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## EXPLORING POST-LIBERAL APPROACHES TO PEACE IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

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# EXPLORING POST-LIBERAL APPROACHES TO PEACE IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

Editors: Philip Gamaghelyan, Sergey Rumyansev, Pinar Sayan,  
Sona Dilanyan

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# From the Editorial Team

A year has passed since that day in December 2018 when the My Step Alliance, led by Nikol Pashinyan, won a decisive victory in Armenia's parliamentary elections, thereby concluding the "Velvet Revolution" that deposed Serzh Sarkissian and his Republican party earlier in the year. The change had an immediate positive effect on the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process as the commitment to maintaining the ceasefire reached between Nikol Pashinyan and Ilham Aliyev still largely holds. The hopes of a further breakthrough, however, were short-lived and the negotiations today are deadlocked both on practical and conceptual level. The peace processes in the other part of the former Soviet Union have also been stagnant. With the liberal paradigm of peace suffering visible retreat in the international arena and no alternative clearly articulated, these conflicts have been effectively stuck in the "post-liberal limbo" which, not incidentally, is the title of the opening article of the issue authored by Laurence Broers.

Sevil Huseynova, Jafar Akhundov, Eviya Hovhannisyan, Katya Myachina, and Ksenia Babich follow with a critical analysis of the increased intensity in military-patriotic education. They argue that the influence of the army has been increasing rapidly in Azerbaijan, Armenia, Russia, and Ukraine. A wide variety of youth associations related to this total institution, militaristic volunteer organizations, and groups of nationalists that propagate far-right ideals become more and more vocal. Militaristic institutes, discourses, practices, and rituals gain momentum and become increasingly more visible in the public spaces. One of the reasons behind these developments are the armed conflicts lingering for years and decades. The institutes of secondary education that are under near complete control of the political regimes in all the four countries are an ideal channel for dissemination of militaristic practices, military-patriotic discourses, and rituals.

The authors focus both on differences and similarities of the militarization of the societies in these countries.

Exploring alternative to militarization and the deadlocked conceptions of liberal peace, a trio of authors from Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—Milena Abrahamyan, Vahid Aliyev, and Sophio Tskvariashvili, respectively—propose a discussion of “feminist approaches to peace in South Caucasus.”

The section that concludes the issue is composed of three articles and is focused on the developments in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. It opens with Vadim Romashov’s analysis of recent official statements and media reports, focusing on two significant trends within the current peace process—(re)establishing dialogue between the Armenians and Azerbaijanis of Nagorno-Karabakh and improving security along the state border between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In his “Opportunities for Fragmented Nagorno-Karabakh Peace Process: Intercommunity Dialogue and Safety of Borderlands,” Romashov argues for disconnecting the two trends from the overall political negotiations and asserts that the “fragmentation” of the privatized official peace process could better contribute to the transformation of the conflict. The article is followed by the “Reflections on Scenarios on the Peaceful Resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict in Armenia and Azerbaijan,” co-authored by Lala Jumayeva, Hayk Smbatyan, Nuriyya Hasanova, and Elen Grigoryan. The co-authors present the findings from their qualitative research conducted in the summer of 2019 exploring the opinions of ordinary Armenians and Azerbaijanis about the possible scenarios of a peaceful resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

The final article by Vadim Romashov, Marina Danoyan, and Hamida Giyasbayli develops an alternative approach for supporting local intercommunity peace processes within the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict setting, based on Etienne Wenger’s concept of community of practice.

In this issue of the *Journal of Conflict Transformation: Caucasus Edition*, experts and analysts from the countries of the South Caucasus, Russia, and Ukraine analyze the violent conflicts in the region and propose

recommendations for various actors aiming to impact the conflict contexts.

The editorial team expresses its gratitude to the Foreign Ministry of Sweden for their support and to the fifteen authors who tirelessly collaborated throughout the entire 2019 to bring to you this issue of the journal.

Editorial Team: Philip Gamaghelyan, Pinar Sayan, Sergey Rumyansev, Sona Dilanyan.



# Stuck in Post-Liberal Limbo? Conflict Resolution in the South Caucasus

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Laurence Broers<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

For 25 years resistance to conflict resolution has been a defining trait of the South Caucasus, despite peace processes running continuously since the early 1990s. The Geneva International Discussions provide a platform for very limited, tactical cooperation and information exchange among Georgians, Abkhaz, South Ossetians, Russians, and other international interlocutors. Yet there is no strategic vision of what a resolved conflict might look like in Abkhazia or South Ossetia. The negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan mediated by the Minsk Group of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) have, in a way, the opposite problem. A strategic vision for peace exists in the form of the Basic Principles, yet there are no tactical levers or meaningful interactions to get there. A quarter-century of negotiations has brought none of the parties closer to a negotiated agreement, begging the question: what does conflict resolution mean in the South Caucasus today?

It is important first to acknowledge that conflict resolution is itself a contested concept and not a consensual goal in the region. The baseline political positions in the region's conflicts have not changed in 30 years. Consequently, for many who are on the winning sides of ethno-territorial conflicts of the 1990s, the status quo *is* conflict resolution, and the world

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<sup>1</sup> The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Chatham House or the Conciliation Resources.

simply needs to catch up with this reality. That view has been repeatedly shaken up by resumptions of large-scale violence, notably violence between Georgia and Russia in South Ossetia in 2008 and escalation between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces in April 2016. Yet, the short duration of these five- and four-day “wars” indicates that a balance of forces exists in the region. However normatively irregular, and for large numbers of people morally unacceptable, the status quo in South Caucasus conflicts—strategically speaking—is sustainable.

