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ACTIVISM AND PEACE IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

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From the Editorial Team

A number of articles in the Volume 3, Issue 1, 2018 of Caucasus Edition criticized the “NGO-ization” of activism in general and peace activism in particular. The paper “A Communitarian Peace Agenda for the South Caucasus: Supporting Everyday Peace Practices” by Vadim Romashov, Nuriyya Guliyeva, Lana Kokaia, and Tatia Kalatozishvili critiqued the (neo-)liberal approaches to peace. In “Women Challenging Gender Norms and Patriarchal Values in Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation across the South Caucasus”, Milena Abrahamyan, Parvana Mammadova, and Sophio Tskhvariashvili critiqued how women’s rights NGOs in the South Caucasus challenge and/or reproduce gender roles and patriarchal values. Finally, in “Beyond NGOs: Decolonizing Peacebuilding and Human Rights,” Sona Dilanyan, Aia Beraia, and Hilal Yavuz criticize what they see as colonization of peacebuilding and women’s rights by professional networks of NGOs and funders and propose strategies for advancing the voice and leadership by those directly impacted by violent structures of nationalism and patriarchy.

The current issue takes the next step in advancing the conversation about peace and activism, critically examining a number of practices conducted by non-NGO actors in areas ranging from environment to commemorations.

Sevil Huseynova, Mikayel Zolyan, and Sergey Rumyantsev set the context for the issue with an article titled “Conflicts and De-Sovietization of the South Caucasus: Political Regimes and Memorial Landscapes.” The authors discuss the controversial and non-linear processes of de-sovietization in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.

Özgür Sevgi Göral, Dmitry Dubrovsky, and Margarita Ter-Oganezova continue the memory theme in the “Alternatives to State Approaches in Turkey and Russia: The Politics of Memory and Civic Activism in Comparison.” This article focuses on civic memory initiatives in Turkey and Russia, two countries with a history of political violence. The civic memory initiatives, the authors argue, have been partially successful in eroding the nationalist official stance of these countries vis-à-vis their own controversial pasts.

The theme of violence takes a different turn in Maia (Nukri) Tabidze and Arpi Atabekyan's piece. While the authors of the previous article look into civic initiatives that challenge nationalism, the authors of "Banality of Nationalism in the South Caucasus: Pro-violence Practices of the Society in Georgia and Armenia" study how the subtle narratives perpetuated in the society contribute to the maintenance of the status quo of war. Through "banal" examples of nationalism in Armenia and Georgia, they illustrate how nationalistic discourses of the state have found their ways in everyday lives of the citizenry. From cherries and bananas riding military airplanes to barbwire prints of socks, the authors examine visual and verbal content that contributes to the sustainability of the enemy image.

Nona Shahnazaryan, Jemali (Thoma) Sukhashvili, and Zhala Banu study stories of rescue during the armed conflicts in the South Caucasus. In their "Stories of Help and Rescue: the Georgian-Ossetian and Nagorno-Karabakh Conflicts," the co-authors examine how did so many people resist violent tendencies and choose to help the victims, saving them from death and the acts of rescue that had taken place.

The final article of issue, by Jeyhun Veliyev, Sofia Manukyan, and Tsira Gvasalia, builds on their 2018 Caucasus Edition article that examined the potential of transboundary rivers to exacerbate conflicts or to be utilized as a means for conflict transformation. In the "Perspectives on Peace in the South Caucasus through the Lens of Environmentalists," they interview environmental activists, environmental scientists, and professionals working in conservation organizations in Yerevan, Baku, and Tbilisi, exploring the range of environmental activism in each country and the challenges and opportunities for developing a regional scheme for environmental cooperation.

The editorial team and all the co-authors express their deepest gratitude to ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen) and the German Federal Foreign Office for making this collaboration and publication possible.

Editorial Team: Philip Gamaghelyan, Sevil Huseynova, Christina Soloyan, Pinar Sayan, Sophio Tskvariashvili

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Conflicts and De-Sovietization of the South Caucasus Political Regimes and Memorial Landscapes

Sevil Huseynova, Mikayel Zolyan, Sergey Rumyantsev

Introduction

The policy of “decommunization” (Osipchuk and Kasyanov 2017) (Rumyantsev 2017) in Ukraine implemented in the context of confrontation with Russia revived interest in the Soviet legacy throughout the former Soviet Union. In the three countries of the South Caucasus, the process of deconstruction of the Soviet places of memory started in the very beginning of the 1990s and took place not only concurrently with the collapse of the Soviet Union, but also within the unfolding conflict context (Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia). The new urgency of the fight against the Soviet legacy sparked by decommunization of Ukraine prompted the authors of this article to discuss the successes and failures of the seemingly long-cooled policy of de-sovietization in the South Caucasus.

The key questions include: is complete “liberation” from the Soviet legacy possible almost three decades after the collapse of the USSR? Should it be forgotten or does the Soviet legacy need to be researched, redefined, and publicly discussed? What norms, values, and a wide range of practices define the current understanding of the Soviet legacy? Is it possible to claim that conflicts have left a unique imprint on the de-sovietization practices and discourses?

Given the politics of the Soviet regime that sought to control all aspects of public and private life, we deem complete “liberation” very difficult to achieve. This is particularly true when the “liberation” is attempted by politicians, entrepreneurs, scientists, and cultural figures who rose to prominence during the Soviet era.

The authors of this analytical review attempt to provide answers to these complex questions by discussing the main stages, peculiarities, and events of the de-sovietization process in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. We believe that this approach will allow looking at de-sovietization as a controversial and non-linear process. The main focus of the analysis is the specificity of the succession of political regimes and the interplay between the reconstruction of public space and memory landscapes in the conflict contexts and the memory of Stalin-era repressions. The authors also make an attempt to develop a range of recommendations on further steps in this area.

The work on the article was divided the following way: Mikayel Zolyan authored the analytical review covering Armenia; Sevil Huseynova authored the analysis of the situation in Azerbaijan; and the analysis of the situation in Georgia was prepared by Sergey Rumyantsev and Sevil Huseynova.

The Armenian Compromise: The development of the Armenian Attitude Model toward the Soviet Past

The Armenian approach toward the Soviet past, which could be called a “compromise model” formed at the beginning of 1990s. The development of this model was influenced by the specifics of the situation that was unfolding in Armenia at the turn of the 1990s.

‘National-democratic’ movement

Armenia was one of the first Soviet republics with a mass opposition movement that positioned itself as “national-democratic.” The confrontation with the central government escalated after its representatives won the elections to the Supreme Soviet of Armenian SSR in the summer of 1990. After the August 1991 coup d’état in Moscow, Armenia was quick to take advantage of the opportunity. In September 1991, the referendum on secession from the USSR and declaration of

independence took place with the national-democratic opposition, called the Pan-Armenian National Movement (ANM), assuming power.

During these years, the attitude towards the Soviet past in Armenia reflected the agenda of the national-democratic movement. By the late 1980s, some of the darkest pages of Soviet history became public: the repressions of the 1930s and the mass deportation of Armenians to Siberia in the late 1940s. The memory politics in Armenia had some similarities with other republics, but also some local specifics. Namely, there were significant discussions about the cooperation between Kemalist Turkey and the Bolsheviks, as well as the alleged role of Stalin regarding the status of Nagorno-Karabakh. Another process that began after ANM representatives came to power could be described as decommunization. Streets, named in honor of key Soviet leaders, were renamed and their monuments were demolished. The statue of Lenin was removed from the main square of Yerevan on April 13, 1991, even before the August coup (Mediamax 2012).

At the first glance, the entire process was no different from decommunization models of Eastern Europe and Baltic states. In Armenia, however, this process was more moderate and showed a strong appetite for compromise. No laws on decommunization or lustration were adopted. At the same time, the law “On Civic-Political Organizations” was adopted in February 1991 that prohibited the creation of party structures “in state bodies, institutions, enterprises, organizations and educational institutions,” which was visibly directed against the cells of the Communist Party (The Law of Republic of Armenia “On Civic-Political Organizations”, Article 3 1991).

In April 1991, the Supreme Soviet of Armenia made a decision to nationalize the property of the Communist Party (Vagharshyan 2015, 9). But the Communist Party was not banned. The Communist Party of Armenia made a decision on self-dissolution in September 1991, and the “Democratic Party of Armenia” was established in its place, which was led by the former first secretary Aram Sargsyan (Kavkazskiy Uzel 2012). In reality, this was not so much of self-dissolution but a split, since those Communists who did not want to “self-dissolve” restored the Communist Party under the leadership of another leader, Sergey Badalyan.

President Levon Ter-Petrosyan, speaking at the ANM party congress in 1993, credited his party with the fact that unlike the Baltic states, Georgia, or Azerbaijan, there was no “retaliation” against the Soviet regime in Armenia. Fourteen out of 36 members of the last communist cabinet, as well as several deputy ministers maintained their portfolios in the first ANM government. In the same speech, Ter-Petrosyan harshly criticized the Soviet system by mentioning, among other things, Stalin-era repressions and collectivization. In his concluding remarks, Ter-Petrosyan stated that when the opposition emphasizes the undeniable positive aspects of the Soviet past, it is difficult not to agree that such aspects existed, but we cannot forget the tragic events of the Soviet past (Ter-Petrosyan 2006, 371).

Ultimately, the attitude that formed towards Armenia’s Soviet past in the first years of independence reflected the desire for a compromise between “Soviet” and “anti-Soviet” (or “non-Soviet”). Unlike some other post-Soviet countries, in Armenia, even in the early 1990s, the Soviet period was never termed as an “occupation,” at least not at the level of state policy of memory. Soviet Armenia continues to be considered a representation of Armenian statehood, and is referred to as “the second republic,” a bridge between the first republic—the first experience of independence from 1918 to 1920—and the third republic, modern Armenia.

‘National’ and ‘anti-national’ Bolsheviks: The fate of Soviet memorials

Decisions on toponyms and demolition of Soviet monuments were made on a case by case basis by the national or local authorities. They reflected the prevailing mood in society at that time and were not always based on coherent policies or clear conceptual frameworks, although certain patterns were visible. Different attitudes towards Soviet statesmen emerged. Armenian communists were divided into “anti-nationals” and “nationals.” The first group saw the demolition of their monuments and renaming of streets and schools that were named after them, while the second group was almost completely spared.

To this day, the monument to “Baku commissar” Stepan Shahumyan stands tall in Yerevan and the Yerevan school number 1 continues to carry his name. Nobody tried renaming the city Stepanavan, which was named in Shahumyan’s honor, and his statue continues to decorate its main

square. Alexander Miasnikyan (Myasnikov), who headed the government of Soviet Armenia in 1921 and died in a plane crash in 1926, is also considered a “nationally oriented” Bolshevik. His monument embellishes the very center of Yerevan.

Aghasi Khanjyan, a leader of Soviet Armenia who fell victim to the repressions of 1937, also retained his place among the “nationalistically oriented” Communists and kept his place on the map of Yerevan.¹ Gay (Hayk Bzhshkyan) Avenue has not been renamed either. Hayk Bzhshkyan, a Red Army commander who distinguished himself during the Civil War in Russia, had nothing to do with the “Sovietization” of Armenia. Perhaps Gay’s name stayed on Yerevan’s map due to the fact that he participated in World War I as part of the Armenian volunteer detachment, and also became a victim of repressions (arrested in 1935, executed in 1937).

In the meantime, the statue to Bolshevik Ghukas Ghukasyan that was standing in one of the parks of Yerevan was demolished, and the street named after him was renamed to Ghazar Parpetsi, in honor of the 5th-century author of History of Armenia. Unlike Shahumyan, who did not live to the moment when independent Armenia was under the pressure from the 11th Red Army, Ghukasyan was one of the organizers of the armed offensive of Armenian Bolsheviks in May 1920. As a result of these events, as well as the “Sovietization” of Armenia in the late 1920s, Ghukasyan fell under the category of “anti-national” Bolsheviks.

Bolsheviks and Communists of non-Armenian descent had only a minimal chance of maintaining their place on Armenia’s map. The toponyms Leninakan, Kirovakan, and Kalinino do not exist anymore—these cities are now called Gyumri, Vanadzor, and Tashir, respectively. Needless to say, the Azerbaijani revolutionary Meshadi Azizbekov² had no chance of holding his place on Armenia’s map. The town named after

¹ According to the official version he committed suicide, but there are a number of other versions of his death, including that he was shot by Beria himself. See: Mirzoyan H. The Soviet Leaders of Armenia. No 2 (137) February, 2009. “Noah’s Ark”, <http://noev-kovcheg.ru/mag/2009-02/1526.html>

² Meshadi Azizbekov was one of the first Marxists among Muslim Turks. He held prominent positions in the Baku commune in 1918 and was among “26th Baku Commissars” who were shot in September 1918 in Krasnovodsk.

him during the Soviet years was renamed to Vayk (after the name of the region), and the square in the center of Yerevan was renamed in Andrei Sakharov's honor ("Sakharov's Square").

Communists from European countries had better luck. On the map of Yerevan, one can still find streets named after Henri Barbusse and Julius Fučík, although these individuals are arguably unknown to the majority of Yerevan residents. The fate of "soviet" names not related to concrete historical figures is more diverse. Leningradyan Avenue still exists in Yerevan, and in the north of the country, there is a town called Noyemberyan (named in honor of Armenia's sovietization on November 29). On the other hand, the city of Hoktemberyan (from the Armenian word for October), which earned its moniker after the October Bolshevik Revolution, was renamed Armavir, its pre-Soviet name.

Architectural heritage: main trends

Another topic that deserves attention is the architectural heritage of the Soviet era, especially in Yerevan. In recent years this topic was discussed quite often³, and we note here the general trends. During the Soviet years, Yerevan grew from a relatively small provincial town to a city with a population of over a million. In the period of independence, the Soviet architectural heritage was discursively incorporated into the narrative of Yerevan's history.

One post-Soviet architectural project, namely the Northern Avenue in the center of Yerevan, was publicly presented as the implementation of the unrealized plans of Alexander Tamanyan, a Soviet-era architect who worked during the first half of the 20th century and who is considered to be the creator of modern Yerevan.⁴

The soviet architectural heritage was much less fortunate. Constructions representing the era of Soviet Armenian Modernism of 1960-1980, while unique architecturally, did not fit into the aesthetics of the "traditional and national" and suffered the most. One of the symbols of the era, the Youth Palace, more popularly known as "Kukuruz" (corn cob), was destroyed to accommodate a new hotel that was never built. Another

³ Petrosyan, 2016; Petrosyan and Topalyan, 2015; Arevshatyan, 2010.

⁴ He could have been called a "soviet" architect, but he began his career during the years of the first republic of 1918-1920.

significant monument of that era, the abandoned old terminal building of Yerevan Zvartnots airport, is still standing but is also under the threat of demolition.

The destruction of this layer of Soviet heritage, however, is not so much the result of an ideological struggle, but a combination of post-Soviet oligarchic capitalism and a lack of sound architectural policy among representatives of the Armenian political and business elite.

World War II in the context of a 'compromise' model of the Armenian politics of memory

Unlike the leaders of the revolution and the civil war era, Soviet military commanders of Armenian descent, who distinguished themselves during the Second World War, became an important part of the national pantheon. In post-Soviet Armenia, there was not a single attempt to rename the avenue named after Marshal of the Soviet Union Hovhannes Baghramyan. Moreover, in 2003, the avenue was decorated with the marshal's equestrian statue. The avenue on which the US Embassy is located is named in honor of Admiral Isakov, who was another Soviet military leader of Armenian descent. His statue was erected in 2005 in Yerevan.

In general, the amalgam of perceptions about the "Great Patriotic War" (World War II), as a heroic page of history, was incorporated into the national narrative of post-Soviet Armenia. The Armenian politics of memory is characterized by a certain eclecticism and desire for a compromise on this issue. On the one hand, the participation of Armenians in the war on the side of the Soviet Union is considered a heroic page in Armenian history, and Armenians who distinguished themselves in the war are part of the national heroic pantheon. On the other hand, the memory of World War II does not have the same significance as it does in modern Russia or Belarus.

In the new history of Armenia, there are a number of events that are much more important for memory politics—the genocide of 1915, the battles with Turkish troops in 1918, the creation of the first republic, and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. When people in Armenia say "during the war," they usually refer to the war in Nagorno-Karabakh, not World War II. When they talk about "veterans," they mean the participants in this

war. The image of enemy in the mass consciousness is not represented by “Nazis” or “Germans,” but rather by “Azerbaijanis” and “Turks.”

In this respect, the fate of “Victory Day” is quite indicative. On May 9, Armenia celebrates the “Day of Peace and Victory,” while at the legislative level there is no clarification of which “victory” is celebrated: the victory over Germany on May 9, 1945, or the capture of the city of Shushi in Nagorno-Karabakh by Armenian forces on May 9, 1992, or both. Such “constructive ambiguity” leaves room for interpretation and fits perfectly into the framework of that “compromise” model of the memory policy that was formed in Armenia.

Return of ‘Soviet’ and ‘anti-Soviet’: Development or opportunism?

In the 1990s, Armenian society developed a compromise view of the Soviet past that worked for nearly everyone except for a few radical voices. Discussions on the Soviet past never ended, but the state politics of memory, in general, remained within the compromise model framework. However, in recent years the topic of the attitude towards the Soviet heritage again became a discussion subject largely in the context of Armenian-Russian relations and other processes taking place in the post-Soviet space, particularly in the context of the clash of European and Eurasian integration projects.

One of the first episodes indicating that the problem of the Soviet past is again relevant was connected with the proposed monument to Soviet leader Anastas Mikoyan. As an ardent supporter of the forced “sovietization” of Armenia at the beginning of the 1920s, Mikoyan could not claim the status of a “nationally-oriented” Bolshevik. Nevertheless, the fact that Mikoyan was one of the influential figures in the Soviet elite made him an object of pride for many Armenians.

Therefore, opinions were divided when the initiative by Mikoyan’s descendants to install his bust in Yerevan became known. The municipal council, with only one vote against, granted permission to install the monument, but due to some vocal protests related to Mikoyan’s role in enabling Stalin-era repressions, the authorities decided not to aggravate the situation and the project was cancelled (Demoyan 2017). A similar discussion took place in connection with the monument to Marshal Hamazasp Babajanyan. On the one hand, just like Baghramyan, he is

perceived primarily as a hero of the Second World War. But the critics of the initiative pointed to his participation in the suppression of the Hungarian revolution of 1956 by Soviet troops (Kavkazskiy Uzel 2016). In this case, the memory of Babajanyan as a positive hero triumphed and the monument was erected (Aravot.am 2016).

Perhaps, with the help of Babajanyan's memorial, the Armenian authorities tried to conceal a much bigger problem related to another monument that was erected at around the same time in honor of political and military leader Garegin Nzhdeh. He was not only one of the most popular leaders of Armenia's first republic but was also considered to be the ideological forerunner of the former-ruling Republican Party. The delicate nature of the situation around Nzhdeh is related to the fact that during World War II he was seen in cooperation with Nazi Germany and participated in the creation of the "Armenian Legion" of Armenian prisoners of war. In Armenia, it is generally considered that Nzhdeh never supported Nazism and his cooperation with them only aimed at rescuing prisoners of war from the camps, as well as protecting them from persecution on the Nazi occupied territories (Dubnov 2016). This position is further justified by the fact that the "Armenian Legion" never participated in military operations, and Nzhdeh himself in 1945 did not use an opportunity to flee to the West, but surrendered to the Soviet army and offered cooperation. The Soviet authorities did not appreciate this gesture and Nzhdeh died in prison in 1955. Nevertheless, the establishment of Nzhdeh's monument, who Russian press placed on the same footing with such "anti-heroes" as Bandera and Vlasov, provoked a negative reaction in Russia (Lenat.ru. 2016; Today.ru. 2016; Ria News Agency 2016).

Against the backdrop of these discussions, the 2017 initiative of the oppositional "Yelk" (Exit) alliance⁵ to rename streets and schools with "soviet" names in Yerevan received a wide response (Rusarminfo.ru 2017). Among them, for example, are the street named after Bolshevik Sargis

⁵ "Yelk" had positioned itself as a pro-Western political force. Parliamentarians from this faction proposed an initiative to withdraw Armenia from the EAEC. After Civic Contract, one of the parties of the "Yelk" alliance, came to power in 2018, however, this stance reversed course and the new authorities opted for continuity in foreign relations.

Kasyan and Leningradyan Avenue. Deputies from the Republican Party blocked this initiative, most likely in order not to affect relations with Moscow.

Additional evidence of the position of the former authorities was the closure of the exhibition “Eclipse” in the house-museum of writer Hovhannes Tumanyan, dedicated to the Red Terror and Stalinist repressions (EVN Report 2017). The exhibition itself most likely would not have received much attention had it not been for the unexpected decision of the Ministry of Culture to close it (Regnum 2017). Critics associated this decision with Russia’s influence—some were quoted stating that “creeping restalinization” was taking place and there was a desire to “score points” with Russian partners (Demoyan 2017). In general, the Armenian public perceived the closing of the “Eclipse” exhibition rather painfully. Perhaps this episode (as well as the discussions around Mikoyan’s statue) suggests that even a moderate “rehabilitation” of Stalinism is unlikely in the Armenian context. The condemnation of Stalinism is a common ground for people from opposite ideological poles - “liberals” and “nationalists”. Perhaps that is why Armenia became one of the few post-Soviet countries and the only EAEU country where the screening of the movie “The Death of Stalin” in the winter of 2018 did not encounter any difficulties⁶ (NovostiNK 2018).

It has to be noted, however, that in Armenian collective memory the Stalin-era repressions hold a secondary place in comparison with the more central role held by the Armenian Genocide of 1915. Unlike several other post-soviet contexts, the condemnation of Stalinism and preservation of the memories on its victims in Armenia does not necessarily lead to rejection of “pro-Russian” orientation in Armenian politics.

The events of April-May 2018 in Armenia dramatically changed the whole course of Armenia’s political development. The “Velvet Revolution,” also referred to as the “Revolution of Love and Solidarity” by some Armenians, turned the politics of memory into a relatively secondary issue, as Armenians started dealing with more pressing problems. In any case, it is unlikely that the compromise model of politics of memory will disappear

⁶ In Belarus, the movie was first banned but it was eventually shown. (Novaya Gazeta 2018).

from Armenia's public life in the near future, since its emergence, as discussed above, has been an outcome of both internal and external factors.

Azerbaijani Model of De-Sovietization Political Regime as Soviet Legacy

The memory of "relations" between Azerbaijan and the Soviet Union received its framing even prior to the official collapse of the latter through the Constitutional Act on "State Independence of the Azerbaijan Republic" of January 18, 1991 (Constitutional Act of the Republic of Azerbaijan 1991). In this document RSFSR/Russia is defined as an occupying force that had annexed the territory of sovereign Azerbaijan. The USSR was established to "seal off this annexation" and throughout "70 years carried out colonial policies, exploited Azerbaijan's natural resources and ransacked its national wealth" (Constitutional Act of the Republic of Azerbaijan 1991). The Treaty on the Formation of the USSR was declared null and void. In essence, the Soviet period turned into an anomaly, interrupting the successful process of creating an independent Azerbaijani Democratic Republic (ADR) in 1918-1920, the successor to which was the post-Soviet Azerbaijan. This act was adopted by the first secretary of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan, Ayaz Mutalibov, who signed it several weeks after committing an important political blunder by supporting the failed August coup of the State Emergency Committee (1991).

In Azerbaijan, where unlike in the Central Asian republics, Soviet functionaries were losing power to nationalists, this law was able to please even the most radicals among them. In the spring and summer of 1992, the Azerbaijani Popular Front (PFA) overthrew the government of the former first secretary of the Communist Party and the first president of independent Azerbaijan, Ayaz Mutalibov. Abulfaz Elchibey, a scientist and a famous dissident, became the second president of Azerbaijan, but never managed to create any viable governance system.

As a result, in the fall of 1993, Heydar Aliyev, the former head of the Republican KGB and head of the Azerbaijani Communist Party in 1969-1982, assumed leadership. He managed to stabilize the situation in the country, retain power, and create a political system that successfully survived his death. As a charismatic leader and a very skillful and flexible

politician, Heydar Aliyev largely remained a Soviet functionary even in this new capacity. Aliyev's biography and former experiences (as well as of his closest associates) had a significant impact on his actions after the collapse of the USSR. In this sense, the continuity of bureaucratic and cultural elites and practices, institutions of power, and discourses in post-Soviet Azerbaijan was logical and largely inevitable.

Similarly, inevitable was another revision of the Soviet past, which remained framed as the history of annexation and colonization, but with a significant amendment for the period of Heydar Aliyev's first reign as a Soviet Azerbaijani leader. According to the official narrative developed after 1993, Aliyev as a high-ranking Soviet executive and politician, successfully prepared the republic for independence already during the USSR years. An article published on the website created by the Heydar Aliyev Foundation stated that: "In essence, this meant already in the 1970s of the 20th century leading Azerbaijani people into a new stage - the stage of the national revival. [...] This is Heydar Aliyev's unprecedented achievement in the history of the struggle for the independence of our people. [...] After all these achievements [...] there is no necessity to prove the dialectical connection between the first and second periods of Heydar Aliyev's work as head of the country. The facts speak louder!" (Azerbaijan.az)⁷

The discourse about Heydar Aliyev was not the only factor that allowed the normalization of the Soviet past in this rather contradictory context. Many other signs of the Soviet institutional heritage can be found in the political structure of modern Azerbaijan. And for the past fifteen years, since the death of the third president, these qualities, as may seem at first glance, have only intensified. The patronage system of relations (Willerton 1992) survived the disintegration of the USSR and was preserved under Ilham Aliyev, the fourth president and Heydar Aliyev's son. The parliament of the republic has the same illusory impact on the president's decisions or the activities of ministers, as the Supreme Soviet in the USSR.

In 2019, this continuity is still clearly visible in the highest echelons of bureaucracy. The authorities created the Yeni Azerbaijan (New

⁷ See also Mahmudov 2015; Huseinova 2005.

Azerbaijan) party, which strongly resembles the Communist Party. Presentation of the successes of the regime in all spheres of the economy, culture, and public life is constructed in the spirit of Soviet discourses of invariably successful and accelerated state building. Many Soviet-style approaches and practices can be seen in the new policy of memory, which in essence is designed to get rid of the legacy of socialism.

But at the same time, the new regime is significantly different from the Soviet regime. The ideological diktat is no longer of a class nature but is focused on the representation of the members of the Aliyev family as the guarantors of independence, extremely effective managers, and irreplaceable national leaders. The ideology of internationalism and the “friendship of nations” is replaced by modern nationalism (“Azerbaijanism”) (Alakbarli 2017) and “Azerbaijani multiculturalism” (Azerbaijani Multiculturalism). Officially there are opposition parties and media, although they are under the pressure of the authorities and their access to the public space is limited. The relative openness of the country is one of the important changes. An increasing number of citizens not only spend their vacation outside of the country, but also travel to the US or Western Europe for education. And although the authorities try to control the activities of their citizens even outside its borders, in addition to the diaspora communities controlled by the government, opposition networks, and groups that can exert some influence on the situation in the country are also being formed. This list could be continued with examples of the obvious continuity and longevity of Soviet institutions, practices, and discourses. But the point is that the modern political regime is eclectic in nature, as is the modern landscape of memory and public spaces.

Nationalization of the Soviet landscape of memory and architectural heritage

As elsewhere in the USSR, the most notable symbols of Sovietization were political monuments and the “new” architecture (Stalinist Empire style and Neoclassicism, typical uptown districts, etc.).

The plan of Lenin's monumental propaganda and extensive urban reconstruction was implemented in Azerbaijan almost immediately after the establishment of Soviet power, which, within the framework of the Soviet Policy on Nationalities, mobilized all possible resources for

development of a new cultural elite comprised of Azerbaijanis.⁸ And yet it took time. By 1920, among Muslim Azerbaijanis there were very few sculptors, artists, and architects. The Azerbaijani cultural elite was finally formed only in the postwar years, and since the late 1940s it very actively joined the process of designing the landscape of memory and the reconstruction of cities.

Most significant political monuments (with the possible exception of the monument to S.M. Kirov) and places of memory acquired their final look by the 1960s and 1970s and were created by Azerbaijani specialists that succeeded the creative sculptors Elizaveta Tripolskaya, Pinhosa Sabsay, and Jacob Keilichis who moved to Baku from Ukraine. Among the most significant names among Azerbaijani sculptors and monument developers are Fuad Abdurakhmanov, who won two Stalin prizes, and Ibrahim Zeynalov, Omar Eldarov, Tokay Mammadov, all laureates of state prizes of the USSR. Sadikh Dadashev and Mikael Useynov, both winners of the State Stalin prize, became the most creative and famous Soviet Azerbaijani architects.

