

**CURRENT DYNAMICS IN THE PUBLIC DISCOURSE  
IN ARMENIA REGARDING FOREIGN POLICY  
PRIORITIES AND PERCEPTIONS OF EU  
AND EU MEMBER COUNTRIES**

*(research conducted by Yerevan Press Club  
in partnership with Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung  
in May 2020 - December 2021)*

The overall goal of the project was identification of the dynamics in the attitudes of Armenian decision makers and opinion shapers towards the EU, member states, the “collective West” in general. This was done in comparison with respective changes vis-à-vis Russia, its integration initiatives, as well as potential role of other global and regional actors. The research was based on a questionnaire addressing the most essential components of the subject and review of respective statements of the most vocal Armenian opinion makers (“reference group”) in the media and social networks. To reflect possible shifts in the attitudes the research was divided into several specific periods when the sensitivity of the situation could lead to the change of perceptions and positions.

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# INTRODUCTION

The suggested study is dedicated to the identification of the dynamics in the attitudes of Armenian public towards the EU, the “collective West” in comparison with respective perceptions vis-à-vis Russia and its integration initiatives. Possible references to other influential actors were also paid attention to. As an indicator for these dynamics the content shared by 32 Armenian “opinion shapers” in the media and social networks were taken. The latter were selected following a consultation within the group of experts both engaged in the study and beyond it. To obtain a comprehensive picture of the opinions and perceptions the selected “respondents” (as the “opinion shapers” were defined throughout the study), represented three conditional segments of the public: a) those sharing or supporting the positions of the current Armenian political leadership (defined as “pro-government”), b) proponents of the previous authorities (1998-2018), conditionally defined as “conservatives”, c) public figures promoting the ideas of “Europeanization”, “westernization” (“pro-Westerners”), d) observers striving to be impartial commentators/analysts of the processes (“experts”).

The dynamics in the public attitudes and perceptions were reflected in the study due to the division of the overall research period (May 1, 2020 - December 31, 2021) into four stages - 1. Prior to the July 2020 clashes on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border; 2. The days of the clashes and subsequent developments preceding the war in NK; 3. The 44 days of the war; 4. Post-war period, which in its turn was split into three sub-periods to track the trends conditioned by internal and external political processes, such as reactions on the trilateral statement on ceasefire, snap elections and start of peace negotiations. The contrasting of the respondents’ positions against their segmentation and timing allowed to identify the peculiarities of the social-political climate in Armenia and certain patterns for its change.

The major conclusions of the study could be formulated as follows:

- the trust of the public towards all external actors tends to decrease;
- the priority of security concerns increasingly dominates over the paradigm of development;
- the attitudes and perceptions vis-à-vis the international context during the studied period were subject to unprecedented volatility;
- further preferences of Armenian public towards the potential foreign partners will mostly depend on the efficiency of their mediation in relations of the country with Azerbaijan and Turkey;
- the opinion shapers who seek to present to the public a impartial picture of what is happening attract less attention of Armenian audience than the opinion leaders with a specific political agenda.

More specific conclusions of the study are presented in the executive summary and detailed findings - in the full report.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At three out of four stages of the current study, which covered 20 months (from the beginning of May 2020 to the end of 2021), the agenda of the reference group (opinion leaders, speaking from different positions, but reflecting through media and social networks the sentiments of different parts of the Armenian society) was almost entirely focused on security issues. Thus, Armenia's relations with the European Union and other external players were considered in this very context. Only at the first stage, preceding the July (2020) hostilities in Tavush region, the topic of Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict and related circumstances was more or less combined with the country's development paradigm and the role of Yerevan's partners in this process, including the EU. Nevertheless, in such a duality of vision of national interests, the security issues of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabagh were unequivocally in the first place. This fact resulted in the dominant attention by four categories of respondents, into which the reference group formed for the joint project of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and Yerevan Press Club (see *study methodology - YPC*) was conditionally split, towards the Armenian-Russian relations as determining the level of military risks and defense capacity of the country. The emphasis in the statements, regardless of the political orientation of their authors, was made on the challenges associated with regional instability, the contradictions between Yerevan and Moscow, the use of various channels of influence by the latter, including elements of “hybrid war” (the price of supplied gas, propaganda, etc.).

Starting from mid-July 2020, the topics of the direct Armenian-Azerbaijani confrontation, the intensification of Turkey's role in the South Caucasus and, by contrast, the decreased interest of the West - both the EU and the United States - in the region became dominant. Accordingly, Armenia's cooperation with the European Union, whose agenda included mainly reforms in various spheres of the country's life, its development as a modern democratic state, appeared on the back burner. The spread of the coronavirus pandemic also had a certain impact on the described situation, which, along with the lack of consistency and political will on the part of the Armenian authorities, halted the implementation of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement and the progress of the visa dialogue between the RA and the EU. At the same time, it is impossible to overlook the quite limited proactivity of the official Yerevan itself in cooperation with Brussels also in countering the pandemic and participation in the “Team Europe” programme.

When it comes to immediately the period of the 44-Day War in Nagorno-Karabagh, the “deactivation” of the role of the West in the South Caucasus was also largely conditioned, based on the results of this study, by such factor as the presidential elections in the United States, which grabbed the attention of both the leading politicians of this country and the international community towards the sharp confrontation between American Republicans and Democrats. Throughout almost the entire study, the reference group noted the weakening of the influence of international institutions on the Karabagh conflict, among them also of the OSCE Minsk Group's Co-Chairs.

One of the key features, recorded based on the study findings, is the volatility, changeability of moods and sympathies in the Armenian society. This was reflected both in the results of various sociological studies, polls, when within a few months the 80% positive attitude towards a particular foreign state could be almost halved, and in the statements in the media and social networks by individual representatives of the

reference group set for this study. The period of the 44-Day War turned out to be particularly distinguishing in this sense. In the early days, there was a patriotic upsurge, satisfaction was expressed with the fact that the RA Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan showed determination to defend the country on his own. At the same time, the opinion leaders, whose awareness could hardly be in doubt, did not give any signs to the general public that during the same period the Armenian armed forces were suffering huge losses. More or less complete information about this became available to the audience only a few months later. Already about a week after the start of hostilities much more importance was given to the external players, their efforts to establish a truce and contain Azerbaijan and Turkey. And the main hopes were pinned not on international organizations (UN Security Council, European Union, OSCE, CSTO), but on individual states - first of all, Russia, USA, France. And towards the end of the war, there was a progressive skepticism about the efficiency of outside influence on the situation. It can be said that both in this period and in the future, from among all international institutions and foreign states, only France managed to retain and even strengthen its positive image in the Armenian information environment.

After the signing of the November 9, 2020 trilateral (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Russia) ceasefire statement, the emphasis of the media discourse, despite the persistence of threats to the security of the country and its citizens, shifted towards domestic politics - accusations of Nikol Pashinyan's treachery and demands for his resignation, conduct of snap parliamentary elections, competition for the role of the main alternative to the ruling team...The arguments of the opponents, however, included mainly foreign policy issues: strengthening Armenia's subjectivity in relations with the outside world, prospects for peace agreements with Azerbaijan, normalization of relations with Turkey, future of Nagorno-Karabagh, priorities of international partnership. However, the central issue remained the maintaining or changing power in the country as the only way to solve problems. The results of the June 20, 2021 parliamentary elections only briefly diminished the relevance of this issue. The cosmetically reformatted RA leadership very soon faced a new flurry of crossfire criticism by the parliamentary and most active extra-parliamentary opposition. The former accused Nikol Pashinyan and his foreign policy of departure from a strategic alliance with Russia, while the latter, on the contrary, for their complete subordination to Moscow and their unwillingness to perceive signals from outside - primarily from the United States and the EU (France playing a special role) - that open up new opportunities for the country. Moreover, both sides, as before the elections, associated the national revival exclusively with the removal of Pashinyan and his team from power.

Only at the end of 2021, when the post-war order in the region was more or less outlined, the substantial component of foreign policy began to balance the internal conjuncture. This was facilitated by both the negotiations mediated by Russia and the vigorous engagement of the EU in the Armenian-Azerbaijani settlement in the person of Charles Michel, President of the European Council, with the active support of French President Emmanuel Macron. The combination of the two processes was assessed by different segments of the reference group set for this study rather controversially. The supporters of the parliamentary opposition once again condemned Pashinyan for the fact that, in search of a solution to problems, he "betrays" Moscow, putting Armenia and Nagorno-Karabagh at risk of being "punished". The conditional category of "pro-Western" respondents within the study sees in what is happening a new manifestation of fierce competition between Russia and the West for the South Caucasus and calls on to bet on the initiatives of Brussels, Paris and Washington. Finally, the third position, observed in the assessments of one part of the reference group, is that the roles of

Moscow and Brussels do not contradict, but complement each other. While Russia, with its military presence, provides a “force basis” for the agreements reached, the EU, with its diplomatic methods and potential investments, creates incentives for the consent of the conflicting parties.

Be that as it may, the practical engagement of the European Union in the post-war processes between Baku and Yerevan, according to publications in the Armenian media and the Armenian segment of social networks, opens up prospects for this external player to step out from certain “self-isolation” in issues related to the South Caucasus. In this regard, there is less certainty, at least for now, with expectations from the “Summit for Democracy” initiative of US President Joe Biden, to which Armenia was also invited. However, forecasts about the intensification of the US role in the region (probably in tandem with the EU) were also recorded within the framework of this study.

**STAGE ONE OF THE STUDY:  
PRIOR TO THE JULY CLASHES  
ON THE ARMENIAN-AZERBAIJANI BORDER  
(MAY 1 - JULY 11, 2020)**

**IN THE PERIOD** preceding the July (2020) clashes between the armed forces of Armenia and Azerbaijan in Tavush region (from May 1 to July 11), the topic of Yerevan's cooperation with the European Union and other external partners, if compared with other periods studied, was quite actively discussed in Armenian media and Armenian segment of social networks.

