

From Independence to “Revolution”: The Evolution of Armenia's Diplomatic Service

Sergei Melkonian, ICCA RAS, Moscow, Russia

Knarik Jalatyan, ARI, Yerevan, Armenia

Correspondence: sergei.g.melkonian@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Since gaining its independence in 1991, Armenia has faced the complex task of building a professional diplomatic service to support its statehood and navigate a challenging geopolitical landscape. This study examines the evolution of Armenia's diplomatic service, focusing on critical milestones such as the adoption of the Law on Diplomatic Service (2001) and the establishment of the Diplomatic School of Armenia (2009). Using a mixed-methods approach, including primary source research and interviews with former diplomats and scholars, the study examines how institutional frameworks, political leadership, and external pressures have shaped the country's foreign service. The findings reveal that Armenia's diplomatic service was initially influenced by Soviet-era bureaucratic structures, supplemented by contributions from the Armenian diaspora and local graduates of specialized academic programs. Over time, successive administrations sought to professionalize the service through institutional reforms. However, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) has frequently struggled with challenges such as centralization and politicization of decision-making. Recent developments under Nikol Pashinyan's 'revolutionary' government highlight the erosion of institutionalized practices, including the weakening of the Diplomatic School's role and the prioritization of political loyalty over merit-based appointments. This paper contributes to the understanding of state-building in post-Soviet contexts by analyzing the interplay between institutional development, bureaucratic politics, and sovereignty in Armenia's diplomacy. The study concludes that while Armenia has made significant progress in institutionalizing its diplomatic service, sustaining these achievements requires addressing current trends that undermine its effectiveness.

KEYWORDS

Armenia, diplomatic service, foreign policy, Nagorno-Karabakh, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, revolution, sovereignty

Since gaining independence in 1991, Armenia has been on an arduous journey of state-building, with the formation of its diplomatic service being one of the biggest and perhaps yet not fully resolved challenges. In the early years of independence, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) operated out of a building with little more than the bare essentials – electricity was sporadic, salaries were modest, and resources were scarce. Despite these challenges, a small group of dedicated individuals worked there without the luxury of weekends and holidays, driven by the urgency of the ongoing war in Nagorno-Karabakh and the need to establish Armenia's presence on the international stage. While small groups of talented people were present in the newly established MFA at almost all stages of its development, the making of an institution required a lot more than that.

This paper examines the evolution of the making of diplomats in Armenia from the beginning to the present day, emphasizing that this evolution has been intricately linked to the country's foreign policy dynamics. As Armenia started building its statehood on the ruins of the Soviet Union, it faced the dual challenges of navigating a new geopolitical landscape and forging a diplomatic service that could effectively represent its interests abroad.

Over time, Armenia's foreign policy priorities evolved in response to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, focusing on international recognition efforts and the pursuit of economic partnerships. The establishment of the Diplomatic School of Armenia and the necessity to professionalize Armenia's foreign service reflected the changing needs of a country striving to assert itself in a rapidly shifting international environment.

By tracing the development of Armenia's Foreign Ministry and its diplomatic personnel, this paper aims to answer the following research question:

"How has the process of the foreign service institution building and the training of diplomats in Armenia evolved since independence?"

The structure of this paper is designed to comprehensively analyze the evolution of Armenia's diplomatic service, periodized by the incumbency of the country's four political leaders. It begins with a detailed literature review, focusing on critical studies in diplomacy and the history of Armenia's state-building efforts since independence. This section is followed by a methodology part that outlines the research approach and methods employed. The analysis is divided into four main sections based on timeframes. The former draws on primary-source research and interviews with high-ranking ex-diplomats and scholars. The paper concludes with a discussion synthesizing the findings from these two blocs of analysis, followed by a conclusion that reflects on the broader implications for Armenia's foreign policy and state-building journey.

Theoretical Framework

The evolution of Armenia's diplomatic service can be understood through a combination of institution-building and bureaucratic decision-making. These two pillars provide a comprehensive view of how Armenia's foreign policy apparatus has developed since independence and how internal and external factors have influenced the process of training diplomats.

Institution-building in diplomacy refers to the formal creation and adaptation of diplomatic structures that enable states to manage their foreign relations. In Armenia's case, the establishment of its Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in the early 1990s and later the Diplomatic School of Armenia marked significant steps in the professionalization its human resources.

As Jeremy Black outlines in *A History of Diplomacy*, the development of diplomatic institutions often parallels broader state-building efforts.¹ Armenia's MFA, formed amid economic difficulties and conflict, initially operated with limited resources, but was crucial in establishing the country's presence on the global stage.

Christer Jönsson and Martin Hall argue that the creation of diplomatic institutions is essential for effective international communication and negotiation.² The establishment of the Diplomatic School of Armenia in 2009 was a critical institutional step that aligned with Armenia's growing need for a professional and well-trained diplomatic service. This reflects Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson's theory of inclusive institutions, as the School symbolized a move toward a more inclusive and merit-based system for training diplomats to improve Armenia's international standing.³

Bureaucratic decision-making plays a crucial role in shaping foreign policy within diplomatic institutions. In Armenia, decisions regarding the diplomatic service have been influenced by both institutional needs and internal power dynamics, best understood through the Bureaucratic Politics Model (BPM).

The BPM, as outlined by Graham Allison⁴ and further elaborated in co-authorship with Philip Zelikow,⁵ explains how decisions are influenced by internal competition and power struggles among various bureaucratic actors. In the case of Armenia, the MFA has experienced internal governmental competition for resources and influence with other pillars of power, often represented by the President's Office, which shaped foreign policy decisions.

This model is useful in explaining how Armenia's foreign policy priorities, including those related to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and economic partnerships, have been shaped by bureaucratic negotiations within the MFA and other state bodies. The competition for resources, influence, and authority within the MFA reflects the complexities of diplomatic decision-making, which often involves compromises and strategic bargaining among bureaucrats.

