

EROSION OF TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY AS A THREAT TO INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

Farid Shafiyev

IN the aftermath of World War II, the international community created, through the United Nations and other international legal instruments, what scholars and policymakers dubbed the “post-war world order.” This term implied that the world was determined to prevent any large-scale global catastrophe by upholding certain principles that they enshrined in the UN Charter. Given that World War II was preceded by the territorial claims of Nazi Germany to Czechoslovakia—as well as irredentist claims by nationalist elements in various European nations, and, in general, the concept of ethnic kinship across state borders—the founders of the United Nations emphasized the principle of territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Post-war development brought decolonization along with many territorial disputes, some of which caused global instability, for example, the Arab-Israeli conflict. The global rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union was characterized by both ideological struggle between liberalism and communism and the two powers’ ambitions to dominate the world, including by various means of political control. In the meantime, direct territorial expansion was put aside and, in general, the principle of territorial integrity was given priority. On several occasions, countries split, and borders were reshaped (e.g., Bangladesh, Congo); but, overall, this was rather the exception than the norm. Most territorial issues were a result of decolonization, with various newly emerging states coming into being

Farid Shafiyev is Chairman of the Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center), Azerbaijan’s premier research institution. You may follow him on Twitter @shafiyev_farid.



Azerbaijani flag at Jidir Plain in Karabakh, overlooking Khankendi (left)

Photo: Damjan Krnjević Mišković

outside of America and Europe, and were thus rendered as the issues of the “developing world” in Asia and Africa. The United States and the Soviet Union dealt with global competition mostly through proxy wars in the Third World based on ideological struggle, leaving the issue of ethnic identity as something outdated and backward.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia brought this issue back to the so-called Old World. The United Nations was not prepared to deal with such issues, particularly because the “balance” which the two rival powers had maintained was no longer

in place—the Soviet Union itself collapsed as a result of its inherent ethnic composition.

Here, it is important to underline that the dissolution of the USSR and Yugoslavia was not within the process of decolonization in terms of international law. These were separations based on agreements—Belovezh and Alma-Ata of 1991 in the former, and the Badinter Arbitration Commission of 1991-1993 in the latter case. The administrative borders of the former republics that constituted the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia became the state borders of the new republics. The first

country that decided to break with this principle was Armenia, by raising a question about the independence of the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. While Yerevan fell short of an official recognition of the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh, it adopted decisions in its domestic legislature—such as granting Azerbaijan’s Karabakh-born Robert Kocharyan the right to run for Armenia’s presidency—thus legalizing the annexation.

Disregard for the norms of international law in a remote corner of Europe did not catch the attention of major policymakers in Europe and America. This trend of irredentism

and separatism in the post-socialist era was followed by the official recognition of the independence of Kosovo by the United States and its Western allies, and Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russia, both of which happened in 2008.

The momentum of unilateralism, managed by the United States for two decades (1990s-2000s), was unfortunately not used for solidifying the existing world order, but rather for reshaping it to meet the demand of American dominance. Here, liberalism was probably the most attractive model,

The momentum of unilateralism, managed by the United States for two decades (1990s-2000s), was unfortunately not used for solidifying the existing world order, but rather for reshaping it to meet the demand of American dominance.

proven by historical developments as a viable solution to many economic and social problems. However, neoliberals misapplied the concept and disregarded regional peculiarities. Aggravated by religious tension in the Middle East (so often used by various political forces, including the United States, India,

and Iran), liberalism was perceived not as a medium for democracy and social well-being, but merely as cover for a new form of colonialism.

The idea of ethnic self-determination that helped to dismantle the Soviet Union and threatened other global and small regional empires looked irresistibly attractive to the West as

an ideology of freedom. In fact, thanks to self-determination, many repressive European empires became assigned to history. However, questions have arisen: What is the limit of self-determination? What unit of ethnic community should be entitled to independence? International law had certain definitions regarding self-determination, but these were mostly relevant to former European colonies. Western countries welcomed the new states emerging in Asia and Africa: Eritrea, East Timor, and South Sudan. On many occasions, the West welcomed the addition of

“friendly” ethnic communities, such as Christians in South Sudan or Kosovo, as buffers against illiberal regimes. However, when those ethnic or religious communities achieved independence (here, the example of South Sudan is quite vivid, with further massacres happening after the attainment of statehood), the security and human rights situations did not improve in those territories, whereas the former parent states made better progress once their political regimes had changed. This raised the question of a correlation between democracy and ethnic struggle. Conflicts emerged in traditional democracies such as the UK, Canada, and Spain with new self-determination claims from Scotland, Quebec, Catalonia, and others. Here, the appetite for supporting independence among advanced democracies was very low.

