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**Defining Borders of Identity: Armenian Leadership Navigating the
Aftermath of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and Loss of Nagorno-
Karabakh**

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Abstract

The thesis investigates the aftermath of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020 and the Loss of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023 through analysing the changing rhetoric of Armenia's leadership around the geopolitical imaginaries of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. The new status-quo around Nagorno-Karabakh has introduced challenges for Armenia's leadership, which had to navigate the loss of a space that has been a pillar of Armenian national identity, as the recent geopolitical reconstructions in the region implied that the old identity narrations have lost its coherence. The thesis employed thematic analysis of the Armenian Prime Minister's speeches between August 2019 and April 2024, complemented by semi-structured expert interviews. Findings show that the Armenian leadership creates a new vision of Armenia as Armenia without Karabakh but with a future despite the difficult past, Armenia with defined borders of homeland and state, prioritising civic identity over ethnic, and finally as a state that does not need an external protector. It further shows that the political legitimacy of the Armenian leadership has become increasingly fragile, and the new identity narrations introduced by the government have become a subject of both scepticism and faith. By making a broader contribution to the field of critical geopolitics, the results illustrate a broader struggle of a small, post-Soviet state, navigating a post-conflict setting and long security dependence on Russia.

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Introduction

Armenia is searching for a new place in the world, a world without Nagorno-Karabakh (N-K/Karabakh/Artsakh)¹. Nagorno-Karabakh, once governed by Karabakh Armenians, is now under complete control of Azerbaijani authorities. The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020 and Azerbaijan's military offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023 have marked a turning point not only for Armenia's geopolitics but also for the nation's sense of identity. In modern Armenian history and political thought, the idea around Karabakh has been more complex than a struggle for the self-determination of Karabakh Armenians. In the late 1980s, the Karabakh conflict catalysed the Armenian independence movement and national consolidation, making it the foundation of the Republic of Armenia (Iskandaryan, 2020). Once Armenia became independent, the nationalist sentiments around Karabakh have shaped Armenia's foreign and domestic policy, making the conflict a defining issue for Armenia's development (Libaridian, 2023). Accordingly, the conflict has become a key element of modern nationalism among the political elite in Armenia. The nationalist sentiments were linked to the victory in the First Nagorno-Karabakh War (1988-1994) as not only the early stage of the conflict sparked the idea of national unity, but to many Armenians, the victory was a "historical vindication" for the lands that Armenians lost in the past (Libaridian, 2023, p.203) and a "fact of historical justice" (De Waal, 2013, p.3). Now, the space that has been a key element of the Armenian identity is lost which raises questions on what happens next.²

Since regaining independence in 1991, Armenia has been facing challenges stemming from its geographical location and the geopolitics of the region (Giragosian, 2020). Closed borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey and ongoing conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh placed Armenia in a vulnerable security position and security reliance on Russia (Giragosian, 2018). Apart from geopolitical challenges, Armenia, as a hybrid regime, faced problems in the domestic sphere, like an underdeveloped political party system, a lack of power rotation and low legitimacy of the political elite (Iskandaryan, 2018b, 2020).

¹ "Artsakh" is the ancient Armenian name for the Karabakh region.

² This thesis does not seek to engage in historical narratives or historical disputes. The length of the thesis does not allow to cover Azerbaijani narratives, but they can be explored through further readings about the conflict, for example *Black Garden* by Thomas de Waal, 2003.

That said, since the Velvet Revolution in 2018, Armenia has experienced a democratic turn (Broers and Ohanyan, 2020). In 2018, Nikol Pashinyan gained the prime minister's position in Armenia as a confident leader who successfully led the revolution's mass protests. With a high level of political legitimacy, the new government has emphasised its goal of building a more democratic and liberal Armenia. The aim was promising as the international observers characterised the post-revolution snap elections as free and fair (Badalyan, 2019). Having said that, the systemic problems of the Armenian political system raised questions about how long the new revolutionary political elite can maintain its legitimacy (Shirinyan, 2019). Furthermore, the loss of N-K is not only a matter of national loss but also a loss on a more individual level, as more than 100,000 Karabakh Armenians lost their homes and livelihoods (Gavin, 2025). While some Karabakh Armenians relocated to Russia or Europe, most settled in Armenia, making up around 3% of Armenia's population. The flow of migration gave rise to integration challenges, as well as challenges of preserving the distinct Karabakh identity among the group (Vartanyan, 2024; Dinev and Douglas, 2025).

In the context of geopolitical reconfigurations in the South Caucasus, the Armenian leadership was confronted with a new challenge - navigating the loss of an important space for the Armenian identity. Armenia is now left with more geopolitical insecurity and the Armenian population in a state of shock and national trauma. The new status quo, and accordingly, the need to reframe the idea of Karabakh raise questions about the future of the nationalist sentiments around Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia without it. This leads to the following research questions: 1) How has the leadership of the Republic of Armenia navigated the aftermath of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War? 2) How have the official rhetoric and narrations rearticulated ideas around Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia?

This research analyses how leadership rhetoric functions as both a tool of sustaining political legitimacy and a way of reframing the trajectory of Armenia. Scholars argue that military defeat can lead to seeking revenge (Harkavy, 2000; Löwenheim and Heimann, 2008). Barnhart (2021) argues that defeated states are more prone to initiate future aggression due to a threat to their status and undermined national confidence. The case of Azerbaijan shows how the leadership's rhetoric around grievance rooted in the defeat

in the First Nagorno-Karabakh War was transformed into a feeling of national pride following the victory of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020 (Kösen and Erdoğan, 2023). Furthermore, in post-imperial states like Russia, the loss of territories and defeat in a war led to irredentist narratives and revanchism (Snegovaya and Lanoszka, 2025). In contrast, the case of post-Second World War Germany shows how, after the defeat, the state can move in a less nationalist direction and introduce a foreign policy of reconciliation with its neighbours (Feldman, 2012). Finally, the case of Poland shows how after experience of war and complex history of the 20th century, the country eventually found its new place in Europe with new borders that were established after the Second World War (Snyder, 2003). Armenia, a relatively small, post-Soviet state, characterised by rapid domestic changes and geopolitical insecurities, makes an interesting case and an opportunity to analyse how political rhetoric can change after a military defeat, the experience of national trauma and loss of territory, with significant importance to the national identity. This thesis shows that local context matters in understanding that there is no one way of looking at leadership behaviour and nationalism in a post-conflict setting.³ The analysis moves beyond focusing on strategic calculations and pragmatism. Instead, it emphasises how the leadership re-articulates the imaginary of Armenia and Karabakh after the war and loss of Nagorno-Karabakh. It reflects agency of the elite in shaping a new place for Armenia, bringing both visions and challenges.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the theoretical framework of critical geopolitics, linking it with ethno-symbolist approach of studying nationalism. Additionally, the chapter provides a contextual background to the case of Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and lastly engages with the existing literature on the Armenia identity, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Armenian political discourse. Chapter 2 outlines the research methodology, depicting how thematic analysis was applied to the collected data of the 153 speeches given by the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan. In addition, the chapter discusses the incorporation of expert interviews which provided further insights and contextual understanding of the

³ In this thesis, 'post-conflict' refers to a current transitional period that followed the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and loss of Nagorno-Karabakh. As of present day, peace consolidation and stability are not yet achieved.

researched topic. Chapter 3 discusses empirical findings, dividing the chapter into the chosen themes identified in the analysis: Armenia as a protector of Nagorno-Karabakh, the challenges of territorial integrity and sovereignty, Blurred borders between homeland and state, Revising the perspectives around the past and future, Erosion of Russia's credibility. Additionally, the chapter includes discussion section which interprets the significance of the empirical findings, emphasising the research implications. Finally, the conclusion highlights the main takeaway from the research, broader literature contribution, and matters that can be explored in further study.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Critical Geopolitics

Geopolitics, in simple understanding, is a term that combines the science of geography and politics. This combination creates unlimited ways to understand geopolitics, simultaneously suggesting that there is more than one way of studying it. This thesis applies critical geopolitics to analyse the case of the Armenian leadership navigating the aftermath of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh. The focus on studying geographical and geopolitical imaginaries emerged and was popularised in the 1970s, in the writings of French geographers, particularly of Yves Lacoste, who inspired the growth of a new geopolitics that was rooted in critical theory, poststructuralist philosophy, and postmodernism (Potulski, 2019). Critical geopolitics became further discussed in Ó Tuathail's (1986) and Dalby's (1990) writings to critique classical geopolitics and imperialist states that legitimised their actions through geography. Consequently, critical geopolitics introduced a new chapter for geopolitics, standing in contrast to classical geopolitics, which in academic circles became associated with an approach rooted in expansionism, imperialism and determinism (Potulski, 2019, p.19). Accordingly, scholars of critical geopolitics argue against determinism by emphasising that the state's action is not determined purely by geography but is constructed through political discourse that shapes the space. Agnew (2010, p.569) defines critical geopolitics as the "construction of the world through conceptions of it". In this regard, the decisive factor that shapes the state's strategy is not purely the geographical space itself, but the meaning ascribed to it. This way, the focus on discourses and creation of meaning attached to geographical space stands in contrast to classical geopolitics. The approach sees geopolitics as subjective and dynamic, as interpretations of geography vary depending on the specific context and time. Over time, given the rise of academic papers that employed the framework and combined it with other critical approaches, the critical geopolitics framework has promoted multiplicity and flexibility (Koopman *et al.*, 2021). Scholars argue that 'geopolitics' is one of the most overused concepts in academic discourse which creates misunderstandings, simultaneously, creating a favourable environment for the rise of the critique around it (Potulski, 2019, p. 16). That being said, despite a diverse scope of

interpretations of the framework, Kluczevska and Silvan (2025, p.644) note that what links different strands of critical geopolitical approaches is a shared focus on “how the ‘truth’ about the importance of some locations is constructed and established”. Consequently, the framework focuses on the interpretivist analysis methods and seeks answers to how geographical spaces are imagined among specific actors. Critical geopolitics can be conceptualised using notion of Geopolitical discourses which includes Formal Geopolitics (strategic studies, bureaucratic reports, political doctrines), Practical Geopolitics (political speeches, state actions, diplomatic and legal practices) and Popular Geopolitics (mass media culture, public opinion) (Ó Tuathail, 2003 cited in O’Loughlin, Tuathail and Kolossov, 2005). Through this conceptualisation, one can analyse the way state’s political strategy and behaviour are shaped by the construction of imaginaries around geography and space, and how they can be instrumentalised through geopolitical discourses.

While the early critical geopolitics implied a more macro-level analysis, there is now a growing literature on the regional and domestic levels of analysis. Kluczevska and Silvan (2025) analyse how Belarusian and Tajik political elites navigate the dependency on Russia and use it to their advantage. The article highlights the issue of Russia’s neo-imperial politics, but simultaneously shows the agency of the post-Soviet political elites in Belarus and Tajikistan. Since Armenia has faced the problem of security dependence on Russia, which is rooted in the Karabakh conflict (Giragosian, 2018; Iskandaryan, 2018a), the new status quo has also directly impacted Armenia-Russia relations. Accordingly, the case of Armenia can build upon the literature of critical geopolitics that focuses on complex relations between Russia and other post-Soviet states. Moreover, while critical geopolitics can be applied as a framework to analyse regional powers like the US, Russia and Iran (Tuathail, 1996; Omelicheva, 2016; Akbarzadeh and Naeni, 2025), there is a growing body of literature discussing smaller states and the way they construct their geographical and geopolitical imaginaries, for example the case of the Baltic states and their place in Europe (Kuus, 2007; Sulg and Crandall, 2020). Therefore, the case of Armenia can also stand in contrast to the cases of expansionist or regional powers, as a relatively small post-Soviet state that transitions towards democracy and looks to re-establish its new place in the regional geopolitics. It can show agency of smaller states

and highlight that they are not simply objects of the “Great Game”. The case of Armenia can also expand critical geopolitics literature on the South Caucasus and post-Soviet states in transition. Broers (2019) applies critical geopolitics to analyse the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and show how geopolitical culture discourses have maintained and transformed the dynamics of the ‘rivalry’ between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This thesis will build upon the literature on critical geopolitics and the Karabakh conflict, as since 2019, the status quo has shifted the geopolitical imaginaries in the region. Merabishvili and Metreveli (2021) analyse how the Georgian Orthodox Church’s geopolitical discourse both intersects with and diverges from state-centric narratives of territorial nationalism, showing the Church as an independent territorial power separated from the state. This shows a variety of actors shaping the narratives about space, showing that there is no one way of perceiving geopolitical imaginaries. Looking at the variety of perceptions of geopolitical actors, Atanesyan, Reynolds and Mkrtychyan (2024) use a critical geopolitics framework to study the Armenian foreign policy strategy of complementarity and how it correlates with the foreign policy preferences of Armenian society. The scholars argue that after the Velvet Revolution in 2018 and the Second Karabakh War, Armenia’s elites started modifying its foreign policy of complementarity; however, the state remained under Russia’s security dependence. This correlated with society’s opinions, as despite disappointments in the context of the Second Karabakh War and gradual decline in the trust towards Russia, Armenians would still express a need to rely on Russia in strategic and security terms (ibid., p.277). The article was submitted to the journal in January 2023, implying that the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh was not included as an additional factor that could further change the perceptions around Russia. This thesis, while primarily focusing on geopolitical imaginaries around the Armenian Republic and Nagorno-Karabakh, cannot overlook the imaginary of Russia within them.

Critical Geopolitics and Ethno-Symbolism

This thesis links critical geopolitics with the concept of political legitimacy and ethno-symbolism to show how the geopolitical imaginaries serve as a tool to maintain power under uncertain geopolitical circumstances and re-articulate ideas of national identity. Political legitimacy is broadly understood as the right to govern (Easton, 1965; Sternberger, 1968). Internal legitimacy has been studied in terms of state legitimacy,

regime legitimacy, and institutional legitimacy (Bakke *et al.*, 2014). Regime legitimacy in this sense refers directly to “trusting the people in power” (*ibid.*, p.593). As this thesis focuses on the Armenian leadership, it will apply the definition of regime legitimacy when discussing the issue of political legitimacy. The concept of political legitimacy has been employed in critical geopolitics by analysing how the nationalist rhetoric of Uzbekistani leadership centred around militarism seeks to legitimise its political power while discursively creating gendered national identities (Koch, 2011). Furthermore, shifting the focus towards nationalism and geopolitics, the intersection of identity and geopolitics has been explored by Rygiel (2002) on the case of Turkey, showing how the state constructs a coherent sense of national borders and identity, but at the same time marginalises and undermines the identities of minority groups. Similarly touching upon the intersection of geopolitics, borders and nationalism, Merabishvili (2023) analyses the contradictions in the Hungarian leadership’s nationalist discourse as in 2015, during increased migration flows, Hungary placed a wall along its southern border, but through this, physically separated itself from its ethnic kin in northern Serbia, a group that was also a subject of nationalist narrations in Hungary. Accordingly, the case shows how the meaning of borders and border policy can shift after a ‘crisis event’ (*ibid.*, p.2102). Considering that the 2020 war and defeat of N-K can also be perceived as a crisis event that disturbed the political situation in Armenia, this thesis will explore the shifting meanings of borders in the aftermath of the crisis. Furthermore, the articles link geopolitics and nationalism studies, which this thesis will also combine by applying the ethno-symbolism approach developed by Anthony D. Smith (1999, 2009) to critical geopolitics. This will strengthen the framework and allow closer examination of how national myths are invoked in the geopolitical imaginaries. Scholars argue that myths, historical memory, and culture are embedded in geopolitical discourses that shape the collective imagination of nations, state borders, and state strategies (Potulski, 2019; Mihaylov, 2024). According to the scholars (*ibid.*), it is a way for groups to find their place and role in the world by forming imaginaries about their own surroundings and the surroundings of others – us vs them. Consequently, it is a means that allows nation-building processes in a world that is dominated by the concept of the nation-state and requires groups to create symbols that differentiate them from others.

