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Politics in Azerbaijan after the Second Karabakh War: Actors and Shifting Internal Discourses

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Executive Summary

The Second Karabakh War has profoundly impacted Azerbaijani society and national identity. The focus of post-war domestic politics is dictated by the significant shifts caused by the outcomes of the war. The victory enormously strengthened the legitimacy of President Ilham Aliyev, who launched a dialogue process with the domestic opposition several months before the war. While some parties accepted the dialogue offer, the mainstream opposition remained critical of it. Following the war and its aftermath, popular support for the government has significantly grown. This policy brief analyzes the shifting discourses of political parties in Azerbaijan, focusing on mainstream and new parties while also taking into account progressive and marginalized actors. These shifts include the critical perception of the aftermath of the conflict, criticism of the Russian presence in the region and right-wing populism. This policy brief also provides recommendations to the EU and the US on engaging with Azerbaijan's domestic political shifts.

Key words: Azerbaijan, Aliyev, Popular Front Party, Musavat, Ali Karimli, Ilgar Mammadov, Karabakh, feminism, Russia

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Introduction

The potential for another war following the 1994 ceasefire in Karabakh was never dismissed. The new war was in accordance with popular demand after high-ranking losses during the July 2021 clashes between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Intensive armed conflict started on September 27 and lasted until November 10, 2020, when the sides signed the Russian-brokered ceasefire. Azerbaijan regained control of seven, previously seized adjacent territories plus Shusha, which was mainly inhabited by ethnic Azerbaijanis before the first war (1988-1994), and the Armenian-inhabited Hadrut district. The renewable five-year Russian peacekeeping mission is now located in the Armenian-inhabited parts of Nagorno-Karabakh. The outcome of the 44-day war in Nagorno-Karabakh has affected the entire region and caused significant shifts in the sociopolitical reality of Azerbaijan. This policy brief analyzes the current political configuration in post-war Azerbaijan, focusing on political actors' discourses and trends. These socially significant changes are vital for further steps and strategies of the international community and NGOs regarding future work in Azerbaijan.

Unity in War

The traumatic impact of the loss of the territories as an outcome of the first Karabakh war (1988-1994) had made the dream of revenge and the retaking of Nagorno-Karabakh the dominant idea of the Azerbaijani national community regardless of political affiliation (see, e.g., Ergun 2021). During the second war, Azerbaijan witnessed unprecedented national unity. President Aliyev's popularity reached its peak: his speeches, interviews, and tweets were closely followed. Support for President Ilham Aliyev had dramatically increased, and the opposition parties and civil society expressed their direct support in the name of national unity and homeland. On September 27, 2020, 50 parties signed a joint statement on "Armenian provocation against Azerbaijan" (Azertag 2020), claiming that the Armenian side had started the military offense. The list did not include the mainstream opposition parties of the Popular Front and Musavat parties and involved the Republican Alternative and the right-wing populist White Party. Most of the parties in the list are not operational; however, the statement broadcast a message of national unity for both internal and external audiences. Although the Popular Front Party did not sign the statement, in the atmosphere of national unity and celebration they nevertheless decided not to be marginalized and acknowledged President Aliyev's role in the victory (Turan 2020).

Along with Azerbaijan's seeming national unification, a few activists stood out against the war, labeling their social media photos with captions of 'No war.' Anti-militarist discourse remained in the virtual space and mainly included critical social media posts and anti-war statements. Anti-militarists faced harassment, public shaming, and blackmailing (Samadov 2020a). Many of these activists belong to progressive circles such as feminists and left-leaning youth. Notably, the state security services did not persecute for 'anti-militarist' activities. This can be explained by the fact the state security services in Azerbaijan oppress those groups who can challenge the official discourse and mobilize people, e.g., members of the Popular Front Party. The marginalized voices received widespread hatred and did not have any mobilizing potential.

Another reason was the unwillingness of the government to garner additional negative press in the foreign media.

- *Mainstream Opposition against the Russian Presence*

The “old” or mainstream opposition parties, namely the Popular Front Party of Azerbaijan (PFPA) and the currently minor Musavat Party, are the successors of the Popular Front movement of the 90s. Both share nationalistic sentiments; while the Musavat Party is more pan-Turkic and conservative, the Popular Front Party is more socially populist and pro-Western. Overall, the parties in Azerbaijan are more associated with leaders rather than with ideologies (Guliyev 2018).