In particular, the category of the studied personalities, to a certain extent **reflecting the official position, or sympathizing with the RA authorities**, highlighted the positive attitude of the European Union towards Armenia, despite the fact that the spread of the coronavirus had significantly reduced the intensity of bilateral cooperation. It was noted that the EU assistance in the framework of the Eastern Partnership remains an important factor for the development of the country. At the same time, discontent was expressed that the visa dialogue was not starting, although anti-discrimination legislation was adopted in Armenia, and biometric passports were introduced.

At the same time, it has been suggested that the format of the Eastern Partnership should be used for the Karabagh settlement.

It is noteworthy that a significant part of the respondents (for the purposes of this study conditionally included in the “close to the RA authorities” category) has, relatively speaking, a pro-Western orientation. In this circle there is an opinion that the RA Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan is an undesirable figure for the leadership of the Russian Federation, Moscow is fighting against him both with the use of a propaganda machine within and outside Armenia, and through the mechanisms of the Eurasian Economic Union, gas prices, political pressure by the representatives of the country's government overthrown in 2018 (“5th column”). Gazprom and other Russian companies present in the country are perceived as instruments for fulfilling Moscow's imperial ambitions and “subjugating Armenia”. According to this category, the goal of Russia is to limit the sovereignty of Armenia, to hinder the course of both Armenia and the South Caucasus as a whole towards the United States and the European Union. Accordingly, there has been put forward an idea that Yerevan should pursue a multi-vector policy with an emphasis on integration processes with Europe and North Atlantic community. Among the same segment of respondents, there is a widespread belief that the rating of Russia in Armenia is constantly decreasing: the 2020 study of Caucasus Research Resource Center is presented as an argument. And one of the main reasons is the sale of offensive weapons by Russia to Azerbaijan.

In general, all the categories of respondents paid much more attention to Russia, relations with Russia, its politics than to the European Union or other international actors. In this sense, one of the topics touched upon at all stages of the study was the “Lavrov Plan” (in the words of the study respondents, “territories in exchange for nothing”), which, according to a widespread assessment, is a bait for Azerbaijan's

engagement in the Eurasian Economic Union (EaEU). At the same time, the pro-Western respondents of this study were inclined not so much to criticize, for instance, the report presented to the European Parliament on the unacceptability of the construction of the Kapan-Hadrut highway, as to place blame on the RA authorities for inefficient diplomacy. In the same context, one should consider the version that the dispatch upon Moscow's request of the Armenian military-humanitarian mission to Syria following the hike in prices for Russian gas for Armenia was Yerevan's legitimization of this step of "Gazprom".

The "friendly criticism" of the RA authorities by its pro-Western supporters also included the position of denying "isms" (ideological doctrines), voiced by Nikol Pashinyan almost immediately after he took office. An example cited was Georgia, which chose "ism" and a geopolitical orientation, carried out reforms based on maximum approximation to the EU standards, and, as a result, kept receiving incomparably greater assistance from the EU and from the West in general, than Armenia. By the same logic, we should consider the reaction of this category of respondents towards the support by Donald Tusk, President of the European People's Party, to the political forces and figures opposing Nikol Pashinyan, namely the ousted Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan and the leader of "Prosperous Armenia" party Gagik Tsarukyan. Their point was that one should neither overestimate nor underestimate Donald Tusk's statements. The ruling political force needs to think about its image in the eyes of the largest European party. Confidence has been expressed that no one canceled the CEPA (Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement), and despite all the efforts of the representatives of the former authorities, the European Union remains interested in strengthening relations with the "new Armenia". They also highlighted the joint letter of the President of the European Council Charles Michel and the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen to the RA Prime Minister Pashinyan on the occasion of the Europe Day celebrations in Yerevan. The letter endorsed the reforms in Armenia and expressed commitment to common values.

More radical points of view were expressed by the respondents, conditionally included in the category of "**pro-Western**" **opponents of the RA authorities**. Despite the relatively modest representation in the political field, as evidenced by the results of the June 20, 2021 parliamentary elections, this category is quite active in the media space. In this circle, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State George Kent's remarks in a May 7 interview to the Voice of America radio were strongly welcomed. In particular, this referred to his negative comments on the statements of Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who had criticized the position of Yerevan on the Karabagh settlement. One of the conclusions made after the interview with Kent was that Azerbaijan should get rid of Ilham Aliyev and come to an agreement with Armenia, proving that these are two democratic states to have freed themselves from Russian dependence.

In this context, there was much talk about the weakening of the positions of Russia and its integration projects: "Putin's rating is falling, and he needs a resounding success in foreign policy - inclusion of Azerbaijan in the EaEU and deployment of Russian troops in Artsakh. But Armenia will not let this happen"; "The influence of China in Kazakhstan and other countries of Central Asia is growing, which will inevitably lead to the collapse of the Eurasian Economic Union"; "The victory of "yes" in the Russian referendum (Russian constitutional referendum of June 25-July 1, 2020 - **YPC**) will result in the overthrow of the "tsar". How ready is Armenia for such a turn of events, will it be able to get rid of those vassal relations Levon Ter-Petrosyan entered into (meaning the first years of the RA independence after the collapse of the USSR - **YPC**)?"

Another evidence of the radical nature of the positions of this category of respondents was the fact that several users of social networks shared a post where the author described his negative feelings after having seen planes with a red Soviet flag circling in the sky on May 9, and claimed that only the view of the Turkish and Azerbaijani flags could have been worse than that. The USSR is a state “which at the beginning of the century deprived us of our independence and gifted our lands to Turkey, Azerbaijan and Georgia.” There were often statements also of the following kind: “More than 200-year domination of Russia over Eastern Armenia is coming to an end. Armenia will no longer be an outpost. Armenia is ten times more important for Russia than vice versa, therefore, it is in the strategic interest of Russia to have decent and equal relations with it”; “An ally for Russia is a “serf”, hence for Armenia, which is a member of the CSTO and the EaEU always voting in favor of Russia, the gas price rises, and for Georgia, aspiring to NATO and EU membership it decreases.”

A specific point present in the content disseminated by this category was the mentioning of the Treaty of Sevres (August 10, 1920) and the US President Woodrow Wilson’s arbitral award (November 22, 1920) defining the borders of Armenia as international legal documents that remained relevant. In particular, a Woodrow Wilson map dated 1925 was published, which, in the author's opinion, was a proof to the recognition of Armenia by the United States within these very borders. All this information was contrasted with the role of Moscow: “Armenia is perceived as an outpost of the Russian Empire, and the outpost is not allowed to develop. When we strengthen our sovereignty, the issues of both gas and electricity will be resolved in the interests of the people, opportunities for development will appear.”

At the same time, Armenian opinion shapers, acting from openly pro-Western, anti-Russian positions, unequivocally reject Russophobia. They claim that their struggle against the great-power, colonial policy of Russia cannot be interpreted as inciting anti-Russian sentiments, that the relations between Armenia and Russia are relations between peoples and not “petty actors”. And the strengthening of Armenia's sovereignty in no way contradicts, but rather reinforces these relations.

In the period preceding the July clashes in Tavush, the respondents of the category, for the purposes of this study conditionally named “**conservatives**” expressed constant concern over the deterioration of relations with both the European Union (“collective West”) and the Russian Federation. At the same time, they firmly gave priority to the latter. Moreover, they underlined that from the first days after taking office, Nikol Pashinyan had been worsening relations with Russia, the EaEU, the CSTO, the USA, the EU, China, Iran, “this government is not capable of pursuing a successful foreign policy.”

As an example of problems in relations with the EU, highlight was put on the lack of initiative by the Armenian authorities to receive a substantial aid package for recovery from losses caused by the coronavirus pandemic (“Team Europe”). Attention was also paid to the ban on flights of Armenian airlines to the countries of the European Union due to their inclusion in the EU AIR Safety List in June 2020. It was noted that not a single word had been said about Armenia, including the CEPA and visa liberalization at the discussion in the European Parliament on the preparation for the next Eastern Partnership summit. The above-mentioned condemnation of the planned construction of the Kapan-Hadrut highway by the special co-rapporteurs of the European Parliament was also assessed primarily as a failure of Armenian diplomacy. And the fact that the

European People's Party, despite its concern expressed on the democratic backsliding in Armenia, including pressure on the opposition, continued to support Armenia and its bilateral relations with the EU within the frames of the CEPA, was happening notwithstanding the activities of the authorities and was purely a merit of the opposition cooperating with EPP.

The only relative success of Armenia in the European structures in this period was the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights on the case of Ramil Safarov. However, the representatives and supporters of the former authorities, included in the conditional category of “conservatives”, claimed that this was their merit, since they had initiated the lawsuit at one time, and not the new government. Added to that, there was an opinion that the ECHR ruling could not be called a complete victory, for it did not imply the responsibility of the state of Azerbaijan, as well as of Hungary, which extradited the murderer of the Armenian officer.

Apart from criticizing the Armenian authorities for the inefficiency of their cooperation with European, Western partners, the respondents of this category also complained about the latter. In particular, their discontent was addressed to the representatives of the European Union for their statements that Armenia has recorded progress in democracy. They highlighted the protest actions in front of the EU Delegation office in Yerevan and other forms of protest demanding a reaction to the criminal persecution of opposition figures, the media, and representatives of the former authorities. The call to the Armenian society by US Ambassador Lynn Tracy to prepare for peace also received a negative response: she was invited to go with this mission to Baku.

But the bulk of the content disseminated by this category addressed Armenia's relations with Russia. Concern was expressed that, in the context of the internal political struggle, the ruling political force was inciting anti-Russian sentiments: this also related to the cases of the second RA President Robert Kocharyan, former CSTO Secretary General Yuri Khachaturov and others, the topic of cancellation of the Russian contract on preventive works at the Armenian Nuclear Power Plant and sanctions against the Russian Railways. In this regard, there was a conviction that a geopolitical U-turn for Armenia was impossible, and problems in relations with Russia created security threats.

Other individual episodes that caused a surge in criticism of the RA authorities by the “conservatives” were Pashinyan's refusal to travel to the victory parade in Moscow (there was an opinion that it was due to the impossibility of a bilateral meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin), the conflict with Gazprom, which is one of the largest employers, taxpayers and investors in Armenia, a reportage on Public TV where opposition figure Alexei Navalny gave an assessment of the constitutional referendum in Russia...