The Soviet Azerbaijani pantheon was composed of many images. The central ones were the hero cult of the 26 Baku commissars and the massive images of S.M. Kirov, the famous Bolshevik of the Civil War period and the Stalin era whose activities in the 1920s were closely connected with the Azerbaijan SSR and, of course, the cult of Lenin. The dismantling and reconstruction of the Soviet memorial heritage in this so-called “triangle” began in the 1990s. In the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the criticism of “Russian colonialism,” Soviet heroes identified as Armenian and Russian were the first ones to go (Kirov, Shaumyan, Lenin, Violetov, Serebrovsky, Petrov, etc.). Local Bolsheviks (Azizbekov, Musabekov, Safaraliev, etc.) successfully survived the de-Sovietization

⁸ Stephen Kotkin, describing the uniqueness of the societies that constituted the Eastern Bloc as “uncivil society,” implies that totalitarian or would-be totalitarian states did not eliminate society – they created their own societies. To paraphrase Kotkin, it can be said that in the years of Soviet totalitarianism (late 1920s-early 1950s), numerous new cultural and bureaucratic elites were created in the national republics. These elites were created not only as Soviet, but also as national. See Kotkin 2009, 12.

wave of the 1990s. However, most of these monuments were dismantled by 2008.

It can be assumed that the monuments still decorating Azerbaijani cities will no longer be dismantled. The well-known Soviet Azerbaijani figure of the 1920s Nariman Narimanov, as well as female heroines Aina Sultanova and Sevil Kazieva, representing a collective image dedicated to the “emancipated woman of the East” survived the period of de-sovietization. Reasons for keeping the Narimanov statue are difficult to understand. Perhaps, one of the reasons was the fact that in the post-Soviet years much was discussed about his unsuccessful struggle against Armenian nationalism. The monuments of the heroines remain intact due to the popularity of the gender policy supported by international and European foundations and organizations, as well as the general shortage of monumental female images. Also, the toponymy of cities changed: streets, squares, and metro stations were renamed, along with the names of country regions, towns, and cities. The most famous among the renamed cities, Kirovabad, the second largest city in the country, recovered its pre-Soviet name, Ganja.

The architectural heritage received less turnover. Despite the massive reconstruction of the cities (especially Baku), many famous architectural monuments and the uptown districts retained their Stalinist flavor. There was no plan for large-scale deconstruction of architectural heritage, and in essence, there could not have been such a plan since depleting a significant portion of the housing and administrative fund of the republic would have been necessary. In most cases, only the Soviet symbols decorating many buildings were removed while the structures remained.

The memory of World War II

The Soviet memorial heritage dedicated to the heroes of the Second World War is also destined for a long life. Almost all these monuments, scattered throughout the territory of the republic, in recent years have been actively restored. The most significant memorial images are of the Azerbaijani native, ethnic German intelligence officer Richard Sorge and the hero of the European resistance movement, Azerbaijani Mehdi Huseyn-zade. One of the oldest monuments in Baku is the statue dedicated to the general of the tank corps Ali Aslanov. One of the most significant centers for the Second World War Commemoration is the city of Lenkoran, the

birthplace of Asi Aslanova. However, de-sovietization also touched the cult of war heroes. In the post-Soviet years, the celebration of "Victory Day"/"May 9" is becoming increasingly modest. Heroes and victims of the Nagorno-Karabakh war overshadowed the memory of the Second World War to the periphery of the policy of commemoration.

Forgotten Stalin-era repressions

In the late 1980s, discussions about the events of Stalin's terror assumed prominence in Azerbaijan and elsewhere in the USSR. But even then, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was the most important topic within public discourse, which contributed to a significant decrease in the relevance of Stalin's political repressions. Politicians, publicists, social researchers, and historians focused on studying the former "blind spots" in the history of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflicts and paid close attention to the confrontations of 1905-1908 and 1918-1920.

More importantly, the Soviet repressive policy quickly became framed as ethnic in the context of the unfolding conflict. The ethnically Armenian, Russian, Georgian KGB operatives (Chekists), were named as the masterminds of terror. In the context of such ethnic framing of the causes of mass repression, the Azerbaijani Chekists were portrayed as simply executors who were forced to participate in these repressions. At the same time, according to the new narrative, the Russian, Georgian and, especially, Armenian Chekists exhibited ingenuity and increased zeal, using a repressive apparatus to kill the Azerbaijanis (The speech of the President of Azerbaijan 1997) (Ismailov 2003).

It is hard to believe that in the coming years interest in the history of political repression will find a second wind. Even during the years of the most active discussions, no steps were taken to officially establish a victims' commemoration day or to inaugurate a memorial to the victims of repressions, nor were there any attempts to locate mass graves (Rumyansev 2016).

De-Sovietization in Georgia: Before and After the 'Charter of Freedom'

'Radical' de-sovietization

Georgia started appearing as a country where effective and radical de-sovietization was underway when Mikheil Saakashvili took power and, in particular, after the August war of 2008 and Charter of Freedom of 2011. Moreover, it was in Georgia where even before these developments, at the end of 1980s, opposition intellectuals were among the first ones talking about the desire to leave the Soviet Union.⁹ Soviet power rapidly lost legitimacy in Georgia in the context of the escalation of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts. The crackdown of the demonstration in front of the Government House in Tbilisi on April 9, 1989 was the key event that changed the public sentiment. Clashes with troops and officers of the Ministry of Internal Affairs resulted in the death of 20 protesters and led to growing popularity of the idea of sovereignty.

By 1991, a new historical narrative emerged that described these events the following way:

During [...] the period of [independence movement] so-called Abkhazian and Ossetian issues again came to the forefront. ... [...] Ethnic conflicts were purposefully supported by the third party – the (imperial) power that was dissatisfied with the separatist sentiment of the Georgian youth [...]. Unauthorized rallies began in Tbilisi on April 4, 1989. [...] Unusual popularity of the movement greatly intimidated the party and the Soviet leadership. [...] a bloody interference was planned which was executed at 4 am on April 9 in front of the government house on Rustaveli Avenue. [...] April 9 exposed the face of imperialist, chauvinistic and imperial ideology among the leadership and the armed forces of the Soviet state, [...] it demonstrated secret admiration toward the idea of “united and indivisible Russia [...]” (Surguladze and Surguladze 1991).

⁹ Soviet dissidents Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Merab Kostava, Irakli Tsereteli, George Chanturia, and others were the key figures of the national movement of the late 1980s that formed while the conflict was developing. The movement united in the framework of the Rustaveli Society and the Popular Front of Georgia.

The critique of the Russian Empire as a practice of de-sovietization

In the process of de-sovietization, Russia and the USSR were discursively equated with the Russian Empire, all three now seen as different incarnations of the same state. The departure from the Soviet Union became both an act of gaining independence and simultaneously a condemnation of imperial domination. In this context, everything Soviet was ascribed to Russia and was declared alien and forcibly imposed on the Georgian people.

One of the earliest and most important documents that set this trend was the “Act of the Restoration of State Independence of Georgia,” (Vedomosti of the State Supreme Council of the Georgian SSR 1991, pp. 136-137) which was symbolically adopted on April 9, exactly two years after the crackdown on the demonstration. This document condemned the Russian Empire as a power that annexed Georgia in the 19th century. The “Georgian nation” was now portrayed as a uniform community always striving for independence. The post-soviet statehood was declared the successor to not only pre-empire Georgia but also to the 1918 republic that was “occupied” and then “annexed” by Soviet Russia.

According to this act, “The entire period of Georgia’s forced stay within the Soviet Union was marked with bloody terror and repressions, the last manifestation of which was the tragedy of April 9, 1989. The covert war against Georgia is still ongoing, and it aims at preventing Georgia’s strive to freedom and democracy” (Vedomosti of the State Supreme Council of the Georgian SSR 1991, 136-137). The statement on “covert war” is explained by the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and Georgia’s challenge to territorial integrity and indivisibility.

The attitude towards the Soviet past outlined in the act remains dominant. This approach was subsequently strengthened and enhanced in the Charter of Freedom. Prior to its adoption, Georgia experienced several political upheavals.

In April 1991, Zviad Gamsakhurdia became the first president the republic. He was the son of a famous Georgian writer and a dissident who adhered to radical ethno-nationalist ideas. His short presidency, lasting until January 1992, ran under the slogan “Georgia for Georgians” and was marred by a civil war. As a result, Eduard Shevardnadze came to power

and retained it until 2003. Shevardnadze was a famous Communist Party bureaucrat who had served as minister of internal affairs and first secretary of the Central Committee of Georgia's Communist party, as well as the minister of foreign affairs of the USSR under Gorbachev. He managed to somewhat stabilize the political situation within the country and "freeze" the Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts that were greatly hurting the authorities (Krechetnikov 2014). The deep economic crisis, unresolved conflicts, and hundreds of thousands of displaced people left Shevardnadze with no time to work on de-sovietization, unlike Aliyev in neighboring Azerbaijan, even if the former Soviet bureaucrat had such plans. His time in office is often compared to the period of Soviet stagnation, although the standard of living of most of the country's citizens was much lower and the political situation remained extremely unstable.

August war and the 'Charter of Freedom'

During the Rose Revolution Shevardnadze was ousted by one of his ministers, Mikheil Saakashvili, under whom the discourse of criticizing USSR/Russia took on a new lease on life. The reign of the third president was marked by intensifying conflict with Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well as with Moscow. When the Georgian armed forces tried to regain control of South Ossetia in August 2008, political disputes and economic battles with Russian turned into a direct armed confrontation. As a result, the Georgian authorities lost any chance to restore control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the foreseeable future. Among other things, Saakashvili compensated for this failure by initiating a symbolic struggle with the Soviet past.

One of the most notorious events was the attempt to create a museum of "Soviet occupation" in Tbilisi. Despite the initial announcement, the opening of the museum for the general public was delayed, apparently due to organizational problems. Even today, it is not a separate museum, despite the name, but an exposition at the entrance to the Georgian National Museum. However, even in this form, the "museum" is unique for the South Caucasus. A large part of the exhibition focused on the history of the Leninist and Stalinist periods, while the post-war life of the Georgian SSR is briefly represented. The museum is meant to reinforce

the idea formulated during independence that the Soviet period was an occupation by an outside power.

The second and more significant step in the memory politics was the adoption of a memorial law—the “Charter of Freedom.” It implicitly reproduces the same perceptions about the relationship between Soviet Union, framed as Russia, and Georgia. The experience of a number of Eastern European states (Czechoslovakia, the Baltic republics, etc.) was used in the drafting of this document. In turn, we can assume that the charter was consulted when preparing the Ukrainian decommunization laws.

As expected, the law mentions “occupied territories” (referring to Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and the fight against terrorism (the labeling of modern nationalist conflicts popular in the post-Soviet space).¹⁰ But the content of this document also demonstrates how the August 2008 war led to an even more radical revision of the discourse towards the Soviet legacy. Within the framework of the law, the Soviet symbols are equated with those of the Nazis, and both ideologies were declared totalitarian and outlawed in Georgia.

The adoption of the charter was also the launch of the lustration process that applied to all citizens of the republic who previously collaborated with the Soviet security services (intelligence agencies). A special commission was set up under the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs to implement the charter’s principles. According to the charter those who were identified as having cooperated with the Soviet security services should have been deprived of the opportunity to claim a number of government posts, positions in the education system, and so forth.

This significant piece of legislation largely remained a populist move that did not lead either to significant discussions on the attitudes towards the Soviet legacy or to any other concrete measures. Primarily, it was a public demonstration of the final and complete break of relations with modern Russia. The law on lustration was adopted with significant delay when it was already very difficult to find any high-ranking bureaucrats in the

¹⁰ This approach to labeling the conflict is repeated in the framework of the confrontation in eastern Ukraine, where according to the official version the “Antiterrorist” operation (ATO) was conducted.

state apparatus, considering that the apparatus itself was already significantly rejuvenated under Saakashvili. There were no high-profile trials of any retired party functionaries or employees of the Soviet security services. The important developments happened long before this law's adoption when Saakashvili, in order to combat corruption, carried out major reforms of the police and security apparatus, thereby completely renewing it.

'Stalin's patrimony' and reconstruction of the memorial landscape

Long after the adoption of the law, when Tbilisi was covered in billboards calling to regard Soviet symbols as totalitarian and equal to Nazi symbols, it was still ironically possible to see bas-reliefs in the city depicting Lenin and Stalin as "the leaders of the world proletariat," unlike in neighboring Baku and Yerevan where such laws were never adopted. Some of the Soviet memorial heritage still embellishes Tbilisi, while many memorials still depict Stalin in Gori.

There are two reasons for the discrepancy between loud statements and notorious laws on the one hand, and tentative steps towards actual de-sovietization of the memorial landscape on the other. First, by the time the law was adopted, many key steps towards de-sovietization were already taken. The key Soviet symbol was Lenin's monument, which decorated Tbilisi's main square and was demolished back in August 1990. The Tbilisi monument was followed by a wave of "Lenin statue demolitions" across the entire republic. Unlike in Baku and Yerevan in 1990-1991 where the statues to "national-communists" were preserved, virtually all monuments to Georgian Bolsheviks were demolished. The first among them was the monument to Sergo Orjonikidze, the fall of which became an important symbol of the breakup with the Soviet past. Within the same period squares, avenues, street, and regions of the country were renamed en masse.

The process of destroying of Soviet memorial heritage also included the destruction of the symbols indicating the presence of Russian empire in Georgia. The most memorable event was the destruction of the monument "The Bows of Friendship" by Zurab Tsereteli, established in honor of the 200th anniversary of The Treaty of Georgievsk, at the entrance to Tbilisi along the famous Georgian Military Road. Yet

numerous memorable signs, installed in honor of this event along the entire length of the road in various styles, remained intact for a long time.

When the most emotional stage of parting with the Soviet Union passed, the population became more concerned with economic problems and conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. As a result, secondary symbols that were not immediately destroyed received a second life. By the 2000s, they had lost their ideological meaning and remained largely invisible to the Georgian population.

More importantly, even after de-Stalinization in the 1950s throughout the Soviet Union, the image of Stalin received a special treatment in Georgia. This was certainly related to the fact that he was an ethnic Georgian. The city of Gori, which was associated with the childhood and adolescence of the “great leader,” was transformed in the 1950s into a significant place of memory. The Stalin Museum still stands, while the monument on the square in front of it was dismantled in the summer of 2010. However, the demolition process followed the spirit of authoritarian traditions as the statue was removed secretly at night (Akhmeteli 2010). To date, several smaller monuments dedicated to Stalin still remain in various locations in Gori.

The symbolic struggle around the main monument obscured the fact that it was not the only reminder of the “greatest” offspring of Gori. It could be argued that eventually, the authorities lost this battle for the most odious part of the Georgian Soviet legacy. However, it would be more accurate to say that the political regime, which declared its radical and uncompromising struggle against the Soviet legacy, once again demonstrated its inherent populism having decided not to tackle the most difficult problem and chose not to deal with the question of Stalin’s ethnicity. The very fact that many in Georgian society are not ready to part with Stalin’s image says a lot about the superficiality of the true de-sovietization of the country (BBC Russian 2013).

The peculiar nature of the commemorative events for the victims of Stalinist repression leads to similar conclusions. The serious discussions around this topic remain confined to intellectual circles. An example of this is a group of predominantly young researchers who have come together as part of a non-governmental organization—the Soviet Past Research Laboratory (SovLab). However, up until now no national

monument to the victims of repressions has been created. “The Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Totalitarian Regimes,” commemorated on August 23, largely refers to the history of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact rather than to the political repressions. This date of mourning was established in 2010, following the August 2008 war, together with the “Day of Soviet Occupation” on February 25 (Akhmeteli 2011).

Marxism-Leninism Institute and the architectural heritage

All these patterns are also seen in relation to the powerful layer of the Soviet architectural heritage. The imperial Tbilisi was built as the capital of the Transcaucasian region. This status was officially preserved until 1936 when the Transcaucasian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic (ZFSFR) was abolished. Tbilisi largely maintained the image of the cultural capital of the region during the entire Soviet period. This status was reflected in the lavish reconstruction of the central Shota Rustaveli Avenue. Currently, it is lined with the most interesting architectural examples representing Stalin’s Empire style and Neoclassicism, which are national in form and socialist in their content. Among them are the Government House, the building of the Academy of Sciences, and the Rustaveli movie theater.

The main disputes unfolded during Mikheil Saakashvili’s time in office around the former branch of the Marxism-Leninism institute, built by famous architect Alexei Shchusev. The reconstruction attempt led to a decision on its demolition. It was announced that a discovery was made during the renovation process, which suggests that gravestones were used during the initial construction. Many intellectuals and even politicians stood up to protect the architectural heritage (Gorbunov 2009). After much debate, and after it became clear that a significant part of the building would be impossible to restore, it was decided to preserve only the front façade of the building. Currently, it has been transformed into the seven-star The Biltmore Hotel Tbilisi. At the same time, the design of the building is a clear representation of the Soviet totalitarian symbolism.

Memorial of military glory Kutaisi

The conflict with Russia that also grew into the confrontation over symbols was reflected in the commemoration of World War II. Here too, Mikheil Saakashvili made several high-profile statements. His government moved the celebration day of victory from May 9 to May 8

and demolished the Glory Memorial in the city of Kutaisi. This was one of the most immediate blunt actions, following the August 2008 war, aimed at touching the nerve of the northern neighbor. It has been well known that in Putin's Russia, the May 9th celebration is the cornerstone of the politics of memory.

The Glory Memorial, which had already suffered extensive damage at the hands of vandals who had stolen a lot of its bronze details, was blown up in front of a large group of onlookers. But this public spectacle ended very unsuccessfully for the authorities. The demolition explosion killed a woman and a child and several others were wounded. In modern Georgia, there was hardly a need to fight the non-existent "cult of May 9" and the populist step of the monument's demolition simply led to the senseless loss of life. Most of the monuments devoted to the celebration of that victory, including the grandiose complex in Tbilisi's Vake Park, have long been neglected and are rapidly falling into decay. There have been no public protests against them in Georgia. Modern nationalist conflicts had already supplanted the memory of the enormous losses that Georgia suffered in World War II.

Conclusion

Armenia

In post-Soviet Armenia of the 1990s, the approach developed toward the Soviet past can be characterized as a compromise ("eclectic" and "hybrid") model. Armenia's Soviet past is neither idealized nor demonized. It fits into the context of the national narrative of history, which allows a dualistic attitude toward the same event. Theoretically, this framework allows for a relatively objective reflection on the Soviet past, where no opinion can be labeled as pronounced by a "fifth column."

The model of the memory policy that was formed in Armenia in the 1990s had its advantages and could even serve as the model for other post-Soviet societies. In recent years, however, it did not withstand the clash with the geopolitical reality. In the context of the processes related to Eurasian integration, events around Ukraine, the conflict between Russia and the West, and the "compromise" model of the policy of memory has been put under scrutiny. The discussions that have developed in recent years, unfortunately, did not help to critically assess the Soviet past, but,

on the contrary, mythologized it. The biographies of such complex figures as Kasyan or Nzhdeh were detached from their historical and controversial fates and became symbols associated with certain political positions. As a result, a critical review of their actions, and in a broader context of the entire Soviet period, becomes almost impossible.

The politicization of the Soviet past is a phenomenon not unique to Armenia. But Armenian political elites find themselves in a complicated position when trying to further pursue the “compromise” model. On the one hand, the geopolitical partnership with Russia forces them to respect the memory policy pursued by the Russian elites. On the other hand, the concept of the memory policy proposed by Moscow calls into question the legitimacy of the existence of post-Soviet states as independent political entities and erodes the legitimacy of the post-Soviet elites. These dynamics, in turn, further complicate the existing conflicts within society.

Azerbaijan

The most significant trend towards the Soviet legacy of Azerbaijan was its eclecticism. It involved a simultaneous condemnation and justification of the Soviet past. A certain part of Soviet history, particularly related to the tenure of Heydar Aliyev as a Soviet Azerbaijani leader, is integrated into the new narrative, and official discourses are represented as a history of successes and achievements. At the same time the actions of the Bolsheviks, particularly those of ethnic Armenians or Russians, are among the most criticized ones, while the actions of Azerbaijani protagonists are explained and justified.

The Soviet discursive, institutional, and repressive practices were not widely discussed and were not condemned at the legislative level. No serious research foundation was prepared for such discussion to take place. Groups and networks of intellectuals that would be engaged in the search and rehabilitation of victims of Stalinist repressions were never formed in the republic. No museums of the Soviet past were created, and the past remains unexplored by the new generation of intellectuals.

The low level of interest in everything Soviet helps to preserve the Soviet-style authoritarian practices and rituals in the present-day politics of memory. Currently, the main ways of preserving memory are the political monument, an unchallenged history textbook, government-controlled

media, and semi-voluntary (or semi-compulsory) demonstrations and officially sanctioned collective rituals.

Georgia

The discursive representation of the Soviet regime as a purely external occupying force imposed onto Georgian statehood is a powerful obstacle that prevents a critical reflection and a deep rethinking of this recent and important period in Georgia's history. De-sovietization, as a practice of marginalizing the image of Russia, boomerangs on Georgia. Radical actions by the authorities aimed at de-sovietization, while simultaneously maintaining the popularity of Stalin's image, results in the segmentation of the Georgian national community and memory. As a result, in the country where by the power of law Soviet symbolism is equated to a Nazi and totalitarian one, memorials to Stalin, one of the most brutal dictators of the 20th century, are preserved.

Recommendations

Armenia

The policy of memory carried out by Armenian political elites in recent years resemble uncontrolled movements in all possible directions rather than a conscious realization of a strategic vision. As a short-term solution to this problem, a moratorium on any state decisions affecting the memory policy, from the erection of monuments and renaming of streets to changes in curricula and textbooks, would be useful.

In the long run, a professional research of the Soviet period is necessary. It will help overcome the oversimplified conceptions of the Soviet period and go beyond the limits of both "Soviet" and "anti-Soviet" myths. One promising area for such research would be the study of various alternative and unrealized conceptions of what it meant to be "Soviet." In this regard, a nuanced discussion can emerge based on the study of the legacy of Armenian left-wing figures (Bolsheviks and others) of the 1920-1930s, most of whom are now forgotten. Equally important is the initiation of debates about the applicability of certain conceptual and methodological frameworks to the study of the Soviet experience, for example whether or not the postcolonial theory is appropriate.

Academic research should become the foundation for future public deliberations about the Soviet past and its place, not only in the history of Armenia, but also its present and future. These discussions should not solely be held by historians and should involve examination by a wide variety of intellectuals, ranging from journalists to artists.

It is important to move beyond the situational and politically motivated discussions of today and formulate important and interesting questions that will help Armenia rethink its Soviet past.

Azerbaijan

In modern Azerbaijan, there are few resources for training specialists capable of conducting professional research of the Soviet period and preparing the foundation for a serious discussion on this topic. Various European, American, and international foundations and some Russian universities and research institutes have such capabilities and could support and revitalize interest in Soviet research.

Support for the development of “area studies” is also important. The experience of the international organization Memorial could be instructive for Azerbaijan. The involvement of young people and professional historians in search of burial sites of victims of Soviet repression could be an opportunity to create an extensive civil movement that can generate wide public interest in rethinking the Soviet past. In this respect, the experience of Georgia and, specifically, the work of the SovLab center, particularly related to the memory of victims of Stalinist repressions, are also important.

Georgia

The process of de-Sovietization in Georgia that, conducted in a context of confrontation with Russia, was not conducive for a serious and broad discussion of the totalitarian heritage. Some significant steps were taken, but they were implemented inconsistently. The historical narrative about the Soviet past requires serious reconceptualization. However, Georgia does not have the necessary academic infrastructure and resources for this. International foundations remain the only funders of research projects aimed at studying the Soviet past.

But even the half-hearted measures taken by the authorities are still an important resource that has not been available to Georgia’s neighbors. To

take the process of de-Sovietization to the next stage, Gori and, first of all, its Stalin museum should be turned into a memory site and a museum of totalitarianism. This will require serious work with the city residents, many of who resist the deconstruction of the heroic image of their famous compatriot. This approach will also require revision and reconstruction of the museum exposition and the discourse surrounding it, as well as the retraining of museum guides. The current practices of commercializing the image of Stalin must also be revised to avoid the reproduction of a positive image of totalitarianism.

The rapid decline of interest towards the memory of World War II can also have negative consequences. Soviet memorials should not be left to decay, but should be reinterpreted with a critical look towards the tradition of heroizing a terrible tragedy. The heroic myths and narratives of World War II, produced by the Soviet propaganda machine and still widespread throughout the post-Soviet space along with the memorials that visualize them, continue to feed into the popularity of the militaristic patriotism and revanchist discourses. In addition, criticism of the Soviet Union's position in that war is often accompanied by the heroization of legionnaires serving Hitler, and this is another pattern that needs to be pushed back on.

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Alternatives to State Approaches in Turkey and Russia: The Politics of Memory and Civic Activism in Comparison

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Introduction

This study focuses on different forms of civil memory activism and their broader consequences in two neighboring powers in the South Caucasus: Turkey and Russia. Civil memory activism is crucial not only for opening up a novel space for dealing with the past but also for strengthening civil society and non-state initiatives. Moreover, the notions of justice and truth that are very much at the heart of these forms of commemorative activism reveal tensions among the concrete demands of different stakeholders in the context of initiatives for reckoning with the past. (Kora 2010)

This study scrutinizes the complex relationship between civic activism focused on remembering the past and the demands of truth and justice of various stakeholders gathered around civic commemoration activities. Focusing on the memory scene of our case studies, Turkey and Russia, we will provide a detailed discussion on the complicated relationships among remembrance, forgetting, “normalization”, and demands for justice and truth.

Memory activism creates a civil space of remembrance that challenges the official narratives of the violent pasts, democratizes one-sided national

accounts, and struggles for the inclusion of the unheard voices. On the one hand, memory activism destabilizes nationalistic accounts and opens up a space for alternative narratives, and on the other hand it builds a space of civic activism for resilience, struggle, and resistance (Schindel and Colombo 2014). Generally speaking, civic memorial initiatives use a wide-ranging repertoire of political mobilization and they have both specific and more general demands for remembrance, accountability, justice, and dealing with the past.

These initiatives reflect the plural demands of various political and social groups: some claim to represent the victims of the coups, like in Argentina, while others claim to represent victims of different ethno-political conflicts, as in Bosnia Herzegovina, South Africa, and Turkey. Some use more depoliticized vocabularies and rhetoric, in places like Cyprus where international NGOs have been active after the conflict (Kovras 2017), while others use relatively more politicized and militant tones, like in Nepal where the Maoist movement has political influence of over grassroots organizations and civic memory actors (Fullard 2008). All in all, these initiatives create an important civil space in relation to memory and commemorations, identity and citizenship, and past and future.

In our study, we chose two cases that are crucial considering their long lasting political influence over the Caucasus region and that illustrate different aspects and challenges of civic memory activism: Turkey and Russia. Given the fact that one of the most important events of these scenes is established in relation of the Armenian Genocide, it is at the core of our analysis. We scrutinize Turkey's memory scene of the Armenian Genocide through civil initiatives on genocide commemoration whereas for Russia, we decided to focus on the civic memory activism of the Armenian diaspora. This choice, we believe, made it possible to concentrate on a more nuanced memory scene that reveals a deepened understanding of civic memory activism, revealing both its relations with Armenia and Russia. Also, civic memory initiatives regarding crucial historical periods of political violence in Russia and Turkey, like Stalin's purges or recent history of the Kurdish conflict, are thoroughly evaluated.

For each case, we chose concrete examples of civic memory activism. For a deepened understanding of each case, we reviewed the press releases, declarations, and online data of the relevant organizations and/or

initiatives. Moreover, for each of the cases we decided to conduct semi-structured interviews with important organizers of the commemoration practices; we aimed to interview between two and five key individuals. (The list of the interviewees can be found in the Appendix.)

The Memory Scene in the Context of Turkey's 2000s: Subtleties of Remembering and Forgetting

Turkey is a country where various forms of violence occurred on a wide range spectrum from the end of the 19th century and all through the 20th century. The Armenian Genocide of 1915, rigidly denied from the official perspective with the strong support of a denialist academic complex, and different forms of violence in the context of the Kurdish conflict constitute two main pillars of this spectrum. Especially after the commencement of armed conflict in 1984 between the Kurdish armed forces, PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan - Kurdistan Workers Party), and the Turkish armed forces, a conflict still ongoing despite several peace attempts, various forms of violence have occurred while the perpetrators have been protected with a shield of impunity.