Accordingly, applying ethno-symbolism to critical geopolitics will strengthen the analysis of geopolitical imaginaries, emphasising the symbolic meaning behind spaces. Anthony D. Smith (1999, 2009) developed an ethno-symbolic approach to studying nationalism, in which the scholar highlights the importance of myths and symbols to the national ideology and identity. In Smith's understanding, a nation is created around shared symbols, myths, memories, and a strong attachment to the homeland (Smith, 2009, p.54). While Smith criticises the modernist top-down approach, he accepts the role of the elite in outlining the national symbols. The scholar points out that the ideas popularised by the elite need to resonate with the society (ibid., pp. 37-39). Consequently, it focuses on the interplay between what the elite suggests and how the population responds to it. Moreover, Smith does not see national identity as static but rather as a concept under continuous reinterpretation of symbols, memories and myths (ibid., p.110). This makes an ethno-symbolist approach compatible with critical geopolitics and the interpretivist method of analysis, as the frameworks highlight the fluidity of concepts. Finally, Anthony D. Smith (ibid., p. 52) also highlights the role of conflict in creating or reinforcing national myths. While the approach has not been developed to assess the problems of ethnic conflict itself (ibid., p.115), it provides a tool to examine how myths of battles and long-standing enemies have been embedded in discourses. Apart from enemies, victories and losses, another key theme of the ethno-symbolism approach is 'homeland'. The idea of homeland reinforces the concept of belonging among the nation and strengthens the perception of the nation's historic and sacred territory (ibid., p.65). The importance of symbols applies to Armenia's case as Panossian (2002) emphasises that Armenian national identity involves an interplay of symbols and myths, such as being the first Christian nation, one of the oldest nations, and the first victims of genocide in the twentieth century. The latter implies the myth of being a nation of martyrs and a nation that lost its homeland (ibid). Furthermore, for Armenians, including the Armenian diaspora, one of the key geographical imaginary that became a symbol is Mount Ararat (Petrosyan, 2016; Woolford, 2022). Ararat is seen as a sacred and biblical mountain in the territories that used to be populated by Armenians, which accordingly creates a complex meaning behind a space, alluding to the long history of the Armenian nation but also to its difficult past in the early 20th century - the Armenian Genocide. Therefore, this thesis will touch upon the myth of Ararat and the lost

homeland, linking it with the broader discussion around Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Furthermore, scholars embark on an ethno-symbolist approach when studying the idea of the national homeland and the lost homeland. Koulos (2021), in the case of Greece, explores how the loss of some parts of the national homeland through conflict becomes a significant part of national identity, constructed by political and cultural discourses. The constructed idea of lost homeland, closely tied to national trauma, further strengthens national belonging and shapes national symbols (ibid). This implies one way of dealing with lost territories: creating an imaginary of a 'lost homeland'. This thesis will extend the literature on lost spaces due to conflict, showing how the Armenian elite creates narrations around the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh. The existing literature around Armenia and the idea of homeland predominantly discusses the Armenian Diaspora, diasporic identity and the myth of 'return' (Pattie, 1999; Payaslian, 2010; Kasbarian, 2015). This thesis, however, will focus on the perceptions from the Republic of Armenia only, as the limited length does not allow for covering the topic of the Armenian diaspora in detail. Accordingly, this study will investigate how the ruling elite in Armenia is shaping the idea of homeland and how myths are appearing and disappearing in the political rhetoric.

Moreover, Smith's approach has been applied to study the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Tokluoglu (2011) uses Anthony D. Smith's nationalism framework in analysing the Azerbaijani elite discourse around Karabakh and how the conflict shapes Azerbaijanis' idea of Armenians' identity and community, and how it eventually leads to isolation among the nations and delays the peace process. The author points out that myths and memory are connected to place, which creates the idea of homeland. This is all tied to national identity and a sense of belonging. In the case of the conflict over Karabakh, Armenians and Azerbaijanis claimed the region to be part of their 'historic lands' (ibid., p. 1230). Tokluoglu (ibid) looks at the Armenian perspective when talking about the importance of the lands of Karabakh. From the 16th to the early 19th century, Nagorno-Karabakh maintained a level of autonomy under Armenians within the Persian empire (Smith et al., 1998, cited in Tokluoglu, 2011, p.1234). Afterwards, when Karabakh was under the Russian Empire's dominance, it was also a region many Armenians fled to, from the Persian and Ottoman Empires (ibid). Consequently, the land has been seen as

a 'homeland' and an important element of Armenian identity. Tokluoglu, however, focuses predominantly on Azerbaijani discourse, which implies that the Armenian context requires more academic focus. Additionally, the changes in the geopolitical landscape around Karabakh since Tokluoglu's article was published call for a reinvestigation of the topic and a search for new ideas around the case of Armenia. Additionally, existing literature around the Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh conflict notes the link between the complex meaning of space and the conflict. While the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has often been perceived as territorial, O'Lear and Whiting (2008, p.188) note that "territory does not hold a universal meaning" but carries geographic, historical, symbolic and imagined meaning. The conflict over the territory roots in "mismatched timelines" of when nations and states emerged (ibid., p. 203). Noting Anthony D. Smith's approach, the authors emphasise that for Armenians, the Nagorno-Karabakh territory is closely linked to Armenian national identity due to its historical significance and the long history of habitation in the region. The authors also point out that for Armenians, land outside the republic's borders carries much meaning, and it is not only about Karabakh but also about Eastern Anatolia and Mount Ararat, as these regions are considered the birthplace of Armenians (ibid., p.190). Consequently, even though the lands are 'empty' now, they still shape the Armenian sense of national identity (ibid., p. 201). This implies the intersection between territory and societal perception of national space. The societal perception of space is also linked to political behaviour. Carter (2023) analyses the impact of lost territories on Armenian society. The research shows that people who attach greater value to lost spaces are more likely to participate in anti-government protests and less likely to vote for the government in future elections (ibid). The scholar includes the following factors to study the impact of territorial losses on public attitudes: the visibility of Mount Ararat and the degree of exposure to internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War. These factors are seen as reminders of loss – Mount Ararat of older losses and IDPs of the most recent losses. The results show that these reminders impact people's views on lost territories and make them feel stronger about the lost spaces (ibid). This shows the ongoing importance of Ararat and its role in shaping the feeling of one's nationalism despite the loss of the mountain so long ago. Overall, the results of this study show that territorial losses impact political behaviours, which implies a strong emotional

connection to these sites. This goes beyond looking at territorial losses from a state-centric perspective; instead, it focuses on individuals' attitudes to the changing political reality. In consequence, Armenians continue to have strong emotions about lost territories, which implies the importance of the politics of memory. Memory politics is discussed by Atanesyan (2024, p.23), who argues that the Armenian post-revolutionary elite is implementing a "forget as if it never happened" policy. This involves undermining the memory of the Armenian Genocide, but also the events that happened in Karabakh. The author notes that this follows Turkey's logic, which also implements the forgetting memory policy around the Armenian genocide. Atanesyan (ibid., p.24) concludes that this approach, combined with no acknowledgement or accountability, may facilitate the recurrence of similar violations in the future. The article emphasises the importance of the role that memory politics and elite rhetoric play in shaping geopolitics. While this thesis will not analyse the memory politics in detail, it is crucial to point out that the loss of territories and conflicts impact many political spheres.

Overall, while the critical geopolitics framework shows where the nation is being imagined and how space is being politicised, Smith's ethno-symbolic approach allows for a better understanding of the importance of myths, which construct Armenian identity and national space within the geopolitical imaginaries. Furthermore, given that many Armenian symbolic spaces are outside the territory of modern Armenia, it brings focus not only to nationalism studies but also to the region's geopolitics. Overall, the framework allows for analysing the intersection of geopolitics, identity, and power in leadership rhetoric and its geopolitical imaginaries.

Historical and Political Context of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

This section will discuss a brief overview of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, providing context before moving on to the next section, which explores the existing literature around Armenian identity and political discourse. The recent geopolitical reconstruction in the South Caucasus and Azerbaijan's launching a military offensive on Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 brought an 'end' to the frozen conflict and changed the status quo of the (then) autonomous region. The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh dates to the early 20th century (Cornell, 1999). Later, under the Soviet Union, the area had autonomy within the Azerbaijani SSR as the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast. At

that time, N-K was inhabited mainly by Armenians, which raised questions and suspicions about the Soviet Union's policy and strategy on its internal borders. Throughout the Soviet times, the ethnic tensions remained. Officially, Soviet ideology promoted Soviet identity and the Friendship of Peoples doctrine. However, scholars point out that the Soviet system has often been characterised as an ethno-territorial federalism, and the bureaucracy of the Soviet Union played a role in shaping the ethnonationalist identities in the Soviet republics (Suny, 1993; Slezkine, 1994). Consequently, despite slogans of collective identity, the Soviet authorities supported the primordial understanding of nations. For example, each citizen had their nationality defined in the passport. That said, while national identity was to an extent undermined in the Soviet Union, the roots of othering and emphasising differences between Azerbaijanis and Armenians can be traced back to the legacy of the Soviet Union (Geukjian, 2012).

In the late 80s, in times of glasnost and perestroika, the regional tensions were escalating, and more and more Armenian voices called for the unification of Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia (Cornell, 1999; De Waal, 2013). In 1991, when the Soviet Union was gradually collapsing, the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast declared its independence from Azerbaijan. The cause for the reunification of Karabakh with Armenia and the organisation of the Karabakh movement in the late 1980s has been characterised as a "moment of national awakening" for Armenians living in the South Caucasus, but also those living in a diaspora (Libaridian, 2023, p. 167). This has added a distinctive meaning to the Karabakh region as the movement brought many Armenians together and mobilised them to fight for the unification of Karabakh with Armenia. Furthermore, Iskandaryan (2020, p. 190) points out that the drive for protests was not the Soviet system and imperialism, as in some other post-Soviet states, but the idea of Karabakh's liberation. The rise of nationalist sentiments came along with the process of redefining Armenian national identity as the Soviet Union and its identity were being shaken by reforms and instabilities (Papazian, 2008, p.2). Between 1992 and 1994, a full-scale war between Armenians and Azerbaijanis broke out (Cornell, 1999). After the Armenian victory in the war, Nagorno-Karabakh started functioning as a de-facto state, the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, with its authorities not recognised by Baku (Broers, 2019,

p.4). During its existence, the authorities of Nagorno-Karabakh were closely cooperating with the Republic of Armenia, but, at the same time, Armenia never recognised the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh. That said, Armenian leadership was vocal about the right to self-determination of Karabakh Armenians, and there was a clear connectedness between the two entities. The Nagorno-Karabakh entity was, through its existence, both connected and separated from Armenia (Hynek and Ter-Ghazaryan, 2024). For example, the connection between entities stemmed from the two previous presidents of Armenia, Robert Kocharyan (1998-2008) and Serzh Sargsyan (2008-2018), who were from Karabakh (Ghaplanyan, 2017). Both were also actively involved in the First Nagorno-Karabakh War. Kocharyan was one of the leaders of the Karabakh movement and later took office as the President of the N-K Republic from 1994 to 1997. Throughout this thesis, the term elite/leadership/ruling elite refers to individuals officially exercising power in Armenia from 2018 until now. The old elite refers to the two previous presidents of Armenia – Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan.⁴

Moreover, the Karabakh conflict has been happening, among other problems in Armenia and Azerbaijan which have just regained their sovereignty. The states had to go through political, social and economic transformation and, simultaneously, find a place in a new geopolitical reality. In the end, the conflict became one of the crucial factors that shaped the strategies and projects of newly independent countries (Özkan, 2008, p. 574). After the first war, the conflict has often been described as 'no war, no peace'. The conflict not only led to closed borders between the two countries that used to have open 'borders' under the Soviet Union, but also intensified differences among the two groups, distancing them further from each other. Instead of increasing regional ties, the countries started to see each other as a threat to their existence and identity. Both governments have instrumentalised the conflict in their national discourses, which led to the growing untrustworthiness, fear and alienation between the two nations, which made peace negotiations ineffective (Tokluoglu, 2011; Libaridian, 2023, p. 508). Finally, the conflict

⁴ The thesis will only reference the two previous presidents as the length does not allow to discuss the first president of Armenia -Levon Ter-Petrosyan, who came from a different political circle than Kocharyan and Sargsyan. Additionally, between 2015 and 2018, Armenia transitioned from a semi-presidential to a parliamentary system, increasing the government's and parliament's power. Therefore, the new elite refers to the Prime Minister and his government, and the old refers to the previous Armenian presidents.

also served as a tool for the national elite's political ambitions to use fear and security threats to legitimise the authoritarian style of regimes (Özkan, 2008, p. 578). Consequently, Karabakh and the conflict have been a crucial element of the Armenian state and nation-building processes.

In 2020, the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war broke out, bringing victory to Azerbaijan. Scholars argue that it was due to conflicting positions of the two states and an ineffective negotiation process (Ibrahimov and Oztarsu, 2022). While Armenia, at that time, saw the status-quo as favourable, Azerbaijan was building military and economic potential, which resulted in a military escalation (ibid, p. 608). Moreover, Davtyan (2024) notes the international context and argues that the lack of responsiveness of the global community created favourable conditions for Azerbaijan to start a war. Scholars assess that the war not only showed Azerbaijan's military potential, lack of attention from the international community, but also alerted the regional order, transforming the region from being under Russia's sole security dominance to a Russian-Turkish bipolar dominance (Sukiasyan and Davtyan, 2025). Consequently, the war brings regional reconstruction as Turkey emerged as a new influential party in the conflict, next to Russia. While Turkey sided with Azerbaijan, Russia's position was more ambiguous. Russia's role involved mediating the ceasefire deal between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which was followed by employing Russia's peacekeeping mission in Karabakh. Popescu (2020) argues that Russia acted in its best diplomatic interests to not completely lose Armenia as its ally, but at the same time not make Azerbaijan an enemy. De Waal (2020) argues that Russia was a winner in the Second Karabakh War, next to Azerbaijan and Turkey, as it showed Russia's relevance, implying that the West did not have sufficient leverage in the region to influence the conflict dynamics. It is important to point out that the war brought a victory to Azerbaijan, which lost in the 90s war. That said, the Azerbaijani narratives of victory differed from those on the Armenian side (Davtyan, 2025). Apart from a symbolic triumph, Azerbaijani narratives were dominated by antagonism and enemy identification, while Armenian narratives centred more on compromise and negotiations (ibid). Scholars point out that despite winning the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, the Azerbaijani elite continued to boost its irredentist and anti-Armenian narratives (Hovsepian and Tonoyan, 2025).

Accordingly, N-K has been a defining factor in Armenian politics, identity-building and broader political discourse. The following section will explore the existing academic literature on Armenia, focusing on the latter-mentioned matters.

Armenian Political Discourse, Identity and Nagorno-Karabakh

Existing literature on Armenia offers a complex interplay of ideas of statehood, national identity and political discourse. Historically, Armenians have experienced long periods of not having a centralised statehood, which implies ongoing struggles to preserve Armenian identity under different external rulers throughout different times. Barseghyan (2003) analyses the evolving political discourse on Armenian national identity after independence, showing how early elites distanced the state from diasporic and historical homeland narratives, but failed to construct a cohesive national ideology, which resulted in an “ideological defeat” (ibid., p 411). The lack of cohesive discourse paved the way for Kocharian’s leadership, which revived Pan-Armenianism by reimagining the nation as a transborder collective including the Diaspora and Karabakh Armenians, ultimately illustrating the complex and contested relationship between homeland, state, and national identity in Armenia (ibid). This shows that attempting to construct a national ideology poses risks, as it can result in losing political legitimacy and bringing new elites to power that will take a different direction regarding identity formation and political discourse. Yengoyan (2023) critically examines the contested development of a post-Soviet national ideology in Armenia. The scholar argues that while historical experiences of statelessness fostered a strong link between identity, homeland, and the idea of statehood; the post-independence period has been marked by ideological fragmentation, value uncertainty, and the need to reconcile historical narratives of national unity with the geopolitical realities and limitations of the modern Armenian state (ibid). Accordingly, the literature shows that the Armenian elite has struggled to form a coherent national ideology after independence. Ter-Ghazaryan (2024) notes that recent events like the defeat in the Second Karabakh War in 2020 altered the discursive narratives among the elites, society and diaspora about the idea of Armenian statehood. The paper argues that the Second Karabakh War alerted one of the Armenian discursive narratives of Nagorno-Karabakh being an “indivisible part” of Armenia (ibid., p. 96). In consequence, it was necessary to acknowledge that Karabakh is not a “[...]”

necessary condition for the continuous existence of Armenia itself” (ibid., p.103). This implies that the new elite is facing a challenge in forming a new idea around Karabakh as the geopolitical reality disturbed the old narratives around it. Furthermore, the correlation between statehood and Karabakh is brought up by Babayev and Mahmudov (2023), who argue that the democratic transition in Armenia led to the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. It was due to a new Armenian leadership being under pressure from the old elite, who would use Karabakh to disturb the democratisation reforms. That resulted in Pashinyan strengthening his nationalist and populist rhetoric on Karabakh, which, in the end, while not intentionally, provoked Azerbaijan’s leadership to the offensive (ibid). This shows that the old elite was still influential in shaping the new Armenian elite behaviour, implying that even if the elite from Karabakh was no longer in power, the Karabakh issue remained a crucial part of the agenda and political rhetoric. Furthermore, Gamaghelyan and Rummyantsev (2021) discuss how the nationalist discourse of both Armenian and Azerbaijani political and intellectual elites gradually led to the Second Karabakh War. Consequently, the discourse appears as a powerful tool that can disrupt geopolitical dynamics. The scholars note that in the 2020 Karabakh War, Armenia “paid a high price for its overconfidence” before the conflict escalation (ibid., p. 329). The authors emphasise the significance of myths around Karabakh, which the elites have formed since the late 80s. The myths popularised by states’ elites included ideas of ‘historic territories’ and ‘ancient nations’ (ibid., p. 321). In broader discussions about the elite discourse on Karabakh, Sahakyan (2024) argues that Armenian political leaders, including Pashinyan, would frame the conflict over Karabakh as ‘Democracy vs Autocracy’ and ‘regional cooperation’. Through these narratives, the elites aimed to create an image of Armenia as a democratic country that supports N-K democratic institutions and seeks peace to enhance regionalism in the South Caucasus. The author, however, points out that Pashinyan would popularise the regional cooperation narrative only after the 2020 war. Sahakyan also highlights that the leaders (Armenian, Azerbaijani and Turkish) would use the narratives to promote their political interests on the world stage, and in the end, Azerbaijan’s framing strategy was more successful than Armenia’s. Scholars also focus on shifts in Azerbaijani discourse by examining Heydar Aliyev’s rhetoric around the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Sahakyan and Kartashyan, 2025). They argue that by looking at discursive strategies, one can identify how “leaders

in conflicts leverage rhetoric to adapt to changing contexts” (ibid., p.3). By looking at the political discourse, the authors explain why negotiations after the First Karabakh War failed and how Heydar Aliyev’s discourse around peace negotiations changed throughout the years, from a peaceful resolution approach to a narrative of war and a swift solution to the conflict (ibid). This shows that discourse is not fixed and how the internal and external dynamics shape it. Accordingly, this thesis will apply this idea by examining how the rhetoric of Armenian leadership adapts to the changing contexts, simultaneously alerting the geopolitical imaginaries and Armenian national ideology.