The *Valdai Discussion Club* report categorizes countries based on their approaches to diplomatic education, differentiating between those with a global epistemology and functional training and those with a national epistemology and fundamental training.⁶ This framework highlights the critical role that diplomatic training plays in enhancing or diminishing a nation's sovereignty and its ability to navigate a multipolar world order.

Applied to Armenia, this framework allows for an analysis of how the evolution of diplomatic training has either bolstered or hindered the country's ability to assert

1 Black 2020.

2 Jönsson, Hall 2005.

3 Acemoglu, Robinson 2012.

4 Allison 1971.

5 Allison, Zelikow 1999.

6 Сушенцов, А., Неклюдов, Н. В поиске национальных интересов: как дипломатическая подготовка влияет на суверенитет стран мира // Международный дискуссионный клуб «Валдай». 28.03.2024. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/reports/v-poiske-natsionalnykh-interesov-2024/> (дата обращения: 25.10.2024).

its sovereignty in the face of external pressures. The *Valdai* report's emphasis on the alignment of diplomatic education with national interests is particularly relevant in the Armenian context, where the legacy of Soviet training, coupled with modern influences, has partially shaped the capacities and limitations of the MFA.

Interaction Between Institution Building, Bureaucratic Decision-Making, and Sovereignty

As argued in the *Valdai Club* report, in the case of Armenia, we observe the interconnection among the development of diplomatic institutions, the internal dynamics of bureaucratic decision-making, and the evolution of diplomatic training. The establishment of formal structures, such as the Diplomatic School of Armenia, provided the foundation for professionalizing Armenia's foreign service, while these institutions were shaped by internal bureaucratic power struggles and external pressures on Armenian sovereignty.

The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy (2013) emphasizes that globalization and the rise of multilateral diplomacy have created new challenges for states. For Armenia, these challenges are compounded by its regional conflicts and limited resources, necessitating the ability of a diplomatic service to navigate local and global issues. Graham Allison's BPM provides insights into how internal bureaucratic competition has influenced the implementation of the institutional reforms that were initiated in Armenia. At the same time, the *Valdai Club* paper highlights that diplomatic training can be an instrument of national sovereignty.

Soviet Legacy and Its Influence

The Soviet legacy significantly imprinted Armenia's diplomatic structures and foreign policy development in the post-independence period. As Armenia transitioned from a Soviet republic to an independent state, it inherited bureaucratic frameworks and cultural norms from Soviet diplomacy, including a centralized decision-making approach and strong ties to Russia.¹

An anecdote from one of the diplomats interviewed for this study illustrates this dependence. When an Armenian diplomat from the diaspora was first assigned a task at the MFA, the initial response from his team was, "But is this communicated with Moscow?" This reaction reflects the ingrained expectation of coordinating with the former 'Center' in Moscow, even after independence.

Although Soviet Armenia's foreign policy was tightly controlled by Moscow, it is a misconception to view the Armenian SSR Foreign Ministry as merely a Kremlin puppet. Soviet Armenia retained a limited but significant degree of agency within the Union framework, especially on issues of cultural and historical importance. Ministers like John Kirakosian utilized their positions to advance Armenian national interests within the constraints of the Soviet system. Kirakosian, in particular, was instrumental in promoting the recognition of the Armenian Genocide, framing it as a critical historical and moral issue. Under his leadership, Soviet Armenia initiated archival

¹ Suny 2006; Sakwa 2017.

research and international conferences highlighting the genocide as a central theme in Armenian history.¹ His scholarly contributions, such as *Young Turks Before the Court of History* (1982),² not only bolstered academic discourse but also subtly advocated for international acknowledgment of the genocide under the USSR auspices.

Despite this dependence, the Soviet legacy also provided Armenia with generation of well-trained and experienced diplomats, which was crucial as the country navigated the complexities of post-Soviet international relations.

The dual nature of this legacy – both beneficial and restrictive – has been one of the defining features of Armenia's foreign policy in the post-independence era.³

State Building and the Evolution of Armenia's MFA

The development of Armenia's MFA reflects the broader trajectory of state-building, shaped by its leaders' strategic priorities and political dynamics. From its initial formation in the post-Soviet period to the more recent challenges under the current authorities, the MFA's role and effectiveness have evolved in response to domestic and international pressures.⁴ As Armenia transitioned from a Soviet republic to an independent state, it inherited bureaucratic frameworks and cultural norms from the Soviet state structure, including a centralized approach to decision-making.⁵ The degree of centralization has varied under the leadership of four consecutive governments, yet it remains an up-to-date and crucial issue.

Levon Ter-Petrosyan's Presidency (1991–1998)

Levon Ter-Petrosyan's presidency was a foundational period for Armenia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), as the newly independent nation sought to establish its sovereignty and secure international recognition. During his tenure, the MFA was heavily engaged in managing critical foreign policy issues, including the ongoing conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and establishing relations with key global powers. However, the MFA's autonomy was limited due to the highly centralized nature of the system, where key decisions, especially those linked to Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenian-Turkish relations, were made outside of the MFA, often by the president and his close advisors.⁶

During Levon Ter-Petrosyan's presidency, Armenia's foreign policy was shaped by the immediate needs of a newly independent state navigating a tumultuous regional and global environment. This period was characterized by a pragmatic and 'balanced' approach to foreign relations. Levon Ter-Petrosyan sought to establish and maintain diplomatic ties with both Western powers and Russia while avoiding alignment with any single bloc. This approach reflected Armenia's precarious geopolitical position and the need to prioritize state-building amid the ongoing conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

1 Institute of Oriental Studies, NAS RA, 2009.

2 Kirakosyan 1982.

3 Iskandaryan et al. 2016.

4 Grigoryan et al. 2019.

5 Suny 2006; Sakwa 2017.

6 Libaridian 1999; Iskandaryan et al. 2016.

The balanced policy was characterized by cautious engagement with Turkey. Although there were exploratory talks between Armenian and Turkish officials, relations remained strained due to Turkey's support for Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and its reluctance to recognize the Armenian Genocide. Ter-Petrosyan's administration focused on de-escalating tensions and pursuing diplomatic avenues for normalization without making genocide recognition a central foreign policy goal.¹ The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict dominated Armenia's foreign policy agenda. Ter-Petrosyan's government advocated for a negotiated settlement based on compromise, which ultimately led to his resignation in 1998 caused by internal opposition to his approach.