Concerning the memory debate in the context of Turkey, the term amnesia is frequently used regarding the formation of a national memory. Accordingly, it is argued that forgetting establishes layers of amnesia concerning different violent experiences that occurred throughout the 20th century, including the Armenian Genocide, pogroms of non-Muslim communities, massacres of the Alevi (a sectarian minority group) community, and forms of violence in the context of the Kurdish conflict.

We argue that amnesia is not an appropriate term to define the Turkish case, instead, in line with Paul Bijl, I suggest using the notion of cultural aphasia. Unlike amnesia that is mostly perceived and understood in a binary opposition with remembering/memory, cultural aphasia “[...] makes clear how silences do not have to point towards oblivion or definitive forgetting, but to issues of the availability of language and possibilities for its expression.” (Bijl 2012, 449) Instead of amnesia, one can talk about a memory boost in Turkey, including several competing memories since political and social groups such as Islamists, feminists, Kurdish activists, and seculars all establish contentious fragments of memories (Özyürek 2007). All these narratives are not equal though; there

are dominant frames of remembrance and these frames produce some experiences as memorable and others as non-memorable. They all do struggle, however, to erode cultural aphasia and provide a new vocabulary for narrating the violent experiences of the past. In this way, a new space of struggle was born for deepening the space of counter-memory against the official, nationalist mnemonic politics, specifically at the beginning of the 2000s.

The early 2000s, in line with Turkey's accession process to the European Union, refers to a window of opportunity when the pluralization of the national memory seemed possible. The new government elected in 2003, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party – AKP) with its popular leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, was a new political actor that declared a political program of “democratization”, including more moderate and liberal approaches regarding the Kurdish conflict, and relations with Armenia. Moreover, again in the early 2000s, a new space of civil society was founded with the flourishing of new non-governmental organizations supported by international funding institutions and EU bodies. These new generation of NGOs working more meticulously on memorial issues and dealing with the past combined with public intellectuals speaking up about past state crimes diversified the civic memory space. And finally, efforts of the Armenian community and their own organizations along with the Kurdish political movement’s institutionalization in the civic memory activism field strengthened the alternative memory scene of Turkey in this period.

Civic Memory Activism in Turkey: Specters of the Past, Conflicts of the Present

Turkey possesses a diversified and heterogeneous space of memory. Despite the cultural aphasia established very rigidly by the state and its various official institutions, several civil initiatives struggled to erode this aphasia and to find a new vocabulary for reflecting on and talking about the atrocities of the past. As we described above, as a result of the new political opening of the 2000s, several initiatives flourished for disseminating alternative narratives of the past. We have chosen two important examples of these initiatives, Saturday Mothers/Persons and the Commemoration of the Armenian Genocide, that represent two most

important issues of the memorial scene in Turkey, namely the Kurdish conflict and the Armenian Genocide.

Saturday Mothers/Persons

One of the most important issues of the contentious memory space of Turkey is the Kurdish conflict. The Kurdish conflict commenced in 1984 and lasted more than 30 years and established a contentious space of memory, and narrative and truth regime in Turkey. Various forms of violence including extra-judicial executions and enforced disappearances, forced migration, widespread use of torture, and denial of civilians' basic human rights due to security concerns created a diversified and intensified repertoire of violence. The 1990s were years when different forms of state violence were implemented vis-à-vis the Kurdish population in order to cut the links between the civilians and armed guerilla forces.

Enforced disappearance is one of the crucial state crimes of the 1990s. One can trace the roots of this crime to the Armenian Genocide, when on 24 April 1915 262 Armenian intellectuals, politicians, and notables living in the (then) capital of the Ottoman Empire, Istanbul, were taken into custody; the fate of most of them remains unknown. After 1915, this strategy of state violence was implemented occasionally; however, the systematic implementation of enforced disappearances began with the 12 September 1980 coup d'état. During the 1980s, different components of the Turkish opposition such as students, trade unionists, and political activists which allegedly had organic ties with armed leftist movements was forcibly disappeared. During the 1990s, on the other hand, well-known activists of the Kurdish movement and other "ordinary" Kurdish citizens were disappeared systematically in Kurdistan, most after being taken into custody in front of eyewitnesses.

After the increase in enforced disappearances during the 1990s, several families contacted İnsan Hakları Derneği (Human Rights Association – IHD), the first human rights institution in Turkey established after the coup d'état of 1980, where different stakeholders applied for the documentation of their violated rights and requested legal support. The family members of Hasan Ocak, whose tortured body had been found in a common grave after he was taken into custody, also contacted IHD.

After meetings with the Ocak family and human rights activists active in IHD they organized a sit-in on May 27 1995 in Galatasaray Square, one of the most crowded sites of Istanbul. The sit-in was organized as a silent event, without chanting any slogan, just reading the press release describing the urgent situation concerning the forcibly disappeared. Moreover, mothers of the disappeared who were few in number during the initial sit-in, carried photographs of their children as part of their struggle to tell the story of their loved ones.

After a while, the group named itself the Saturday Mothers/Persons and started to sit-in at the same place, Galatasaray Square, at the same day and hour, Saturday at noon. During our interview, one of the initial organizers, Filiz Koçali, narrated the commencement of the silent action as follows:

“Well, at that period of time, the family of Hasan Ocak, one of the enforced disappearances of the 1990s, was very active. After the discovery of his body in a common grave, other family members also began to contact us at IHD or Hasan Ocak’s family directly. Then, we understood the seriousness of the situation: there were hundreds of disappeared people and it was an ongoing process. Slowly, families began to gather at IHD and we, as human rights activists, were thinking about how we could make this urgent issue more visible. During our initial meetings one of the activists asked ‘Why not doing like Plaza del Mayo Mothers?’ And we decided to organize a silent sit-in that may be regular on Saturdays in Galatasaray Square. To be honest, I think initially none of us was thinking that it would be one of the most important civil memory initiatives of Turkey, which lasted more than 20 years. We were thinking that we’d be there, I don’t know, for several weeks or months maybe.”

During the initial search for Hasan Ocak, by mere coincidence some documents were found in the registers of the Forensic Medicine Institute referring to yet another forcibly disappeared person. The silent action of Saturday Mothers/Persons started within this context of immediacy which not only rendered this strategy visible but also made it a challenge to even use this tactic. Given that there were several feminists among the initial organizers of the event, the name of the sit-ins was determined as

Saturday Mothers/Persons. However, in the larger public audience it has been widely named and referred to as Saturday Mothers.

Very quickly, Saturday Mothers/Persons decided to narrate the story of one individual, how he/she was forcibly disappeared, the place and date of the disappearance, the name of the perpetrators (if known), and the names of the political responsible, including the president, prime minister, minister of interior, minister of justice, and the responsible of security apparatus (Günaysu 2014). One of the interviewees, Eren Keskin, emphasized that relatives of the disappeared have contacted them a number of times. One day they received a phone call from IHD Diyarbakır branch, the biggest city of the Kurdish region, and were informed that several relatives of the disappeared would come to participate in the sit-in. "When they came," she added, "we all understood the obvious link between the enforced disappearances and the situation in Kurdistan, which we did not adequately understand previously. So many relatives of the disappeared came from Diyarbakır that Saturday, a whole bus full of women, that is how we understood that the situation was extremely urgent in Kurdistan and the implementation of this strategy was organically related to the Kurdish conflict." Women, mostly mothers or wives of the disappeared, began to be the main actors of this counter-memory initiative, with their narrative combining the components of their personal experiences with their political demands (Ahıska 2014, 171). Moreover, the Kurdish political movement began to include the issue of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings in the repertoire of its own political struggle since the significant majority of the victims were disappeared with the claim that they were supporting Kurdish armed guerillas. It means that pro-Kurdish newspapers and various grassroots organizations and NGOs connected to the Kurdish political movement began to disseminate knowledge on the issue.

One of the initial organizers of the sit-ins emphasized that right from the start, the legal struggle of the disappeared was always considered an internal part of the Saturday Mothers' action. The families participating in Saturday Mothers/Persons sit-ins were simultaneously in a legal struggle for the accountability of the perpetrators that remained fruitless during the 1990s. In all the press releases, these demands of justice were articulated as:

Stating the names of the perpetrator and the political cadres in relation to the disappeared;

Referring to other disappeared people related to the same perpetrators and political circle;

Telling the story of the futile legal attempts of the relatives (rejection of their petitions under different pretexts; refusal of the investigations; rejection of launching a legal procedure of the prosecutors etc.)

Repeating the demand of the investigation and trial concerning the perpetrators of the case.

The sit-ins continued for 200 weeks and had a broader effect as well; for instance, Sezen Aksu, one of the most acclaimed and popular singers of Turkey, wrote a song for the Saturday Mothers called “The Ballad of Saturday”, and a recording of this song was distributed as a supplement of the popular weekly magazine (Göral 2019). Mainstream television channels broadcasted the action at least once a month on prime-time news.

Despite this powerful effect, however, the sit-ins were also targeted by the police and official authorities. Police violence continued several weeks despite the persistence of the organizers, families, and other participants. On March 13, 1999 the families of the disappeared decided to stop the action due to the constant ill treatment and severe oppression to which they were subjected. Maside Ocak, sister of Hasan Ocak, said that the families were not terminating but solely suspending the action. She added: “For us, every place is another Galatasaray Square; we will continue the search for our disappeared relatives.”

After the indictment of a high-profile legal case, the Ergenekon case where several army officers were tried due to an alleged plot against the government, the Saturday Mothers/Persons sit-ins recommenced on January 31, 2009. Most of the defendants of the Ergenekon case were simultaneously the perpetrators of the enforced disappearances that occurred during the 1990s. The new round of sit-ins was, therefore, initiated by a much more concrete demand for accountability and justice: incorporation of the crime of enforced disappearance in the indictment of Ergenekon case. Furthermore, the sit-ins were now taking place also in Kurdish cities such as Diyarbakır, Batman, Yüksekova and Cizre. During the initial period of the recommencement of the action, then-prime

minister of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan held a meeting with the relatives of the disappeared and the representatives of the Saturday Mothers/Persons to discuss their demands. However, the demand of the relatives for enforced disappearance to be included in the indictment of the Ergenekon case was refused and with the resurgence of the armed conflict in the context of the Kurdish issue, the political situation has dramatically changed. As a result of the new political context of the Kurdish conflict, the sit-ins in the Batman, Yüksekova and Cizre were, for the most part, suspended; presently, they continue to be held only in Istanbul and Diyarbakır, in a partial manner.

Armenian Genocide Commemorations

The Armenian Genocide is an issue that has remained intact for a long time not only by the official commemoration practices but also by the civic memorial initiatives as well. The rigid denialism of the state was also accompanied by a striking ignorance or lack of interest of the oppositional circles as well, concerning the remembrance of the Armenian Genocide (Bayraktar 2015). Some crucial events like the founding of the first Armenian independent newspaper, *Agos* (mostly publishing in Turkish) in 1996, the founding of Aras Publishing House in 1993 which publishes important oeuvres of Armenian literature, and the publication activities of Belge Publishing House that offers important studies on the Armenian Genocide were all crucial during the 1990s. However, one would have to wait until the 2000s for the commemorations of the Armenian Genocide. With the launch of the European Union accession process and steps for normalization between Armenia and Turkey, the beginning of the 2000s provided a space for more debates and dialogue concerning the Armenian Genocide, although without using the word “genocide” most of the time. In 2005, the first civic activity concerning the Armenian Genocide using the word “genocide” and stating the demands of recognition and apology from the Turkish state was held by the Commission Against Racism and Discrimination (Commission) of the Human Rights Association (IHD) at a press meeting, in Istanbul. One of the interviewees, Ayşe Günaysu, informed us that, at that time, even the activists in the headquarters of IHD were not sure whether use of “genocide” was a good idea. Activists of the Commission used the word to insist on the importance of the

recognition during the press meeting and it has been recorded as the first event that is dedicated to the recognition of genocide.

Hrant Dink and Agos had a tremendous impact on the recognition of the immense current problems of the Armenian population in Turkey and also deepened the debate on the historical background. However, it was after Hrant Dink's assassination on January 19, 2007 that Armenian Genocide debate was intensified publicly. Unexpectedly, several hundred thousand of people attended his funeral chanting the slogan, "We are all Hrant, we are all Armenians". This slogan, too radical even for the majority of oppositional groups, had a tremendous effect. In 2008, several intellectuals launched a signature campaign entitled I Apologize, with a short text as follows: "My conscience does not accept the insensitivity showed to and the denial of the Great Catastrophe that the Ottoman Armenians were subjected to in 1915. I reject this injustice and for my share, I empathize with the feelings and pain of my Armenian brothers. I apologize to them." This online petition, although the term "genocide" was not referred to, was signed by 5,000 people within the first 24 hours, and had collected over 30,000 signatories by January 2009.

In the meantime, the IHD commission continued its commemoration of the Armenian Genocide each 24 April after 2005. Commencing by 2010, the Commission continued its civic commemoration activity by going to Haydarpaşa Train Station, a symbolic memory space where Armenian intellectuals taken under custody on 24 April 1915 began their death journey. Right from the beginning, the Commission was very specific on its purpose. The purpose was not asking for empathy from Turkish society but rather insisting on official genocide recognition, with very specific demands. One of the organizers, Eren Keskin, stated: "As a human right defender I believe that we should not deceive ourselves by saying that we are waiting the society to be more open so that we can use some words like 'genocide'. This society will never be more open. It is our duty to oblige different societal segments to use the appropriate terms by using such terms first ourselves concerning the crimes of the past and state violence. I think it is our first and primary duty." That is why right from the beginning the Commission was very specific for the demands of the commemoration; the slogan was addressed to the state: "Armenian Genocide: Recognize! Make an Apology! Make Amends!"

Since 2010, a new initiative has been organizing a public commemoration on İstiklal Street, one of the most crowded places of Istanbul that inhabits Galatasaray Square as well. Mostly intellectuals who organized the I Apologize campaign were active in the organization of this public commemoration. The event was organized with the slogan “This pain belongs to all of us”; the word genocide is not mentioned in the press release; still, as the first public event it was extremely important. Almost two thousand people attended to the first public commemoration, a number was much higher than the initial organizers were expecting. The word “genocide” was referred to during the next public commemorations, but as one of the organizers, Meltem Oral, put it, what was important was being able to make this public commemoration instead of naming per se the events of 1915. The organizers took the name of The Platform of Commemorating 24 April and continued to organize the public commemorations as a platform in communication with the Commission of IHD.

The two different commemorations of the Armenian Genocide are still ongoing in Turkey despite the altered political atmosphere. Obviously, they refer to two different approaches in civil memorial activism; while the Commission of IHD struggles for more specific demands of recognition and justice, the Platform is more concerned with disseminating an idea of civil commemoration concerning the genocide.

Russia – The Memory Scene

Demands to open the archives and publish the real story of the mass atrocities committed by the USSR, as well as the real history of World War II (known as “the Great Patriotic War” in Russia), were among the main claims of the political transformation that took place in Russia between 1986 and 1993. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the de-legitimization of Stalin’s regime were generally perceived as two important achievements of the new Russian democracy in 1990s. At the same time, however, memories of the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945) and of Stalin’s Purges (1937-38) created a unique situation in the Russian collective memory.

Elisabeth Anstett has mentioned three commemorative aspects of political repression in Russia (Anstett 2011): societal – to re-live the traumatic

experience of Soviet repression; political – to push the Russian state’s acceptance of its legal responsibilities and practical obligations in light of its past deeds; and, finally, symbolic or religious – to guarantee the “right to be named” as a victim, to obtain a place for mourning, first of all, for relatives. At the same time, the losses of World War II also seem to contradict this commemoration, mostly because of the aggressive historical politics of the USSR since the Brezhnev era, where Brezhnev has converted the day of mourning to a Day of Victory celebration with the endless military parades all over the country in order to cut off the discussion about the price of the victory as well as failure and serious mistakes of the state authority, i.e. Joseph Stalin.

Since the beginning of the 2000s, however, memory politics, and especially the attitude toward Stalin’s time in Russia, have slowly changed. Two juxtaposed memories, the memory of Stalin’s purges and of the Great Patriotic War, have created contested commemorative practices. The sphere of the commemoration of Stalin’s purges was predominantly occupied by non-governmental organizations. Memorial and the Sakharov Center are the most active actors of such commemoration politics. These NGOs’ approach to commemorative politics was and remains highly legalistic: they collect information about victims of the Stalin’s Great Terror in their archives, publish so-called “memory books,” and provide legal support for victims’ rehabilitation. The second dimension of their work is to create and support places of memory, mostly connected with the Great Terror. Although the popularity historical debates enjoyed during the 2000s has largely abated, commemorative practices continue to mobilize diverse groups of civil rights activists. The only new project, dated December 2014 – the Last Address - pertains to the last addresses of Nazi victims. It is a German initiative called Stolpersteine (“stumbling stones”) and it is based on the concept of “one name – one life – one sign.”

The second commemoration, the Great Patriotic War, has been mostly controlled by the Soviet, and later by the Russian, government. Nevertheless, in 2012 a group of activists from the Siberian state of Tomsk created the idea of an Immortal Regiment – a symbolic parade of the relatives of WWII veterans who bring the veterans’ portraits to the traditional Victory Parade held every 9th of May. The authorities’ attitude

toward such projects is controversial. While the “Immortal Regiment” do not attack the historical policy of Russian government directly, “Memorial” – the most famous and influential human rights organization in the country – does precisely that, and the Russian government has responded. The Ministry of Justice has included members of the Memorial in its list of “foreign agents,” a common discriminatory practice of the government against independent NGOs. In a similar vein, Yuri Dmitriev, a historian and Memorial member from Karelia who discovered a place of mass execution of Gulag prisoners, was imprisoned on the basis of a fully fabricated accusation.

The Last Address project, by contrast, is being treated by the Russian state rather neutrally, if not quite positively as we demonstrate below. The situation with the Immortal Regiment, on the other hand, is different. The government has organized raids to attack the project and currently even most of the regional organization of the Immortal Regiment is controlled by the State and the ruling party, United Russia, to exhibit “patriotism” and “pride” instead of mourning and commemoration. Furthermore, the Russian government is attempting to use this Immortal Regiment project to promote its own political agenda abroad. In a nutshell, it can be argued the memory scene in Russia is highly contentious; if private commemoration of the repressions, such as the Last Address project, is limited but acceptable, everything connected with the Great Patriotic War remains controlled by the state with no independent initiatives allowed.

The Last Address Project

Sergey Parkhomenko, a journalist and civil rights activist, explained during his that he came up with the idea of Last Address after visiting Frankfurt, Germany, where he encountered several signs belonging to the aforementioned German memorial project, Stolperstein. Parkhomenko mentioned that he visited the human rights center Memorial in Moscow in the fall of 2013 and its director, Arseniy Roginsky, immediately responded: “We had been needing somebody like you. We have expected that somebody would come and tell us we need to do something like this.” The idea was simple – to establish a sign in the memory of those who had been arrested and then executed, and whose last address was in this building. Even though the project was rather positively received by the Moscow municipal authority – for example, Moscow’s vice-governor has

granted personal appointment to Parkhomenko, no official permission has ever been granted. The project's team, headed by Sergey, has decided to simply ignore this fact. By Russian law, only the building owner's agreement is valid in order to obtain permission to install a plaque on a building's wall, and that was how the project began in December of 2014. Chronologically, the project covers victims from 1918 to 1991. In other words, from the beginning of the Civil War in Russia and until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Most of the plaques, however, are devoted to victims of the Great Purges (1937-1938).

The main idea, as summarized by Parkhomenko, is to encourage people to talk about this tragedy using different categories. Currently the main issue in having this conversation is the fact that there are "two distinct bubbles of people, pro-Stalin and anti-Stalin", that cannot find any common ground. Last Address is shifting the main focus of the conversation from general questions of politics and repression to the fate of the ordinary person. Within the context of Last Address, the question is not the number of executed people or the reality of the "plot against the Soviet state" but about whether there was a need in the first place to kill the simple housewife who lived at a particular address in order to support the Soviet state. "In this kind of conversation", explained Parkhomenko, "we have a serious advantage." The main idea for the project is not to assemble cities with millions of such signs, but rather to gather people around — to activate public discussion and public awareness about the Soviet regime's atrocities.

The underlying idea behind the principle — only one story, one plaque, no collective commemoration and no "celebrities" — is, therefore, to commemorate those who otherwise have little chance of being remembered. The second important aspect is the legal status of the sign itself. By law, in order to establish a "memorial plaque" for a celebrity killed in Stalin's purges, the applicant must go through a tedious bureaucratic procedure. As Parkhomenko stated, the project seeks to memorialize "ordinary people," which is why the Last Address plaque is just an informative plaque. It consists only of a name, surname, date of birth, and affiliation. By design, there is no picture on the plaque — just an empty square instead of a likeness of the repressed person.

The project began in Moscow and has quickly been disseminated throughout the country. The project has decided to exclude all possible state funds and has only accepted money from private donors. An attempt by the authorities to investigate evidence of “foreign support” has been fruitless – the Ministry of Justice’s investigation did not find any evidence of “political activity” nor of “foreign support,” either of which is needed in order to include a Russian NGO in the list of “foreign agents”, with obviously grave repercussions. The next and most important step is to obtain permission from all building owners, usually through the collection of signatures. Sergey Parkhomenko has called this “silent neutrality” with regard to the authorities: “We are not asking them for anything, and the authorities do not intervene.” There were several stories of Last Address plaques disappearing, but in most cases, they were reinstalled later.

As for the media, its attitude toward the project in general was “abnormally positive,” Sergey Parkhomenko insisted. It looks like the Kremlin’s administration did not articulate any particular position with regard to the project and, therefore, in most media, even though fully controlled by the state, the project became local but not federal news. That is why general coverage of Last Address events has been rather positive – it was rather local event, but not the federal story.

Nikolay Ivanov believes that the most active subsection of the applicants, are representatives of the Russian intelligentsia. Families of actors, artists, academics are very actively joining the project. The reason for the serious mobilization of Russian intelligentsia around the project is the fact that they are angry about current tendencies to whitewash the Stalin Era and to shift the focus of public attention away from the atrocities and to substitute the question of Stalin’s repression to the “challenging question of internal and international politics of the Soviet Union.” There are practically no celebrities among the people who are already commemorated by a Last Address plaque, just ordinary citizens who were executed following the notorious “plan of execution” and who were never involved in any political or any anti-Soviet activities. Nevertheless, one of the most controversial points of the project is to formulate who is entitled to appear as a “victim” for being commemorated by Last Address. The main question here was: what should we do with “executors and

murderers”? In fact, it was rather common during the time of the repressions that the executors should later be executed as well, during the next wave of repressions. The project decided to establish only two rules for such cases. The first rule is legal – the person to be commemorated must be rehabilitated, i.e. all official accusations must be legally removed and a person should be declared as innocent. The second rule is ethical – the person in question should not have been a member of quasi-legal tools of repression (so-called Troikas – three people who issued orders for execution). Here the project met with real difficult stories both in the legal and in the ethical sense. For example, Fanny Kaplan, the woman who had wounded Lenin in 1918, was immediately executed without any formal procedure at all and it is therefore difficult to apply for her rehabilitation. Also, victims of the Civil War are not considered victims of political repression—only those who were detained and executed as a citizen of Soviet Union are considered as such.

It cannot therefore be said that the project is free of challenges. In fact, its various instances of failure are connected with the pro-Stalinist position of the current inhabitants of a particular building, or with their position that “we do not want a cemetery here.” Likewise, it has encountered issues with obtaining special permission (although by law it is not required, but usually requested from the municipal administration) in different cities, and so on. Nevertheless, there are currently about nine hundred plaques in more than fifty cities of various nations, including the Czech Republic, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and in late August the first Last Address plaque will appear in Germany – in commemoration of the victims of East German repression.

Immortal Regiment

One of the weaknesses of the Russian civil rights movement is that it is mostly centralized. Most of its civic initiatives were born either in St Petersburg, or in Moscow. On the other hand, Immortal Regiment is a project that began in Tomsk, a city in the center of Siberia, quite far from the Russian capital. Three friends (Sergey Lapenkov and Igor Dmitriev among them) met near the Eternal Flame, the traditional veteran memorial found in most Russian cities and erected during Soviet times to commemorate fallen Soviet soldiers who never returned from the war. Traditionally 9 May, Victory Day, entails an orchestrated Military Parade,

which originally consisted of a group of living war veterans who march in memory of the War and of their comrades. Year by year, the number of veterans has decreased dramatically, and their friends and families were disappointed by what has come to substitute for them – a parade of military personnel, long and empty speeches of city bureaucrats – and they have decided to make this day about those who had made it possible, the veterans. Because the grandfathers have already passed away, they decided to bring portraits of the veterans to the streets and create the idea of an Immortal Regiment. The idea, as Sergey Lapenkov points out in the interview, was “to say thank you to my grandpa” and to eliminate all this soulless bureaucracy from the parade and return it to the family mourning the memory of its relatives, victims of the most notorious war of the 20th century.

Coincidentally, three friends who were journalists from the Tomsk Media group were recently targeted by the Russian State because of their independent information policy. They had used media channels to distribute the Immortal Regiment idea and to share the common principles of the project with all stakeholders: a non-narrowly political project, based on the idea of personal engagement and relationship to the veterans. The second important point was that no donor or state funds are accepted. Personal responsibility might be strengthened if a person who is interested in commemorating his or her relatives, were to pay a relatively small amount of money only for a banner with the portrait of his grandfather or grandmother. Even a proposal from the local bank to provide financial support to the movement for advertising was rejected.

To encourage people to investigate the personal stories of the veterans, a dedicated website moypolk.ru (literally “myregiment.ru”) was created. This site has collected almost half a million stories, from long reading to short bios, that have allowed many to find relatives, to connect to fellow soldiers, and to share real stories of the war without censorship or oversight.

The first Immortal Regiment was organized in Tomsk in 2012, and by 2019 it covered the entire country. Since its inception, it has brought a feeling of unification – there was no rich and poor, no political opponents in the crowd, just people of one country who have decided to commemorate along with others who have made peace possible.

As Sergey Lapenkov pointed out, it has been a “horizontal initiative” since the very beginning. The organizers did not ask for anything from the authorities, only the permission to be represented in the Victory Day Parade as a separate rubric. The main idea was to allow people to self-organize the same project in the different cities of Russia without any narrowly political or ideological message. For those who decided to break the rules, the project’s organizers created a special subsection on the website called “guardroom” to publicize the stories of such violations.

The Russian authority decided to raid this project with the help of Nikolay Zemtsov, who assisted to control the Immortal Regiment and who pursues political interests (he recently became a deputy of the Russian State Duma for the ruling United Russia party) in order to combat “the negative influence” of the independent and horizontally organized project. Having been invited to organize the Immortal Regiment in Moscow, he registered his own organization of the same title and tried to substitute the local activists in regions to the peoples he has personally appointed. As Sergey Lapenkov explained, among the semi-official accusations against TV-2 (Tomsk independent channel, forcibly closed by the State authority) were the separation of Siberia from Russia, the collaboration with disgraced oligarch M. Khodorkovsky, and finally the attempt to control the “state narrative of the Great Patriotic War”.

Instead of volunteer work and free participation, the project’s organizers have received reports from various places and cities about pressure on schoolchildren, the organization of “patronage” by the ruling United Russia party for local Immortal Regiments, and the forcible replacement of local volunteers with “more constructive” (i.e., loyal to the government) persons. As a result, the project has started slowly changing its guiding principles – from family commemoration it has come to be more ideological. It is especially visible in the Immortal Regiment groups abroad, where the Russian government is trying to use it as a part of its soft power strategy.

Nevertheless, the situation is currently still more complicated. As Grigoriy Kunis, organizer of the local Immortal Regiment in St. Petersburg, has suggested “for most of the people in the country the change wasn’t challenged seriously, most of the people still visit this commemoration to publicly represent and uphold the main principle of

the project, that is, private memory.” As Sergey Lapenkov summarizes “it is simply impossible to establish full control over the family with the family album of photographs.” He adds that “if and when I would like to say ‘thank you’ to my grandpa, there is nobody who can stop me and nobody who can fully control my personal memories.” Despite the fact that currently Immortal Regiment is still fully included in the official commemoration and is therefore totally controlled by the state, a number of its local initiatives remain independent and a substantial amount of people visit the event just to remember—not just celebrate the “Great Victory”, but rather to mourn and to commemorate. At the same time, the website continues to collect stories, encourage people to discuss the past with their children and great-grandchildren, and in this regard the raiders’ attack has failed. A number of people, including the organizers, have decided not to participate in this event any longer, and to concentrate instead either on other projects or on the Immortal Regiment’s website.