The existing academic literature discusses the correlations between the Armenian statehood, discourse, identity, nationalism, geography and Nagorno-Karabakh. Given the significant changes in the geopolitical situation of Armenia, it is important to build upon the existing literature on Armenian identity and discourse around Nagorno-Karabakh by applying the critical geopolitics framework. This thesis focuses on the changing rhetoric of Armenian leadership around the Armenia and Karabakh from 2019 to 2024. The analysis will connect geopolitics with identity and power, as Armenians have lost a territory that holds significant value to their identity. At the same time, the ruling elite has also maintained its power, which suggests a new challenge for the elite to adapt to the new geopolitical reality. This thesis will analyse how political rhetoric operates as a response and tool of the Armenian leadership to manage geopolitical change and seek to maintain political legitimacy. It will build upon broader literature of critical geopolitics, ethno-symbolist nationalism, and post-conflict state behaviour showing, how states in transition to democracy operate through threats like military defeat and national trauma.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Research Design

The research is characterised as a single-case study of Armenia. Single case studies allow for fewer generalisations and more focus on the specific context, which allows for exploring the case of Armenia more comprehensively, especially in the historical, cultural and institutional context (George and Bennett, 2005). This allows the author to explore how the Armenian leadership manages the defeat and loss of territories, and subsequently, how it seeks legitimacy and re-defines geopolitical imaginaries and national identity under the changing geopolitical circumstances. Accordingly, the thesis performs a qualitative analysis of the Armenian PM's speeches through a mixed-methods approach. The approach combines textual analysis of the speeches with semi-structured expert interviews. Speeches are considered primary sources that fall into a practical geopolitics conceptualisation of critical geopolitics. Conducted interviews also fall into the primary source category as they were specifically tailored to the research project to enrich the analysis and enhance the validity of the research. Moreover, public opinion statistics, expert analyses available online, and media articles will be included to strengthen the analysis as complementary data. All the data combined allows for a more critical analysis. The speeches serve as the foundation of the data set, as the new status quo of Karabakh and reconstruction of regional dynamics in the South Caucasus led to an expectation that the Armenian leadership needs to change its rhetoric and strategy to adapt to a new post-war and post-Karabakh reality. After gathering all the data, thematic analysis is applied. The research is characterised as top-down as it focuses on the ruling elite's speeches and statements. Firstly, by examining elite speeches, changes towards the elite approach to N-K are identified, leading to the analysis of how geopolitical imaginaries are reconstructed under specific geopolitical and domestic contexts.

Data Collection

Primary data was collected from December 2024 to April 2025. The first data collection step included gathering and reading statements and messages of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan. The statements were found on the official website of the Armenian Prime Minister (*The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia*,

no date). The website offers language options which allow users to gather speeches and statements with official English translation. Data collection involved finding and saving speeches that would include words: "Artsakh" and "Karabakh". The reason for including speeches with these words is that the changes that alerted the regional geopolitics and internal politics in Armenia were centred predominately around the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and this thesis is looking specifically into the geopolitical imaginaries that were alerted because of the Second Karabakh War and Loss of Karabakh. The speeches that only included the word "Artsakh"/"Karabakh" in welcoming or closing remarks, but not in the main speech, were not included.⁵ While it shows a specific way of talking about Nagorno-Karabakh in a way that the region is important for Armenia's political agenda and national identity, other speeches mentioned "Artsakh"/"Karabakh" in both welcoming/closing remarks and main speech body, which were more applicable to the research. Accordingly, the speeches that mentioned "Artsakh" or "Karabakh" in the main body created a space for more in-depth analysis. Additionally, speeches that included only 'Artsakh' next to proper nouns like "Artsakh State Jazz Orchestra" or "Artsakh State Choir" were not included. These measures were taken to simplify the textual data set. Overall, the data gathered included 153 speeches from August 2019 to April 2024. The speeches were saved in chronological order on a Microsoft Excel sheet. The analysis of the speeches starts on 05.08.2019, as it was the date of a famous Pashinyan speech in which the PM said, "*Artsakh is Armenia*". The end of the analysis falls on the 10th of April 2024, when Pashinyan made a clear distinction between "*Real Armenia*" and "*Historical Armenia*". Accordingly, these two speeches create contrasting ideas which clearly articulate the change in the government's rhetoric around the geopolitical imaginaries around both Armenia and Karabakh. Moreover, the first speech was given before the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020, and the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023, while the last speech included in the analysis was given afterwards. Accordingly, this allows for identifying changes in the Armenian leadership statements depending on the context. The pre-2020 speeches will be included in the analysis section as it illustrates the changing rhetoric, rather than going straight to the times after the war and not allowing

⁵ For example, "Dear compatriots in Armenia, Artsakh and the Diaspora," or "Long live the Republic of Armenia! Long live the Republic of Artsakh! Long live the Armenian people!"

comparison. Given the high number of the collected data and specified source of the speeches, the referencing of the speeches in the analysis section will be based on providing a date of the speech if quoted, rather than providing date and author as all the speeches cited were given by Nikol Pashinyan and their source is the official website of the Prime Minister of Armenia.

Table 1. Comparative overview of the number of speeches that included words “Karabakh” or “Artsakh” each year/specific part of the year that correlates with the timeframe of the analysis.

| Year | 05.08.2019-31.12.2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 01.01.2024-10.04.2024 |
|--------------------|-----------------------|------|------|------|------|-----------------------|
| Number of Speeches | 23 | 37 | 22 | 22 | 48 | 1 |

Source: author’s own work

The reasoning behind including speeches only by the Prime Minister of Armenia and no other governmental politicians or opposition members is the following. The prime minister is a leader of the ruling party that holds a constitutional majority in the parliament. This makes the party have the most significant direct impact on the state and foreign policy. The prime minister has also strengthened his power through legislative reforms and is often called "super prime minister" (Madoyan, 2025). Additionally, the ruling Civil Contract party, like other political parties in Armenia, are characterised as personalistic, which makes the party's leader the centre of it rather than any specific ideology (Madoyan, 2025). Therefore, to simplify the research and make it more straightforward, the primary sources include statements only by the Prime Minister, as it reflects the government's strategy and would also reflect the voice of a politician who is still the most trusted of all by the public. On that note, it is important to point out that as of 2024, only 16% of the public trusts Pashinyan and a great percentage of the society, 61% do not trust any politician (International Republican Institute, 2024). Opposition in Armenia is relatively weak, and its leading actors come from the previous ruling elite, which currently has a low level of trust and legitimacy. For example, Robert Kocharyan notes 2% of public trust (International Republican Institute, 2024).

On top of analysing the speeches of the Armenian Prime Minister, the researcher conducted six semi-structured expert interviews to gain more context and cross-validate

the initial findings. Semi-structured interviews aimed to explore the topic further, especially the issues the author encountered during the extensive literature review and collection of the PM speeches. The format of the semi-structured interviews allowed for more flexibility and adaptation to the interview dynamics (see Appendix C for guiding interview questions). The interview themes included: 1) Geography and Symbolism: The idea of Armenian Homeland and its borders; symbolism of Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh. 2) Identity and Political Discourse: Contemporary Armenian political and geopolitical discourse – its evolution over time and current objectives.

In the participant recruitment process, the researcher contacted scholars from the universities, policymakers, and representatives of governmental, international, and civil society organisations based in Armenia. Experts were found through researcher's academic network, LinkedIn, conferences, and webinars. On top of that, a snowballing method was applied, and some experts were found through the experts already interviewed. The participants, based in Armenia, were political analysts, academics in the fields of Politics, International Relations and Sociology as well as members of civil society organisations such as think-tanks and non-governmental organisations operating in Armenia. The experts engaged in the topic of Karabakh or Armenian politics during their academic careers or through their workplace. They have also lived in Armenia through recent political and geopolitical changes. While the goal was to interview around eight experts, it was challenging due to limited network and resources. Most interviews were scheduled during a pre-planned trip to Yerevan in March 2025, and the rest were conducted online through Microsoft Teams in March-April 2025. All interviews were conducted in English. Before contacting people and scheduling interviews, ethical approval of the research was obtained from the University of Glasgow (see Appendix A). Accordingly, ethical matters were taken into consideration. Every participant signed the consent form and agreed to participate in this research (see Appendix B). Interviews were audio-recorded through a digital voice recorder, transcribed and stored securely in a password-protected laptop. Recordings were securely deleted after completion of the interview transcripts. Participation in the research was voluntary, and the participant could withdraw from participation at any point before, during, or after the interview. Confidentiality and anonymity were also ensured by coding the names of the participants

into randomly allocated numbers from 1 to 6. In the analysis, a randomly allocated letter will be used instead of a name when referring to any expert's opinion and analysis. After completing the degree, all the interview data material will be securely deleted from the researcher's device.

Data Analysis

This thesis applies thematic analysis to the collected data. Braun and Clarke (2006, p.79) define thematic analysis as a method "for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data". The method follows six steps: familiarising with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming the themes, and finally producing the report (ibid., p.87). The method is considered more accessible to new researchers in qualitative research as it does not require extensive theoretical knowledge like grounded theory, discourse analysis or narrative analysis (ibid., p.81). The method also offers flexibility as it is compatible with different theoretical frameworks. The data for the analysis consists of a data corpus (all data collected for the project), a data set (data used for the analysis) and a data item (individual piece of data collected). Themes must relate to the research questions and reflect recurring matter/response/or meaning in a data set. The themes can be inductive or deductive, and this thesis performs inductive coding as codes were gathered and identified while reading the texts. Having said that, the themes are connected to the theoretical framework as they are closely linked to critical geopolitics that also applies concepts from an ethno-symbolist approach. The themes will be identified at a latent level, which seeks to interpret underlying ideas and meanings behind them (ibid., p.84). The underlying ideas and meanings are analysed through the critical geopolitics framework. While the study applies thematic analysis, the analysis chapter includes words like "discourse" and "narratives". This does not, however, reflect a change of the applied methods but rather refers to a broader system of meaning that allows to perform a more analytical thematic analysis. It shows how narratives form certain themes within the political speeches and how they become part of the broader Armenian political discourse.

The organisation and coding of the political speeches was performed in NVivo 14 software. The software provides tools for qualitative data analysis that allows to store and navigate large volumes of data. The programme allows to organise chosen sentences and text fragments into systematic codes which later helps to identify overarching themes between the codes. The software gives researcher independence as it is up to the researcher what codes are created and what fragments are assigned to each code. Accordingly, the programme does not assist the way data is analysed but rather allows for more consistency and clarity when analysing the data. The data identified the following codes around the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh (see Table 2): Azerbaijani Leadership, Future, Homeland, Negotiations, Old Elite, Opportunity, Unity and Pan-Armenianism, Past, Peace and Conflict Settlement, Russia, Security and Self-determination, Sovereignty, Strategy and Development, Velvet Revolution and Karabakh. Secondly, the codes identified following themes: Armenia as a protector of Nagorno-Karabakh, the challenges of territorial integrity and sovereignty, Blurred borders between homeland and state, Revising the perspectives around the past and future, Erosion of Russia's credibility. The themes and codes would sometimes overlap, showing a general continuity and coherence of the data collected.

The interview data is considered supplementary data to the analysed political speeches. The participants challenged or confirmed initial interpretations and offered more depth, context and information to the analysis. Especially considering that the author is an outsider to Armenia with no Armenian language skills or experience living in Armenia, the expert interviews allowed for identifying context-specific information that would be otherwise overlooked. The ability to travel to Yerevan and conduct expert interviews enhanced the validity of the research and analysis. Thanks to the interviews, it was easier to understand local contexts and fill gaps in knowledge that a sole analysis of speeches and reading the literature would not offer. Additionally, while the PM's statements mainly focus on Nagorno-Karabakh, the interviews discussed the idea of a broader Armenian geographical space – the Mount Ararat and the idea of Armenian motherland, which the speeches mention in a less detailed way.

Table 2. Comparative overview of gathered codes in speeches of the Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan

| Code name | References |
|---------------------------------|------------|
| Azerbaijani Leadership | 27 |
| Future | 22 |
| Homeland | 30 |
| Negotiations | 19 |
| Old Elite | 12 |
| Opportunity | 10 |
| Unity and Pan-Armenianism | 20 |
| Past | 39 |
| Peace and Conflict Settlement | 45 |
| Russia | 35 |
| Security and Self-determination | 51 |
| Sovereignty | 39 |
| Strategy and Development | 7 |
| Velvet Revolution and Karabakh | 10 |

Source: author's own work

Limitations

There are a few limitations to this topic of research. Firstly, it is a recent topic that is still evolving. While the author put a clear timeline for the thematic analysis (August 2019-April 2024), keeping to that timeline during the interviews was more difficult. Some experts would refer to events or the Prime Minister's statements after April 2024. Additionally, some of the public opinion statistics, expert analyses available online, and media articles used in the analysis as secondary sources would also go beyond the timeline of the speeches. Another limitation concerns foreign language skills. While the author used an official English translation to analyse the speeches, the original text was Armenian. In this regard, some matters could have been lost in translation. That being said, discourse and language were among the themes of the interviews, which helped to confirm or reject some of the initial observations. Additionally, if a particular word was found to be particularly crucial for the analysis, the researcher would look at the Russian

official translation to compare it with the English one, and on top of that, use online translation tools to double-check whether the Armenian translation reflects the other two. In case of English version differing in some way, it will be noted in a footnote (for example, see footnote No.15). Nevertheless, some translation misinterpretations could still occur as not every quote cited in the analysis was checked through this method.

Moreover, one of the main limitations when focusing on the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh is not including the Azerbaijani discourse. This thesis focuses only on Armenia, which, on the one hand, allows more depth in the analysis but, on the other, shows only one side of the story. Some of the justifications for choosing to focus on Armenia solely, besides the limited time and word count of the thesis, were that travelling from Tbilisi (where the researcher was based) to Baku was not as accessible due to the closed land border between Georgia and Azerbaijan. Additionally, according to the Freedom House Index, Azerbaijan is classified as 'Not Free' and Armenia as 'Partly Free' (Freedom House, 2025). In this regard, connecting and conducting unbiased interviews with Azerbaijani experts could be challenging. Finally, it was safer for a young researcher to study Armenia and not risk travelling between both countries regularly, given the tense geopolitical situation and relatively stricter Azerbaijani border controls.

Additionally, the analysis focuses only on the ruling political elite's rhetoric, which creates another limitation, as the voices of ordinary people or non-political elites are overlooked. For example, Anthony D. Smith (2009) emphasises the role of cultural and religious intellectuals and artists in shaping nation's symbols, myths and ideas. While critical geopolitics can be conceptualised through only practical geopolitics that includes political speeches, the framework could be enriched through popular geopolitics, including mass media culture and public opinion. Conducting expert interviews and referencing statistical data from reliable institutions based in Armenia were measures to mitigate this limitation. Thanks to that, the gap between the ruling political elite and society was decreased to some extent. While expert interviews cannot be seen as a representative sample of the whole Armenian society, they gave the researcher an impression of how the elite's decisions affect the society. Having said that, limited time, network, and resources did not allow the author to conduct a high number of interviews. Some experts who were contacted have never replied, and some would say

they are busy with their work and cannot participate in the study. Additionally, semi-structured interviews offer flexibility, meaning that some interviews explored some issues more than others. While the same interview guide was used in each interview, each interview was different. That is, however, the nature of a real-life data collection involving people. Furthermore, the reason for choosing expert interviews and not conducting a study with ordinary citizens is limited network, time and resources. Thanks to social media platforms and public information, experts are more approachable and easier to contact. Moreover, while the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh can come across as a sensitive issue to Armenians, experts are a group of people who often get interviewed and discuss matters like Nagorno-Karabakh and national identity, which are issues broadly discussed in academia and public debate.

