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**Russia's Politics of Deference towards Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh
Conflict**

THESIS BOOKLET

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1. Research background and Justification for the Selection of the Topic

Nagorno-Karabakh is a mountainous enclave that, while located within Azerbaijan's internationally recognized borders, was governed by its ethnic Armenian majority with support from Armenia from 1994 to September 2023. That month, the Azerbaijani army launched a swift and decisive offensive that swept away their decades-long pursuit of independence in just 24 hours, triggering their mass exodus to neighboring Armenia and bringing to an end what had long been regarded as the longest-running conflict in post-Soviet Eurasia. On September 28, Samvel Shahramanyan, the elected president of the self-proclaimed Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh, signed a decree dissolving the entity, effective January 1, 2024.

In the wake of these events, observers have turned their attention to an actor involved in the dynamics of this dispute since the 18th century and, in certain respects, played a decisive role in its resolution: the Russian Federation. In particular, many have wondered why Russian peacekeepers, tasked with protecting the local Armenian population under the terms of the ceasefire agreement that ended the war between Yerevan and Baku in 2020, failed to prevent Azerbaijan's military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh.

This dynamic reflects a broader tendency in the existing literature to interpret Moscow's involvement in the Armenian-Azerbaijani dispute primarily through the lens of its strategic interests and physical security practices. By comparison, comparatively little attention has been devoted to examining how the Kremlin constructed and sustained the meaning of its (dis)engagement in the conflict. Such a neglect is particularly puzzling given the substantial body of literature on Russian foreign policy discourse, which has examined how the Kremlin articulates and communicates its self-identity in international politics and in relation to neighboring states (Laruelle 2009; Clunan 2014; Tsygankov 2014; Morozov 2015; Hansen 2016; Reshetnikov 2017; Curanović 2021; Kanet & Moulioukova 2022; Götz & Ekman 2024).

Two interrelated reasons suggest that this body of literature should begin to explore Russia's involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The first concerns the Caucasus and its centrality in Russian imperial history and collective memory (Gammer & Kaplan 2014; Oskanian 2014; De Waal 2019). Russian rulers took two centuries to establish control over this region. Russia's expansion into the Caucasus began in the late sixteenth century and largely secured control over its southern territories by the early nineteenth century. Furthermore, consolidating authority over the entire region required more than thirty years of continuous military campaigns against the

North Caucasian mountaineers (Henze 1996, 389). Meanwhile, writers, poets, ethnographers, military figures, and chroniclers helped establish the Caucasus's prominence in Russian popular consciousness (Gammer & Kaplan 2014). They contributed to the image of Russia as a civilization bridging Europe and Asia and to a sense of exceptionalism that has persisted through the Tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods (Layton 1995; Gammer & Kaplan 2014; Morozov 2015; Oskanian 2017; Curanović 2021).

The second factor concerns Russia's historical relationship with Armenia. A significant yet often overlooked dynamic revealed by the events of September 2023 was the erosion of the long-held belief that the Kremlin would protect Armenians (Hess 2022; Atasuntsev 2023; Zolyan 2023; Shahverdyan 2024). While scholars have long recognized that Armenia's economic, energy, and security vulnerabilities have shaped its generally favorable orientation toward Russia since the Soviet Union's collapse (De Waal 2013; Minasyan 2013; De Waal 2019; Iskandaryan 2019; Broers 2023; Çakmak & Özşahin 2023), its relationship with Moscow is also firmly grounded in identity and historical memory, most notably in the enduring image of Russia as a protector.

The latter emerged between the 18th and early 20th centuries. During that period, the Russian Empire not only conquered the South Caucasus but also liberated part of the Armenian population from Persian and Ottoman control, bringing them under the influence of a European and Christian power (Hovannisian 1971, 31). Furthermore, as Russia became increasingly entangled in the geopolitical implications of the declining Ottoman Empire's future and territorial integrity, Tsarist authorities often positioned themselves as protectors of the Sublime Porte's Christian subjects (Badalyan Riegg 2020). Consequently, the Empire regarded Christian Armenians not only as allies on the southern frontier but also as defenseless victims whom it had a religious duty to protect from Muslim oppressors (Blauvelt & Berglund 2016, 70).