Both Last Address and Immortal Regiment are civic projects, arising from a feeling of civic patriotism and compassion for the victims. At the same time, Russia as a multi-cultural state also has memorial practices oriented to mobilize a particular ethnic and religious group and not the entire Russian society. The most powerful commemorative practice is the commemoration of a group trauma – genocide – and Soviet history produced the number of such atrocities, including genocide of Crimean Tartars, Chechens, Balkars, and others. And while Armenians were repressed not by the Soviet regime but Ottoman Turkey, the commemoration of the Armenian Genocide is the most commonly reproduced memory of genocide in Russia.

Russian Memory Scene of the Armenian Genocide

The multinational character of 21st century Russia makes minority-oriented self-organization a necessity. However, for the many decades of Soviet era, the policies and attitudes of the state have made it nearly impossible for national minorities to define themselves or their culture on the public level. The case of the Armenian diaspora was not an exception and the official organizations representing the Armenian minority were only founded during the late 1980s. The primal time for national communities in Russia started after the collapse of USSR that left its

descendant, the Russian Federation, a state populated with more than hundred national groups, each one with its particular history and culture.

The celebration of these cultures might sometimes include the memory practices of the historical events significant for the group. The most notable one, perhaps, is the case of Armenian genocide commemoration. Like all other national minorities in Russia, Armenian diaspora associations focus on practicing their culture, language, history, and supporting Armenians living in Russia. The primary focus of these associations has been the commemoration of the Armenian genocide. These memory practices come in different forms and play important role in the Armenian genocide's memory scene worldwide due to the Russian Federation being home to more than a million Armenians, according to population census of 2002, and according to Armenians' Union of Russia the number is reaching above two million. This makes it likely the largest Armenian population beyond the Armenian Republic on the one hand, and one of the five biggest national groups in Russia on the other.

In a nutshell, the memory scene of the Armenian Genocide in Russia it is mostly controlled by the Armenian diaspora's officials and Armenian Apostol Church, often as a part of their programs on Armenian culture and history. Two biggest and most influential diaspora's representatives are the Armenians' Union of Russia (Союз Армян России) and the Commonwealth of Russians and Armenians (Русско-Армянское содружество). Both organizations focus on different kinds of support for the Armenian community in Russia and are involved in some memory practices regarding the Armenian Genocide as well. For example, for the centennial of the genocide, Armenian's Union of Russia organized a mobile photo-exhibition in Moscow (Armenians' Union of Russia, 17/04/15).

Nevertheless, this type of old-school diaspora representation has slowly started to fade away. The younger generation of Armenians living in Russia offer a new take on memory politics in response to standardized activities of old-fashion NGOs that are criticized for having centralized and sole-controlled administration and a lack of openness. It also seems that "old NGOs", due to their commitment to supporting the official relationship between Russia and Armenia, would inevitably become political at some point. Popular historical narrative portrays Russia, or

more precisely the Russian Empire at the time, as a savior of Armenian people, explaining how Russian forces transferred Armenian refugees from the warzone, protected them, and mobilized financial resources to help Armenians in need (Darbinyan 2016). A century later, after a whole era of coexistence as parts of a unified country, the USSR, today's Russian Federation supports the image of a big Christian brother watching over Armenia.

This makes it necessary for the powerful Russian-Armenian NGOs to show their support for the Russian government and adapt to the popular official narrative about Russian-Armenian relationship and Russian policies as well. That said, we would like to give an example of the commentary that the President of the Armenians' Union of Russia made regarding very controversial legal initiative of "foreign agents". His quite pro-Russian government statement showed support for regulations and forms of control that "illuminate destructive foreign interfere in the internal life of our country" (Armenians' Union of Russia News 2012). When in fact such legal initiative could become a threat to any NGO that has ties outside Russian borders, which practically all of the national minorities' communities do, Armenian NGOs being no exception. This is especially relevant now after the threat of Russian media scaring Russians off with "western influence everywhere" even in the context of Armenian "Velvet revolution" with the cases like one of Russia Today's investigation into revolutionaries' NATO camps in Yerevan and Michail Leontiev's comments on Armenians for his Komsomolskaya Pravda interview (Russia Today, 12/02/19), (Komsomolskaya Pravda, 3/05/18).

The key influence in the genocide memory scene in Russia is still the Armenian Apostol Church. Because of the partly religion-based prosecution during the genocide, the Armenian Church plays a crucial role in the events connected to genocide commemoration. It also promotes initiatives for further genocide recognition on the international scene. Aside from providing yearly services coincided with anniversary of the genocide, the Church patronizes a museum that exposes cultural items related to Armenian culture, religion, and genocide. Armenian churches in other cities of Russia also support the genocide commemoration; for example, just recently in April 2019, on the territory of the Armenian Church in Yaroslavl, a commemoration manifestation was held in support

of genocide recognition (Новости ОАР, 26/04/19). In many ways, the Armenian Church is the center of the genocide victims commemoration – for example, the only monuments dedicated to tragic events, in Moscow and in Rostov, are situated in Church complex areas. In a sense, as many other religions are the glue for the national communities in the multicultural space, the Armenian Church serves the community-building role for the Armenians.

Another (more secular and independent) actor of the memorial scene, that participates in memorial practices is the Armenian Museum of Moscow. The Museum was opened in April of 2015 as the opening coincided with the genocide anniversary. The Museum has an exposition of various items related to Armenian culture, history, and the history of genocide itself. It also conducts conferences and lectures in collaboration with knowledgeable experts. Currently, the Museum is in the process of moving and its usual functioning is interrupted. However, the Museum has an impressive web-portal that provides visitors the possibility to see the whole exposition online.

During our interview with David, the deputy director of the Museum, I asked about the history and activity of the Museum. The museum was opened on the centennial of the Armenian Genocide. The initiator was a philanthropist named Ruben Grigoryan and the museum aimed to keep the memory of Armenian history alive, including the history of Armenian genocide. David informed us that the Museum received a strong public reaction from media in Russia, Armenia, and abroad because it was the biggest Armenian Genocide-oriented Museum outside of Armenia. Given that the exhibition was interrupted due to moving, the commemoration of the genocide is practiced via publications posted on their website. Also, various experts from Armenia and other countries continue to give lectures in the working lecture hall. The museum collaborates with the Armenian Museum of the Genocide in Yerevan and participates in different informational projects. It has also published the original edition of early 20th-century book dedicated to the Armenian Genocide entitled “The Blackest Page of Recent History” written by American author Herbert Adams Gibbons who witnessed mass-killings himself (Armenian Museum of Moscow’s Artifacts).

One of the organizations that regularly collaborates with Armenian Museum of Moscow is the Association of Armenian Youth of Moscow (Ассоциация Армянской Молодежи Москвы). It was founded in 2011 on students' initiative and has already taken part in significant commemoration practices. The Association collaborates with the Consolidation of Armenians of Russia (Объединение Армян России) as well, the most recent organization, founded in 2018 as a younger and more progressive alternative to an old-school diaspora representation. They are actively collaborating with other organizations and maintain a website where they inform their readers about Armenian issues and post news about events dedicated to genocide commemoration.

Along with the Moscow's museum the Consolidation participated in the organization of the genocide themed demonstration: the 19:15 (Новости ОАР, 22/04/19), which was supposed to be held on the territory of the Church and represent a "live map" of the Armenian territories in the Ottoman Empire and how people were forced to move from their homelands. Unfortunately, the demonstration was disrupted, as the Church administration forbid the implementation on its territory, officially due to concern for the safety of the participants; however, the organizers argue that the real reason was the personal conflict between the Archbishop and the representative of one of the organizers (Новости ОАР, 24/04/19).

Many commemoration events were held by the Association of Armenian Youth on the centennial as well. Thus, in April 2015, the international forum for recognition and legal repercussions of the Armenian Genocide entitled "I Remember and Demand" was held by the Association of Armenian Youth of Moscow and included various representative from the aforementioned organizations as well as public officials like ambassadors and parliamentarians (Агентство Социальной Информации, 17/04/15).

One of the most significant events organized by the Association of Armenian Youth of Moscow was an action entitled Immortal Souls (quite similar to another Russian initiative Immortal Regiment) held in 2015 all over the Russian Federation. The event was comprised of demonstrations dedicated to victims of the genocide in 20 Russian cities and culminated with white balloons released in the sky at exactly 19:15—the year

associated with the genocide—representing the souls of innocents killed in the Ottoman Empire. It was the first Armenian event that unified different parts of Russia for the genocide commemoration. (Association of Armenian Youth of Moscow, 25/02/16)

These civil initiatives are the examples of young Armenians taking charge of their history and finding ways to honor victims — most often their own great-great-grandparents — and using this tragedy to bring Russian Armenians together. It is important to mention that many Armenians who live in Russia today do not have another motherland, as their ancestors were forced to leave their homeland of historical Western Armenia and settle in today's Russia. These acts of commemoration serve a way to feel connected and unified as well, which may be not so easy for a national group that is torn away from their historical land.

There are different ways to organize memory practices and some of them do not necessary include public expression on the streets or conferences in the lecture halls. Today, due to huge impact of the online channels and different social media platforms, it has become much more accessible to attract public attention to acute issues including civic memory activism. This was the case for Vadim Artyunov, journalist and producer from Russian city Rostov-on-Don, who is the founder of historiographic community – the informational analytical web-portal Antitopor or in English, Anti-Axe (АНТИТОПОР), that focuses on historic falsifications, including the denial of the Armenian genocide.

According to Vadim, this civil initiative developed spontaneously and started after he uploaded a few video-blogs about Armenian culture that gained interest and started discussion. Afterwards, noticing the influx of negative posts and comments from Turkish and Azerbaijani sides he decided to focus on the rebuff of the “informational expansion”. For six years, he and his followers have been writing articles, working with historic documents and producing video blogs about Armenian issue on their web site and popular social media, like Antitopor's YouTube channel. Now this internet-community aims to struggle against historic falsifications by disseminating to the public eye stories and interviews and promoting historical facts. The portal and its social media counterparts release content related to Armenian culture, and history and life of Armenians in other countries as well.

Vadim says that despite having a broader spectrum of interest, the topic of genocide is still important among his writers. As he noted, 30 out of 250 issues that Antitopor releases are allocated to the Armenian Genocide. Apart from Antitopor's work with historical documents, Vadim also conducts interviews, documents his travelling to places of historical importance for the memory of genocide and does research on the genocide interpretation in Turkey. This is the topic he studies during his travel blog-series in Turkish part of historical Armenia, where he explores how opposite the events of 1915 are interpreted there. He gives the particular example of the "Turkish genocide museum" – a museum that presents Turks as victims of the genocide of 1915 rather than Armenians. As another example of his research on Armenian Genocide, Vadim also mentioned his series of interviews conducted in Serbia with descendants of Sogomon Teylerian – a popular hero for Armenians who avenged victims of the Armenian genocide by assassinating one of the main organizers of mass-killings, Talaat-Pasha, in 2001.

The community also collaborates with the Armenian Museum of Moscow. However, as Vadim mentions, the portal struggles from lack of financial resources as most of its funding comes from Vadim himself. There is a need for more fiscal support and more engaged and capable writers to join the community of Antitopor for successful extension of its work, according to Vadim. The problem, Vadim noted in the context of successful genocide commemoration in general, is the lack of non-Armenian-language content and especially lack of Russian-language content from Armenians themselves.

The Antitopor community demonstrates how crucial the link is between a more committed personal involvement with technological development in the current civic memorial activism. Thanks to the access to Internet, people can now get information and spread information in the blink of an eye. Most importantly, it has become much easier to bring different communities together, which certainly gives hope for more knowledgeable and engaged generations to come. What is particularly interesting is that this case – rather than focusing on bringing Armenians together like previous examples – serves educational purposes by spreading information for anyone interested in the topic, which makes these memory practices more inclusive.

Therefore, we can divide memory practices of Russian Armenians in two main trends. The first one aims to keep memory inside the Armenian community – celebrating and honoring ancestors of today’s Armenians who suffered the purge of Armenian genocide. This type of memory activism also serves the purpose of self-identification for Armenians for whom commemoration Armenian genocide is a significant part of their culture, just as well as commemoration of the Holocaust is an important part of the Jewish community’s life. The second trend has to do with the outside recognition – bringing knowledge about the events through educational content. This type of memory practice is mostly addressed to non-Armenians, people who may not know about the genocide or have discrepant ideas about what happened more than hundred years ago and was swept under the rug by history as just another atrocity of WWI. In the end, both trends serve one purpose: to keep the memory inside and outside of the Armenian community and not to let the prosecution of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire remain “the forgotten genocide”.

Concluding Analysis

Civic memory activism represents a diversified civil space. This heterogeneous space is comprised of different actors, different discourses, and various political affiliations. This plurality reflects the need for the coexistence of different forms of commemorations and memory activism. Civic memory activism includes some contradictions as well. On the one hand, over-politicization may be a hindrance for the plurality of memory activism. However, on the other hand constant de-politicization may also discomfit the stakeholders, who would like to remind others of the relation between their political affiliations and their experiences.

Different forms of nationalism represent other important conceptual and practical burdens for the deepening of the civic memory activism field. These fields are struggling against rigid forms of denialisms, ultra-chauvinistic national historical narratives, and excessive occurrences of cultural aphasia, e.g. not a total amnesia but rather a selective lack of certain vocabularies. Therefore, trans-national collaboration is a necessity in order to prevent the establishment of alternative nationalisms and the ossification of the identities.

Finally, the dialectics of recognition and inclusion, demands of justice and memory may partially contradict each other. In other words, in one commemoration the emphasis may be on official recognition whereas for another memory activism's ability to honor the commemoration may be more important. Different manipulations of the state apparatus for coopting and manipulating existing commemoration efforts or contradicting each other through different tactics and strategies also contribute to internal contentions.

Our concluding remarks for preserving the democratic plurality of civic memory activism space and for strengthening its transformative content may be cited as follows:

Respecting victims' definitions and struggling for the recognition of the historical events with the appropriate terms. As argued by one of the interviewees, there should at least one initiative that names and defines the historical violence by the name given by the victims despite the importance of plurality.

Activists in the civic memory space may think about transnational approaches, relations, participations, and discourses in a more in-depth manner and such efforts may help for breaking the impact of diverse nationalisms. Organizing a commemoration regionally may be an excellent trial of transnational and regional solidarity. These steps are already realized in the context of several efforts of commemorations. However, framing them in a more organized manner may democratize the content and the forms of the memory activism in each of the examples.

More collaboration among different civil initiatives is crucial for the plurality of the field. In the event of Turkey, there are two different initiatives for the Armenian Genocide's commemoration and they have different approaches on how to commemorate the genocide. However, they are in communication with each other despite their different approaches and criticisms. This kind of collaborative example should be developed while recognizing the existence of different perspectives, methods, and political positions.

As Russian case illustrates, not only state violence or intimidation but also cooptation within the official national narrative is a threat for civic memory activism. Relations and collaborations with historians that have

a critical approach, or collaborations among different grassroots organizations, may strengthen civil initiatives vis-à-vis the state.

The Armenian diaspora experience reveals a crucial issue for civil memory activism: the importance of the use of innovative digital methods. In a world where digital media constantly gains more importance, online platforms became much more crucial in comparison to more conventional activism methods. For the engagements and involvement of young generations, these alternative methods of content-production and dissemination are very important. Therefore, activists should reflect more on non-conventional methods of data gathering, collecting, and disseminating.

Appendix I

The list of the interviewees:

Turkey

Murat Çelikkan – Journalist, Director of Truth Justice Memory Center, Saturday Mothers/Persons; Commemoration of the Armenian Genocide.

Ayşe Günaysu – Activist in Human Rights Association, Saturday Mothers/Persons; Commemoration of the Armenian Genocide.

Eren Keskin – Director of Human Rights Association, Saturday Mothers/Persons; Commemoration of the Armenian Genocide.

Filiz Koçali – Journalist, Saturday Mothers/Persons.

Meltem Oral – Activist, Commemoration of the Armenian Genocide.

Russia

Nikolay Ivanov – Art historian, Berlin' "Last address" project, Germany.

Georgii Kunis – Businessmen, civil rights activist, Immortal Regiment (2015-2017) St. Petersburg, Russia.

Sergey Lapenkov – Journalist, civil rights activists, Founder, Immortal Regiment, Moscow, Russia.

Sergey Parkhomenko – Journalist, Civil rights activists, Founder, Last Address project, Moscow, Russia.

Armenian Diaspora in Russia

Vadim Artyukov – Founder of the "Antitopor".

David Tonoyan – Deputy Director of the Armenian Museum of Moscow.

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Banality of Nationalism in the South Caucasus: Pro- Violence Practices of the Society in Georgia and Armenia

Maia (Nukri) Tabidze, Arpi Atabekyan

Introduction

Maia (Nukri) Tabidze¹

6

12

24

45

What do these numbers refer to?

I thought for a few seconds and then shouted with self-satisfaction:

That is the changing amount of welfare money for displaced people!

It was the 27th of September 2018 my friend and I were sitting in a park discussing the exhibition we had just visited when she half jokingly came up with

¹ While most of the article is co-authored by Maia (Nukri) Tabidze and Arpi Atabekyan, some sections are authored by one of author individually and therefore start with that person's name.

this riddle. Only those whose lives had depended on this welfare money could guess it. It was witty and funny. But we were far from amused. We were angry. It was the day when Sukhumi² fell. Earlier we had attended an exhibition and listened to several news and speeches commemorating this day. There was not a single reference to the displaced people. Some of the Georgian Dream party activists had organized the silent protest demonstration in Zugdidi near the Abkhazian border to protest the occupation. Their letter was addressed to Putin. He was the one blamed for hatred and confrontation between Georgia and Abkhazia. Abkhazians were not mentioned either.

When did displaced people and Abkhazians get excluded from Tbilisi-Moscow dialogue? Or were we ever even part of it? I kept asking myself these questions. And later, when I started to discuss it with my colleagues, fellow activists, and friends I found it hard to articulate the perspective of people whose lives have been directly affected by the conflict. I would like to write about this silence (Or should I say silencing?)

This article is an attempt of two co-authors from Georgia and Armenia to analyze the often invisible mechanisms that disguise pro-war discourses and justify violence and militarism. We will unite two voices into one perspective and address the insidious and subtle ways that the status quo of “frozen conflicts” is maintained and deepened. Even though conflicts in the South Caucasus have often been discussed in the context of the state violence, ethnic conflict, right wing nationalists, and “separatists” who seek independence, more subtle ways of reproducing pro-war ideology and the responsibility of civil society and business have rarely been recognized.

By analyzing several examples of banal nationalism in Georgia and Armenia, we aim to explore the discourses supporting violence and exclusion that are produced and reproduced on a daily basis in above mentioned societies through online media and advertising. While advertisements and digital media are not the only areas where these discourses are articulated or where the civil society operates, we concentrate on these areas due to their wide coverage, and ability to reach thousands and form mainstream discourse. These cases are interesting as they provide insight into how business and the state’s militaristic interests

² Sukhum, in the Abkhazian version (eds.).

meet in very unconventional circumstances and how such commodification of nationalistic ideology through repetition creates a vicious circle, where civil society acts as the consumer and reproducer of the pro-war ideology at the same time.

We use the concept of “banal nationalism” to describe pro-violence and exclusion discourses that contribute to and normalize “us-them” division between opposing sides of a conflict. The term “nationalism” has usually been associated with “those who struggle to create new states or with extreme right-wing politics” (Billig 2018, 5). The producers of the discourses in question are far from stereotypical right wing nationalists. Some of them actively define themselves in opposition to it. To understand the complexity of this controversy we use Michael Billig’s concept (1995) of “banal nationalism”. The latter refers to the mundane ways of reproducing nationalism in everyday life. “Daily the nation is ‘flagged’ in the lives of its citizenry” (Billig 2018, 6) and often without our acknowledgement we construct and reconstruct our own “nation” in confrontation with the image of an enemy. Visual content on social and mainstream media, display of flags and militaristic attributes, speeches and slogans, and advertisements can all be considered examples of the banal nationalism we attempt to assess.

In more general terms, we propose that nationalism be understood in alignment not solely with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with large cultural systems out of which — as well as against which — it comes into being. Nationalistic ideology usually “disguises” itself so well that we do not necessarily perceive the direct link between banal examples of nationalism and actual violence. They come across in everyday life as naive, sometimes funny and smart ideas, but they are far from being innocent. The nationalistic sentiment they produce can intensify differences between various groups and even set the foundation for justifying violence (Billig 2018).

In both countries these discourses are usually produced and introduced by state actors. The conflicts of Georgia with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Armenia with Azerbaijan that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union, followed by further escalations in 2008 and in 2016, and their frozen status have created solid ground for the domination of militaristic and nationalistic discourses in state narratives. But with the “help” of civil

society and business they gradually penetrated every aspect of daily life in Georgian and Armenian societies. Their reproduction by non-governmental actors like businesses, NGOs, activists, social media users, digital influencers, and regular citizens normalizes and neutralizes these discourses to the point when their original sources and harmful effects cannot be easily recognized. Even though we cannot speak of their actual empirical consequences, through reflection on what seems “natural” and mundane we explain how banal nationalism contributes to the maintenance of the frozen conflicts at the discursive and symbolic level. Since such reflection is a political act, and we must admit quite a painful one, we would like to analyze it in relation to our own lives.

When War Goes Bananas, Bananas Go to the War

Arpi Atabekyan:

It was mid 2015, when on a regular weekday, like all other days I took the metro in Yerevan that would take me from Baghramyan street to Yeritasardakan metro station. I was accompanied by a friend of mine from Europe, who was in Yerevan for a short visit. While the loudspeakers were still announcing the next metro station, we were slowly (as much as it is possible on Yerevan metro’s running escalators), driven up towards the bright entrance of Yeritasardakan. We were carelessly chatting about the hot weather, the new political developments, the Centennial of the Armenian genocide and related events when I heard my friend saying: “Why do they need to portray the juice box and those fruits on the tanks? Look, omg, there are cherries and bananas driving the military airplane, why?”. “What are you talking about?”, I asked, but he was already showing me the huge advertisement posters of an infamous and most probably beloved Armenian juice hung across the quickly-passing escalators. The fruits and juice boxes were ridiculously advertised on military airplanes and tanks, marching forward like heroes, all colorful and clashing with military grayness.

Indeed, I had been passing by them for several months already, and when I am on the escalator, I always check the advertisements. Had I noticed the tanks, the airplane, the slogans? Hardly. Apparently, I had been looking at the posters, but looking through them, with no feelings, without reflecting on how this is an unnecessarily militarized and exaggerated advertisement.

Such an attitude is typical for everydayness in nation states in the South Caucasus, a “form of life which is daily lived in a world of nation states”

(Billig, 2018, 68) that becomes so normalized and taken for granted, rarely commented on and very rarely criticized (Skey 2011, 332). Following Billig's approach, in this context it is also significant to notice the "tendencies of one group, i.e. nation that treats the particular nation as a given in everyday life." The example of the posters is only one among thousands of "banal signifiers" of nationalism (Skey 2011, 334). In this juice advertisement with fruit driving tanks, the image does not explicitly state who the enemy is; however, it definitely assumes the "other" as a target against which force can be used. In this context we can only guess that in most viewers eyes, the latter could be Azerbaijan.

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan has been a frozen yet ongoing conflict for decades. It broke out shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union and throughout the first years of the establishment of the independent states. Even though a cease-fire was signed in 1994 to provide a peaceful resolution to the Karabakh conflict, it has been violated on an almost daily basis. The military symbols in the advertisements contribute to the crystallization of the constant condition of conflict as something normal for these countries to have been engaged in for almost two decades.

In more symbolic terms, the advertisement aiming to promote a certain product reinforces a number of pro-violence associations: (1) It assumes that the war is something appealing and can "sell" a product; (2) it promotes violence and militarism through associating it with harmless juice; (3) it adds a consumerist touch to the process: even though, the producers of the advertisement in question cannot be held responsible for the introduction of nationalistic and militarist sentiments, the business has definitely capitalized and profited from it. Thus, it reinforces the pro-violence discourse, but also uses its existing popularity to sell the product. Eventually, (4) humor and wit serve not only the marketing purpose, but disguise the nationalistic ideology behind it.

Everyday circulation and repetition, the "hidden" origins of the content, an implicit reference to the enemy, humor, and a consumerist approach: these are the most widespread yet unrecognized mechanisms of banal nationalism articulated by the business sector in the South Caucasus. Obviously, business is not the only actor; civil society and citizenry also participate in the process of reproduction. It is important to note that just

like business, all actors easily gain attention on social media as they usually integrate marketing strategies: they are provocative, witty, and funny with, visual content and references to already well-known cultural images, concepts that make them even more appealing and memorable. But their message, sometimes even unrecognized by the content creators (usually designers and copywriters) “hides itself” even better.

Together with the explicit examples of using military symbols like tanks and military planes, there are a number of cases when the discourse excludes certain groups and prevents the peaceful resolution of conflict through more subtle reference to the war and enemy in everyday life. One such example is the anti-occupation narrative in Georgia articulated both by business and civil society. Since 2018 the words “I am from Georgia and 20% of my country is occupied by Russia” has appeared on various online and offline platforms. In order to explain why we call it an exclusive practice, we need to better understand the context, utilization and historic background of the statement.

“20% of My Country is Occupied by Russia”

The narrative of Russian occupation started to gain power in the narratives of the former government of Georgia. Later it turned into a widespread campaign, mainly articulated through digital activities and by small- to medium-sized businesses. And recently it has slowly transformed into a movement.

The group consisting of (mostly) young digital and media influencers who call themselves the “Liberation Disseminating Society” has been actively engaged in demonstrations and digital activism against Russia. “20% of my country is occupied by Russia” has been the main slogan of all their online and offline activities and has been around for at least a year. Very soon after its introduction, this campaign detached itself from the one particular group and now it receives support internationally and is widely reproduced locally by various civil society actors. Black and red colors separated by barb wire stand as the visual sign for it. Even though it mainly started as an online campaign, the slogan quickly became a marketing and promotional strategy of various products and has aligned itself with other causes and ideas.

In the light of the imperialist approach of Russia, the anti-occupation movement seems to represent an attack on colonial forces. After all, in response to the anti-occupation movement Vladimir Putin tried to delegitimize them through false claims on history by framing the Soviet repressions of the 1930s as atrocities against Abkhazians by Georgians and portraying Russia as the protector of peace in the region. This narrative conveniently leaves out the Muhajirs of the 19th century and the fact that Georgians themselves were victims of same repressions by Stalin.³ We do not intend to question the imperial character of Russian politics in South Caucasus, but the major problem is that the current anti-occupation narrative excludes Abkhazians, Ossetians, and displaced people, as well as those living near the borders and directly affected by these activities as interested parties. Long before the introduction of this campaign, Georgia had successfully labeled the 2008 war as a “Russian-Georgian war” and it has been referred like this since then.⁴ Ossetians and their positions, losses, interests, and casualties have never been discussed and are not part of the mainstream narrative.

In the symbolic domain we can see a transformation of visual representation from peace attributes to martial ones. Since 2009 with the approach of the 8th of August many Facebook users in Georgia would change their profile pictures to the photo of poppy flower – the symbol of peace and death. This was a way of commemorating the five-day war of 2008. At verbal level in previous years “Samachablo and Abkhazia are Georgia” was the main slogan of civil society actors and the Georgian state. In recent years we have slowly observed how the words “Abkhazia”, “Abkhazian”, “Ossetia”, and “Ossetians”, and even “Samachablo”⁵ have slowly disappeared and are instead reduced to the “20% of the territory”. 20% of the territory is deprived of face, agency and interest. It is invisible in the presence of a bigger threat – Russia. The latter is considered as the only enemy and obstacle to resolution of the conflict.

³ For further analysis of the speech: <http://open-archives.org/en/newsblogs/interestingnews/27> (Accessed November 20, 2019)

⁴ Since South Ossetia cannot be excluded from the analysis of this war, we will refer to it as the August War.

⁵ Georgians call South Ossetia Samachablo, but the term is not internationally recognized.