Chapter 3: Empirical Findings and Analysis

Armenia as a protector of Nagorno-Karabakh

This section analyses the theme of the Armenian leadership portraying Armenia as a protector of Nagorno-Karabakh and Karabakh Armenians. Simultaneously, it discusses how the role of Karabakh's protector has been embedded into issues of national unity and political legitimacy in Armenia. On the anniversary of the Proclamation of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, the PM emphasises that the security of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh is Armenia's "*top priority*" (02.09.2019). In line with security cooperation, prior to the 2020 war, Armenia and N-K authorities held three joint sessions of the Security Councils. During the sessions, Pashinyan says that "*Armenia will continue to act as the guarantor of Artsakh's comprehensive security*" (23.12.2019) and that Armenia and N-K "*constitute a common security zone*" (22.02.2020). Accordingly, the joint security meetings imply a close security cooperation between the two entities and Armenia's willingness to be seen as a protector of Karabakh Armenians and Nagorno-Karabakh. That said, an image of a protector is more complex as many Karabakh Armenians perceived Russia as their main protector (expert 2). During a visit to New York, Pashinyan states that Azerbaijan refuses to negotiate with N-K authorities and, therefore, "*it should not come as a surprise to Azerbaijan that the people of Nagorno-Karabakh strongly rely on Armenia as the only guarantor of their survival and development*" (25.09.2019). The rhetoric positions Azerbaijan as uncompromising, which legitimises Armenia's involvement in Karabakh's affairs. Simultaneously, on a numerous occasions, the PM highlights his support of Karabakh's elected representatives participating in the peace negotiation process alongside Armenia and Azerbaijan. Beyond looking at it from protector-protected framework, some experts would consider the government's pre-war approach towards Karabakh as Armenia trying to distance itself from N-K by wanting to give more agency to Karabakh through participation in the negotiation process, however some would see Pashinyan's rhetoric as seeking more influence in Karabakh (experts 1 and 6). This shows two contrasting perceptions as the policy of the participation in the negotiations was accepting de-facto autonomy of N-K but the rhetoric would often frame close connectedness between Armenia and Karabakh, once even suggesting that Karabakh is part of Armenia.

On 05.08.2019, Pashinyan states, "*Artsakh is Armenia*" in Stepanakert, back then the capital of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic.⁶ The statement, according to Pashinyan, had security dimensions, as on a working visit to Berlin, he explains it by saying: "*we will perceive Azerbaijan's attack on Karabakh as an attack on the Republic of Armenia. The Republic of Armenia is the guarantor of Karabakh's security*" (13.02.2020). Accordingly, it was a way to show Armenia's commitment to protect Karabakh. That said, the statement comes out as controversial as de-facto and de-jure, Karabakh was not Armenia, but a de-facto state, within Azerbaijan's internationally recognised borders. Experts emphasise that the statement "*Artsakh is Armenia*" did not imply any official policy shifts towards Karabakh but rather illustrated an impulsive and populist style of the PM's rhetoric (experts 1, 3 and 6). The statement demonstrated patriotism to the people gathered in the square while simultaneously sought to secure Pashinyan's political popularity in Armenia and Karabakh (experts 5 and 4). Expert 4 follows up that the government is skilled at creating the feeling of unity between people, which was also seen during the Velvet Revolution in 2018. Moreover, another layer of the context behind the 05.08.2019 speech is the ongoing domestic dynamics that led to the PM's insecurity over the Karabakh issue. It was an insecurity due to the ongoing critique towards Pashinyan from the former political elites about how the new PM dealt with N-K (experts 1 and 3). Therefore, the speech was a reminder to the public and old elite that the new Armenian leadership has not been dismissing the issue so important to many Armenians, and that Armenia is willing to protect Karabakh. This implies that the old elite, even if no longer in the government, still impacted political affairs in Armenia. Moreover, none of the experts argued that the speech in Stepanakert was in any way directed towards Azerbaijan. However, despite no intentions of worsening the geopolitical situation in the region, it unintentionally escalated the conflict and created an opportunity for Baku to use it against Armenia (experts 1 and 3). Accordingly, the rhetoric has shaken the credibility of Armenia in the peace negotiation process (expert 6). While the statement could be motivated through domestic pressure and a means to show patriotism and maintain a high level of political legitimacy, the strong rhetoric resulted in a greater sense of geopolitical insecurity for Armenia, as the rhetoric was diplomatically dangerous. In

⁶ In Azerbaijani: Khankendi

consequence, the pre-2020 war leadership's rhetoric created a geopolitical imaginary of Armenia as Karabakh's protector, which in contradiction has created risks as the Azerbaijani side perceived statements like "*Artsakh is Armenia*" as provocations.

In September 2020, Azerbaijan launched an attack on N-K and Armenia got directly involved as Pashinyan declared general mobilisation and stated that the hostilities posed an "*immediate threat of an attack also on the borders of Armenia*" (27.09.2020). It reflects Armenia's willingness to protect Armenia and Karabakh through words and actions. During the 2020 war, Pashinyan highlights the importance of defending "*Homeland*" and protecting the rights of the Armenian people, "*since we realised in the early 90s that there is no Armenia without Artsakh*" (21.10.2020). This implies that protecting Karabakh Armenians means protecting Armenians and their identity everywhere else. As the war finished, Pashinyan faced the results of an unfavourable agreement between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia. Accordingly, in a long-term perspective, the pre-war rhetoric would raise questions of domestic legitimacy. Expert 4 notes that the inconsistency in the leadership's rhetoric caused a wave of criticism on the government from the public, as the words "*Artsakh is Armenia*" did not reflect the future government's actions. The following events like the Second Karabakh War in 2020 and everything that followed afterwards showed that Armenia cannot protect Karabakh. Moreover, the speech and the 2020 war fell closely chronologically, creating a favourable environment for the rise of conspiracy theories among the public, as some wondered what the government knew and hid from the public before the war. Nonetheless, theories like that cannot be verified in any way, but they were present among the public (expert 4).

Furthermore, the announcement of the ceasefire agreement caused a series of protests in Armenia that called for the resignation of Pashinyan (RFE/RL, 2020). Pashinyan himself admits "*when I signed that document [ceasefire agreement], I realised that I was facing the threat of my personal death, not only in a political but also in a physical sense*" (12.11.2020). Consequently, one can conclude that the PM's populist and overconfident stance did not reflect reality, and the 2020 war and its aftermath disrupted the image of Armenia as Karabakh's protector as well as shaken the legitimacy of Pashinyan. That said, Pashinyan does not initiate any plans to resign after signing the ceasefire agreement, as he takes on the mission to restore security and stability around Armenia

and Karabakh. However, as the domestic political crisis continues, the PM announces snap parliamentary elections for June 2021. Against expectations, the party under Pashinyan's leadership wins the elections. Accordingly, despite defeat in the war and mass protests in the country, Pashinyan maintained a sufficient level of political legitimacy to win the elections. That said, compared to the 2018 elections, the support for Pashinyan's party decreased as the alliance led by Pashinyan in 2018 received around 70% while in 2021, Pashinyan's political party received around 54% (IFES, 2018, 2021). The political turnout has been comparable to that in 2018, at 48.63%, and in 2021, at 49.37% (ibid). Accordingly, significant shifts in people's political engagement through elections have not been noted.

The image of Armenia as a protector of Karabakh further erodes in the post-2020 war period. Despite the PM voicing support towards people of Karabakh and Armenia implementing a big share of financial support towards Karabakh, the geopolitical situation was worsening as Azerbaijan maintained its position that there is no Nagorno-Karabakh entity. The blockade of the Lachin corridor imposed by Azerbaijan in December 2022 led to a humanitarian crisis in N-K, which caused more insecurity and instability in Armenia and Karabakh.⁷ Accordingly, from December 2022, the PM's speeches discussing the Karabakh issue are mostly centred around the humanitarian crisis in N-K. Considering the urgency of action and quick developments, the number of speeches with "*Karabakh/Artsakh*" was significantly higher than in the previous years. The long blockade shows Armenia's powerlessness, Azerbaijan's assertiveness in the conflict, the ineffectiveness of Russia's peacekeeping mission and finally the lack of an enforcement mechanism of international law, as the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ordered the opening of the corridor. On 16.03.2023, Pashinyan states, "*our assessment remains the same: the military-political leadership of Azerbaijan sees preparations for ethnic cleansing and genocide against the people of Nagorno-Karabakh*". A few months later, on September 19.09.2023, Azerbaijan launched a military offensive on Karabakh. In 24 hours, N-K authorities surrender, and Azerbaijan announces victory and restoration of its territorial integrity. Pashinyan, in his statement, declares that "*the Republic of Armenia is*

⁷ Lachin corridor: road that linked N-K with Armenia, which after the 2020 war was controlled by the Russian peacekeeping forces.

not involved in military operations” (19.09.2023). This reflects a change in Armenia's strategy, as during the Second Karabakh War, the Republic of Armenia was involved in the conflict escalations. Furthermore, instead of emphasising the role of Armenia as a protector, Pashinyan emphasises the role of Russia's peacekeeping mission whose responsibility was *"ensuring the safety of the civil population"* (21.09.2023). Accordingly, the lack of direct involvement of Armenia implies broader shifts in geopolitics, such as Azerbaijan having a military advantage over Armenia as well as Russia failing to implement an effective peacekeeping mission, which left Armenia in a vulnerable security position. Pashinyan states that the involvement of Armenia in the attack would threaten Armenia's *"sovereignty"* itself (20.09.2023). On 28.09.2023, Pashinyan says:

"The analysis shows that there will be no more Armenians left in Nagorno Karabakh in the coming days. This is a direct act of ethnic cleansing and deprivation of homeland, something we have been warning the international community about for a long time".

This implies Karabakh, once pictured as an entity protected by Armenia, is now an empty land.

Moreover, while the loss of Karabakh was not politically favourable to the Armenian leadership, it also impacted the image of the old elite. This is linked with power shifts within N-K itself, as a few weeks before Azerbaijan's military offensive, Karabakh's leader was pressured to resign by oppositional forces linked to the Armenia's previous elite; therefore, the N-K authorities who surrendered were not associated with the new elite, but the old one (expert 1). This further discredited the old elite in Armenia, which indirectly allowed Pashinyan to maintain relative political legitimacy despite being unable to protect Karabakh and its status quo. Having said that, Pashinyan's legitimacy is in question. In 2024, 28% of the Caucasus Barometer survey respondents in Armenia trusted the government, which suggests low political legitimacy (CRRC, 2024). In contrast, in 2019, the trust in the government was 71% (CRRC, 2019). The issue of political legitimacy is complex, as while Pashinyan and his government are still in power, the lack of alternatives means that the government is still more popular than any other political force in Armenia. Another issue one can observe is the alienation between society and the political elites. In 2024, 15% of respondents said that the Civil Contract party run by Nikol Pashinyan is the closest political party to them, while 55% said that

none of the parties are (CRRC, 2024). The same dataset also shows that 23% of people are uninterested in Armenia's politics, while 14% are hardly interested (ibid). Moreover, 42% of people would agree that there is "*no difference in whom I vote*" and only 9% of people participated in any demonstration, rally or protest (ibid). Finally, 71% agree that "*public officials don't care what people think*" (ibid). All the mentioned data illustrates alienation between people in power and society. In this regard, political legitimacy gains another complexity as one can ask how stable or real the political legitimacy of the government is in the state of elite-society alienation.

In the aftermath of the September 2023 attack on N-K, Karabakh Armenians relocate to the Republic of Armenia, and Pashinyan states that the government's primary duty is "*to accommodate our brothers and sisters forcibly displaced from Nagorno Karabakh in the most caring way and meet their most urgent needs*" (28.09.2023). Having said that, the support of the Armenian government towards the refugees raises questions, as the government cut social assistance to Karabakh Armenians, challenging the practical willingness to support Karabakh Armenians (Barseghyan, 2024a). Furthermore, the Armenian government has no clear agenda about a possible return of Karabakh Armenians to Karabakh (expert 6). While expert 6 sees a possibility of return as a result of peace consolidation between Armenia and Azerbaijan, expert 5 would not see the return of Karabakh Armenians to the region or the restoration of the Karabakh de facto republic as a realistic scenario. Pashinyan would also reject notions of establishing the Nagorno-Karabakh government in exile, as according to the PM, it could become a tool of the external actors to influence Armenia (Avetisyan, 2024). This implies that Armenia cannot be a protector of N-K or its institutions as it creates risks for Armenia's internal politics especially for the current leadership which, unlike the old elite, has no direct links to Karabakh. Accordingly, at first, supporting Karabakh was sustaining the political legitimacy of the PM, however now when there is no longer Karabakh, the PM tries to save the legitimacy by limiting the influence of Karabakh ex-authorities. Moreover, the most recent rhetoric, which will be analysed further in the next sections, starts framing Karabakh as an obstacle to Armenia's full sovereignty. The conflict over Karabakh has a complex nature, however, creating a black and white image of Karabakh as an obstacle to Armenia's development involves risks of the rhetoric being harmful for Karabakh

Armenians who now live in Armenia (expert 3). Accordingly, others highlight the issue of the existing anti-Karabakh rhetoric in the public sphere, which is partly reinforced by the ruling party's rhetoric and pro-government media (Tadevosyan, 2025). It can be observed especially on the internet, as social media provides a favourable platform for spreading hate speech towards the Karabakh people (ibid). Firstly, this shows the risks of navigating the Karabakh issue by simplifying the narrations around it. Secondly, it also directly contradicts the old narration of unity between Armenia and Karabakh supported by the government pre-2020 war.

Overall, this section discusses how has the geopolitical imaginary of Armenia as a protector of Karabakh gradually changed along the recent years and how that protector image is no longer a source of the Armenia's leadership legitimacy, as there is no Karabakh and no agenda of restoring it. Following sections continue the analysis by illustrating implications of Armenia no longer being able to be the patron of Karabakh and discuss what other narrations are employed by the leadership to reframe the idea of Karabakh and Armenia without it.

The challenges of territorial integrity and sovereignty

This section draws similarities to the previous one, as while portraying itself as Karabakh's protector, the Armenian leadership had to navigate the issue of its own and Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. Before the war, Armenia's strategy was centred around supporting the right of self-determination of the Karabakh people. The rhetoric was present on both domestic and international platforms. This stood in contrast to Azerbaijan's position that saw Karabakh as an integral part of its internationally recognised territory and perceived the conflict over N-K as a territorial one. On the international platforms like the UN General Assembly, Pashinyan states that the conflict is not a territorial dispute, but about "*people, [...] and their right to live in their homeland in the way that their ancestors lived over many centuries*" (26.09.2019). The issue of territorial integrity and the right of self-determination offers complexity, as for a long time, the Armenian political discourse around Azerbaijani territorial integrity was centred around the idea that Nagorno-Karabakh decided to seek independence from Azerbaijan in parallel to how Azerbaijan withdrew from the USSR according to the USSR legislation. Additionally, Pashinyan would on several occasions support the negotiation format

within the OSCE Minsk Group as the negotiations were meant to decide on the final status of N-K (experts 1 and 2). Along with the support for negotiations, Pashinyan would emphasise the commitment to peace and solving the conflict only through non-violent means.

In the early post-war rhetoric, the Prime Minister shows his determination to "*create and to rebuild Armenia and Artsakh*" (19.12.2020), "*ensure the rebirth of Artsakh*" (20.02.2021), "*ensure the revival of Artsakh*" (09.05.2021). The status of Karabakh was not certain at that time. However, the Armenian government was vocal about ensuring security around Armenia and Karabakh, also describing the status of Karabakh as a "*priority*" for the government (31.12.2020). In June 2021, during the election period, Pashinyan advocates for remedial secession as a solution to the Karabakh issue (expert 6). Remedial secession derives from the right to self-determination; however, it is more contested in international law, as it advocates for people's right to secession unilaterally, when experiencing systematic human rights violations (UCLA, 2021). Furthermore, during the 2021 election campaign, the ruling party would advocate for '*de-occupation*' of Shushi and Hadrut (experts 3 and 2).⁸ Throughout the conflict, Shushi has held a strategic and symbolic value to both cultures, often called the "*Jerusalem of Karabakh*" (Waal, 2013, p.197). Accordingly, the capture of Shushi by Azerbaijani forces during the 2020 war was a crucial moment as it led to a ceasefire agreement. On 20.06.2023, Pashinyan states that "*as long as Shushi was standing, the fight had a very specific purpose and motivation*", as the capture of Shushi has made Stepanakert a vulnerable next target. This shows challenges of the government as while the post-war reality was unfavourable for Armenia and Karabakh, the PM's rhetoric was hopeful of restoration of old status-quo.

