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PUBLICLY DECLARED POSITIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE KARABAKH PROCESS: PROBLEMS OF CONSISTENCY AND CONTINUITY

***Abstract:** The paper focuses on the analysis of the publicly declared positions of Nikol Pashinian, the Prime Minister of Armenia, in the context of the Karabakh process, examining the impact of the declared position on the negotiation process and identifying the shifts in the leader's positions on the Karabakh issue over the time. The research is conducted using the qualitative content analysis method. The research demonstrates that Pashinian's declared positions on Karabakh issues led to the disruption of the negotiation process and identifies that the leader's declared positions were targeted at preserving public support and staying in power have changed over time due to the changing circumstances.*

***Keywords:** conflict resolution, negotiations, leadership, political statements, Karabakh process.*

Introduction

The initiation of a conflict resolution process and the signing of ceasefire/peace agreements in international conflicts are almost always perceived as an outstanding achievement for leaders, placing their names in the history books. However, only at first glance does the initiation of the conflict resolution process seem to be perceived by the public as a positive result of the actions of a leader. In fact, the leader is often trapped in the initiated conflict resolution process, especially when the public is not ready for peace and does not truly appreciate and understand the need for steps to achieve it.

Frequently, leaders who sign peace agreements are declared by the people to be traitors of national interests and are forced to end their political careers. The conflict resolution process heavily depends on the leader's ability to communicate with his public, informing them about the possibilities and plans for resolving the conflict in the face of the need to preserve public support and maintain power. This becomes even more relevant due to the advancement of information technologies and mass media that gives the domestic public more possibility to follow and

monitor the conflict resolution process and express its opinion. Moreover, in a conflict resolution process full of uncertainties and in the context of existing distrust between the negotiating parties, the publicly declared positions are important to establish communication between the adversaries.

In the context of Armenia, the recent 44-day Karabakh War has shown the particular importance of this research, the topic for which was chosen before the war broke out. The war that disrupted the ongoing conflict resolution process allows examining and distinctly seeing how the Armenian Prime Minister's public statements influenced the development of the negotiation process. It also gives the ability to trace how many of his initially stated positions corresponded to the positions publicly declared by him later, mainly after signing the 2020 Joint Statement on Karabakh.

In order to understand how public statements by leaders are relevant to the conflict resolution process, based on Pashinian's case, the study set out to answer the following question: 1) how did Pashinian's publicly declared positions impact the Karabakh negotiation process; 2) do the declarations made by Pashinian on issues related to the Karabakh conflict change over the time, specifically in the pre- and post-war periods, and if yes, why?

The hypotheses worked out to test are the following: 1) Pashinian's declared positions contributed to the disruption of the negotiation process leading to a full-scale war; 2) Pashinian has changed his position on a number of significant issues on the Karabakh issue with time, specifically after the 44-day Karabakh War, to justify the conditions signed by Armenia in the 2020 Joint Statement on Karabakh, preserve public support and stay in power;

Thus, taking into consideration the above-mentioned points and realizing that the leader's public statements are of particular importance to the conflict resolution process, the topic was voluntarily chosen as a matter of thorough research.

Literature review

Conflict resolution is a complex phenomenon that is affected by a number of factors such as the situation on the battlefield, the domestic situation in the conflicting countries, the objectives and goals of the conflicting parties, etc. The positions taken by the leaders of the countries also have a significant impact on the conflict resolution process and have the capacity to determine the development of the negotiations. Any conflict resolution process is full of uncertainties and unpredictability, because of the distrust that naturally exists between the conflicting parties coming to the negotiation table and the public questioning the ability of

their governments to pursue such a track in the negotiation process that would ensure the protection of the publicly perceived national interests of the country. Hence the leaders should find an effective way to communicate with their domestic public to ensure the public support of the negotiation process launched and signal to other participants of the negotiation process such messages that would help to move the negotiation process forward. That is why the impact of the declared positions of the leaders on the conflict resolution process should be carefully examined and is a focus of this article.

Conflict resolution can be defined as a phased, multi-layered and multi-dimensional process involving different numbers of participants (Deutsch 1973, 56). Conflict resolution can be bilateral which means that it can involve two conflicting parties in the resolution of the conflict (India-Pakistan peace process). The conflict resolution can also be in a multilateral form which means that some third party such as a state or an international organization will be involved in the conflict resolution process (Serbia-Kosovo peace process). Sometimes the conflict resolution process can be openly multilateral when the third party is openly and directly involved in the process. However, in some cases, the conflict resolution process is not multilateral, when third party or parties significantly impact the conflict resolution process, but do not openly and directly participate in it (Deutsch 1973, 48).