While scholars have long acknowledged the crucial role of this distant memory in shaping contemporary Armenian political identity (Suny 1993; Shnirelman 2001; Libaridian 2007; Payaslian 2007; Badalyan Riegg 2020), they have rarely examined how the same historical image has shaped Russia's self-identity. This gap marks the starting point of my dissertation, which seeks to answer the research question of *how Russia navigated anxieties about its self-image as a benevolent protector during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between 2015 and 2024*.

1.1. Theoretical Premises

The central assumption of this dissertation is that Russia's practices in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict have been symptomatic of a quest for *ontological security* that has persisted since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Ontological security refers to the "security not of the body but of the self, the subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice" (Mitzen 2006, 344). It is a sense of coherence that social actors seek to preserve through biographical narratives and/or routinized relations with "significant Others" (Giddens 1984; Kinnvall 2004; Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008; Gustafsson & Krickel-Choi 2020). When this coherence is disrupted, "critical situations" arise, and existential anxiety may drive actors to restore continuity by reproducing familiar, even conflictual, practices, often at significant material cost (Rumelili 2015; Subotić 2016; Ejodus 2017).

This study posits that the collapse of the Soviet Union not only produced political, economic, and institutional upheavals across the post-Soviet space but also plunged the newly born republics into existential turmoil. For post-Soviet Russian leadership, confronting dilemmas of self-identity became as urgent as steering the transition from a planned to a market economy, defining the contours of a new political system, and tackling the corruption and organized crime that thrived in the power vacuum of those years (Mankoff 2009; Sakwa 2020; Curanović 2021). Because ontological security largely depends on the coherence of biographical narratives, this notion is closely tied to *memory politics*, which concerns "who wants whom to remember what, and why" (Confino 1997, 1393). Memory plays a central role in shaping social actors' self-identity, serving as a temporal anchor that makes the past meaningful by providing a sense of "where 'we' have come from and what 'we' have been through" (Berenskoetter 2012, 270). Consequently, as Maria Mälksoo (2015, 221) notes, "memory must be defended."

The central argument of this study is that, in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Russia's pursuit of ontological security was shaped by mnemonic reflections on its Tsarist past in the Caucasus and expressed through what I define as a *politics of deference* toward Armenia. Accordingly, Russia sought ontological security by interpreting its asymmetrical alliance with Armenia through the reconstructed self-image of protector, while seeking Yerevan's recognition of that role. The concept of honor aptly captures this hierarchical dynamic, as it combines a social actor's claim to worth with the recognition of that claim by significant Others (Pitt-Rivers 1965, 21). Research on its gendered dimension has shown that male honor is closely associated with the protector role and often depends on the capacity to defend others, provide for their needs,

safeguard their reputation, and respond to insults (Spierenburg 1998; Vandello and Cohen 2003; Barnes et al. 2012; Travaglini et al. 2016, 184). This connection is particularly relevant in the Russian context, where honor has shaped state identity since before the Romanov dynasty's accession (Tsygankov 2014; Kollmann 2016).

2. The Methods Used

A. Research design

The dissertation adopts a qualitative-interpretive research design to develop a contextually grounded understanding of how Russia constructed meaning around its involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. It is structured around a research process with two interconnected stages: (1) reconstructing the mnemonic foundations of Russia's biographical narrative; and (2) examining how that narrative was mobilized and adapted in Russian discourse about Armenia during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

This process is abductive, moving iteratively among 1) the concepts of ontological security, collective memory, and honor; 2) historical scholarship on Tsarist policies toward Armenians; and 3) contemporary Russian discourse. The hero-protector narrative, developed by Clément et al. (2017) to examine how political leaders mobilize compassion and anger and legitimize interventionist practices, serves as the analytical framework. It distinguishes four recurring roles—the hero-protector, the innocent victim, the perverse aggressor, and the coward—and traces the narrative sequences that underlie their interactions.