The sustainability of intractable conflicts is reinforced by the South Caucasus’ positioning within the wider, contested geopolitical field of the post-Soviet space. The region briefly became the focal point of competition between Russia and Euro-Atlantic powers in 2008, but has since ceded this role to Ukraine. This raises the further question of whether it is possible to think about conflict resolution in this region for as long as the conflict in Ukraine continues. For as long as it does, external attention to conflicts in the South Caucasus will remain diminished and the region’s normative trajectory indeterminate. The Ukrainian crisis also reinforces a powerful tendency to see external actors as primary in both the causality and resolution of conflict. Those who see interfering geopolitical forces as the sole cause of South Caucasian problems see this analysis confirmed in Ukraine, challenging the argument that local will, agency, and capacities matter.

A more nuanced view is to see the South Caucasus as an extreme case of regional fracture (Ohanyan 2018). Fractured regions are characterized by weak internally networked ties and regional identities, which expose them to competing region-building projects from outside, often from former colonial hegemons. The South Caucasus offers a vivid example of this process, which has seen the geo-strategic, security, and trade relations of the region’s constituent republics vectored in distinct and incoherent ways. While fractured regions offer opportunities for great power penetration, their fractured nature also obstructs their incorporation into regional organizations and structures. External hegemony over such regions is often itself fractured, partial, and inconsistent. Although marginal in world politics, fractured regions threaten global security as sites where local conflicts and external agendas cannot be absorbed into a regional fabric, and spillover is a risk.

In this article, I extend the regional fracture argument to contend that fracture also characterizes the conceptual argument over appropriate responses to conflict in the South Caucasus. I argue that just as we observe the impacts of fracture in the South Caucasus on other policy domains such as democratization, regional cooperation, and security alliance formation, we also observe a fractured field in the philosophy of conflict resolution. Liberal and post-liberal models for addressing conflict compete with one another in the region, overlapping with rival Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian projects in hegemonic regionalism. Yet no model dominates, leading to incoherent and mutually exclusive policies. The resolution of South Caucasus conflicts is consequently stuck in a post-liberal limbo.

## **The Liberal Peace and its Solutions**

In the late 1990s and the 2000s up to about a decade ago, almost all Western thinking about conflict resolution in the South Caucasus was rooted in concepts such as federalism, confederalism, or some formulation of self-government within formally preserved but geopolitically less significant borders. Consider, for example, the agenda laid out in the many publications by Bruno Coppieters, in books with titles such as *Federal Practice: Exploring Alternatives for Georgia and Abkhazia* (Coppieters, Darchiashvili, and Akaba 2000). Conflict resolution in these publications was imagined in terms of Europeanization— incorporation into a Euro-Atlantic geopolitical space in which borders of themselves would become less significant.

Coppieters and his colleagues were advocating for solutions within the wider paradigm of the “liberal peace,” which was a set of ideas inseparable from the post-Cold War unipolar moment and which comprised the conflict resolution wing of transition theory (Campbell, Chandler, and Sabaratnam 2011). It assumed that democracy, rule of law, and the market are the pillars of sustainable peace. The liberal peace prescribed a path to peace through internationally-brokered peace negotiations, often accompanied by peacekeeping forces or military intervention and the containment of local violent actors; a focus on internationally monitored, free, and fair elections; the promotion of human and minority rights and gender equality in a new constitutional settlement; the advancement of development goals by identifying plural

stakeholders, focusing on reducing poverty, and providing international aid and foreign investment; and embedding the new political order through institutions such as transitional justice.

The liberal peace shared a common genealogy with the idea of democratic transition (the two ideas merge in the concept of “democratic peace,” the notion that democracies do not go to war with each other). In the aftermath of the end of the Cold War, it formed a core element of what appeared to be a new global dispensation mandating the global hegemony of liberal democracy. Yet much like democratic transition, the liberal peace has both a questionable track record in practice. Numerous critiques of the liberal peace appeared, some of which discussed putative alternatives, such as “indigenous peace” or “hybrid peace” (Mac Ginty 2011, Paris 2004, Paris 2010, Richmond and Mitchell 2012). The assumption that liberal norms of conflict resolution generated in the “global north” would be accepted in global peripheries was proven wrong. Like the transition paradigm, the liberal peace mistakenly placed a prescriptive emphasis on formal institutions and procedures, yet even when followed these prescriptions did not lead to sustainable liberal outcomes. Practically, the liberal peace as a mode of interventionist peacemaking endured a number of failures: peacebuilding interventions conceived in liberal terms led ultimately to authoritarian outcomes in countries such as Tajikistan, Rwanda, and Angola. The idea that liberal nation-building would follow invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan has been a spectacular and costly failure, most of all for the peoples of these states. Even in so-called “success stories,” such as the Western Balkans, a stabilized regional order has not led to the anticipated and irreversible liberal transitions, but to a fragile and still fractured region (Bechev 2018).

Liberal scenarios of conflict resolution in the South Caucasus involved the rehabilitation of autonomous self-governing institutions in secessionist areas. For example, the first proposal put forward by the Minsk Group in 1997, defined Nagorno-Karabakh as “a statal and territorial formation, within the borders of Azerbaijan.” Karabakh Armenians were to be compensated with a wide range of rights, such as enhanced mobility to Armenia and specially annotated passports, but they would be Azerbaijani citizens and elect representatives to the Azerbaijani parliament. Two other plans from the late 1990s, one put forward by former US ambassador to the OSCE John Maresca, and one proposed by

American scholars Ronald Suny and David Laitin, similarly advocated for a “Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh” within Azerbaijan that would be compensated with extensive rights and guarantees (Maresca 1994, Laitin and Suny 1999). In the Georgian-Abkhaz context, the Boden Plan of 2004, associated with former United Nations envoy Dieter Boden, re-conceptualized Georgia as a federal state and Abkhazia within its borders. A Concept for the Status of Abkhazia elaborated by a working group of Georgian activists in the early 2000s accorded a wide range of devolved rights and powers to Abkhazia in the framework of Georgian statehood (Concept on the Special Status of Abkhazia in the Georgian State 2004).