In academia, there are three main phases of conflict resolution identified: the pre-negotiation phase, negotiation phase and post-negotiation phase (Saudners 1985, 249). During the pre-negotiation phase, the sides of the conflict seek to build trust and make all of them more dependent on each other so as to limit the capability of one party of the conflict to act unilaterally and harm the others. This helps to put the conflict on a hold for at least some period of time and start to find common grounds for reaching a resolution of the conflict. The main objectives of the pre-negotiation phase are to define the actors who are going to take part in the actual negotiation process, the time and location of the meeting, discussing and defining the agenda of the meeting and the level of the negotiations (Saudners 1985, 260).

Negotiation is defined as a process in which the conflicting parties are discussing the common and conflicting interests directly with each other and try to reach a compromise taking into account the concerns and interests of all of the parties involved in the conflict (Brigg 2008, 68). Negotiation is considered to be an important tool in peacemaking that gives a possibility to avoid the use of force. The crucial part of a negotiation process is that none of the conflicting sides will get all

of its needs satisfied and both of the sides should be ready for some concessions in order to reach a compromise (Cohen 1997, 92). However, it is important to take into consideration that the minimum concept is also important in the negotiation process as both of the parties have in their perspective the minimum and most basic interests and demands that should be accounted for.

The post-negotiation phase usually comes with analyzing the course and results of the negotiations held and results in signing some kind of an agreement that encompasses the outcomes of the negotiations. In case of low mutual trust between the conflicting parties, different kinds of control mechanisms are introduced in order to ensure the compliance of the conflicting parties to the reached agreements. The phase of implementation and monitoring comes into force (Spector 2013, 5-16).

Conflict resolution is a complex process that is impacted by a number of factors. One of the factors that should be considered is the role of the leaders and the positions declared by the leaders on the peace process. In academia, there is a common understanding that leadership is an important factor in the development of the peace process that can have a significant impact on the final outcomes.

Leaders who initiate a peace process and take active part in it should take a balanced approach to conflict resolution in order to be able to preserve public support and keep their power, but at the same time move the negotiation process forward, leading to a breakthrough in the negotiations. On the one hand, the leaders are expected to signal the opponents about openness to the negotiation process and readiness for the following possible compromises and concessions to create a basis for negotiations with the conflicting parties. On the other hand, the leaders should at least appear to adhere to their initial demands, being “tough” and persistent to keep the political support of the public and other political forces and institutions that frequently react extremely sensitively to the concessions made and are ready to express their outrage and disagreements which can lead to leaders losing their political power and public support (Ortriz 2020, 34).

There are a number of factors that can impact the positions taken by the leaders in a negotiation process, such as domestic politics, personal beliefs and values, the behavior of the adversary, the international environment, etc.

The stability of the political power of the leaders at the domestic landscape and the political support obtained in the country significantly impact the positions of the leaders in the negotiation process. In cases when the leader does not have solid power in the country and is heavily undermined and contested by opposition forces, the leader tends to be more cautious and limited in his actions as he prefers

to act with maximum care, not to give the opposition parties the opportunity to destabilize the situation and weaken his position. Moreover, in the countries with a strong civil society constantly involved in monitoring the actions of the leaders, specifically regarding the negotiation process, the leader is also prone to act less reckless and be more restricted in his strategies and actions in the course of the negotiation process. When striving to stay in the office in a state with a well-developed civil society, free, fair and regular election practices, the leader would be focused on preserving electoral support (Ghosn 2010, 1055). The initiation of the peace process has the potential to be perceived critically by the public and other political forces and institutions that have issues with accepting and supporting the peace process and strong opposition at the domestic level can be formed. In a case when the public struggles with accepting the concessions and compromises initiated, the leader can be framed as a traitor who is bargaining on national interests and is betraying the whole nation (Rosler 2016, 46). Thus, to avoid such a destiny in a democratic country with a well-developed election system, civil society and active political life of the state, the leader would be more restricted in his actions and more careful about the expressed positions in the course of the negotiation process. In autocratic systems with failing election system, being neither competitive, free nor fair, with a lack of checks and balances, and an absence of public monitoring of the leaders` actions in the negotiation process, the leader can take more controversial and unexpected actions, and agree to publicly hurtful concessions to move the negotiation process forward (Irragori 2011, 94).

The personal beliefs and values of the leaders can significantly influence the decisions made by leaders in the course of the negotiation process, either moving it forward and reaching outstanding results or stagnating and even degrading the process. It is widely accepted in academia that some leaders “are better negotiators than the others as a gift from nature and culture” (Ghosn 2010, 1058). The individual and psychological characteristics of the leader are assumed to have a significant impact developed by the leader in the negotiation process. Some leaders, due to their personal characteristics, are more prone to apply an individualistic style of negotiations when they take an active part in the negotiation process, becoming involved in all the phases of the negotiations by themselves, limiting the possibilities for other political officials to step in and influence the negotiation process (Ghosn 2010, 1058). However, others are more prone to use the group negotiation style when leaders rely more on group discussions in the negotiation process and create possibilities for other political actors to get involved in the process. Due to individual and psychological characteristics, some leaders

tend to be more effective, being more open to the negotiation process, more flexible and adaptive that allows them to move the negotiation process forward, while other leaders, due to their high level of anxiety, suspicions, being more reserved, etc. can take such positions in the negotiation process that would stagnate and prevent progress (Irragori 2011, 97).