In the first phase, the hero-protector narrative guides the interpretation of historical scholarship on Tsarist–Armenian relations, including works by Suny (1993), Badalyan Riegg (2020), Bournoutian (1997), Shnirelman (2001), Hovannisian (1971), Mostashari (2017), and Atkin (1980). This enables the reconstruction of how Tsarist authorities portrayed their engagements with Armenians through specific roles and narrative sequences that became embedded in the Russian Self. In the next phase, the thematic and emotional patterns identified through this reconstruction inform the analysis of contemporary Russian discourse toward Armenia, showing how the hero-protector narrative continues to shape the mnemonic repertoire through which Russian actors guide their politics of deference.

The contemporary analysis covers 2015–2024 through three analytically bounded intervals: 2015–2018, 2020–2022, and 2023–2024. Rather than treating the period as a single, uninterrupted sequence or reducing it to the Four-Day War, the 44-day war, and Azerbaijan's

September 2023 military operation, each interval encompasses the critical juncture together with the earlier and subsequent developments through which Russia's role in the Armenian–Azerbaijani dispute was articulated and negotiated. This periodization allows examination of how moments of crisis reinforced, challenged, or transformed Russia's self-perception as Armenia's protector and security guarantor.

The first juncture begins with Vladimir Putin's speech at the Tsitsernakaberd Memorial during the centenary of the Armenian Genocide and encompasses the 2016 Four-Day War and Armenia's 2018 Velvet Revolution. The second covers the 2020 war and its immediate aftermath. The third examines 2023–2024, when Russia became increasingly isolated after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and the Azerbaijani operation in Nagorno-Karabakh directly undermined its standing as a security guarantor. Comparing these intervals reveals shifts not only in terminology but also in the functions the protector narrative performed.

By focusing on these three critical junctures, this dissertation shows how the hero-protector narrative was produced and transformed during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, especially as Russian actors perceived the Armenian side increasingly questioning Russia's role as a hero-protector. Variations in discourse may involve shifts in terminology as well as changes in the underlying functions of these narratives. Such variations tend to become most apparent at critical turning points, where Russia's role as a protector was most acutely contested.

B. Data collection

The empirical analysis draws on seventy-five primary texts in Russian, collected through document analysis. This method facilitated the collection of speeches, press conferences, statements, and other materials in their officially published formats within a unified corpus. The texts were identified via targeted searches in Russian on official websites, state news agencies, media archives, Telegram channels, and recordings of television programs. Initial search terms included “Armenia” (Армения/Armenia), “Nagorno-Karabakh” (Нагорный Карабах/Nagorny-Karabakh), and “Pashinyan” (Пашинян/Pashinyan). Following transcription and analysis in Russian, the texts were translated into English.

The corpus was constructed to yield what Weldes (2014) calls “high data”: official and semi-official sources circulating among elites and disseminated by elites to broader publics. Official texts include presidential speeches and press conferences, Ministry of Foreign Affairs statements,

government webpages, and remarks by senior representatives such as Vladimir Putin and Sergey Lavrov, as well as their spokespeople, Dmitry Peskov and Mariya Zakharova.

Semi-official discourse encompasses a broader range of actors, including figures in state-aligned media and political commentary, politicians, and prominent members of the Armenian diaspora in Russia. These actors were selected based on three criteria: 1) sustained engagement with Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh; 2) visibility and amplification across Russian information spaces; and 3) institutional embeddedness through recurrent participation in state broadcasters or state-supported initiatives. The category includes figures such as Margarita Simonyan, Vladimir Solovyov, Konstantin Zatulin, Semyon Bagdasarov, Aleksandr Kots, and representatives of the Russian-Armenian community.

The difference between official and semi-official discourse is crucial for analysis. Official statements are usually fewer and more restrained. In contrast, semi-official actors often render state-aligned positions into emotionally charged narratives, openly name aggressors and cowards, and highlight themes of protection, gratitude, and betrayal. Therefore, this study does not assume that these actors speak with a unified voice or that semi-official discourse directly shapes official policy. Instead, it explores how these overlapping yet distinct discursive spaces generate and adapt the same narrative themes.

