presented a severely distorted picture of what happened there in that period. It describes not a failure of a valiant attempt to transcend the burdens of a tragic history and build a liberal society, but a process where a bunch of corrupt nationalists pretended to govern democratically until they faced threats, and then abandoned the pretense as well. One would never guess reading that literature that authoritarian nationalism and liberalism were, in fact, pitted against each other in a sophisticated debate and intense political contestation, and that it was the liberals who won initially. I have tried to correct the record, showing that there was, in fact, a genuine effort to transition in Armenia with impressive initial results. I have also tried to demonstrate that it was the political processes set off by the Karabagh conflict that derailed the process.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to Rachel Goshgarian for her comments and editorial help.

Funding

This work was supported by the Franz Fellowship, Lehigh University.

Notes

1. See the reports of the observation missions of the Office of the Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organization of the Security and Cooperation in Europe available at http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/armenia.
2. See the reports on Armenia by the Human Rights Watch, available at: https://www.hrw.org/publications?keyword=&date%5Bvalue%5D%5Byear%5D=&country%5B%5D=9581.
3. Pan-Turkism or pan-Turanism was the doctrine of unifying all Turkic speaking groups under the banner of the Ottoman Empire. It became popular among Turkish nationalists in the early twentieth century (Lewis 1968, 343–352). Many Armenians consider this doctrine incompatible with the continued existence of an Armenian population in the Caucasus. Some also insist that the Armenian Genocide was the consequence of this doctrine.
4. Armenians comprised more than 90% of Karabagh's population in 1921, but only 67% in 1988.
5. The statement is a response to a speech about the threat of pan-Turanism delivered in the Supreme Soviet by Zory Balayan, who was a prominent old-school nationalist (for both Balayan's speech and the Karabagh Committee's response, see Libaridian 1991, 151–156).
6. The Armenian Cause is the ideology of achieving recognition of the Armenian genocide by Turkey and compensation for that crime. It also envisions restoration of Armenian sovereignty over historic Armenia, much of which is in modern-day Turkey. This ideology went hand in hand with the traditional nationalist narrative.
7. A question arises as to why the conflict escalated if the Armenian government was willing to make compromises. The answer is that Azerbaijan adopted a position that was equivalent to demanding capitulation, then militarized the conflict in 1991–1992. For accounts corroborating this claim, see Melander (2001, 69–70) and de Waal (2003, chapter 8).

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8. The Armenian economy was particularly heavily industrialized and tied to the Soviet defense industry.
9. The word can be translated as "protectors of the country."
10. In the same article where he spoke about the proposal to remove Ter-Petrossian from office temporarily, Siradeghyan described the Interior Ministry as a counterweight to "ambitions of the thousands of officers of two victorious armies" (that is, the armies of Armenia and Karabagh), and criticized the bosses of the ANM for failing to see it. With his removal, the merging of the Interior and National Security Ministry, and the appointment of Serge Sargsyan, that counterweight was gone. See Harutyunyan, "The Coup Was Going to Take Place in the Spring of 1995."
11. The very constitutionality of Kocharyan's candidacy was a problem, as the Armenian constitution demanded that a candidate for the presidency must have been a resident of Armenia for the past 10 years.
12. Demirchyan became the chairman of the National Assembly and Vazgen Sargsyan became the prime minister.
13. The Armenian constitution imposes a limit of two consecutive terms on the president, which meant Kocharyan was not eligible to run. It is a minor consolation that, unlike many other authoritarian leaders in the post-Soviet space, Kocharyan did not try to change the constitution to do away with that limit.
14. For some recent examples, see Herszenhorn (2015) and Mulcare (2015). A Google search for "Christian Armenians and Muslim Azerbaijanis" identifies 623 items.
15. This was true of other highly industrialized and urbanized parts of the Soviet Union as well. As Moshe Lewin (1995, 63) correctly and elegantly points out, the Soviet Union "began with the bulk of society being composed of a rather primitive, not very dynamic peasantry, facing an action-oriented bureaucratic state, and ended with a complex urban society, pushing for change, facing a stagnating bureaucratic state – quite a turnover!" See also Suny (1993).
16. The claims by Levitsky and Way, and Fisher that the West failed to exercise its leverage over Ter-Petrossian because it was blind to his autocratic nature is puzzling. As I have already pointed out, Ter-Petrossian and his administration were heavily and unfairly criticized for persecuting the opposition for "manipulating elections" and putting restrictions on the media. As Levitsky and Way report, the USA also reduced Armenia's foreign aid following the 1996 elections. There have also been allegations, which unfortunately have triggered no interest among Western journalists, that the USA deliberately undermined Ter-Petrossian. Gerard Libaridian (2014) has claimed that the American ambassador to Armenia actively and inappropriately supported the opposition during the presidential campaign of 1996, which emboldened the opposition to engage in violence. Libaridian has also claimed that a senior US diplomat expressed enthusiasm about Kocharyan replacing Ter-Petrossian during a private conversation with him in 1998, saying that Ter-Petrossian was too weak to deliver a solution on Karabagh, while Kocharyan was more likely to succeed given his credibility as a hardliner.
17. This argument is corroborated by the fact that articles criticizing Ter-Petrossian's ostensibly autocratic nature began appearing in the American media before the events that later became the empirical backbone of the "Ter-Petrossian, the autocrat" narrative. See, for example, "Armenia: Presidential Hegemony" (1994) and LeVine (1995).
18. Bonn International Center for Conversion ranks Armenia as the fourth most militarized state in the world. See http://gmi.bicc.de/uploads/pdf/GMI_Daten_2013_e.pdf.
19. It is a firm conviction of Ter-Petrossian's that peace with neighbors is not only a desirable end in itself, but a prerequisite for democratic development. See Ter-Petrossian (2018).

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