Another geopolitical mistake, in their opinion, was the joining of Armenia to the International Religious Freedom Alliance in June 2020, which was viewed as an “anti-Chinese initiative”. A forecast was voiced that by this step Yerevan was causing enormous damage to its highly important relations with Beijing.

One of the main points in one way or another connected with external circles of contradictions **between the supporters of Armenian authorities and their main critics, “conservatives”**, was the conflict around the Constitutional Court. The first ones were confident that the ECHR would not interfere in this sovereign issue for

Armenia, that the Constitutional Court issue was tantamount to the fight against mafia, and it could be easily explained to the Venice Commission. In the media and on social networks, one could even come across mocking statements about the Head of the Venice Commission Gianni Buquicchio, and the judges of the ECHR who were “misguided” in the conflict.

The “conservatives”, on the contrary, endorsed the statement of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe that Armenia was acting against the recommendations of the Venice Commission on the Constitutional Court, disseminated the EPP's concern over the reaction of Yerevan regarding the very recommendations of the Venice Commission and the call of the Centrist Democrat International to the RA authorities to end their policy towards the Constitutional Court. At the same time, they appealed to the representatives of the EU and other international organizations, stating that the situation around the CC damages the RA-EU relations and the promotion of the European values in Armenia.

Another reason for heated discussions between the two main opponents was the ratification by the RA National Assembly of the Council of Europe's (Lanzarote) Convention on Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse. The government supporters, who welcomed the ratification, brought examples of sexual abuse of children in Armenia, “trolled” the representatives of the former government by saying that they had not joined the Convention at one time, since the adviser to their prime minister was a pedophile. The opponents of the current authorities, in their turn, argued that the ratification of the Lanzarote Convention threatened the traditional family values.

The discussion on the above-mentioned topic was often intertwined with accusations of the supporters of the authorities and the “conservatives” against each other in pandering to the “fifth columns”. The former actively disseminated information about the foreign funding of a number of organizations associated with the previous government, which undermined the sovereignty of Armenia and hindered the implementation of democratic reforms. While the “conservatives” claimed that the Western money was used to create and operate “serf NGOs” threatening the national security. They consistently introduced into the public discourse the stereotype of “sorosists” and kept looking for them in power structures.

Another topic with hidden geopolitical undertone was the debate on coronavirus. The supporters of the authorities revealed cases of the spread of disinformation on the coronavirus, measures to counter it, vaccination, seeing this as machinations of external forces and demanding that the National Security Service investigate such precedents. Among other things, representatives of the former authorities and “their patrons in Russia” were accused of such activities.

And the fourth conditional category, defined for the purposes of the current study, included the “**experts**”, who were supposed to be guided in their informational preferences and assessments mainly by their knowledge of the subject. The representatives of this category at the first stage of the study focused on the topic of Armenia's sovereignty. In particular, they analyzed the external factors influencing it.

Thus, in their opinion, Russian gas supplies are an important instrument of counteracting Armenia's sovereign ambitions. The 2013 “Gas agreement”, which was a continuation of the “operation to force” Armenia to abandon the Association Agreement

with the European Union, deprived Yerevan of any independence in providing the country with "blue fuel". The increase in prices for Russian gas in 2020 should be considered in the same context.

The topic of the popular national figure of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Garegin Nzhdeh "being a collaborator with fascist Germany", according to a number of Armenian experts, was also from time to time activated from the outside (in this case from Russia and Azerbaijan) when there was a need to exert pressure and limit the sovereignty of Armenia. This happened in 2020 as well.

There was a belief that the main subject of discussion on the Armenian-Russian relations should be independence and not the geopolitical orientation. Whenever the country was drawn into the confrontation between Russia and the West (on either side), it paid with sovereignty. Therefore, Armenia should not be a party to this confrontation.

In this regard, a conclusion by one of the representatives of the "experts" category was quite distinguishing: "There has not been internal political struggle in Armenia. There has been, in fact, a fight between sovereignty and the great-power encroachment on it."

## **STAGE TWO OF THE STUDY: THE DAYS OF THE CLASHES AND SUBSEQUENT DEVELOPMENTS PRECEDING THE 44-DAY WAR IN NK (JULY 12 - SEPTEMBER 26, 2020)**

**Due to the concentration** of public attention in this period on security issues, the topic of Armenia's cooperation with the European Union remained relatively in the shadow. Moreover, the representatives of the reference group selected for this study touched upon it even less often than at the previous stage. As for the role of the main international players in issues of priority to Armenia, Russia appeared to be even more in the spotlight than in the previous two plus months.

As at the first stage of the study, in issues related to foreign policy and security, there was recorded a certain proximity of positions of respondents included in two conditional categories - on the one hand, **supporting Prime Minister** Nikol Pashinyan and his team and, on the other hand, **having “pro-Western” views**.

Both of them attached great importance to the cooperation with the European Union in general and within the framework of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), in particular. The importance of the EU provision of the GSP+ trade regime to Yerevan, which envisaged substantial tariff concessions for the products imported from Armenia, was emphasized. As at the first stage of monitoring, the potential role of the European Union in the negotiation process between Armenia and Azerbaijan was noted. At the same time, there was very little specificity on the agenda of the RA-EU bilateral relations.

During this period there were responses, albeit apparently modest, recorded to the publication of the book “The Armenian Revolution: An Unfinished Cable” by the former EU Ambassador to Armenia Peter Switalski, which was perceived by many as a reflection of the European foreign policy vis-à-vis Armenia. Allowing such consideration means accepting that Brussels endorsed the “velvet revolution” and the new government. At the same time, Nikol Pashinyan's supporters rejected the opinion that the interest of his political associates in cooperation with the EU implied a course towards abandoning the EaEU and the CSTO.

The role of the CSTO in the context of hostilities in Tavush became the focus of attention of all categories of respondents, including the **supporters of the authorities and Western oriented politicians and analysts**. Both of these categories supported the stated position of official Yerevan: “We don’t need any support from the CSTO, we’ll get away by ourselves. If anything further comes up, then we can talk on multilateral level about what we expect and from whom.” However, the tone of the statements by the representatives of the above two categories regarding Russia and the security system headed by it differed in acuteness.

The first ones underlined the point that Vladimir Putin could not order Pashinyan, unlike his predecessor Serzh Sargsyan, not to respond to the Azerbaijani aggression and withdraw troops (implying that during the 2016 four-day war Russia held Armenia

back). Respectively, they saw positive trends in the CSTO attitude towards Armenia as part of the responsibility zone of this organization and in the Armenian-Russian relations following the July events. The RF and the RA have a number of shared interests in the South Caucasus region, and the parties continue the mutually beneficial cooperation.

The second ones, however, were sharper in their comments: the actors of international relations considered or declared as “enemies” by Russia will not necessarily be such for us. In particular, Armenia has no reason to spoil its relations with the European Union, USA, Japan, India, China, Canada, etc. On the contrary, there is every reason to strengthen and expand these relations, and Russia has to reckon with the choice of Yerevan, regardless of whether she likes it or not.

**Both of the above-mentioned categories** of respondents recognized the importance of joint efforts of the United States, France, Russia, the OSCE and, in particular, the Minsk Group Co-Chairs, to reduce the tension created as a result of the clashes in Tavush. The OSCE monitoring on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border and the line of contact in Nagorno-Karabagh, which had become one of the main topics in the negotiations after the April 2016 war, regained its relevance.

The calls of prominent American and European officials, politicians, celebrities (in particular, Kim Kardashian) to take measures to ensure the security of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabagh in the face of the threat of new military actions posed by Azerbaijan, received regular and wide coverage. The legislative initiative of members of the US House of Representatives Brad Sherman and Frank Pallone against the provision of military aid to Azerbaijan was highly appreciated. At the same time, it was noted that after the presidency of George W. Bush, official Washington started reducing its activity in relation to the South Caucasus region and, in particular, the Karabagh problem.

The conditional “**pro-Westerners**” questioned whether the CSTO actually existed. If now the EaEU and the CSTO do not react, then we are going different ways. The UN, the USA, the EU, and the OSCE Minsk Group reacted to the escalation, and the CSTO was bound to make a statement in favor of Yerevan, but they even canceled the meeting on this issue. Based on the July events, a conclusion was drawn about a possible adventure of Azerbaijan after the joint military drills with Turkey in Nakhichevan. It was assumed that the CSTO would not fulfill its obligations, and Russia would delay the planned supply of arms, since it had given Azerbaijan the “go-ahead” to attack. The goal of Russia was to force Armenia to relinquish the controlled territories around Nagorno-Karabagh. Therefore, Armenia should appeal to the USA, France and Greece for assistance. This category welcomed the decision of the US Congress to provide assistance to Artsakh in mine clearance matters. The activity of “Halo Trust” organization in this regard was highly appreciated.

At the same time, worthy of note in the new circumstances was the mentioning of the Kosovo problem and its comparison with the Karabagh one. It should be noted that within the framework of this study such mentions were rare, but symptomatic for obtaining a complete picture of public expectations in Armenia from the West and Russia. It was emphasized that Kosovo is territorially an inseparable part of Europe, therefore, the US and the EU were much more interested in the settlement there than in the case of Nagorno-Karabagh. As soon as Serbia overcomes its disagreements with Washington and the European capitals, Russia will definitively lose significant leverage

in the Balkans. But in the Nagorno-Karabagh issue, despite the presence of other MG Co-Chairs, Moscow remains the main player.

The focus on the CSTO topic became a reason to discuss the mission and regulations of this organization in comparison with its counterparts. In particular, it was noted that the CSTO, which declared itself a military alliance, in fact was not one, since the treaty did not have equivalents to the NATO Article 5 or the Warsaw Pact article 4, which defines that attack against one ally is considered as an attack against all allies.