C. Data analysis

The seventy-five texts were analyzed through Emotion Discourse Analysis (EDA). EDA starts from the premise that discourse is never emotionally neutral and examines what emotional expressions do: how they reveal appraisals, construct Self–Other relations and hierarchies, and orient possible responses (Edwards 1997; Koschut 2018). The analysis focused on emotion-signifying words, metaphors, evaluative descriptions, historical analogies, role assignments, and the relationships established between Russia and Armenia.

The study coded all texts manually, in line with its interpretive orientation. This enabled close attention to contextual, metaphorical, and relational features of emotional language that automated procedures would have struggled to capture. Each text was read repeatedly and annotated along two interconnected dimensions: a thematic layer concerned with how the four roles of the hero-protector narrative were discursively enacted and an emotional layer concerned with the affective cues through which these roles were constituted, connected to compassion and anger, and with which other emotions were mobilized.

The thematic layer drew directly on the hero-protector narrative framework. Its four narrative roles served as sensitizing analytical categories, each associated with recurrent expressions and motifs in the Russian-language material. Indicative expressions of the hero-protector role included terms such as protector (защитник/zashchitnik), savior (спаситель/spasitel'), peacekeeper (мироотворец/mirotvorets), duty (долг/dolg), honor (честь/chest'), mission (миссия/missiya), and responsibility (ответственность/otvetstvennost'), as well as verbs such as to save (спасти/spasti) and to defend (защищать/zashchishchat').

Markers associated with the victim role included innocent (невинный/nevinnyy), suffering (страдание/stradanie), victim (жертва/zhertva), helpless (беспомощный/bespomoshchnyy), brotherly people (братский народ/bratskiy narod), and loyal (верный/vernyy). The aggressor role was identified through expressions such as aggressor (агрессор/agressor), provocation (провокация/provokatsiya), enemy (враг/vrag), fear (страх/strakh), and deception (обман/obman).

Finally, recurring cues associated with the coward role included failure (провал/proval), betrayal (предательство/predatel'stvo), treachery (коварство/kovarstvo), cowardice (трусость/trusost'), ingratitude (неблагодарность/neblagodarnost'), and lack of will (безволие/bezvolie).

Within and across these thematic categories, the analysis followed the three steps of EDA, which are summarized in the present table:

Stage	Description	Focus
Text Selection	Identify and select appropriate texts for analysis, focusing on emotional expressions that are either explicit or implicit during foundational or transformative moments (Koschut 2018, 281–283).	Select different genres such as speeches, treaties, media articles, and biographies, recognizing that different text types reveal emotions differently; pay attention to intertextuality, temporal framing, and landmark texts produced during crises, when emotions become more visible (Koschut 2018, 282–283).
Mapping Emotion Potential	Analyze the emotional content of the texts by distinguishing between their descriptive and emotional meanings (Koschut 2018, 283).	Identification of emotion terms, emotional connotations, metaphors, analogies, and the emotional structure of Self and Other; includes attention to intensity markers, culturally embedded emotion concepts, and silence or avoidance of emotion terms (Koschut 2018, 283–285).
Interpretation	Contextualize emotional expressions to understand their sociopolitical effects, including how emotions	Understand when emotional expressions generate belonging, exclusion, and motivation for action

	shape identities and group behavior (Koschut 2018, 285).	(Koschut 2018, 285–287).
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Table 1: Emotion Discourse Analysis Framework (Source: Author’s elaboration based on Koschut)

3. Scientific Results

A. Findings

- The analysis reveals that, at each of the three critical junctures in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict examined, Russian official and semi-official actors *consistently mobilized* the hero-protector narrative to sustain their politics of deference toward Armenia. Drawing on Tsarist portrayals of Russia as a morally superior Christian power and Armenians as helpless victims, they interpreted Russia’s ambiguous involvement in the conflict and its role as Armenia’s ally through a specific configuration of roles, narrative sequences, and emotions, detailed below.