The fundamental problem with these scenarios, however, is that the liberal peace was inconceivable without liberal states. These plans assumed a converging and mutually constitutive dynamic, whereby *both* regimes *and* conflicts would be transformed. But this is not the dynamic that emerged. Instead of the wider social and political transformation within which the liberal peace is embedded, a significantly more inconclusive process followed of partial and reversible transitions in some states, and contested or consolidating authoritarianism in others.

## **Post-liberal Modes of Managing Conflict**

A rich academic and practitioner’s critique of the liberal peace was already long established before the seismic shifts within the Euro-Atlantic space of the mid-2010s. These shifts further undercut the eroded appeal of the liberal peace. Information manipulation and “fake news” corroded the notion of an open and transparent informational space, in which different narratives and political perspectives can be genuinely debated and reconciled. Perceptions of the integrity of liberal institutions within democratic states, from elections to courts, were compromised, and public trust in law, norms, and truth degraded. The presumed home of the liberal peace, the Western powers, appeared fractured and ridden with challengers inside and out, from US isolationism, to Brexit, to illiberal challengers in Eastern Europe. Meanwhile, multilateral international organizations, from the United Nations to the OSCE, became deadlocked in formulating responses to crises in Sudan, Libya, Syria, and Ukraine. Rising and regional powers, such Russia, Turkey, and China, rejected liberal norms in the resolution of their internal conflicts, and experimented with non-liberal approaches.

In short, to paraphrase Francis Fukuyama's now infamous phrase, whoever imagined that we had reached "the end of conflict and the last peace" because of the hegemony of the liberal peace was mistaken. Yet scholars and practitioners alike have been slow to acknowledge that the problem is not simply insufficient peacebuilding capacity, which would suggest more peacebuilding programming as a solution, but the appearance and consolidation of an alternative to the liberal peace. This alternative has been described as the illiberal peace, or by David Lewis and his co-authors as "authoritarian conflict management" (Lewis, Heathershaw, and Megoran 2015). This term describes an array of norms, discourses, and practices that do not seek to cohabit or hybridize with the liberal peace in any way, but instead to manage conflict in ways that are consistent with preserving authoritarian rule. This is an approach that invites us to take non-liberal actors seriously, rather than depicting them simply as "spoilers" to a liberal peace, shadow networks, or temporary aberrations that will eventually, after some period of contestation, internalize liberal norms. Instead, authoritarian conflict management aims to achieve the end of an armed rebellion by one part of society through sustained hegemonic control by a consolidated political elite, with a rather limited kind of political stability being the result.

Lewis and his co-authors identify three core components to authoritarian modes of managing conflict. In the realm of discourse, a single hegemonic discourse about the conflict is imposed that legitimates the state and delegitimates all other actors. Rather than portraying them as actors with legitimate grievances, a state-centered discourse depicts them as, for example, Islamist terrorists, marionettes of occupying powers, or as bearers of a fundamentally antagonistic culture or civilization. In its spatial dimension, authoritarian modes of managing conflict brings all spaces under government control and limits access to any spaces beyond it, which is securitized, for example, through travel bans. A third angle concerns the control over economic resources, using informal flows and patron-client relations that liberal perspectives would depict as "corruption" to impose a political economy of control. This means, for instance denying access for humanitarian and development agencies to rebel areas. Another aspect that can be added is the limited use of coercion itself. Whereas the state seeks to suppress unsanctioned violence in the theatre of conflict itself, limited violence may serve purposes of defining

wider political fields and spaces in specific ways justifying military spending, suspension of civil liberties and rights, and additional political and security controls.

One contemporary example of authoritarian conflict management is Russia's quelling of rebel forces in Chechnya over two wars, the containment of the wider North Caucasus insurgency, and the establishment of a power *vertikal'* between Moscow and Ramzan Kadyrov. Another example is China's management of dissent among Uyghurs in Xinjiang, involving the imposition of a single hegemonic narrative, the suppression of alternatives, and the reported "re-education" of large numbers of people in the state narrative. This model of managing conflict offers an alternative to the liberal peace, not of course by resolving conflict but by simply managing it indefinitely in ways that uphold and embed authoritarian rule.

## **The South Caucasus between Liberal Peace and Authoritarian Conflict Management**

Consistent with the wider pattern of regional fracture, liberal and authoritarian responses to conflict in the South Caucasus compete with and mutually exclude each other. Emphatically, liberal and authoritarian approaches do not coincide with the *de jure/de facto* divide. The relevant divide is between actors more invested in liberal modes of conflict resolution and actors more invested in authoritarian modes of conflict management. The distribution of these actors across conflicts in the South Caucasus does not replicate or follow conflict fault-lines; rather, groups and actors inclined to these different approaches can be found in each society. This reflects more fundamental cleavages in each society, between those who wish to see a reformed political order (and to varying extents a liberal one), and those who are invested in the status quo or more authoritarian alternatives.

Yet partisans of both the liberal peace and authoritarian conflict management encounter the deeper structural condition of regional fracture. Competing vectors for the region's geopolitical, security, and normative alignments, and the embeddedness of fracture, constrain both liberal and illiberal responses to conflict.

### *Constraints for the liberal peace in the South Caucasus*

Some of the constraints to the liberal peace in the South Caucasus have been alluded to above. Globally, the liberal peace everywhere confronts the passing of the unipolar moment, the decline in Euro-Atlantic cohesion and the power to attract, and the emergence of a multipolar order featuring several entrepreneurs of authoritarian conflict management. Regionally, the three major powers surrounding the Caucasus, Russia, Turkey, and Iran are all to varying extents invested or experimenting in authoritarian models of conflict management.