Another topic discussed on social networks was the opinion on the plans of the Russian Federation to take Nagorno-Karabagh under its own control. One of the reasons was the publication of an article on “Regnum” news agency website, where the following view was put forward: “Pro-Russian Karabagh will be much more beneficial for Russia than a military base in Armenia. There is an understanding of this in Yerevan, that is why the talk that the 102nd military base should be withdrawn has died down. Moreover, hardly anyone believes that the presence of this base is more beneficial for Russia than for Armenia. If Moscow directs all its attention towards Nagorno-Karabagh, Armenia will have to reconsider its emphases and slightly upset the balance.”

The respondents with **conditionally pro-Western orientation** touched upon the consequences of Moscow's pressure on Yerevan and the increased influence of Russia. They particularly wondered why the Armenian authorities turned a blind eye to the malpractices in the activities of the South Caucasus Railway (a 100% subsidiary of the “Russian Railways” company), which they had begun to investigate almost immediately after the 2018 “velvet revolution”.

For several days, during and after the end of hostilities in Tavush, the problem of violence and other anti-Armenian actions by Azerbaijanis in the USA, Europe and Russia came to the forefront. For example, both “pro-government” and “pro-Western” respondents noted: “If Russian law enforcement agencies do not prosecute the owners of the Food City market for discriminating against Armenian suppliers on national grounds, it will become obvious that they were acting with the direct connivance of the Kremlin.”

A strong backlash by both of the above-mentioned categories of respondents was triggered by the post of the editor-in-chief of “Russia Today” news agency Margarita Simonyan, whose main point was that today's Armenia did not deserve Russia's support. At the same time, they highlighted the fact that this post had first been published and later removed from the CSTO website, followed by a statement that it contradicted the position of the organization. However, there was an opinion that the RA Ministry of Foreign Affairs had to demand clarifications regarding the statements of Margarita Simonyan given her status as one of the leaders of the largest Russian state media group. Thus, the “pro-Western” respondents declared: “Don't forget that Simonyan is a Kremlin mouthpiece. Therefore, address the discontent properly.”

It was during **the period covered by the second stage** of this study that highly intense and sharp discussions unfolded over Turkey's claims to the role of an actor directly involved in decision-making regarding the processes in the South Caucasus. The participants of this discourse in Armenian media and Armenian segment of social networks persistently repeated that the Minsk Group was the only format mandated to deal with Karabagh conflict. The “pro-Western” respondents resolutely contrasted their arguments with those who believe that cooperation between Russia and Turkey may

become another effective resource for solving the problems of the region. Meanwhile, opinion leaders, more loyal to official Yerevan, speculated that, unlike past escalations in Karabagh conflict zone, Moscow, after the July hostilities in Tavush, would clearly declare its priorities and would not allow destabilization in the region, since Armenia is its partner within the CSTO. At the same time, a demand was repeatedly voiced to expel Turkey from its membership of the OSCE Minsk Group.

It is in the context of the July events in Tavush that **the overwhelming majority of opinion leaders in Armenia** started seriously viewing Ankara as a factor acting in the region contrary to the interests of the European Union and the United States. Taking into account the extraordinary activeness of Turkey, distancing itself from the NATO, the EU and the United States, there was a conviction that Armenia should initiate a new dialogue on security issues with both Russia and the United States (in a bilateral format and within NATO), and with interested European members of the North Atlantic alliance. And relations with the Greece-Cyprus tandem, Egypt, Israel and a number of other countries should take on a new dimension - security and defense. Following the results of the Tavush events, a forecast was voiced that Ankara (it was Turkey to be considered as the side most interested in escalation) had temporarily been pushed back and, until September 26, would not initiate actions that would aggravate the European Union "nausea" towards her.

In general, the topic of the claims by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to interfere in the affairs of the South Caucasus was discussed in close connection with Armenian-Russian relations, Armenia's membership to the EaEU and the CSTO. One of the respondents included in the "pro-Western" category said the following: "Fears about Turkey (sometimes justified) have led Armenia to consistent compromises on the issue of sovereignty - Russian base on unfavorable terms; transfer of property to Russia in exchange for debt; the terrorist attack of October 27, 1999, and the March 1, 2008 shooting at the protesters; scandalous changes in the CSTO Charter, due to which Armenia lost exclusive control over its territory and made possible Moscow's interference in its domestic affairs."

Already after the July 2020 hostilities in Tavush, the Armenian information space began to discuss the topic of bans on Turkish made products and their replacement with their own ones or those of other importers. Doubts, however, were expressed about the feasibility of such a ban, since due to its EaEU membership, Armenia lost its full-fledged sovereignty for the effective application of such measures. Unless, as noted by the representatives of the reference group of this study, Yerevan might come up with an unpromising initiative so that "all the member states of the Eurasian Economic Union renounce Turkish products..."

A separate topic of discussion in the Armenian information space was the **destructive role of Russian media** actively spreading disinformation and replicating fakes. Moreover, quite often these media presented the situation around the July escalation in Tavush in a way similar to the Azerbaijani viewpoint. And this despite the fact that the Armenian side on a 24-hour basis also transmitted the whole amount of information about the developments on the ground. Many of the leading Russian media simply ignored reports from Armenia, although balanced coverage would involve the use of different sources. Directly on July 12-14, 2020 (days of hostilities), according to the calculations of Armenian researchers, approximately 80% of Russian media production on the operational environment in Tavush was based on Azerbaijani sources. One of the examples of disinformation was the fact that Armenia had reportedly requested

assistance from the CSTO, although this was not true. At the same time, the “pro-Western” respondents contrasted the behavior of Russian media with more professional work of the most reputable European players in the information field - in particular, the British BBC.

At this stage of the study as well, the intentions of Gazprom to increase gas prices for Armenian consumers remained another irritant in Armenian-Russian relations. In a tough situation prevailing in Armenia at that moment, many perceived this as another unfriendly step by Russia towards her. This intention of the Russian company sparked intense debate on the use of alternative energy sources with the support of the European Union, as well as on gas supplies from Iran.

**The respondents conditionally included in the category of “conservatives”**, attaching importance to relations with both the European Union and Russia, noted the retreat of Nikol Pashinyan and his government from their previous achievements. In particular, a view was expressed that the new authorities should be grateful to the legacy left by Serzh Sargsyan for the level of relations maintained with the EaEU, EU, NATO, Iran. This legacy included also the 2017 final signing of the agreement on Armenia's participation in the European Union's HORIZON 2020 programme, which was highly important for the development of science in the country.

Regarding the relations with Russia, the opinion of Moscow Carnegie Center expert Dmitri Trenin was cited, who believed that Armenia's attitude towards Russia was that of a consumer, and if the situation did not change, then Yerevan would no longer be a trusted partner for Moscow. Under normal relations with Russian political establishment, Armenian leadership would have been aware in advance of the nature and content of Vladimir Putin's contacts with Recep Tayyip Erdogan and their possible consequences for the security of Armenia and NK. The facts that Russia did not want to give primacy to Armenia as a strategic ally over Azerbaijan as a country with a lower status of a strategic partner; that Russian-Turkish relations allow Ankara to play an increasingly stronger role in the South Caucasus; that there was nothing to oppose to the Turkish-Azerbaijani military drills in Nakhichevan were a consequence of the short-sighted policy of Yerevan. In Moscow, the idea of anti-Russianness of the Armenian ruling elite has taken root, while there has been a constant and to some extent successful Russian search of mutual interests with Azerbaijan.

**The Representatives of the “conservatives”** expressed bewilderment at the enthusiasm with which the “pro-government” and “pro-Western” circles attacked Margarita Simonyan for her aforementioned post. The respondents of this category, like some “pro-Western” opinion leaders, were convinced that the editor-in-chief of “Russia Today” did not voice exclusively her personal point of view, but drew an opposite conclusion from this: one should not be imbued with aggression against the Kremlin, but rather think what he did wrong. A conviction was expressed that Armenia was a very small actor and could not ignore the reaction to its behavior of countries like the United States, Russia, Iran. In early 1990s, there were also ambitious sentiments in Armenia, but it all ended up being forced to place a Russian military base in Armenia in 1995. History repeated itself in July 2020: first, the pro-government circles started attacking Simonyan, some people deliberately incited anti-Russian sentiments, but then the country's leadership realized the seriousness of the Tavush events, backed out and tried to rehabilitate itself in front of Moscow. In contrast to the positions of the other two categories of respondents who considered the reaction from the West more effective,

the “conservatives” attached particular importance to the statement of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the joint statement of the RF and RA General Staffs.

At this stage certain attention was paid to the National Security Strategy adopted in Armenia. Mainly the opponents of the authorities considered the document extremely weak. In this context, a discussion unfolded on the threats to strategic alliances, which were manifested in the sale of offensive weaponry by CSTO members Russia and Belarus to Azerbaijan. Due to the attitude of a number of members of this organization towards Armenia, Yerevan's appeal to the CSTO regarding the escalation in Tavush made no sense, since Kazakhstan and Belarus would have rather supported the position of Azerbaijan.

There was an opinion voiced that the Minsk Group and its Co-Chairs have little influence on anything. And Armenian leadership, due to its own incompetence, having become a victim of the geopolitical games of various powers in the region, missed the opportunity to win the effective attention of the United States, the EU and Russia towards the complex situation. The lack of international containment leverages allowed Turkey to make things extremely dangerous for Armenia.

A study by the “Dossier” Center was cited by the “**conservatives**” as an unsuccessful attempt to stir up a fuss about the topic of “Russian agents” in Armenia. It was noted that it was unacceptable to raise an anti-Russian wave under American influence: it turned out that “the pro-Western” circles were exposing the “pro-Russian ones”. It is noteworthy that those of the reference group of this study conditionally included in three other categories, did not attach much importance to the “Dossier” study either, highlighting its superficiality.

From among other topics more or less frequently raised by the representatives of the **conditional category of “conservatives”**, three more are worth emphasizing. First, they claimed that they kept working for the benefit of the country in European structures with greater efficiency than the current Armenian authorities did. Secondly, they drew attention to the fact that the US Ambassador to Azerbaijan accused Armenians of clashes with Azerbaijanis in Los Angeles. And they called on the RA Foreign Ministry to either demand a refutation from the US Ambassador to Armenia, or at least to issue a similar statement. Third, following the July escalation they considered it urgent to restart negotiations within the OSCE Minsk Group and reintroduce on the MG agenda the Vienna and St. Petersburg agreements on monitoring on Armenian-Azerbaijani border and the line of contact in Nagorno-Karabagh. In this regard, it was proposed to contribute to the establishment of strategic space cooperation between the United States and the Russian Federation, which would make it possible to promptly address issues of preventing unintended escalation through space monitoring and incident management in hot spots.

