THE WINDOW THAT CLOSED SLOWLY AND THEN ALL AT ONCE

Posted on June 3, 2026 by Keghart



Category: Opinions

By Varouj Pogharian, Bogota, Colombia, 3 June 2026

Hindsight is cruel because it simplifies. It turns time into a straight line and choices into verdicts. It assumes that what is obvious now must have been obvious then.

For Armenians of Karabagh, hindsight delivers a particularly bitter truth: there was a moment when "maximum autonomy" within Azerbaijan might have preserved Armenian life on the historical land. That moment passed. Not because Armenians were weak, but because they believed strength could pause history.

The deporting of Armenians from Karabagh did not begin in 2023. It began years earlier, when leverage was mistaken for permanence and negotiations were treated as a delay tactic rather than decision.

After the 1994 ceasefire, Armenia and Karabagh stood in a position that history rarely grants small nations. Armenians had won militarily. They controlled territory beyond the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast. Azerbaijan was internally unstable, militarily inferior, and diplomatically constrained. The balance of power favored the victors.

That balance was leverage. But leverage only matters if it is spent. Instead, it was hoarded.

The Armenian political class, particularly during the Kocharyan–Oskanian period, operated on the central assumptions that time was neutral; that holding ground would eventually force the world to adjust; and that facts on the ground would harden into facts of law. This belief was not irrational. It was supported by experience. The ceasefire was holding. International mediators were talking without forcing concessions. Armenia paid no immediate price for delay.

When the Madrid Principles emerged in 2007, they reflected a reality that had already begun to shift. Azerbaijan had oil revenue, growing military capacity, and diplomatic momentum. The Minsk Group, led by the United States, Russia, and France, was no longer looking for creative ambiguity. It was looking for a managed settlement.

The Madrid framework offered a painful bargain: phased withdrawal from surrounding territories, security guarantees, peacekeepers, and a future referendum on status. It was not independence. It was not annexation. It was a form of maximum autonomy deferred in time and wrapped in international language.

Armenia's government accepted Madrid as a basis for negotiation. Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian oversaw the process. He defended the framework publicly and internationally as the best available option. And in purely diplomatic terms, it may have been. It preserved the principle of self-determination. It postponed final status. It avoided immediate defeat. It bought time.

Victory had taught the Armenian victors the wrong lessons: treating land as dignity, framing concessions as betrayal, and speaking of autonomy inside Azerbaijan as fantasy—even as the world

moved steadily toward reasserting Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. What Armenian leaders failed to do was prepare society for the idea that the conflict had an expiration date. Negotiations became a performance rather than a process aimed at closure. The assumption was that delay favored the status quo. In reality, delay favored the party that was growing stronger. The Armenian political class spoke one language to the international community (acknowledged trade-offs) and another to its own people (allowed the myth of permanence to harden.)

This was the core misstep. Victory had given President Kocharyan confidence, and confidence allowed delay. Under his presidency, Armenia lived inside the afterglow of 1994, mistaking the absence of pressure for the absence of danger. He believed that holding ground was itself a strategy, that time could be stretched without cost, that leverage could be preserved indefinitely through patience and discipline. He governed as if consequences were optional, something to be managed later.

In Madrid, Oskanian, the Foreign Minister, understood the international system better than most Armenian officials before or after him. He preserved language about self-determination and avoided outright diplomatic defeat. But he mistook leverage for time. He treated negotiations as a way to prolong advantage rather than to conclude it. Madrid was neither fully embraced nor decisively rejected by the Armenian government. It lingered and became a framework to inhabit, not a window to close. Each year it remained unsigned, its value diminished. Each year that passed without resolution made the same terms worse. Furthermore, autonomy lost value with every dollar Azerbaijan spent on arms and bribing European officials, and every year Armenia failed to consolidate guarantees.

Serzh Sarkissian inherited Kocharyan's assumptions and governed with the confidence of a victor. He preserved the belief that the status quo, though imperfect, was survivable. Kocharyan and Sarkissian differed in temperament and rhetoric, but they shared a foundational belief: that the clock could be slowed, perhaps even stopped.

By the time Nikol Pashinyan came to power in 2018, the window had already narrowed to a crack. The conflict was frozen only in language. Militarily and diplomatically, it was thawing fast. Azerbaijan no longer needed compromise. Russia no longer felt obliged to restrain Baku. The West had other priorities.

Pashinyan inherited a society taught to believe that victory was permanent and that land, once taken, could not be lost. He inherited a negotiating framework whose best version had expired before he arrived, and a war whose logic—technologically, diplomatically, and geopolitically—had already changed. He did not arrive with illusions about leverage because there was none left. He counted constraints rather than promises. This made him hesitant, erratic, and often clumsy in speech. It also made him more honest than his predecessors about two brutal facts: Armenia was out of time and the world does not pause for unresolved conflicts. It replaces them.