So often, we hear about the importance of upholding the “rules-based international order,” but the room for interpretation remains quite wide. As Stephen Walt pointed out in his telling piece for *Foreign Policy*, appropriately titled “Some Rules of Global Politics Matter More than Others,” “Norms do matter, but there’s enormous room for interpretation and

In 2008, the United States and its Western allies recognized the independence of Kosovo, which opened the Pandora’s Box for countries such as Russia, eager to re-establish its former empire.

powerful states will typically find ways to work around whatever constraints a norm might impose.” The decades of the U.S. unipolar dominance from 1991 (the collapse of the USSR) to 2008 (the Russian invasion of Georgia and the financial crisis) manifested that the rules-based liberal international

order is defined by the United States. In 2008, the United States and its Western allies recognized the independence of Kosovo, which opened the Pandora’s Box for countries such as Russia, eager to re-establish its former empire. For this reason, Moscow unleashed a series of recognitions of separatist entities on

the territory of the former Soviet Union and openly claimed the territories of neighboring countries, beginning with the 2014 annexation of Crimea and continuing to the war of aggression against Ukraine starting in 2022. This war—a blatant violation of international law—can by no means be justified by the actions of the United States. The point I am trying to make here is that, by the year 2022, international law and the rules-based liberal order had already been eroded by the actions of global powers. One reason for such erosion was ethnic conflicts and territorial claims.

Immediately after the end of the Cold War, in 1992, the United Nations Secretary General in the report “Agenda for peace” underlined that “the foundation-stone [...] must remain the State. Respect for its fundamental sovereignty and integrity are crucial to any common international progress.”

He then warned, “if every ethnic, religious or linguistic group claimed statehood, there would be no limit to fragmentation, and peace, security, and economic well-being for all would become ever more difficult to achieve.”

Ethnic conflicts have two major types: first, a separatist ethnic group trying to reach independence, and a second, which has a proper academic name: irredentist.

However, the view of many leading Western countries regarding the separatist aspirations of certain ethnic groups in the aftermath of the Cold War was rather welcoming. In the 1990s, Americans viewed such movements through the prism of liberal tenets, encouraging them as those movements would help to dismantle old rivals. In fact, some movements were inspired by radicalism and extreme nationalism. After the age of big global empires, ethnic leaders, warlords, and local opportunists preached about small regional empires. One such idea was that of a “Greater Armenia” in the South Caucasus, which gave birth to the idea of *miatsum* (unification in the Armenian language).

Without going into historical details, the core problem was the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) within Azerbaijan—an artificial creation of the Soviet authorities dating back to the period between 1921 and 1923, which carved out territories with Armenian popula-

tions from the historical Karabakh region, which had a mainly Azerbaijani population. As with so many other conflicts, the army of warring historians and intellectuals began a dangerous *danse macabre* around the demand by local Armeni-

ans in February 1988 to be united with Armenia.

Ethnic conflicts have two major types: first, a separatist ethnic group trying to reach independence, and a second, which has a proper academic name: irredentist. This aims at enlargement and unification across borders with parent states. Many conflicts have some historical background with a burden of grievances caused by massacres, or economic, social, or religious problems. A large number of those grievances are legitimate and must be addressed. In the meantime, many others lead to the involvement of hordes of warlords and entrepreneurs who profit from arms sales and illegal trafficking. Armenian territorial claims produced similar

characters, both locally and across the wide and influential Armenian diaspora—perhaps one of the most organized and vocal communities in many leading Western countries. This was one of the reasons why, when the conflict erupted in 1987-1988, Russian liberals and Western policymakers, celebrities, and journalists supported the Armenian demonstrations that, in essence, were part of a bloody irredentist project.

In November 1987, one of Mikhail Gorbachev’s leading economic advisors, Abel Aganbegyan, an Armenian, speaking to a group of French Armenians in Paris, said

At a time when all Soviet norms and arrangements were under question, the Karabakh problem was the one about which all experts rushed to talk, just as today everyone speaks about COVID-19, Taiwan, or Ukraine.

that he supported the unification of Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia: “I have already made a similar proposal and I hope that these ideas will be implemented in the spirit of perestroika and democracy.” Russian, American, and French liberal intellectuals had little knowledge about the complexity of the history of the region and fully disregarded the legal and moral context surrounding the issue. They accepted the slogans of Armenian nationalists at face value and supported what they believed was a freedom movement in the Soviet Union. At a time when all Soviet norms and arrangements were under

question, the Karabakh problem was the one about which all experts rushed to talk, just as today everyone speaks about COVID-19, Taiwan, or Ukraine.

