

DIVERSIONARY USE OF FORCE IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES: THE CASE OF 2016 APRIL'S ARMENIAN-AZERBAIJANI BORDER CLASHES

Gevorg Gasparyan

PhD candidate, 4th year, Jilin University,
School of International and Public Affairs, P.R. China

ABSTRACT

The economic downturns influence autocratic and democratic regimes's perspectives of being involved in militarized disputes. However, the mechanism of influence varies across different regimes. In democratic regimes leaders are more worried about the upcoming elections and have more tools to use to compensate the economic losses like implementing economic reforms, while autocratic ones are more worried about their long-term reputation and face higher risks domestically in case of failure. In authoritarian regimes economic downturns influence the leaders' decisions to engage in interstate conflict not through worsening of the electorate's economic conditions but by harming the reputation of the regime. Here we examine how the economic downturn of Azerbaijan fostered Armenian-Azerbaijani open military conflict in April, 2016. We argue that the drastic decline in annual growth of GDP due to decreased oil prices was the main incentive for Azerbaijani leadership to try to compensate losses in the economy by gaining military victories over an old rival.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, Diversionary use of force, Economic downturn, Nagorno Karabagh, War

1. INTRODUCTION

Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno Karabagh dates back to 1990s when Nagorno Karabagh declared its independence from Azerbaijan through referendum which was responded by Azerbaijan with a large scale military attack on the Nagorno-Karabagh. The latter turned into a large scale war between two countries. As a result Armenian and Nagorno Karabagh forces took operative control over Nagorno Karabagh and other seven regions, not included on the territory of Nagorno Karabagh, but being taken for insuring the security of Nagorno Karabagh. Later, in 1994, through the mediation of Russia, a ceasefire was signed in Moscow by Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents. The conflict remained unsolved during years but the frontline had been calm during 1990s and 2000s with exchange of only occasional fire by two sides using

small calibre weapons and snipers. The Minsk group was created under OSCE with the US, Russia and France being co-chairmen to monitor the situation.

However, the situation began to escalate after 2010s. In 2014 the ceasefire violation rates increased three times compared to 2013.

In the night of April 1st and 2nd 2016 large-scale military actions broke out in the Nagorno-Karabagh-Azerbaijani frontline in southern, southeastern and northeastern directions with the use of artillery, heavy armoured weaponry and airforce (Nagorno Karabagh Defence Army, 2016, April 2). Both sides blamed each other for the outbreak of the violence. In the morning of April 2nd Nagorno Karabagh defence army announced the downing of Azerbaijani MI-24 helicopter which was later confirmed by the Azerbaijani sources. According to the estimates of Nagorno Karabagh Defence Army at night of April 1st and 2nd as well as the daytime of April 2nd more than 200 Azerbaijani soldiers were killed, four tanks and drones demolished (the data has not been confirmed by the Azerbaijani side) (Nagorno Karabagh Defence Army, 2016, April 2). Russian-produced BM-21 "Grad" rocket launchers were recorded used against Nagorno Karabagh Defence Army.

After four years of military operations, unprecedented since the ceasefire in 1994, a ceasefire was achieved between the sides which continued to be violated in the following days. The four days military actions were unprecedented since the Russian-mediated ceasefire was achieved in 1994 (Nagorno Karabagh Defence Army, 2016, April 2). Both sides used rocket systems and exchange artillery fire. Both sides used almost all types of weapons they had except the C-300 systems.

The event in the beginning of April of 2016 were not only unprecedented from the perspective of weapons used in the frontline, but also from the perspective of casualties and technical losses. Hundreds of dead and wounded from both sides were reported.

The events of 2016 April can't be fitted within the logic of the overall dynamics of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. After the ending of military operations in 1994, the frontline had been mostly peaceful despite minor ceasefire violations. During these years the ceasefire violations had never included the usage of heavy artillery, tanks and rockets. The exchange of fire in 2016 has been unprecedented with the recent years marking with decreasing severity of violations. So, what explains the unprecedented break-up of violence on Armenian-Azerbaijani border?