Unlike his successors, Ter-Petrosyan would often change Foreign Ministers during his time in office. The first was Raffi Hovhannisyan, followed by Vahan Papazian, and finally, Alexander Arzumanyan. The frequent turnover in these roles reflected the centralization of foreign policy within the President's Office rather than within the MFA.²

It is also noteworthy that Ter-Petrosyan's resignation in 1998 was based on a foreign policy issue – his stance on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict – and was forced not by the MFA but by the Prime Minister, the Minister of Defense, and the Minister of Interior and National Security.³

Robert Kocharyan's Presidency (1998–2008)

During Robert Kocharyan's presidency, the MFA's institutional capacity was strengthened as Armenia navigated a complex geopolitical landscape. The MFA played an increasingly active role in multilateral diplomacy, particularly within the United Nations and the OSCE frameworks. During this period, the Law on Diplomatic Service was adopted, providing a legal basis for the professionalization of Armenia's diplomatic service.⁴ It was a decade of stability in the MFA, as Vartan Oskanian, Armenian Minister of Foreign Affairs from diaspora, remained in office exactly as long as the president who appointed him. He introduced the concept of 'complementarity' in Armenian foreign policy, which refers to balancing relations with both Eastern and Western powers. This approach aimed to avoid excessive dependence on any one bloc. Oskanian sought to maintain strong ties with Russia while fostering relationships with Western institutions such as NATO and the EU.⁵

A key difference from Ter-Petrosyan's balanced policy was Kocharyan's inclusion of the Armenian Genocide international recognition as a formal agenda item in Armenia's foreign policy. This move resonated deeply with the global Armenian diaspora. It aimed to leverage genocide recognition to strengthen Armenia's moral and political position internationally. Relations with Turkey remained strained, with no progress toward normalization due to preconditions set by both sides.⁶

1 Ter-Petrosian 2018.

2 Astourian 2000.

3 Libaridian 1999.

4 "Law of the Republic of Armenia on Diplomatic Service," ARLIS Official Legal Information System, accessed October 22, 2024, <https://www.arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?docid=75809>.

5 Oskanian 2006.

6 Oskanian 2013; Kocharyan 2019.

On the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, Kocharyan's administration adopted a more assertive stance. As a former leader of Nagorno-Karabakh, Kocharyan emphasized the self-determination for the region's Armenian population and sought to strengthen ties between Armenia and the de facto authorities in Stepanakert. This period saw the institutionalization of the negotiation process, with a dedicated group of diplomats from the Armenian Foreign Ministry regularly collaborating with the Artsakh Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of Defense, and other state bodies. This approach underscored the integration of Nagorno-Karabakh into Armenia's broader foreign policy framework while focusing on multilateral negotiations under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group. Despite these advancements, the centralization of decision-making in the state structure remained significant.¹

Serzh Sargsyan's Presidency (2008–2018)

Serzh Sargsyan's presidency marked a period of further institutionalization for the MFA. A significant milestone during this time was the establishment of the Diplomatic School of Armenia in 2009, which aimed to enhance the professional training of diplomats. This initiative was part of a broader effort to modernize Armenia's foreign service and ensure that its diplomats were equipped with the necessary skills to navigate increasingly complex international relations.²

The central focus of foreign policy during Serzh Sargsyan's presidency was the 'multi-vector policy.' Eduard Nalbandyan described it as "deepening relations and diversifying areas of cooperation with countries in the East and West, North and South, [which] is at the core of our foreign policy."³ Underscored by the unsuccessful attempts to normalize relations with Turkey in 2008–2009, the multivector policy largely mirrored the previous complementarity doctrine. It continued the institutionalized approach to addressing the Nagorno-Karabakh issue within the OSCE framework.

During this time, one of the MFA's most notable efforts was to secure an Association Agreement with the European Union (EU). The negotiations represented a significant push by the MFA to align Armenia more closely with European standards. However, this progress was abruptly reversed in 2013, when President Serzh Sargsyan chose to abandon the EU Association Agreement and instead announced Armenia's intention to join the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), a decision made without prior consultation with the MFA. This shift was seen as a significant blow to the MFA's efforts and reputation, underscoring that the real decision-maker in Armenia's foreign policy was the President, not the Ministry.⁴

The Revolutionary Government (2018–Present)

The institutional advancements of Armenia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) faced significant challenges under Nikol Pashinyan's government. Initially, Pashinyan's regime change in 2018 promised a shift towards a more decentralized and transparent approach to governance, including foreign policy. However, as analyzed

1 Grigoryan et al. 2019.

2 Gabrielyan et al. 2016.

3 "The Armenian Minister of Foreign Affairs delivered a speech at World Affairs Council," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, September 24, 2012, accessed October 24, 2024, <https://www.mfa.am/en/press-releases/2012/09/24/la-wac/3181>.

4 De Waal 2018; Ter-Matevosyan et al. 2017.

by Arman Grigoryan, revolutionary governments, such as Pashinyan's, often bring with them leaders lacking sufficient experience in statecraft, which results in reckless decisions.¹ This phenomenon aligns with the revolutionary pressures Grigoryan describes, where radicalized, conflict-prone leaders tend to rise to power and prioritize uncompromising, idealistic goals over pragmatic state-building efforts.

