



**The Current Narratives about the Correlation of Democracy, Human Rights and Security in Post-War Armenia: True or False?**  
*February 11*

***Summary and Conclusions***

The event started with opening remarks by **Marc Behrendt**, the Director of the Europe and Eurasia Programs (EEP) of Freedom House, followed by a brief presentation about the project and of the topic by **Sossi Tatikyan**, the Project Coordinator of Freedom House in Armenia.

In his opening remarks, **Marc Behrendt** underlined the dynamic between three different sides of Freedom House's programming: Emergency assistance to activists, journalists, and human rights defenders that have found themselves attacked or at risk because of the work that they do, Freedom House's flagship reports, and the deeper relationships and long-term collaborations with partners in different countries around the world through work to support the progress of democracy and human rights. Freedom House helps human rights defenders and civil society to take lead in their society, to identify the most important issues, and to move as far forward as they possibly can. Reporting and research give Freedom House the legitimacy to engage with governments and policymakers. The combination of these three pillars is what makes the role of Freedom House unique. He also reflected on the impact of disinformation in the current Armenian context following the war and the Covid-19 crisis. He noted that one thing that Freedom House understood is that the idea of democracy is being pinned against the idea of security, which has resulted in a lot of disinformation in Armenia. Security, human rights, democracy, freedom of expression, and the rule of law are fundamentally associated with one another. One cannot have security without predictable governance, one cannot have rule of law without the protection of minorities and unpopular opinions. Marc Behrendt concluded his remarks by saying that democracy is a cornerstone of a secure country, and this is one of the motivational principles for Freedom House. There has been a lot of opponents of this idea who have tried to sell the idea of security as an alternative to democracy. We need to debunk this myth in ways that are appropriate to individual countries and individual contexts.

**Sossi Tatikyan** underlined that the Freedom House project in Armenia is aimed at advancing democratic culture in Armenia through combatting disinformation. The project was designed before the pandemic and war, which have both deepened the previously existing problems in the Armenian society. Tackling disinformation has many aspects, and currently, various organizations have projects on its various aspects such as media literacy, information security, etc. Freedom House focuses on tackling false narratives

created through disinformation and their polarizing impact on society, in particular, the problems they create for democracy and human rights. The project is aimed to contribute to the coalition-building between various groups of civil society, media organizations, and the public to become more resilient while facing disinformation, as well as aiming to encourage the executive and legislative authorities to develop strategic communication to prevent disinformation. Amongst other activities, Freedom House intends to organize a series of public and Chatham House discussions with the participation of CSOs, media organizations, independent oversight bodies, representatives of the executive and legislature, individual experts, and academia. This is the first discussion on the correlation of human rights, democracy, and security. As she mentioned, there is a narrative in Armenia, strengthened after the war that human rights and democracy are Western, liberal, globalist, and even false values that are imposed externally and weaken the immunity of the society. In Armenia, some individuals and groups claim that Armenia was defeated in the war since it prioritized democracy promoted by the civil society, adopted principles and values that weakened its “immunity” and its security. However, there cannot be real security without human rights and genuine democracy that ensures good governance in all areas, including security and defense. The UN has concluded that human rights, development, and security are directly correlated with each other, as stated by its former Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

The online session then featured two thematic briefings, starting with **Arman Tatoyan**, the Human Rights Defender, or Ombudsman, of Armenia, whose presentation focused on “The correlation of Human Rights, Rule of Law and Security in Armenia”. Tatoyan started his speech by noting about the dangers of the current trend to oppose democracy, human rights with security in Armenia. As an HRD, he emphasized that these do not contradict but complement each other, and the way out of the crisis is to be guided by democracy and human rights. It is only through human rights protection mechanisms that an effective oversight over the government is established, which in its turn is the guarantee for the state to carry out its duties. This applies also to the international organizations and the importance of their timely response. Tatoyan pointed out regrettably that currently the authoritarian regimes in the world are strengthening their positions. As the recent war in Nagorno Karabakh showed, authoritarian states are dealing with the conflicts and problems not through the intervention of international bodies but through political power and military force. He presented international humanitarian law and human rights violations committed during the recent war in Nagorno Karabakh, such as decapitation and mutilation towards the military and civilians, use of banned armaments, the maltreatment of prisoners of war, and ethnic hatred and racism advocated by the Azerbaijani authorities towards Armenians. He underlined that he has written numerous letters and shown videos of atrocities to the international human rights bodies in relation to the human rights violations but has faced the absence of missions, response and reaction by them to see the problems in and around Armenia, such as in the border regions, despite the pledge to leave no one behind which applies also to the unrecognized states.

