

Competing perspectives:

A research paper on how did different political and ideological objectives affect the prism of the view and the decisions of the Italian media and administration, such as the official governmental, parliamentary, and municipal levels, during the Second Karabakh War

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Introduction

While maintaining historical and cultural ties with the Republic of Armenia and excellent relations with the Republic of Azerbaijan, to the point that it could be considered a strategic partnership, the Italian Republic has always been clear and explicit in its support of the norms and the rules of international law. According to the resolutions of the United Nations Security Council, OSCE Minsk Group, and many different agreements, Armenian forces had to withdraw from the occupied regions of Azerbaijan, namely Karabakh and its surrounding regions. Consistently with its respect to international law, the Italian government has multiple times demonstrated its support for the territorial integrity within the internationally recognized borders of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Being a country with the complex structure of central and regional governing bodies, it is also important to analyze both the views within the parliament of the Italian Republic, which consists of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate of the Republic, and the position of different regional governing bodies, such as the regional, city and municipal councils, apart from the official government policy of Italy. While analyzing the response of different Italian governing bodies to the Second Karabakh War, it is also useful to examine the objectivity of the Italian media sources relative to the Western media sources in general regarding the issue in the Southern Caucasus. Although the official government policy of the Italian Republic in relation to the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict has always been the respect of the internationally recognized borders of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the view of the conflict by some of the local governing bodies does not always have endorsed this view, while

Italian media sources have remained relatively objective in relation to the general Western media towards the war.

The official governmental view

Being strategic partners, Italy and Azerbaijan managed to build deep-rooted relations that were solidified by a number of economic projects, especially in the field of energy. The development of strong cooperation could be noted both in the role of the Italian Republic as one of the members of the OSCE Minsk Group and in the \$ 6 billion trade turnover between Italy and Azerbaijan in 2019, which made Italy Azerbaijan's biggest economic partner and Azerbaijan Italy's main export destination in the Caucasus. Indeed, 92% of the Italian trade in the region was directed to Azerbaijan. Moreover, Azerbaijani oil amounts to 17% of Italy's yearly oil import, making the possibility of further development in bilateral relations possible. Bilateral relations between Azerbaijan and Italy were further solidified during the state visit of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev to Rome on 19-22nd of February 2020, where he met with the President of the Italian Republic Sergio Mattarella. President Ilham Aliyev, together with numerous government officials, also held a meeting with Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and a number of Italian high-level officials. The outcome of the meeting resulted in the signing of 28 agreements that included a wide range of fields, from military to energy exports, along with a "Joint Declaration on Strengthening Multidimensional Strategic Partnership". Not only these agreements led to the possibility of military cooperation between the countries, but the joint declaration also reconfirmed Baku and Rome as strategic partners and declared their willingness to further develop their cooperation. Furthermore, Italy officially acknowledged Armenia as the side of the conflict, while declaring support for the territorial integrity of the Republic of Azerbaijan under international law, with the Helsinki Final Act, United Nations Security Council's resolutions, and OSCE Minsk group documents, among others.

The Second Karabakh War started with provocations from the Armenian Armed Forces in Tovuz, a city that is not situated within the conflicted area. The Italian Government responded with statements of condemnation of the provocations from the Armenian side. According to the document, published by the Senate of the Republic in Italy in October 2020, the Italian side was mainly concerned with issues related to the extent of the clashes in the region, the need for the ceasefire to stop further escalation and destabilizing effect of the conflict

on the region, and the display of failure of the status quo and the necessity of the return of the conflicting sides to negotiations under the co-chairmanship of the Minsk group of OSCE with the greater commitment to the process. This document reflected the Italian government's position during the war itself, which also respected the territorial integrity of the Republic of Azerbaijan and called both sides to agree on a ceasefire and return to the negotiations table with greater commitment from both sides of the conflict.

During the Second Karabakh War, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Luigi Di Maio held talks with both sides, declaring Italy's concern about the ongoing clashes in region and mentioning the need for the ceasefire for the prevention of further destabilization of the region, while also underlining the importance of returning to the talks under OSCE with the mediation from the Minsk group. When the trilateral declaration between the President of Azerbaijan, the President of Russia and the Prime Minister of Armenia was signed on the 10th of November 2020, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a press statement welcoming the agreement reached between the conflicting sides, mentioning the importance of reaching a ceasefire for the stabilization of the region, emphasizing the importance of preserving of the cultural and religious heritage of the region, and guaranteeing the Italian participation as member of the Minsk Group in the consolidation of the ceasefire.