Within the region itself, regime trajectories have not developed towards the kinds of liberal democratic governance with which the liberal peace is associated. Azerbaijan and, until 2018, Armenia featured stably authoritarian regimes. Georgia has exhibited a highly contested trajectory in the direction of a more democratic regime type, a trajectory that Armenia looks set to follow in the wake of its 2018 “Velvet Revolution.” In different ways all of the region’s states exhibit the kinds of weak institutional capacity characteristic of fractured regions and present credible commitment problems for liberal mechanisms such as elections, referendums, or transitional justice.

Another factor is the emergence and viability of the “de facto state” as an alternative political model in secessionist areas that has to varying extents been able to present itself as an emancipatory project framed by ostensibly liberal norms such as self-determination. Yet for all three of these entities in the South Caucasus, legacies of ethnic cleansing or the exclusion of residual populations belonging to the “parent-state” nationality continually undermine a liberal framing of a self-determination project.<sup>2</sup>

A crucial constraint for the liberal peace is the political resource that unresolved conflict offers to political entrepreneurs of various kinds. Through the rhetoric and practice of securitization—depicting certain

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<sup>2</sup> The term “parent state” has become common in the academic literature, although many actors in “de facto states” dislike the term for its connotations of kinship and hierarchy. However, like the term “de facto state”, “parent state” is in many ways a least worst option compared to alternatives, such as the “metropolitan state” (which implies a directly colonial relationship), “base state” (which is more neutral but ambiguous) or the cumbersome “central state authority”.



actors, ideas, or practices as a threat to national interests sufficient to warrant the deployment of security policies in response— national security can be effectively construed as the Achilles' heel of any who challenge or win power. For example, during the eight-hour parliamentary marathon on May 1, 2018 that preceded the first and unsuccessful attempt to vote him in as prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan's opponents consistently targeted his security credentials. Ruling Republican Party MPs pronounced Pashinyan an implausible commander-in-chief and guardian of national security. In Georgia, security in the form of appropriate responses to the Russian presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia has emerged over the last 15 years as a key playing field in which government and opposition score points against one another. In this febrile competitive environment, liberal peace strategies are easily depicted as "going soft," and the case for them is more challenging to argue.

This reflects a further, critical constraint to the liberal peace in the South Caucasus, which is the simple reality that public opinion does not support such approaches. Polling on politically sensitive issues such as ethno-territorial conflict is prone to bias and the delivery of expected answers, yet it seems reasonable to conclude that the approaches embedded within the liberal peace, such as dialogue, autonomy, and power-sharing, are less popular than top-down, unitary approaches. The last Caucasus Barometer conducted in Azerbaijan, for example, found in 2013 that autonomy for Nagorno-Karabakh was significantly less popular (50% definitely or maybe) than no autonomy at all (98%). What counts as "authoritarian" in authoritarian conflict management is consequently moot, as such policies may reflect majority views.<sup>3</sup> (Of course, this overlooks the role that political elites play in propagating and normalizing such views through rhetoric, education, and state-controlled media.)

The horizons for the liberal peace in the South Caucasus consequently face grave and enduring constraints. The hegemony of the liberal global order that underpinned it has dissipated, and the era of large-scale multilateral interventions to enforce liberal outcomes is over. There is neither an unambiguous evidentiary base to justify such interventions, nor capacity among fractious multilateral organizations to field them.

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<sup>3</sup> I thank David Lewis for this point.

*Constraints for authoritarian conflict management in the South Caucasus*

Yet the prospects for more authoritarian approaches to definitively displace the liberal peace in the South Caucasus are also critically constrained because the basic structural conditions that have allowed, for example, Russia and China to quell internal conflict in Chechnya and Xinjiang are absent in the South Caucasus. Authoritarian conflict management is most effective when used against internal adversaries without heavily internationalized support. Secessionists in the South Caucasus, however, have reliable external support that mitigates and deflects the costs of authoritarian strategies directed at them. Recalling the three components as described by Lewis and his co-authors—discourse, space, and economic relations inside rebel areas—the latter two factors are largely beyond the effective reach of most post-Soviet “parent states.” Strategies of isolation may be pursued, yet these result primarily in accelerating secessionist areas’ integration with external patron states. Moreover, isolation strategies also compromise the credibility of “parent-state” claims to be genuinely committed to peaceful resolution and to this extent may entail reputational costs among some international audiences.

Second, authoritarian models of conflict management are not capable of definitively stabilizing conflicts with a strong communal element. Powerful collective memories and nationalist narratives drive conflicts in the South Caucasus. From the perspective of the region’s “parent states”, the idea that today’s de facto states are artificial or transient entities ignores the fact that they represent the institutionalization of local aspirations to separate ethno-territorial status that go back a century. This suggests that it is only open, public, multi-vocal, and extended processes of articulating grievances and reconciling them that can, eventually, transform and resolve these conflicts.

The idea that authoritarian regimes are better suppliers of security than their liberal alternatives can also hardly be taken as axiomatic. April 2016’s “four-day war” exposed corrupt authoritarians in Armenia as a primary security risk for the population in Nagorno-Karabakh. Although the “four-day war” played out as a tactical victory for Azerbaijan, it nevertheless came at a high human cost, with casualties reported to be broadly equivalent to Armenian losses and with very limited territorial gains for the billions of dollars spent on the military in the preceding decade.

Finally, like the liberal peace, authoritarian conflict management faces the South Caucasus' fractured positioning between Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian centers of power. The depth and pace of European integration may have been disappointing for some of its advocates in the South Caucasus, yet it is still sufficient to exercise a normative influence. That influence may now increase with the appearance of a new government in Armenia explicitly claiming a liberal-democratic form of legitimacy, even as it seeks to manage an ongoing security alliance with Russia. All South Caucasus actors are aware of an elective affinity between local strategies to pursue authoritarian strategies of managing conflict and Russian influence as a regional and global entrepreneur of these same strategies. This affinity may serve the interests of strongmen seeking to win or regain power by instilling insecurity in their populations and selling themselves as the solution to it. But many in the South Caucasus understand that authoritarian conflict management and a region penetrated by hard and soft Russian power are two sides of the same coin.