The international environment can also impact the positions declared by the leaders in the negotiation process, and changes in the international context can also lead to the altering of the declared positions of state leaders, who would review their attitude due to the transforming international environment (Kremenjuk 1988, 215).

The actions of enemies can also impact the declared positions of the leaders. If the adversary takes a harsh position and does not demonstrate any willingness to negotiate, the leader involved in the negotiation process can also declare about the stagnation of the negotiations and no prospects for progress. If the adversaries hesitate to act according to the points negotiated and act in such a way that their words and deeds come in a conflict, the leaders can start to change their attitude (Bailer 2010, 748). Thus, in academia there is a strong understanding of the crucial role of the leaders in the negotiation process and the factors that can impact their negotiation style. However, while examining the existing literature, it became apparent that issues such as how the publicly stated positions of the leaders can impact the negotiation process are not broadly discussed in academia and deserve careful study.

In the case of Pashinian, the role that his publicly declared statements related to the Karabakh issue played in the negotiation process has not been thoroughly studied. The correlations between his initial (mainly pre 2020 Karabakh War) and post-war positions on Karabakh were also not broadly discussed. That is why this paper focuses on filling the existing gaps in academia.

Methodology

The qualitative method of content analysis was applied for this research. The publicly declared statements of Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian on the Karabakh issue were carefully studied. 14 speeches of Nikol Pashinian from January 2018 to 2021 March on Karabakh from the official website of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, 8 newspaper articles informing about Pashinian's statements on foreign policy issues from Armenian and other Russian and international outlets and the 2020 Joint Statement on Karabakh were analysed. The purposive sampling was applied to select the articles and speeches for the

analysis. The hashtags “Nagorno-Karabakh”, “Nikol Pashinian Karabakh”, “Karabakh issue”, “Azerbaijan Armenia”, “44 Day War”, “Joint Statement on Karabakh”, etc. were applied on the official website of the Armenian Prime Minister and Armenian and international media outlets to select the speeches and articles for analysis.

The analysis was not focused on latent content, as the latent meanings behind the speeches of Nikol Pashinian have been identified and analyzed in the course of the research. The speeches delivered by the leader before the Joint Statement on Karabakh was signed, the statement itself and the speeches of the Armenian leader after the Joint Statement was signed have been analysed to see how his initial statements correlated with the latter one and how they impacted the negotiation process.

Limitations

The research has some considerable limitations. First of all, it should be mentioned that only the positions publicly declared by Pashinian in the timeframe of January 2018 – March 2021 have been analysed, as the main part of the research focused on the current, ongoing events was finished by April 2021. Thus, the declarations publicly made after March 2021 were not in any way studied and analysed, which does not allow us to trace the changing dynamics of Pashinian’s position on the issues related to the Karabakh process and identify how his declarations continue to impact the conflict resolution process.

Moreover, the research does not include an extensive study on the factors that have impacted the positions of the state’s leader over the course of the negotiation process, besides shedding light on the impact of domestic politics on the declarations publicly stated by the leader. Other factors such as the personal beliefs and values of Pashinian, the international context and the behavior of the adversaries are touched upon, but not comprehensively studied due to the following reasons.

The personal beliefs and values can be barely accurately studied and examined, as in the case of Pashinian, there was no possibility to have an interview with him due to the unstable political situation in Armenia and the continuation of the Karabakh process in the context of which he is barely expected to be sincere and open for a conversation. It was decided not to look profoundly into the impact of the international context and the behavior of the adversaries as it would enormously stretch the research and make it highly unfocused. There were also considerable limitations regarding the study of the relevance of Pashinian’s

declared position. It was related to the fact that the 2020 Karabakh process was very recent and Pashinian is still in process of clarifying his current positions on a number of issues and they are not solidly formed and declared yet. Also it should be considered that no significant literature in the academia on the relevance of Pashinian's declared positions, the correlation of his initial statements with the currently declared positions exists due to the recent nature of the war that has fundamentally transformed the previously ongoing conflict resolution process, so there was no solid academic basis for the study of the Pashinian's case and it was done almost from scratch.