The support of the Italian government for the restoration of the rule of international law, which implied the restoration of the territorial integrity of the Republic of Azerbaijan, was shown in practice in early December 2020 through the visit of Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Manlio Di Stefano to the liberated town of Aghdam, during his official mission to the Southern Caucasus. Prior to this mission, on the 16th of November in 2020, during his interview to the news agency Agenzia Nova, he shared his opinion on several global geopolitical issues, including the situation in the Southern Caucasus. While addressing the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, Di Stefano clearly stated the support of the Italian government of the position of the United Nations, stating that the liberation of the Azerbaijani lands will not lead to the diminishing of the rights of any ethnic, or religious minority in the region, because of the existence of the fact that Azerbaijan is a multicultural multi-faith country.

The discourse within the Parliament

Although Azerbaijan is considered a strategic partner by the Italian government, the discussions within the parliament were not unanimously favoring neither the views of Azerbaijan nor the official stance of the Italian government. While analyzing the views of different parties within the parliament of the Italian Republic, it is important to distinguish between its two houses, namely the Senate of the Republic and the Chamber of Deputies, which together form the bicameral parliamentary system, where both houses perform separately while having similar functions.

To understand the views of different parties and the ideas that influenced the decisions of the members of the Italian parliament, it is helpful to analyze and to compare the different texts of the resolutions that were adopted and discussed within the Chamber of Deputies of the Italian Republic during and after the Second Karabakh War. One of the resolutions that was discussed but not adopted within the Chamber of Deputies, was clearly showing the view of some parliament members on the Conflict in Karabakh through the prism of the Turkish influence in the region. The preambular part of the suggested text of the resolution, presented by Andrea Delle Vedove Delmastro, member of the parliament from the party Fratelli D'Italia, was clearly having biases towards the region. The text of the resolution clearly showed anxiety driven from the Turkish influence in the region, as only the name of President Erdogan was mentioned 6 times. The subjectivity of the text appears evident from the mentioning of topics such as the participation of so-called "jihadists from Syria and Lebanon", which is a rumor that did not find any reliable proof; mentioning of Erdogan as the source of destabilization in Syria, Libya and other regions; mentioning of the idea of the new Ottoman empire; claim of Erdogan's willingness of Turkey to be a strong nation of the Muslim Brotherhood; controversial critique and irrelevant raising of the question of so-called "Armenian genocide", and suggestion of revocation of Turkey's candidate status to the European Union. None of the aforementioned topics has any relation to the situation in the Second Karabakh War.

Another resolution presented by Deputy Piero Fassino has been approved by the members of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the Chamber of Deputies of Italy after a large number of changes to the previous text of the resolution was made due to the subjective views that were previously reflected on the paper. The discussion within the Chamber led to the removal of the names "Nagorno-Karabakh" and "Artsakh", representing an illegitimate naming of the region by the Armenian side that is not recognized by the international community, as

well as the removal of the strong criticizing rhetoric of the previous text portraying Azerbaijan as an aggressor. Nevertheless, the mentioning of Turkish will to bring so-called “jihadists” to the region and portrayal of Armenians as the millenary preserves of Christianity in the Muslim region were the factors that show the Turkish policy-driven anxiety and Christianity-driven conservative aspirations of some members of the Chamber of Deputies of the Italian Republic. On the other side, the inclusion on the final text of the four United Nations Security Council Resolutions demanding the immediate withdrawal of the Armenian troops from occupied regions, and the mentioning of the Declaration signed by the leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia were some of the positive developments in the final adopted version of the resolution of the Chamber of Deputies. The position of the Italian parliament has thus distinguished itself by becoming the first parliament in Europe to clearly demonstrate a balanced approach to the conflict situation, being supportive of the Trilateral Declaration signed on the 9th of November in 2020.