In the South Caucasus context, then, authoritarian conflict management may serve as a powerful tool for shaping the domestic political arena, but it is not able to actually contain internationalized conflicts. It may be an addictive prop for illiberal politicians or regimes, and useful in demobilizing liberal alternatives. As a component of wide stagnation stifling reform, innovation, and efficiency, authoritarian conflict management can also be corrosive of state power. As Armenia's autocrats discovered in 2018, it only takes a crisis to reveal the depth of that corrosion.

## **Conclusion**

Conflict resolution in the South Caucasus is caught between liberal and authoritarian models of responding to conflict. Reflecting and feeding back into the wider structural condition of regional fracture, neither approach can consolidate into effective strategies for either the resolution of conflicts along liberal lines, or their suppression consistent with authoritarian rule. The region is stuck in a post-liberal limbo, where the liberal peace is no longer hegemonic, yet authoritarian conflict management is incapable of decisively displacing it. This state of limbo, moreover, is set to continue and deepen for the foreseeable future.

Movement from this limbo to a new dispensation more conducive to conflict resolution will be a slow, incremental, and multi-faceted process, necessitating the passing of multiple interlinked thresholds. A full discussion of what these might be lies beyond the scope of this paper. I will conclude with mention of just three.

First, the limitations and wider socio-political costs of authoritarian conflict management need to become a publicly recognized problem. This implies on the one hand a public recognition that the balance of forces in South Caucasus conflicts makes their termination through military means prohibitively costly. On the other hand, it implies a broad public awareness that the pursuit of authoritarian conflict management brings with it a much wider series of negative consequences for society. These span a wide spectrum from the centralization of power and authoritarian evasions of accountability behind the rhetoric of “national security,” the diversion of resources to defense spending, the demobilization of dissent, the masculinization of society, and much more.

A second threshold would be the reduction of external influence. This idea, of course, pushes back against the received narrative of the South Caucasus as an object of competing external influences. It is certainly true that external patrons are hard-wired into the region’s conflicts by their asymmetric nature. Smaller actors borrow external power and geopoliticize conflicts in the process. The regional fracture perspective argues, however, that fractured regions are as much the product of local agency as external intervention. Negating the local levels of conflict and attributing a causal monopoly to geopolitics has been a very widely used rhetorical strategy in the South Caucasus. The liberal peace, of course, is also tainted by association with intrusive external powers pushing democratization and governance agendas. Yet a multitude of alternatives—hybrid peace, everyday peace, communitarian or community-driven peace, and quality peace—have been proposed as alternative paths to the relentless geopoliticization of conflicts (Mac Ginty 2011, Wallensteen 2015, Kokaia, Guliyeva, Kalatozishvili, and Romashov 2019, Sargsyan and Aydin 2019). Serious adoption of these perspectives could reinstate local political agency and over time lead to a new conjuncture beyond the impasse between the liberal peace and authoritarian conflict management.

A third threshold would be the advent of strategies that would meaningfully engage, but not recognize, *de facto* states. After a quarter-century of securitization and containment, “parent states” can point to the limited or non-existent number of recognitions, but very little else, as indicators of success. Furthermore, notwithstanding the Syrian exception, after Russia’s annexation of Crimea it is extremely unlikely that any further recognitions will be forthcoming in the foreseeable future. Rather than leading to the collapse of *de facto* states, isolation leads rather to their development along harder, illiberal lines making them more, not less, resistant to conflict resolution. Strengthened capacities in these entities are essential to *either* their accession to a new constitutional settlement with “parent states”, *or* their eventual recognition as independent states (Broers 2013).

Passing these thresholds might allow for today’s emaciated peace processes to expand sufficiently to draw disparate segments and social constituencies into a genuine political process. Increasing networked ties could also contribute to the greater institutional embeddedness of the South Caucasus as a framework for the resolution of conflicts and future for this region.

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# Conflicts and Militarization of Education: Totalitarian Institutions in Secondary Schools and in the System of Extracurricular Education in Azerbaijan and Armenia, Ukraine, and Russia

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Sevil Huseynova, Jafar Akhundov, Eviya Hovhannisyan, Ksenia Babich, Katya Myachina

## Introduction

The influence of the army has been increasing rapidly in Azerbaijan, Armenia, Russia, and Ukraine. A wide variety of youth associations related to this total institution, militaristic volunteer organizations, and groups of nationalists that propagate far-right ideals become more and more vocal (Goffman 1961, 1–124). Militaristic institutes, discourses, practices, and rituals gain momentum and become increasingly more visible in the public spaces. One of the reasons behind these developments are the armed conflicts lingering for years and decades.

In all the studied countries, despite some differences, the army is built around mandatory conscription. Thus, a significant part of youth, especially men, find themselves within the authority of this total

institution “where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut-off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administrated round of life” (Goffman 1961, XIII). However, for many years now militarization of the society is not limited to mandatory army service.

The institutes of secondary education that are under near complete control of the political regimes in the four countries of focus are an ideal channel for dissemination of militaristic practices, military-patriotic discourses, and rituals. As rightfully noted by Seth Kershner and Scott Harding in reference to the United States, “schools are a primary site for socialization into societies that support war” (Kershner and Harding 2019, 191).

All the societies examined in this review have gone through the process of similar “socialization,” although to a varying degree and at different times. Despite some differences, there are many similar trends and strategies of the militarization of the societies in these countries. The strengthening of the army or the increase in military budget is justified by the necessity for defending the homeland. The instigation of the conflict, and the inability to prevent it or reach a resolution, are always blamed on external forces with no introspection. Each political regime insists on own rightness and attempts to divert criticism by labeling it as “anti-patriotic.”<sup>4</sup>

The conflicts that persist as a result of this militarization and military-patriotic propaganda lead to the death of the own citizens of the states: both as military personnel and civilians. Even in the case of conflicts that are considered “frozen” for a long time (for example the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict), the constant casualties along the line of contact have become the expected norm. The killed citizens then become a “resource” that fires up the revanchist and patriotic sentiment and supports further militarist rhetoric and mobilization.