Furthermore, on 15.06.2022, Pashinyan states that while in the past the status of N-K was a key matter in the negotiations, now the Armenian government sees it as of secondary importance and rather wants to focus first on security and rights of Karabakh Armenians. On 16.11.2022, Pashinyan states that Russia first proposed this change of approach of postponing the status of Karabakh and that the Armenian government accepted it already

⁸ Shushi (in Azerbaijani: Shusha) and Hadrut were the two main towns that N-K lost during the Second Karabakh War.

in January 2021 but has not openly talked about it until long after. This implies Armenia's hopes that Russia would return to the issue of the Karabakh status in the future and support Armenia in the negotiations. Simultaneously, it shows that Armenia has been under Russia's constant influence and has had limited options to negotiate on its terms. Therefore, looking at 2021-2022, one can observe contradictions and inconsistencies in Pashinyan's narrations around Karabakh and an unclear government agenda about the Karabakh status and the future of Karabakh. On the one hand, Pashinyan presents optimistic rhetoric around Karabakh. On the other, Karabakh's status was postponed indefinitely in the negotiation process, which did not offer much optimism. Accordingly, on a domestic level, the hope of restoring Karabakh is part of the rhetoric, while on the international level, Armenia needs to act in agreement with stronger parties. This creates two parallel and paradoxical realities which are not compatible. Expert 1 analyses the changing post-war narratives around Karabakh through the dilemma the Armenian government has faced in the last few years. On the one hand, the government has been under pressure to make concessions towards Azerbaijan. However, on the other, they have been under pressure not to dismiss the Karabakh issue as it has been a crucial matter for Armenian identity and a key point of the Armenian foreign policy agenda (expert 1). That being said, because the government has been changing its agenda towards Karabakh so often, the public was left confused about what the agenda of the ruling elite is (expert 6). The case of Karabakh in the elite's rhetoric yet again demonstrates how the issues of identity and geopolitics overlap, as the political statements can be influenced by both international politics and nationalist sentiments, often illustrating two different narrations. Expert 5 points out that the elections were a factor for shaping the narrative around Karabakh after the war, as going into elections as an optimistic and confident leader was a favourable strategy after the military defeat and national tragedy. After the elections, however, the PM enters international forums and must adjust to the dialogue of the international community. Furthermore, other experts would rather see the change of the rhetoric as a natural way of adjusting to the new post-2020 reality. This included growing geopolitical pressure and new demands coming from Azerbaijan, realisation that Armenia is a weaker party in the conflict, and finally, the lack of international support towards Karabakh and Karabakh Armenians (experts 6, 3, 2). The geopolitical pressure is visible through ongoing border clashes between Azerbaijan and Armenia since May 2021,

with intensified clashes in September 2022. Accordingly, the clashes provoked by Azerbaijan put Armenia's sovereignty at risk.

On 31.03.2022 and 13.04.2022, Pashinyan claims that recognising Azerbaijani territorial integrity is acceptable for Armenia. However, here the issue of territorial integrity is more complex as Pashinyan notes on 13.04.2022 that, de jure, Armenia has recognised Azerbaijani territorial integrity since 1992 (the Agreement on the Establishment of the CIS). Accordingly, March and April 2022 statements can be perceived as the Armenian leadership moving towards a de facto recognition of the Azerbaijani territory. In April 2024, Pashinyan states that after the September 2022 border clashes:

"I [Pashinyan] became unequivocally and unambiguously convinced that fixing the internationally recognised territory of the Republic of Armenia can become an additional and decisive factor in ensuring the short-term, medium-term and long-term security of our country" (10.04.2024).

Here the focus is on Armenia's territory, however one can note that by accepting defined borders of Armenia, Armenia also accepts the defined borders of Azerbaijan, especially given that the status of Karabakh was postponed in the negotiations. Moreover, Pashinyan brings a critical outlook of Armenia's approach towards the status of N-K. The PM says that *"we have deceived ourselves, the people of Armenia and the people of Nagorno-Karabakh"* in the context of advocating for the right of self-determination of Karabakh people while not firstly de-facto accepting the Azerbaijani territorial integrity (18.04.2023). Accordingly, 2022-2023 marks a change within the Armenian leadership rhetoric that accepts the internationally recognised borders of both Armenia and Azerbaijan, simultaneously, recognising Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan and the issue of Karabakh as a matter of domestic issue between N-K authorities and Azerbaijan. On 27.04.2023, the PM says, *"the rights and security of the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh should become the subject of negotiations between Stepanakert and Baku within the framework of the international format"*. This implies Armenia separating itself from the N-K affairs and developments to protect the Republic of Armenia.

In parallel to navigating the issue of territorial integrity, one can notice a language shift in the PM's rhetoric that reflects de facto acceptance that Karabakh is an internal issue of

Azerbaijan and should be solved between the authorities of N-K and Azerbaijan. On 02.09.2023, in a statement on the anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence of Nagorno-Karabakh, Pashinyan uses only the wording “*Nagorno-Karabakh*” in his speech. In contrast, in the same anniversary speech in 2019, the PM would only use “*Artsakh*” and “*Republic of Artsakh*”, and in 2021 and 2022 speeches, the PM would use both terms – “*Artsakh*” and “*Nagorno-Karabakh*”.⁹ The change in language in the statements on the anniversaries of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence of N-K reflects a more general trend. Since the end of 2022, one can notice that the Prime Minister, in his speeches, with a couple of exceptions, refers to the region exclusively as “*Nagorno-Karabakh*”/“*Karabakh*”, rather than by its Armenian word – “*Artsakh*”. This language shift corresponds with Armenia recognising Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan in 2022. Before, the PM exclusively would use “*Nagorno-Karabakh*” only on international forums like the UN and on working visits abroad. After consulting with the experts, it can be seen as a deliberate strategy of the Prime Minister and the government. Even public TV hardly uses the term “*Artsakh*” (expert 3). It implies a systematic change in the official discourse. The change suggests that through language, the government is creating a new reality which is more pragmatic (expert 4). While to some experts, it is a way of appeasing to Azerbaijan as Azerbaijan's leadership can be provoked by the use of “*Artsakh*” (experts 3 and 6), some would see it as more pragmatic and a way of using a neutral wording which is accepted and known by the international community (experts 1 and 2). Furthermore, during the humanitarian crisis and corridor blockade period, Pashinyan would use exclusively “*Nagorno-Karabakh*”, which one can argue was a tool of seeking more international attention around the crisis. Even if the direct audience was domestic, like cabinet meetings, it was also directed to the international community, which voiced concerns over the situation. Having said that, on 31.03.2022, Pashinyan notes that Azerbaijani officials do not like when the term “*Nagorno-Karabakh*” is used even by international actors, as in the Azerbaijani elite narrations, there is no entity such as Nagorno-Karabakh. Accordingly, expert 6 points out that recently, Pashinyan has started using “*Karabakh*” more often than “*Nagorno-Karabakh*”. This language shift also reflects a reversed shift as “*Artsakh*” was not a popular term under the Soviet Union but

⁹ There was no statement on 02.09.2020

rather gained its popular use after the independence (expert 6). Under the USSR, the term “Karabakh” was broadly used while “Artsakh” was used mostly by historians.

This section has shown changing geopolitical imaginaries about the territory of Karabakh, Armenia and Azerbaijan which have been paradoxical at times but eventually led to de-facto accepting the territorial integrity of both Armenia and Azerbaijan by the Armenian leadership.

Blurred borders between homeland and state

Under the changing perception of Armenia’s territorial integrity and Karabakh’s status, it is crucial to analyse the geopolitical imagination of the Armenian state further – this time through the perception of borders of homeland and state. Before the 2020 war, the PM often notes the idea of homeland, which includes the Republic of Armenia and N-K.¹⁰ On 05.08.2019, Pashinyan brings up a slogan of "*Pan-Armenianism*" which connects Armenians from Armenia, Karabakh Armenians and the Armenian Diaspora together and for which the homeland is "*Armenia and Artsakh*". It presents a coherent vision of the Armenian nation whose homeland goes beyond the Republic of Armenia. This creates an image of Armenian identity as more ethnic rather than civic. The slogan "*Pan-Armenianism*" was later articulated several more times, especially before the war. The experts, however, would not consider "*Pan-Armenianism*" an influential slogan (expert 1). According to experts (1 and 4), when reading the speeches, the slogan seems more associated with the Armenian diaspora than Armenians in Armenia and Karabakh. The slogan has also been perceived as a parallel to a more significant slogan of "*Pan-Turkism*" which is more grounded and well-known (expert 1). That being said, the PM's rhetoric around the idea of "*homeland*" emphasises a geopolitical imagination of Armenia as something broader than the Republic of Armenia. In this understanding, what is under the Armenians' control is claimed as the Armenian homeland, which legitimises the status quo at the time of close connection between Armenia and N-K. This perception was further verbalised through statement during a gala in Los Angeles when Pashinyan

¹⁰ In the English translation of speeches, one can find ‘homeland’, ‘fatherland’ and ‘motherland’. These are synonymous to each other and do not imply different meanings. Expert 3 points out that in Armenian ‘homeland’ is “hayrenik” which in more literal translation would be “fatherland” as “hayr” means “father”. There are no words in Armenian that would in literal sense mean ‘motherland’ or ‘homeland’ therefore, in the analysis, there is no differentiation between words ‘homeland’, ‘motherland’ or ‘fatherland’.

says, that the "[...] goal [of a creative power of the Armenian nation] is to build a powerful Republic of Armenia, a powerful Artsakh and a united homeland" (23.09.2019). Los Angeles is known for its significant Armenian diaspora, which Pashinyan addresses in the speech. Therefore, even during the international visits, when addressing predominantly Armenians, Pashinyan uses the formulation of a "*united homeland*". The narration links territorial unity with national unity but remains symbolic as Armenia has never officially recognised the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic.

Furthermore, Pashinyan emphasised the importance of the opening ceremony of the Pan-Armenian games in August 2019 being held in Karabakh, which he refers to as "*the fortress of the Armenian dignity*" (06.09.2019). The motive of collective dignity, like the idea of homeland, historical homeland and sacred homeland, is a crucial element of national ideology in the ethno-symbolist approach that reinforces unity and nation's unique identity and history. During the 2020 war, the fight is described as a "*life and death struggle for the sacred land of Artsakh*" (03.10.2020). Additionally, in a statement on the 30th Anniversary of Baku pogrom, Pashinyan refers to N-K as "*historical motherland*":

"The Republic of Armenia, the Republic of Artsakh and all Armenians around the world will use their full potential to ensure the right of existence and peaceful development of the Armenian people in their historical motherland, including in Artsakh" (13.01.2020).

This again brings the focus on the importance of the motherland and the broad perception of the Armenian space, which, before the war, was voiced by the Armenian Prime Minister. What is also interesting in the context of 'historical motherland' is that the population of Karabakh, similarly to the population of Syunik and Lori in Armenia, has been predominantly indigenous (experts 3 and 2). This stands in contrast to Yerevan, Gyumri and other parts of Armenia, which saw large-scale migration flows of genocide survivors in the first half of the 20th century. This brings another layer to the perception of Karabakh as the historical motherland due to a long history of Armenian presence there and their distinct Armenian identity. At the beginning of the 20th century, Yerevan's population was relatively small – around 30 thousand people, while Baku and Tbilisi had a population number closer to 150 thousand or even more (Alstadt, 1992). In this regard, the history of long periods of no statehood, forcible displacements, migration and ongoing conflict makes the geopolitical imaginaries less straightforward to navigate.

Armenian art and literature from the 18th-19th centuries would present a vision of the motherland as something abstract rather than fixed, as, at that time, sovereignty over the land where Armenians lived was pictured as a national dream (expert 3). In the modern context, expert 4 points out that the societies of ‘no war no peace’ tend to have a romanticised perception of space due to a long insecurity and structural uncertainty that are rooted in ongoing conflict. While there is an understanding of what modern Armenia is, some would consider the areas outside Armenia as lost Armenian spaces to different historical periods (expert 4). People who have family roots in modern-day Eastern Turkey have sentiments towards the space as they remember their ancestors and know about the Armenian religious and cultural sites that are still there (expert 5). This creates a complex nexus linking ideas of modern state territory, lost national spaces, and identity which can also be seen in the pre-war Pashinyan’s rhetoric.

Furthermore, Karabakh is still called “homeland” in the PM’s speeches in the early post-war period. In this regard, the geopolitical imaginations continue to place Karabakh as an important land to Armenian identity despite shaken regional geopolitics. The apparent change in the rhetoric around ‘Motherland’ starts in July 2023, which falls even before the loss of Karabakh. On 23.07.2023, Pashinyan makes a speech on the 30th anniversary of the Yerkrpah Volunteer Union about the idea of Motherland and State. While Karabakh is mentioned only once in the speech and is not directly connected to the volunteer union, the issue is connected to Karabakh matters, as the union and its founder, Vazgen Sargsyan, were involved in the First Karabakh War. In contrast, before the war, on 05.03.2020, Pashinyan gives a statement on Vazgen Sargsyan’s 61st anniversary, where he directly references Sargsyan’s involvement in the First Karabakh War. In 2023, Pashinyan’s speech about the union and its founder, Vazgen Sargsyan, is not centred around their involvement in Karabakh, but instead their involvement in Armenia’s state-building and sovereignty.¹¹ This implies bringing more attention to the Armenian statehood and state-building rather than the romanticised idea of the Armenian homeland and the victory in the First Karabakh War. Pashinyan in the speech states that “we must equate the concepts of Motherland and State” (23.07.2023). Accordingly, the

¹¹ Vazgen Sargsyan was the 8th Prime Minister of Armenia but also a commander during the First Nagorno-Karabakh War.

government starts prioritising the borders of Armenia and, at the same time, simplifies the rhetoric that the state and motherland are one. The emphasis on the identification of the motherland with the state reappears again in the future on numerous occasions, and “*the motherland is the state, if you love your motherland, strengthen your state*” will be the first point of ‘The Ideology of the Real Armenia’.¹² The identification of motherland with the state also implies the change of rhetoric that prioritises civic identity rather than ethnic (experts 4 and 3). It stands in contrast to slogan of “Pan-Armenianism” popularised before the war and follows risks of reinforcing the division between Karabakh Armenians and Armenians from Armenia which are already present in the public (Tadevosyan, 2025). Consequently, the notion of unity is being reshaped in the government’s discourse as the priority is redirected to the people living in the Republic of Armenia. The phrase of connecting motherland with the state reappears on the 30.10.2023 when Pashinyan presents the draft state budget at the National Assembly. The PM notes that a misleading perception of Armenia’s territory has been “*the cornerstone of all the setbacks and failures we have suffered*” and the way to ensure security is to merge the concepts of Motherland and State, which the PM refers to as a “*road to maturity*” (30.10.2023). Having said that, while the idea of identification of motherland with the state is present in Pashinyan's speeches, the idea of homeland about Karabakh would still appear in 2023. This time, however, it is spoken of as “*their homeland*”, meaning that Karabakh is the homeland of Karabakh Armenians (21.09.2023). This separates the symbolic bond between the entities that existed before, when Pashinyan would refer to both as ‘*homeland*’ or ‘*our homeland*’.

In April 2024, Pashinyan states:

"Our Historical motherland is just a tool in the hands of others to prevent our sovereignty, accomplishment and development of statehood, and our Historical motherland should be left alone, if we don't want to lose our Real motherland [the Republic of Armenia] [...]" (10.04.2024).

¹² The announcement of the Real Armenia ideology and its points exceeds this thesis’s timeline of analysis as it was presented on the 19.02.2025.

This reflects a change in how the Armenian leadership perceives the geopolitical imaginary of Armenia as the Republic of Armenia becomes the government's key focus. While this trend of prioritising the Republic of Armenia can be observed a few months before the loss of Karabakh, as Armenia faced security border threats, the loss of Karabakh and the forcible displacement of Karabakh Armenians solidified this new thinking proposed by the government. It implies that Armenia losing Karabakh has lost the last part of its '*historical homeland*' that was outside Armenia but under the governance of ethnic Armenians. Having realised this loss, the Armenian leadership seeks to save the only Armenian recognised state that exists by stating the risks of focusing on the idea of the historical motherland. This stands in contrast to a possible expectation that Armenian leadership would create a narration of '*lost homeland*' around Karabakh. Instead, the historical motherland is shown as something that can weaken Armenia, implying that under uncertain geopolitics, constant security threats and reconstruction of regional alliances, the Armenian leadership chooses a path of focusing on what is left and not on what is lost. Expert 1 highlights that focusing on what is left was one of the main decisions made by Pashinyan after the loss of Karabakh, together with the decision that Armenia will not seek revenge. Experts 2 and 4 note that this change of romanticised homeland started with accepting the loss of the 2020 war and focusing on what is left, so no more territorial loss occurs in the future.