The other resolution, the initial text of which can be considered as controversial, as it presented wording such as “war hostages” in it, was the one that was presented to the parliament by the Deputy Piero Fassino and discussed on the 2nd of March 2021. The expressions within the initial text included such parts as the accusation of Azerbaijan on still having so-called “hostages”; disputable argumentation on the Azerbaijani side taking to the court women and individuals under the charge of terrorism; and demand on the release of all these individuals. All these expressions were a clear representation of the biased opinion of some of the members of the parliament, as different authorities within Azerbaijan. Indeed, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has repeatedly reported that, under the international law, all of the hostages that were taken during the war were already returned to the Armenian side, while criminals that were captured after the war under the suspicion of the provocation on the internationally recognized borders of Azerbaijan, would be judged in the courts of Azerbaijan, while being kept in the conditions agreed by the international community. Although the initial text of the resolution contained controversial wording both in its naming and the text, the amendments and changes made during the discussion within the parliament led to the removal of debatable expressions and to the inclusion of the views of the Azerbaijani side into the final text adopted by the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chamber of Deputies. The position of the parliament in Italy has also shown a clearly balanced approach to the issue of war hostages and spoke about the issue of the heavy mining of the liberated territories by the Armenian side.

To some extent there was a division on the opinion and the views regarding the Second Karabakh War, since some of the deputies and senators from parties Forza Italia, Italia Viva, Fratelli D'Italia and the Federal Secretary of the party Lega Nord Matteo Salvini participated in the protest of Armenians organized in Rome in support of the illegitimate regime in the regions of Azerbaijan. However, the predominant part of the deputies within the parliament support the territorial integrity of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the principles of international law. This was clearly seen from the words of some members of the parliament, such as the senator Maria Rizzotti from Forza Italia who condemned the violation of the ceasefire by the Armenian troops in the direction of Tovuz city of Azerbaijan in July 2020; the statement of the senator Stefano Lucidi from Lega Nord condemning the rocket shelling on the civilian areas of Ganja in October 2020; the statement of the senator Mauro Marino from the Italia Viva condemning the provocations of Armenia leading to the war while the world was fighting Covid19 pandemic; and the statements of many more deputies and senators. The support of the majority of the Italian parliament for the implementation of the international law and territorial integrity of Azerbaijan was also clearly seen even after the Second Karabakh War, when the delegation from the Italian Chamber of Deputies under the leadership of its Vice-President where received by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev. The delegation also visited the lands liberated from the Armenian occupation, as well as the some of the cities that were heavily bombed in their civilian areas by the Armenian armed forces during the war. This made Italy the first European parliamentary delegation to visit the liberated lands of Azerbaijan.

Contrasting positions of the city and regional governments

Besides having a complex structure of the state government at the central level itself, the Italian Republic also has a quite complex regional government system. Although Italy is an unitary state, it also acknowledges the presence of local autonomy and decentralization, which makes it possible to consider this country as a “regionalized” one. Being a country that recognizes broader regional decentralization, the regional governing of the Italian Republic consists of regions, provinces, municipalities, and cities, where each has its own local council. However, although the local governing bodies within the Italian Republic have legislative power over matters not directly related to the State or relevant legislation, they do not possess the powers to be able to affect the foreign policy of the state and the issues of international

relations, as these sphere belongs to the domain of jurisdiction of the national authorities in Italy. Indeed, the motions adopted by the city or regional councils in Italy can only play the role of an appeal to the local executive bodies, asking to transmit their request to the national authorities - although in many cases these appeals were not even transmitted. Although the national government of the Italian Republic has informed all city and regional governments about its official position regarding the conflict, some of them still decided to adopt motions, being affected by the propaganda of the regional Armenian minorities.

During the Second Karabakh War, the large number of Armenian communities in Italy have started the campaigns of disinformation and appeals to the local governing bodies, where they were misinterpreting the conflict by presenting it as the fight of the Armenian forces against the Turkish and Azerbaijani forces, which triggered a number of Turkish influence anxiety-driven responses from some authorities. A number of local governing bodies in Italy, such as the regional council of Lombardy, the municipal council of Milan and the municipal council of Forli, although having almost no effect on the foreign policy of the official central government, decided to adopt and send motions to the central government to recognize the independence of the illegal regime in Karabakh, without greater inquiry about the subject nor research of the views of both sides. On the other hand, regional authorities, such as the regional council of Tuscany and the regional council of Marche, after getting deeper knowledge about the issue between the conflicting sides, decided to withdraw their motions. Other governing bodies, such as the regional city council of Catania and the regional council of Calabria, even adopted a document that was expressing its solidarity with the Azerbaijanis. The regional council of Calabria has distinguished itself from the other cases. Being affected by the Armenian propaganda, it initially put a motion in support of the recognition of the illegal regime in Karabakh. Later on, after a greater inquiry on the subject, the regional council decided to withdraw the previous motion and adopt a motion in support of the territorial integrity of the Republic of Azerbaijan, while mentioning the importance of the rule of international law and the decisions adopted by the national government of the Italian Republic. Although a separate demonstration of the view on the foreign policy of regional governing bodies does not have a greater effect on the official policies adopted by the central governing authority of the Italian Republic, the Second Karabakh War led to the expression of different positions from some regional authorities.