Subsequent events in 1987-1990, with emerging refugees and massacres on both sides, left many experts puzzled about the nature of the conflict. Superficial explanations were usually available with several undertones, such as Christian Armenians fighting Muslim Azerbaijanis, which made the narrative in the West and Russia overall favorable towards Armenian irredentism. The Armenian propaganda machine employed a historical

narrative about genocide. In general, Armenians were better prepared for the armed struggle and information warfare. As reported by British journalist Thomas De Waal based on interviews with local Armenian activists, as soon as 1986, Armenian nationalists had begun collecting weapons: “the activists received a first consignment of small arms from abroad in the summer of 1986 with the help of the Dashnaks [Armenian nationalist party].” The Armenian nationalists managed to create a whole historiography around victimhood and the threat of genocide, even though, prior to 1987, the situation was

peaceful and in Azerbaijan there was no public discussion around issues related to Armenian-Azerbaijani animosity.

As American political scientist Stuart J. Kaufman points out, the Armenian mythology played an important role in advancing ideas about indigenous habitation dating back several millennia and convinced the wider public that history “entitles them to possession of those territories regardless of the ethnicity of their current populations.” Central to that was the idea of a “Greater Armenia,” encompassing an enormous land area in the Caucasus and the Middle East.

In addition, the Armenian people developed the idea of martyrdom for the Christian faith, claiming to be a first state to officially adopt Christianity. Among Christian advocates in the West, Armenian activists have portrayed the conflict as a religious one, even though Armenia has long enjoyed good relations with Iran. Armenian publicist and historian Rafael Ishkhanian wrote that cursing Muslims and especially Turks, and reminding people about past brutalities in Armenian society, were “all regarded as expressions of patriotism.”

This hatred was also transferred to Azerbaijanis, an ethnic group close to Anatolian Turks.

While claiming the threat of a new genocide at the hands of Azerbaijanis, the Armenian Soviet government acted along with nationalists in the ethnic cleansing of Azerbaijanis from Armenia in 1987-1989. As a result, about 250,000 Azerbaijanis were violently expelled from Armenia, while about 400,000 Armenians experienced the same consequences, leaving Azerbaijan in 1988-1990 (later, between 1992 and 1994, an additional 700,000

Azerbaijanis were ethnically cleansed from the Armenian-occupied Karabakh and the adjacent areas). However, the petition of Karabakh Armenians to the central authorities in Moscow to transfer the NKAO to Armenia was not granted. Then, the Armenian Soviet parliament decided to act unilaterally and adopted a decision to annex NKAO on December 1st, 1989. This decision was annulled by the Supreme Soviet of the USSR (central parliament), as it ran contrary to the Soviet constitution—which stipulated that changes of borders between Soviet republics should be agreed upon by all parties involved. In this case, Azerbaijan did not give its consent to such a transfer.

The idea of ethnic self-determination that helped to dismantle the Soviet Union and threatened other global and small regional empires looked irresistibly attractive to the West as an ideology of freedom.

As the Soviet Union collapsed in December 1991, the Armenian nationalists changed their tactics. The idea of *miatsum* was put aside because, in the situation where Azerbaijan and Armenia became two independent states, direct territorial acquisition would have been perceived by the international community as annexation. The Armenian side promoted the idea of self-determination, which received much more positive feedback from international policymakers. However, as international law was firmly on the Azerbaijani side, and the United Nations recognized Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan at the time of accession on March 2nd, 1992, Armenia soon launched a full-scale undeclared war against Azerbaijan. Gradually taking control of essential cities in the NKAO—for example Shusha on May 8th, 1992—and then even those outside of it, Armenia had occupied the former autonomous oblast and seven adjacent regions of Azerbaijan by the end of 1993. In response, the United Nations Security Council adopted four resolutions in 1993 recognizing Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity, including its sovereignty over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, and demanding the unconditional and immediate withdrawal of all occupying forces from Azerbaijan. The slightly vague language of the resolutions, which did not directly implicate Armenia in the military occupation thanks to the lobbying efforts of France

and Russia in the UN Security Council, allowed official Yerevan to deny the involvement of its army and instead attribute the situation to local Karabakh Armenians, a population of 120,000 that supposedly defeated the regular units of Azerbaijan—a country with a population of 7 million at the time.

