

The Aftermath of Peace; Navigating the Nagorno-Karabakh Peace Process through Memory Politics

By: Angel Savanagouder



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Introduction

On August 8, 2025, following a US-led mediation strategy, a peace deal was signed concluding the decades-long Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict. While the international community may be breathing a long-awaited sigh of relief, there are components that bring this peace deal's long-term stability into account. Memory politics provides the best angle into discrepancies that could make or break the deal as it analyzes conflicts through collective and social memory. However, long-seated historical trauma often goes unaddressed within peace processes and as a result does not address the structural conflict that has occurred. The issue becomes increasingly complicated when differing views are taken into account, specifically in terms of how nations remember the origins of the conflict. Ultimately, to understand whether this peace process will last, the content of the peace deal must reflect acknowledgment of historical traumas. Now, both nations have requested amendments to the proposed deal, providing a window into the fragile conditions that this peace deal hinges on.

Background

The Nagorno-Karabakh is a relatively small region within the South Caucasus and has remained disputed land since the late 1980s following weakening Soviet influence in the area. Much of the population identified as ethnically Armenian, although ethnic Azerbaijani remained in the area. Meetings with Mikhail Gorbachev concerning the reunification of the Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia were repeatedly postponed and eventually rejected, leaving the Nagorno-Karabakh under Soviet-Azerbaijan jurisdiction (Fraser et al., 1990). Mass military mobilization between 1987-1988 and the Nagorno-Karabakh War from 1991-1994 led to mass violence, diaspora, and displaced individuals. However, beginning in 2024 normalization efforts began to take place through reciprocal use of both nations' airspace, an act that has not previously occurred. These normalization efforts reached their peak with the most recent peace deal mediated by the United States in August 2025 (EU Reporter, 2025).

The signing of a trilateral joint declaration between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the United States took place in Washington D.C. at the White House in August 2025 (The White House Washington). While the majority of the peace agreement has been agreed upon there are requests from both sides to finetune aspects of the agreement. Among the most notable components include Azerbaijani's request for the dissolution of the OSCE Minsk group and amendments to the Armenian Constitution to strike any mention of the Nagorno-Karabakh region (Ohanjanyan) (Hosaka). In March Armenia conceded to two article propositions put forth by Azerbaijan, the non-deployment of

third-party forces along the contested border as well as the withdrawal of cases against Azerbaijan from International Courts (France-Presse).

Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan's request for the dissolution of the OSCE Minsk group has come to pass after numerous statements from the Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev stating that the task group often represented a biased view of the conflict (Eruygur). This request illustrates Azerbaijan's memory of the OSCE Minsk group process as legitimizing Armenian claims to the land without acknowledging a history of Azerbaijani displacement (Caucasus Watch). However, nearly thirty years from the start of the conflict the institution remained effectively frozen, furthered by the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine (EU Reporter). The Russian invasion of Ukraine additionally restricted contact between the chairs with the US and France stating they had ceased communication in 2022, effectively making the group ineffective. This was an institutional failure that compromised security in both nations, promoting status quo rather than resolving the conflict. Aliyev asserted that the OSCE Minsk group's role in border security was made moot by the claiming of the Karabakh region by Azerbaijan in 2023, claiming that the conflict has ended with the mutual recognition of territory (Faig Mahmudov). The act of declaring a settled conflict reflects the act of closing a memory loop, reframing from a past of displacement as resolved rather than a stagnant persistent issue. Armenia's compliance with this request comes with a need to return displaced ethnic Armenians in the region to Armenia. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan expressed concerns over the dissolution but ultimately agreed with the claim that the conflict has ended (Caucasus Watch)(EU Reporter). However, this reluctant compliance indicates a competing Armenian memory of displacement and territorial claims that are not being addressed through legal streams.