Findings

The Karabakh conflict is one of the most complex conflicts in the present day that has intensified since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The conflict is not only a territorial dispute but is also an example of ethnic confrontation, which makes it even more complex. For over 30 years, the Karabakh conflict has been attempted to be resolved through various diplomatic, military and political means, but to no avail. The last serious escalation of the conflict occurred in the fall of 2020, due to the aggression of Azerbaijan, turning into a full-scale war that completely changed the status quo that had existed since 1994.

The Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian, who came to power on the wave of the massive public protests during which the population demanded the resignation of the former Armenian leader Serzh Sargsyan, has used the Karabakh issue in order to criticize and discredit the government of Sargsyan and gain public support. Pashinian has criticised Sargsyan's government for incompetent and non-transparent management of the Karabakh issue that was stagnating and remaining unresolved.

Being elected by the majority of votes and being framed as the first democratic leader of Armenia, it was important for Pashinian to make efforts to move the Karabakh conflict resolution process forward, which the perceived democratically elected leader saw as his mission. Pashinian's personal perception that democratic countries are invincible and that no country would dare to attack a democratic Armenia that was trying to gain the support of other powerful Western democracies made him convinced that he can change the flow of the Karabakh conflict resolution process and be more bold in his demands and statements. His perception of himself as a national savior who came to take the country out of the chaos and represent the interests of the nation also contributed to making his approach to conflict resolution more individualistic and lacking checks and

balances. Pashinian's individualistic and discrete approach to conflict resolution led to the fact that other institutions and political forces as well as the public did not have a lot of opportunities to have a say and were largely removed from the negotiation process. This became even more vivid due to the extreme polarization of the Armenian political forces and public who were in one night informed about the conditions of the Joint Statement on Karabakh signed and were not ready to accept them.

In this section, the statements of Prime Minister Pashinian in the pre and postwar periods from 2018 to 2021 are analysed, to understand how his initial statements corresponded to his declarations made in the 2020 post-war period, to what extent they were consistent and to see how the statements impacted the Karabakh negotiation process.

In his statements Pashinian has touched upon a number of issues which have been identified and classified to provide an analysis:

- 1) The issue of the seven surrounding districts taken by Armenia in the 1994 war
- 2) The issue of the stakeholders and the format of the negotiations;
- 3) The issue of transparency of the Karabakh negotiation processes;
- 4) The issue of Russia's role in the negotiation process and conflict-management.

Analysing the statements made by Nikol Pashinian as an opposition representative and as an official representative (Prime Minister) of Armenia, it becomes evident that his declarations from being extremely categorical in the time when he was an opposition representative shifted to being more moderate and balanced as prime minister of the country. This can be seen as a result of the responsibility gained as a Prime Minister and the necessity to be diplomatic in order to ensure and protect the national interests of the country in different directions. The role of an opposition representative criticising government actions, sometimes even without being constructive due to the lack of real responsibilities and obligations allowed Pashinian to be more categorical. While holding office, because of the need to establish multifaceted foreign policy and pay attention to issues existing in various domains, Pashinian's statements concerning the Karabakh issue can be characterized as more deliberate and balanced. Nevertheless, over the course of his governance, Pashinian has been prone to make categorical statements and adhere to a hard and what is more important, inconsistent line regarding the Karabakh problem that did not benefit the negotiation process.

For example, in the course of his political career, Pashinian made statements on the seven liberated provinces and the status of Karabakh, which went beyond the existing negotiation process, were too tough and uncompromising, and obviously did not have any real chance to be accepted by the Azerbaijani side. Pashinian made this statement in 2019, declaring that “Artsakh is Armenia. Period” (Eurasinet 2019).

At the core of the negotiation process are the Madrid Principles, which call for the return of the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani control. While declaring that Artsakh is Armenia, Pashinian in his statements did not define what he meant by Artsakh - the territory of the former Autonomous Karabakh Oblast, or all the territories liberated in the course of the 1994 war, including the seven districts surrounding the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast that, according to the Madrid Principles, should be returned to Azerbaijani control (OSCE 2009).

Moreover, his statement declaring that Artsakh is Armenia came into conflict with the Madrid principle of granting interim status to Karabakh providing guarantees for security and self-governance and future determination of the final legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh through a legally binding expression of will (ibid). It should be also taken into account that Armenia’s official position on the status of Karabakh before Pashinian came to power was to demand independence for Artsakh, not to make Artsakh a part of Armenia, at least officially. By stating that Artsakh is Armenia, Pashinian not only was contradicting the Madrid principles, but was also making Armenia's position on the status of Karabakh highly inconsistent and unpredictable.