Since there is no explicit hatred towards Ossetians and Abkhazians, most Georgian authors and activists stay silent with the fear that it might redirect the resentment from Russia to Abkhazians and Ossetians. We would argue that recognition of the conflict as only involving the two sides of Georgian and Russian has led to the further isolation and disappearance of these groups from the mainstream narrative and has prevented the discussions of possible dialogue between Georgians, Abkhazians, and Ossetians. Such a narrative definitely serves Russian interests in the region, which remains and is seen as the only ally, by the Abkhazian and Ossetian side, and as the only problem to the conflict resolution, by Georgians.

There is no recognition of how the relations of these regions towards Russia vary either. For example, in terms of economy, security, and civil documentation South Ossetia is more internationally isolated and more closely integrated into its patron state Russia (DeWaal 2018, 10). Although Abkhazia hugely depends on Russia too, it shows more resistance as well as more capacity to function independently with its government, banks, etc. Thus in 2014 when Russia proposed “integration treaties” for both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the latter accepted it while Abkhazia demanded a second version. This new document called the “Union Relations and Strategic Partnership,” denied Russian citizens fast-track of citizenship, which made acquiring property in Abkhazia harder (DeWaal 2018).

In this context the term “occupation” becomes problematic, because while Russia has violently interfered in the conflict between South Ossetian and Georgia, and the Georgian government claimed that Russia started the war in August 2008, Ossetians do not necessarily see it the same way. The integration of South Ossetia into the Russian Federation has been actively discussed in South Ossetia. Leader of South Ossetia Anatoli Bibilov has announced that a referendum would be held on this topic and justified this sentiment with the fear of Georgian aggression.⁶ Even though Georgian political scientist Irakli Tskitishvili evaluated this statement as

⁶ For more information, please visit <https://reginfo.ge/politics/item/793-samxret-osetis-de-paqto-respublikis-rusetan-miertebaze-reperendumi-shesawloa-gadadon> (Accessed November 30, 2019)

a “bluff” and as political blackmail against Georgia⁷, one cannot deny that the pro-Russian sentiment is very strong among current Ossetian leadership and Georgia, not Russia, is considered to be the aggressor.

Even though the violent resolution of the conflict has not even been mentioned and has not been the subject of any public debates, we argue that anti-occupation should be understood not just as resistance against imperial forces, while advancing peaceful coexistence of Georgians with Abkhazians and Ossetians, but rather in the context of a “territorial integrity” narrative that has been around since the 1990s and that ignores the grievances of Abkhazians and Ossetians. The challenges to territorial integrity are often referred to by Georgian politicians as the major reason why Georgia cannot join NATO and the European Union. The visual and verbal content of the slogan does not directly justify violence, and is not considered as nationalistic and aggressive by its reproducers, yet it has normalized the vision of Georgians as separate group who in opposition to Russia have right to decide the fate of Abkhazians and Ossetians.

This change in discourse and shift from poppies to barbwire did not take place in one day or a year, but “took its time” until it found its language and visual materialization. With no single leader or group leading the charge, it slowly became seen as natural in the minds of most Georgians. The image of barbed wire that was accepted with admiration slowly penetrated the everydayness of Georgians’ lives through repetition and commodification. First, it was a Facebook frame and a passport wallet and served as a means of communicating the message about Russian aggression in Georgia. At this point it was still associated with the performance of one’s national identity in relevant settings e.g. at borders and airports during passport check, or during important events such as the commemoration of the 5-day war. Later, it was printed on a wide range of products: socks, clothes, bags, it appeared at cafes, bars, banks, pharmacies, even the packages of the sunflower seeds in Georgia. Similar to the juice advertisement in Armenia, businesses like the one of sunflower seeds started to use the slogan to promote their brands and at the same time reinforce the ideology behind it.

⁷ For Georgian translation of the quote, please visit: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/tskhinvali-rusetan-sheertebas-cdilobs/27316014.html> (Accessed November 30, 2019)

The slogan is further normalized through commodification and follows the demand-supply logic of the market. Following the trend by Georgian brand Giovanni Mora, other designers and producers have started to integrate some variations of the narrative into fashion, consumer goods, food, and lifestyle. Now one can buy T-shirts with “Sokumi” and “Gagra” (towns in Abkhazia) printed on them discounted for the 27th of September.⁸ It is no longer a special event like demonstration or speech or even a Facebook post where we express and reproduce our opinions, personalities, and identities in public domain, but rather a consumer good like sugar, T-shirt or socks. It is part of our everyday online and offline lives.

With such wide circulation, narrative like this presents themselves as without history, because we no longer can point to their beginnings or origin. With such camouflage, a narrative can rewrite history, add, and cut it its own terms by excluding certain groups and solidifying images of “us” and “them” divided by barb wire. It can no longer be identified as an ideology or political statement. We eat and drink it, we wear it, we own it in every possible way to the point that the narrative becomes us.

These discourses are the “are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern” (Weedon 1987, 108). Therefore, they are not mere acts of speech or visuals, but are “dehumanized” (read as: human, individual factor taken out of them) in a very literal sense. Paradoxically, despite their dependance on individual material and verbal reproduction by people (like advertisers, internet users), the narratives have acquired a life of their own. Thus, be it juice in Armenia or sunflower seeds in Georgia, they do not simply sell the product, or communicate ideas (or ideologies), they hide them and contain them through integration into our everyday private domains until eventually they become trivial facts and common sense. And one does not notice or question banal truths like that.

They don't Call it Mother's Milk for Nothing

⁸ Online shop for the “Abkhazia”-themed t-shirts” https://www.facebook.com/pg/lacoajgeorgia/shop/?ref=page_internal (Accessed September 13, 2019)

Despite the fact that these narratives “disguise” themselves as ahistorical and “hide” their origins, we should recognize they have at some point been and still are intentionally produced, supported, and promoted by governments and state institutions. The investigation of their origins is neither our aim, nor can we provide ultimate solutions to the deconstruction of the pro-violence narratives. However, we would like to recognize the crucial role of governments and state institutions, as well as the role that similar challenges of building independent nation-state in the context of post-Soviet transformation have played in the construction of pro-war ideologies in Georgia and Armenia.

While all institutions education, media, state policies, academic scholarship, art, and even language have been in the service of building a nation state at varying degrees, ideologies manage to hide their origins best in cyberspace. Since social media trends are governed by domino principle, it is almost impossible to track how the threads start. Thus, viral contents distribute responsibility among such a large number of people that eventually the origins of the ideology behind it cannot be tracked. This repetitive character of social media content and the ability to blur the lines between public and private spaces creates favorable conditions for reproducing nationalism in the everyday lives of internet users while at the same time actively engaging the latter to contribute through comments, pictures, and posts. The anti-occupation narrative discussed was widely distributed as a Facebook frame. Similar trends can be observed in Armenia.

Photos of children dressed up like soldiers and given toy guns in hand went viral on social media in the years between 2015-2017 in Armenia. Harmless “cute” images of little children in military uniforms present little boys as representatives of the nation, while at the same time apply totally different standard to women, who are expected to mother and raise their sons as soldiers. Uniform and toy guns “harmless at the surface” are those material entities that can turn into violent nationalism (Billig, 1995). Feelings of ultimate national pride and unquestioned devotion to symbols, such as the flag, military uniform, etc. intrude into the everyday of the citizens starting from the most fragile group: children. As a piece of children’s clothes, military uniforms are neutralized. They are associated with harmless children; they bring a smile to our faces and through wide

circulation such coupling cannot be perceived as something out of the ordinary.

If we look at the bigger picture, we will understand that this trend was “born” in these specific circumstances to justify state ideology and even actual violence. The militarist school events especially on the week of national holidays were supported and encouraged by the state, covered by local media, and were highly supported by the families of the pupils⁹. In Armenia these were the years of the elaboration of the nation-army concept¹⁰, which was developed and brought onto the agenda later in 2016, after the news of the breakout of violence in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict zone.

“Nation-army is a country where there is no soldier and citizen, but there is a citizen in a uniform and a defender of the nation in civil clothes”¹¹. These were the words of the Armenian Defense Minister in 2016 that found their fame on the streets of Yerevan, within the frame of the Army-Nation concept promotion. Soldiering and citizenship have been interrelated and characterized as male activity even during Soviet times. Military service both back then and also in modern Armenia is considered as a “key tool in the proper ideological socialization of men” (Eichler 2011, 21).

While men are seen as soldiers, women are expected to discipline them as such. In 2018 another advertisement within the frames of the Nation-Army concept harked on women’s role as “signifiers of the traditionalism and reinforcers of socially constructed norms” (McClintock 1993, 61-62). In the ad there was portrayed a milk bottle for a baby with a little toy tank floating inside the liquid. The text next to the bottle said: “Let’s disseminate patriotism from childhood” (Tshagharyan 2018). It was a direct call to Armenian mothers as responsible for the upbringing of their sons (and only sons) as citizen-soldiers and a reminder of biological

⁹ Union of informed citizens. «Ազգ-բանակ» գաղափարախոսության քարոզչությունը ուսումնական հաստատություններում. գեկույց. (Accessed July 13, 2016)

¹⁰ Armedia. “Defence Minister of Armenia Elaborated on the “Nation-Army” Principle.” <http://armedia.am/eng/news/40901/defense-minister-of-armenia-elaborated-on-the-nation-army-principle.html> (Accessed June 3, 2019)

¹¹ For more information visit: <http://www.mil.am/hy/pages/21>

reproduction and motherhood as a priority interest of the state (Eichler 2011, 22).

The Rise and Fall of Militarism

Fortunately, with the last revolution in the Republic of Armenia the concept of the nation-army did not receive enough possibility to expand. Despite the multiple misunderstandings between civil society and the post-revolution government, the extensive propaganda of militarism seems to have backed off. While the pro-violence slogans and calls reached their peak in the 2016 breakout of the Nagorno Karabakh war (Aravor, 2016), in the post-2018 period (Simonyan 2018) the Karabakh conflict has been observed from the angle of peaceful resolution — yet not at every cost and only on mutual terms (News Armenia 2018). On the contrary, the ideas of democracy and citizenship are articulated much more actively and seem to find a larger acceptance.

Interestingly similar to Armenia, in Georgia militaristic narrative of the state faded with the change of the government in 2012. A popular 2006 Georgian song “We Are the Georgia Army” could be an illustration of the state ideology that promoted the army and promised taking back of the lost territories. The army chanted: “We are a Georgian army, we will take back what has been lost.”¹² This narrative repeated itself in speeches of Saakashvili and his party members.¹³ By contrast, in 2017, we see the signs of active resistance to obligatory military service when young Georgian men register themselves as priests of the newly established religious organization just to avoid military service.¹⁴

Although the current anti-occupation and anti-militarist activism in Georgia seems to marginalize the violent expressions of nationalism, as

¹² Follow the link to listen to the song <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FF9DJFOWoLU> (Accessed July 8, 2019)

¹³ In 2010 former Mayor of Tbilisi speaking about taking back territories by force or peace can be read here: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/1944484.html> Later, in 2011 Saakashvili articulating same narrative can be read here: <https://www.ambebi.ge/article/35141-mikheil-saakashvili-saqarthvelo-teritoriebis-dabrunebas-shedzlebs/> (Accessed July 11, 2019)

¹⁴ The political party Girchi has registered organization Biblical Freedom just to let young people avoid military service <https://bit.ly/2pYbJR2> (Accessed July 8, 2019)

the cases discussed above illustrate, the nationalist ideology transformed its expression to more hidden and subtle forms. We are challenged to grasp these hidden forms of nationalism that explain why they are pro-violence practices. A multiplicity of civil society actors and discourses are not necessarily aligned with the original nationalistic narratives of the state. These nationalisms come in many different forms, detach or attach to various commercial or social and cultural interests.

Obviously, this tendency is not unique to only the countries discussed in this article, but rather is an omnipresent phenomenon in the everyday existence of the nation-state. After all, Billig's (2018) research and theory of banal nationalism derives from the idea that democratic countries of the West that tend to see themselves free from the mainstream definition of nationalism also reproduce nationalistic narratives in more subtle and hidden ways in the everyday lives of the nation-states. Since they do not necessarily result in or stem from military offensives, it is impossible to support this claim with empirical data or examine its scope of influence. However, in the Georgian and Armenian context they are directly related to supporting the status-quo of the frozen conflict at the discursive level and hinder any alternative discussion about the relationship between conflicted sides.

Furthermore, the lack of scholarship as well as the voices from the other side of the conflict definitely limit the scope of our analysis spatially and temporally. While writing this article we had to bear in mind the hypothetical argument against our self-critical approach. "But what about the atrocities by the other side?" So far in public discussions the main arguments of every actor in the dialogues suggest that their counterpart is or has been doing the same or worse. As a matter of fact, they might be right. However, we would like to unlearn speaking from this mistrustful position and take a risk. Maybe too much damage has already been done for communal coexistence. And yet we would like to ask "provocative" question: What do we long for? If we set peace as the one and most important aim in the region and place human lives and not the territories and interests of nation-states as our main priority, we might witness a different kind of peace activism in the South Caucasus.

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Stories of Help and Rescue: the Georgian-Ossetian and Nagorno-Karabakh Conflicts

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This article undertakes a retrospective investigation of the multi-layered nature of human relations in the former Soviet Republics of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Written in a style of *life writing*, the article analyzed social phenomena of friendship and hatred in the contexts of interethnic conflicts, with a focus on those who rescued the vulnerable. A number of controversial issues will be touched upon in the context of post-Soviet conflicts, in particular the Georgian-South Ossetian and Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts, which have shown us patterns in behavior of the *human face* that rejects the sinister language of enmity, hate, and violence.

How do ordinary people behave during a period of political violence, ethnic cleansing, and other inhumane practices? Why do they choose to take part in the process of ethnic cleansing and massacres? Hannah Arendt has proposed an answer to this question: because evil is, in essence, *banal* and *trivial*; people are more ready to follow the orders of the repressive system than to bear the burden of *thinking*. They submit thoughtlessly to charismatic figures, unwilling to *think for themselves* (Arendt 2008, 126).

The following question sounds a lot more optimistic: why do others resist violent tendencies and choose to help the victims, saving them from death? What kind of acts of rescue had taken place and how should we define them?

The collection of oral histories in various locations, following the armed conflict in Tskhinval/i and nearby villages, the pogroms in Sumgait and Baku, and acts of violence in Armenian villages and towns, have shown the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon of rescue.

At the site of the Jewish Holocaust Museum, Yad Vashem, one may find the definition of the “righteous” person who saved one or many Jews from death, putting their own life at risk. These people are awarded the honorable title of “Righteous among the Nations” and are considered to be supranational, not belonging to any nation in particular. Over the past few decades, social philosophers have deliberated over the sacralization of identity and global or, as some put it, transnational morality (Gushee, 2011; Klempner, 2006; Hellman, 1999; Oliner and Oliner, 1988).

The disintegration of the Soviet Union plunged the former soviet republics of the South Caucasus into political chaos and civil war. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which saw brutality and violence in abundance, was one of the bloodiest conflicts of the independence movements across the Soviet Union.

The mass movement of Azerbaijanis from Armenia to Azerbaijan and of Armenians from Azerbaijan to Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh started in 1988. During the pre-war period of 1988-1991 there were incidents of violence and massacres on both sides (Huseynova, Hakobyan, and Rumyansev 2012) that affected people motivating them to fight. After mistreated Azerbaijanis of Armenia started to move to Azerbaijan, the idea of friendship, neighborhood, and brotherhood declined. It became dangerous for minorities live in Armenia and Azerbaijan, in the country they considered their homeland.

Another area of conflict in the South Caucasus was South Ossetia, an autonomous region within Georgia during the Soviet period and the scene of a bloody conflict in the period 1989-92 (Ezez 1996). In South Ossetia the conflict started in 1989 and eventually progressed into armed conflict, which took part during three separate timeframes: 1991-1992, 2004, and 2008. After 1989, more than 3,000 people died from both sides in the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, most of whom were civilians. As a result, tens of villages were destroyed, thousands of houses were burned, and tens of thousands of people were forced to flee from their homes and became displaced persons or refugees.

Communities having almost the same traditions, familiar words, and cuisine have now been isolated from each other for a few decades and rarely talk about peace. They are, however, considering that 31 years ago, the people lived peacefully and sat at the same table side by side in their classroom, shared their food, water, and their homes. While coexisting peacefully together in the Soviet Union for more than 70 years, it is essential to understand how they reacted to this new violence and separation.

Being human and having a sense of humanity created some courageous stories of people helping one another in those hard times. This idea is illustrated from one of the interviews where Azerbaijani mother A., who moved from the village Sayat Nova in the vicinity of Masis, Armenia to Baku, Azerbaijan said: “We do not have to agree on anything to be kind to one another.”

In the Soviet Union similar to other nationalities, despite some incidents, particularly related to stereotyping and name-calling, the overall relations were harmonious, and Azerbaijanis and Armenians had good neighborly relations, with *kirvə* (godfather) traditions, mixed marriages, and economic ties. These friendly ties existed not only in Baku or Yerevan but also in rural areas and villages.

Some Armenians alerted the fleeing Azerbaijanis about the impending danger presented by Armenian nationalists and protected them from violence by providing refuge and security in their homes and gradually assisting in their safe passage across the border, sometimes even providing them vehicles. Many Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan who arrived in Armenia before Azerbaijanis moved to Azerbaijan were instrumental in helping those fleeing to find a job or housing to the place to which they were moving to. The cities in Azerbaijan that were later subject to pogroms were characterized by friendship and night-time gatherings outside in the neighborhoods (*məhallə*), which became the focus of informal interactions. The neighborhoods would have gazebos (*besedka*) and branches (*skameika*) in front of the high-rise buildings. There were many cases where the Azerbaijanis demonstrated a will to save their neighbors and friends. Centuries-old cultural exchange among the various peoples of the South Caucasus fostered intimate cultural

interactions. Ethnic Georgians and Ossetians also helped each other to avoid violence at the hands of nationalists.

While analyzing the interviews, it became evident that some Armenians helped their Azerbaijani friends and neighbors and Azerbaijanis helped Armenians. The same was the case with Ossetians helping Georgians and vice versa. These stories are mostly forgotten, or very few of them have been passed on to the next generation. Due to the severe polarization caused by ongoing conflicts and the widespread nationalist discourses, many rescue stories have not been told until now.

Method and Statement of Intent

To some extent, the mystified notion of friendly (Derrida), romantic (Barthes), and especially neighborly relations is imbued with a plethora of colors, manifestations, and meanings, and requires a specific lens through which to investigate specific incidents. These relations are related to the human's everyday life, the *here and now*, *face-to-face* communal relations. As neighborly relations constitute one of the most important components of people's routines, neighborly interactions, on the one hand, cover one's everyday needs of social interaction to a certain point. On the other hand, they can become the key mechanism of (non)rescue at a critical moment in a situation of a force majeure. One objective of this article is to present the reflection of the *human face* in an environment of all-encompassing violence.

We used a collection of ethnographic and oral history methodologies for this joint research. Microhistories allow for the collection of memories, excerpts of individual memory, and personal commentaries under one umbrella. These types of microhistories all have their historical value. They shed light on how geopolitics and political crises have an effect on the lives of ordinary people, just as relations between states are intertwined with the fate of individuals.

Rescue story interviews from Armenians who used to live in Azerbaijan were conducted in the framework of biographical narratives in more than five countries. It was challenging to persuade people to talk on the topic that required recollection of the painful past. Some Georgian-Ossetian stories were collected in settlements of Georgians displaced by the war in a very trying situation. For many, even three decades after the conflict, life

is still not normalized. In Azerbaijan, all the stories were collected anonymously as the respondents feared for their safety as well as putting their jobs and livelihoods at risk. Therefore, the setting of interviews for the authors in all sites was testing to say the least.

Another challenge faced by authors was the access to interviewees that would agree to share their rescue stories from South Ossetia. To fill the gap, authors recourse to two books, "The other picture of war" edited by Megi Bibiluti (2012) and Dina Alborova's (2016) "Cost of Conflict: Untold Stories" that collected oral stories from South Ossetia, which include testimonies on rescue of the other.

A number of unorthodox issues will be touched upon in the context of Georgian-Ossetian and Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts, which have offered us patterns in human behavior that reject the sinister language of enmity, hate, and violence. The literature on the discussion of rescue provides us with a fragmented comparison of some types of rescuers, namely neighbors, relatives, friends, and strangers.

Considering the message given by both countries for peace, the stories supporting peace should be collected and brought to light. These stories happened when entire villages were exchanging their homes between each other (Huseynova 2019) in the two countries while both Azerbaijanis and Armenians were subjected to discrimination. In an atmosphere of hate speech and hostility some brave people on both sides dared to help the so-called "enemy" disregarding their own safety.

The idea of rescue in our cases provides an analytical description of the actions of social agents who take the "uncomfortable" decision to "go against the crowd."

Neighbors Helping Victims: Like One Big Family

In the analysis of social processes in situ, anthropologists are often required to take into account that the evaluation of a particular event or incident may be perceived in a polarized manner among the representatives of various social, political, and religious groups who have lived together side by side for a long time. The perception of the physical environment and interpersonal relations often ends up with the formation and preservation of a stereotypical image of the "other," from whom one must dissociate with both tangible and imagined barriers. During the

separation of communities into two antagonistic camps, these barriers become ever more pertinent especially following an armed conflict. For this reason, we have chosen to focus on the terms neighborhood and neighborliness since they are imbued with the idea of spatiality and are basic units of social interaction.

According to the testimony given by D. from Sumgait (b. 1930), neighbors would provide strategically vital information that would then facilitate the escape of victims: "During the pogroms we switched off the light in the flat and tried to be unnoticeable, but our neighbor told us that we should, on the contrary, switch on the light, because dark windows were an invitation to attack."

There were cases where those Azerbaijanis who demonstrated a will to save their neighbors were punished by thugs. In such circumstances victims were driven to the corner. The sheer pressure on local residents rendered it too difficult for some to take moral responsibility for the lives of their neighbors. M. from Sumgait (born 1941) recounted the events of February 1988:

I looked on at the Street of Friendship. Something was going on and it wasn't possible to cross the street. An enormous crowd was passing through. Some taxi drivers were standing there and one of them shouted at me telling me not to go there... I then returned to Lenin Street and somebody ran up to me telling me not to go there and that people were walking around with rocks. I then ran to my neighborhood and somehow got home. I gave the keys to my neighbor and he took out the car to the parking lot. I stayed overnight at my Azerbaijani neighbors' place on the 27th. My neighbors didn't let me go out in the morning of the 28th. They hid all of my family—me, my wife, and my son. I have four sons—three were in the army at the time. Then we heard that some Azerbaijanis went to our neighbors' flat, knocked on the door, and shouted: "If there are Armenians here then tell us and show us where they are. If you don't tell us and if you're hiding them then we will kill you, too." I thought to myself: "Why should they suffer for my sake? [...]" Then a police car came and the

soldiers gathered the Armenians from the homes and took them to the club. We also went there.

In most of the interviews, Azerbaijanis from Armenia expressed that they did not believe that one day they would be forced to move. Interviewees shared that, after living in Armenia in Vardenis region their whole lives, it was hard to think about leaving their homeland. One of the interviewees, an 80-year-old man, T. from Cakhirli village, said:

My dear child, imagine that you are living in your home all your life, that you have fond memories of your first day in school, your first classroom, your friends, celebrating birthdays, everything that is important to you. It's where I got married and have all my wedding memories. It is where my first child went to the local school. The huge part of my identity is tied to my homeland [Armenia]. And then one day, unexpectedly, my friends advised me to go away for my own safety. I had to leave everything behind and take my family on a hard and unknown journey in order to escape. Others around me were also forced to collect their belongings and leave. How would you respond to leaving all your childhood memories behind? I remember when my Armenian neighbor Bahruz came to talk to me about a serious matter. It was for me to leave. This was the first time I heard the words "running away" and it hit me hard. We spent all our childhood together. But now? Running away? Where? How?

T. was crying while remembering his friend and youth. He added that: "Armenians were not bad people, they were our *kirva* (godfather), brothers, sisters. We had a different religion, ethnicity, and ideas, but in the end, we were sharing salt and bread. It was a provocation, made-up stories. It was not them, not even Bahruz." T. added how Bahruz helped to find ties in Tartar (a region in Azerbaijan) and to pack up valuables.

A 58-year-old Azerbaijani mother called A., who moved from Sayat Nova village near Masis, Armenia, described the events as follows:

I first had to go to Azerbaijan to search for a house and then return to collect our belongings. I left my elderly mother behind as she was unable to travel back and forth. I didn't

know where I would be staying while I searched for a suitable house in Azerbaijan, which was very troubling for me. My mother had excellent friendships with Armenians. After 3-4 weeks, I came back with good news about buying a house. On the way, I was anxious about her safety and hoping and praying for the best. When I returned, she was safe and well. She told me she was terrified of going out even to buy food so her Armenian neighbors brought her food at night. I was very grateful for the risk they took in helping my mother during my absence. They kept her alive and safe.

23-year-old P. added that before leaving city, "Armed Armenians were everywhere looking for Azerbaijanis. Therefore, her mother and the family went to hide in the chicken coop. When Armenian armed men arrived, their neighbor Anush came in front of the house and screamed at them: "They are not here. They went to Baku. Go away! Don't disturb us!"

Cases from South Ossetia echo with the Azerbaijani stories. M., 45, from Tserovani, recounted the following story:

Only my mother and I were at home when my mother saw from the window how armed gang members were pointing to our house [to indicate] that Georgians live there. Being a young girl with only my mother by my side we felt very threatened. Some Georgians had already gone; perhaps they had more information, maybe they had a gut feel of impending danger. Armed people walked in the streets or drove military cars. There was a feeling of complete lack of safety. We lived in a high-rise building and had less chance of escape. We went to my neighbor's home which was 200 meters away. The host family was Ossetian. They gave us shelter and I felt more secure. I spent several nights there. When I recall this story, I have a strange feeling as if it happened with somebody else. I don't have the feeling that this is my story. It seems to me that I'm telling someone else's story. During the shootings, I remember how we hid in the bathroom where we felt secure from stray bullets. In the middle of winter at night,

when we were afraid to stay at home, we used to go into the basement. We spent a few days there like one big family. Finally, we realized that it was impossible to stay in those conditions and we had to escape the city.

T., 58, a woman who lives in Gori, shared the following account:

Many Ossetians fled from Tbilisi, Gori, and other cities to join relatives in North Ossetia. They were afraid to stay here [in Georgia]. My husband and I changed our surname to a Georgian surname, but this didn't help my husband to keep his job—he was fired. I remember how our 17-year-old boy came home all beaten up. Some Georgian youngsters confronted him and told him that Ossetians were no longer welcome to stay here. They accused Ossetians of fighting against Georgians and that's why they beat him as a sign of warning. We were very scared. Some days we were afraid to leave the house. Then one night we sent our son to my sister's in Vladikavkaz and he lived there for several years until the situation became stable here.

The only Georgian friend that never left me during this time of [Georgian-Ossetian] turmoil was my neighbor, Nana. Back then it was not easy to find a job, as factories were closed. We started trading in the Tbilisi market. We used to sell beans, fruits, and dairy products. On the road armed youths stopped the bus and demanded money or goods. Nana always tried to protect me even though it was dangerous for her as well. I was scared that if I spoke in Georgian they would realize from my accent that I was Ossetian. While we were selling in the bazaar I asked Nana to talk to customers on my behalf, because I was afraid I would be treated badly. She helped keep me calm all the time. I used to feel safe next to her. This situation continued for years. When Gori was bombed during the war in 2008 and the Russians came into the city, the first thing I did was run to Nana's house. I knew that this time it was now my

turn to help Nana. Luckily in the end everything went well. Nana passed away two years ago.

Neighborhood, as a social category, has been a primary condition for interactions within Armenian-Azerbaijani and Georgian-Ossetian relations and it has facilitated mutual recognition as well as cooperation.

The Stories of Friends Helping One Another

Most of the stories we have collected came from friends or co-workers. S., a 45-year-old woman from Vorontsovka (known as Tashir city since 1991, Lori region, Armenia), talked about her childhood and her father:

In our village, there were only a few Azerbaijanis. However, as far as I know, we always lived there. Anyway, my father was one of the best school teachers in our village. He enthusiastically taught children. After a while my dad was promoted to headmaster in the school. As the only Azerbaijani teacher, being a headmaster in an almost Armenian school was incredible. Towards the end of the 1980s things started to heat up. Unfortunately, I don't remember the details, but my mother and father were discussing it a lot. My father had a friend in a high position who had informed him about the coming danger. It was after the Sumgait events, one freezing March night. My father's friend and my parents were talking. It was very late and I was asleep. All of a sudden, I woke up hearing gunshots, screaming, and car screeching. A lot of Armenians with guns were screaming and calling on my father to leave the country. My father's friend went outside and yelled at them to stop. Immediately he called the police and they protected our house all night. It was a terrible time, and I was horrified and did not even go to school. After two days, with the help of my father's friends, we had to move to another house for our safety. We later escaped to Baku. My father decided to withdraw his money from the Armenian bank. Even though my mother was terrified at the thought of him returning to collect his funds, my father assured her that his friend would assist

and ensure that everything will be alright. My father returned safe and sound with his money. His friend helped him.