Since Nagorno Karabagh is under the efficient control of Armenian and Nagorno Karabagh military forces, Armenian side has no incentives in initiating clash on the border. Hence, Azerbaijani side's dynamics become more important in determining the situation and the future of status-quo.

We use the theory of diversionary use of foreign policy to show how Azerbaijan's recent bad economic performance has affected the conflictual situation in Nagorno Karabagh. After the independence Azerbaijan had very high economic performance, mostly due to large oil and gas resources residing in this country and high international energy resources prices worldwide. Over the past 10 years, Azerbaijan's economy has grown by 300%. In 2005 Azerbaijan had the second highest GDP growth in the world after Equatorial Guinea and in 2006 it has grown by 34.6 % (world highest). In 2015, one year prior to the outbreak of hostilities Azerbaijan's annual GDP growth equaled only 1.1% compared to 3.0 % percent growth of Armenian GDP and 2.8% of Georgia. So, from the perspective of economic performance Azerbaijani president was in the domain of losses. The initiation of violence abroad could divert domestic attention from economic downturn and provide legitimacy to the regime.

There's a huge volume of literature trying to analyse the relationship between domestic conditions and engagement into international militarized disputes by states. The theories known as diversionary use of foreign policy have tried to find the relationship between the probability of losing office and leaders's decisions to foster wars. The diversionary war literature (Levy 1989) argues that leaders become more likely to initiate conflict when they face a higher risk of losing office. The risk of losing office now features prominently in the explanation of several dimensions of conflict beyond diversionary war: in particular, war initiation (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1999; Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson 1995), war termination (Goemans 2000), war widening (Siverson 1996), war outcome (Reiter and Stam 2002), the relationship between democracy and war (Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson 1995; Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1999), and the effect of trade on war (Gelpi and Grieco 2001b). A second strand in the literature on diversionary war has long argued that international conflict or the threat of conflict could in turn affect the fate of leaders through the well-known "rally-around-the-flag" effect. Leaders try to divert attention from domestic issues by involving into international disputes and thus dragging domestic issues into second plan and securing their positions.

Another volume of literature has tried to understand the connection between economic downturns and engagement in international disputes (Haggard and Kaufman, 1995; Russett 1987; Russett 1990; Oneal, 2006; Min Kim and Rousseau, 2005). They argue that the economic crisis or downturn of a country's GDP makes leader more prone to go to foster militarized disputes. Democratic governments are more expected to go to war when facing the economic downturn than the autocratic ones. Here, we examine a case, which goes against this accepted model and shows how the decline of Azerbaijan's GDP has affected its decision to intensify Armenian-Azerbaijani frozen conflict.

First, we examine the main trend in the literature on diversionary use of force and, particularly, the role of economic downturns in autocratic and democratic states. Then, we try to analyze the relationship between the decline in Azerbaijan's economy and its influence on Armenian-Azerbaijani militarized dispute. The last section concludes and assesses the robustness of the results.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: THEORIES OF DIVERSIONARY USE OF WAR

The diversionary theories imply that state leaders engage in interstate conflict in order to divert public attention from domestic issues. States do so, because they, even authoritarian, value the public opinion and realize that it can influence their fate. The probability of losing office is the driving force in making decisions of engaging in militarized disputes, but this is more true in case of democratic regimes where public opinion and audience costs matter more than in authoritarian ones. However, the authoritarian states are prone to aggressive behavior once the main source of their legitimacy is at stake, which can be ideology, security, sustainable economic growth etc.

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Diversionary theories try to understand the connection between a wide range of domestic factors on leaders' decisions to engage in international disputes. Another volume of research, using diversionary theories, has focused on the influence of economic activity, particularly economic downturns on stability of authoritarian regimes and war decisions (Haggard and Kaufman, 1995; Russett 1987; Russett 1990; Oneal, 2006; Min Kim and Rousseau, 2005).