Pashinyan is not tragic in the classical sense. He did not fall from greatness through hubris. He is post-tragic. He is blamed not because he created the loss, but because he was present when it became unavoidable.

History will undoubtedly judge him unkindly and unfairly. It will say he mishandled negotiations, antagonized allies, and failed to deter war. What it will struggle to admit is simpler and more disturbing: that he was asked to decide when there was nothing left to decide—only bills to pay. History will not say clearly enough that he was the first Armenian leader forced to act after time had already run out.

The tragedy is not that autonomy within Azerbaijan would have been imperfect. It is that it was no longer available when Armenians were finally forced to consider it seriously. Maximum autonomy is not negotiated after defeat. It is negotiated while the other side still needs you. That moment had existed. It passed by somewhere between victory and complacency.

None of this absolves Azerbaijan of responsibility. Ethnic cleansing is a crime regardless of context. But moral clarity does not undo political error. Armenians were emptied from Karabagh not only because Azerbaijan chose force, but because Armenia failed to close a deal when force was still restrained by uncertainty.

Who is to blame?

If the question of blame is asked honestly—not rhetorically, not for comfort—then the answer is uncomfortable.

Aside from Azerbaijan's government, the Armenians of Karabagh have reason to be angry at **three other actors,** each for a different kind of failure. None of these actors are villains in the simple sense. That is what makes the anger harder to place.

First: Their own political leadership (local and pan-Armenian.) Not for losing the war, but for **misreading time**. Karabagh's leadership, together with Armenia's political class, helped cultivate a belief that victory had frozen history. They spoke the language of permanence while living inside a contingency. They rejected autonomy as humiliation without offering a viable path to recognized independence. They treated negotiations as a performance to be survived rather than a decision to be concluded.

No leader understood that that **leverage decays**, that autonomy has a shelf life, that victory does not suspend demographics, economics, or geopolitics. The people of Karabagh were prepared to endure hardship, even war—but they were never prepared for **inevitability**. Their leaders told them: "Nothing will change without our consent." What they should have said was: "Everything will change unless we decide first." This was strategic blindness.

Second, the Armenian state as an institution, not a nation. The Armenian state failed Karabagh not because it abandoned it, but because it never told it the truth. For decades, Armenia treated

Karabagh as both sacred and unspeakable. Sacred enough to defend rhetorically. Unspeakable enough to never explain the limits of defense. The state allowed ambiguity to replace strategy. It relied on Russia without demanding guarantees. It accepted negotiation frameworks without preparing society for their implications. Worst of all, it allowed **myth to substitute for policy**. A state that cannot tell its citizens what it cannot do will eventually be punished for pretending it could do everything.

Third: Russia, not for betrayal, but for predictability. Anger at Russia is justified, but it must be precise. Russia did not betray Karabagh. It did what it always does: act in its own interest, enforce dependency, and preserve leverage rather than justice. Armenians were encouraged to believe Russia was a protector. In reality, it was a manager of instability: Russia provided peacekeepers without enforcement, guarantees without obligation, and a token presence without responsibility. Russia succeeded in keeping Karabagh **useful**—until it wasn't. The mistake was not trusting Russia. The mistake was believing Russia's interests aligned permanently with Armenian survival.

Lastly: Pashinyan, who helped set the fuse on fire by clumsily declaring "Karabagh is Armenia. Period."

Who The People of Karabagh Should *Not* Be Mad At

Not the West—which never promised protection. Not international law—which has no teeth without power. Not history—which explains but does not decide. And not themselves as a people.

The deepest anger is not outward. It is inward, toward a past moment when choice still existed. That kind of anger has no clear target. Which is why it lingers. And why it will shape Armenian politics for a generation.

Granted that no Armenian leader could have signed a settlement without tearing the country apart. However, Armenian leaders should have understood that delaying only invited catastrophe. The loss of Karabagh is a tragedy shaped by timing.

The Armenians of Karabagh did not fail. They endured. They worked. They stayed. They trusted what they were told. That trust was abused—sometimes cynically, sometimes negligently. Armenians were not defeated when they lost the war. They were defeated when their leaders failed to realize that decisions needed to be taken at the right time—before the window closed.