However, this creates societal tensions as not everyone would see the Armenian motherland the same way (expert 2). The narrative of framing 'motherland' as something limited to a concept of Armenian statehood can pose questions, given that the pre-war rhetoric reflected a different narrative around 'homeland' and the importance of lost spaces to Armenian history and identity. Experts' assessment on this matter shows that there is no one way of talking about the borders of the Armenian motherland. The way people see it is not purely based on what rhetoric is currently voiced by the government but instead on their experience, family stories, and Armenian art and literature. Expert 4 analyses this change by noting that this shift of narratives about Armenian borders and Karabakh is most likely to influence the Armenians who have no strong direct connection to Karabakh. Furthermore, it is not only about Karabakh, as Armenians' family roots often lead to other places that no longer have an Armenian population, like modern-day

Eastern Turkey or Azerbaijan (Baku, Sumgait, Kirovabad).¹³ Experts 2 and 6 point out that people do not see a broader idea of motherland as a territorial claim towards other countries, but rather a way to honour and remember the Armenian heritage. In this regard, while experts understand focusing on Armenia as a state, some question why the concept of motherland needs to be restricted to the borders of the Armenian modern statehood, as the narrative undermines Armenian memory and identity. Some see it as a narrative that is too appeasing to Azerbaijani demands, which is not very effective as there is still no peace treaty signed at this moment, and the border tensions remain (experts 2 and 6). Expert 2 points out that the rhetoric favours Azerbaijani narratives as the Armenian government's rhetoric creates an impression that there are existing narrations within the Armenian society that call for territorial demands. This raises questions on how effective the rhetoric can be both domestically and internationally, as it causes criticism within the society and does not prevent constant insecurity, especially in the border regions of Syunik, as Azerbaijan does not seem to compromise on the issue of the road that would connect the Azerbaijani exclave Nakhichevan with Azerbaijan through Armenia.¹⁴ Others, however, would see it as a grounded and coherent strategy that can bring more attention towards democratic reforms and improve the relations with the Armenian neighbours (expert 1). In this regard, Armenia's strategy is to reevaluate its narratives to preserve its statehood in its current form. According to expert 6, Pashinyan supporters believe the PM can bring peace and stability to Armenia. Pashinyan, on numerous occasions, highlights the importance of the peace agenda despite Azerbaijan's offensive rhetoric and states that "*there is no alternative*" to following a policy focused on peace developments in Armenia and the region (24.03.2022). Expert 6 points out that throughout Armenia's independence, the lack of peace has been a source of constant tensions and hostilities, which led to growing societal exhaustion of the conflict, which was intensified by the most recent war and the loss of Karabakh. Consequently, the presence of a peace agenda sustains Pashinyan's legitimacy, and any alternative political force needs to have a clear and realistic peace agenda that could

¹³ Kirovabad: Ganja in Azerbaijani

¹⁴ Azerbaijan would refer to its plan as Zangezur Corridor which would be a transit corridor through Armenia without Armenia's control over it. However, on the 08.08.2025, a new agreement was accepted on this matter between Nikol Pashinyan, Ilham Aliyev and Donald Trump who agreed on the US having control over the transit corridor – the so-called Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity.

effectively challenge the approach introduced by the authorities. Statistics illustrate that 89% of Armenians wish for peace (CRRC, 2024). This shows that even though the society may not fully resonate with the government's new rhetoric, the peace agenda assigned to this change of thinking secures Pashinyan's political survival.

The topic of how statehood overlaps with motherland goes beyond the matters of Karabakh and division between civic and ethnic identity. On 15.06.2023, Pashinyan in the National Assembly brings to attention the coat of arms of Armenia and questions its connection to the modern state of Armenia. The PM notes that the coat of arms depicts Mount Ararat and water, which gives the impression that the modern Armenia is under the water and later summarises with *“and this issue that we are discussing is actually about each of us, about that duality that exists in each of us, historical Armenia and real Armenia”* (15.06.2023). Pashinyan asks: *“should the real Armenia serve the historical Armenia or should the historical Armenia serve the real Armenia?”* (15.06.2023). After September 2023, one can observe Pashinyan returning to the matter of Ararat. At the beginning of 2024, the PM posts a photo of Aragats on his Instagram with a note, *“Aragats. The highest peak of the Republic of Armenia, 4.090 meters”* (Kucera, 2024). The post causes backlash and confusion in the comments as people would quickly mention that Ararat is a taller mountain, nowadays in Turkey. Kucera (ibid) notes that this narrative depicts “Armenian search for identity” between the two mountains. Additionally, Pashinyan also placed a painting of Aragats in his office. Essentially, redirecting focus from Ararat to Aragats follows the same logic as moving from broad vision of motherland to a vision that links state and motherland together. However, this time, it relates to Armenia-Turkey relations rather than Armenia-Azerbaijan. According to expert 1, through this narration, the PM stands against territorial claims towards Turkey. That said, expert 1 continues that Turkey does not see the symbolism behind Ararat as a territorial claim. On another occasion, Pashinyan, in an interview with the Public Television of Armenia, brought up an issue of Azerbaijan referring to Armenia as *“Western Azerbaijan”* and stated that while Armenians get irritated about it, Armenians can irritate others when saying terms like *“Western Armenia”* (The Armenian Weekly, 2024). The lands referred to as Western Armenia, like Ararat, is now within Turkey's modern borders. These statements from the Armenian PM again illustrate the systematic change in Armenia's

leadership perception of the Armenian territory and geopolitical imaginations, but this time not referring directly to Karabakh.

Furthermore, all the interviewed experts agree that Ararat is much bigger than just a mountain, which makes the new Pashinyan's narrative unlikely to succeed. Here, the ethno-symbolist approach of studying national myth is crucial, as according to the theory, elements are becoming national myths not only due to the elite introducing them but also due to the society connecting with them (Smith, 2009). Thus, Pashinyan cannot replace Ararat with Aragats as society's attachment to Ararat is greater than that of Aragats. That said, expert 3 notes that it could be a successfully absorbed narrative by the core Pashinyan supporters, but the reason for that would not be that Ararat stops being important to them, but rather because the society is polarised and is willing to accept the new perspective to stand against the opposition. Expert 4 notes that the Aragats discourse is not easily absorbed because the society is distracted by everything happening around Karabakh, which is a shock and national trauma. Ararat reminds people of Christianity, but also of surviving the Armenian genocide, while Aragats is just a 'nice' mountain to climb or ski on (experts 3,5,6). In a public survey, 86% of people in Armenia agreed that when seeing national symbols of Armenia, like Ararat, they experience strong emotions (CRRC, 2024). Expert 5 compares Ararat to the symbolism of Jerusalem, a centre for many different cultures, which at the same time is geographically far away for many. Expert 4 also notes that the symbolism of Ararat does not come from it being a mountain itself but rather a geographical shape associated with Armenia. It is also a shape seen from many places in Armenia, but cannot be accessed, which brings another mythical layer to it. It is close to people by sight but challenging to access due to closed borders. Additionally, the mountain cannot be overlooked as it is easily seen from Yerevan and many other parts of Armenia. Finally, the change of rhetoric brings another question on why a mountain is replaced with another mountain and not something else, which could better resonate with the society (expert 4). Replacing Ararat with another mountain simplifies the importance of national myths and implies that symbols are replaceable objects. It also implies agency of the government that even if Armenia is under geopolitical vulnerability, it is the elite who attempts to alert to the myth of Ararat. The rhetoric around Ararat, similarly to the shifting idea of Armenian

motherland, shows that the government is seeking new ideas to replace the old ones. However, given the complex nexus between the Armenian nation, space and statehood, this rhetoric can be viewed as undermining an important part of the Armenian identity. Accordingly, expert 4 notes that the government should pay more attention to anthropological, sociological, and political research to better connect to society when introducing new ideas. This would also diminish the disconnection between the society and the elite.

Overall the section shows the changing rhetoric around the concept of homeland, implying the emphasise on prioritising the state of Armenia, and not lands outside its internationally recognised borders.

Revising the perspectives around the past and future

The change in the perception of the motherland and identifying it with the Armenian modern state implies broader changes behind a geopolitical imaginary of Armenia. Accordingly, this section focuses on analysing the theme of time narrations of the Armenian PM around Karabakh and Armenia. It will analyse the PM's rhetoric about the First Karabakh War, the old elite, past negotiations, followed by introducing the concept of "Real Armenia" and contradicting it with the concept of "Historical Armenia", attempting to replace the past national ideology into the modern one.

At the beginning of the speech on 05.08.2019, the PM makes a reference to the Karabakh Movement by saying "*Reunification*". The slogan echoes nationalist sentiments voiced in the same square of Stepanakert in 1988 and the victory of the First Karabakh War, which granted the existence of Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. Throughout the broader political discourse, the symbolism of Karabakh has been based around the First Karabakh War, as it was the first victory in over two millennia (expert 1). It was a symbol of surviving the Armenian genocide and a way of overcoming the collective historical trauma (expert 1). In this regard, Karabakh was a symbol of unity, victory, pride, strength, and overcoming a difficult past. However, Karabakh has also been symbolic to Armenians because of its history that goes beyond the conflict, which includes the cultural and religious heritage (experts 6 and 5). On 02.09.2019, Pashinyan says that the First Karabakh War "*is one of the brightest chapters in the history of the Armenian people*". On 05.08.2019 and

02.09.2019, the Armenian victories are highlighted not only through the First Karabakh War but also through the success of the Velvet Revolution of 2018. According to the PM's rhetoric, the 2018 revolution was another example of unity among Armenians and their patriotism. Considering that the protests around the unification of Karabakh with Armenia sparked the idea of Armenia's independence and mobilised people under the Soviet Union, it is logically consistent to connect the two events as in both cases Armenians called for a change (Iskandaryan, 2020). Linking the revolution with Karabakh more directly, Pashinyan states that Karabakh Armenians supported the 2018 revolution and Karabakh safeguarded "*the front line during the revolutionary days [which] gave indescribable power and confidence to Armenia*" (05.08.2019). This implies that important moments of Armenian modern history go beyond the victory in the first Karabakh war.

On 21.05.2020, the Armenian PM attends Arayik Harutyunyan's (President-elect of N-K Republic) inauguration ceremony in Shushi and says, "*Artsakh is the only part of our country where perspectives are unlimited*".¹⁵ The idea of "*unlimited perspective*" is said in reference to the First Karabakh War, a significant victory that changed Armenian "*national thinking*". In this regard, the symbolism of the victorious past is further articulated in connection to national strength, new beginnings and an optimistic outlook on the future. Moreover, this change of national thinking is linked to the success of the 2018 Revolution: "*It was the change in thinking that led to the non-violent velvet people's revolution of 2018, and this change in thinking began with the victorious result of the Artsakh liberation war*" (21.05.2020). Linking both the First Karabakh War and 2018 Velvet Revolution implies another observation. In contrast to the previous elite, Pashinyan was born in the Republic of Armenia and did not participate in the war. Consequently, the rhetoric that merges the success of the First Karabakh War and the 2018 Revolution creates a continuity of achievements of Armenians that Pashinyan helped to carry on despite not being involved in Karabakh directly. Accordingly, it can be perceived as seeking legitimacy and invoking collective identity not only around the issue of past

¹⁵ In the Armenian original text, the word "hayrenik" is used which means "motherland", not "state".

victories in Karabakh but also bringing the focus to Pashinyan's success, which differentiated him from the two previous Armenian leaders.

During the 2020 war, the Prime Minister displays an optimistic and confident vision of the future, referring to intertwined motives of identity and the past. On the first day of the fight, Pashinyan reminds the public about the victory in the First Karabakh War and states, “*that victory is our backbone; that victory makes our identity*” (27.09.2020). Pashinyan also refers to the complex history of the Armenian nation by saying that the war “*is another milestone in our millennial fight for survival*” (27.09.2020) and describes the war as a continuation of “*genocidal policy*” towards the Armenian nation (03.10.2020). Turkey’s involvement on the side of Azerbaijan brought up the memories of the Armenian genocide (expert 3) but also showed that Russia no longer had a monopoly in the regional security arrangements (expert 5). This again shows a correlation between identity and geopolitics as well as past and present, as the war intensified the fear and memory of Turkey, but also showed Ankara’s geopolitical strength and growing influence in the modern day. The war ends in a defeat for the Armenian side and a victory for Azerbaijan. This leaves the Armenian society in a state of shock and national trauma, as many did not expect this outcome. Expert 1 notes that while the First Karabakh War was a first victory for Armenians in centuries, the Second Karabakh War becomes an equivalent of that for Azerbaijanis. It was Azerbaijan’s first victory, which created euphoric emotions among the society.

After the war, the Armenian ruling elite needs to adapt to a new geopolitical reality while facing growing demands from Azerbaijan. Pashinyan describes the war and what followed as a national tragedy; “*we are experiencing a nightmare as a nation*” (19.12.2020). The present is portrayed as national mourning, which in contradiction leads to an optimistic future as Pashinyan wants to seek “*optimism and hope*” and points out that what has happened cannot be the “*end [of our story]*” (19.12.2020). Accordingly, one can notice much emphasis on the future in the post-war statements. Despite military defeat and difficult times following the war, the ruling elite highlights its goal of focusing on future developments in Armenia and N-K. Pashinyan says, “*it is important to talk about the past, and we will still have opportunities to do so. But today it is much more important to talk about the future*” (27.11.2020). The attitude of focusing on the future and

opportunities has a broader geopolitical dimension, as hopes for lasting peace refer to the opening of transport communications in the region and ending Armenia's geographic isolation. The PM believes that Karabakh "*can become the symbol of lasting peace and stability in our region*" (02.09.2021). Moreover, the emphasis on the future in the post-war rhetoric stands in contrast to times when the past was romanticised, especially in the example of the Armenian victory in the First Karabakh War. The case of Armenia shows that after a military defeat, the rhetoric focuses on the future rather than on past victories. That said, the pre-war rhetoric would emphasise future but in a different context. Before, the focus on future developments would appear regarding domestic reforms and foreign policy strategies. Consequently, the pre-war rhetoric around the future was more confident due to the Armenians' successes in the past. However, in the post-war context, the rhetoric around the future implies a way of dealing with national trauma and refocusing the society towards the future rather than centring the narrations on military defeat. Accordingly, the post-war rhetoric tries to maintain that confidence and seeks optimism despite the circumstances. The post-war statements still mention victory, however, this time it is to gain an optimistic vision on the future; "*we must transform our defeat into victory*" (21.09.2021).

Furthermore, the defeat brings more insecurity to the leadership because now, while the old elite can still be associated with the victorious First Karabakh War, the current one becomes associated with defeat and loss of territory. Consequently, the agenda of challenging the old elite as a source of Pashinyan's political legitimacy is being shaken in light of the national tragedy and subsequent mass protests that followed the November 2020 ceasefire agreement. That being said, after the war, the old elite retained a very low level of legitimacy, which in 2021 allowed Pashinyan's party to be re-elected in the snap parliamentary elections. Civil Contract led by Pashinyan received 53.95% of votes, while Armenian Alliance led by Robert Kocharyan received 21.11% and I Have Honor Alliance, founded by Serzh Sargsyan, received 5.22% (IFES, 2021). Libaridian (2023, p. XLIII) notes that the Karabakh conflict was never a subject of a popular vote in Armenia, but one can consider the 2021 snap elections to be something close to that, as against expectations, Pashinyan won the election after losing the war. It showed that the military defeat was not a determining factor behind the voting, as the public preferred a more democratic

candidate (ibid). Consequently, Pashinyan's democratisation agenda and low legitimacy of the opposition allowed the PM to stay in power. The success of the snap elections was also linked to the Velvet Revolution, as it was the second election that followed democratic standards. Here, one can notice that if before the war, Karabakh was linked to the Velvet Revolution as a continuation of national successes, after the war, the snap elections were seen as a continuation of the successes of the Velvet Revolution.