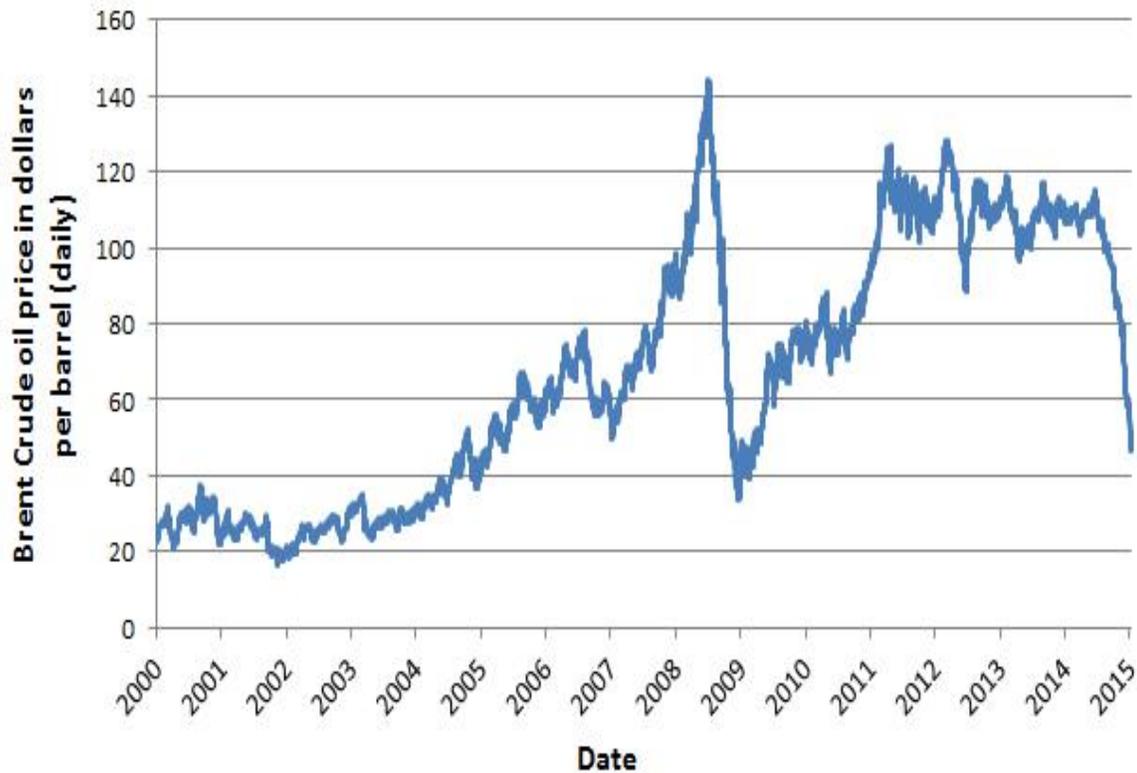
The main question in this literature is 1. how does the economic downturn affect the fate of regimes and 2. does the economic downturn affect autocratic and democratic regimes differently or not? Some parts of the literature states that domestic problems drive democratic regimes into

war more than the autocratic ones (Hess and Orphanides 1995, 2001; Smith 1996). Others argue that autocrats, too, are dependent upon the support of groups adversely affected by a poor economy (Richards et al. 1993; Downs and Rocke 1994; Miller 1995; Pickering and Kisangani 2005). The risks of losing of an office in authoritarian regime are much higher than in democratic ones, hence autocrats might be afraid of revolutions and prone to providing high economic growth. “Even authoritarian governments have powerful incentives to promote economic growth, not out of concern for their citizens, but because failure to deliver adequate economic performance may lead to their downfall.” Indeed, autocracies may be more prone to use military force for diversionary purposes because citizens in democratic countries are able to express their preference for peace (Russett 1990). Thus, in both autocratic and democratic regimes engagement in war serves a useful tool for maintaining public support and legitimacy.