At the level of the **conditional category of “experts”** at this stage of the study there was an explanation proposed for the low level of mutual understanding between Moscow and Yerevan. According to the respondents of this category, both Russian and Armenian political cultures are dominated by the element of counteraction, rather than the search for mutual interests, of which there are many between the two states.

There has also been an opinion that Armenia's membership to the EaEU and participation in the Eastern Partnership, the implementation of CEPA do not interfere with each other. The EU is the main partner in the implementation of reforms, but

leaving the EaEU in the current situation does not meet Armenia's interests either. There is also no disappointment in the EU about Armenia's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union.

Within this category of respondents it was emphasized that Armenia believed that Turkey's military activeness could also contain ambitions in the South Caucasus threatening Armenia's vital national interests. The only real obstacle for such developments was Russia's position, which viewed the South Caucasus as a part of its legitimate zone of special interests. However, a possible Russia-Turkey deal, one that would enable the two countries to manage their rivalry in the region for their mutual benefit, could not be excluded, and this would be detrimental to Armenian interests. Besides, if and when Kremlin would decide that the Armenian leadership could not be fully trusted, Russia might allow Turkey a limited military involvement in Karabagh conflict to punish Armenia, and to trigger a government change in Yerevan. At the same time, although Russia was controlling the situation, it could not always contain Azerbaijan, since it sold offensive weapons to the latter and had no reason to prohibit its use to solve the problem, which Baku considered to be the main one for itself.

According to the analyses of the the history of the settlement of Karabagh conflict by majority of the study's reference group, since the 2011 Kazan document, Russia had been consistently promoting its model ("Lavrov Plan"), which the United States and France were not happy about, but they were not able to change anything. Washington and Paris might even agree to the "Lavrov Plan" so as not to get a new conflict, where Russia and Turkey would decide everything.

The following scenarios were proposed regarding the future of the conflict. While firmly anchored in Russian sphere of influence, Armenia since its independence has sought to establish partner relations with the US, EU and NATO. This direction of Armenian foreign policy was boosted after the 2018 "velvet revolution" which was welcomed by the Euro-Atlantic community. Meanwhile, it was clear that if Biden administration sought to undermine Russia in the South Caucasus, Turkey would play "a role of bulldozer". In this scenario Armenia would face two options: if Yerevan wanted to align with the American policy in the region, it should come to terms with Azerbaijan and Turkey, but this would be possible only if Armenia capitulated in Karabagh. The other option was to keep its alliance with Russia and jointly prevent the growth of Turkish influence in the region, thus acting against the US strategic interests.

Noteworthy is also the Minsk Group US former Co-Chair Richard Hoagland's suggestion: he proposed to put Nagorno-Karabagh under the UN protectorate, claiming that this fits into the phased solution proposed by the MG. However, under the given circumstances this was possible only if special interests of Russia and Turkey were respected, i.e. with a certain modification of "Lavrov Plan".

Attention was also paid to the historical context and its possible projection on the current situation. Especially since the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Treaty of Sevres (August 10, 2020) fell into this study period. In an interview RA President Armen Sargsyan mentioned it as an important document, which contained a just solution to the Armenian issue. This was the first time that Armenian authorities made such an assessment. An opinion was expressed that the anniversary of the Treaty of Sevres needed to be celebrated quietly, bearing in mind the Moscow and Kars treaties that followed a year later. Some political forces did not mention the Sevres Treaty, considering it anti-Russian. In particular, the infeasibility of the Treaty of Sevres lies in the fact that

Armenia did not rely on its own forces. Issues are not solved by “paper”, one must be able to say “no” to the world and use force to solve problems, including those enshrined in documents.

As for the recent history of Armenia, according to the conditional category of “experts” the first three presidents of Armenia understood the importance of deepening cooperation with the West as a necessary balance for the influence of Russia. Without this, it was dangerous to build relations with Moscow. Nikol Pashinyan was trying to do the same, but now the situation both in Armenia and Russia, and the geopolitical environment around them, do not favor such a policy. And the main difficulties were related to this.

## **STAGE THREE OF THE STUDY: 44-DAY WAR IN NAGORNO-KARABAGH (SEPTEMBER 27 - OCTOBER 31, 2020)**

**At this stage of the study** the reference to certain external players in Armenian media and Armenian segment of social networks was largely conditioned by the role they played or tried to play in the cessation of hostilities. Thus, it was reported that in early October 2020 RA Foreign Minister Zohrab Mnatsakanyan discussed the situation by phone with his Russian and French counterparts Sergey Lavrov and Jean-Yves Le Drian, as well as with the US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun, stressing the dangerous consequences of Azerbaijan aggression against Nagorno-Karabagh and risks of deeper instability in the region. The Armenian minister emphasized the immediate priority to end hostilities.

**Representatives of the reference group** set up for this study reacted to all three statements on the cessation of fighting on October 10 (at the initiative of the Russian Federation), October 19 (at the initiative of France) and October 26 (at the initiative of the United States). However, in all three cases there were accusations of Azerbaijan for breaking the accords.

Great attention was paid to the support of Azerbaijan by Turkey, as well as the direct involvement of that country and terrorist fighters in the war. The respondents saw a link between the war in Nagorno-Karabagh and a series of terrorist attacks in different European cities. In particular, one could find posts similar to these ones on social networks: “Barbarity and terrorism smearing around... Armenians in Nagorno-Karabagh are fighting those terrorists sponsored by Turkey and their client Azerbaijan”; “If you don't want people decapitated in the center of Europe. If you don't want towers blown up in the center of New York. If you want to leave peacefully in a peaceful neighborhood, RECOGNIZE ARTSAKH. Artsakh is strong, but yet not strong enough to face the international terrorism alone.”

In the first weeks of the war, the representatives of the reference group expressed satisfaction with the reaction of international organizations and Western countries to the outbreak of war. In particular, the October 7, 2020 debate in the European Parliament on the issue with the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy received a positive response in Armenia. Official Washington's statement was interpreted as an indirect warning to Turkey against its engagement in the Karabagh conflict, satisfaction was expressed regarding the assurances of US President Donald Trump that his administration was closely following the events, people pinned their hopes (unrealized thereafter - **YPC**) with the discussion of the problem in the UN Security Council. The interim decision of the European Court of Human Rights on the inadmissibility of launching strikes on civilian objects and civilians was regarded as a success of the Armenian side. People shared the statement of the RA representative to the ECHR on submission of new evidence “on Azerbaijan's failure to comply with the decision on applying interim measure ... Armenia will utilize available tools to stop human rights violations.”

The part of the reference group, which for the purposes of this study was conditionally named “**conservatives**”, emphasized the support of the European People's Party and Centrist Democrat International (CDI), of which the Republican Party of Armenia (in power until May 2018) is a member.

Armenian protests “against Turkish-Azerbaijani aggression” in the US and European countries received wide coverage. An opinion was expressed that it was these actions that forced US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo to view Karabagh war as part of Washington's foreign policy agenda. The recognition by the American state of Michigan of the independence of Nagorno-Karabagh, the submission of a similar draft resolution to the House of Representatives of the US Congress, Canada's cancellation of export to Turkey of technology intended for the weapons used against civilians, the condemnation by Geneva City Council of Turkish-Azerbaijani attacks against Armenia and Artsakh were also considered as achievements of Armenian diplomacy and the fruits of the efforts of the diaspora. Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti was quoted as saying: “L.A. is proud to be home to the largest Armenian diaspora. We stand with the people of Armenia. I urge our leaders in Washington to conduct the sustained and rigorous diplomacy necessary to bring peace to Artsakh region. Turkey must disengage.”

**The respondents, conditionally categorized as “pro-Western”** were particularly appreciative of the position of France and, above all, its President Emanuel Macron during the war. The latter was quoted as saying “I directly told Aliyev that nothing can justify Azerbaijani attacks against NK”. Added to that his criticism of Turkey for using mercenaries was widely disseminated. A view was expressed that France forced everyone (USA, EU, RF...) to admit that it was Azerbaijan who started the war. People met with enthusiasm the words “If the only solution to the current conflict is the recognition of Nagorno-Karabagh as an independent state, then we should not hesitate” of Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo, as well as the call of the deputy of the French National Assembly Valérie Boyer on all groups of the Senate to join her proposal to adopt a resolution condemning Azerbaijan and Turkey and recognizing the independence of the Republic of Artsakh.

The most radical part of the “**pro-Westerners**” claimed that the United States and leading European countries wanted Armenia to win and were ready to pardon her any method to succeed, including the destruction of Azerbaijani economic and civilian infrastructures. And in political terms, it was proposed to declare Artsakh, including the seven regions outside the former Nagorno-Karabagh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO), part of Armenia and appeal to the CSTO to defend the entire territory. In the event of an anticipated refusal, they proposed appealing to China, India, France, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Egypt, USA, Greece and Iran with a request for air and space military assistance.

They welcomed and viewed the offers of France for military assistance as feasible. In their opinion, this was prevented by Nikol Pashinyan's statement of adherence to the format of the meaningless Minsk Group, which forced France, ready to unconditionally support Armenia, to maintain neutrality in the status of MG Co-Chair.

Information was disseminated about manifestations of support both by individual citizens of European countries and politicians of the EU member states, in particular, about the unanimous condemnation of the aggressive military actions of Azerbaijan by the Luxembourg Parliament, the statement of 21 congressmen and 15 senators of

Spain condemning “the Turkish-Azerbaijani aggression against Armenia and Nagorno-Karabagh”. Great importance was attached to the visit of Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias to Yerevan at the very height of the war. It was reported that Milan City Council condemned the “Turkish-Azerbaijani aggression against Artsakh”, recognized the independence of the Republic of Artsakh and demanded that the central authorities of Italy take similar steps.