Similar dramatic conflicts unfolded in other former Soviet republics such as Georgia and Moldova, where small separatist groups in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria outperformed central armies. These all happened with the direct support of Russia. For the authorities in Russia, which found itself surrounded by newly independent states, ethnic conflicts represented an opportunity to keep the former colonies under control. In the mid-1990s, Russia formed a military union with Armenia and several other post-Soviet states, established military bases in Armenia, and essentially guaranteed Armenian control over the occupied territories of Azerbaijan.

Tragedies caused by ethnic clashes also ravaged the Balkans. The closeness to Western Europe prompted a more rapid reaction—the flow of refugees and media coverage prompted the leading Western powers to intervene. The concept of humanitarian intervention was championed by many Western leaders and renowned scholars, even though some of the modalities of such inter-

ventions had problematic implications for international order and law. Thus, certain ethnic groups were occasionally encouraged to provoke violence in order to invite interventions.

There was not, and still cannot be, a single recipe for the resolution of ethno-territorial conflicts. What solution proves to be effective is still debatable. In Bosnia, the Dayton agreement preserved the unity of Bosnia and Herzegovina and introduced a community-based power-sharing agreement to ensure the rights and security of three ethnic groups, primarily the most vulnerable Muslim Bosniaks. In Macedonia, there was a mechanism to protect the Albanian minority. However, in the case of Kosovo, the Western powers decided to promote self-determination in its maximalist understanding as the right of secession. They rejected the compromise formula “more than autonomy, less than independence,” which in some ways is reminiscent of what Baku might have been willing to offer the Armenian minority in Karabakh. And Westerners did this despite the terms set by the UN Security Council resolution 1244 (1999), which stipulated the preservation of the territorial integrity of Serbia.

The concept of humanitarian intervention was championed by many Western leaders and renowned scholars, even though some of the modalities of such interventions had problematic implications for international order and law.

While the United States and its allies recognized the independence of Kosovo in 2008, many other states, including some European ones, refused to act in a similar manner. The United Nations consequently had no unified approach. The then Secretary-General of the United Nations Ban Ki-Moon emphasized that “each situation needs to be examined based on its unique circumstances,” and Kosovo was a “highly distinctive situation,” making it *sui generis*, that is, a unique case. Russian President Vladimir Putin described the declaration of independence by Kosovo as a “terrible precedent that will come back to hit the West in the face,” and he decided to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia that same year. Serbia’s former President Boris Tadić, rightfully observed in an essay that features prominently in this edition of *Horizons* that “for Putin, his salami slicing of other nations begins with Kosovo: it has been repeatedly cited as precedent in recognizing or annexing South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Crimea, and now the latest regions in eastern and southern Ukraine.” As I mentioned earlier, Russian actions should not create a false equivalence with Western actions in the Balkans, where there was a complex

situation involving war crimes such as those in Srebrenica. However, the outcome, and especially the legal framework that the International Court of Justice tried to include in its 2010 ruling on the Kosovo declaration of independence, inspired even more crimes and further infringements of international law. “Inconsistency has denuded international law of its authority, creating a world where unilateral declarations of border changes become permissible.”

There was not, and still cannot be, a single recipe for the resolution of ethno-territorial conflicts.

Armenians were also inspired by the Kosovo precedent. However, the resolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict was a matter of long negotiations under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group, which, from 1997, was co-chaired by France, Russia, and the United States. That same year, the parties were very close to a resolution based on a proposal for an autonomy status for Nagorno-Karabakh. Unfortunately, Armenian president Levon Ter-Petrosian, who accepted this proposal, was ousted from power in 1998, and his successors, former Karabakh warlords Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan, opted to indefinitely prolong the status quo with the hope that, in the future, a new geopolitical reality would permit achieving international recognition for Nagorno-Karabakh and then, finally, unification with Armenia.

Achieving that goal required further propaganda efforts. Orientalist biases against Azerbaijan were prevalent in Western academia and media among both liberals and Christian fundamentalists, albeit for different reasons—the latter perceived a messianic role of Westerners in supporting the Armenian cause against Azerbaijanis and Turks. American scholar Thomas Ambrosio rightly called the situation an “international permissive environment” that allowed the occupation of Azerbaijani territories. Based on already established stereotypes, Armenian nationalists streamlined the campaign for self-determination, and then, after the Armenian defeat in the Second Karabakh War (September 27th-November 10th, 2020), promoted the idea of “remedial secession.”