Pashinyan's government struggled to balance populist promises with the practical demands of statecraft, particularly in the arena of foreign politics.² The MFA, an institution already grappling with limited resources, was increasingly sidelined in favor of centralized decision-making within the Prime Minister's Office. This pattern, described by Arman Grigoryan, is characteristic of post-revolutionary governments, which often concentrate power in fewer hands due to the lack of institutional checks and balances. The Armenian-Turkish negotiations, for instance, were led by a member of parliament from Pashinyan's party rather than by the MFA, highlighting the tensions between institutional roles and political leadership.³

Furthermore, Arman Grigoryan argues that revolutionary governments tend to reject compromise and bargaining, which often leads to catastrophic consequences in conflict settings.⁴ This was evident during Pashinyan's tenure, particularly in the run-up to the Second Karabakh War when the Armenian government adopted a hard-line stance, unwilling to negotiate on Karabakh's status. Statements such as Pashinyan's declaration in 2019 that "Artsakh is Armenia, period"⁵ reflect the rigid and uncompromising diplomatic posture described by Arman Grigoryan, which contributed to the escalation of the conflict. This hard-line diplomacy, combined with Pashinyan's centralization of foreign policy under his office and the appointments of inexperienced and unqualified individuals, including Ararat Mirzoyan as a Minister of Foreign Affairs, Vahan Kostanyan as a Deputy Minister, and many others, illustrate how revolutionary leadership can undermine institutional diplomacy, sidelining expertise in favor of political loyalty.

After the devastating defeat in the 2020 war and Pashinyan's subsequent re-election in 2021, the centralization of power within the Prime Minister's Office only deepened. Mirzoyan's appointment as Foreign Minister – despite his lack of diplomatic experience – further eroded the MFA's traditional role, as foreign policy was increasingly directed from the Prime Minister's Office. This move, as Hovhannes Nikoghosyan and Vahram Ter-Matevosyan as well as Arman Grigoryan suggest, highlights the growing trend of bypassing institutional expertise in favor of political allegiances, which has posed significant challenges to the professionalization and institutionalization of Armenian diplomacy.⁶

1 Grigoryan 2024.

2 Nikoghosyan, Ter-Matevosyan 2023.

3 "Armenia names Vice Speaker Ruben Rubinyan as Special Envoy for Dialogue with Turkey," Armenpress, December 18, 2021, accessed September 24, 2024, <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1071145>.

4 Grigoryan 2024.

5 "Armenia PM: Artsakh is Armenia, period," Armenian News – NEWS.am, 5 August, 2019, accessed September 24, 2024, <https://news.am/eng/news/527358.html>.

6 Nikoghosyan, Ter-Matevosyan 2023; Grigoryan 2024.

Methodology

The research employs a mixed-methods approach to study the evolution of diplomat-making in Armenia since its independence. The methodology is structured around two primary research methods: primary data collection related to the Diplomatic School of Armenia and expert interviews with key figures in Armenian diplomacy.

In order to effectively capture the evolution over time, the data analysis is segmented into distinct time frames corresponding to changes in the country's leadership:

- **First Stage:** Levon Ter-Petrosyan's incumbency (1991–1998);
- **Second Stage:** Robert Kocharyan's incumbency (1998–2008);
- **Third Stage:** Serzh Sargsyan's incumbency (2008–2018);
- **Fourth Stage:** Nikol Pashinyan's incumbency (2018–Present).

Interviews

Interviews are a critical component of the research, involving MFA officials who were actively engaged in Armenia's diplomatic processes through all four stages. The interviewees include former minister, high-ranking MFA officials, including career diplomats and scholars, whose experiences span from 1991 to 2021. In addition to serving as diplomats, they were at the root of the most significant initiatives aimed at the institutionalization of MFA and structured approach to preparation of diplomats, such as the Law on Diplomatic Service or the establishment of the Diplomatic School. Their insights offer a qualitative perspective on the practicalities of diplomat-making and its influence on foreign policy. Notably, no current MFA employees were interviewed due to non-response to interview requests.

Interview Structure:

The interviews are organized into three thematic blocks, each designed to explore specific aspects of the diplomatic profession:

1. Education:

- Questions explored where the interviewees had received their diplomatic education, the subjects prioritized during their training, and their assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the educational process.
- Additional focus was set on how these diplomats enhanced their qualifications, including internships and other professional development opportunities.

2. Job Entry:

- This block examined the selection and entry process into the diplomatic service, including the priorities during recruitment, the role of interviews, and the mentorship programs in place.
- The research explored the practice of internships abroad, identifying key countries and the impact of these experiences on the diplomats' careers.

3. Evaluation:

- The interviewees were questioned about key milestones for career advancement, the types of diplomats who had the most impact on foreign policy, and specific cases where diplomatic preparation had a significant effect on policy outcomes.

Primary Data Collection:
Diplomatic School of Armenia

In addition to expert interviews, the research includes direct primary data collection focusing on the Diplomatic School of Armenia. This part of the study covers the period from the establishment of the School in 2009 to 2024. Key areas of focus include admissions and curricula, training programs, and the institutional role of the Diplomatic School.

This methodology provides a comprehensive approach to understanding how the process of diplomat-making in Armenia has evolved, reflecting changes in leadership, educational practices, and institutional structures.