In many stories, interviewees revealed that Azerbaijani families had stayed in Armenian households for a while. L., a 78-year-old woman from Qaraqala village (Dzoravanq in Armenian) in the Vorontsovka district, told us how they spent many nights in her friend's house:

We sold our house very soon and could not find a house in Azerbaijan. My husband and I decided that our children and I should go and stay with Irina, my childhood friend. We had attended the same school. I had left the village to live with my husband after we married. Irina received us very warmly; we never felt any discrimination or coldness. She was taking care of us and never allowed anyone to know we were there. The time we spent living with Irina and her husband was somehow sad and happy. It was quiet, and I was with my friend. At the same time, I knew the terrible truth that we should leave very soon.

23-year-old P. from Masis, Armenia told the story of his mother's family:

My mother and her family took the train to go back [to Baku.] The weather was really cold. When they thought they were safe, a group of armed Armenians went to the train. They were threatening to kill the Azerbaijanis. My mother and her family fled the train. They had Armenian friends living nearby. It was very dangerous at that time to host Azerbaijani families. However, they were accepted and stayed there until things calmed down.

For the testimonies below we apply the idea of the strength of weak ties (Granovetter 1973). On a personal level, individual identity and otherization play significant roles in determining perceptions of the *other*. For instance, according to O. from Hrazdan, Armenia, who previously lived in Mingechaur, Azerbaijan, her close friend Intizar abandoned years of friendship and neighborly relations with her: "All of a sudden, she [Intizar, her best friend since childhood] became concerned with the apparent ecological threat posed to all sorts of species in the "national" ecosystem. She repeatedly mentioned the butterflies in Topkhana Forest

and the flowers in Shusha [Shushi in Armenian], which were allegedly threatened by Armenians in Karabakh “with malicious intent.””

These “threats” constituted a counterweight to the longstanding friendship and neighborly relations of the past. In contrast, according to the same respondent, during the period of tensions leading up to the pogroms in Azerbaijan, Leyla, who was barely acquainted with O., offered her safety in case of an eruption of violence. She offered help in spite of a real risk to her life, in contrast to Intizar, who supposedly had motives to hold an antagonistic stance.

It is within a similar framework that acts of rescue occurred in Sumgait. According to testimonies given by the Vanyan family, they received help that was least expected from people with whom they did not have previous neighborly relations. The victims were baffled by the help surprisingly extended to them.

E., a woman who resided in Sumgait, recounted the following about the perpetrators of the pogrom:

They began to yell at the door: “Is it you who poured hot water on us, tormented us and cursed us? Now you will see what we will do to you!” And they started to hit me from all sides. They said they would burn me with boiling water. All that I remember is how my Azerbaijani neighbor ran around shouting, “You’ve already beaten her. It’s enough. I won’t let you burn her.” His name was Bəylər. He and his brother lived on the third floor. I was lying on the asphalt, surrounded by these jerks. Bəylər and his brother broke up the circle and shouted, “Enough. We won’t let you burn her. What has she done to you?” After consulting each other, the criminals said, “Okay, we’ll leave. But it’s a shame that we didn’t burn her.” And they actually left [...]

Her son V. recalled the following: “We did not expect that from him because he was a drug addict. He was always smoking and didn’t get along with Armenians.” Such stories from Sumgait depict a complex picture of human relationships in an extreme situation.

Fieldwork on the matter among Ossetians shows a breadth of cases where language played a vital role in people's escape from discrimination and violence. 58-year-old T., a local Ossetian who used to live in Tshinvali but now lives in Gori, told us the following account:

I don't even remember how all this started. I am originally from Tskhinvali and married and lived in Gori. Both my husband and children are ethnic Ossetians. Back then I worked as a teacher in a kindergarten. Soon everything changed—we went through wars, famines, and difficult times. One day, the kindergarten director told me that I could no longer work. The problem was that I wasn't fluent in the Georgian language. At work, they always knew that Georgian was not my native language, but this never posed a problem working with children. I was most upset that my Georgian staff did not raise their voices or come to my defense. I knew that it was because of my ethnicity.

Strangers Helping Strangers: 'I could feel that this man was innocent'

Even though there are very few recorded cases where complete strangers help victims, they were also present. According to the nationalistic logic, "the enemy" should be confronted, but sometimes the potential perpetrator not only sets the victim free but also helps the victim. The question is why.

The testimonies bring us to the understanding of relationships between empathy and rescue. Apart from the philosophical and ethical issues regarding the plurality of categories related to rescue and empathy, it is important to refer to those respondents that have outlined the events that took place in Soviet Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia as well as assistance given from strangers to other victimized strangers. The structure of empathy brings forth further challenges to our analysis. Empathy, on close examination, manifests itself in myriad forms, which are often difficult to extrapolate to the sphere of morality and ethics, to the pureness of the altruistic behavior of rescuers. In one way or another,

the spontaneous unmanaged sympathetic attitude sometimes was the reason for rescuing several people in trouble.

Below is the dramatic story of X., who was an 11-year-old student when a band of men from Popular Front of Azerbaijan (PFA) captured her and her extended family and locked them in a basement in Baku. One of the young members of the PFA party freed the entire family, taking them all out of danger.

It was January 13, 1990 in Baku. Some Popular Front guys forcefully entered our apartment and started to beat up my uncle. My mother was continually pleading for mercy and clinging on to the hand of the person beating my uncle. My mom spoke fluent Azeri and the thug thought she was an Azerbaijani neighbor. The young guy pushed her aside and took no notice of her plea. She was screaming: “No I am not a neighbor, I am an Armenian, the man’s sister.” They took us all to the basement. I could observe the attacker begin to soften, and this transformation happened within three to four hours. I remember when he first entered our house, he was full of hate and loathing towards his captives. He kicked our suitcases asking us sarcastically whether we were fully packed and ready to flee. I don’t even know his name. I just know that he was not ErAz (Erevan Azerbaijani)²⁵ he was from Baku. I felt he connected with me as he suddenly became very sympathetic towards me—I was just a child in this difficult situation. I was rude and argumentative with the thugs. The guy who rescued us told me, with a kind face, that when I arrive in Yerevan I’d be taught how to be a good girl. When the group of attackers brought us to the basement they separated the women from the men—there were seven of us, all relatives. My uncle—my mother’s brother—was taken to another room where men were beating them up. My mom was begging the guy who was gradually becoming kind to us to stop beating my uncle.

²⁵ ErAz, “Erevan Azerbaijanis” is a colloquial term for Azerbaijanis originating from Armenia.

He looked at me and said: "Let her ask me." I asked and he went with his friends to the "execution" room and brought my uncle back. I was shivering. He fetched a blanket for me and my mom. He took us under his wing and provided safe passage to the [Soviet] soldiers. At early morning, January 16, we left Baku by ferry.

X. admitted that her story makes people cry.

S., 37 years old, recalled his story of rescuing a complete stranger, but this time S. himself was an agent of rescue. S. was just following his gut feeling that the victim was not guilty even though the dominant doctrine of that time dictated that they are guilty by definition. He listened to his instinct rather than nationalistic arguments:

It was January 1990 and it was very cold in the mountains of Shida-Kartli. There was enormous tension between the Georgians and Ossetians. They were hunting each other like animals. There were special groups patrolling the area to evaluate each step the other groups made. Sometimes they would forget the reality and, thinking about the peaceful past, they would find themselves in the territory controlled by the enemy. The same happened on that day. The chairman of the local administration Zelim Kelekhsaev was on his way to his parents. He forgot that there was a safe road and a dangerous road as well. The Georgians found him and took him prisoner.

I remember I had just turned 16 that year. On my birthday, the elders blessed me and said I was already old enough to stand by them and protect my homeland from the enemy. It was hard for me to realize who that enemy was, as I grew up with Ossetians and could not understand why they would be our enemies.

Late that evening our group went out on patrol. Nearby the conventional border we found an Ossetian who tried to run away. They caught Kelekhsaev and brought him to the headquarters. Judging from his clothes I could see he was going to visit someone and did not look like a gunman at all. At the interrogation, he said he was not an enemy;

he was just going to see his friend. Nobody listened to him. My heart was telling me that this man was not an enemy. A couple of times I tried to tell the elders that this man did not look like an enemy, but as soon as I looked in their faces I would go silent. Yes, they have told me I had grown up already, but at that moment I was an inexperienced, honest kid.

It was New Year's Eve and I thought they would have mercy and would not torture him. I was wrong; at first they beat him up, then took off his clothes and locked him in a cellar; it was very cold. I was wearing warm clothes and was still cold. When they took his clothes off, I lost peace of mind; for sure he would freeze to death. He was the first prisoner I ever saw in my life.

Late at night our people left, some to celebrate and some to the frontline. Only two of us stayed in the headquarters. I could feel something inside me saying this man was innocent and I had to save him. I knew they would torture him again when they would come back. I told my partner on duty I was going to let the prisoner go. He did not oppose me and said I could do anything I wanted... I went down the cellar; I was careful because was afraid of my comrades. They would not kill me of course for my intention but I would be in big trouble. I opened the door bravely, as I did not want him to see me scared. He was freezing standing there, shivering. I ordered him to come out and gave him my warm military coat and his sports pants. He took the clothes at once. I showed him the safe direction in which to run.

I'll never forget what happened after. He wasn't shivering anymore—he just looked at me in fear and distrust. Then he whispered: "Shoot now; I know you'll kill me anyway." I said no and forced him to run. He started away slowly but after several steps stopped and told me: "You are a good person, people like you do not die. You need to live a long life." It was not only gratitude, it was like an order—

live a long life. Later I found out that the man was safe. I've never regretted about what I did (Bibiluri 2012).

The Azerbaijani case reveals the story of M., a 38-year-old man who was born in the village in the Vardenis region. Y. describes the events:

I was eight years old but still dream about the days we had. We were living in Qizilbulag that was situated in Basarkecher [now Vardenis]. Our village was mixed, with 120 Azerbaijani families and and 700 Armenian families. After Yerevan, we were one of the first villages. There were several Armenian villages between us and the border. A lot of Azerbaijanis were losing their high-ranking jobs. My father's friend, who worked as a brigadier at the tobacco factory, lost his job and he and his family were staying with us. My father was looking after them, too. It was a very crowded house. The tension was real; the stay was impossible. Azerbaijanis were fired from their jobs and were not respected at all. The elders decided that it was time to leave. On November 28 [1988] we collected all [belongings] we could and went to the border. The border was far away, and with a lot of belongings and two families, it took us a while to get there. But the problem was the way we were heading. It was between Armenian villages. While my dad was driving, armed locals stopped us. My mom hugged us very tightly. I felt it ended, and we would be dead. In a second they would let others know about us and would take all our belongings. My dad and his friend went to talk to them. In a few minutes, they returned and drove to the border again. After a while with a great shock and fear, my dad told us that because they knew that there were children, they let us go and told us never to return. Furthermore, they pointed out the safe roads without armed soldiers and Saqqalilar [meaning "long-bearded" in Azerbaijani—the nationalists]. I don't know how I would have wound up here if they were not good people. There were some stories of violence, and we escaped because they did not harm us.

The professional ethics of doctors was also harshly challenged during the nationalistic movements. Many testimonies state that medical personnel were placed under massive pressure by thugs. A refugee woman from Baku who used to work in Sumgait testified that ambulances would not arrive to help injured Armenian victims. Many terrifying stories of women who were giving birth at the time show that in the atmosphere of radical nationalism, victims were fully dependent on what we can call favoritism and exclusive treatment, which was actually based on some form of sympathy or bribery. Presumably, one in trouble was dependent on his or her appearance and ability to make an impression on potential rescuer.

G., 60 years old, from Kheiti, who now lives in Khurvaleti IDP settlement, shared the following story:

I know almost everyone in Tskhinvali. I'm a good car mechanic so I was well known among many clients in the city. Tskhinvali was part of my soul, so I thought nobody would ever try to hurt me there. Still it happened. Once some strangers hit me so hard that I lost consciousness. I can't say how long I was unconscious but when I woke up car lights were pointed at me. Someone grabbed me very harshly and threw me into the trunk of the car.

They took me to a nearby old touristic site, opened the trunk, pulled me out, and shouted, "Stand up!" Another person approached me—I realized he was going to beat me. I pleaded and told them that I had family to look after and had never done anything bad to anyone. Then he jumped on me and stabbed a knife into my heart. I felt horrible pain and lost my senses again.

I still don't know who took me to the emergency room. Doctors Aivar Bestaev and Alik Tasoev performed the surgery. I was dead and they brought me back to life. I was bleeding out; they transfused three liters of blood. The entire hospital was on its feet. "It's G., we need to save him!" It was Rosa's voice—one of the nurses. They gave me all the blood they could. Ossetians were in line: Zura and

Rudik Jioevs, Alan Bitiev... “For a good man we will always do as much as we can,” they said.

In several days they transported me to Tbilisi. The doctor who checked the surgery wound could not hold his delight: he should have been the real doctor who first treated your wound.

Whenever I hear the names Aivar or Alik, I am filled with happiness. But I still don’t know the name of the person that took me to the hospital.

‘Tradition’ as a Rescuer

The vernacular understanding of cosmopolitanism is based on the experience of mutual coexistence, fluency of language, and recognition of the culture of others. The centuries-old cultural exchange between the various peoples of the South Caucasus fostered intimate cultural interactions and a shared taste in music, food, literature, and pop culture. In this environment, mixed marriages were common. T., a resident of Znaur, 52 years old (Alborova 2016, 65), shared the following story:

In 1988, I graduated from the Institute of Economy, at the faculty of light industry in Moscow. I returned and married into a family with a Georgian mother and Ossetian father. Thus, the family that I happened to join was mixed. I had heard back then that local Georgians would often gather at the house of one of their leaders. They gathered and discussed future actions. They had plans—this was happening during Gamsakhurdia’s time. A slogan suggesting that Georgia was for Georgians, and that Ossetians, who were aliens, were welcome to use the Roki tunnel, and those who wanted to live with us could stay and those who didn’t were free to go through the Roki tunnel because this territory belonged to the Georgians. These were popular phrases and slogans, which had already penetrated South Ossetia.

There were Georgians in our districts—nationalists—and they would also gather. For instance, I can even name you the village, Sunisi, where one of them lived. He used to

work here, in the district, and they would gather at his place and talk as they were having dinner, which is expected from a Caucasian person. But the conversations they would have were about future plans, plans for a revolution, which they had been plotting on the territory of South Ossetia. Back then the conversations revolved around South Ossetia, an autonomous district within Georgia. There were mixed marriages, but they were more reserved towards these developments, because it was way more difficult for them as there were both Georgians and Ossetians living in these families. On the other hand, those who had little kinship with Georgians entered into disputes with the Georgian nationalists. These disputes often came down to fist fighting. There were lots of incidents. But back then the police were still around and they managed to intervene.

To be honest, we did not expect what ensued. We thought that it would have been much smoother. It was only later on when I actually realized what was coming. Why? Probably because, well, first of all I grew up in a family where my dad had very warm, friendly relations with Georgians. In our house where I grew up we used to host a lot of Georgians and I had the impression that Georgians were the same as Ossetians. Afterwards, when I got married and moved in with a mixed family, we had our Georgian relatives visiting us very often. In other words, I had only seen amicable and warm relations [between Ossetians and Georgians]. Even when my husband said that we had to leave and save the children, and that the Georgians were about to come and we had to save ourselves and our children, I still kept thinking that this was utterly impossible.

I quickly grabbed my child, who was then two years old, and I was seven months pregnant with our second child. I packed and thought to myself that this could not really be happening. I refused to believe it until the very last moment. But we were tipped off by a local Georgian... A

local Georgian man came over and told my husband that they were coming and that he had to send his wife and the child away just in case. I am still praying for this man. If it had not been for him we would have stayed and I think a tragedy would have happened. When they came, they set up a position very close to our house. And the room where I stayed with my child was full of bullets, the windows were smashed, and the cot was filled with shell casings. In other words, it would have been a tragic end. As I said earlier, we were tipped off by a local Georgian. They say he lives on Georgian territory. I was curious to know his fate. How is he doing? I even sent him a warm message saying that thanks to him, my child and I managed to stay alive. (Alborova 2016)

Aside from Russian, the lingua franca of the Soviet Union, many non-Azerbaijanis, especially Armenians, struggled to learn the Azerbaijani language and used it more as a “substitute” language of interaction, as a means of integration. The significance and power of such symbols (e.g., language or cultural interaction) acted as agents of rescue, as was the case in the incident that took place with R., a woman, born 1968, in her flat in Sumgait. The case of S. from Mingechar sounds more tragic. She faced nationalist hooligans explaining them how dear to her heart was Azerbaijani culture: “Look at these wonderful books! I have read them all.” S. tried to stop the thugs from violence. This way she managed to distract their attention from her balcony on the fifth floor at the moment when her four children were climbing over the balcony to the neighbors. They all survived but as compensation for her good knowledge of the Azerbaijani language and culture, S. was severely beaten, not killed. Fieldwork materials display a breadth of cases where culture played a vital role in people’s escape from violence. The incident concerning R., who now lives in Stepanakert, shows knowledge of well-known “Azerbaijani” cultural symbols and their connection with ethnic identity facilitated the rescue of her family and prevented the plundering of her flat: “The thugs saw books by Saadi²⁶ on the bookshelves, while they didn’t notice the *Wounds of Armenia* by Khachatour Abovian next to them.”

²⁶ Saadi known as a Persian poet also celebrated in Azerbaijan.

The cultural integration of certain Armenians and Azerbaijanis can be demonstrated by a number of aspects. For instance, some married couples gave Muslim and respectively Christian names to their children as a result of the institution of *kirvalik*.²⁷ Furthermore, in some Armenian homes one could find elements of the local culture (e.g., pictures of Azerbaijani saints, *Athagha*, found on the shelves of homes subject to the pogroms or presented by victims to perpetrators at the door). The innate similarity in appearance²⁸ as well as the acquired similarities (e.g., golden teeth and other internalized attributes that represented “Azerbaijaniness”) made it impossible to distinguish the *us* (Azerbaijanis) from *them* (Armenians). This is why the perpetrators asked for the passports of their targets in order to verify the nationality of their victims. This level of integration and indistinguishability strengthened the standardization and universalization of soviet culture and, to some extent, helped some escape the attacks.

From an interview with E. living in Detroit, Michigan:

After [the pogrom in Sumgait] we continued to work for a whole year. [...] I would continue to go to Sumgait for work... I would go without a passport, but I would always be asked on the street where my passport was. There was always a Russian soldier on the bus. I said that if I carried my passport with me they would kill me straight away. I travel without a passport because I could speak Azerbaijani and nobody would lay a finger on me, but with a passport I wouldn't be able to travel to Sumgait. I would travel like this for a year and then we left in the summer...

E. was a piano teacher who was rescued by the parents of her student. She lived in Azerbaijani family in Baku for two weeks before fleeing to Moscow in the early 1990s. She left her pet rabbit, Masha, with the family.

²⁷ *Kirvalik* or *kirve* is the name given to the person who plays a part in the circumcision ritual.

²⁸ For example, during the military operation “Wedding in the mountains” in the capture of Shushi/Shusha, Armenian soldiers were ordered to wear white crosses on their sleeves so they would be able to differentiate between Armenians and Azerbaijanis.

The authors employ the concept of rescue in the context of ethnic cleansings and persecuted victims who were chosen as scapegoats (Girard 1977, 1986). D., who is 33 years old from Karaleti, South Ossetia, shared his story:

It was August 12. My neighbors and I were gathered in my yard. Suddenly marauders snuck up on us. There were eight of us and five had managed to run away. They caught three of us and put us in a truck—I went unconscious. When I came to my senses we were already in Tskhinvali. It was very dark, but I saw that we were nearby a department store in a cellar of some building. The third person who was also kidnapped never showed up again. I have no idea what they did to him on the road. They were beating us and swearing at us. One of them told me in Russian they would take us to the graves of their dead and kill us right there. One of the Ossetians told him: “Let me take them there. The Georgians killed my brother, I have to avenge him. I will kill these pigs on those graves.”

To make a long story short they let him take us; they put us in an Opel and the Ossetians turned to us and said: “Don’t be afraid; we will let you go, but first we have to treat your wounds.” They took us to the house of one of the Ossetians, hid us in a cellar, and treated us. The next day they took us close to Karaleti. We were in our village, but we could not go to our houses; they would find us again. That’s why we hid in the orchards—for four days we were lying on the ground.

Even though this particular story has a “happy ending,” the entire narrative shows that human sacrifices as a pre-modern religious act of revenge (blood for blood) were there. Similar rhetoric and sinister actions were registered from both sides during the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict.

‘Retail’ and ‘Wholesale’ Rescuers: Ordinary People vs. Officials

There was another type of rescuer who had power to use some effective leverage in order to save many people at once. That is the case of the head

of town (*gorispolkom*) in one of the provincial towns in Soviet Azerbaijan. T. had many phone calls from the members of Popular Front who put enormous pressure on him to start pogroms in his town. "It will never happen in my town!" he kept answering them. After many renouncements, the radical nationalists sent him a parcel with a set of female underwear. That way the tough "true" Azerbaijani men tried to mock a "weak and sensitive" man, though he rescued thousands of Armenian lives. Empowered individuals would think and act the same way the ordinary people did but with multiplied effects.

Here is another marvelous case about the Georgian militiaman (i.e., Soviet policeman) R, who is now 59 years old and resides in Tbilisi:

It was in 1991-1992 when the Georgian-Ossetian armed conflict was in progress and the tense situation also concerned other ethnic minorities. So Ossetians mainly were forced to leave the country. For a secure emigration, they needed to change their surnames to Georgian ones. Most of them went to North Ossetia. When they were crossing the border, they needed to have Georgian sounding surnames. The temporary passport was enough for crossing the border, where their nationality wasn't visible but a Georgian surname was. This document was a temporary kind of passport, similar to an ID card, that would expire in a month. I was then one of the officials who could solve these problems and issue a passport. They would ask me for help— they wanted to leave Georgia, but until they crossed the border, in order to avoid problems, they needed a Georgian surname written in their documents. Of course, I could decline the requests. They just wanted to cross the Georgian border and go somewhere and wanted to avoid problems when their documents were checked—that's why I did what I did. They said that while crossing the Georgian border, they could have problems because they were Ossetians, Abkhazians, Armenians, Azeris... They did not lie.

Many came to me during that period. I did it for more than 250 people. There are still so many people whose surnames

I changed. As standard procedure for changing the surnames, they would bring certificates from the institute of ethnography and history, which was the institution of identification of the surnames—the institution was giving a certificate that proved that the former surname of their ancestors was Georgian. But this is another case. Some of them were coming from Tbilisi because they could not change their surnames there, since they required official documents issued by the court... The bureaucratic process for these types of things was endless. They couldn't wait and wanted to emigrate the next day, that's why it was urgently needed. By law, this document was given free of charge. I never received money for providing those documents. All these people knew me and trusted me. It was based on bilateral mutual trust.

They knew that the document was issued for a one-month period. They would say: "I only want to cross the border and if you wish, I will tear up this certificate and send it to you by post in order to assure you that I will not use it for other purposes." It was just like a temporary visa, but under another surname. At that time the road to Tskhinvali was blocked, so most Ossetians had to leave through Larsi. When they submitted a document with a Georgian surname on it to the border control, there wasn't a problem.

At that time, there was no computer system to run checks, and verification was normally done at the border, that's it. Ossetians knew Georgian perfectly and in order to prove their new surnames they would answer in Georgian to avoid any problems. Moreover, those who sold their houses here and were going to resettle were carrying their belongings and furniture. Those Ossetians were not saying that they were leaving to North Ossetia, instead they used to say that they were going to Stavropol or somewhere else in Russia, where they had already bought a house.

There was also civil war in Tbilisi back then. The situation was unstable in the country, and there were bandit groups

all over. When they noticed a loaded car, they would think that the people were running away, so they were not “ours.” So the bandit groups or criminals could possibly rob them and even kill them. Because of this I was giving out Georgian documents. People would show the documents [to the bandits] and say: “I’m a Georgian, bro, going to some Russian city.” Someone who knew me well would accompany them and would vouch for them, that they would not sell me out and create problems for me. Of course, I would have a problem if I was reported to the authorities. I was breaking the law. If a person was a criminal or was wanted by the police, I would refuse, because I was already taking a big risk. When I knew that the person is decent and just needs to cross the border, I was just giving them the freedom to move and that’s it.

One time, close to an Ossetian village, there were shootings between Georgians and Ossetians. Two guys were injured and were going through treatment in our hospital. It was dangerous for them to stay in the hospital, because they were Ossetians—some of those Georgians might have attacked the hospital and killed those two. I gave documents to both of them and secretly sent them to Vladikavkaz to receive treatment there. The head of the hospital asked me whether I needed them for the investigation. I said I didn’t because they had already been interrogated. That’s why I let them go and they were able to move freely. They moved to Vladikavkaz. Today they are safe and sound and some of them are now my friends.

R. actually saved people by bending the rules of the legal system.

There were negative examples of dysfunctional behavior by officials as well. In Azerbaijan the events were no less dramatic. Soviet soldiers in Sumgait hesitated to intervene and help Armenian victims as they were not given any orders to do so. According to E., “The soldiers looked on for two long days, with weapons in hand, as the perpetrators of the pogroms ran riot.” In these circumstances, the significance of local individuals who rescued multiplied.

Many interviewees reported about their observations of the vacuum of state power. K., who was born in 1942, lived in Sumgait. She worked as a manager in Housing and Maintenance Office №11, which served the city's 17th, 10th, and 8th neighborhoods. She recounted the following account:

Many of those living in our building, my employees, came to our house. Even the figurehead of the *Aksakal* [white-bearded man] Mahmudov Jamil. They all invited us to their homes, but I told them that I would not go anywhere. This was around three o'clock in the afternoon. Shirinov Arshad, who lived opposite us on the second floor in a one-bedroom flat, also came in [and joined the other guests]. He kept insisting that we hide in his flat. I, nevertheless, didn't want to go, but my mother-in-law whispered in my ear and told me to come to my senses and go there as it was a safer place. [If the bandits broke into the house] disgrace might be brought upon the girls [they could be raped].

Aksakal (means "white-bearded man") is an elder whom the *Jamaat* (means "the people") obeyed according to the ethics of common law. Another vocal incident happened in 1988 nearby the Azerbaijani town Aghdam, where Khuraman Abbasova, one of the Soviet kolkhozes chairpersons, flung her headscarf to the ground in defiance to prevent the bloodshed. All those cases indicate the extent to which it was the "traditional" informal social context; that is, people tried to solve problems of illegitimate violence in the framework of *adat* (means customary rules, rather than the formal law). In other words, people were compelled to switch to norm-based regulation mode, squeezing out state regulations. It was a vacuum, a gap in the formal law that revealed the weakness of the state at the time.

A difficult memory

X recollected the following story:

As the ferry gradually left the shore and sailed very slowly we were still very frightened. We were standing on the bow of the ferry. My mom told me in a very weird voice, "Anna, my dear, look back—it'll be the last time you'll see this scene." I looked back and the saw the sun-drenched

Boulevard. I saw Baku, the city I grew up in, and for some unknown and inexplicable reason I knew that I would never return there. This moment has left an indelible mark in my memory.

A., born in 1973, from Yerevan, stated: "I love visiting Tbilisi, because it smells like my home town Mingechaur in Azerbaijan. This is because of the smell of the Kura River. It makes Tbilisi so homey, it brings me my childhood feelings and memories, in a way."

Many respondents, former residents of Baku, remember the freshness of the Caspian Sea, the Khazar²⁹, its sounds, semblance, and smells. They remember faces as well.

The pogroms and ethnic cleansings have left behind a deep scar in the consciousness of victims. The incidents in Sumgait have been repeatedly discussed in public discourse in Azerbaijan, often in conspiratorial terms ("Armenians organized the pogroms themselves"). These dramatic events altered the social and ethno-cultural landscape of the cities and regions of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Ossetia to an unrecognizable degree.