At the same time, the respondents, conditionally categorized as “**pro-Western,**” contrasted the West’s response with the silence of Moscow and the CSTO regarding Azerbaijan’s responsibility for unleashing the war simply because Nagorno-Karabagh was formally not part of the territory of the Russia-led defense alliance. Moreover, the representatives of this category have repeatedly accused not only Azerbaijan and Turkey, but also Russia of unleashing the war.

A caricature was posted with the following message: “Russia + Turkey = Azerbaijan”. Also, ironic statements such as the following were made: “From whom should the Russian military base protect us? Probably from coronavirus...” The formula of Russian policy in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict was presented as follows: “First you sell offensive weapons to one side, then you sell defensive weapons to the other side, and when the weapons you sold are about to finish, you call for peace so that they can calm down, fix their economies and buy new weapons from you...”

The same conditional category of respondents welcomed the proposal of the US National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien to use Scandinavian peacekeepers in the Karabagh conflict zone, rather than representatives of any of the Minsk Group co-chairing countries. First of all, they highlighted the unacceptability of the deployment of Russian contingent. It was noted that throughout history there has never been a case when a true ally, instead of providing full assistance, would speak of the deployment of its own peacekeepers. In this sense, the position of the RA Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan in the first days of the war received endorsement: he spoke against any external military involvement in the conflict and declared that he had not discussed that topic with Vladimir Putin. However, further, both Pashinyan's assessment and the attitude towards external interference changed in a certain way.

From the very beginning the conditional category of “**conservatives**” disagreed with the position of the “**pro-Westerners**”, claiming that there was no alternative to the Russian peacekeepers, who by the end of October 2020 were recognized as acceptable by both Yerevan and Baku. And regarding the topic of the Scandinavian peacekeepers, the “conservatives” specified that these could be Swedes, Danes, Finns or Norwegians. At the same time, Denmark and Norway are NATO members, the same military-political bloc, of which Turkey is a member. Thus, according to the “conservatives”, the arrival in Nagorno-Karabagh of peacekeepers from the Scandinavian NATO member states, in fact, would mean a complete loss of Moscow's influence in the South Caucasus to Ankara.

**At this stage of the study**, the volatility of public sentiments in Armenia regarding foreign players became particularly evident. Two weeks after the start of the war, there began to emerge disappointment with the position of the US administration, which did not use its leverage over the conflicting parties. It took Fox News over 10 days to report the first news about the war. Dissatisfaction was expressed with the statements of US President Donald Trump and the US National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien, who limited themselves to expressing regret over the failed ceasefire, without blaming any

side of renewed fighting. The disappointment in this case was also due to the fact that the same O'Brien had previously recognized the use of jihadist mercenaries in the war.

The noted change in public sentiments closer to the end of the war was also related to the European Union and individual European countries. There were more frequent statements about the EU's double standards, which at the official level did not clearly state anything about the damages and death of civilians in Nagorno-Karabagh, but immediately and unambiguously reacted to the Armenian missile attack on the residential area of Azerbaijani Ganja. This was explained, in particular, by the effective pressure on the Europeans by Baku and Ankara: "everyone loves the winners". At the same time, the respondents themselves in a tough military situation were not much selective in the search for persons supporting Armenia. Some of them welcomed the pro-Armenian statements of politicians with whom they had opposite value orientations, including one of the leaders of the Italian "League of the North" party Matteo Salvini and the reactionary deputy of the Russian State Duma Vitaly Milonov.

At the end of October 2020, when the adverse course of the war became obvious to all more or less informed citizens of Armenia, the assessments of the radical part of the "pro-Westerners" also underwent a notable transformation. During this period, they started disseminating calls to seek help from wherever it could come. They came to a conclusion that the West was not Armenia's ally in this situation, since they viewed it as Russian area of influence. The rumors that the UN Security Council pro-Armenian resolution had been voted down by Great Britain were, among others, attributed to this factor. Apart from being in Moscow's orbit, Yerevan has not shown any interest in building relationships with London (for many years Armenia did not even have an ambassador to this country).

Even more skepticism about the role of the EU and the US was expressed by the **conditional category of "conservatives"**. This attitude grew stronger as the war drew to a close. In particular, the following assessments were voiced: "This is the main reason for the European Union's behavior, which disappoints us all. By the end of the year, 10 billion cubic meters of Azerbaijani gas are entering the EU for the first time. For a long time this threat has been balanced by an EU-Armenia political agenda based on values. Unfortunately, the Turkish-Azerbaijani-terrorist war unleashed against Artsakh revealed that cynical European interests had swallowed the values"; "The current US and EU ambassadors will become scapegoats and have nothing to do in Armenia anymore. It is still a big question whether after all this the totally degraded and demoralized EU, in particular, has anything to do in Armenia... The United States will still to a certain extent be kept afloat due to its status of the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair."

At the same time, some respondents began to pin certain hopes on the anticipated election of Joe Biden, welcoming his statement on the need to stop supplying arms to Azerbaijan and Turkey, condemning Russia for fueling the conflict and Turkey for sending mercenaries from Syria to Nagorno-Karabagh. Therefore, an appeal was made to Armenian circles of the United States to consolidate around the candidacy of Biden, who would revert to the active global role of his country. Along with this, forecasts were voiced that due to the "treacherous policy" of the RA authorities, even a candidate from the Democratic Party, if elected, would recognize the seven regions around the former Nagorno-Karabagh Autonomous Oblast as Azerbaijani.

In the opinion of respondents conditionally categorized as **"conservatives"**, the trusting allied relationship between Yerevan and Moscow was the only factor capable of

containing Azerbaijan and Turkey and preventing an escalation. However, the political force that came to power in 2018 appointed “sorosists” - which were persona non grata in Russia - to key positions in the security sector of the RA and Nagorno-Karabagh. The criminal prosecution against the former CSTO Secretary General Yuri Khachaturov made Armenia's membership to this organization vulnerable. In addition, the damaged relations with Iran resulted in the closure by the latter of its airspace for the supply of arms. The West was displeased with the sending of Armenian servicemen within the Russian contingent to Syria.

This part of the reference group noted that neither the US, nor the EU, nor Russia, nor Iran were interested in allowing Turkey to enter the South Caucasus under those circumstances. And the policy of the previous authorities Armenia's corresponded to those interests. However, Nikol Pashinyan and his government did not manage to defend this position, and as a result, even Russia lost arguments to hinder Turkey's entry into the region.

This category had no doubt that the statements of Russian President Vladimir Putin and the former Chief of the General Staff of the RA Armed Forces Onik Gasparyan that Nikol Pashinyan missed the opportunity to stop the war on more favorable terms were true. This was viewed as an additional circumstance that did not allow to benefit from the decisive role of Moscow in contributing to the security of the RA and NK. Responding to their political opponents, the “conservatives” periodically mentioned the following: “Wherever you see posts generating anti-Russian sentiments, be aware that you are dealing with a network of Turkish-Azerbaijani-Israeli agents of influence.” As a continuation of their argumentation, the following ironic statement can also be quoted: “So, Turkey and Israel provide weapons and military to Azerbaijan, Americans a day earlier warn their citizens not to leave their homes, Georgians do not allow to transfer military cargo to Armenia through their territory, but who is, following the guide, to be blamed for all this? Of course, Russians...”

The category of respondents, for the purposes of the study conditionally named “**experts**” at this stage continued to pay attention to the relations between the EU and the RA outside the context of the war. It was emphasized that “EU can assist in capacity building, implementation of reforms, rule of law, strengthening human rights in the entire South Caucasus”. Added to that, the following was said: “The EU has significant soft power to influence events on the ground supporting various reforms. Brussels was very active in elaborating a robust assistance package for the EaP member states since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic within “Team Europe” initiative launched in April 2020. In mid-September 2020 EU allocated 30 million Euros to Armenia to fight COVID-19 and another 30 million Euros to foster judiciary reforms.” At the same time it was noted: “However, soft power is definitely not enough to stop the war in Karabagh, and the US in the meantime is significantly disengaged from the region.”

In this context, confidence was expressed that the region was dominated by two players - Russia and Turkey. The war was the result of a convergence of views between Turkey and Russia regarding the “Lavrov Plan”. Moscow faced a dilemma - either to reduce its influence on Armenia, or to finally lose Azerbaijan. And throughout the war Moscow was looking for a solution that could minimize losses in such a complicated geopolitical situation for itself.

## **STAGE FOUR OF THE STUDY: POST-WAR DEVELOPMENTS (NOVEMBER 10, 2020 - DECEMBER 31, 2021)**

It would be reasonable to divide this stage of the study into **three time periods**: 1. the period immediately after the trilateral (Azerbaijan-Armenia-Russia) Statement of November 9, 2020 and the cessation of hostilities; 2. the period of the campaign for the RA snap parliamentary elections in June, 2021; 3. the post-election period (which also marked the intensification of the negotiation process on the settlement of Armenian-Azerbaijani and Armenian-Turkish relations).

**In the first of the mentioned periods**, the focus was on the results of the 44-Day War and the conclusions from what occurred. But since this discourse took place in light of intensified domestic political struggle in Armenia, the suggested assessments and analysis of the situation quite often turned out to be under strong influence of the respective conjuncture and did not always contain realistic approaches to the problems.

As at the previous stages of the study, the views of those parts of the reference group that were conditionally classified as **supporters of Nikol Pashinyan and his team** and **moderate “pro-Westerners”** in many ways coincided. In particular, both of them, speaking about the role of external players, laid the blame for Armenia’s defeat in the war mostly on Russia, which “did not fulfill its alliance obligations”, by deploying its peacekeeping contingent in Nagorno-Karabagh weakened the sovereignty of both Armenia and Azerbaijan and at the same time made the positions of RA Prime Minister Pashinyan vulnerable. Yet, the West and the international community were passive due to the coronavirus pandemic, focus on the US presidential elections, as well as the ongoing general crisis in the European Union. This led them to a conclusion that Yerevan needed to find new resources for ensuring national security, not limiting itself to cooperation in this area with Russia and the CSTO, but also not abandoning them - both by strengthening its own defense capacity and by looking for alternative external partners. They also considered the possibility of establishing relations with two problematic neighbors – with Azerbaijan and, first of all, with Turkey.