On 17.05.2023, Pashinyan states that the 2020 war was a threat to Armenia's democracy and states that "*for a long time, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict served as an excuse for the lack of democracy in Armenia*". This suggests another indirect reference to the old elite who came from Karabakh, as they are often associated with authoritarian tendencies and corruption. It is also a reference to what followed after the war, as Armenia was going through a political crisis, for example, protesters storming the government and parliament building in November 2020, and an alleged military coup attempt in February 2021. Consequently, snap elections of 2021 are framed in the elite rhetoric, as a success for Armenia's democracy and as a proof of the PM's legitimacy. In the speech on 10.04.2024, Pashinyan talks about the September 2023 attack on Karabakh and voices that it was "*another conspiracy to bring Armenia's statehood to its knees*". In this context, events around Karabakh are pictured as a trap and a means to weaken Armenia internally which would lead to a "*political chaos*" and "*establishing a puppet government*" in Armenia (10.04.2024). Consequently, through this rhetoric, the government is emphasising its commitment to follow democratic trajectory. According to expert 4, there is a feeling of democratisation under the current government and visible actions against corruption. Armenia scored 47 points in 2024 in the corruption perceptions index compared to 35 points in 2018 (Transparency International, 2018, 2024). This shows significant improvement since 2018. However, the democratisation process and the idea of democracy are more complex. There are concerns over the competitiveness of local elections and the government's involvement in their outcomes (Ghazaryan, 2025). Moreover, expert 6 points out the issue of high centralisation of power, which decreases the power of local governance in Armenia and further endorses the personalistic system of governance in Armenia. There are also voices of concern over silencing opposition figures in Armenia and instances of offensive rhetoric of some ruling

party's politicians towards journalists and government critics (Grigoryan, 2025a, 2025b). The lack of accountability for these actions leads to increased political polarisation in Armenia (ibid). Furthermore, despite the efforts of the government, Armenia still has not been classified 'free' by the Freedom House (2025). Consequently, simplifying the democratisation challenges to the Karabakh issue makes the narration one-dimensional as Armenia continues to be a hybrid regime. This however shows a critical perception of the past which is put as contrast to the present times when the snap elections happened as a way to prove political legitimacy and democratic trajectory of the ruling elite.

On 24.08.2021, at the presentation of the Government Action Plan, Pashinyan confirms the issue of the existing past and present contradictions within the strategy towards Karabakh. The PM refers to that as a '*systemic*' problem within the Armenian society in general, and not a problem only concerning the current government. The PM states that there was a lack of clarity and no public agreement around the settlement of the conflict – whether Karabakh should be an independent entity, become a part of Armenia, and what is the plan for the surrounding regions of Nagorno-Karabakh, which before the 2020 war were under the control of the N-K authorities. As a contrast to Armenia's position, Pashinyan states that Azerbaijan has had a clear agenda since the beginning of the negotiation process, which was that Karabakh is Azerbaijan (24.08.2021). This also implies that there is a level of transparency about the present, which serves as a reminder that even if the Armenian leadership seeks hope, Azerbaijan sees Karabakh as an integral part of its territory. On 13.04.2022, Pashinyan denies his guilt of surrendering lands as part of a ceasefire agreement after the Second Karabakh War. Instead, the PM confesses that he should be guilty of not surrendering these lands earlier. In the same speech, which Pashinyan himself calls "*speech of confession*" on 13.04.2022 in the National Assembly, one can observe more pragmatism and realisation that Armenia needs to make further concessions and that the conflict settlement will not be on Armenia's terms. Pashinyan says that he was not transparent enough about the Karabakh negotiations, admits the difficulties of giving up the "*fruits of victory*" from the First Karabakh War, and emphasises the need for "*sober judgement*" in the present time (13.04.2022). The PM notes the difficulty of coming to this conclusion of pragmatism:

"[...] for 25 years we have been telling the Armenian society that all the deprivations we have suffered and are suffering have a great goal and that goal is the freedom of Artsakh. All the hardships we face is for the sake of having powerful army, and it is difficult to believe that an army built on so much hardships will not be able to defend our dream" (13.04.2022).

What is interesting is that Karabakh is still seen as a "*dream*", however simultaneously it marks the beginning of no longer looking at it through the same lens and introducing a new approach to the Karabakh and the conflict. Accordingly, the critical assessment of the past implies leaving the visions of the romantic past behind and focusing on the realistic options for Armenia and Karabakh, which are advised to the government by the international community. In this regard, the past victory is seen as a matter that overshadowed the idea of possible concessions in the negotiations, as the war's legacy implied supporting Karabakh Armenians' right to self-determination and their control over the territories surrounding Karabakh. Consequently, as a contrast to romanticised past, the post-war speeches discuss diplomatic failures and mistakes of the Armenian side. On 05.12.2020, Pashinyan replies to accusations that the poor diplomatic skills led to the 2020 war by saying "*we have not failed in diplomacy; we failed in our attempts to cope with the burden of the past 20-25 years' diplomatic failures*". This creates complex interconnectedness, as on the one hand, Pashinyan, on a few occasions, accepts the responsibility for the defeat. However, on the other, the PM redirects the focus to the mistakes of the previous Armenian leadership instead of the mistakes made only by his government. In this understanding, Karabakh is no longer portrayed as a national myth and sacred land but rather an issue that has been hanging over the current and past Armenian political elite.

On 23.08.2023, Pashinyan makes a speech on the anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence of Armenia and admits that his interpretation of the document changed after the war. The Declaration of Independence has a crucial role in the political discourse as the document mentions "*joint decision of the Armenian SSR Supreme Council and the Artsakh National Council on the "Reunification of the Armenian SSR and the Mountainous Region of Karabakh;"*" (*Armenian Declaration of Independence*, 1990). The PM says that the declaration set a "*confrontational narrative*" that kept

Armenia “*in constant conflicts with our [its] neighbours*” (23.08.2023). The PM continues that that narrative and lack of regional peace left Armenia under “*the ghost of the USSR*” and with no complete independence (23.08.2023). The Declaration is currently one of the points of the peace negotiations, as the Armenian constitution references the declaration, and Azerbaijan sees it as a threat to its territorial integrity. In consequence, Azerbaijan demands the change of the Armenian constitution. Experts argue that Azerbaijan’s demands for legislature changes in Armenia may only be a pretext to prolong the peace process and leave a possibility for further hostilities, especially in Syunik region which would pressure Armenia to open the “Zangezur Corridor” (Poghosyan, 2024, p.25). That said, in 2024, Pashinyan expressed the willingness to make amendments to the Armenian constitution and remove fragments which Azerbaijan sees as territorial claims (Barseghyan, 2024b). The Armenian Constitutional Amendment Council has time till the end of 2026 to approve the draft of the new constitution (Saribekian, 2024). Moreover, as a continuation of contrasting past and present perceptions around Armenia, Pashinyan highlights the division of “Historical Armenia” and “Real Armenia” (10.04.2024). The PM confirms that the change in the perception of looking at these two Armenias changed after the Second Karabakh War. Before the war, “Real Armenia” and “Historical Armenia” coexisted, and their relationship was mutually reinforcing. However, in the aftermath of the war, Pashinyan states that:

"The government and I [Pashinyan] personally have come to the conviction that Historical Armenia and Real Armenia are not only not compatible, but are often in conflict with each other and even pose grave threats to each other [...]" (10.04.2024).

“Real Armenia” in this context is the Republic of Armenia with internationally recognised territory. The PM states that the “*de jure re-establishment of Real Armenia took place as a result of the September 2022 war*” (10.04.2024). September 2022 is often referred to as border clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan, starting when Azerbaijan launched an attack on Armenia's sovereign territory. In this understanding, it was not only the 2020 war that changed the narratives of the government, but all the subsequent events that started to involve Armenia more directly.

Accordingly, “Real Armenia” becomes a new national ideology introduced by the government. It creates a new vision of Armenia that stands in contrast to old imaginaries

rooted from the Soviet times. Expert 5 notes that the political elite is trying to establish something new, as the old narratives no longer correspond with the current reality. This leaves Armenia in a transitional moment between old and new norms. Pashinyan states a need to establish Armenia's "*state model of patriotism*" that prioritises Armenian modern statehood and is not grounded in Soviet-Armenian historiography (18.04.2023). This is also repeated after the loss of Karabakh, when Pashinyan talks about a change in national thinking that replaces the "*Soviet model of patriotism*" (16.11.2023). This contradicts pre-war times, when a change in national thinking was once linked to the First Karabakh War and the Velvet Revolution. Now the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is seen as rooted in the Soviet legacy, which left Armenia a vulnerable actor internationally. Accordingly, the change of thinking is linked to a new vision of Armenia, which is left without N-K. The concept of "*Real Armenia*" is perceived by some experts as likely to be one of the key concepts of the next parliamentary elections in 2026 (expert 6, 3 and 2). This implies that the 'new ideology' of Armenia is a means of trying to stay in power, and its impact can be assessed in 2026 elections. While some experts would see the new government's approach as something realistic and reasonable, some would be more critical and wary of the way the ruling elite is managing it. Experts 6 would analyse it as an artificial way of talking about the state of Armenia. Expert 3 analyses these concepts in a way that prioritises civic identity over national identity, which follows the same logic as identifying the motherland with the state. Nevertheless, the fact that this approach came only after the war, suggests that it may have been long overdue (expert 3). Consequently, the division between Real Armenia and Historical Armenia articulates that the government's primary focus is on people living in Armenia.

After September 2023, there is little mention of N-K in the PM's speeches. That being said, in most experts' perception, the Karabakh topic will not disappear from the general discourse among the people. While people understand that Karabakh is gone, there are 150,000 Karabakh refugees living in Armenia among the population, which reminds people of the national tragedy and current challenges for Armenia (experts 2, 4 and 5). Accordingly, along with the geopolitical changes, Armenia's demographic composition changed as well. Additionally, expert 4 observes that there has been more Karabakh symbols in Yerevan; for example, more souvenir shops sell items with the flag of the

Nagorno-Karabakh Republic or the statue of the grandmother and grandfather "We Are Our Mountains". The region will also remain part of history books and Armenian art given its long history and importance to the Armenian identity (expert 6). Amaras Monastery in Karabakh is associated with the first Armenian school that used the Armenian alphabet, and a famous Armenian historian, Leo, who was born in Shushi (expert 6). Therefore, even if since September 2023, the elite has not been very vocal about Karabakh and its symbolic meaning, Karabakh will remain part of Armenian identity due to its cultural and historical heritage. Furthermore, important memory sites like the Genocide memorial in Yerevan will not only remind Armenians of what happened under the Ottoman empire, but also about the contemporary struggles of the Armenian nation (expert 3). Consequently, despite the elite trying to avoid the topic of Karabakh or critically assessing it in black and white colours, the memory of it will prevail among the society. It implies that past, present and future will continue to be entangled and not be as easily separated from one another. That said, the imaginary of Real Armenia implies more focus on the future the Republic of Armenia and less focus on romanticised past surrounding the Karabakh conflict.

Erosion of Russia's credibility

The changes in the status-quo of Karabakh and a new imaginary of Armenia directly affect the image of Russia, which for a long time, has been portrayed as a long-term ally of Armenia. Since Armenia's independence, there was an impression within the public and political elite that Russia is Armenia's protector (expert 5). Before the war, Pashinyan states that Russia is Armenia's "*key strategic partner and ally*" (26.09.2019). That said, Russia has not intervened militarily in the 2020 war, by claiming that its security commitments do not apply to N-K as it is not within Armenia's borders (Popescu, 2020). Accordingly, some would point out Pashinyan's miscalculations about how willing and capable Russia was to prevent the 2020 war (expert 6). Simultaneously, some part of the society would blame Pashinyan for not improving relations with Russia, resulting in the current geopolitical outcome and loss of Karabakh (expert 2). In 2016, Russia stopped the escalation of hostilities in Karabakh; therefore, there was a feeling that the status quo and Russia's protection could continue to last (expert 6). While there were existing hopes for Russia to prevail its security role, some experts note that Russia started distancing

itself from the region before the 2020 war, as tensions on the Moscow-Yerevan line started under the previous Armenian leadership (experts 1 and 5). Accordingly, it is crucial not to consider the 2020 war a one-off event that changed the alliance between Russia and Armenia. Having said that, experts would name the war a crucial moment in the change in the perception of Russia among the public, as it significantly decreased trust in Armenia's main ally (experts 6 and 3). According to expert 2, even the very pro-Russian people felt disappointed by Russia in 2020. In 2019, 57% Armenians perceived Russia as the main friend of Armenia, while in 2021 the number fell to 34% and finally in 2024 to only 14% (CRRRC, 2019, 2021, 2024). In consequence, in recent years Russia has gone from having a high level of support from more than half of the population towards having a limited level of support.

Interestingly, in the PM's speeches, Russia is discussed in a relatively positively light during and after the war. On 14.10.2020, Pashinyan says that:

"Russia has been able to fulfil its role of the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair and Armenia's strategic ally at a high level, and I am convinced that Russia will implement this role unequivocally in accordance with the best traditions of friendship between the Armenian and Russian peoples".

Therefore, despite the public disappointments surrounding Russia's limited action during the Second Karabakh War, the elite rhetoric around Russia has maintained a positive tone. In the early post-war period, 2020-2021, Pashinyan, on various platforms, would emphasise the importance of Russia's role in stopping the Second Karabakh War, Russia's role as the primary security partner for Armenia and the Russian peacekeeping mission's role in ensuring the security of Karabakh and Karabakh Armenians. While it can show an apparent willingness of the government to preserve good relations with Russia, it also articulates Armenia's geopolitical vulnerability and security overdependence. Despite defeat and limited help from Russia, the PM would highlight the will to "*further strengthen*" the relations with Moscow (31.12.2020). Accordingly, the post-war rhetoric notes no significant changes towards the alliance with Russia and shows gratitude for helping to cease the fire. Consequently, despite decreasing trust in Russia among the society and Russia's limited action in the war, one can argue that the elite was under pressure to keep good relations with Russia as, at that moment, there was no other

geopolitical actor that committed to protecting Karabakh Armenians. This shows the complexity of geography and alliance, as while the geopolitical imagination of Russia as an ally was disappearing, the rhetoric was creating an illusion of Russia maintaining its role as the protector of Armenia and Armenians.

During the time of intensified escalations in Karabakh, Pashinyan shows appreciation towards Russian peacekeepers' "efforts" to maintain stability and security in Karabakh, but at the same time raises issues that there have been violations of the ceasefire agreement (04.08.2022). That said, Pashinyan highlights the issue of Azerbaijan not legitimising the peacekeeping forces in Karabakh and the need to clarify the agreement, rather than directly mentioning the ineffectiveness of the peacekeeping mission itself. That brings another complexity to the peacekeeping mission, as Azerbaijan did not legitimise the peacekeeping mandate. However, given Russia's influence in the region, it should not automatically imply the lack of agency of the peacekeepers. During Azerbaijan's blockade of the Lachin corridor, the PM mentions numerous times that Russia should fulfil its obligations of being in charge of the corridor. At the same time, the Armenian PM says that despite the difficulties, Russia is "*our friend and ally*" and expresses gratitude towards the peacekeepers' actions, thanks to which the "*humanitarian crisis*" did not turn into a "*humanitarian disaster*" (16.03.2023).

Despite voices of appreciation towards the peacekeeping mission in Karabakh, significant rhetoric shifts surrounding Russia can be noted in 2022 as the Armenia's territory is directly under threat. On 13.04.2022, Pashinyan discusses May 2021 border clashes when Azerbaijan attacked the territory of the Republic of Armenia and says that the lack of CSTO response was a "*failure for the organisation*". It was a significant critique, or rather disappointment, about the Russia-led organisation. Another crucial moment in Armenia-CSTO relations comes when Azerbaijan attacks Armenia's sovereign territory again in September 2022. In response, CSTO refrains from providing military assistance to Armenia, leaving Armenia questioning its allies. Expert 6 points out that the September 2022 battles were another case, after which the change towards Russia within the Armenian society intensified towards negative sentiments, as it illustrated Russia's ambiguous position as Armenia's ally.

Furthermore, on the day of Azerbaijan's attack on Karabakh, Pashinyan notes:

"And the information that Azerbaijan officially informed the Russian Federation about the start of these operations was also strange and puzzling for us. Of course, this is the version, the information of Azerbaijan, and I want to draw attention to this, but the fact is that we did not receive any information about this operation from our Russian partners".
(19.09.2023)

Additionally, when referring to the narrative in Russian press that Armenia tries to place a significant responsibility on Russia, Pashinyan says:

"Obviously, we bear our share of responsibility, but on the other hand, I don't think that we all should turn a blind eye to the failures that the peacekeeping troops of the Russian Federation had in Nagorno-Karabakh". (21.09.2023)

Overall, the speeches between 2020-2023 show a gradual process from maintaining faith in Russia towards confusion and a stronger rhetoric of seeking accountability from the long-term ally. It creates a blurry geopolitical imaginary of Russia, as similarly to the loss of Karabakh, old perceptions lost its coherence under the current reality. That being said, the ineffective peacekeeping mission and no response of CSTO in 2021 and 2022 led to the realisation that Armenia must start seeking trust in other states to establish a more diversified foreign policy. Zolyan (2023) argues that Armenia is most likely to look towards other geopolitical actors in the aftermath of September 2023. In February 2024, Pashinyan in an interview with France24 says that *"the Collective Security Treaty has not fulfilled its objectives as far as Armenia is concerned, particularly in 2021 and 2022"* and declares the membership 'frozen' (Reuters, 2024). Here, one can observe that the main critique lies in the inaction during Azerbaijan's attacks on Armenia's territory rather than the loss of Karabakh and the failure of Russia's peacekeeping mission. That said, 'freezing' membership is more symbolic than practical, as expert 3 points out, there is no such official mechanism within the CSTO framework.