Many Sumgait residents who got the best Soviet internationalism upbringing became extremely xenophobic after what they experienced. They had nightmares for years after the events. Svetlana, who now lives in Stepanakert, tries hard to forget the horrific flashbacks. She's never felt nostalgic for her hometown since then. Bakuvians from Michigan complain that they have no reason to return to Baku, "no friends, no colleagues, no gravestones" (R., Michigan). They actually talk about the de-cosmopolitanization process of international (in Soviet parlance) cities and towns, which results with the radical transformation of the cultural landscape. Admittedly many of the respondents feel nostalgic for a city that virtually does not exist anymore. The famous chess player Garry Kasparov, a former resident of multicultural Baku, summarized the statements made by the participants of this study, stating: "No, I do not miss Baku, because the Baku that I loved no longer exists."

M., a South Ossetian respondent, told the following account:

²⁹ A coastal district in Azerbaijan.

It was January 10, 1991. I was a student. I was spending my holidays in Akhgori with grandmother. The period of the exam was approaching and I had to go to Tskhinvali, even though we knew that there was a tense situation. But I did not expect that everything would end so badly. I used to study at home for the exams from morning till evening, but the situation was so tense, I heard the sound of shooting more often. There were announcements by megaphone at 6 a.m. I remember so well this episode, I will never forget.

They called out "Ossetians, leave the town" in the Ossetian language. When you are not ethnically Ossetian and you are a representative of another group, when they don't call every inhabitant but only Ossetians, of course, this is a threat to me. The population was split into two. Several weeks earlier, my little 13-year-old brother was beaten in the park for his ethnicity and our mother took him to Akhgori. She was afraid that such a thing could happen again.

The experiencing Georgian-Ossetian conflict traumatized I. from Tskhinvali (Bibiluti 2012):

I can't remember what date it was; I'm trying to forget that tragic period completely. But miracles happen during war, too, and those who carry arms and bring death can do good, too....

After two days spent in the cellar we heard some noise outside the door. Someone carefully opened the heavy iron door; we saw a machinegun first and then tall men in military uniform came in. "Don't shoot us," I whispered in Georgian. "Are you Georgian?" the soldier asked. "No. We have only children here," I managed to say.

The soldiers turned back and put his finger to his lips. It was apparent he warned someone to be quiet and then called someone upstairs that there was nobody downstairs, then he went into the cellar. The second soldier followed him; they looked around our shelter using the torchlight and asked me if we had food. I could not say a word; others

were speechless from fear and astonishment, too. What would you think? An enemy soldier came in, concealed our existence from his commander, petted the children, and then asked for food.

I admit I thought they were hungry and that's why they asked about the food. I pointed them at the canned food and said it was horrible to eat without bread.

One of the soldiers took out some bread from his backpack; the other one took out dry food—soldier's meal—and put it in front of the children. They went back to the door and quietly warned us not to go outside.

My husband came back the next day. He managed to find a closed truck. We all got into the back of the truck and started for Vladikavkaz.

The descriptions of the unprecedented violence are linked to the difficulty of talking about such traumatic experiences, the problems of individual memories. I. recalled the following:

When our apartment was ruined we found shelter in the cellar. We lived in horrible humidity, and for some time some time we didn't even have food for children. Infants were in a better situation, as we, their mothers, breastfed them. We expected death at every second. We couldn't even lock the cellar door as we were afraid that someone would come and fire upon the locked door and one of us inside would be killed for sure. We hoped that when they'd find the cellar we wouldn't let them kill children and surrender as prisoners together with the children. There were only women, children, and two elders in the cellar. Our men were not fighting but were trying to take us to safety. They left and failed to come back due to intense military actions. We didn't let the infants cry so nobody would hear we were hiding; as soon as they started crying we put a breast in their mouth. Older children knew they had to be silent. We lived like we were buried alive in the dark, with rats.

From the Azerbaijani stories it was apparent that friendship—sacrificing your own life for the so-called “enemy”—was the main thought. As a result of war, people suffered intensely because of their emotional state and lost their values. People’s mixed feelings of friendship and hate were most significant. They were the ones living together, sharing their food, but were now “the enemy.” Their feelings were suppressed by the community, and for some, it was the first time they talked and expressed themselves. While interviewing the people, the longing for their homelands and friends was clear. Most of the time, they mentioned Armenians being “brainwashed and did not have any intention to commit all this violence.” People still could not believe the things that had happened and lived in trauma. The rescue stories are the only hope they have for peace.

Conclusion

The aforementioned cases reveal three categories of agents of rescue: neighbors, friends (including in-laws and work colleagues), and strangers (this final category represents the most unique case).

In this paper, the authors have touched upon the following philosophical question: what motivates a person, a neighbor, and a friend to risk their lives and save the “other?” The answers lie in what makes that “other” a human (*adam*, *insan* [in Azerbaijani]; *mard* [in Armenian]; *adamiani* [in Georgian]; *адæймаг* [in Ossetian]—all words for “human being”). The multifaceted process of “mental work,” which can be conceptualized as conscience or morality, renders the individual human a social and political agent who desires to express their will and change the world around them.

The testimonies included in this article show how the agents of the dehumanization of the “other” gradually transformed into perpetrators. Our cases showed that long-standing neighbors and friends were able to take active and passive stances, but were rarely seen playing a role in the violence that broke out. It was much rarer to see any violence committed by immediate neighbors or acquaintances who had been interacting with the victims on a daily basis. This is probably so because the barrier between “self” and “other” among these community members (neighborly relations, professional collegiality) had gradually worn away. How did we treat evidence that did not square with the argument? We

have added a new category, which leaves some gray areas: *Strangers helping strangers*. This category proves that the “mass” of perpetrators has a heterogeneous texture, showing that ethnic violence is a process during which different or antagonistic social roles can overlap or function simultaneously: perpetrators can evolve into rescuers (in the case of X.) and rescuers can become perpetrators toward “others” —not neighbors.⁹

This joint study undermines the populist nationalistic discourse on the long-lasting “historical confrontation” between Armenians and Azerbaijanis as well as Georgians and Ossetians. It aims to change the rhetoric by emphasizing human relationships, empathy, and rescue. Nevertheless, if we were to expand and internationalize the scope of the social phenomenon of rescuing and of individual resistance to the state apparatus, then this term has the potential to exclude and construct barriers.

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Perspectives on Peace in the South Caucasus through the Lens of Environmentalists

Jeyhun Veliyev, Tsira Gvasalia, Sofya Manukyan

Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia as well as South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Nagorno-Karabakh face not only territorial conflicts but also multiple environmental problems, including water, air, and industrial pollution. One of the existing environmental issues concerns the transboundary waters that affect the lives of millions in the region, including in the conflict zones of Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. This paper examines the perspectives of environmentalists on domestic and regional environmental problems and evaluates the prospects for regional environmental cooperation in the conflict-ridden South Caucasus.

Our previous study examined the potential of transboundary rivers to exacerbate conflicts or to be utilized as a mean for conflict transformation in the region (Veliyev, Manukyan and Gvasalia 2018). A case with a positive outcome studied in our work was the Enguri Hydropower Plant, the biggest hydropower plant in the South Caucasus, as its massive infrastructure pieces are divided between the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict divide. From Soviet times to the present, its management has been cooperative and has mostly served the common good (Garb and Whitely 2001). This article begins with the brief history of environmentalism in the region from the late 1980s to the present to set the context, followed by the examination of perspectives of environmentalists on the possibility of environmental cooperation and policy recommendations.

This study is primarily based on interviews conducted with environmental activists, environmental scientists, and professionals working in conservation organizations from Yerevan, Baku, and Tbilisi.

No interview was carried out with experts representing Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, or Abkhazia. In total, eighteen interviews were conducted during the two-month-long data collection phase, distributed as five to seven interviewees per country. The interviewees were composed of five females and two males from Georgia, two females and three males from Armenia, and one female and five males from Azerbaijan. The interview questions aimed at exploring the range of environmental activism in each country by asking correspondents to elaborate on the past and present situation and the scale of activism in order to examine whether it has been country specific or regional. The study of the challenges encountered in developing a regional scheme for environmental cooperation was also an important part of the interviews. In this context, the perspectives of the correspondents on the impact of protracted conflicts on exacerbation of environmental issues were specifically examined. Prospects for domestic and regional environmental protection as well as interviewees' recommendations on building regional environmental initiatives were also inquired to infer specific policy recommendations.

Environmental Problems in the South Caucasus Region

The entire South Caucasus faces trans-boundary environmental pollution. During the past years a number of international agreements on environmental protection have been signed obliging each of the states to take better care of nature, biodiversity, and health. The questions we asked aimed to identify whether environmentalists see local and trans-boundary environmental problems as a means of regional cooperation or a matter to be solved locally. In fact, the attempt made in this paper to introduce readers to local environmental problems was incited by the fragmented knowledge or, in some cases, absence of information of the interviewees regarding the environmental problems of the neighbors. Therefore, the paper initially gives an introduction to these problems after which the environmentalists' perspectives on regional cooperation are presented.

Pre- and Post-Soviet Era: Environmental Activism in the Region

Even though the environment has hardly been a top government agenda item for each of the countries in the South Caucasus in the past decades,

environmentalists have always been present and have sometimes been successful in having their demands heard. Environmentalism in the region can be traced back to the late Soviet years, even though the nationalist movements and protests, particularly in Armenia and Azerbaijan and to a lesser extent in Georgia, eventually overshadowed all the other movements.

Certain environmental problems are shared by many communities in the region. These include pollution from mining and hydropower plants, deforestation, and river pollution. Azerbaijan faces the challenge of water pollution caused by oil extraction, while Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia have other concerns, such as lack of international recognition and involvement that could increase environmental awareness. Below we look at longstanding local environmental problems and the activism that has evolved around them through the lens of environmentalists.

Georgia

The green/environmental movement in Georgia started in 1987. It raised issues such as pollution, environmental education and awareness, equality, and the eradication of the technocratic attitude towards the use of natural resources. The green movement was aimed at introducing new, environmentally friendly technologies (Patariaia 2013). This coincided with the perestroika period of the Soviet Union and its subsequent collapse, ushering in a new economic reality with a free, unregulated market, property rights, and other similar concepts.

In 1992, Georgia's Green Movement acquired political ambitions: on April 12 of that year the group became registered as a political party. Some members left the movement and founded the Green Party (Patariaia 2013), which would actively work on the improvement of water supply, agricultural matters, and other pressing environmental issues.

In the 1992 Georgian parliamentary elections, the Green Party won eleven seats. Its leaders remained in political life but left the Green Party to join the Civil Activism Union. During this time, important legal environmental frameworks were drafted, including laws on forest protection, water management, air protection, natural resources licensing, mining, and other issues. Thanks to the Green Party, the "right to clean environment" was included in the Georgian Constitution under Chapter 37.

Overall, in the 1990s, “green subjects” were used by some politicians in Georgia to enter the political arena and get elected, since after coming to power, they would either abandon green issues or rank them down and subordinate them to economic or social issues, which seemed as the path to win the hearts of most of the economically vulnerable communities. This was especially possible in the light of low environmental awareness among the general Georgian population, especially in the 1990s.

And yet, one of the major projects that faced protests and was opposed by both the Green Movement and Green Party was the Khudoni Hydropower Plant in the mountainous region of Svaneti, with its steep slopes and landslide-prone areas. Manana Kochladze, an environment activist, coordinator of Bankwatch Network for Ukraine and Georgia, and the founder of Green Alternative in Tbilisi, began fighting against the Khudoni Hydropower plant once the project was reintroduced by Georgia’s ruling United National Movement government in 2005. It was supposed to be the second largest dam and hydropower plant in the country. Construction began during Soviet times and was never completed, with leftover construction pieces left on site. “It was not a new topic, but its rejuvenation was extremely painful” (Kochladze 2019).

Eventually, other smaller hydropower projects were added to Khudoni, which were large enough to pose major social and environmental impact locally. Currently, the Georgian government is planning to construct 98 dams throughout the country. With the serious lack of geological surveys, the dams pose additional risks to the landslide prone regions. Kochladze questions the necessity of such projects: “To build so many dams in Georgia means to build them in places where people live now. The government is not able to provide evidence in neither of these cases that these projects are of national importance to the energy security” (Kochladze 2019).

Subsequently, these risks have given rise to people’s discontent. When in 2011, heavy machinery was introduced to one of the mountainous regions of Georgia—Kazbegi’s Dariali Gorge—the concerns of the locals transformed into a more organized action, though not always successful. The company Pheri LTD, which had no prior experience in constructing hydropower plants, was to build a plant in the region, but the local people knew nothing about it. The project was called Dariali HPP and was to be

built on the Tergi River, in the Dariali Gorge. Shota Buchukuri, a 23-year-old local activist, had already established an NGO called “Stepantsminda” and was busy with local tourism and cultural issues. “The problem was that some important changes were taking place around us which would change our lives but no one would inform us about them. That lack of clarity provoked me to start getting information myself” (Buchukuri 2019).

Soon, after the first plant was completed, the company introduced a second planned project in the gorge. The company held a public hearing on the second project in the local municipal building. Buchukuri was the only representative from civil society at the meeting. “When I asked several questions to the investors during that hearing, they said they did not see any problems regarding their project. They would not consider not only my opinions on the projects—and I was a dilettante by that time—but also the opinions of geologists and other specialists related to the sphere. They would not take anyone seriously” (Buchukuri 2019).

In those times the law did not require the company to inform the local communities about new projects. After the introduction of the new framework law on Environment Impact Assessment, the local municipality was obliged to inform its people about large projects that would impact the environment. After some time, Buchukuri got other people involved in the process. They created a council of 10-12 persons, consisting of local residents, company representatives, and municipal staff. The collaboration was aimed at creating better communication between the company and locals. Despite the communication, Buchukuri said the company did not consider the public’s opinions (Buchukuri 2019). Two years later, Pheri LLC built the third plant nearby. In 2014, soon after the first Larsi Plant became operational, extensive flooding ravaged the territory. Sludge covered all three plants, killed several people, and seized pipes and machinery. Despite this catastrophe and its other environmental harms, the company soon renewed the infrastructure and put it into working condition again. “That plant takes water from a small river which turns totally dry during winter seasons: all the water is diverted to the pipes” (Buchukuri 2019).

Pheri LTD is closely connected to the ruling political parties. In 2010, the company director Lasha Iordanishvili contributed 50,000 GEL (about 17,600 USD) to the United National Movement party. In 2012, the

company's directors contributed an additional 135,000 GEL (about 47,500 USD) to the party (Gujaraidze 2013). Additionally, Pheri LTD was awarded the "best business of the year" prize by the Georgian president (Mercury Business Award Ceremony 2012).

Green Activism in Tbilisi

Around the same period, Tbilisi too was witnessing new zeal and energy of green activism. In 2013, during the second year of the new Georgian Dream government, new grassroots activism by young people started to emerge. One of the more active and flamboyant groups of that time was "Green Fist." Students and young scientists in their twenties protested against large hydropower plants, mining in regions, privatization of green spaces in Tbilisi, and other similar issues. The Green Fist manifesto had one main idea: natural resources should not be used only as an economic tool and a way to contribute to the budget. The manifesto stated that ecological, social, and cultural values of natural resources should also be considered, duly assessed, and taken into consideration before extraction decisions were made (Green Fist Manifesto 2014). Though the Green Fist protests had no major impact on the development of the projects they were protesting against, it was one of the most colorful unions of the young people fighting for change. The group did not register the initiative legally as they did not want to get grants and attribute their names to the then-cliché reference discrediting non-government organizations: people fighting for money and grants. Young people wanted to fight for ideas. Green Fist held several major protests against the above mentioned large hydro-power plant Khudoni, tried to save an ancient gold-mining site (Democracy and Freedom Watch 2015) and preserve it as a museum (allegedly the oldest site in Europe), and fought for green spaces in Tbilisi. The group had a good traditional and new media presence, but it started to lose its members after four years. Some members continued fighting on their own against other projects, including large hydro power plants and gold mines.

Nikoloz Tsikaridze, one of the most active members and leaders of Green Fist, left the group in 2017 after four years of protesting. He said he felt something was stagnating and a move forward was needed: "Too much time in the street meant less work," he said. According to him, some leaders in the group started to pay more attention to social and

educational issues rather than setting more specific green agendas: “I’m a ‘green’ person by nature. So I had to leave” (Tsikaridze 2019).

After leaving Green Fist, Tsikaridze founded his own organization called Green Policy Public Platform. He says the organization has two main directions: academia and public platform. Along with his scientist and activist friends, Tsikaridze received a small grant to do research on gold mining contamination in Kvemo Kartli, Georgia (Avkopashvili, et al. 2019). Tsikaridze explained that the green activism in Georgia was formed with a top-down rather than a bottom-up process since NGOs from Tbilisi go to the regions and “teach” the locals about their rights, suggest they read environmental assessment documents, and “preach” how to behave. “Activists are taking over the local people and dictating what to say and when. I’m happy that in my fieldwork I had local people involved—the father of one of the researchers worked in the gold-mining company. It was fundamental for me” (Tsikaridze 2019). His attempts have had some tangible results. An initiative group was created involving the Environmental Committee of the Parliament of Georgia and other parties, such as the gold-mining company. Currently, the initiative group is monitoring the process where precious metals mining company Rich Metals Group has to re-cultivate old mining tailing landslides and install pipes to create the closed water cycle, preventing the tailing liquid from flowing into the Kazretula River and polluting the local irrigation channels.

Today green movements in Georgia, both old and new, still continue working, but their overall impact on decision making is questionable.

Armenia

Environmental activists in Armenia have long been vocal and oftentimes served as a catalyst for substantive changes. In 1987-88, several marches for environmental purposes took place (EVN Report 2018). Initially the protests and marches covered mostly ecological problems faced by Armenian industrial towns, such as pollution from the Nairit chemical plant in Yerevan, radioactive waste from the Metsamor Nuclear Power Plant, and construction of the amino acid production factory in Abovyan (Mediamax 2013). Hrach Mirzoyan, a chemist and an environmental expert who used to work for Nairit, remembered the first protests in which he also participated. Mirzoyan said he does not regret participating in

these protests since it was not merely an environmental threat, but also plunder and absence of responsibility. “Nairit was one of the biggest plants in Armenia, yet it was saving about 30-40% on environmental expenditure, which was resulting in high quality products that were 30-40% cheaper than products from other countries. This cheap cost was at the expense of reduced environmental expenditures, our health, and well-being. A lot of gas was being emitted without control. And I couldn’t keep silent at the false statements that Nairit was enriching Armenia and that Armenia could not live without it. It was an environmental threat and the plunder of Armenia” (Mirzoyan 2019).

However, the environmental movement was soon to be swallowed by another process: the movement for unification of Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) with the Armenian SSR, which came to the forefront of the protests. Environmental issues were temporarily pushed back (Hakobyan 2018). Environmental issues were to remain in the backstage even after Armenia’s independence for the years to come amid shortages of basic means of living—food and energy. Mirzoyan remembers that when the first post-Soviet government was forming, Prime Minister Vazgen Manukyan invited several environmentalists, including Mirzoyan, to manage the Environmental Committee. The first question raised was the future of Nairit, to which the Prime Minister answered that whoever takes the role of the head of the Committee should prioritize the re-opening of the plant. When Mirzoyan objected, pointing to Nairit’s devastating effect on the environment, the Prime Minister answered that now they were in power and they had to feed the people. The environmentalists were very disappointed and the movement on which the whole process of independence started was no longer needed. “We were now traitors who wanted to close the plant” (Mirzoyan 2019).

Until the late 2000s, the environmental agenda remained relatively secondary. In 2007, a group of environmentalists raised concerns over a copper-molybdenum mine project planned in the northern Armenian village of Teghut. Environmentalists were alarmed by the harm that would befall the forests and wildlife as well as the communities living near this mining project (Matosian 2012). Parallel to this activism, environmentalists were getting involved in raising other issues as well, such as protecting the Trchkan waterfall from the construction of a hydropower plant and protecting Mashtots Park in Yerevan from

encroaching construction. This brought issues to the public's attention, such as the clash of private and public interests, but also exposed the Teghut mine problem. As a result, in 2012 there were many more people aware and engaged in the Save Teghut movement (Matosian 2012).

Environmental activism was growing. Levon Galstyan, geographer-geomorphologist, was among those actively engaged in saving Trchkan waterfall from the hydropower plant. This was actually how he got involved in environmental activism. According to Galstyan: "Since the fight for protecting the waterfall was a success, and since many other environmental problems were not adequately addressed by the government, we founded Armenian Environmental Front (AEF). It became a tool for showing the state its omissions. Sometimes AEF would act wherever the state failed to". He added that with their civil initiative they started monitoring hydropower plants, forests, water resources, and the mining sector (Galstyan 2019). They faced different obstacles posed by the state, private sector, or the communities, but this has never stopped AEF from raising issues, alarming the state bodies, presenting scientific analysis and research, and pushing for solutions. One of their most important achievements is raising community awareness about the environmental issues, so that the locals themselves launch their own activities to protect their environment. Galstyan says that some great examples of such self-organization are petitions by residents of Noyemberyan, Jermuk, and elsewhere declaring their communities as areas to develop a green economy and banning any harming industrial activity, such as mining (Galstyan 2019).

This environmental awareness has been the result of years of hard work. Journalist Tehmine Yenokyan witnessed this transformation through developments in her own community. Her activism is a prime example of how an individual initiative can have a spill-over effect in raising awareness and mobilizing other communities. "In 2011, I learned about the risks of a mining project in Amulsar that was planned near the village Gndevaz. I am from that village and the environmental risks were concerning to me. That's when I started to investigate overall environmental issues in Armenia" (Yenokyan 2019). Having seen the negative examples from Syunik and covering the problems caused by mines there and elsewhere in Armenia, Yenokyan foresaw the future that would await her village if she and others did not act. The impact of the

videos she made about environmental harms to human health in Armenia was enormous. As a result, people in a village in Vayots Dzor, who had seen one such video, managed to self-organize against a mining project (Yenokyan 2019).

Another transformation Yenokyan mentions is the fight for protection of the environment in her own village: “Before I felt very lonely against this mining project in Amulsar since not only was there little awareness, but also that project had the backing of international banks as well as embassies that, at the same time, would provide grants to our civil society. It was thus shocking for me to see a generation that grew and showed willingness to stand against such a big project. People there woke up also thanks to the revolution³⁰ and started to demand the implementation of direct democracy” (Yenokyan 2019).

Whether people woke up due to the revolution, or the revolution occurred as a result of years of oppression and reaction to it, is a matter of discussion. The debate is formed around the idea that the revolution was not some spontaneous action but rather the result of years of protests on various issues and accumulated knowledge on its strategies (Schiffers 2018). Soon after the first goal of revolution was achieved and the desired candidate was appointed as the head of state, the protests stretched further and permeated to other towns and villages, no longer meeting the obstacles of local political or business “elites.” The Amulsar case developed with the same scenario.

However, Mirzoyan is skeptical that there has been much change in terms of environmental protection and especially policymaking, because mining in Armenia is based on exporting raw material, much like during the Soviet times. Mirzoyan explains that if Armenia produced and exported goods instead, the production chain would grow; there would be more jobs thus more taxes, which would make it possible to cover environmental costs. He adds that despite this, “today we export raw resources, while pollution stays with us; therefore mining in this form is anti-environmental” (Mirzoyan 2019).

Arsen Gasparyan, a biodiversity expert responsible for environmental projects at World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Armenia, sees slower progress in

³⁰ The Armenian Revolution of 2018.

another field—the creation and protection of reserves and national parks, since there are systemic problems, including the absence of environmental policy on protected areas. Years of crises following independence had a high cost on Armenia’s forests and nature as a whole, yet even decades later there is reluctance to protect the environment. One such outcome of that reluctance, as Gasparyan mentions, is that only one or two out of twenty-seven state reserves have maps so far. He mentions other problems as well: “Take the draft law on specially protected nature areas; if I am not mistaken it was drafted in 2012-2013, but it wasn’t adopted—it might even need an update now. We also continue having problems with inspection bodies; the inspectors are often neither well trained, nor properly equipped” (Gasparyan 2019).

Gasparyan identifies initiatives aimed at filling these gaps. He mentions that since Armenia is a hotspot location for biodiversity, there is a need for protected areas to be more connected to each other. For this purpose, the WWF is implementing projects for creating eco-corridors, one of which connects Khosrov and Zangezur state reserves and serves as a route for leopards. “Moreover, we also implemented the first cross-border project between Armenia and Georgia by creating a new protected area near Lake Arpi on this side and the Javakheti protected area on the Georgian side. This has allowed for developing infrastructure, creating visitor centers, monitoring birds, and other activities on both sides” (Gasparyan 2019).

Despite overall systemic problems, legislative issues, and ineffective implementation mechanisms, local environmental groups in Armenia seem to have been successful in building tools for protecting the environment but have been even more successful in raising awareness in local communities.

Azerbaijan

The pre-independence period of the late 1980s and early 1990s in Azerbaijan is associated with widespread nationalist movements and protests. Unlike Georgia and Armenia, there is little evidence to indicate that environmentalism had a distinct place in Azerbaijan in the 1990s. However, as in Armenia and Georgia, the absence of corporate responsibility towards the environment and the lack of implementation of environmental protection legislation are also common in Azerbaijan. Challenges in dealing with environmental issues are well described in a

report that objectively touches upon the generally accepted factors, such as the non-existence of a common system of environmental monitoring, environmental expertise, environmental audits, underdeveloped information access mechanisms, and insufficient cooperation between governmental and non-governmental organizations (Rzayev 2002).

Despite the lack of data or studies to indicate the emergence of extensive environmental activism in Azerbaijan at the time, according to Vicken Cheterian, the first ever demonstrations in Azerbaijan rose as a reaction to the alleged intention of the Nagorno-Karabakh authorities to cut down the forest of Topkhana in order to build an aluminum plant (Cheterian 2009), which was headquartered in Yerevan (Shaffer 2002). Mass protests broke out in Baku in November 1988 and the construction was halted. The protestors' narrative described the forest as a "national shrine" for Azerbaijan since a battle against Iranian forces had taken place there in the 18th century. On the other hand, it was a direct challenge to the Azerbaijani government's authority as Nagorno-Karabakh officials, by deferring the former, had made a decision for a company located in Yerevan (Shaffer 2002). The extent to which the demonstrations were an outcome of environmentalist concerns is thus a very debatable subject since it was a reaction molded with a strong political background. Therefore, it suffices to reiterate what Azer Panahli, a journalist from Azerbaijan, stated, that "the demonstrations about Topkhana were not about trees or ecology at all" (Panahli 1994).

Environmental pollution in Azerbaijan is predominantly related to oil and natural gas extraction, both on and offshore, which has polluted both the land and air, especially in Absheron Peninsula. Trans-boundary water pollution and land degradation also cause serious ecological problems. In an interview conducted with Islam Mustafayev, an environmental scientist in the National Academy of Sciences in Azerbaijan, he highlighted soil and air pollution due to oil production as the gravest ecological problem for Azerbaijan, which he claims will be the top source of pollution in the coming decades (Mustafayev 2019). The report by the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources in Azerbaijan underlines potential environmental impacts of increased offshore oil and gas activity in a broader geographic and biological context, since the currents in the Caspian Sea are large-scale and ignore geographic boundaries. In the report, it is stated that an offshore spill has a chance of hitting any of the

Caspian littoral country coasts, which can result in large-scale mortalities of seals, fish, and other commercially important species (Rzayev 2002). Hence, oil pollution in the Caspian Sea is a collateral damage, although there is not a common understanding in this regard. For instance, Mustafayev argues that Russia and Iran are not willing to acknowledge that they have also been polluting the Caspian Sea (Mustafayev 2019). Recent efforts to resolve the long-standing dilemma on the status of the Caspian Sea gives hope for cooperation in different spheres, from which the environment can also benefit. Crude Accountability consultant Sergey Solyanik claims that the resolution on the status of the Caspian Sea will urge the states to more actively solve environmental problems and analyze the consequences of megaprojects there. However, “there is little reason for optimism, given the widespread violations of national and international laws in the participating countries” (Crude Accountability 2018).

Alongside actual pollution, human indifference is viewed as a great harm to nature. Samir Gadirov, the founder of Green Baku in Azerbaijan, sees the indifferent attitude of people toward the environment as the biggest ecological problem in the country (Gadirov 2019). Javid Qara, an environmental activist from Azerbaijan, sees the careless behavior of people towards nature from a different perspective, namely lack of infrastructure for environmental protection: “People in the regions dump the waste or simply bury it because there is no waste management system in villages and towns” (Qara 2019).