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Comments



Varouj Pogharian – 2026-06-05 12:49:28

Armenia's leverage after the 1993 war took the form of battlefield success, territorial control, and psychological advantage for having forced Azerbaijan into a ceasefire. But leverage is only meaningful if it's converted into durable gains, such as diplomatic recognition, binding security guarantees, and/or long-term military modernization. Sadly, Armenia treated its post1993 leverage like a trophy rather than a tool. Yerevan did not push hard for an internationally recognized settlement while it still held the upper hand. The occupied districts around Karabagh could have been bargaining chips. Yerevan assumed Moscow's patronage would suffice, rather than diversifying alliances or securing Western guarantees. Russia's "balancing act" of maintaining ties with both warring sides and selling arms to both left Armenia exposed. Corruption and weak institutions prevented Armenia from transforming military victory into sustainable strength. The army was not modernized, and the economy remained fragile. How can we forget General Manvel Grigoryan, a decorated general from the Karabagh war, later a member of the National Assembly representing the Republican Party, who was arrested after investigators found massive quantities of food, supplies, and vehicles meant for frontline soldiers stored in his garages and properties? He had used soldier rations to feed the animals in his private zoo. He died before the trial ended. He never served a formal prison term. Baku spent oil revenues strategically—buying advanced weapons, funding lobbying in Europe (read: bribery, amply documented), and building ties with Turkey and Israel. By the 2020 war, Azerbaijan's technological superiority (especially Turkish-supplied drones) overwhelmed Armenian defenses, leading to the loss of most of Karabagh. How many times did we hear, "We won once, we'll win again"? This romantic nationalism blinded Armenia to Azerbaijan's oilfunded buildup. So yes, Armenia had leverage, but it treated it as something to be preserved rather than expended. In geopolitics, unused leverage decays. By the time Azerbaijan was ready to strike again, Armenia's earlier advantage had evaporated. The minimum lesson from the Karabagh tragedy is that Armenian citizens need to be vigilant toward their government and institutions. Vigilance alone isn't enough—it has to be paired with structural reforms and cultural shifts. We saw how corruption in the military directly undermined national security. Armenians must insist on transparent procurement, independent audits, and punishment for abuses. The "hero" status should never shield officials from scrutiny. Wartime reputations cannot excuse peacetime theft.



Vahe H Apelian – 2026-06-05 11:33:58
CROWD MENTALITY – ԱՄԲՈԽԱՅԻՆ ՏՐԱՄԱԲԱՆՈՒԹԻՒՆ – Varouj, your article reminded me of Kristapor Mikayelian's famous treatise – Crowd Mentality - that is quoted to this day. In it ,Kristapor Mikayelian refuted the crowd mentality that follows the Latin phase "post hoc, ergo propter hoc" - after this because of this. He was refuting the mentality that attributed mid 1890's Hamidian massacres to the revolutionary organizations founded not even a decade earlier. Surprisingly, elements who uphold Kristapor Mikayelian's treatise, nowadays do the same, attributing the depopulation of Artsakh squarely to Nikol Pashinyan because it happened under his watch. You negated that that notion, while not absolving him from responsibility, in the broadest and most effective way possible in your short, concise, effectively narrated article for the subject matter you so effectively treated and communicated. Well done and thank you.



David Boyajian – 2026-06-04 21:12:40
Do we know exactly what Azerbaijan was "offering" Artsakh way back in terms of "autonomy," and could Baku's lying, dictatorial regime ever be trusted? Would Artsakh have gotten: Defensible borders? Its own police force? Immigration control? Would Azeris have returned in force and deliberately created a mess and civil war to justify Azeri military intervention (no matter what agreement had been signed)? A Lachin Corridor that Azerbaijan could not impede or close? What outside force would agree to guarantee all this and have been acceptable to both sides? "Hindsight is 20-20."



Antoine S. Terjanian – 2026-06-04 15:38:19
Excellent analysis Mr. Pogharian. Thank you. I wish this hindsight had been available in 'foresight'.



Ditord – 2026-06-04 14:45:58
Overall, a good piece.... I don't know what you mean by this sentence: "That balance was leverage. But leverage only matters if it is spent. Instead, it was hoarded." The diction leaves the reader with ambiguity regarding the interpretation and accuracy to the context of the article overall. The leverage was Armenia's superior military and battlefield capability and skill. That should have been "hoarded." A more accurate description would have been to say Armenia's leverage should have been expanded, modernized, made more advanced and sophisticated. "You prepare for war so you don't have to go to war." -- Sun Tzu



Cassandra – 2026-06-04 05:44:55
We are forgetting one thing: Azerbaijan (and Turkey) do not abide by treaties, agreements or the rule of law. Even autonomy would not be permissible or respected or lasting when both countries have official policies of hatred for Armenians firmly in place.



Asbed Pogarian – 2026-06-04 01:17:51
Varouj, this is a masterful analysis. You are absolutely spot on. It should be required reading for anyone interested in understanding the root causes of the loss of Artsakh, rather than relying on the shallow blame game that so often dominates the discussion. Your piece provides the depth, context, and nuance that this subject deserves.