Speaking about the deployment of Azerbaijani military around the borders of Armenia proper, Tatoyan noted the illegal nature of the process, as it violates human rights,

including but not limited to rights to property, security, children rights, etc., of the Armenians leaving in the border villages. The logic of the human-centric concept of the international law should be applied as the cornerstone of democracy. The passive stance by the international human rights bodies is discrediting and decreasing the faith and respect towards the international system of human rights and democracy. He also mentioned that states of emergencies and military situations create temptation for the authorities to use the restrictions to promote their political agendas. Tatoyan emphasized the positive responsibility of a democratic state to establish an efficient public communication in order not to leave vacuum which is filled with disinformation. Tatoyan thinks that the most important issues of human rights are neglected in Armenia and the political discourse evolves only around power dispute. Tatoyan concluded that human rights and democracy do not oppose but are crucial for security, and in this sense the discussion organized by Freedom House is an important step.

**Richard Giragosian**, the Director of the Regional Studies Center (RSC), offered his presentation on “The End of Armenia’s Post-Revolution Honeymoon?”. Since an impressive non-violent victory of “Velvet Revolution” in 2018, the Armenian PM Pashinyan’s Government has struggled to sustain the momentum of democratization. Although bolstered by a significant degree of legitimacy from a sweeping victory in a rare free and fair parliamentary election in December 2018, the Armenian government has floundered more recently, however, with a series of serious political missteps and policy mistakes. Armenia now faces a starkly new political reality, as the unexpected 44-day war for Nagorno Karabakh that erupted in September 2020 abruptly ended Armenia’s euphoric “post-revolution honeymoon.” Armenian democracy faced several serious challenges well before the war, encompassing pre-existing conditions, such as fighting against the coronavirus since March 2020 that was straining both state capacity and credibility, and attempts to impose measures to dangerously restrict and restrain civil liberties, including some media restrictions under the pretext of security. Another pre-war challenge stems from the weakness and deficiencies in the structure of democracy in Armenia. Faced with a legacy of authoritarian rule and entrenched corruption, the 2018 Velvet Revolution failed to properly invest in the institutions of democracy, with a misplaced over-reliance on empowering individuals. This absence of checks and balances has only distorted the development of institutional democracy and given rise to a more informal system of governance based on an overcentralization of power in the office of the PM. According to Giragosian, one of the more surprising shortcomings from the “honeymoon” of Armenia’s “Velvet Revolution,” is the lack of any clear or coherent strategic vision to guide governance and reform. The lack of strategic vision only continues, however, and with a related lack of direction, is now most evident across several policy areas, such as security and defense reform.

Giragosian defined two broader trends that beset the Armenian democracy. The first of these trends is the dangerous precedent from the perception that the recent war for Karabakh vindicates the use of force as an acceptable means to resolve essentially political conflicts. A second dangerous trend is rooted in a related precedent involving the apparent acceptance of the military victory of two much larger, more powerful authoritarian countries (Azerbaijan and Turkey) over a small democracy.

He concluded saying that the risk of regress and retreat from reform and democracy not only stands out as a danger for Armenia, but also stands apart as a threat to the international community. And for the future of Armenia, democracy protection is now as important as democracy promotion.

After the two thematic briefings, the online discussion then featured a panel discussion moderated by Sossi Tatikyan with five speakers:

**Styopa Safaryan**, the Head of Public Council of Armenia and a founder and head of the Armenian Institute of International and Security Affairs noted that democracy was endangered in Armenia in the last couple of decades due to a perception that since the country had an unresolved conflict and was under a threat of a war, there was no need for full democracy. Velvet revolution in 2018 was an opportunity to clarify and confirm that Armenia can have perfect security only in the conditions of democracy. However, the democracy was not sufficiently defended, the authorities did not create strong institutional mechanisms, did not ensure information security, public communication and regulation of the media. Democratic revolution became a target for anti-democratic forces since its victory. Provisions in the Agreement of the Enhanced Partnership with the EU contain a number of declarative provisions and EU commitments about jointly combatting terrorism that are not integrated in the security system of Armenia.