Such statements concerning the official status of Karabakh, which were made by the Prime Minister, not only had the potential to lead the already stagnating negotiation process to a deadlock, but also showed the inconsistency of the Armenian position in resolving the Karabakh issue. This statement runs in conflict with the previously declared position of Armenia, on the basis of which the negotiation process has been built for more than two decades, and shows Armenia's inability to form a single consistent position for participation in the negotiation process under Pashinian. It is interesting that later, during the 44-day war, the representatives of Azerbaijan will call this statement of Pashinian the reason for the outbreak of the war, referring to the fact that such statements led the negotiation process to a deadlock and did not imply a peaceful settlement of the conflict (Nezavisimaya Gazeta 2020). Nikol Pashinian to a large extent did not manage to take a balanced approach to the Karabakh issue, keeping a balance between the

need to compromise with Azerbaijan and meet public expectations. His hard line communicated to the public was not backed up enough with “behind closed door” negotiations with the Azerbaijani side, which in many ways disrupted the negotiation process and kept it in a deadlock.

There are also a number of inconsistencies identified in the declared positions of Nikol Pashinian regarding the Karabakh conflict. For instance, in a radio interview in the pre-war period Pashinyan stated that “there is no land to hand over to Azerbaijan” and has later declared that the territories controlled by Artsakh are of “significance to our survival as a country” (Abrahamian 2018). By doing so, Pashinian was sending a clear message that Armenia was not ready for any concessions on the territories and did not consider returning the seven surrounding districts, as stated in the Madrid principles, to the Azerbaijani control. So, it is crucial to note that in the pre-44-Day Karabakh War period, Nikol Pashinian was frequently stating that no Karabakh territories will be returned and that they have a significant importance to Armenia. These kinds of messages sent could not but cause significant outrage on the Azerbaijani side and signal that barely any negotiations were possible, making Azerbaijan more aggressive and more likely to turn to the violent means to resolve the conflict, which led to the devastating 44-Day War.

However, after the 2020 Karabakh war when the withdrawal of Armenian forces from a number of districts was agreed on, Nikol Pashinian made statements that were implied to undermine the importance of the territories lost, questioning their development capacity and their Armenian roots and origins. This can be vividly illustrated by Pashinian’s remarks made on Shushi, the loss of which caused the major outrage of the Armenian public. So, in the post-war period Pashinian has stated that Shushi was a “miserable and pale ” city and questioned the importance of keeping Shushi (The Armenian Weekly 2021). The abovementioned shows that from the rhetoric of significance of all the lands held and their remarkable importance for Armenia, after signing the 2020 Joint Statement declaring the withdrawal of the Armenian forces from a number of territories kept under the Karabakh control, Pashinian shifted to questioning the relevance of the lost territories for Armenia. So, his pre-war statements on the territories kept under the Karabakh control did not correspond to the declarations made by him on that issue in the post-war period. Pashinian changed his position on the issue trying to justify the territorial concession that he had agreed upon signing the 2020 Joint Statement on Karabakh, sending to the public the messages that would decrease the public outrage and help him stay in power.

Being an opposition leader, Nikol Pashinyan has stated that “We need to prevent Armenia’s Azerbaijanisation” and in his victory speech in 2018 Pashinian also promised to finally make “the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic an inseparable part of the Republic of Armenia” (Open Democracy 2018). These statements show that in the pre-war period, Pashinian trying to gain public support was trying to utilize the nationalistic sentiments of the people and build the victorious rhetoric stating that the Karabakh issue would be resolved in favor of Armenians. This kind of nationalistic rhetoric and ready-made formulas utilized by Pashinian in his messages to the public could not avoid but being tracked by the Azerbaijani side that perceived Pashinian’s position as an uncompromising one and did not really demonstrate his willingness to negotiate on the issues that were still perceived as being unresolved. Undoubtedly, this position clearly conveyed by Pashinian had no chance to add to Azerbaijan's willingness to negotiate and to resolve the conflict in a peaceful way. It is interesting to note that after the 44-Day War, Pashinian has numerously stated the territorial concessions were the only existing alternative for Armenia, a “painful decision, but a necessary and inevitable one” (Hetq 2020). Speaking about the territorial concessions which he agreed on signing the 2020 Joint Statement, Pashinian stated: “There was no option. There was a thesis that existed throughout the entire history of the negotiations, and it was a hardened reality”. In the course of the analysis it becomes evident that Nikol Pashinian’s publicly declared positions have dramatically changed from the times of him being an opposition leader to the after-war period when he as a Prime Minister of the country signed the 2020 Joint Statement. Coming to power on the wave of the nationalistic and victorious sentiments, representing himself as a savior who was going to resolve the Karabakh issue in favor of Armenia, after the 44 Day War Pashinian has dramatically changed his rhetoric to justify the decisions made. The change of his rhetoric declaring that territorial concessions were the only option had a potential to help the Prime Minister keep the power and not to be perceived as a traitor preserving the public support.