In this analysis we will take the assumption that the economic downturns affect both democratic and authoritarian regimes (although possibly differently) and that the engagement in militarized disputes is aimed at diverting the public opinion from deepening economic crises.

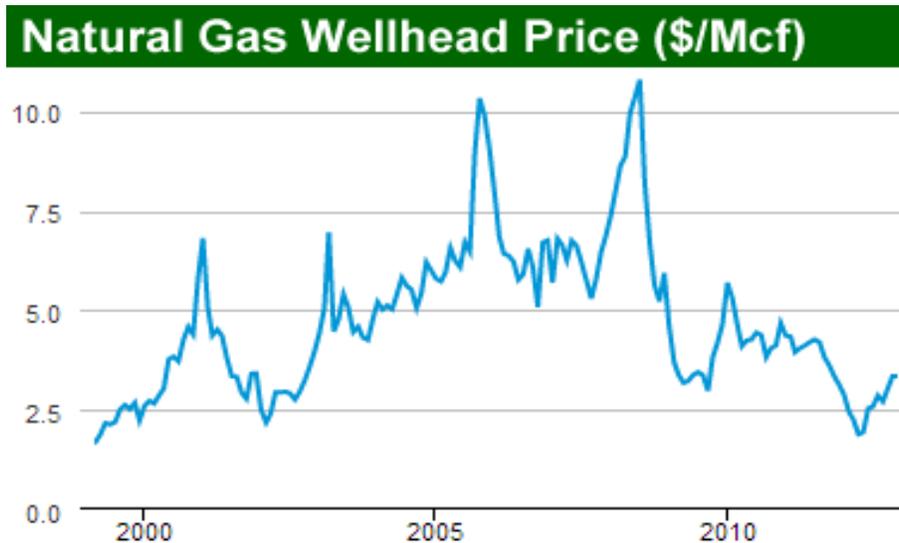
3. AZERBAIJAN’S ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE PRIOR TO 2016 APRIL EVENTS

After the independence Azerbaijan had very high economic performance, mostly due to large oil and gas resources residing in this country and high international energy resources prices worldwide. Over the past 10 years, Azerbaijan’s economy has grown by 300%. In 2005 Azerbaijan had the second highest GDP growth in the world after Equatorial Guinea and in 2006 it has grown by 34.6 % (world highest). In 2015, one year prior to the outbreak of hostilities Azerbaijan’s annual GDP growth equaled only 1.1% compare to 3.0 % percent growth of Armenian GDP and 2.8% of Georgia. In 2016 Azerbaijan’s annual GDP growth equaled to -3.1 % , an unprecedented decline after the 2000s, while Armenia provided 0.2 % growth and Georgia 2.74%. The unprecedented decline of Azerbaijani economy is mostly conditioned by the declining prices of energy resources in the world markets. In 2015 the world oil prices declined historically unprecedently below 40 \$ barell. The decline has been significant in the world gas prices as well (EUROPP – European Politics and Policy).