**Artur Sakunts**, Helsinki Citizens' Assembly – Vanadzor noted that the concept of security has not been designed and based on democratic principles and values in Armenia. Armenia did not develop democratic institutions and culture but rather took over Soviet mechanisms and institutions in the post-Soviet times. The current authorities also failed to radically reorganize state institutions in line with human rights and democracy after the Velvet Revolution. The problems with democracy in Russia and role of Russia as a main security guarantor of Armenia has a negative impact on democratic developments in Armenia. During the Velvet Revolution, the citizens of Armenia demanded and applied for a democratic and legal state, but the current government wasted its high legitimacy and confidence of people by incompetent governance. The lack of the reaction by the government to the attacks towards NGOs, such as OSF, had a negative effect on the democratic institutions. During the war in NK, autocratic states defeated Armenia that had chosen the path of democracy; however, international partners did not demonstrate a principled stance and allowed impunity towards human rights violations in NK by Azerbaijan, which made it difficult for the Armenian civil society to advocate for democratic values in Armenia. Currently, Armenia expects a response by international organizations requiring the return of PoWs.

**Edgar Khachatryan**, Peace Dialogue NGO, noted that the conflict between human rights and security is neither new nor purely an Armenian phenomenon but is coming from the Soviet times and currently they are considered conflicting each other in Russian policies. Probably the reason for this is that the new authorities in Armenia did not analyze and assess the past and did not learn its lessons and continued to operate based on pre-revolutionary logic. If the state institutions are not able to ensure the rights and security of its citizens, those who spread disinformation and fake news benefit from it. The

foundations of human rights and democracy were shattered during the war, leading to a situation where many in Armenia perceive Russia as a security provider, thus shaping a destiny to live in the existing geopolitical environment. Human rights and democratic institutions in Armenia are in an unhealthy state and need to develop and empower citizens to change the policies.

**Zhanna Aleksanyan**, Journalists for Human Rights, noted that since Armenia's problems remain unresolved months after the war, there is a feeling of isolation of Armenia and defenselessness of individuals. Human rights activists are targeted by the previous authorities, and the society is polarized. When the civil society and human rights defenders were raising the problems, such as human rights violations and corruption in the army, they were targeted as threatening the national security; however, those problems contributed to the defeat in the war and did not need to be covered up and ignored.

**Armen Grigoryan**, Centre for Policy Studies, also noted that the contradiction between the security and democracy has existed in Armenia for a long time. Civil society was told not to raise problems since it would threaten the national security. The problem of survival always existing in Armenia and short-term problems have a negative impact on democratic developments. Instead of being pro-active and taking initiatives, the ruling power becomes responsive while reacting to the propaganda by the opponents of democracy.

## **Conclusions**

Various conflicting narratives and disinformation about the correlation between human rights, democracy and security exist and have a polarizing impact in the society not only in Armenia but globally, especially in the post-Soviet space.

The passive stance by the international human rights bodies to the international humanitarian law and human rights violations in Nagorno Karabakh war is discrediting and decreasing the faith and respect towards the international system of human rights and democracy. Despite the pledge to leave no one behind, which applies also to the unrecognized states, the UN and other international bodies avoid visiting and see the situation in NK on the ground. The recent war in NK has set a dangerous precedent creating a perception that the use of force may be acceptable means to resolve political conflicts, and that the military victory of two much larger and more powerful authoritarian countries over a small democracy may be accepted.

There was a belief that since Armenia has been more democratic than Azerbaijan, the international community, in particular, human rights organizations, were expected to support Armenia, which was eliminated during and in the aftermath of the war. It was replaced with the notion that even human rights bodies are led by geopolitics and Realpolitik.

There is a lot of resentment in Armenia, including by the civil society, due to the silence of international community during the recent war in Nagorno Karabakh. Currently, civil society has a reservation to advocate for the democracy and human rights values in Armenia because of that frustration. By doing so, the civil society is stigmatized as a national security threat by reactionary groups. The state needs to address attacks on the civil society groups that promote democracy and human rights to empower the role of civil society in that process. Democracy protection is now as important as democracy promotion.

The current authorities in Armenia that came to power through a revolution advocating for democratic values, were slow and inconsistent while carrying out reforms in line with the principles of human rights and democracy that caused disappointment and the loss of credibility in the society. A democratic state also has a positive responsibility to establish an efficient public communication and ensure information security in order not to leave vacuum, which is filled with disinformation. The opponents of democratic reform took advantage of those gaps and filled in that space with disinformation, fake news, hate speech and false narratives to a degree that it is becoming a national security issue.

Instead of relying on individuals, genuine democracy needs strong institutional mechanisms to ensure human rights and democracy and refusal from the heritage of non-democratic past needs to be ensured by the state authorities based on the lessons learned with active participation, advocacy and empowerment by the civil society. This absence of checks and balances distorts the development of institutional democracy and gives rise to a more informal system of governance based on an overcentralization of power.

Human rights and democracy do not oppose but complement security, create a basis for protecting it. Maintaining the course of democratic reform and staying committed to human rights principles is even more important in post-war Armenia than it has been before.