However, Nikol Pashinyan’s positions on territorial concessions differed not only in the pre-war and post-war periods. In the times of Nikol Pashinian being an opposition leader, his position on the Karabakh issue can also hardly be characterized as a consistent one. In his book “The other side of the Earth” Nikol Pashinian concerning the Karabakh issue has written that:

“The rationality says: because of the part, the whole cannot be endangered, and at least, it is necessary to declare, loudly declare, that we do not need these

fields, that we are ready to return these lands in the name of peace” (Pashinian 2018).

In his book Nikol Pashinian has stated that territorial concessions should be made by Armenia in order to reach peace. This comes into conflict with his latter statements about the unity of Armenia and Karabakh and the essential role of the Karabakh lands for Armenia. As can be seen Pashinian’s position on the territorial concessions has numerous times changed over time from the narrative that “we do not need the fields” in the early times of him being an opposition leader to the narrative that the Nagorno-Karabakh territories are “necessary for our survival as a state” in the times when he was trying to gain power and public support and in the first years of him being a newly elected Prime Minister and, finally to the narrative that the territorial concessions were the only option. Based on the analysis conducted it becomes evident that the publicly declared positions of Nikol Pashinian on territorial concessions can barely be characterized as consistent ones. His nationalistic rhetoric on Nagorno-Karabakh being an indispensable part of Armenia, in the revolutionary period and at the early stage of his Prime Minister career before the 44-Day Karabakh war, strongly communicated to the Armenian public to gain support but not being backed up by any talks with the Azerbaijani side has given Azerbaijan the room to blame Armenia for the unwillingness to negotiate and resolve the issue at the negotiation table, creating a possibility for Azerbaijan to turn to violence.

In the pre-war period Pashinian’s statements about the need to change the format of the negotiations, bringing back to table the representatives of Artsakh can also be considered as a cause of the disruption of the negotiation processes as they were also breaking the worked out pattern of the negotiations held and were perceived by the Azerbaijan’s government as categorical and unacceptable ones. This position taken by Pashinian actually implied that the negotiation process should *de facto* start from scratch undermining the previous negotiations held. The OSCE Minsk group released a statement urging the sides to refrain from “demanding unilateral changes to the format without agreement of the other party” (OSCE, March 9).

However, Pashinian was persistent in declaring that Artsakh should become a full-fledged negotiator stating that:

“Only the authorities of the Republic of Artsakh can speak on behalf of the Republic of Artsakh, as the Republic of Armenia can speak on behalf of the Republic of Armenia. The Republic of Armenia is a party to the conflict and will speak for itself on its behalf” (Artsakh Press 2018).

Even though the Joint Statement on Karabakh was signed without Karabakh official participation, as only Armenian, Azerbaijani and Russian leaders have signed the document, still in the post-war period in his speeches Pashinian has stated that he made the decision on signing the Statement based on the talks with the Artsakh representatives who have stated that the war should be stopped, showing that the Artsakh position was also taken into account. Moreover, in his article about the origins of the 44-Day War, Pashinian stated that the expulsion of Artsakh from the negotiation process was the major failure of the Armenian government over the course of the years (The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia 2021). This kind of declarations have shown that Pashinian kept being consistent with his pre-war declaration about the necessity of including Artsakh in the negotiation process even after the Statement signed, explaining the non-participation of the Artsakh representatives in the 2020 Karabakh process by the impossibility to include Artsakh in the process at that escalating stage of the war when the decision on the cessation of the hostilities should have been made immediately.

However, it seems that Pashinian was consistent in his positions on the issue due to the fact that his consistency in including Artsakh as a negotiation party made it possible for him to blame the former Armenian governments for excluding Artsakh out of the negotiation process. He stated that the expulsion of Artsakh has been detrimental for the conflict resolution process and that the mistakes made by the former governments haven't given him any real possibility to avoid the disastrous outcomes, specifically in the situation of an active military conflict. Pashinian has been consistent on the issue of the negotiation parties as this gave him a chance not to take the responsibility for the outcomes and keep the public support highlighting that he made everything possible in the process disrupted by the previous government. However, the question of to what extent his uncompromisingly publicly expressed position on including Artsakh as a full-fledged participant in the negotiation process, have contributed to the intensification of Azerbaijan's willingness to provoke a real war, still remains open. While receiving criticism for plaguing the negotiation process to the deadlock by deliberately taking such a categorical position of officially including the representatives of Karabakh in the negotiation that in no scenario will be accepted by the Azerbaijani side Pashinian stated that:

“The negotiations have already come to a deadlock. In fact, I offer a way out of the deadlock” (The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia 2018).

It is interesting to note that Pashinian himself has numerously stated that the negotiation process was in a deadlock and being asked about Armenia's interpretation of Madrid principles under his governance, refrained from answering, stating that:

“Of course, we can present our own interpretation of these principles, but there will be no use, because our objective is not the engagement in a verbal dispute, but the efficient negotiation process” (The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia 2019).