However, overall, the international community has been aware of the fact of Armenian occupation, and for this reason, there was no strong resistance to Azerbaijan’s military actions during the Second Karabakh War. As Damjan Krnjević-Mišković pointed out in a 2020 essay for *The National Interest*, “irrespective of ancient grievances, a convoluted historical record, and whatever other vagarious claims have been put forward, the situation is, at the end of the day, unambiguous: the outcome to

the conflict requires the end of Yerevan’s military occupation of these lands and the return of hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijani civilians to their homes.”

Armenian nationalists had built their strategy on a false foundation by equating self-determination with the avowed rights of secession and occupation. International law is quite clear about the right of self-determination, except in cases of decolonization (which does not apply to the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan): it cannot happen by military force and requires the consent of the central government. The UN Charter and the OSCE Helsinki Act, which Armenians like referring to, are firm about the right of sovereignty and territorial integrity, presuming that self-determination cannot violently infringe on those principles. Armenia realized that it could not win the case diplomatically, that is, through international organizations, and decided to impose the principle of *fait accompli*—to make Azerbaijan accept the reality on the ground, or simply the fact of occupation. However, Azerbaijan always maintained that it would not accept the result of the use of force and changed the reality on the ground in 2020.

International law is quite clear about the right of self-determination, except in cases of decolonization it cannot happen by military force and requires the consent of the central government.

Liberal phraseology covered up the Armenian terror of ethnic cleansing and war crimes such as that of Khojaly on February 26th, 1992, when Armenian armed units destroyed an Azerbaijani settlement, killing 613 people. Vast areas in Azerbaijan were razed to the ground, contaminated by mines, while mosques and graves were pillaged—yet the liberal policymakers in America and Europe expressed their unconditional support to Armenia. The conflict produced civilian victims on both sides (although disproportionately high numbers of those killed and forced to become refugees were from Azerbaijan), but Western media paid much more attention to those on the Armenian side. As American scholars John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt point out in their 2008 book *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, “the disproportionate influence of small but focused interest groups increases even more when opposing groups are weak or nonexistent, because politicians have to accommodate only one set of interests and the public is likely to hear only one side of the story.”

Westerners would reject the claim of Orientalist bias and point rather to the human rights situation as the reason for the different treatment of Azerbaijan

and Armenia. Today, Armenian experts and their supporters base their claims on developing a democracy in Armenia versus authoritarianism in Azerbaijan.

How human rights correlate with the conflict is indeed subject to problematic reasoning in terms of several factors. While the argument about a democratic deficit easily fits into the media’s already existing pro-Armenian narrative, the reality could not be further from the truth.

The conflict, which is not that old and has no “ancient hatred” element, is nevertheless rooted in Imperial Russian rule and originated during the First Russian Revolution of 1905. The first clashes of 1905-1906 took place against a background of rising nationalism and socio-economic problems. The modern conflict began in 1987-1988, when both countries were part of the Soviet Union, and the problems—economic, social, and humanitarian—raised during demonstrations were prevalent across the whole Soviet system. In fact, the economic data demonstrate that on average, Karabakh residents enjoyed better living conditions than the rest of the people in Azerbaijan. The mobilization of Armenians occurred through nationalistic slogans accompanied by environmental and cultural demands. Azerbaijanis were expelled prior to the situation being reciprocated for Armenians in Azerbaijan, and this was later

accompanied by full ethnic cleansing from both Armenia and the occupied areas. As Stephen M. Saideman and R. William Ayres argue in *Kin or Country: Xenophobia, Nationalism, and War* (2015), the Armenian seizure of Nagorno-Karabakh and plan to move “Armenia’s international boundary to cover the Karabakh region and assume control of that area’s Armenian population” through the ethnic cleansing of Azerbaijanis was aimed at “solving the problem that xenophobic nationalists often want to avoid—the incorporation of Others.” This attests to the fact that the conflict is the product of a jingoistic plan based on the idea of a “Greater Armenia,” rather than being a necessity born out of human rights concerns.

