

REVIEW ESSAY

Academic vs. government discourse: different and similar views on regional conflicts in the South Caucasus

From conflict to autonomy in the Caucasus, by Arsene Saparov, London, Routledge, 2015, 217 pp., \$145 (hardback), ISBN 978-0415658027

Conflict resolution in South Caucasus, by Esmira Jafarova, Lanham, MD, Lexington Books, 2015, 198 pp., \$61 (hardback), ISBN 978-1498502870

Introduction

The conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and Ossetia are among the most complicated and longest-running disputes that currently exist within the territories of the former Soviet Union. Since the early 1990s, the governments in the region (Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Georgian) have each produced divergent historical interpretations and approaches to these conflicts and to wider regional security issues. Among these, the Azerbaijani and Armenian governments' perceptions of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict have become increasingly sharp and uncompromising as the conflict remains unresolved. Both governments criticize the perceived historical injustices inflicted upon them, and at the same time develop their own victim discourse. Additionally, they accuse each other of misinterpreting the historical record.

While constantly criticizing the West's perceived double standards (offering more support for the territorial integrity of Georgia than for Azerbaijan), the Azerbaijani government wants the Western powers to recognize the injustices suffered by the Azerbaijanis and act accordingly during the peace process (Tokluoglu 2011). On the other hand, while relying mainly on Russia and the external support of its diasporas, the Armenian government believes that the international community will eventually recognize Nagorno-Karabakh. Therefore, both discourses continue to generate negative stereotypes of each other, leading to isolation, intransigence, and lack of mutual trust, thus preventing parties from engaging in proper dialogue. When there is dialogue, it usually ends in an "us versus them" dichotomy.

Considering these challenges, there exists quite a diverse and respectable literature on regional conflict in the South Caucasus, written by both local and foreign scholars, which helps explain the conflicts from political, economic, legal, social, and historic perspectives. The diversity of scholarship makes it possible to read narratives about these conflicts from the point of view of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Abkhazia, and Ossetia. However, despite this diversity, little research has been done to compare academic discourses with government discourses. In an attempt to facilitate such discussion, this review essay aims to compare two books; one from an Azerbaijani scholar and the other from an Armenian scholar, in order to highlight the differences and similarities in perspectives. Inspired by a functionalist approach, this essay seeks to illustrate whether we can expect more from academics, or if the discourse within these books mirrors existing government discourses.¹ We

will first introduce the books according to the three concepts: narratives about the regional conflicts, reflections about regional players, and the role of external actors. We then explain common arguments between both scholars and the possibilities for enhanced communication between them.

Academic narratives on regional conflicts

In *From Conflict to Autonomy in the Caucasus*, Arsene Saparov argues that while a vast body of literature exists on the three South Caucasus states, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, less attention has been devoted to ethnic minority groups. The main aim of this book is to explain the creation of the autonomous regions for ethnic minority groups which resulted from conflict at the time of the collapse of the USSR. The author asks: Why did the Soviet Union grant autonomy to particular ethnic groups, while others were ignored?

Unlike existing scholarship that views the Soviet and Tsarist occupation as one of the main causes of the conflicts in the South Caucasus, Saparov approaches this argument in a more positive way. According to him, while the Tsarist and Bolshevik regimes implemented a number of assimilation and demographic policies, they also provided these ethnic groups with European cultural development, stability, education, and socio-economic progress. The writer argues that before Russians the Caucasus was still pre-industrial, relying on traditional military organization and a large degree of indirect rule from either the Ottoman or Persian empires. While denigrating external players, such as the Ottoman, Persian, and British empires, Saparov explicitly favors the policies of the Bolsheviks and Tsarist Empire in his explanation.