Pashinian has also made it vocal that looking for compromise is not something that is being on the agenda for the Armenian government due to the unwillingness of Azerbaijan to accept bringing Artsakh back to the negotiation table. He stated that: “I consider any discussion of compromise senseless” (The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia 2018).

Which significantly disrupted the sheer essence of the negotiation process aimed at finding compromises in the diplomatic domain in order not to be reduced to the situation of an intense armed conflict. This kind of framing of the negotiation process as a verbal dispute, signaling about the stagnation of the negotiation process and deadlock it ended up in, pointlessness of future talks and compromises have negatively impacted the negotiation process, making it even more irrelevant without any prospects of future breakthroughs. It is consequential that by discrediting and undermining the negotiation process stating its uselessness and irrelevance, the conflicting parties are prone to refer to war means in order to resolve the existing dispute, which happened in the Karabakh case.

It is also interesting to note that Pashinian's initial criticism delivered to the former government of Armenia on the lack of transparency of the negotiation process could be used to characterise the negotiations under his governance as well. The existing opposition was strongly criticising Pashinian for keeping in secret the content of the informal talks between Aliyev and him, for example, after the Davos meeting when Pashinian refused to disclose the discussed issues (Caucasian Knot 2019). Criticising the former government for keeping the negotiation process in secret, Pashinian coming to the power has promised that:

“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” (The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia 2018).

This kind of criticism targeted the former government and the promises to ensure a transparent negotiation process were crucial for Pashinian to gain public support in terms of the Karabakh issue as well as to help him to gain and keep the power. However, the main claim of the Armenian society and opposition forces to Pashinian after the war is that the negotiations on Karabakh before and during the war can be characterised as “closed” and lacking transparency, and that the decision to sign the Statement with painful losses for the Armenian society was not presented to the public approval and discussion as promised, but was kept in the strictest confidence until the very last minutes.

In the address to the nation on November 12, 2020 Pashinian states that he had to keep the negotiation process in secret and did not consult with the public in order not to give detailed information about the real situation to the enemy (The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia 2020). Moreover, one of the reasons for keeping the negotiations process in secret, as stated by him, is that his promise to present the details to public for the approval concerned the options for the settlement of the conflict, which the agreement signed is not about, as Pashinian states that the document signed “does not envisage a substantive solution to the issue, but only a cessation of hostilities” (ibid). However, this kind of explanation is not fully convincing and raises numerous questions as the Statement signed included such conditions as handing over lands to Azerbaijan, and not only the buffer zones discussed in the Madrid principles, but also the territories of the former Karabakh Autonomous Oblast, deployment of peacekeeping forces, issue of the IDPs and refugees, and establishment of new transport links, which makes it impossible to characterise the Statement as not including the topics that he has promised to discuss with the public prior to signing any kind of a document.

Hence, Pashinian’s initial claims about keeping the process transparent and open with taking no secret actions and signing any confidential paper without presenting it to the public were inconsistent with his post-war statements on the importance of keeping the negotiations in secret due to a number of reasons. It can be assumed that Pashinian kept the details of the negotiations secret, realising that the terms discussed would not be accepted by the Armenian society and would face a serious backlash from the public demanding the resignation of the leader. By keeping the negotiations secret Pashinian managed to sign the Statement to stop the hostilities. The shift in the position concerning the openness of the negotiation process was also defined by his desire to minimize the public outrage, demonstrate that there was no alternative to keeping the process in secret and increase his chances of staying in power.

Pashinian's position on Russia's role in the negotiation process has also been significantly inconsistent and became one of the factors that could have led to the disruption of the negotiation process. In 2016, after the April War, being a representative of the opposition forces, Pashinian declared that Russia with its actions *de facto* provoked the war, highlighting Russia's negative role in the conflict resolution process, stating that Russia uses the conflict in order to promote its own interests and benefit from the confrontation (Tsargrad 2020). Being an opposition leader, Pashinian was criticising Russia's actions in the region which could have caused tensions between the Russian government and Pashinian as a politician. Even after Pashinian becoming the Prime Minister, the tension between the Russian and Pashinian's governments was increasing, and the Russian government perceiving Armeni as its sphere of influence, criticised the Pashinian for being non-constructive (*RIA News* 2018). Azerbaijani side, closely following the existing dynamic, could not but have noticed that with Pashianian becoming the Prime Minister of Armenia, the relations between Russia and Armenia became more complex. For Azerbaijan it created a possibility to decrease the Russian support to Armenia, continue building close relations with the Russian government and prevent Russia from fully supporting Armenia in the conflict.