Azerbaijan's second request for amendments to the Armenian constitution would request rewording of the aspects that refer to reunification of the Nagorno-Karabakh region with the nation of Armenia. According to a statement from Aliyev the phrasing of this statement could be misconstrued as "a territorial threat to Azerbaijan" (Kucera). This statement demonstrates a layer of Azerbaijan's memory of those who view Armenian reunification as a source of historical conflict. Aliyev followed up this statement expressing that a peace agreement would not be possible without amendments to the Armenian Constitution. These sentiments can be traced back to events that took place following the Second Karabakh War in 2020 and a significant escalation in 2022 that led to Azerbaijan occupation of the contested land (Nauk) (USC Dornsife). However, the outcome of the conflict is vital to the peace process of 2025 leaving the contested area within Azerbaijan (Tase). Territory gained post 2020 depicts the reframing of Azerbaijani memory from one of victimhood to restored sovereignty, legal ambiguity in this case could serve as a trigger for historical traumas. Despite newly gained territory the conflict continued with the closing of the Lachin corridor by Azerbaijan in 2022 that sparked outrage as thousands were left stranded without resources (Human Rights Watch). The closure of the

corridor reveals long seated memory trauma surrounding past external intervention, and an attempt to reassure internal autonomy. The Russian invasion of Ukraine occurred in the same year significantly limiting Russian involvement in the conflict. Lack of Russian assistance backed up Azerbaijan's view of outside support as unreliable and unhelpful. While it is agreed that following 2020 the contested area became Azerbaijani territory, a constitutional amendment may serve as a legal legitimacy against future references to earlier conflict.

Armenia

Within this conflict, Armenia had contested two articles within the peace process, one which would request the removal of third-party involvement in the region, and the second which would require the removal of all legal cases filed against Azerbaijan. As of March 2025, the peace deal has officially been signed, although the Armenian Constitution has yet to be changed in order to remove any mention of the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan stated that "peace is crucial" for Armenia and has expressed clear concern for the displaced peoples within this conflict, explaining why Armenia has conceded to these two articles despite deep historic ties to the land (ECFR Comms). However, Armenia has shown significant global cooperation creating alliances with Iran, India, and the EU, as well as allowing an EU Monitoring mission to remain in Armenia until 2027 (Walla). While on an international level this constitutional change signals cooperation and conflict resolution, domestically, society remains rooted in historical traumas linked to displacement and genocide as ties to Armenian national identity.

Concerns arise with the removal of the Nagorno-Karabakh from the Armenian Constitution as many ethnic Armenians feel that this is a betrayal to the nation, viewing it as a symbolic loss of identity. As a result, there have been several large protests demanding the removal of Pashinyan from the government, especially following the loss of land after the Second Karabakh War, displaying a withdrawal of collective-memory legitimacy tying into national identity. The perceived erasure of Armenian struggles is a memory trauma lodged within history as demonstrated by historical records reporting Armenian displacement dating back as far as 1878 in the Ottoman Empire (Martin's Press and York). The cycle continued with the contested Armenian genocide, which took place between 1915-1917, but was only recognized as a genocide in 1948, and remains unrecognized by several nations including the UK and Turkey (Balakian). However, despite growing outrage, Pashinyan has remained in power, whether that will continue into the future is uncertain, but collapse of the Armenian government may topple the new and delicate peace agreement (Atasuntsev). As displaced individuals return to Armenia protests grow alongside protests at the Armenia-Iran border add to the already fragile political environment and illustrate growing internal frustration ("BBC Reports from Iranian-Armenian Border").

The removal of the international court cases is something that Pashinyan has stated is necessary to achieving peace in the long term. Armenia officially filed a case with the International Court of Justice (ICJ) against Azerbaijan, under the charge of ethnic cleansing, to which Azerbaijan filed a countersuit. The ICJ agreed to allow both cases proceed, but no ruling was officially decided. Ultimately the charges have been dropped, although the Armenian population has continued to protest (Center for Preventative Action).

Memory Politics and Peace Processes

Memory politics, specifically the idea of collective memory, plays a crucial role in navigating conflict. In considering the way in which conflicts develop, memory builds a narrative that is politicized to escalate or deescalate tensions. Maurice Halbwachs, generally revered as the father of the idea of collective memory, proposed the notion of collective memory is centered around the idea that ‘the past is not preserved but is reconstructed on the basis of the present’. This implies that while the past plays a vital role in creating a collective recollection, acts within the present define how that past will be interpreted.

