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➤ Armenia’s Velvet Revolution and the Breakdown of the Nagorno-Karabakh Peace Process*

- The 2018 Velvet Revolution led to a democratic transition in Armenia, marking a detachment from the post-Soviet oligarchic trajectory that characterised its first decades as an independent state.
- Despite all the progresses on the domestic front, Erevan could not help but remain engulfed in a new phase of the long-lasting Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Azerbaijan.
- The Armenian case illustrates that democratisation does not automatically translate into enhanced security. Neither is democratisation inherently destabilising, though: it rather needs strengthening and support by relevant actors.

The Second Nagorno-Karabakh war of autumn 2020 marked a dramatic turning point in the post-Soviet South Caucasus. Beyond its military and humanitarian consequences, the conflict raised a deeper question: how did Armenia’s democratic transition following the 2018 Velvet Revolution interact with a long-stalled peace process, and ultimately precede a major escalation of violence?

Sure, Armenia’s democratisation did not *cause* the 2020 war. Rather, it reshaped domestic decision-making, diplomatic signalling and regional perceptions in ways that – under specific internal and external conditions – contributed to the breakdown of deterrence and negotiations. The Armenian case highlights the risks faced by democratising states embedded in authoritarian and securitised regional environments, where domestic political change can generate strategic misalignment, rigid narratives and unintended escalation.

Democratisation and conflict: A contested relationship

The relationship between democratisation and war has long been debated in International Relations scholarship. While the democratic peace theory maintains that consolidated democracies rarely fight each other,¹ the transitional

¹ The democratic peace theory, popularised in the academic field between the 1980s and 1990s by scholars such as Jack Levy, Edward Masnfield and Jack Snyder revolves around the basic assumption that democracies don’t move war to each other.

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phase toward democracy has been associated with higher conflict propensity. Mansfield and Snyder famously argued that incomplete democratisation can increase the likelihood of war, particularly when weak institutions enable elites to mobilise nationalist rhetoric to secure political support.²

Armenia's post-2018 trajectory fits several elements of this framework, though with important caveats. The Velvet Revolution brought to power a new leadership with strong popular legitimacy but limited experience in statecraft and foreign policy. While democratic standards improved measurably, institutional consolidation lagged behind. Executive power remained highly centralised, checks and balances weak and the foreign policy bureaucracy – especially the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – structurally marginal.

However, unlike classic cases emphasised by Mansfield and Snyder, Armenia did not embark on an aggressive revisionist strategy. Its leadership did not initiate war, nor did it seek territorial expansion. Instead, democratisation altered the *political context* in which the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was managed, affecting both Armenia's negotiation posture and the perceptions of external actors, especially Azerbaijan and Russia.

The Velvet Revolution and Armenia's foreign policy reset

The 2018 Velvet Revolution was a domestically driven, non-violent uprising that ousted a long-entrenched ruling elite and brought Nikol Pashinyan to the premiership. It represented a clear break with Armenia's textbook post-Soviet political order, characterised by oligarchic control, limited pluralism and securitised governance.

In foreign policy terms, the new leadership pursued two parallel objectives. First, it sought to re-legitimise Armenia internationally as a democratic state, hoping this would translate into greater diplomatic support and moral leverage in negotiations. Second, it attempted to reframe the Nagorno-Karabakh issue domestically by aligning it more explicitly with democratic accountability and popular sovereignty.

This dual strategy had mixed results. On the one hand, Armenia's democratic credentials improved its image in Western capitals and multilateral forums. On the other hand, the government's public discourse on Nagorno-Karabakh became increasingly rigid. Statements emphasising the inseparability of Artsakh's security from Armenia's democracy, or the need for Artsakh's direct participation in negotiations, resonated domestically but complicated an already fragile diplomatic process.

International Relations Theory may support again an analytical observation of the matter: from a Foreign Policy Analysis perspective, this evolution reflects the strong role of individual leadership beliefs and perceptions. Pashinyan's political identity as a revolutionary outsider fostered a sharp discursive rupture with previous governments. As a result, negotiation strategies associated with

² Mansfield, Edward D. and Jack Snyder, *Electing to Fight. Why Emerging Democracies Go to War*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2005, <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/2660.001.0001>.



»» **One of the key mechanisms linking Armenia's democratisation to the 2020 escalation lies in misperception and signalling failures**

the old elite were delegitimised as corrupt, ineffective, or morally compromised. This rupture-oriented approach limited policy continuity and reduced room for pragmatic compromise, particularly on confidence-building measures.