Following victory in the Karabakh war, President Aliyev’s popularity is higher than ever before. The opposition parties in contrast have lost their mobilizing potential. Before the war, one of the central arguments of the mainstream opposition was the ‘unwillingness’ of the government to solve the conflict in favor of Azerbaijan. Given this fact, various political actors have chosen specific strategies to stay relevant in the new political landscape.

The Russian presence in Karabakh is the main argument levied against Aliyev’s political competence. The main argument is that the victory is not complete as far as the Russian peacekeeping mission is situated in Nagorno-Karabakh, potentially threatening the sovereignty of Azerbaijan. Shortly after the war, the Popular Front Party proposed replacing the Russian peacekeeping mission with an international mission (Osmanqizi TV 2020). The Popular Front’s leader, Ali Karimli, claimed that the peacekeeping mission took over strategic heights and accused the government of weakness. In an alarmist way, Karimli speculated that Russia aims to eliminate the influence of Turkey in the region to stay in Nagorno-Karabakh for a more extended period, threatening the sovereignty of Azerbaijan (Osmanqizi TV 2021). Musavat Party took a similar approach and even tried to rally against the peacekeeping mission in front of the Russian Embassy in Baku (Turan 2021a).

The everyday activities of the mainstream opposition have declined following the war. For example, they have not organized any protest rallies and stayed primarily in the virtual space. The unwillingness to call for new protests can be explained as the lack of widespread engagement with the opposition after the war and the reduction of demands to either protest the Russian presence or bring attention to socioeconomic issues. Moreover, as the Russian presence in the Armenian-inhabited areas does not bother the majority of Azerbaijanis, the opposition has not mobilized popular protest.

Regarding the issue of political prisoners, notable changes have taken place. Many arrested during the July 2020 rally PNFA representatives were transferred to house arrest on November 16, 2020 (APA 2020). Many consider this move Aliyev’s gesture in exchange for Karimli’s support during the war. Despite this gesture, other facts show no reconciliation with the “old” opposition. For example, Karimli’s former bodyguard Niyameddin Ahmedov was unexpectedly accused of financing terrorism and sentenced to 13 years in prison (Turan 2021b). He physically defended Karimli during his violent arrest on October 19, 2019, rally and was among the detained Popular Front activists during the March-April 2020 wave of arrests. The Amnesty Act on the

occasion of the November 8 Victory Day had 17,000 names, but no political prisoner was among them (JamNews 2021).

- *The Republican Alternative and the White Party*

Apart from the war, the most notable recent political event in Azerbaijan has been the emergence of a dialogue narrative in the political discourse. It was launched in late February 2020, on the initiative of President Aliyev. While the Republican Alternative has agreed to be engaged in the process, the mainstream opposition rejected the process as not transparent, calling the process an “imitation of dialogue.” This division weakened the opposition camp already before the war (Samadov 2020b).

Republican Alternative leader Ilgar Mammadov described the political dialogue as plausible for both the opposition and independent NGOs. According to him (2021), the dialogue process would increase opportunities for NGO activities, making them open and transparent. Mammadov claims that his party is trying to push the government towards positive change regarding the registration of NGOs and their normal functioning.

While the Republican Alternative line is arguably pro-reformist and not populist, the political landscape of the country has witnessed the rise of the former leader of the youth branch of Musavat Party, Tural Abbasly of the White Party (AG Partiya, from the name of the ruling AK Party in Turkey). He employs the ideology and style of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. In his speeches, Abbasly appeals to the underdog, to “the children of chai khanas, who liberated Karabakh” (TV Musavat 2021a). His criticism usually targets Parliament and government officials, and his videos go viral not only on traditional social media platforms but also on TikTok.

Abbasly has also attacked local feminists and their advocacy activities (InfoAz 2021). Following the post-war official discourse, Abbasly, who lost his brother in the war, actively supported further territorial claims against Armenia, namely to Syunik province in southern Armenia. The White Party never targets President Aliyev, focusing instead on criticism of secondary officials. This stance has been criticized by the mainstream opposition, sometimes accusing him of being a state agent. In his reply, Abbasly has called the opposition “gay conference attenders” and “Soros agents” (TV Musavat 2021c).