Collective memory can often include memory trauma that either side may feel they have suffered through the conflict. If peace processes occur without addressing the trauma, this can leave residual grievances that can come to light in a resurgence of the conflict. This can also impact the way memory of a conflict is passed through generations to create a collective memory. Perception plays a key role in developing a future memory and narrative and is vital in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh. If both nations involved are not willing to understand and explore differing views on the conflict, conflicting narratives prolong conflicts and jeopardize peace processes. However, a key feature of memory politics lies in its reliance on the past to govern future actions, often providing explanations for state action that may seem uncalled for. For this reason, memory politics is viewed as too messy, vague, and convoluted to be effectively employed with analyzing peace processes and conflict. However, its relevance in examining the aftermath of a peace process and conflict to determine its longevity provides a wider scope and narrative to understand the conflict. This assists in deliberations by allowing states to consider the view of another state equipping them with an evaluative framework to navigate the conflict and as a guide out of conflict(Aron).

Sociologist John Galtung discussed the idea of two types of peace, positive and negative. Negative peace describes the absence of violence within a conflict, whereas positive peace describes structural peacebuilding that addresses the root causes of the conflict (Galtung). Galtung theorized that while negative peace brings about the end of the violent aspect of conflict, positive peace ensures long lasting peace rather than continuous frozen conflicts. One way in which to address negative peace would be to address the structural violence that is perpetuated by collective memory and

historical traumas. In the case of the Nagorno-Karabakh this would look like recognition of past atrocities and understanding current domestic tensions. However, this alone would not be enough to fix decades of historical traumas, but memory politics could provide a framework to address past grievances within the peace process.

The Future of Peace in Nagorno-Karabakh

While collective memory is constructed based on the past, it has implications today in understanding how states and societies recall and perceive a conflict. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is rife with historical traumas, which when left unaddressed can lead to residual grievances that create a fragile peace. With history describing a past of displacement, violence, and national identity crises, memory politics sheds light on how unaddressed displacement, domestic backlash, and constitutional change must be reviewed in order to see stability and peace.

The rewriting of aspects of Armenia's constitution to remove mentions of Nagorno-Karabakh has received significant backlash from the Armenian community, which may lead to government instability. Many ethnic and displaced Armenians do not feel that this peace deal honors the history of the conflict, and that Pashinyan is sacrificing Nagorno-Karabakh for peace in Armenia. Notably, there remains concerns in Armenia over the removal of third parties patrolling the border, due to the perceived security threat of future territorial revision by Azerbaijan. This perceived threat has the potential to foster insecurity and mistrust between the nations if left unaddressed. Domestic pressure and pushback may result in a fragile peace agreement with the potential to relapse into conflict.

Overall, the current peace agreement has been met with contestation on both sides of the conflict, but in terms of addressing the history of the conflict, it appears that both nations wish to bring an end to the conflict in the most concise way possible. While this may be peaceful for the time being, failure to address historical trauma may mean this is simply a frozen conflict and not a peace deal.

The main component that presents a threat to the current peace deal arises from domestic instability as a response to proposed amendments. This analysis suggests that the most effective way to combat this issue would be to pause the current plan to amend the Armenian constitution to remove mentions of the Nagorno-Karabakh. While both nations have agreed to this amendment, protests and general backlash in Armenia show that this decision is not well supported domestically. A momentary pause, put in place by both nations and overseen by a third-party mediator, would ensure stability and allow current peace mechanisms to be completed, such as the return of displaced individuals to their homes. Multiple third parties, such as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, have recognized that this peace process is delicate, and have pushed for third party monitoring to continue.

This would limit mistrust and provide assurances before major legal changes occur (Foreign Policy Research Institute).

Additionally, while the process is paused, it would be prudent for both nations to revisit the terms of this agreement. The possibility of sequencing constitutional changes to align with implementation of other aspects of the agreement would ensure that changes occur slowly and allow for revision during the process. This would be overseen by a third-party mediator, such as the placement of on the ground presence, to monitor the situation prior to constitutional change. Additionally, arranging regular meetings between Armenian and Azerbaijani officials to revisit how to properly implement constitutional changes without disrupting domestic peace. These meetings would be convened by third party mediators in order to understand how the implementation process is impacting domestic stability (Georgian Institute of Politics). This recommendation would allow further discussion into what constitutional changes would mean for domestic stability and historical grievances and allow for a peaceful transition out of this conflict.

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