Data Analysis:
The evolution of making diplomats

Stage 1: 4 Ministers to 1 President: Making of an Institute (1991–1998)

One of the interviewees, a high-ranking diplomat who started his diplomatic career in 1991 right after the establishment of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, noted that right after its foundation the Ministry relied on three pillars as its cadre base: *former USSR diplomats of Armenian origin who offered their services, professionals from diaspora offering their services and graduates of the Department of Middle Eastern Studies of Yerevan State University.*

Former Soviet diplomats became the 'bureaucratic backbone' on which the MFA started to form. Eduard Nalbandyan (Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, 2008–2018), for example, served as the First Secretary in the USSR Embassy in Egypt and was invited to become Armenia's *chargé d'affaires* in Egypt after independence by establishing the Armenian Embassy there and later becoming its first Ambassador. As quoted by interviewees, he was one of the people who knew 'from the inside' how Soviet foreign services worked. Other prominent cadres from the USSR state apparatus also served as carriers of institutional memory and contributors to putting the MFA on institutional rails. Arman Navasardyan (Deputy Minister, 1991–1993), for example, was an alumnus of the Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the USSR and held several senior positions in the MFA of the USSR before its collapse.

The segment of diplomats from diaspora had two representatives in the highest echelon of the Ministry: the first Minister of Foreign Affairs Raffi Hovhannisyan and the fourth Minister of Foreign Affairs Vartan Oskanian. Their motivation was based on the post-independence euphoria and patriotic desire to serve the Republic of Armenia, bringing their knowledge and connections to the table. The case of Raffi Hovhannisyan, who served as a Minister for a very short time,¹ was, of course, a lot different from the case of Vartan Oskanian, who climbed the career ladder to the highest post and brought a lot of his experience in the West to the institutional

¹ Elizabeth Shogren, "Armenia's First Post-Soviet Foreign Minister Resigns," Los Angeles Times, October 17, 1992, accessed September 24, 2024, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-10-17-mn-226-story.html>.

development of the Ministry. It is mentioned that the diplomats and the cadre base were not the only things with which the Armenian diaspora, full of happiness and hope in the early 1990s, was ready to support the Armenian Republic. In the first years of independence, many wealthy people, organizations, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), the Armenian Apostolic Church, Armenian Catholics, the Armenian Protestant Church, as well as big and small communities of the Armenian diaspora bought or rented buildings for Armenian embassies and providing significant financial support. Armenian politicians and diplomats were being welcomed in different parts of the world, from the USA to Europe and the Middle East, with all respect and tribute. The diaspora's support for the establishment and competitive advantages that the Armenian MFA and its foreign representatives received in the early 1990s was truly huge, especially given the ongoing war in Nagorno-Karabakh. This support allowed for an advantage in foreign representation over other regional countries.

Echoed by another high-ranking diplomat who worked in the system almost from the establishment to 2021, a Department of Middle Eastern Studies graduate, the recruitment from the mentioned department was very high, especially during the first years of independence. There were two reasons for this. First, many professors in the department were among the first to enter the newly established MFA, given their knowledge of foreign languages and experience. Hence, they were suggesting their successful students or recent graduates with potential for diplomatic service for the vacant roles in the Ministry. After the suggestion, the candidates were to be interviewed and to pass language tests as well as exams on the basics of international relations, but the headhunting of students took place first of all. The second reason was the special role of YSU's Department of Middle Eastern Studies due to its low acceptance rate, with only 25 available places annually and very high acceptance criteria. Given the scarcity of international relations schools in the Soviet Union except Moscow, the YSU's Department of Middle Eastern Studies was one of the few hubs in Soviet Armenia that provided an opportunity to connect with the world on the other side of the Iron Curtain, making it a prestigious and desirable place to study. In addition to one Middle Eastern language (Arabic, Turkish, Farsi) and military translation, the students also studied one European language (English, French, or German), with possible career paths to the USSR's MFA or military intelligence. After the USSR collapsed, that career path turned to Armenia's MFA, with euphoria and the mission of being the creators of one of the most vital institutions of the newly independent state coming as a bonus. A specificity of the cadres coming from this hub was that they eventually became the basis of what is known as 'career diplomats' who entered the institutions as employees or attachés and moved through the career ladder step by step to become Ambassadors, Deputy Ministers, like Artak Apitonyan, or, for example, in the case of Ara Ayvazyan (Minister of Foreign Affairs, 2020–2021) – Minister of Foreign Affairs.

During this timeframe, there was no law regulating the logic of foreign internships and qualification courses. However, the executive government had a clear vision that there was an urgent need to prepare competent diplomats. The strategy, thus, was to use all possible opportunities and send cadres upon every invitation. Fortunately, there were plenty of offers and opportunities coming from Russia, the US, EU countries, and Middle Eastern countries for Armenian diplomats. Egypt, for example, offered

five-month courses for 12 Armenian diplomats and later, based on the successful experience, made it regular for applicants from different countries too. It is important to mention that the diplomatic efforts of the representatives and, later, the Embassy of Armenia in Egypt played a great role in making these opportunities possible and in establishing friendly relations between the two countries.

Russia, in turn, offered quotas for Armenian diplomats in the Diplomatic Academy of MFA, and Armenian MFA sent them in full capacity. *'If they had offered 50 places, we would have sent 50 people,'* said one of the interviewees, highlighting that there was mutual interest and appreciation from the Armenian side, too.

There were also cases of institutionalization at the departmental level. One of the department heads, for example, established a system within the department whereby all the cadres passed the foreign internships and qualification courses that he had done before becoming head of the department.

Thus, during the initial stage of the development of Armenia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, under the leadership of Levon Ter-Petrosyan and his three successive Foreign Ministers, the Ministry was largely reactive, adapting to the opportunities as they arose. The Ministry focused on building a strong diplomatic service through continuous training, internships, and qualification courses abroad. The influence of Soviet-era bureaucrats, who carried institutional memory and maintained strong ties to Russia and other post-Soviet states, persisted as a legacy of the Soviet period. Diaspora cadres contributed with their solid Western education and connections, while the young, motivated graduates from YSU's Middle Eastern Studies Department formed the core of the new diplomatic service. Despite these efforts, the level of institutionalization and the establishment of a clearly defined approach to the training and education of diplomats remained limited. This challenge became a key focus for subsequent administrations.