In addition, unlike the existing literature, which argues that the Bolsheviks implemented a “divide and rule” strategy in order to maximize their own control, the author claims that the Bolsheviks divided the South Caucasus region in order to solve the ethnic rivalries in the region. Saparov contends that these problems were not created by the Bolsheviks. Rather these problems emerged with the dissolution of the Russian empire. In 1918, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia declared their independence without a clear border division. In order to establish these new borders, these newly-independent nations resorted to violence, which was also exacerbated by British and Ottoman meddling. These regional disputes were inherited by the Bolsheviks, who later created the autonomous regions in order to provide a short-term solution to these conflicts. It was feared to do otherwise would have hampered their control in the region. While some ethnic groups were granted autonomy, others were ignored because the Bolsheviks gave autonomy only to the places where there were conflicts. Saparov argues that despite the economic importance of these regions, the Bolsheviks were not motivated by the economic importance of these autonomous territories per se. However, Saparov ignores the question of what the Bolsheviks would do with these ethnic identities later and how they used them after coming up with a short-term solution in the 1920–1930s.

Saparov’s book is based on archive materials (Russian, Georgjan, and Armenian) and academic publications with a wide national make-up. He uses mostly Armenian work with some international authors to contribute to the discussion. The archival sources from Azerbaijan are missing, which might be due to a lack of access, and academic literature from Azerbaijani and Georgian scholars is given less space. Due to its clear structure and slight engagement with historical periods, the book is useful to specialists looking for a historical introduction from the perspective of ethnic minorities and Armenia.

Conflict Resolution in South Caucasus by Esmira Jafarova analyzes the engagement of international actors – the United Nations (UN), Organization for Security and Cooperation

in Europe (OSCE), European Union (EU), Russia, Turkey, and US – with three conflicts: Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. The book seeks to identify and explain the main challenges faced by international actors in the region. Jafarova proposes two hypotheses: (1) the contradictory narratives of conflicting parties prevent international actors from settling regional conflicts; (2) the interests of regional and external powers impact the capability of international organizations to deal with regional conflicts. By using the perspectives of neo (classical) realism and constructivism, Jafarova illustrates the contemporary challenges to the regional conflicts, marking a different approach to Saparov's book.

Following the introduction, Chapter Two provides a discussion of historical and alternative narratives of the conflicting parties. Unlike Saparov, Jafarova views the Bolsheviks and Tsarist government as one of the main reasons for the conflicts in the South Caucasus. She argues that they purposefully enhanced the regional disputes in order to divide these nations and rule them easily.

Chapter Three is dedicated to questioning the regional roles of the UN and OSCE. Jafarova argues that both organizations need systematic coordination and management regarding peace settlement. She views the Minsk Group (handling the Karabakh negotiations) as a loose entity rather than an organization in its own right, with its ineffective shuttle diplomacy. According to Jafarova, one of the main challenges to these organizations is the competing interests of member states, particularly Russia. By using its veto power, Russia prevents the UN Security Council from accepting any peace resolutions that are not in its interest.

Chapter Four focuses on Turkey and Russia. On the one hand, Jafarova views Russia as the main challenge and the trigger to the conflicts due to its military prowess and its regional economic monopoly. She also views Turkey as one of the challenges due to its less aggressive but significant foreign policy priorities, which, from time to time, clash with Russian priorities. Unlike Saparov, Jafarova implicitly favors Turkey, while criticizing Russia. This chapter would have benefitted from a discussion of the role of Iran and France. Jafarova argues that Turkey and Russia have more influence on these conflicts than Iran or France. However, France is one of the co-chairs of the Minsk group and a member of the UN Security Council and the EU. Second, Iran has a large Azerbaijani-speaking population and it has good economic and political relations with both Armenia and Azerbaijan. In this regard, while Iran may not directly be involved in the conflict, it plays an important role in terms of balancing its relations with both countries.