The division of Real Armenia and Historical Armenia, which is articulated in April 2024, also finds relevance to Russia. On 10.04.2024, Pashinyan says that Historical Armenia needs *"outside help"*, *"sponsor"*, *"saviour"*, and *"an elder friend"*. While it does not explicitly say Russia, one can argue that Russia has been Armenia's leading security

provider, and Armenia has relied on Russia in the context of protecting "*Historical Armenia*", which included Karabakh. Pashinyan further states that "*some countries used the Nagorno Karabakh issue to put a collar on the Republic of Armenia*" (10.04.2024). In consequence, this division between Real Armenia and Historical Armenia has geopolitical implications as it implies a start of a new approach to foreign policy and perception of Armenia's allies. That said, the same speech mentions the government's gratefulness towards Russia's important role for Armenia's "*statehood, sovereignty, security and economy*" (10.04.2024). The PM emphasises that:

"[...] *we do not want to wrangle with the Russian Federation, not only because we do not have the opportunity and strength to do so, but also because we appreciate the enormous positive aspects that have been and are in our relations*" (10.04.2024).

Consequently, the government's attitude towards Russia implies an ongoing paradox of the Armenia-Russia relations as Armenia seeks to be less dependent on Russia but simultaneously needs Russia as an ally in the light of ongoing geopolitical vulnerability. Moreover, the association of "*Historical Armenia*" with its overreliance on Russia poses questions about whether "*Real Armenia*" becomes associated with Europe (expert 3). This, however, is uncertain given the limited EU's leverage in the South Caucasus compared to Russia. While the Karabakh leverage is gone, Russia still has a military base in Gyumri, and Armenia remains under Russia's influence in economy and energy sectors (Mammadova, 2024). While the post-war elite rhetoric shows the awareness of the over-dependency on Russia and introduces a chapter of Armenia distancing itself from Russia, it also shows awareness that geography cannot change, and Russia will remain one of the key geopolitical players in the region. Most experts argue that Russia will not return to its old position as Armenia's main friend and ally, but it will not disappear and will continue to have an influence in Armenia (experts 1, 2, 5, 6). Expert 6 notes that under the current geopolitical challenges, some in the Armenian society would still believe that despite previous disappointments, Russia could make a positive impact in Armenia. That said, currently there are other geopolitical players in the region, including Turkey, the US, Europe, Iran and possibly China in the future (expert 5). This implies that Russia is no longer the only main player, which requires Armenia to adapt to the new regional status-quo. However, it also shows a level of uncertainty about what happens next and whether

Russia comes back by implementing hard or soft power (expert 1 and 2). However, as it seems, there are no longer illusions about Russia's role as Armenia's protector. After the war, not only the geopolitical imaginary of Russia changed, but simultaneously "Historical Armenia" started to be framed as Armenia under external influences which was an obstacle to Armenia's diversified foreign policy and full independence. Consequently, the imaginary of "Real Armenia" stands in contrast as Armenia with more agency on the international arena.

Discussion

The empirical section has shown how Armenia's leadership has navigated geopolitical, domestic and security challenges across varying times and contexts by reframing geopolitical imaginaries and instrumentalising national unity and identity narrations. Along with adapting to geopolitical challenges of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and its aftermath, the elite has sustained a low level of political legitimacy, but still higher than that of the political opposition. Militarily strong Azerbaijan, an ambiguous alliance with Russia, the growing influence of Turkey and a lack of measures to implement international law have all left Armenia vulnerable on the international stage. However, the analysis of Armenia should go beyond the concept of realpolitik. This thesis has shown how ideas, narrations and rhetoric construct the meaning behind the state's strategy in a post-conflict setting. Through de-facto accepting territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and redefining the borders of Armenia's homeland and the state, the Armenian elite is constructing a new place in the world that has significantly changed since Armenia's independence. Despite defeat and the experience of national trauma, the Armenian PM reestablishes the idea of Armenia and its trajectory with emphasis on the protection of statehood and democratic principles. There is no longer Nagorno-Karabakh, populated by Armenians, and, against expectations, the loss of war and defeat of N-K have not led the elite to lose power nor frame Karabakh as a place that needs to be reclaimed or repopulated by Karabakh Armenians who had to leave their homes in September 2023.

The new geopolitical imaginaries reflect abandoning the old norms that framed Armenia, its identity around Karabakh and foreign policy. The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh is no longer seen through the lens of the First Karabakh War victory. It is, however, framed in a critical lens, as something that was hanging over the independent Armenia and refrained

it from its full sovereignty. This stands in contrast to the sentiments around Karabakh that mention the role of Karabakh movement from the late 80s in sparking the idea of Armenia's independence. Furthermore, Armenia once sought a role as Karabakh's protector but now seeks to be the protector of only the Republic of Armenia. Russia's role as Armenia's protector has also been disrupted under the recent geopolitical reconstruction, which implies a new chapter for Armenia-Russia relations. Consequently, through the rhetoric and narrations around sovereignty, peace, opportunity, and not needing an external protector, the Armenian elite is justifying its way of navigating issues of international and domestic legitimacy, the national trauma and loss of Karabakh. Karabakh, once a place that was framed as a national myth, associated with Armenian victory, unity and dignity, has become perceived as a growing security issue and internal weakness of the Armenian statehood. Consequently, the idea of Karabakh as a national myth and part of the homeland has gradually disappeared from the political rhetoric of the Armenian PM. There has also been a significant language shift as the Prime Minister would avoid using "Artsakh" and instead would refer to the area as "Nagorno-Karabakh" or "Karabakh".

That said, the change in rhetoric has come gradually. At first, the narrations and rhetoric were inconsistent or paradoxical. It implies Armenia's vulnerability, which has been under pressure to adjust to changing geopolitical and security dynamics, which implies growing demands from Azerbaijan. However, at the same time, it shows agency of the Armenian leadership as they decided to introduce concepts like "Real Armenia" or emphasise Mount Aragats instead of Ararat. The case of Armenia is interesting from a critical geopolitical lens as it shows a significant shift in the rhetoric and narrations around national ideas. The pre-war rhetoric was protecting the old norms around Karabakh. However, when the geopolitical threats intensified, there was a rhetorical shift towards redirecting Armenian identity into new ideas proposed by the government instead of strengthening the old identities. Having consulted the idea of changing identity narrations, some experts would see it as realistic. However, many would be somewhat sceptical of the way the government has approached it. None of the experts would agree with any expansionist geopolitical views. Nevertheless, the critique lies in the use of superficial concepts that do not necessarily reflect the needs of society. Some would

also see it as a way of undermining the Armenian national identity by the government, which prevents the new ideas from being effectively absorbed by the society that is still dealing with national trauma. This is another interesting observation that, in a situation of national shock and trauma, the government is undermining the ideas around identity. While this thesis could not gather a large sample of sociological data on this topic, the low level of political legitimacy and trust towards Pashinyan and the government implies that there are voices of critique about how Pashinyan is navigating geopolitical issues and national trauma. That said, the critique and different views on the topic should be embraced in countries that move towards a democratic system.

Moreover, the new vision of Armenia is a project that reflects the government's agenda and not the whole society. The agenda prioritises the civic identity over ethnic which stands in contrast to what was reinforced before the war. That said, it emphasises the differences between Karabakh Armenians and Armenians from Armenia which creates integration challenges as they all live in Armenia. Finally, both pre- and post-war rhetoric and narrations come down to power and seeking political legitimacy by the Armenian leadership. "Artsakh is Armenia" was opportunistic, a way to gain popularity and show patriotism. It was populist and driven by the PM's charisma. Now, the current narration of "Real Armenia", despite different geopolitical circumstances, has a similar goal of maintaining executive rule and trust.

Conclusion

The Armenian ruling elite creates Armenia's new place in the changing world as Armenia without Karabakh but with a future despite the difficult past, Armenia as a state with defined borders of homeland and state, prioritising civic identity, and finally as a state that does not need an external protector. Consequently, the case of Armenia presents how the leadership employs new narratives to maintain political legitimacy and illustrates how political rhetoric evolves in response to military defeat and growing security threats. This is, however, a complex process as Armenia continues to be on the edge of Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia, which poses challenges of finding one coherent narration of its place in the world. Considering that these parts of the world have contrasting visions of alliance, identity and political systems, Armenia needs to navigate its complex relationship with Russia, Iran, and Europe. Simultaneously, Armenia faces challenges of normalising relations with Turkey and establishing lasting peace with Azerbaijan. Accordingly, Armenia illustrates a case of a geopolitically vulnerable state whose elite tries to navigate its existence despite constant insecurity. This implies challenges faced by a small state in the aftermath of a military defeat and loss of territory that, while not within its internationally recognised borders, had been a key element for Armenian identity, and foreign and security policy.

Moreover, the thesis shows how political legitimacy is maintained to a limited level in conditions of significant political polarisation, weak political opposition, alienation of the society from the elites, societal exhaustion of a protracted conflict, and finally, the lack of support from a long-term security provider – Russia. Armenia illustrates a case of a post-socialist state retaining its place after a historical dependence on Russia. However, in contrast to the case of Poland and the Baltic states, which were also under a dominant Russia's influence, Armenia has not framed its new place as strictly European Armenia (Snyder, 2003; Kuus, 2007). Accordingly, it presents a bigger picture in the struggle among the post-socialist states of becoming less dependent on its past colonial power. While the Armenian leadership shows agency when criticising CSTO or “freezing” its membership, the rhetoric around Russia remains relatively positive. In consequence, the relationship between Armenia and Russia remains paradoxical as, on the one hand, it seeks to be less dependent but, at the same time, remains under Russia's influence. It

correlates to the work by Atanesyan, Reynolds and Mkrtychyan (2024) who argue that Armenia despite seeking more balancing, remains under Russia's significant influence. That said, currently the leverage of Karabakh is gone, which implies that Armenia is likely to further drift away from Russia's dominance which can be seen through Armenia's most recent developments in the foreign policy. Additionally, the public trust in Russia has never been as low as nowadays.

Overall, this thesis contributes to critical geopolitics, nationalism and post-conflict studies by assessing the specific political context of Armenia, where the leadership adopts a less nationalist rhetoric after the military defeat and the loss of territories that have a significant meaning to Armenian identity. In contrast to the case of Greek elites constructing the idea of a lost homeland (Koulos, 2021), the Armenian ruling elite has not followed the same direction. The leadership has not framed Karabakh as a lost national homeland and a symbol of the national ideology. Instead, the topic of Karabakh is often avoided or approached critically. However, in the case of Greece, cultural elites have played a role in shaping the symbol of a lost homeland; therefore, a further research can involve studying how cultural elites frame Karabakh and Armenia in the post-war discourse and how it differs from the narrations of the ruling elite. The topic can be studied through analysis of art exhibitions, contemporary poems and street art in Armenia. Moreover, similarly to the case of Hungary analysed by Merabishvili (2023), the case of Armenia shows how the meaning of borders can change in the political rhetoric after the crisis event. In the case of Armenia, it can be seen primarily through the borders of where the state is and where the homeland is.

Furthermore, while the formation of new norms is still evolving, it can be perceived as a long process and a challenging time, which corresponds to the works of scholars (Barseghyan, 2003; Yengoyan, 2023) who argue that forming a coherent national ideology has been an issue for the political elites in Armenia. That said, the current government, in light of new geopolitical developments, has introduced a new approach of reframing imaginaries around Armenia and Karabakh. Accordingly, the next parliamentary elections in Armenia in June 2026 may test how effective the current narrative and rhetoric shifts are. Here the research by Carter (2023) is important as according to it, Armenians who attach a greater value to lost spaces are less likely to vote for the current government.

Furthermore, national identity is not something that can rapidly change, as it is a long process driven not only by the ruling elites but also by collective memory, literature and art. Especially since Armenia is now facing issues of political polarisation, it may further underline the issue of value fragmentation and lack of coherent national ideology in the society. Scholars like Atanesyan (2024) emphasise the importance of not disregarding the memory of Karabakh as it implies seeking no accountability and creating an environment that allows further aggressions. Moreover, while Sahakyan and Kartashyan (2025) discuss how the rhetoric of Heydar Alyiev changed from peace to war narrative under a changing context, here the analysis shows that the changing context has not impacted the peace narrative as the emphasis on peace agenda was present both before and after the war. That said, other narrations, which were discussed earlier, were driven by a changing context and time.

Further research could continue to assess the topic of political legitimacy in Armenia by analysing the role of opposition and civil society in shaping the reality of the post-war period. The attention could also shift towards the church, which currently stands in opposition to the ruling elite. Alternatively, further research can also ask a question on why Armenia continues to show democratisation efforts despite the defeat in the war, which stands in contrast to Azerbaijan, in which case, the state has become more authoritarian after the defeat in the First Nagorno Karabakh War. In this regard, the role of the EU and the leadership's interest in pursuing closer relations with Europe are among the factors to be assessed. It could be interesting given the continuous rise of the internal crisis in Europe and the rise of right-wing politics. Finally, as the peace negotiations progress, and Armenia normalises relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan, one could research how the Armenian population, especially living in the border regions, is experiencing the changes, whether they see it as a threat or an opportunity, and what their geopolitical imaginaries are.

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Appendix A - Confirmation of Ethical Approval



University
of Glasgow

Ethics Committee for Non-Clinical Research Involving Human Subjects

College of Social
Sciences

Notification of Ethics Application Outcome – UG and PGT Student Applications

Application Details

Undergraduate Student Research Ethics Application Postgraduate Student Research Ethics Application

Application Number: PGT/SPS/2025/003/IMCEERES

Applicant's Name: Anna Olszewska

Project Title: Critical Geopolitics: Reconstruction of the Armenian Political Discourse around Nagorno-Karabakh

Application Status: Fully Approved

Date of Review: 19/02/2025

Start Date of Approval 19/02/2025 End Date of Approval 25/11/2025

NB: Only if the applicant has been given approval can they proceed with their data collection with effect from the date of approval.

Appendix B - Consent Form



University
of Glasgow

College of Social
Sciences

Consent Form

Title of Project: **Critical Geopolitics: Reconstruction of the Armenian discourse around Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenian Geographical Space**

Name of Researcher: Anna Olszewska

Name of Supervisors: David Darchiashvili, Kristel Vits

Please tick as appropriate

- Yes No I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet (Plain Language Statement) for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- Yes No I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
- Yes No I consent to interviews being audio-recorded
- Yes No I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by randomly allocated letter.

I agree that:

- Yes No All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised.
- Yes No The material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.
- Yes No The material will be destroyed once the project is complete.
- Yes No The material may be used in future publications, both print and online.
- Yes No I waive my copyright to any data collected as part of this project.

Privacy Notice:

Yes No

I acknowledge the provision of a Privacy Notice in relation to this research project.

Consent clause:

I agree to take part in this research study

I do not agree to take part in this research study

Name of Participant Signature

Date

Name of Researcher Signature

Date

Appendix C - Interview Questions

Symbolism and Geography

1. The government is currently emphasising the identification of ‘Motherland’ with the state, but what makes up the Motherland for Armenians today?
2. Talking more about Motherland and its symbols, Pashinyan would start emphasising Mount Aragats instead of Mount Ararat – to what extent can it be a successful for Aragats to replace such a symbol of the Mount Ararat?
3. Moving on to the discourse around Karabakh - From my initial observations, before the 2020 war, Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh was shaped as an important symbol for Armenians - it was a pride and reminder of 90s victory, hope and strength – now the topic of Karabakh is no longer at the forefront of the political speeches – how would you describe the current framing of Nagorno-Karabakh in the contemporary Armenian political discourse?
4. Since the end of 2022, I have observed that Pashinyan's started avoiding saying Artsakh in favour of Nagorno-Karabakh in his speeches – do you think it has been a deliberate strategy?
5. Are new myths or identity narratives emerging in Armenia today, especially after 2020/2023?

Geopolitical Discourse

6. In 2019, Pashinyan stated that "Artsakh is Armenia" while at the same time, he supported bringing the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic back to the negotiation process next to Armenia and Azerbaijan, which at first glance contradicts the notion "Artsakh is Armenia" – is there a contradiction between these two positions, or are they reconcilable?
7. After the war in 2020, I would notice contradiction in the ruling elite’s rhetoric, the PM in his statements would hope for “revival of Artsakh” in May 2021 but then in March 2022, Pashinyan would talk about recognising Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity – What role do you think international and domestic actors have played in shaping the discourse change?
8. Russia has been seen as a protector of Armenia since the 19th century – how has this role changed after September 2023?
9. Are there any other points that you wish to share before we conclude this interview?