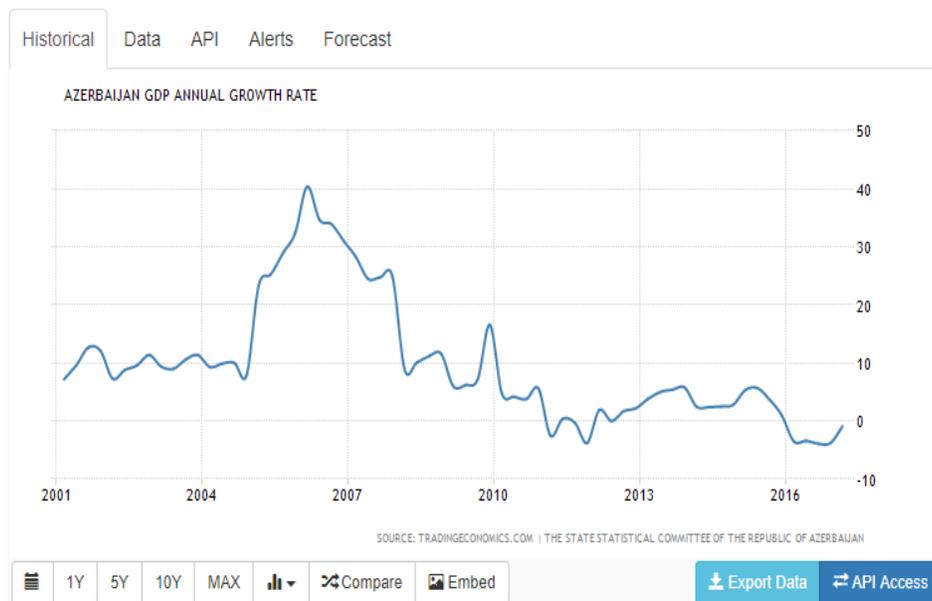
Source: EUROPP – European Politics and Policy

The oil revenues have constituted a huge part of Azerbaijan's GDP. In 2006, when Azerbaijan indicated the world's highest GDP annual growth, the oil revenues constituted 62.17 percent of country's GDP. During the years of independence energy resources revenues have been the most crucial factor of building country's wealth. According to the Ministry of Finance of Baku, this sector accounts for over 75% of the country's tax revenue, but other estimates point to a figure that exceeds 84%. Gas and oil make up 95% of Azerbaijani exports. Only when it comes to GDP do we see a decline in the contribution of the oil sector, from 65% to less than 50% in the last three years (Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa). After the world oil prices declined, the GDP share of oil revenues declines drastically as well. In 2014, oil revenues covered only 27.13 percent of GDP which is the lowest since 2000 (The Global Economy).



Source: The Global Economy.com

The changes in world energy resources prices had influences countries overall economic performance drastically. In 2015 exports fell by 44.8 percent, and international reserves of the country fell by 50 % compared to 2011. External debts rose from 11% of GDP in 2011 to 38% in 2015. Public debt grew from 11 percent of GDP into 28 percent in 2015 (Focus Economics).



Source: Trading Economics

The decline of Azerbaijan's economy couldn't not to influence the countries performance at home and abroad but instead of trying to find solutions to the deepening economic crisis, the government went in the direction of domestic repressions and intensifying the conflict on the Armenia-Azerbaijani border. The Freedom house report a few months before the April clashes seems to have predicted the upcoming events in advance : "In many countries with authoritarian governments, the drop in revenues from falling commodity prices led dictators to redouble political repression at home and lash out at perceived foreign enemies. The price of oil in particular, which was also pushed down by Saudi Arabia's refusal to curb production and a longer-term increase in output by the United States, threatened the economic well-being of repressive petro-states from Angola to Azerbaijan. Wary of spending cuts, declining living standards, and the social unrest they could cause, most of these regimes cracked down on rights activists and other critics" (Freedom House, 2016).