Stage 2: Oskanyan's Law on Diplomatic Service and Fletcher Contract (1998–2008)

Vartan Oskanian, a diaspora representative who worked in the MFA during Levon Ter-Petrosyan's tenure, was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs by Robert Kocharyan and spent all ten years in the highest rank of the MFA under the second President.

One of the most significant steps in the institutionalization of the diplomatic service of Armenia was the Law of the Republic of Armenia on the Diplomatic Service (hereinafter 'the Law'), ratified in October 2001. The Law established the legal framework for the functioning and organization of Armenia's diplomatic service. It defined the structure of the diplomatic service, outlined the roles and responsibilities of diplomats, and specified recruitment, training, and career progression processes. The Law aimed to create a professional and merit-based foreign service that would effectively represent Armenia's interests abroad.

The Law outlined the structure of the MFA and its missions abroad, including embassies and consulates. It specified the roles and hierarchy within the diplomatic service, from junior diplomats to ambassadors. The Law mandated a merit-based recruitment process, requiring candidates to pass competitive tests and meet specific qualifications. It emphasized the importance of continuous professional development,

including mandatory training and qualifications, to ensure that diplomats were well prepared for their roles. It set clear guidelines for career advancement within the diplomatic service based on performance, experience, and qualifications. It also included provisions for the rotation of diplomats between different postings to ensure a broad range of experience. In addition, it enforced strict ethical standards for diplomats, including codes of conduct and disciplinary measures for breaches of these standards. All this aimed to ensure that diplomats maintained a high level of integrity and professionalism.

Specifically, several key educational requirements were underscored. The first was a higher education degree from a recognized institution, with a strong preference for fields relevant to diplomacy, such as international relations, political science, law, and economics. Second was language proficiency. Diplomats were expected to be fluent in at least one foreign language, with Russian and English being prioritized.

The Law emphasized the importance of comprehensive training for diplomats. Newly appointed diplomats were required to undergo initial training, which typically included courses on diplomatic protocol, international law, negotiation strategies, and geopolitical issues relevant to Armenia. Continuous professional development was also mandated by the Law, ensuring that diplomats remained current with global diplomatic practices. This included regular participation in training programs and professional development opportunities at home and abroad.

The Law also established a clear, merit-based pathway for career advancement within the diplomatic service. Diplomats were supposed to meet specific performance and qualification standards, and their progress within the service was contingent on successfully fulfilling these criteria. Regular evaluations and the requirement for continuous training ensured that only the most qualified individuals advanced to higher positions within the diplomatic hierarchy.

Leaving the effective and equal enforcement of the Law, the mere fact of adopting it was already a leap towards institutionalization, which later served as a basis for other important steps.

Oskanian's tenure and his approach towards the training of diplomats were also marked by cooperation with his alma mater, the Fletcher School of Global Affairs, with the financial support of the Tavitian Foundation. This initiative was another manifestation of the diaspora's investment in the Ministry's growth, as the founder of the Tavitian Foundation, entrepreneur Aso Tavitian, was another diaspora representative. The foundation sponsored MFA diplomats and civil servants for Tavitian Scholarship certificate programs at the Fletcher School, which started in 1999.¹ Groups of 15 diplomats or civil servants annually traveled to the United States for this special qualification program. In addition to diplomats from the Foreign Ministry, civil servants from the Ministries of Finance, Trade, Justice, Health as well as from the President's Office, the Prosecutor General's Office, and some agencies benefitted from the initiative.² Along with other training

1 "Minister Oskanian Addresses Fletcher School, Receives Dean's Medal," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, October 8, 2007, accessed October 24, 2024, <https://www.mfa.am/en/press-releases/2007/10/08/osk/356>.

2 "Celebrating the 2021 Tavitian Scholars Program Graduation," Tufts University, July 1, 2021, accessed October 24, 2024, <https://fletcher.tufts.edu/news-events/news/celebrating-2021-tavitian-scholars-program-graduation>.

opportunities for Armenian diplomats, this program became one of the periodic and institutionalized.

Vartan Oskanian's tenure left a notable legacy, including enacting the Law on Diplomacy, establishing partnerships with foreign institutions for regular qualification programs, and a good foundation for advancing the approach towards professional training within Armenia's diplomatic service.

*Stage 3: Nalbandyan's Decade:
"We Make Our Own Cadres" (2008–2018)*

The highlight of Edvard Nalbandyan's decade-long tenure was the establishment of the Diplomatic School of Armenia. The qualification programs, training and internships abroad gave Armenian diplomats a lot of understanding and experience, yet the necessity to make the cadres at home and to have a curriculum with Armenian foreign policy issues at the center led to the establishment of the school.

The Diplomatic School of Armenia was established as a crucial step in the professionalization of Armenia's diplomatic service, providing a structured and rigorous training process for future diplomats. Before the establishment of the School, candidates could enter the diplomatic service only through a selection process directly within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This process consisted of two stages: a written examination covering international relations and language proficiency, an analytical essay and an interview. To progress, candidates had to score 80% on the written component before moving on to the evaluation commission, which was chaired by the Secretary General of the MFA.

However, after the establishment of the Diplomatic School, only narrow specialists were admitted via an open call, and the majority of candidates came from the school. The admission process to the Diplomatic School also involved three stages: writing an essay, doing an interview and a language translation exam. The training program at the school lasted nine months and was intensive and comprehensive. Besides the main training program, the school offers consular training and mid-career training for diplomats.

During their training, students were required to pass multiple exams, including written assessments for each course. The curriculum was enriched by the participation of foreign instructors, who conducted two-week courses. These instructors included specialists from Russia, Estonia, China, the United States, etc., each bringing expertise in their respective fields. Notably, high-profile visitors such as ambassadors or foreign ministers of different countries were also invited to give guest lectures during their official visits to Armenia.