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<sup>4</sup> Different parties to the conflict carry a different level of responsibility for conflict escalation. For example, even with all its complexities the conflict in Eastern Ukraine never would take such a large-scale and bloody turn without Russia's direct military intervention there.



Secondary schools<sup>5</sup> are the most important institutions of primary socialization for all future citizens of a given country. In a conflict context, these schools are turning into institutions that produce militarist and revanchist-minded patriots, future soldiers, and officers who are ready to sacrifice their lives for the theoretical future of their state. Military education, a legacy of the Soviet Union, is a standalone subject that has been reintroduced to secondary schools in one form or another.<sup>6</sup> In each of the four studied countries, new strategies for educating “future patriots” from children and teenagers are being developed and put into practice.

Secondary education, which is one of the most important periods of primary socialization of an individual, once militarized can deprive societies of the chance for successful peaceful transformation of conflicts. This review of the situation in the four post-Soviet countries will not only draw readers’ attention to the obvious general trends around this issue but will also enable them to see the specifics of the process of militarization of societies in each country.

## **Military-political discourse and state youth policy in Azerbaijan**

**Jafar Akhundov**

### **The April 2016 escalation and militarization of rituals**

The April 2016 escalation resulted in substantial changes in the measured flow of education in Azerbaijani schools. Students of middle and elementary schools were gathered during breaks and class sessions and sometimes even after school to participate in military-style drills as

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<sup>5</sup> Including related extracurricular education organizations and practices (summer camps and others).

<sup>6</sup> Armenia and Azerbaijan reintroduced the subject many years ago. In Ukraine, the subject “Protection of Fatherland” was introduced at the high school level during the presidency of Petro Poroshenko. In Russia, while there is no mandatory subject present called military education, the network of “cadet classes” becomes increasingly popular (see below).

well as recitation of patriotic poems and the national anthem. During these activities, the participants were dressed in military or military-style uniforms. Some of the participants held imitation machine guns in their hands. During two weeks of intensive activities, the most popular motto was “The martyrs are immortal; the homeland is indivisible!” During these improvised mass activities, teachers told students that another Armenian attempt to seize their land completely failed and they were crushed with responsive measures. Also, students were taught that the duty of each Azerbaijani as a real patriot, regardless of age, was to be ready to sacrifice everything, including his own life, for the homeland. That was something that the martyrs—the heroes of the April war—had already done.

Military-patriotic education as part of the academic and educational process has a special place within the overall nationalistic discourse (cultural, political, and ideological). The militarization of education discourse at the middle school level is the organic continuation of memory and history politics carried out by the authorities. One function of history politics is to represent the ruling regime as the only competent actor in interpreting national history that also holds the monopoly over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement. Thus, on the internal and foreign policy level the military-patriotic education has the following two main goals:

1. In the historical, cultural, and national-ethnic aspect, it refers to identity, contrasting Azerbaijanis with Armenians and representing Azerbaijan as a bastion that for centuries has resisted the aggressive claims of the “historical enemy” constructed through ethnic, cultural, religious, and even biological categories;
2. On the side of domestic politics, this education is aimed at contrasting the government with the opposition and representing the ruling political regime as an uncontested and competent force that can protect the interests of the nation and state.

### **Institutes and agents of power**

The Azerbaijani government’s repressive approaches augmented by the lack of unity within the opposition have stripped the latter of any type of wider respect. The opposition’s attempts to play military-patriotic games

on the same field with the authorities are strictly curbed by the regime. The authorities have also not been in favor of allowing the development of any large youth organization, even a militarist-patriotic one, as it could hypothetically transform into a significant political actor. Considering the absence of any significant non-state actor in the field, this section is focused on the official governmental politics of military-patriotic education.

The authorities carry out the military-patriotic education through centralized state structures and different actors within the civil society (through so-called “GONGOs”). In general, there are three major institutes and/or agents of power that implement the policy of military-patriotic education:

1. The educational institutions where one of the central pillars are the secondary schools;
2. Different NGOs that are focused on working with youth (including only youth organizations and NGOs that work with veterans);
3. Specialized ministries, local executive authorities, and other state structures.

## **Secondary schools**

It is difficult to overestimate the key role of schools as one of the most important institutes of state propaganda in Azerbaijan. The school has a huge emotional impact not only on children. The scope of information outreach includes teaching staff, technical staff, parents, and other close relatives attending various school events. In essence, it is the school that is the most important institution of collective memory generation. The military-patriotic education curriculum is realized through the utilization of the following resources:

1. Specific textbook content that represents national-moral categories, identity criteria, enemy images, and the history of confrontation in the past and the inevitability of repetition of the confrontation in the future;
2. Inclusion of the teachers, especially those representing the field of humanities and military instructors. Their efforts make the pages

of textbooks come to life, narratives are visualized and are overlaid on each other, which significantly enhances the effect;

3. School rituals related to holiday and mourning dates with the obligatory inclusion of military-patriotic rhetoric that call to remember the losses and heroes, as well as to be ready to continue the heroic struggle of the ancestors.

In addition to school rituals, students are included in numerous state programs and projects ranging from cooperation with museums to different military-sport competitions and military-patriotic camps. Local executive authorities and specialized ministries usually manage the organization of these activities.