Most of the respondents from the mentioned segments of the reference group believed that Turkey and Russia continued to act in concert, weakening the positions of the US, EU and NATO in the South Caucasus. As a result, in all contentious situations following the end of the war, Moscow appeared to be on the side of Azerbaijan, and not on the side of its strategic ally Armenia. And since the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs, the United States and France, were unhappy with the fact that the third Co-Chair, Russia, had excluded them from the regional processes, Yerevan should intensify cooperation specifically with them, among other things making the MG do as much as possible for raising the issue of the status of Nagorno-Karabagh.

It should be noted here that the RA authorities themselves did not voice the approaches mentioned above, underlining the strength and unconditional priority of their ties with Moscow, but their supporters, which were active in the media space, in fact, expressed a somewhat different position.

**In the first weeks after the signing of the trilateral Statement** of November 9, 2020, despite the generally low spirits in the Armenian society, certain circles still kept hoping for possible adjustments to the post-war parameters under the influence of the international community. In particular, the media and social networks covered the recognition of the independence of Nagorno-Karabagh by both chambers of the French Parliament, the Resolution of Los Angeles Council declaring November 9 a day of remembrance for the victims of Azerbaijani aggression and suspension of the friendship status with Shushi “until it is free of Azeri occupation”. However, rather quickly, most opinion leaders began to realize that these hopes were groundless. This was conditioned by both the dominance of the principles of realpolitik and the course of action of the main political forces of the country, well-established in the new vision of the country's future, which, according to one of the respondents of this study, can be defined by this formulation: “there is an ideal, but it is no longer in the West.”

In contrast to the “moderate” ones, the more **radical-minded “pro-Westerners”** with varying degrees of harshness laid the blame on the RA authorities for the defeat in the war, claiming that they missed the opportunity to move closer to the US and the EU. As a way out of the complicated situation, they proposed to immediately withdraw from the CSTO and the EaEU and return to the agenda of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) Agreement with the EU. It was argued that Russia could not be anyone's ally as long as there were people with imperial ambitions in the Kremlin. Therefore, as stated, it was necessary to get closer to strong countries that were unhappy with the rapprochement between Turkey and Russia. Moreover, with the arrival of Joe Biden in the White House, ties between the US and the EU will start to get restored. It is noteworthy that, apart from the West, this category saw Iran as an alternative to Moscow, especially after the statements of its officials about the unacceptability of change in the geopolitical configuration in the region, as well as India, whose foreign minister's visit to Yerevan was particularly emphasized. These two episodes were interpreted as a sign of the formation, under the auspices of the US and the EU, of a broad coalition of states opposing the Russian-Turkish tandem. Hence, the “3+3” (Turkey, Russia, Iran + Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia) initiative of this tandem seemed highly unpromising.

The representatives of the category of respondents in the frames of this study conditionally named “**conservatives**” both in the media and on social networks did not restrain themselves from calling the RA authorities “traitors”, “capitulators”, and judged the post-war situation with the same sharpness. They explained the lack of support for Armenia from any party by the fact that the world wanted to know Armenia's position, but it did not exist: Yerevan had spoiled relations with everyone, and things were going towards the loss of the state. Therefore, for the “restart of statehood” Nikol Pashinyan should leave as soon as possible, and a transitional government needed to be formed. At the same time, the restoration of the national defense resource is possible only in partnership with Russia, which for the upcoming 5 years is an irreplaceable ally for the Armenians, as, at least for this period, Russia deployed its peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabagh and is the only guarantor of the security of the population of this region. The OSCE Minsk Group and other international structures can do nothing of substance amidst the dominance of Moscow and Ankara in the region.

At this stage of the study, accusations of the RA authorities for having links with external forces continued to be observed. The version about the “Soros conspiracy”, who allegedly brought Nikol Pashinyan to power in order to “implement his anti-Armenian programmes”, was disseminated with less intensity than before. The role of

the “puppeteer” of the Armenian authorities ascribed to the American philanthropist in the versions of the “conservatives” started increasingly to be replaced by Turkey, Great Britain, “Western liberals” ...

The opinions of the respondents within this study included in the conditional category of “**experts**” regarding the outcome of the war were summarized as follows: “As a result of the war, Russia gained a weakening of its strategic ally in the region and tensions in relations with Armenia, but it strengthened its relations with Azerbaijan and achieved the deployment of a de facto second military base in the South Caucasus”; “The trilateral statement is Turkey's victory over Russia, which was watched in cold blood by the West and Iran.”

The volatility, sharp swings in the sentiments and assessments of opinion leaders in Armenia, observed during the 44-Day War, were also manifested in the post-war period. This affected also the **attitude towards various external players**. Interesting in this sense are the results of express polls of Russian online media “Caucasian Knot” (“Kavkazskii Uzel”), which was regularly asking the respondents the same question: “On whom, in the event of difficulty, can Armenia count and expect military-political assistance?”

After its peak of October 30, 2020 (79.6%), Russia's indicator dropped during the pre-election period on May 18-21, 2021 to 38.3% (judging by media reviews, this trend most likely continued during and after the November 16-17, 2021 clashes). In the case of France, the October 2020 indicator (21.3%) increased to 31.3% in May 2021. The highest indicator of the United States, recorded on October 6-7, 2020 (27.5%), slightly dropped (to 23.8%) on May 18-21, 2021. It is noteworthy that international organizations - the UN and its Security Council, the European Union, the OSCE - were hardly considered by anyone as factors capable of contributing to the security of Armenia.

This and a number of other studies demonstrate that it is mainly Russia and France that “compete” for the hearts of the Armenian society. At the same time, judging by the studied content of media and social networks, the friendly feelings (naturally, of those who experience them) are mainly expressed through the following formulations: in the case of Russia - “Historically, Russia has always been close to Armenia”; “Russia stopped the war”; “Russia protects us from Turkey”; “Russia is the source of our income”; “Today Russian peacekeepers are in Karabagh”.

In the case of France, those are - “In a difficult moment, France is with us”; “France gave asylum to Armenians in its country”; “France has been helping us since 1915”; “France has recognized the Armenian genocide”; “France tried to help Armenia”; “During the war, France stood with Armenia”; “There are positive relations between the leaders of our countries”; “France supported us morally”.

**During the pre-election campaign of the 2021 parliamentary elections**, both the recent history of the Karabagh conflict (including the finger-pointing) and current challenges (the advance of Azerbaijani troops on certain parts of the border, the situation with prisoners of war, etc.) had a significant impact on the campaign's media agenda with regards to the foreign policy views of the reference group. The severity of the political struggle led to extremely aggressive rhetoric on the mentioned topics and to polarization of the views within a large part of the reference group selected for this study. This was also compounded by the fact that a certain part of the opinion leaders

in Armenia, who were the objects of the study, was included in the electoral lists of parties and blocs running in the elections.

The pre-election discussions grew even more acute when there emerged details related to the 44-Day War, which the majority of representatives of Armenian public were not aware of. In April, the “hot topic” that penetrated into the Armenian information space from Azerbaijan was some relatively specific information about the use of “Iskander” missiles against Azerbaijani troops in Shushi. As a result of blocking of Azerbaijani Internet resources, the majority of the audience in Armenia belatedly learnt about the huge losses on the very first day of the war, which were further confirmed by the former Secretary of the Nagorno-Karabagh Security Council Samvel Babayan.

The Russian Federation was the external actor, more than any other mentioned by the respondents in the context of the elections, and largely due to the position of Moscow and the CSTO headed by it (non-interference in “border incidents”), the role of this country in the conflict received an extremely negative assessment. The categories of respondents conditionally classified under the **supporters of the authorities** and, especially, “**pro-Westerners**” referred to Russia's harmful actions both in numerous post-war incidents in Nagorno-Karabagh and on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, and its initiatives to resolve the conflict. In particular, one of the topics on the pre-election agenda was the so-called “Lavrov Plan”, which was characterized by the “pro-Westerners” as a document aimed at using Armenian-Azerbaijani contradictions to strengthen Russian positions in the South Caucasus. And the statement by the Russian Foreign Minister himself that it was inappropriate under the current conditions to raise the issue of the status of Nagorno-Karabagh, was followed by a reminder on social networks of the opposite position of Moscow when it came to Russian interests in relation to Crimea.

At the same time, the respondents classified as “**conservatives**” stressed that no one could deny the fraternal relations between Armenia and Russia, that the Russian peacekeeping contingent was the only factor ensuring the residence of the Karabagh Armenians in their homeland, and that the indefinite terms of Russian peacekeepers were in the interests of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabagh.

Unlike Russia, the United States and France, as the other two Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group, were mentioned less often, but at the same time in a more positive context. This, in particular, is evidenced by the results of a study of Facebook, carried out by “Region” Research Center in the pre-election period. Representatives of the political forces running in the elections mentioned Russia in a positive context only in 15% of cases, while in a negative context - in 49% and neutral in 36% of cases. In case of the United States, these figures look much better - 45%, 6% and 49%, respectively, and in the case of France 46%, 6% and 48%, respectively. The positive mentions of the United States were particularly connected with their assistance to Georgia in the return of 15 Armenian prisoners of war by Azerbaijan. France, on the other hand, received positive assessments for its consistent support in the conflict to Armenia and Nagorno-Karabagh.

A similar pre-election picture could be observed with mentions of **international organizations** on Facebook. The CSTO was mentioned most often, but with an unfavorable connotational balance - 5% positive, 56% negative and 39% neutral. For comparison, the OSCE Minsk Group received 30% positive, 5% negative and 65% neutral mentionings, and the NATO - 30%, 0% and 65%, respectively. The European

Union also has a positive balance (67%, 5% and 28%), however, with very rare references to it. As all recent studies show, there is an extremely limited public interest towards the EU as an institution. The topic of CEPA (in fact, the largest international assistance programme for Armenia) was also not properly reflected in the election programmes of the political forces, in the media and social networks.