A study of different sources in the local media that underline the government-sponsored programs creates a vision that all implemented plans are flawless. And yet these valuable contributions of the interviewees provide a more balanced perspective in an otherwise biased context. Importantly, they also show the high level of scrutiny of media by the government that leaves no room for critique.

Green actions on the ground

Most of the government funded events and independent volunteer initiatives supported by foreign institutions, such as the EU Delegation, cover cleaning up the beaches of the Caspian Sea. According to Samir Gadirov, for instance, Green Baku facilitates ecological initiatives by engaging volunteers in cleaning waste, tree-planting, and implementing

educational programs for the residents of Baku (Gadirov 2019). Green Baku's biggest project is its beach cleaning activity—collecting waste on the beaches of the Caspian Sea's Absheron peninsula (Green Baku 2019). In an interview, Gadirov stated that the beach cleaning initiative started in 2010 by a group of five or six friends, but a decade later it engages thousands of volunteers twice every year (Gadirov 2019). On one hand, it seems as a great leap forward and a positive example of mobilization, and such activities raise public awareness. On the other hand, the scale of activities is mainly limited to Baku and the surrounding areas with no extended impact countrywide. For instance, the southern coastlines of the Caspian Sea in Azerbaijan suffer from high pollution as mentioned above, but those regions receive little or no attention in terms of cleaning activities. Widespread local environmental activism in smaller towns and villages are not common in Azerbaijan, as compared to Armenia or Georgia. Some of the reasons behind such limited activism include strong governmental control and restrictions on what takes place locally, which makes it difficult for the activists to visit different regions in order to organize various projects. For example, the latest Freedom House report indicates that some activists who sought to visit regions have been strictly observed and restrained from conducting anything significant. The report states: "In the aftermath of protests against worsening economic conditions and high prices in 2016, local governments reacted by increasing surveillance and drafting local volunteers into informal militias to monitor residents for signs of further unrest. Travel to the regions by Baku-based activists is viewed with more suspicion than in the past. In April, local authorities briefly detained human rights activist Bashir Suleymanli and questioned members of his family about the purpose of his personal visits in the regions" (Runey 2018).

Having problems with space for civil society organizations to carry out activities and organize events is a grave issue because it hinders society's organizational nature, which leads to reduced activity in non-political spheres as well. Studies show that to protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss, civil society actors working to protect the environment, forests, and biodiversity are under particular direct attacks and face hostility that prevents them from acting in a growing number of countries

around the world (Hossain, et al. 2019). Hence, the lack of political space for civil society organizations turns out to be one of the reasons, if not the only one, for weak environmental activism in Azerbaijan. A young environmentalist from Azerbaijan, who preferred to be renamed as Ilhama Aliyeva to remain anonymous, underlined that there are financial and logistical difficulties for environmental activism. However, she added, a bigger problem is the “lack of opportunity due to pressure from the above hierarchies” to organize open-air and broader events for raising environmental awareness “such as rallies or demonstrations to show our care for ecology in Baku and surrounding regions” (Aliyeva 2019).

Some organizations implement different environmental activities and projects, but other activists interviewed for this paper expressed discontent concerning the nature of such projects. For example, International Dialogue for Environmental Action (IDEA), a public union, promotes awareness of environmental issues and identifies environmental problems to find proper solutions for them (IDEA 2019). Most of IDEA’s projects are tree-planting activities carried out by school and university students in addition to providing shelter for homeless animals. However, these activities are specific and local in nature, called a “show” by the anonymous interviewee. Despite this, IDEA is a major partner with international institutions such as the United Nations in organizing international events on environmental problems. In June 2018, IDEA together with the UN office in Azerbaijan and the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources organized an event gathering 200 youth to raise youth awareness on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and increase the role in the implementation of these goals (United Nations Azerbaijan 2018). However, limitations on the independent activism of civil society organizations cast doubt on the mid- and long-term impact of such workshops.

Additional critique by Aliyeva summarizes these doubts: “Do you expect an agency controlled by the president’s daughter [edit-referring to IDEA public union] to open up serious debates about ecological problems by highlighting the shortcomings of her father’s regime?” This statement can be taken as an answer to the limited nature (both in content and geographically) of certain environmental organizations in Azerbaijan.

Thus, notwithstanding being less of a political issue, the protection of environment faces challenges as well. Zulfu Farajli, an environmental activist from Azerbaijan, recalls some of the obstacles he met during his activities as a result of state's lack of operative behavior: "Upon being notified about illegal hunting in the nature preservations, we notified the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources for them to catch and punish the criminals. It took three days for the Ministry representatives to visit the place of crime, too late" (Farajli 2019). Farajli suggests that it would be helpful if an emergency operation response is installed, so operative measures can be implemented, or for a policy to be adopted regarding the investigation and potential prosecution of those advertising on social media the illegal killing of animals, as is being implemented in Turkey (Farajli 2019).

There is therefore a stark contrast between the government promoting tree plantings and its failure to implement effective protection of the forests. Javid Qara states that while working for the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources, he was involved in uncovering criminal groups that were engaged in tree-cutting in the forests. Thanks to Qara's efforts, some massive tree-cutting cases have been identified and those groups have been punished by the ministry. And yet, "corruption is so widespread that my presence disturbed the systemic process of how bribery worked, so I was an 'outsider,' an enemy for them" (Qara 2019). Therefore, corruption is another reason for holding back the effective implementation of policies and legal frameworks for environmental protection.

Awareness of Environmental Problems in the Neighboring Countries

Before moving on to the discussion of perspectives of environmentalists on regional cooperation opportunities, it is important to highlight that the above introductory information on the green movement in each state was also important since most of the environmentalists interviewed had fragmented information on the situation regarding their neighbors. We wanted to understand the presence of regional environmental consciousness, and whether years of independence in post-Soviet countries such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia has shifted the thinking towards more regional environmental protection or hampered environmental protection in each country. In general, most of the

interviewees mentioned the pollution of the trans-boundary waters as one of the pending regional environmental issues. There appeared to be a general consensus among all interviewees that ecological problems are similar in nature in the South Caucasus countries, but as Gadirov noted, “approaches to resolve them vary from country to country” (Gadirov 2019). Galstyan admits having little information regarding the state of environmental protection in the neighboring states. He says he mostly knows some of the most outstanding things, like problems with hydropower plants and mines in Georgia: “Also, I remember problems with public spaces in Tbilisi. I have even less information on Iran, Turkey, or Azerbaijan” (Galstyan 2019).

Parvin Guliyev, a young agricultural engineer from Azerbaijan, mentions that he is aware of pollution of the Kura River where it crosses Tbilisi, but he is not informed about any other ecological problems in Georgia or Armenia (Guliyev 2019). To resolve issues such as informational gaps as well as environmental inaction, all interviewees from Azerbaijan see regional cooperation as a possible solution, which is, however, impeded by persistent conflicts in the region, especially the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Gadirov stated that this conflict negatively affected the biodiversity and land usage (Gadirov 2019). Studies also show that local land use change specifically in the conflict period from 1987 through 2000 is profound (Baumann, et al. 2014).

Humanitarian and ecological disaster from a possible accident in Armenia’s Metsamor Atomic Station was also mentioned by some environmentalists from Azerbaijan, but it was more of an urgent concern that can be unilaterally preempted by Armenia. Aliyeva argued that third parties should pressure Armenia to close the atomic station because it is in a seismic zone. She added: “Azerbaijan’s criticism in this context don’t seem objective as we are enemies” (Aliyeva 2019).

Mirzoyan, when speaking about the need for regional cooperation, indicated the absence of borders in nature and that environmental pollution in one place affects everyone regardless of distance, through acid rain, groundwater, or fruits irrigated with polluted water. For him, cooperation is critical. “Environmentalists have to stand above the politics because earth is so small that even environmental degradation in China affects our region in form of global warming” (Mirzoyan 2019).

Inga Zarafyan, biophysicist and founder of Ecolur environmental news agency in Armenia, raised a similar concern that collaboration could also help in terms of protection of the Caspian Sea as it covers an even bigger region that includes Russia, Iran, and Kazakhstan. “For example, the current cooperation on the Caspian includes the component of environmental cooperation, and this helps to prevent countries from blaming each other on some environmental issues” (Zarafyan 2019).

Experiences of Regional Cooperation and Obstacles Met on this Path

Drawing from the above considerations about the need for regional environmental cooperation, it must be mentioned that there have already been certain attempts in this direction, with some continuing even today.

For example, Nugzar Zazanashvili, World Wildlife Fund Conservation program director in Tbilisi, Georgia, when talking about South Caucasus regional cooperation, mentioned the Eco-Region Conservation Plan for the Caucasus that started at the end of the 1990s and includes six countries beneath a common cooperation umbrella: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Russia, Iran, and Turkey (Zazanashvili 2019). Mustafayev also highlighted that some regional projects have been carried out by USAID from 2000-2010 aimed at addressing regional environmental problems (Mustafayev 2019).

Gadirov added that Green Baku is engaged in cooperation with organizations from Iran, Georgia, and Russia (Gadirov 2019), but due to the ongoing conflicts, full-scale regional cooperation engaging all parties is missing. This missing point, as Conca and Dabelko state, could in fact be a tool for post-conflict transformation and peacemaking built upon partnership and cooperation in the environmental sphere (Conca and Dabelko 2003). All interviewees perceived regional cooperation in the environmental sphere as an important step in building relationships beyond politics.

A more grassroots cooperation took place when environmentalists from Georgia and Armenia demonstrated the will to mobilize their resources to fight against the pollution deriving from the Teghut mine. In 2010, Manana Kochladze of Georgia, along with her colleagues, joined Armenian activists against mining Teghut. When interviewing the

investor Vallex Group, Kochladze said the project could pose a risk not only to Armenia, but also to Georgia, if the tailing dam collapsed and spilled into the Debed River, which joins the Kura River in Georgia and eventually flows into the Caspian Sea through Azerbaijan. When addressing the government of Georgia in this context, Kochladze also underlined the importance that Georgia becomes part of the Espoo Convention ³¹ to have more mechanisms to avoid trans-boundary pollution (Kochladze 2019). Our previous study also indicates that the lack of participation in regional environmental agreements is one of the serious issues that creates lack of responsibility and commitment from the region (Veliyev, Manukyan and Gvasalia 2018). Yenokyan remembers an instance of cooperation when campaigning against the Teghut mine: “Tailings from Teghut mine pollute the Debed River. We tried to present the issue in Georgia and receive their solidarity. I personally presented the issue there a couple of times” (Yenokyan 2019).

Anano Tsintsabadze, a lawyer and environmental activist working on urban issues in Georgia, recalls another attempt of cooperation among grassroots. During the protection protests of public spaces, such as Mashtots Park in Armenia and Vake Park in Georgia, activists had visited each other to support their colleagues (Tsintsabadze 2019). Yenokyan also recalls the Armenian activists at Mashtots Park making a video in solidarity with the movement for Tbilisi’s Vake Park to remain public (Yenokyan 2019). However, as Tsintsabadze mentions, that collaboration soon ended because the protests are not constant in the region, but rather sporadic: “First we fight over a case, we either win or lose and then everybody continues their principal jobs: environmental activism cannot be a source of income, one has to survive as well” (Tsintsabadze 2019). Below, highlights of the obstacles faced by environmentalists on their path towards regional cooperation are examined.

Scarcity of Long-Term Funding

One such obstacle mentioned for long-term environmental project implementation domestically or regionally has been the unsustainable nature of funding. Tsintsabadze [Georgia] shares her concerns: “A donor may finance a reactive action against this or that project, which is not

³¹ Armenia as well as Azerbaijan are parties to the convention, whereas Georgia is not.

sustainable, is not a constant or preventive fight against such an injustice” (Tsintsabadze 2019). Other environmentalists raised concerns over the unequal distribution of funding between the recipient countries. Mustafayev [Azerbaijan], for example, questions the effectiveness of the projects since Azerbaijan usually receives less financial support compared with Armenia and Georgia (Mustafayev 2019).

Locality of Activism and Thinking

Conversations on various experiences of implemented projects and activism further demonstrate that the scale of the activities is local, although the problems are identical and more regional. Environmentalists like Tsintsabadze [Georgia] recognize it as a major problem that hinders regional cooperation: “Throughout the region, be it in Georgia, Armenia, or Azerbaijan, activists fight locally for one park in one city without seeking the root reasons: why is that in all these countries we have the same problems?” Mentioning that private interest always outweighs public interest because there is no sustainable economy, she further suggests that environmental movements also demand a sustainable economy plan from their politicians as a step towards solving local issues with the common interests of the region in mind (Tsintsabadze 2019).

Politicization of Environmental Problems

The conflicts in the region result in matters that are politicized, even if these matters go much beyond politics. Environmental issues in their turn are not void of politicization. Since direct cooperation between conflicting countries is challenging, some environmentalists have mentioned international organizations as possible mediators for finding creative ways for cooperation for the common sake of environmental protection with as little politics involved as possible. Zazanashvili [Georgia] suggests that identifying common problems can give the possibility to suggest common solutions to conflicting parties. And yet, he reminds that even in presence of common issues, separate solutions may be given to these issues in an attempt to keep them away from politics. (Zazanashvili 2019). Yenokyan [Armenia] also reminds about politicization of environmental issues preventing from cooperation. In the past, she participated in some activities with Georgians and Azerbaijanis, such as protests against

privatization of beaches in Ureki³², and yet she is skeptical about the current possibility of cooperation: “It is difficult to imagine sitting and talking about environmental problems. Even if that was still possible before April 2016³³, after that it became even harder” (Yenokyan 2019). But even with Georgian environmentalists, Yenokyan estimates the level of cooperation as low despite the common problems. One reason for this is the lack of specific targets and goals: “Regional cooperation is important, but there should be very specific issues framed for solving them” (Yenokyan 2019).

Galstyan [Armenia], regarding politicization as an obstacle for regional cooperation, does not think that environmental cooperation can bypass political differences. “I don’t think environmental issues have enough leverages to impact the situation. It can be a drop in the sea, but if there is no mechanism and willingness for conflict resolution, I don’t imagine that environmental issues can change something, but maybe other fields like human rights can” (Galstyan 2019). This skepticism is not theoretical, but rather is based on experience. Zarafyan [Armenia] mentioned that for years, experts and scientists worked on creating standards for monitoring the quality of water in rivers that would be acceptable for Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, but it did not work due to politicization: “If a standard is adopted, it should be accepted by all countries, but Azerbaijan always brings up the Karabakh issue, claiming that until this question is solved, it won’t cooperate on anything. Georgia in its turn sees it unfit to collaborate with one side refusing to do so. But such cooperation could help to understand the responsibility of each state in terms of environmental pollution” (Zarafyan 2019).

Qara [Azerbaijan] also shares the view on how the conflict negatively influences the perceptions of “the other.” He highlights that accusing the neighboring countries of polluting the trans-boundary waters does not make sense if Azerbaijan itself keeps polluting the Caspian Sea with sewage. “Critics in Azerbaijan argue that Armenians exploit nature in

³² Ureki is a town in Georgia near the Black Sea.

³³ Clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan took place during four days in April 2016.

Kalbajar³⁴ with gold mining activities, but for me their purpose is not to destroy nature, but mine gold, which pollutes nature, and we do pollute in Gadabay by gold mining. They lack an effective domestic mechanism and management, and so does Azerbaijan” (Qara 2019). The politicization of environmental issues is thus one side of the coin, while the other side has more to do with the careless attitude towards nature stemming from cultural norms and institutional factors, such as lack of mechanisms for effective implementation of laws, as well as from structural problems, including corruption.

But politicization of environmental matters also negatively affects the involvement of international organizations in nature protection and conservation activities. Nevertheless, even for such scenarios environmentalists offer solutions by inviting the local non-governmental organizations to be more active. Zazanashvili, when discussing, as he puts it, the “sensitive” case of Georgia and its breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, mentions the perspective of the non-recognized states, which usually demand to be presented among regional countries with their self-declared statuses, borders, and flags when asked to join a certain regional project. “But this creates problems for international projects because organizations like World Wildlife Fund (WWF) cannot agree on such conditions and the countries refuse to accept our conditions. We, as an organization, cannot ignore UN rules. Here is when national NGOs can play a better role and interfere” (Zazanashvili 2019).

Isolation of Non-recognized Territories

The existing conflicts in the region isolate the non-recognized entities from the regional and international collaborations and treaties, among other issues creating a fertile ground for environmental problems. The interviews show that the absence of international organizations in non-recognized states in the South Caucasus has a high cost on the environment there due to the lack of support to civil society that results in little awareness and activities in the sphere of environmental protection. For example, Zarafyan [Armenia] knows of no environmental organizations in Nagorno-Karabakh: “The civil society is not very strong

³⁴ Kalbajar is the Azerbaijani name for one of the regions in the zone of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

there. To work professionally, you have to invest all your resources and thus you need some support that international funds provide. But that's not possible in Artsakh³⁵. This problem is similar in all non-recognized territories—Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Crimea. It is very difficult to raise environmental problems in these areas. Even if raised, there may be no response" (Zarafyan 2019).

Galstyan [Armenia] also highlights the more problematic situation of non-recognized states due to inapplicable international regulations: "It is difficult to protect the environment in Artsakh as the laws applicable there are unclear. I have been there to monitor the forests, but it was difficult. People alert us about environmental issues there, but all we suggest is to self-organize" (Galstyan 2019).

Despite this isolation, there have been some cases of collaboration in which the non-recognized entities have also participated. Eliko Bendeliani, an employee at the Nationalism and Conflict Research Institute and a consultant at Conciliation Resources in Georgia, works towards connecting Georgia and Abkhazia via environmental issues. Bendeliani tries to initiate peace and environmental projects in Abkhazia to protect migrating animals and endemic plants that have no sense of borders. She also shares the idea that "Ecology stands beyond politics and it is important to acknowledge this. Nature belongs to everyone" (Bendeliani 2019). Bendeliani's initiative has been supported by the British organization Conciliation Resources, which has been working on the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict for years. One of the projects the organization implements is *Line House*, where people from conflicting regions all over the world meet each other. Such meetings usually take place in neutral locations. Each year the topics change—in 2019 the topic was sustainable development.

Bendeliani states that at this stage, there are no barriers from the government of Abkhazia, which shows that environmental issues are seriously considered there. She also points out the non-recognized states suffering from isolation and that such meetings are important for them: "Realistically speaking, from the environmental protection point of view, Abkhazia is like a "black spot" on the map—it is not part of the international or regional projects. During meetings, which took place in

³⁵ Artsakh is the Armenian name for Nagorno-Karabakh.

London and Berlin, we summed up some important topics: water management, protected areas, and green spaces management issues in Abkhazia” (Bendeliani 2019). The meeting in which Georgian and Abkhazian representatives participated included MPs and government representatives from both sides, as well as environmental specialists in different areas such as water, mining safety, and green space preservation. Later, European colleagues went to Sukhumi and shared their experience with the local government.

Suggestions of the Interviewees to Overcome the Regional Challenges

Several interviewees mentioned the leopard protection project that, even though implemented in Armenia and Azerbaijan, is not limited by regional borders. The leopard conservation plan was formed and put into operation as Armenia and Azerbaijan protect this species separately, under one umbrella project, in their territories where the species is proliferating, and some great results have been recorded. Zazanashvili stated: “When two countries are in conflict with each other our aim should not be the maximalist approach to cooperation. Forget about an illusion that they will embrace each other right away. Some diplomacy is necessary” (Zazanashvili 2019). Gasparyan [Armenia] also says that while there are similar activities for protecting the leopard in Armenia and Azerbaijan, there is no cooperation between the two countries. “We are in touch, we meet in Georgia, but it is not a cooperation; no joint activities are planned. It only foresees actions here and there. But animals recognize no borders, and such projects are important” (Gasparyan 2019).

Gasparyan also highlights the absence of borders in nature as animals pass boundaries, but due to mined areas such as the Nakhchivan border, animals (e.g., mouflon) blow up. He sees animals as a possible link for communication, for which there should be willingness to cooperate. He suggests several options for regional cooperation, such as the forested lands in Jiliza³⁶ becoming a cross-border park shared between Armenia and Georgia and the creation of an eco-corridor between Armenia and Iran by opening some sections of the border for animal migration and installing technologies to monitor the border. He points out that even though there

³⁶ A region in Armenia bordering Georgia.

are no conflicts between Armenia and Georgia or Armenia and Iran, there still needs to be *willingness* on both sides for such environmental cooperation (Gasparyan 2019).

Another opportunity for cooperation mentioned by some interviewees is the face to face meetings of professionals. Such meetings among environmental experts rather than officials were mentioned to be more effective in reducing enmity and opening up a dialogue. Zazanashvili [Georgia] for example highlights the importance of finding ways of intersection, especially personal meetings between mid-level people who do the real work since meetings between ministers and other high profile figures always get political appeal: “Some people think such projects are a waste of money but I disagree; such meetings are crucial to lower the level of alienation” (Zazanashvili 2019).

Zarafyan [Armenia] believes that international organizations can be helpful for overcoming regional environmental cooperation challenges. She sees them as a suitable platform for regional environmentalists, particularly when the scope of environmental action crosses national borders. “We have many political problems and it is difficult when any environmental issue is politicized, whether they are issues with forests or rivers or mines. In such circumstances international organizations are good platforms to get people together and talk” (Zarafyan 2019). She mentions the creation of such a platform by the European Neighborhood Policy, which Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan are part of and send representatives for meetings and discussions on environmental issues.

Nonetheless, not all environmentalists have a positive view about the visible impact of such platforms since some consider these meetings as merely opportunities to exchange information that rarely create grounds for cooperation. As a result, some environmental activists like Galstyan [Armenia] do not even consider visiting such meetings due to resource constraints and lack of tangible results. “There are international organizations with their branches in this region, and yet we are not an NGO, but a civil initiative. To organize something on the level of civil initiatives is even harder” (Galstyan 2019). Galstyan mentioned that despite this, there may sometimes be joint announcements and solidarity actions in which their initiative does participate (Galstyan 2019). Zarafyan states that even such conferences organized on certain international

platforms aimed at developing cooperation have not always produced the desired outcomes. “Once at a meeting organized by Goethe Institute we were discussing issues related to natural monuments. We suggested studying the problems we have in three countries and create a map of natural monuments. This shouldn’t have given rise to any conflict, but again Azerbaijan didn’t approve it, they said water problems are more important for them and again politicized the issue. Had we implemented this project, I think we could have done something useful. It could also be used for touristic purposes” (Zarafyan 2019).

Despite the organizational difficulties, especially for the grassroots, the international organizations are seen as a crucial medium for regions in conflict, such as the South Caucasus. Gasparyan [Armenia] mentions that the few international environmental organizations that operate in the region have the potential to connect the region: “Problems in our region are localized and there is literally no linking body. The environmental organizations do not have those functions, but it wouldn’t be bad if, for example, there was cooperation among rangers from the whole region. And yet no such step is initiated” (Gasparyan 2019).

Conclusions and Recommendations

In Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, waves of nationalist movements in the 1980s expressed in the form of widespread demonstrations did have certain associations with environmental concerns as a substantive matter. Whether it was the demonstrations concerning Topkhana forest or protests against pollution from Nairit chemical plant or Khudoni power plant, environmental issues were at the core of expression of discontent within the context of ethnic conflicts or irrespective of them. According to Cheterian, the focus of mass movements gradually shifted from environmental concerns, but nevertheless the green movements in all three countries at different levels became the precursors of nationalist movements (Cheterian 2009). Hence, environmental issues were foreshadowed by growing political problems and experienced a downward slope in terms of urgency and significance as a national issue. In other words, environmental protection became marginalized and lost the momentum as a mainstream approach, but its legacy was considerably profound.

When thinking about at least two layers of environment and conflicts, we can see from the discussions mentioned above that on the one hand, the environmental issue related to the Topkhana forest played a role in the eruption of conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. But it obviously was a spark in the fire that was going to burn in the already heated political context of ethnic division. On the other hand, we observe the conflict having a negative impact on the environment as attempts for environmental cooperation to solve the existing problems are hindered by that same conflict. The victims of the situation, however, are not only the conflicting sides, but everyone in the region as a result of the trans-boundary character of nature itself. Therefore, it is in the interest of everyone in the region to establish grounds for cooperation in the solution of environmental problems.

Compared with Armenia and Georgia, the level of mobilization and activism in Azerbaijan to address environmental problems is substantially weak, which is due to the lack of political space for independent civil society organizations. Even worse is the situation of environmental awareness and protection in non-recognized territories, which suffer due to their status and as a result of absence of international organizations and their support.

And yet we have also heard environmentalists highlighting the absence of prioritization of environmental protection even on national levels. The absence of education or awareness on environmental matters, as well as the fact that often politicians campaigning on green ideas have gone up the political ladder only to cast aside their environmental agendas, shows that environmental awareness is an urgent issue that must not be used as a tool of manipulation by politicians.

Additionally, some interviewees, highlighting the need for environmental education and awareness, proved the point by denoting how it had empowered the locals to be not only more environmentally active, but also demand their right for participation in decision making, especially in local governance. This could be an important path for avoiding the top-down approach—activists from the capital engaging in environmentalism outside the capital, which would further decentralize environmental activism.

The interviewees, although agreeing that regional cooperation is a must, did not all share the same opinions about the paths to such cooperation. While for non-recognized entities it was mentioned that little can be done by international organizations due to their abiding to international regulations, suggesting that local organizations take responsibility, for recognized independent states the opposite was highlighted—international organizations were viewed as a good platform to bring the conflicting states together to discuss environmental matters.

In the past years there have been meetings between environmental organization representatives as well as activists, and yet we have seen little regional cooperation, which may be due to different reasons—overall lack of interest, insufficient mediation by international organizations, lack of long-term funding, and the absence of a regional environmental vision among environmentalists themselves.

The interviewees, when speaking of the need to cooperate on matters of environmental protection, also highlighted the willingness to put aside political agendas and concentrate on matters that will lead to common visions in nature protection. One way for this could be a very narrow specialized collaboration, such as organizing a meeting for rangers. Another step for conflicting and non-conflicting states could be the creation of cross-border parks protected by the states as well as eco-corridors for animal migration with the assistance of technologies to monitor the borders. There has been such a precedent for conflict transformation, as in the case of the creation of a peace park in the mountainous Cordillera del Condor border area between Ecuador and Peru. For decades this territory had witnessed territorial conflicts until peace talks began in 1995, the result of which was the Brasilia Agreement highlighting the need to establish protected areas on both sides of the border with both countries committing to promote socioeconomic and environmental cooperation in this trans-boundary area. The contribution of governmental bodies, as well as conservation organizations, local scientists, and indigenous peoples, framed the assessment of the region's biological importance, the outcome of which was a peace park contributing to the conservation of the rich biodiversity and creating an atmosphere of trust as an essential component for a lasting peace in the region (Hauk 2016).

The transitioning economies of all states in the South Caucasus have had a high cost on the environment. In the absence of local environmental agendas and perspectives, discussions on regional environmental cooperation have been somewhat inapplicable, not to mention the regional conflicts hindering the situation. And yet, common problems as much as collective fights for environmental justice are key points for discussions and cooperation, so long as there is willingness to live in clean and healthy environment. In the context of global changes of climate, viewing the South Caucasus in its wholeness as one big ecological hub is now no longer a matter of politics but a matter of survival for all of the species in the region, including humans. For this purpose, we have the following recommendations for different stakeholders.

To states and non-recognized territories in the region:

- Ensuring good governance to eradicate corruption and raise effectiveness through strict control of the bodies responsible for scrutiny of environmental protection (ministry and agencies, national parks, water areas, etc.).
- Implementing educational programs in schools to raise environmental awareness throughout the countries, thus decentralizing the topic.

To international organizations:

- Advocating for the incorporation of the non-recognized territories into awareness raising and conservational programs and ensuring the implementation of such projects on the ground, which will be one of the pillars in de-politicization.
- Focusing more on arranging meetings between people with more narrow specializations in conservation or general environmental protection, such as rangers, conservationists, and veterinarians, since their meetings deem to be more productive and less political or official in nature.

To both states and international organizations:

- Extending the existing domestic conservation projects for leopards to a bilateral partnership between Armenia and Azerbaijan coordinated bilaterally or by third parties to erect an alternative way for public diplomacy.

To civil society and grassroots:

- Creating a regional environmental charter/manifest and plan activities to ensure more sustainable collaboration and regional environmental protection.

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The Caucasus Edition, the Journal of the Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation is an independent publication that serves as a forum for scholars, practitioners, journalists, policy analysts and novice researchers to discuss conflicts and related issues in the South Caucasus and Turkey.

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