The “real citizen” and the “real patriot” has to know his enemies and his roots, as well as be a person who remembers. These criteria are reflected in the National Curricula—a conceptual framework document adopted by the Ministry of Education in 2006. The document defines the learning outcomes and standards of narratives in the field of general education (General Education Concept [National Curriculum] of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2006). The rationale for the course on “History of Azerbaijan” presents the following requirements for this academic course:

Delivery of this subject ensures mastering of systemic information on Azerbaijan as one of the most ancient human settlements, statehood traditions of Azerbaijan, origin and development of Azerbaijan people and its national, social, moral and spiritual values, position and role of Azerbaijan in geopolitical location, contribution of Azerbaijan into development of the world civilization, interventions experienced by Azerbaijan and fight against these interventions. (General Education Concept (National Curriculum) of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2006)

### **Textbook content**

Separate attention should be paid to the content of history textbooks. The historical narrative presented at schools tells the students that hundreds and thousands of years ago their direct valiant ancestors protected their native lands, and they inherited not only heroic glory but also the eternal hostility of aggressive neighbors, which determines the need for constant readiness to defend “native lands” with weapons in their hands. For

example, in the fifth-grade history textbook in the section dedicated to the heroic epic “Book of Dede Gorgud,” the necessity to be always armed and vigilant is expressed by the words of the main character—the old man Dede Gorgud<sup>7</sup>: “An old enemy can never be a friend.” The same passage explains who should be considered as an enemy. These are the Georgian and Armenian feudal lords under the auspices of the Byzantine Empire who are called “the infidels in black.” At the end of the section, the authors construct a myth about the direct connection of times and generations, portraying the theme of the never-ending struggle with the enemy.

“Oghuz Turk brave men vowed to avenge the blood of the deceased Shahid. This tradition of the Oghuz Turks eventually spread among the entire Azerbaijani people. The Azerbaijani people even now swear that they will not leave the blood of martyrs without retaliation.” (Mahmudlu, Jabbarov, and Huseynova 2016)

At the same time, Armenians are those, who are described by “hypocrisy and Armenization of Turkic-Azerbaijani place names/toponyms” (Mahmudlu, Jabbarov, and Huseynova 2016). Textbooks for higher grades expand and deepen this historical discourse.

## Narrators

The special role of narrators was briefly discussed above. Due to the charisma and credibility of those who narrate story, the patriotic narratives vividly reflect in students’ consciousness. Although the Ministry of Education urges all teachers to engage in this kind of educational work, undoubtedly, the teachers of humanities and military instructors take the lead role. Military instructors teach the course “Pre-military training of youth.”<sup>8</sup> They are reserve officers and are appointed on the recommendation of the State Service for Mobilization and Conscription of the Republic of Azerbaijan. They can have a significant

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<sup>7</sup> The collective literary image is presented in textbooks as a real historical figure.

<sup>8</sup> A standalone school subject on military education starting from the 9th grade has also been part of the Soviet education system. Many schools had special classrooms dedicated to the topic. The subject was usually taught by teachers in military uniform.

influence on students. At the same time, they can use their credibility to marginalize teachers of other disciplines in case those have more moderate views towards propaganda of enemy image and militarization. Students who possess and express an alternative point of views can also be ostracized. They can have their grades lowered. Also, these students lose the support of their classmates who don't want to be criticized for lack of patriotism.

In addition to specialized military classrooms at schools, separate educational corners for military-patriotic education are established with the support of the leadership of the Internal Troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Defense. These facilities house poster presentations, documents on the history of the development of the army, and manuals for pre-military training (Azertac 2008). In 2015, a pilot project was launched in Baku that later could be expanded to other cities and the regions of the country. Per the agreement between the Ministry of Education and the Space Instrument Engineering Experimental Plant of the Ministry of Defense fifty schools will be equipped following the latest standards. The military classrooms have already been equipped with training machine guns, handguns, grenade, and landmines as well as with different electronic equipment (Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2016). We can learn about the classroom atmosphere during these classes, for example, from the article published by the military instructor of Baku school No. 80 Reserve Lieutenant-Colonel Mursala Gurbanov (2015): "Military-patriotic Education of the Youth: What Aspects Should be Emphasized?" The author starts his article with a quote from Heydar Aliyev: "Everyone must promote and educate patriotism, loyalty to the motherland, and willingness to sacrifice life for it." Gurbanov directly ties patriotism with the readiness to self-sacrifice. Later he lists historical figures from different historical times and with a diverse background as an example. This list simultaneously can include the leader of the anti-Islamic uprising of 9th century and the founder of the Safavid state in the 16th century, shah Ismail Khatai. Within the national-patriotic discourse both of these figures are considered Azerbaijani whose selfless struggle for the motherland has to be an outstanding example of pride and an ultimate goal. Gurbanov stresses that Azerbaijanis are heroic people that have educated resilient

youth, the proof of which are the martyrs that battled with the “Armenian thugs” to the death.

The author also touches on the issue of identity. The historical and educational discourse includes an axiomatic statement about the Turkic foundation of the Azerbaijani people, their ancient roots, and rights to the lands of their ancestors due to their ancient origin and the constant struggle for independence. Due to such an approach, certain historical periods have ambiguous interpretation. On one hand, the Soviet period is presented as an era of total imperialism and colonial oppression. Gurbanov interprets the internationalism characteristic to the Soviet period as an integral part of the anti-Turkic policy of genocide. But even against this bleak background, the period of Heydar Aliyev’s leadership stands out as a time of unprecedented growth in all areas.<sup>9</sup>

### **Rituals at schools**

At the end of the above-mentioned article, the author stresses the need to strengthen/intensify work with children. There is a need to introduce children to poems and other literary works related to military topics, underline the importance of mass/collective visits to the graves of martyrs and other memory places, and so on. All these steps are an integral part of school rituals that take place on holiday and memorial days in the form of theatrical performances attended by parents. Occasionally, these events are accompanied by school patrols when students are dressed in military uniform and stand on guard with training weapons in their hands on all the floors. Gurbanov concludes his ideas of military-patriotic education with a thought that the bloody history of Khojali intensifies the sense of revenge towards the enemy. At the same time, World War II veterans who saved the world from the Nazi plague cannot be forgotten either. The introduction of veterans in this discourse is not a coincidence. They participate in the majority of events on the military-patriotic topic organized by schools or state structures at the schools. They represent the link between generations and the past. The stories about German Fascism

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<sup>9</sup> Heydar Aliyev’s cult is an integral part of a larger national-patriotic ideology. In 2019, at various government agencies all across the country, events dedicated to the 50th anniversary of Heydar Aliyev assuming power are held.

are inevitably compared with “Armenian Fascism,” and not in the favor of the latter.