**In the post-election period**, the severity of the internal political struggle continued to largely determine the agenda of discussions in the media and social networks of Armenia's foreign policy priorities. Another contributing factor to this were the intensification of the Armenian-Azerbaijani negotiations mediated by Moscow and efforts to initiate a dialogue between Yerevan and Ankara, as well as yet new incidents on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, information about the readiness to sign a new document between the conflicting parties and consideration of complaints of Armenia and Azerbaijan in the UN International Criminal Court.

The victory of “Civil Contract” party in the parliamentary elections of June 20, 2021 allowed its **supporters included in the reference group** formed for this study to promote the idea of the “era of peace” announced by the Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. At the same time, specific circumstances gave this conditional category reason to condemn the aggressive actions of Azerbaijan, criticize Russia's policy in the region and particularly towards Armenia.

At the same time, after the elections, the “pro-government” respondents had to fend off powerful information attacks from two flanks at once. The “**conservatives**” were persistently repeating their accusations against Pashinyan and his team of serving the interests of forces hostile to Armenia, they insisted that it was unacceptable that representatives of the government that had lost the war hold any negotiations with the outside world. Concern was also expressed about the very subject of the negotiations. In particular, it was noted that one should not start the process of delimitation and demarcation of borders in a situation where military tension between Armenia and Azerbaijan persists. As for the opening of transport communications, there was a conviction that each country - the United States, France and Russia - first of all, pursued its own interests. Therefore, they declared as groundless the hopes that with the opening of communications Turkey and Azerbaijan would let Armenia develop economically.

On the other hand, the category of respondents within this study conditionally named “**pro-Westerners**” (**especially their “radical wing”**) compared the “collusion” of Russia and Turkey, in the absence of proper defense of their own interests by the Armenian authorities, with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The ruling political force was viewed by this category just as pro-Russian as its predecessors.

At the same time, they expressed confidence that the US, France and the European Union in general are ready to provide Armenia with all kinds of assistance as soon as it announces its withdrawal from the EaEU and the CSTO. According to the “radical Westerners”, Turkey and Azerbaijan are doomed, and the use of the term “Armenian genocide” by President Biden, the cold reception of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan at the G20 Summit and heavy US sanctions for Ankara's acquisition of Russian S-400 complexes were signs of extreme discontent of the West with Ankara. These forecasts were also underpinned by reference to the financial and economic crisis in Turkey. In the words of this category of respondents, the “Kosovization of Artsakh” may begin with the “miloševization” of Ilham Aliyev. The first step towards this should be Yerevan's

demand for the deployment of additional peacekeeping forces under the auspices of the Minsk Group in those parts of the former Nagorno-Karabagh Republic where there are no Russian troops (Shushi and Hadrut regions). This will be followed, according to this conditional category of respondents, in one way or another by the implementation of the Sevres Treaty and the arbitral award of Woodrow Wilson, restoring “historical justice” in relation to the Armenians. And the only obstacle to the realization of all these plans is the anti-national government of Armenia, which must be removed. It should be noted that such ideas, apparently in total contradiction with the processes currently taking place, as they say, “on the ground,” are intensively covered in the media and social networks. The carriers of these ideas are the representatives of at least two political forces that participated in the 2021 snap parliamentary elections. Therefore, one should not underestimate their influence on public sentiments in the country.

At none of the three previous stages of this study, the interpretation of events and facts by the category conditionally named “**experts**” (who seek to present to the public a real picture of what is happening) did not come into such a conflict with the statements of the other three conditional categories as in the fourth one. However, judging by the numbers of views of various kinds of pieces on the Internet, they attract less attention of the audience than the opinion leaders with a specific political agenda.

Three remarkable events of 2021 particularly attracted the attention of the “experts”. Firstly, this is another interim decision of the UN International Court of Justice, which promises a certain progress in the issue of the return of Armenian prisoners of war and other detainees by Azerbaijan. Especially since the relevant complaints in the ECHR also contribute to this. It is noteworthy that the same person represents Armenia in both international courts.

Secondly, this is Armenia’s invitation to the Summit for Democracy, initiated by US President Joe Biden, which was held in virtual mode on December 9-10, 2021. Apart from the three Baltic states, only 4 former Soviet republics were invited. As noted by the respondents from the “experts” and “pro-Western” categories, this fact aroused the “jealousy” of both Moscow and the parliamentary opposition. The representatives of political forces having opposition factions in the RA National Assembly, and along with them the respondents of this study from the conditional category of “**conservatives**” criticized Nikol Pashinyan, who spoke at the Summit. In their opinion, the head of state declaring himself an ally of Russia should not have taken part in an event, which had apparent anti-Russian orientation. The essence of the critical commentary from another camp of opponents (“**radical pro-Westerners**”) was that Armenia had become an unreliable partner for everyone, and the participation in the Summit was the last chance for her to rehabilitate herself.

The respondents from the “**experts**” category, while positively assessing Armenia's participation in the Summit, called Pashinyan's speech poorly targeted. Taking advantage of the fact that Biden had not invited Azerbaijan and Turkey, the Armenian Prime Minister should have put more stress on the problems associated with these two neighbors.

The publications in Armenian media and Armenian segment of social networks, which described in detail the idea and agenda of the Summit itself, were also useful. At the same time, the media and social media users, supporting former authorities, actively disseminated a statement by the Chinese Foreign Ministry, which expressed resentment with regards to that event.

And the third event of the end of the year that elicited the interest of the “**experts**” was the Eastern Partnership Summit in Brussels, during which Pashinyan met with Ilham Aliyev twice - with the participation of the European Council President Charles Michel and French President Emmanuel Macron. The meetings were recognized as useful, since they allowed making important clarifications to the agreements previously reached between the two sides at the trilateral (with the participation of Vladimir Putin) meeting in Sochi (November 26, 2021).

The “experts” attached importance to the Brussels meeting also because it was emphasized that the planned Armenian-Azerbaijani transport corridors (in particular, the one through Meghri) should not violate the sovereignty of the country, through which they pass. Also of great importance was the statement of Charles Michel on the provision of advisory assistance by the EU in the process of delimitation and demarcation of Armenian-Azerbaijani border.

There was a debate in the media and social networks as to whether the Brussels meeting means that the EU is taking the initiative for the conflict settlement from Moscow, or that the two processes complement each other. The “**experts**” tend to favor the second version. In addition, there was a forecast that another trilateral meeting with the participation of the United States would follow the Brussels one. Such an increase in the number of moderators is regarded as quite positive, namely as a sign that important geopolitical players such as Washington and Brussels intend to play a serious role in the South Caucasus region.

## METHODOLOGY

The overall goal of the study was the identification of the dynamics in the attitudes of decision makers and statements of certain group of influential Armenian opinion makers towards the EU and the “collective West” in general. This was done in conjunction with reviewing respective perceptions on relations with Russia and participation in its integration initiatives. Attention was also paid to possible references to other influential external actors. Respective (see below) publications in the media and posts on social platforms (mostly “Facebook” and “Youtube” became the main source for the study, which was conducted for 20 months, from May 1, 2020 until December 31, 2021). To follow the evolution of trends within the theme of the study, its time frame was divided in four stages, which corresponded to specific periods in the life of the country: 1. Prior to the July clashes on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border (May 1 - July 11, 2020); 2. The days of the clashes and subsequent developments preceding the war in NK (July 12 - September 26, 2020); 3. The 44 days of the war in NK (September 27 - November 9, 2020); 4. Post war developments (November 10, 2020 - December 31, 2021). The post-war period in its turn was split into three sub-periods to track the changes in the attitudes and perceptions conditioned by internal and external political processes, such as reactions on the trilateral statement on ceasefire, snap elections and start of peace negotiations.

The coverage of the following main issues was taken as an indication of the dynamics in public attitudes and perceptions within the theme of the study: 1. Whether the cooperation with EU/member states/Russia/EaEU/CSTO contributes to the development of Armenia? 2. Whether the cooperation with EU/member states/NATO/Russia/EaEU/CSTO contributes to the security of Armenia and NK? 3. What can be expected from EU/member states/NATO/Russia/EaEU/CSTO regarding the settlement of the Karabagh conflict? 4. To what extent CEPA remains a priority for Armenia? 5. What are the roles of the Russian infrastructural companies (“Gazprom Armenia”, “Armenian Electricity Networks”, “Russian Railways”) and Russian “soft power” entities/initiatives (“Rossotrudnichestvo”, “Lazarev Club” etc.) in the processes in Armenia? 6. Whether the RA leadership ensures (or should ensure) balance in its foreign policy, particularly, vis-à-vis the EU and Russia? 7. Whose (EU, Russia) response to the increasing terrorist threats from political Islam is the most adequate? Given the changing agenda in the global and regional politics certain modification of the formulated issues was made possible.

As a target of the study, the respective statements, interviews and other content shared by the selected reference group were used. Upon consultations within the group of experts both engaged in the study and beyond, 32 opinion shapers (conditional “respondents”) were included in the reference group. To ensure reflection of diverse positions on the above-mentioned issues, representatives of four conditional segments of opinion shapers were selected: a) those sharing or supporting the positions of the current Armenian political leadership (defined as “pro-government”), b) proponents of the previous authorities (1998-2018), conditionally defined as “conservatives”, c) public figures promoting the ideas of “Europeanization”, “westernization” (“pro-Westerners”), d) observers striving to be impartial commentators/analysts of the processes (“experts”).

The research group was recording the most frequent statements on the theme of the study, thus, identifying the major trends in public attitudes and perceptions for each

period and each issue. The monitored/reviewed statements were processed through qualitative (attitude and connotation) and quantitative (volume and frequency) approaches. Similar statements of at least two opinion shapers/respondents from the same segment were taken as exponential and deserving to become material for further generalization and analyses. In exceptional cases uncommon but remarkable statements were taken into consideration as an illustration of sharp public discourse. The systemized set of statements became material for analyzing the trends and dynamics in the attitudes and perceptions spread in Armenian society vis-à-vis the theme of the study. Special report allowing to make certain predictions on the further development of public moods and political agenda was prepared as a final product.



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