The value conflict between “pro-dialogue” and “anti-dialogue” opposition parties has not only weakened the opposition but has also made the political environment toxic and unpromising to challenge the ruling New Azerbaijan Party. Both the White Party and Republican Alternative have gained unofficial recognition by the ruling regime, enabling their leaders to participate in broadcast TV programs and public debates. The “old” opposition functions solely on social media. This configuration allows the ruling regime to present the situation in the country as democratic and pluralist while maintaining authoritarian control and marginalizing mainstream parties.

- *The Others: Small Movements After the War*

While the popularization of feminism and NGO activism focusing on gender relations in Azerbaijan started in the early 2010s, the politicization of feminism in Azerbaijan has been especially visible since 2019. Between 2019-2021, feminists organized four protest rallies in

downtown Baku; three of them took place on March 8 – International Women’s Day. Feminist activists and initiatives have been attacked by various groups, who accuse activists of ‘immorality’ (Namazov 2021).

During the 44-day war, many prominent feminists openly condemned the war as a characteristic element of nationalism and patriarchy. This anti-militarist stance has further marginalized feminists and other progressive voices. They have been accused of “betrayal of the nation” (Samadov 2020a).

The March 8 International Women’s Day rally in 2021 attracted fewer activists compared to the previous year; over 15 women were detained. In their statements, the feminist activists stressed that “the war and socioeconomic problems that affected women’s lives went unnoticed.” (Meydan TV 2021). Femicide and domestic violence were the main topics that feminists raised after the war, trying to reveal the political nature of these problems. They also organized small protests after March 8 (Isayev 2021), remaining visible after the war by speaking about issues such as domestic abuse and violence against the LGBTQ community. The opposition parties usually ignore or remain on the sidelines of such cases, which could be explained as the wish to not be associated with marginalized groups and value differences between them and the progressive groups.

On October 13, a small group of young activists from the NIDA Civic Movement and D18 Movement held a protest in front of the former office of the ruling party. Despite a small number of activists, both movements target the youth and deploy a mixture of progressive and patriotic narratives. They demanded freedom for political prisoners, including the recently imprisoned Niyameddin Ahmedov of the Popular Front Party. Elmir Abbasov of the NIDA Movement received 30 days of administrative arrest for disobeying the police (Turan 2021c). However, the limited resources and scope of activities do not allow them to attract a broader audience.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Based on the description and analysis of the post-war political environment and shifts in Azerbaijan, it can be argued that not only has the mainstream opposition been weakened and lost its support, but the progressive forces have also been further marginalized. Narratives on democracy, European integration, and human rights are not widespread after the victory, and the mainstream opposition is trying to mobilize support around anti-Russian narratives. However, this strategy is not successful without any clear evidence that Russia threatens the sovereignty of Azerbaijan. Considering the rise of nationalistic ideas around the victory narrative, some right-wing populists, such as Tural Abbasly, are gaining popularity and positive feedback from the general public.

The dialogue format does not aim at the democratization of public space. Instead, this policy seeks to normalize parties who do not target and criticize President Aliyev. It could be assumed that party officials who agree on the dialogue agenda have a chance of membership in the Parliament, representing the new generation of government-controlled opposition parties to imitate democracy and pluralism.

Recommendations:

The US, the EU and its Member States, their Embassies and Representative Institutions in Azerbaijan should:

- Consider the existing power dynamics in the country, especially the government-initiated ongoing dialogue process, which may have a positive outcome for the registration of NGOs. However, the process should not be assessed as necessarily positive and should be tracked with critical attention.
- Be attentive to the values of the groups and individuals with whom they seek to cooperate; they should assess their stances towards the war and its outcomes.
- Support the progressive forces and their activities in Azerbaijan without the hesitation to work with new faces. These local actors are crucial to progressive alternatives to the existing nationalistic discourses. Meetings with and expression of moral support for progressive activists have a productive psychological impact. The personal attendance of embassy representatives in cultural events organized by progressive activists has moral importance.
- Support the local NGOs that organize training and workshops for activists, lawyers, social workers, and journalists. Support fellowships, research stays, and scholarships for lawyers, journalists, and critical researchers, which is of immense importance. These opportunities will increase their skills and motivate them to work in Azerbaijan.
- Acknowledge that statements regarding the political shifts and significant events in the country are powerful. Positive or critical (e.g., condemning harassment), more often released public statements, gestures, and social media posts (especially by embassies) will demonstrate the engagement of the collective West in the realities of Azerbaijan.
- Promote private meetings with officials regarding issues of political prisoners, harassment of activists, and dialogue-related topics.

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