In addition to classroom instruction, the program allowed for two internships, including at least one visit to the Republic of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh Republic). This hands-on experience was designed to provide students with practical insights and exposure to real-world diplomatic challenges.

If assessed from the lenses of the Valdai report *In Search of National Interests: How Diplomatic Preparation Affects the Sovereignty of Countries*, this curriculum reflects a blend of global epistemology and national priorities. Courses such as *Introduction to International Relations*, *International Law*, and *Security Studies* provide foundational

knowledge essential for understanding the global landscape, while specialized courses like *Armenia's Consular Diplomacy and Armenia's Relations with its Neighbors* ensure that diplomats are well versed in issues that directly impact Armenian sovereignty and regional stability. The inclusion of *Energy Politics, EU Processes, Institutions and Policy, and Public Diplomacy* highlights the need for diplomats to engage with emerging global challenges and multilateral institutions, consistent with the Valdai report's emphasis on aligning diplomatic training with national interests.

Furthermore, courses like *International Negotiation Skills and Diplomatic Ethics and Protocol* are crucial for building the practical knowledge that diplomats require in their daily interactions, both within Armenia and on the international stage. The curriculum's broad scope, covering everything from *Economic Diplomacy to Science Diplomacy*, reflects an understanding of the diverse skill set needed to assert Armenia's position in global affairs while ensuring that diplomats are equipped to address the specific challenges faced by their nation.

The selection process for the Diplomatic School was highly competitive, with some 200 applicants filtered down to 25–27 students (about 10–13%), of whom 10–15 would eventually become diplomats. After completing their education, graduates were subject to a probationary period of up to six months within the MFA. If their supervisor did not give a positive assessment at the end of this period, the graduate could be dismissed – a practice that, while rare, did occur. Nevertheless, successful cadres were judged to be highly productive by the interviewees who worked with them.

The training also included opportunities for international internships. Invitations for such internships were received regularly, and candidates were selected on the basis of their specialization. About 30% of these internships were in European capitals (Vienna, Brussels, Berlin), focusing primarily on security issues, with others in the United States, Iran, Egypt, and India. Russia was represented mainly by the Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In some cases, trainees were also sent to the Armenian Parliament and government institutions for further training.

This structured approach to diplomatic training marked a significant development in Armenia's foreign service, ensuring that the country's diplomats were not only well-educated but also well-prepared through practical experience and international exposure, and most importantly, they were made in Armenia with a precise focus on the foreign policy issues that Armenia faces. For example, the Nagorno-Karabakh issue and the Armenian Genocide were studied as required courses. Meanwhile, the MFA's firm stance on accepting and promoting cadres that graduated from the school highly emphasized its importance and increased the number of applicants.

However, the Diplomatic School of Armenia faced challenges and had its own shortcomings. In 2016 Ambassador Vahe Gabrielyan, director of the Diplomatic School of Armenia, co-authored an article which compared 14 Diplomatic Schools, Academies, and Training Centers. The text highlighted several challenges that the Diplomatic School of Armenia was already facing back then.¹ Key findings included the variability in training approaches, the importance of aligning training programs with national contexts, and the issues smaller institutions like the Diplomatic School of Armenia

1 Gabrielyan et al. 2016.

deal with, particularly in sustaining funding and developing a comprehensive training model. The paper concluded that the future of the Armenian school depended on continued government support and strategic development, especially as international funding was to wind down in 2017.

Despite the challenges, the Diplomatic School of Armenia is surely a valuable legacy of Nalbandyan's incumbency as a Minister of Foreign Affairs, which proved to be a productive, sustainable, and systematic institute for making Armenian diplomats.

*When the Revolution Comes to MFA:
Pashinyan and three Ministers (yet) (2018–present)*

After the regime change in 2018, Nikol Pashinyan appointed Zohrab Mnatsakanyan, a diplomat from within the Ministry, as Minister of Foreign Affairs. During Pashinyan's tenure, the second minister was also a career diplomat, Ara Ayvazyan, who took office immediately after the war but held the position for only seven months. Following the post-war snap elections, Pashinyan moved toward greater centralization of power and made a political appointment. Ararat Mirzoyan, a founding member of Pashinyan's *Civil Contract* party, became Minister of Foreign Affairs; he remains in office.

As the revolution affected the MFA, like other government bodies, individuals who had not completed the required milestones, including studies at the Diplomatic School, began to receive high-ranking positions. According to the interviewees, this development posed a serious challenge to maintaining the significance of the Diplomatic School. At the same time, there was competition among ministries for the best talent. Since the MFA was the only ministry requiring completion of the Diplomatic School for employment, it became less attractive to new graduates. This context is how decision-makers from the 2018–2020 period explain the shift towards open job applications that bypassed the Diplomatic School, starting in 2018.

However, the interviewees' opinions on this matter diverge. Some high-ranking diplomats who remained in the system during this period view the decision to restart the open calls as the primary reason for the diminishing role of the Diplomatic School and the deinstitutionalization of diplomatic training in Armenia. As one interviewee associated with the Diplomatic School noted, the number of applications dropped after 2018, as did the school's status.

The dismissal of Zohrab Mnatsakanyan following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War and the subsequent appointment of Ara Ayvazyan led to only minor changes, such as the inclusion of Azerbaijani studies in the curriculum of the Diplomatic School. However, Ayvazyan's tenure was marked by turbulence and internal governmental conflicts, including instances where the Ministry was bypassed by the Prime Minister's Office. As a result, it is difficult to identify any significant developments during this period regarding the diplomat-making process.