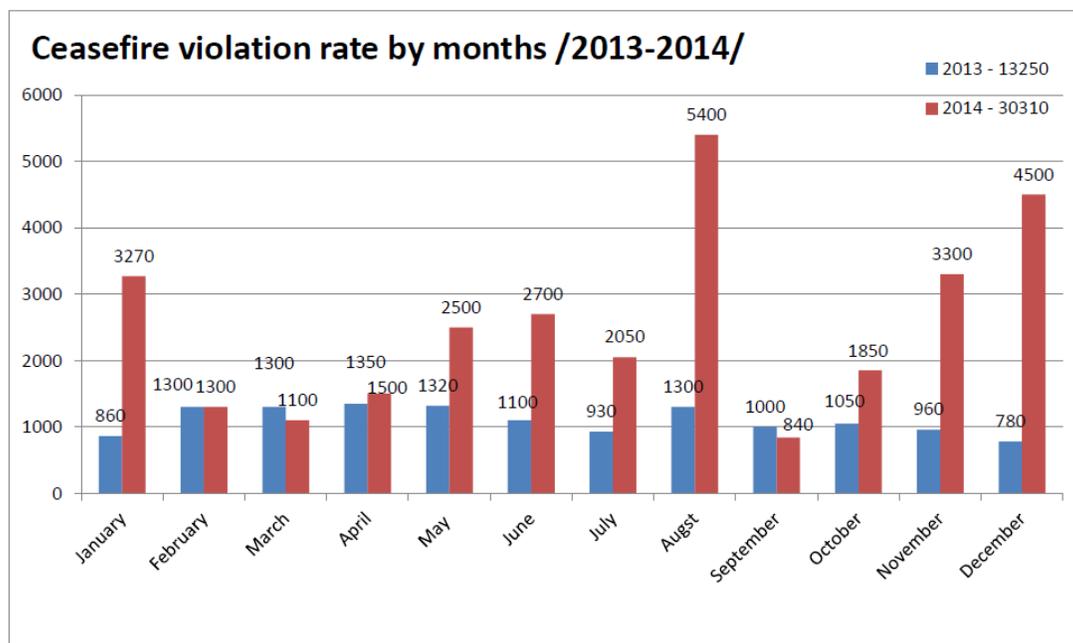
4. DIVERSIONARY USE OF FORCE: 2016 APRIL BORDER CLASHES

In the night of April 1st and 2nd 2016 large-scale military actions outbroke in the Nagorno-Karabagh-Azerbaijani frontline in southern, southeastern and northeastern directions with the use of artillery, heavy armoured weaponry and airforce (Nagorno Karabagh Defence Army, 2016). Both sides blamed each other for the outbreak of the violence. In the morning of April 2nd Nagorno Karabagh defence army announced the downment of Azerbaijani MI-24 helicopter which was later confirmed by the Azerbaijani sources. According the estimates of Nagorno Karabagh Defence Army at night of April 1st and 2nd as well as the daytime of April 2nd more than 200 Azerbaijani soldiers were killed, four tanks and drones demolished (the data has not been confirmed by the Azerbaijani side) (Nagorno Karabagh Defence Army, 2016). Russian-produced BM-21 "Grad" rocket launchers were recorded used against Nagorno Karabagh Defence Army.

After four years of military operations, unprecedented since the ceasefire in 1994, a ceasefire was achieved the sides which continued to be violated in the following days. The four days military actions were unprecedented since the Russian-mediated ceasefire was achieved in 1994. This time it was not simply a ceasefire violation but a large-scale military operations included battle tanks, rocket launchers, artillery and air force. Nagorno Karabagh Defence Army recorded the use of not only BM-21 "Grad" systems by the Azerbaijani side, but also TOS-1A "Solntsepyok" Heavy Flamethrower Systems ((Defense Ministry of Armenia, 2016) and BM-30 Smerch heavy multiple rocket launchers. Both TOS-1A "Solntsepyok" and BM-30 Smerch systems were supplied by Russia to Azerbaijan in the recent years based on the arms trade contracts signed by two countries.

The event in the beginning of April of 2016 were not only unprecedented from the perspective of weapons used in the frontline, but also from the perspective of casualties and technical losses. The Defence Ministry of the Republic of Armenia in April 13th reported 92 killed in military personnel and civilians. Azerbaijani side has reported 31 killed while according to unofficial Azerbaijani media it equals to 100 (Survey, 2016), and Karabagh authorities claim more than 300 Azerbaijani soldiers killed and 2000 wounded (“Azerbaijan holds body of a killed Armenian serviceman”, 2016).