Relative objectivity of the Italian Media

Although the Second Karabakh War was fought to restore the rule of international law, some of the Western media was clearly biased in their reports about the situation in the conflict, which sometimes was even going beyond the state position of the countries where the media were operating. While the war operations were happening within the territory of Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijani side did not attack any position in the Armenian territory, the Armenian side launched missiles multiple times on some cities of Azerbaijan that were out of the conflict zone. Some of such missiles were launched towards the Ganja city, which is the second largest city in the Republic of Azerbaijan. As a consequence, many civilians were killed or wounded. Some Western media, such as the CNN and the Wall Street Journal, did not report the bombing of the regions populated by civilians in Azerbaijan by the Armenian side. The news published by channels such as Russia's Sputnik, France's Agence France Presse and France 24 clearly had biased wording within the content shared by them during the war. The other issues regarding the biasness of some of the Western media was the wrongful accusation of the Azerbaijani side on having so-called "jihadists" from Syria fighting of their side, while totally undermining the issue of PKK fighters and Armenians from Syria fighting on the Armenian side, or focusing greatly on the Turkish influence in the region, which was clearly exaggerated by the media under the influence of the Armenian diaspora.

Representing the position of the Azerbaijani side, President Ilham Aliyev has released interviews to a number of foreign media representatives regarding the processes that were happening during the Second Karabakh War. The relative objectivity of the Italian media among the representatives of the Western media was clearly seen even from the questions during those interviews. For instance, the relative objectivity was evident in comparison to the biased interview of BBC News, where the reporter was clearly demonstrating the subjectivity on the matter by referring to the return of the occupied regions as a big precondition for the peace talks, wrongfully rephrasing the quotes from the speech of the President Ilham Aliyev regarding the illegitimate regime in the occupied territories. Comparing the aforementioned interview by British BBC News to the interview by Italian La Repubblica newspaper or Rai 1 TV channel, where one could clearly see the British side asking to the question regarding so-called "jihadists" from Syria without any reference, the Italian side was not aiming to direct the question in a confronting way. This relatively objective approach towards the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, in comparison to the other Western media sources, was also seen in the reports shared by the Italian media outlets, such as AgenziaNova and La Repubblica.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of the positions of different governmental and administrative bodies in the Italian Republic, the divergent tendency in the position of some circles within those bodies is evident. The official governmental position of the Italian Republic regarding the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia during the Second Karabakh War was calling both sides to the ceasefire and return to the peace talks in the format of the OSCE Minsk group. However, after the war, the government in its official foreign policy decided to support the trilateral declaration, signed on 10th of November 2020 by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, President of the Russian Federation, and Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, while mentioning the will of Italy as the member of the OSCE Minsk group in participation in the process consolidation of the peace in the region. While some of the members within the parliament as the result of the lack of inquiry on the situation in the region have been deceived by the propaganda of the Armenian side, the general trend of the positions of the members within the Chamber and the Senate led to the adoption of the final position that favored international law. Similarly, although not having a greater effect on the foreign policy of the state, some of the local governing bodies in Italy, being deceived by the propaganda of the Armenian diaspora, have adopted motions disregarding both international agreements and the official policy of the Italian Republic, the greater extent of those bodies after greater inquiry on the subject decided to withdraw their motions, while some even declared solidarity with the Azerbaijani population. In conclusion, it can be said that, while the official position of the Italian Republic was reflecting the respect of the integrity of the territorial integrity of the Republic of Azerbaijan and demand of the implementation of the resolutions of UNSC and the agreements, there has been a divergence in the positions regarding the conflict among the members of the parliaments and different local governing bodies, whereas the Italian media remained relatively objective in presenting the situation in the region compared to the other Western media. The urge of the Armenian side to target Italy was based on the distress coming from the tremendous development in the relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Italian Republic, because the Armenian side believed in suitability of the situation created by the Second Karabakh War. During and after the Second Karabakh War, it was clearly seen that the diplomacy of the Republic of Azerbaijan and its clearly set geopolitical goals were able to prevail the propaganda of the Armenian side and anti-Turkish distress in all four fields, namely the official governmental view of the Italian Republic, the position of the parliament, the view of the city and regional governments, and the standpoint of the Italian media.

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