In 2021, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, all Deputy Ministers, Secretary General and subsequently more than a dozen of Ambassadors and high-ranking career diplomats resigned, citing deep disagreements with Nikol Pashinyan's foreign policy and the practice of bypassing the Ministry. Following his re-election, Pashinyan appointed Ararat Mirzoyan, which appeared to resolve the conflicts between the government and the Ministry for the above reasons. However, those who resigned in 2021 generally agree that the Ministry's institutional role is at its weakest in history,

with most decisions now being politically driven. As one former official remarked, "Currently, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs serves merely a façade function."

As noted above, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not respond to requests for an interview, which may present a limitation due to the lack of data. However, three key findings can be highlighted to conclude this section: the diminished role of the Diplomatic School, the facilitation of the admission process, and the failure of the institution to advise the political leadership and to lead the nation in foreign policy issues.

Key Findings and Conclusion

Thus, the evolution of Armenia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) rests upon three key pillars: the legacy of the Soviet Union, which provided a base of well-trained and experienced professional diplomats; the contributions of the Armenian diaspora, both in terms of personnel and material support; and the input of graduates of the Yerevan State University's Department of Middle Eastern Studies, who formed the core of the newly established MFA.

In the early years of independence, Armenia's executive government recognized the urgent need for a solid diplomatic service, but the war in Nagorno-Karabakh and other immediate foreign policy challenges left little room for a standardized approach. As a result, the initial preparation of diplomats was chaotic but rich in opportunities. The MFA sent diplomats to a wide range of suggested internships and qualification courses abroad, seizing every opportunity to build the necessary expertise as quickly as possible.

Under the leadership of Vartan Oskanian and Eduard Nalbandyan, Armenia's foreign service took significant steps towards institutionalization. Adopting the Law on Diplomatic Service in 2001 and establishing the Diplomatic School of Armenia in 2009 were pivotal moments in creating a more structured and professional diplomatic service. These developments laid the groundwork for a merit-based system that emphasized continuous training and qualifications, aligning Armenia's diplomatic practices with international standards. Although there were serious challenges and shortcomings and all subsequent Armenian governments achieved certain levels of power centralization and, therefore, politicization of the Ministry, the mentioned steps provided a solid ground for the further development of an institutional approach to diplomatic training in Armenia.

However, recent developments under Nikol Pashinyan's government have posed challenges to these institutionalization efforts. The return to open calls for diplomatic positions, bypassing the Diplomatic School, and the political appointment of key figures like the Minister of Foreign Affairs have contributed to a perceived weakening of the MFA's institutional role. Moreover, lack of diplomatic education and background of key figures such as ministers, deputy ministers, or ambassadors to strategically important countries (e.g. Russia, the US, etc.) changed the attitude towards diplomacy and diplomatic work, which contradicted the necessity of forming diplomatic traditions.

The erosion of the Diplomatic School's significance and the further centralization of foreign policy decisions within the Prime Minister's Office have raised concerns about the long-term sustainability of Armenia's diplomatic service. Moreover, it has demotivated other diplomats to improve their skills by sending a clear message: political loyalty prevails over professional competence.

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Authors

Sergei G. Melkonian,

PhD, Research Fellow, Caucasus Studies Department, Institute of China and Contemporary Asia Russian Academy of Sciences
32, Nakhimovsky avenue, Moscow, Russia, 117997
e-mail: sergei.g.melkonian@gmail.com

Knarik M. Jalatyan,

Program Coordinator, Armenian Research Institute
23/1, Rubinyants street, Yerevan, Armenia, 0069
e-mail: knarikmjalatyan@gmail.com

Additional information

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От независимости к «революции»: эволюция дипломатической службы Армении

АННОТАЦИЯ

С момента обретения независимости в 1991 г. перед Арменией стоит непростая задача создания профессиональной дипломатической службы, что связано с необходимостью укрепления государственности и с потребностью ориентироваться на геополитической арене. В настоящем исследовании рассматривается эволюция внешнеполитического ведомства Армении с особым вниманием к таким важнейшим вехам, как принятие Закона о дипломатической службе в 2001 г. и создание Дипломатической школы Армении в 2009 году.

С помощью анализа количественных данных и применения качественных методов, включая изучение первоисточников и интервью с бывшими дипломатами и учеными, предпринимается попытка ответить на вопрос о том, какова роль институтов, политических лидеров и внешних факторов в формировании дипломатической службы страны. Анализ показал, что особый вклад в ее первоначальное становление внесли бюрократические структуры советского периода, армянская диаспора и выпускники специализированных академических программ. В дальнейшем сменявшие друг друга правительства стремились к большей профессионализации службы посредством институциональных реформ. Тем не менее, Министерство иностранных дел зачастую сталкивалось с такими проблемами, как централизация и политизация процесса принятия решений. Последние события, произошедшие при «революционном» правительстве Никола Пашиняна, свидетельствуют об эрозии институциональных практик, включая ослабление роли Дипломатической школы и превалирование критерия политической лояльности над принципом меритократии при распределении должностей. В настоящем исследовании анализируются взаимосвязи между институциональным развитием, бюрократической политикой и суверенитетом в дипломатии Армении. Таким образом, работа вносит вклад в понимание процессов государственного строительства в постсоветских государствах. В статье делается вывод о том, что, хотя Армения добилась значительного прогресса в институционализации дипломатической службы, для сохранения этих достижений необходимо нивелировать актуальные тенденции, которые подрывают ее эффективность.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА

Армения, дипломатическая служба, внешняя политика, Нагорный Карабах, Министерство иностранных дел, революция, суверенитет

Сведения об авторах

Сергей Георгиевич Мелконян,

к.и.н., научный сотрудник Сектора кавказских исследований Института Китая и современной Азии Российской академии наук

117997, Россия, Москва, Нахимовский пр-т, 32

e-mail: sergei.g.melkonian@gmail.com

Кнарик Мурадовна Джалатян,

программный координатор Армянского института исследований

0069, Армения, Ереван, ул. Рубинянц, 23/1

e-mail: knarikmjalatyan@gmail.com

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