Even though, as a Prime Minister of the country, Pashinian has significantly reviewed his position on Russia realising that building at least stable and respectful relations with Russia is one of the Armenian foreign policy priorities, the already existing tensions were visible for the adversary that now had more possibilities to resolve the conflict with preferred military means. As a Prime Minister, Pashinian had to take into consideration the already existing geopolitical, military and economic realities and pay attention to the development of the Russian-Armenian relations which were significant for the country's economy and security. Pashinian called Russia a "strategic partner", referring to it as "friendly Russia" taking into consideration that Russia's role in keeping the Karabakh conflict resolution in a peaceful flow was considerable (Hetq 2019). In 2018 Pashinian stated that: We all understand that Russia, as a superpower, has an opportunity to prevent a war (Armenpress 2018). By making statements about Russia being a friend and partner of Armenia, Pashinian tried to ensure the security of the country and non-aggression of Azerbaijan and make sure that Russia will not shift to supporting Azerbaijan in the negotiation process, which will be critical to Armenia and Artsakh. During the 44-Day War, Pashinian has numerously stated that "in case of necessity Russia will fulfill its treaty obligations".

Thus, it can be stated that performing as an opposition representative, Pashinian turned to criticising Russia's actions in terms of the Karabakh conflict, and the strategy was primarily chosen as it gave Pashinian a possibility to discredit the in-action government that was strongly relying on Russia in terms of Karabakh issue and was maintaining close ties with the Russian government. Pashinian's criticism of Russia's role in the Karabakh conflict resolution process helped him to gain the support of the public that lost trust and was disappointed by Sargsyan's government which was closely cooperating with Russia. At the same time Pashinian's messages on Russia sent to the public reached also the Russian government being dissatisfied by the existing rhetoric and the Azerbaijani government that saw the issues in Russian-Armenian relations as an opportunity to develop its relations with Russia and prevent Russia from supporting Armenia with military, diplomatic and economic means. However, Pashinian has evidently changed his position on Russia's role in the Karabakh process stating the importance of Russian-Armenian partnership as soon as he came to power as a Prime Minister of the country. Being in a position of an official leader of the country, Pashinian changed his publicly expressed views on Russia's role in the Karabakh process, gaining the real responsibility for the security and wellbeing of the country and taking into account the geopolitical realities, already existing agreements and etc. that for more than two decades have shaped the Karabakh process.

Thus, it can be stated that Pashinian's inconsistent statements made on a number of issues such as the status of Karabakh, the format of negotiations, Russia's involvement and others discussed above, uncompromising statements and harsh rhetoric applied have significantly disrupted the negotiation process before the 44-Day War and, to a large extent did not correspond to the real actions and decisions made by the Pashinian government and Pashinian, in particular, after signing the peace treaty that has caused an intensive public outrage and disapproval. Even though in some cases, such as participation of the Artsakh representatives in the negotiations process, Pashinian remained quite consistent even in his post-war rhetoric, still on a number of issues his positions declared in the pre-war and war period diverged from those declared in the post-war period. Most of the shifts in the positions declared by Pashinian were aimed at gaining support of the public and political power in the country and staying in office.

Conclusion

The analysis of Nikol Pashinian's publicly declared statements has made it evident that his statements had a significant impact on the Karabakh negotiation process, which aligns with a broader academic framework stating that the publicly declared statements of the leaders have the capacity to impact the negotiation process. Taking into account the existing academic approach that the publicly declared positions of the leaders can either move the negotiation process forward and lead to the diplomatic resolution of the conflict or disrupt the negotiation process and reduce the conflict to a full-scale war, as a result of this study, it can be stated that mainly due to their inconsistencies and categorical nature and harsh, uncompromising rhetoric, Pashinian's publicly declared positions have undermined and disrupted the negotiation process. A balanced approach to negotiations, stating that to reach success in the conflict resolution process the leader should keep a balance between taking a harder line to meet public expectations and messaging the adversaries about the readiness to negotiations and compromise, was not successfully applied by the Armenian Prime Minister. Pashinian did not manage to balance the messaging for the domestic public and the adversary which in the end led to the disruption of the negotiation process and Azerbaijan's willingness to turn to military means, being provoked by the messages sent by the Prime Minister and seeing no room for negotiations and compromises.

The existing idea in academia that the positions that leaders publicly declare are meant to gain public support and help them stay in office has also been revealed in the studied case. As revealed by the research the publicly declared positions of Pashinian to a large extent did not correlate with each other and have changed in the pre and post-war periods depending on the changing circumstances in order to justify the decisions made by the government, decrease public outrage by convincing the public that no alternatives in fact existed, and maximise the leader's probabilities of staying in power. Pashinian's pre-war publicly declared positions on the legal status of the territories of Nagorno-Karabakh, the transparency of the negotiation process, Russia's role in the negotiation process and the deployment of peacekeeping troops in Karabakh to a large extent did not correlate with his later ones and were changed to maximally legitimise the actions taken and increase his chances of remaining in power.

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