Misperception, signalling and the erosion of deterrence

One of the key mechanisms linking Armenia's democratisation to the 2020 escalation lies in misperception and signalling failures. Armenian leaders appeared to overestimate the protective value of international norms and democratic legitimacy, assuming that overt aggression by Azerbaijan would be constrained by diplomatic and reputational costs. At the same time, they underestimated the extent to which domestic political changes in Armenia were perceived as destabilising, or opportunistic, by regional actors.

Azerbaijan, for its part, interpreted Armenia's internal transformation through a strategic lens. The weakening of entrenched elites, civil-military frictions and the politicisation of the Karabakh issue signalled vulnerability rather than restraint. Democratic discourse did not function as a credible commitment device in a region where power asymmetries and military capabilities remain decisive.

This dynamic aligns with classic findings in the literature on misperception and the security dilemma. Decision-makers tend to overestimate their own signalling clarity and underestimate how threatening, or weak, they appear to others.³ In Armenia's case, rhetorical firmness intended for domestic consumption likely reinforced Azerbaijani perceptions that negotiations were deadlocked, while Armenia lacked both the coercive capacity and the external backing to deter escalation.

Institutions, groupthink and policy rigidity

Institutional weakness further exacerbated these dynamics. The post-revolutionary leadership relied heavily on a narrow decision-making circle centred around the Prime Minister's office. While this enhanced political coherence, it also increased the risk of groupthink. Dissenting views, particularly from career diplomats or security professionals perceived as associated with the previous regime, were often sidelined.

The absence of a robust institutional mediation reduced strategic flexibility. Standard operating procedures inherited from the past were either distrusted or insufficiently adapted to new realities. As a result, Armenia struggled to reconcile domestic democratic narratives with the requirements of crisis management and deterrence in a hostile regional environment.

Importantly, this was not simply a failure of leadership competence. It reflected a structural dilemma common to democratising states: how to maintain internal legitimacy while navigating unresolved conflicts shaped by power

³ Jervis, Robert, "War and Misperception", in *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Spring 1988), p. 675-700, <https://doi.org/10.7916/D8348J74>.



»» **Armenia's democratisation unfolded in a predominantly authoritarian regional security complex**

politics rather than norms. In such contexts, democratisation can paradoxically narrow policy options, especially when national identity and territorial issues are deeply intertwined.

Regional dynamics and the authoritarian neighbourhood

Armenia's democratisation unfolded in a predominantly authoritarian regional security complex. Azerbaijan consolidated its own authoritarian model while investing heavily in military modernisation. Turkey provided decisive diplomatic and military backing to Baku, while Russia maintained a position of strategic ambiguity, balancing alliance commitments with broader regional interests.

Within this environment, Armenia's democratic turn altered regional alignments without fundamentally changing the balance of power. While Western actors welcomed political reforms, they remained reluctant to engage more deeply in conflict mediation or security guarantees. Russia, meanwhile, viewed the Velvet Revolution with suspicion, interpreting it as a potential challenge to its influence in the post-Soviet space.

The result was a growing strategic asymmetry. Azerbaijan faced fewer constraints on the use of force, while Armenia increasingly relied on normative expectations rather than material deterrence. From a regional security complex perspective, democratisation in one state can generate instability when it disrupts established patterns of alignment without producing new security arrangements.⁴

Democratisation without protection

The Armenian case illustrates a broader lesson: democratisation does not automatically translate into enhanced security, particularly in unresolved conflict settings. When democratic transitions occur without parallel institutional strengthening, credible deterrence, or supportive regional frameworks, they may expose states to heightened risks.

This does not imply that democratisation is inherently destabilising. Rather, it underscores the importance of sequencing, external support and strategic realism. Democratic legitimacy can complement, but not substitute, military preparedness, diplomatic flexibility and alliance management.

Armenia's experience therefore may be a case in point in observing democratic transitions and its potential implications in broader security issues, although the Caucasus is a case of its own.

First, supporting democratisation in conflict-affected regions requires sustained engagement beyond electoral processes. Institutional capacity-building in foreign policy and security sectors is essential to prevent strategic drift.

⁴ Buzan, Barry and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers. The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511491252>.



Second, democratic governments emerging from revolutions need tailored diplomatic support to manage legacy conflicts. Normative encouragement without material backing may foster false expectations and strategic miscalculation.

Third, regional security dynamics must be taken seriously. Democratisation in authoritarian neighbourhoods can alter threat perceptions and incentives for force. External actors should anticipate and mitigate these effects through proactive diplomacy and conflict prevention mechanisms. In the case of the Caucasus, the presence of highly influential and oversized neighbours such as Turkey and Russia may prove to be an outlier, but that does not mean that the basic assumption should be invalidated by that.

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