Chapter Five argues that both the EU and the US have primarily relied on soft diplomacy in relation to the regional conflicts, with the EU focusing on technical assistance and the US working through the Minsk Group. Jafarova argues that three factors changed this blinkered diplomacy: the energy resources of Azerbaijan, the 2001 War on Terror, and the 2008 Georgia war. However, Jafarova criticizes Western double standards toward the regional conflicts. According to her, the West's support to Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty has always been more indomitable compared to that of Azerbaijan's. Defending Georgia against its powerful adversary Russia seems a higher priority than defending Azerbaijan against Armenia. Chapter Six analyzes the involvement of international organizations and external powers from a theoretical perspective. Despite its strong contribution, some arguments of this chapter overlap with other chapters. The final part of this chapter covers the activities of the Armenian diaspora in the US, but it ignores the diasporas of Azerbaijan and Georgia.

This book is based mainly on reports and academic publications mostly from Azerbaijani and international scholars. Academic literature from Armenian and Georgian scholars

are given less space, which gives a one-sided approach. Despite this, it represents a rich contribution to understanding these regional conflicts from the perspective of Azerbaijan, especially with respect to the role of international organizations.

Selling government discourse?

Despite divergent views on the regional conflicts, both these authors share a number of similar assumptions. First, both scholars view the external actors as a challenge and/or an obstacle to regional stability (Saparov 2015, 21; Jafarova 2015, 22). Furthermore, both see external actors as the initial cause of conflict. For Saparov, this was the Ottoman Empire, and for Jafarova, it was Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union. Second, both scholars agree that after the invasion of Azerbaijan and Armenia in April 1920, Soviet measures were intended to put an end to regional conflicts in the short term. Third and probably most importantly, they both agree that during the period between 1828 and 1840, the Russian authorities purposefully manipulated the demography of the South Caucasus by increasing the number of Armenians in the region in order to strengthen its own power.

Unlike the existing official positions, both scholars try to preserve a balanced language while explaining the regional conflicts. For example, while illustrating the arguments of all parties, Jafarova argues that one of the factors that impede systematic communication between the parties is the existence of contradictory narratives. The author explains that the same event can have multiple interpretations and all sides are equally convinced of the validity of their own narratives, which is an obstacle that international organizations must surmount in order to engage in meaningful peace-building initiatives. This argument is important because – unlike the respective governments – Jafarova does not ignore the narratives of opposing sides. While detailing the narrative of Azerbaijan and Georgia, she also introduces the narratives of Armenia, Abkhazia, and Ossetia. In the same vein, Saparov also mentions conflict victims from all the regional players rather than emphasizing one side. However, despite these differences, both books contribute something to national debates. For instance, both scholars tend to blame external actors for either escalating or ignoring the regional conflicts, notably Russia, Turkey (Ottoman), the EU, and the US. However, what is missing is that neither of them are critical of the failings of the governments in the region (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Abkhazia, Ossetia), while trying to scapegoat external actors for regional failures.

In addition, in line with the Armenian position, Saparov rejects the 1921 decision of the Caucasus Bureau, which gave Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan. Jafarova's criticism of Western double standards is in line with the official position of the Azerbaijani government. Finally, while explaining the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, both scholars tend to criticize the other side for violence and aggression. According to Saparov, Azerbaijan was the initiator of violence and Armenia had to respond to this violence for reasons of self-defense. In the same vein, Jafarova argues that escalation was started by Armenians.

One may argue that despite difficulties, it is feasible to expect more from academics, to some extent. On the one hand, both Saparov and Jafarova intend to preserve a balanced academic discourse while detailing the regional conflicts, all the while they are unable to distance themselves from supporting their own historical narratives. Similar to the Azerbaijan and Armenian governmental discourses, they first seek to solve controversies over the past, to then focus on present issues. However, there are several events on which both Saparov and Jafarova share similar arguments, albeit imperfectly. Therefore, although the same events tell two different stories, it is still possible to find common points between two

scholars. Considering functionalist assumptions, i.e. on pragmatic grounds, it can be argued that by emphasizing contradictory (political) narratives, it is not possible to achieve a comprehensive solution. It is important to either accept or ignore these stories and to move beyond the current mode of thinking.

Note

1. Functionalism is a theory which seeks to bring different nations together under common societal interests and problems without emphasizing power politics, nationalism, religious, cultural, and ideological differences.

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