Identifying the conflict as the result of a democracy problem also implies that the West would be more sympathetic to the Azerbaijani position if it were a more democratic state. The events of 1992, more specifically Section 907, adopted as part of the Freedom Support Act and the freezing of U.S. aid to Azerbaijan—implemented during the presidency of the pro-Western and pro-democracy Abulfaz Elchibey—debunk these claims. All leaders of Azerbaijan have become victims of Western villainization, regardless of their domestic politics. In the meantime, Armenia, despite having been ruled by warlords for 20 years (1998-2018), and the autocratic and corrupt practices of its government, still enjoys

support among Western policymakers and the traditional backers of the Armenian lobby. It is also essential to decode current Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan’s vision of “democracy.” The fact that Pashinyan’s version of the country’s democracy can only be extended to ethnic Armenians, with Azerbaijanis ethnically cleansed from Armenia (and, until the 2020 war, from the occupied territories of Azerbaijan), makes such a vision more characteristic of a white supremacist ideology rather than democracy.

Finally, the existence of current ethno-territorial conflicts within advanced Western democracies, such as Quebec in Canada, Scotland in the United Kingdom, or Catalonia in Spain, undermines the hypothesis about the correlation between human rights and identity conflicts.

The rhetoric about human rights as a cause of conflict was invoked on several occasions. As mentioned, Western countries supported the creation and secession of several states, such as Eritrea and South Sudan. However, the establishment of new states has not improved the situation in terms of the liberties and freedoms of people living there. Kosovo is

another vivid example. In fact, the people who founded the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA)—like the former president Hashim Thaçi, the former speaker of Kosovo’s parliament Kadri Veseli, former KLA spokesman Jakup Krasniqi, and former KLA commander Rexhep Selimi—were all later brought to justice for numerous war crimes. Former Armenian presidents Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan boasted about their participation in armed actions and admitted their role in war crimes (Sargsyan confessed to British journalist Thomas de Waal his role in the Khojaly massacre). Before the Syrian conflict, the highest number of refugees in Germany were from Kosovo. Meanwhile political refugees in Europe from Armenia outnumbered those from Azerbaijan.

In the end, discussions about injustices, past genocides, and whatever other grievances Armenia has, and the moral right to secession for Armenians in the context of human rights infringements in Azerbaijan, should be put in the context of the ethnic cleansing of Azerbaijanis from Armenia and Karabakh and the creation of a basically monoethnic Armenian state with the prevailing slogan “No *Turks* in Armenia,” which was voiced

The fact that Pashinyan’s version of the country’s democracy can only be extended to ethnic Armenians, with Azerbaijanis ethnically cleansed from Armenia makes such a vision more characteristic of a white supremacist ideology rather than democracy.

on the streets of Yerevan in March 2022, when the government of Nikol Pashinyan expressed initial consent to Azerbaijan’s proposal to mutually recognize the two states’ territorial integrity. The horrible crimes and destruction committed by Armenians cannot be justified because of past tragedies, even if we accept them unconditionally.

Despite numerous examples of problematic secessions and border changes, some influential policymakers and experts advocate for the creation of new states to solve the problems that people have been experiencing in existing states. Economic hardships and the lack of good governance definitely have an impact on ethnic tensions. However, the solution is not in making new borders, but rather in creating the conditions for central governments to function properly and ensure the safety and freedoms of various ethnic groups living together. The solution is coexistence and cooperation—not the building of new borders and walls. Liberals around the world should strive for this vision of a globalized world.

The Russian war against Ukraine made many European policymakers rethink their approach to the issue

of self-determination and territorial integrity. How should one treat the fact that Russians in Crimea expressed their desire to live under the Russian jurisdiction? Should we accept the fact that, historically, it was only in 1954 that Crimea was transferred to Ukraine? Russian leaders and historians claim that the Ukrainian identity is a by-product of Bolshevik nation-making. By exactly the same token, Armenian nationalists speak about the transfer of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan in 1921 (whereas according to archival documents, Karabakh was in fact left within Azerbaijan), and assert that Azerbaijanis as a distinct ethnic group emerged due to the Stalin’s nationality policy. They claim that Armenians do not want to live under Azerbaijani rule while, just as Russian leaders speak about Nazism in Ukraine, Armenian leaders talk about dictatorship in Azerbaijan.

Unfortunately, the international community does not only face serious challenges from ethno-nationalist leaders and xenophobic activists. It is the world-leading countries that frequently undermine the rules-based liberal international order—and do so at their own peril. ●

The existence of current ethno-territorial conflicts within advanced Western democracies, such as Quebec in Canada, Scotland in the United Kingdom, or Catalonia in Spain, undermines the hypothesis about the correlation between human rights and identity conflicts.