As of April 5, the Azerbaijani side has lost 26 tanks and 4 infantry fighting vehicles, as well as 1 BM-21 Grad multiple rocket launcher, 1 engineering vehicle, 2 military helicopters and 14 unmanned aerial vehicles. The Azerbaijani side has admitted the loss of 31 fighters, 1 helicopter and 1 unmanned drone, 1 helicopter and 3 UAVs. Nagorno Karabagh Defence Army has lost 14 tanks since April 2 (The Defence Ministry of Armenia).



Source: Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor Office

The events of 2016 April can't be fitted within the logic of the overall dynamics of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. After the ending of military operations in 1994, the frontline had been mostly peaceful despite minor ceasefire violations. During these years the ceasefire violations had never included the usage of heavy artillery, tanks and rockets. The exchange of fire in 2016 has been unprecedented with the recent years marking with decreasing severity of violations. So, what explains the unprecedented broke-up of violence on Armenia-Azerbaijani border?

Since Nagorno Karabagh is under the efficient control of Armenian and Nagorno Karabagh military forces, Armenian side has no incentives in initiating clash on the border. Hence, Azerbaijani side's dynamics become more important in determining the situation and the future of status-quo. We posit that Azerbaijan's economic downturn was the main driving force of the outbreak of violence on the border. The ability to provide high economic growth rate during years (one of the highest in the world) has been the main source of legitimacy of Azerbaijani regime. But the economic downturn's influence on the decision of escalating the conflict isn't direct as it might be in the case of democracies-through worsening of economic conditions of the electorate and, then, possibly influencing the election outcomes. Azerbaijan is rated as "not free" state by international organizations such and classified as having an authoritarian regime. The main issue influencing Ilyam Alliev's decision to escalate the situations is reputation. Azerbaijan has been the side which lost 1991-94 war in Nagorno Karabagh to Armenia which put Azerbaijani leadership in a difficult condition. Losing a war to a state which had less resources than Azerbaijan had affected the reputation of regime in Azerbaijan heavily and after the war the main tenure in domestic politics have been around the "liberation of occupied territories" from Armenia. Thus, the problem of reputation had been important for the persistence of Azerbaijani regime. The decline of economy while economic growth had been the main cornerstone of regime's policy is totally undermining the regime's legitimacy. The economic decline was combined with the fading reputation of Azerbaijani regime worldwide, especially in the West. Azerbaijan is receiving more and more criticism from international organization and different countries over its violations of human rights, political prisoners' right, constitutional changes in the country, democratisation and so on. The overall democracy score has dropped from 3.31 in 2006 to 2.65 in 2016 (The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index) making the country 148th on the list. The country is being classified as "not free" by the Freedom House and is considered having an authoritarian regime.

The problem of reputation and legitimacy were the main incentives of violating the ceasefire and unleashing hostilities on Armenia-Azerbaijani border by Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani regime was in the domain of losses both internationally and domestically which made the military adventure an attractive choice. Although it was militarily costly for both side, Azerbaijani regime was the only side who could possibly benefit from the military gains. The problem is that the oil prices aren't stabilizing and the forecasts of Azerbaijan's economic growth in the upcoming years hasn't foreseen the possibility of going back to previous rapid economic growth which makes us predict that in the future the hostilities might be resumed due to the same reasons as in 2016, April.

5. CONCLUSION

It's commonly accepted that the economic downturns have the ability to influence leaders' decisions to engage in military adventures to compensate the losses domestically both in authoritarian and democratic regimes. The incentives, however, differ in two different regimes. In democratic regimes, the economic downturns increase the likelihood of losing office in the upcoming elections, while in authoritarian regimes, where elections are under the total control of the regime, elections don't play an important role in determining the leader's decisions. The legitimacy in authoritarian regimes is based on the performance of the regime in certain areas which can be security, economy, military victory over the opponents and so on. In case of the Azerbaijani regime the decline in the economic growth would drastically influence the overall ideological construction of the regime which has been so apologetic of its ability to provide rapid economic modernization.

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