Roles	Actors	Actions	Emotion-signifying terms
Hero-Protector	Russia Russian Empire President Vladimir Putin	Providing Security and Stability Providing Shelter	Moral Duty Pride Care Compassion Empathy Sympathy
Victim	Armenia Armenian People; Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh	Impossibility of defending itself Loyalty to a benevolent protector to pursue survival	Chaos Grief Pain Survival Fear Gratitude
Perverse Aggressor	“Ottoman Empire,” “Undefined enemy,” “Turkey,” “Azerbaijan”	Destroying Armenia	Dark Death Envy Hatred

Coward	Armenian Government West	Betrayal Revisionism (Condemnation of Old and New policies) Moral Corruption	Dishonesty Distrust Anger Hypocrisy Injustice

Table 2: Roles within the Hero-Protector Framework (Source: the Author).

- At times, official and semi-official discourse articulated the hero-protector narrative in different ways. Across all three critical junctures, both portrayed Russia as historically committed to protecting the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh from another genocide, invoking the legacy of the Russian Empire. Nonetheless, they differed in identifying the *aggressor*. Semi-official sources explicitly assigned this role to the *Ottoman Empire, Turkey, and Azerbaijan*. In contrast, official actors were more reluctant to do so, possibly to preserve Russia's diplomatic relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan. This omission also served the politics of deference by making the reaffirmation of Armenian victimhood contingent on Yerevan's conformity to it.
- The *coward* role likewise shifted according to the perceived source of the challenge to Russia's protector status. Both official and semi-official actors assigned it at times to the *West*, portrayed as historically incapable of providing Armenia with meaningful support. However, semi-official discourse increasingly transferred this role to the *Armenian authorities*, distinguishing between the Armenian people, who remained honorable victims, and political elites depicted as ungrateful beneficiaries of Russian protection, unwilling to acknowledge their dependence on Moscow and engaged in historical revisionism. Official discourse began to adopt this representation more gradually after the 2020 war. Following September 2023, the two forms of discourse fully converged, not only in their portrayal of the Armenian government but also in their use of emotionally charged language. This convergence preserved compassion for the Armenian people while directing anger toward authorities perceived as withholding the recognition and deference Russia deserved.

- Overall, *ontological security concerns shaped Russian discourse toward Armenia*. The politics of deference presupposed Armenian recognition of Russia's self-ascribed hero-protector status. When this expectation was met, Russian actors reproduced a stable configuration of Russia as the morally superior protector, Armenians as defenseless victims deserving compassion, and their adversaries as aggressors. When Armenia challenged Russia's moral authority, the resulting anxiety prompted an adaptation rather than an abandonment of the narrative. Russian actors reconfigured the roles, emotional structure, and sequences by drawing on an alternative Tsarist representation of Armenians as unreliable and conspiratorial when they contested Russian authority (Suny 1993). Recasting the Armenian government as a coward thus made Russia's anger, disengagement, and unfulfilled commitments intelligible within the established narrative.

B. Contributions

The findings make two principal *empirical* contributions. First, they broaden existing understandings of how post-Soviet Russia pursues ontological security by shifting attention from its horizontal search for recognition as a great power from the West to vertical, hierarchical relationships with former imperial subjects. Armenia's recognition of Russian moral authority is not merely a by-product of Moscow's status relationship with the West, but a constitutive element of Russia's coherent sense of Self. Second, the case advances debates on neo-imperialism by showing that Russia's imperial legacy operates not necessarily as an *aspiration* to restore the empire territorially, but as a source of *inspiration* for what concerns its self-identity.

Theoretically, the politics of deference brings ontological security, collective memory, and honor together. It shows how the Tsarist legacy operates as a mnemonic framework through which post-Soviet Russia reproduces a stable Self in hierarchical relationships, claims moral worth as a protector, and seeks acknowledgment from those it represents as protected. The hero-protector narrative identifies the relational mechanism, while compassion and anger reveal how this hierarchy is emotionally sustained and defended.

Methodologically, the dissertation contributes a corpus of seventy-five Russian-language primary sources and demonstrates the value of analyzing official and semi-official discourse together. Russian foreign-policy meaning emerges from a more diverse and fragmented set of actors than the elite tier alone: semi-official actors amplify the affective register of official

discourse and make the emotional expectations underpinning the politics of deference particularly visible.

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5. List of Publications

A. Journal Articles

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B. Book Chapters

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C. Editorial Contributions

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D. Policy Papers

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