The more recent school rituals, which gained additional reinforcement after the April 2016 war, include the participation of 5th to 10th graders in combat marches during school parades held at some schools shortly before the celebration of Victory Day on May 9. Yet another school ritual that is not connected with any specific event is the campaign “Letter to the Soldier,” as part of which students write letters to soldiers serving on the contact line. This campaign was launched right after the April war on the initiative of ASAN (Azerbaijan Service and Assessment Network) (ASAN 2016).

### **The new wave of militarization**

The four-day war of April 2016 showed that militarization course adopted by the regime is yielding results. The military escalation of the conflict that immediately followed the economic crisis diverted society’s protest mood in the direction necessary for the authorities. In April there was an increased number of young men volunteering to be sent to the front line. Within this context, the statements made by school students about their readiness to take the orders and participate in military actions do not seem far-fetched or exaggerated (1news.Az 2017).

The April events signaled a new round of militarization and an ambitious campaign of military-patriotic education. New narratives and new places of memory appeared. Now it was possible to be proud of not only the heroic and selfless struggle of the martyrs and ghazis during the unsuccessful actions in Karabakh in the early 1990s but also of new victory and display of public solidarity as many had long been waiting for. This meant an increase in the number of commemorative events with a strong militaristic pitch.

The impressive intensity of events included seminars, conferences, round-table discussions, visits to places of memory, different military-sports games, and military-patriotic camps. These activities were held either at schools or with the participation of students and were implemented under the auspices of local executive authorities, the Ministries of



Education, Defense, Internal Affairs, Youth and Sport, State Border Services, and the State Service for Mobilization and Conscription.

### **Post-April 2016 events**

The first large-scale events held throughout the country in April 2016 were the lavish funerals of soldiers killed during the fighting. Funeral processions accompanied with a special escort drove along the city streets with music, and groups of teachers and schoolchildren ushered them along the route. The schools in which the deceased officers and soldiers studied or those schools that were located in the districts where they lived were renamed after them. The names of new places of memory—Lele Tepe, Chojuk-Marjanly, and Seysulan—were just introduced to the discourse (in 2018 they were included in the History of Azerbaijan textbooks for the 11th grade). The most visited places of memory became the Ally of Martyrs in Baku and Guba Memorial. The latter was created to honor the victims of the genocide committed by Armenian Dashnaks and Bolsheviks against Azerbaijanis in early May 1918 (Azertac 2017).

From mid-April 2018 Heydar Aliyev centers across the country hosted events organized by the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan (New Azerbaijan, YAP) party and the local executive authorities. In addition to teachers and schoolchildren, veterans (*gazi*) of both the Karabakh war of the early 1990s and World War II, as well as parents and other close relatives of those killed in battles for the Nagorno-Karabakh region, were necessarily invited to them.

Almost all such events followed a standard plan. After laying a wreath to Heydar Aliyev's memorial a speech was made by the head of the local executive authority who never failed to mention the April escalation. The April events were presented as symbolizing an outstanding victory that became a part of the history of the Azerbaijani army. Within this discourse, it is always underlined that this victory, like all other achievements, is a result of successful policies laid down by Heydar Aliyev and carried on by Ilham Aliyev. Such events were also organized in the areas of relative proximity to the context line. The most frequent location for such events became the village of Kuzanly, the municipal center of the part of the Agdam region that is under the control of Azerbaijan.

The speeches made by the relatives of deceased soldiers are also not very diverse. All of them emphasize the sense of pride and joy that their sons had fulfilled their duty to the motherland and reached the heights of martyrdom. And it could not be otherwise because they brought their sons up as real patriots. As a rule, all relatives confidently state that all young men should be ready to sacrifice everything for motherland. The fight should continue, otherwise all the sacrifices would be in vain. This type of unity is possible only as a result of "correct" military-patriotic education of youth before they are drafted into the army.

Later, similar events were scheduled at schools as well and took place throughout the entire year almost non-stop. A scientific-practical conference and training on the "Role of the April fighting in the promotion of military patriotism" conducted as part of the project "Advocating Patriotism among Adolescents and Youth" serves as a good example of the nature and atmosphere of such meetings. An event with the participation of party officials and representatives of local executive authorities with the financial support of the Youth Fund took place at the Gabibbek Makhmudbekov Technical and Humanitarian Lyceum No. 2 (Azerbaijan Youth Foundation 2018).

The framing of the overarching theme of the speeches relied on Heydar Aliyev's words uttered at the Youth Forum: "Since part of the territory of Azerbaijan is occupied, national-patriotic principles of education should be instilled from childhood, should become a way of life, the life charter of every citizen" (Aliyev 1996). Thus, military-patriotic education should begin in childhood, and it should include all levels of education, military service, and family. The youth is getting completely absorbed by this process. These types of events usually conclude with a presentation of certificates, diplomas, badges, and various gifts.

### **Military-sports games and military-patriotic camps**

Military-sports games (MSG) and military-patriotic camps (MPC) play an important role in the process of military-patriotic education. According to the head of the Department of Preschool and General Education of the Ministry of Education Aydin Akhmedov, in 2014 there were plans made to introduce children to life in the military units, real weapons, and participation in the military oath ceremony (Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2014).

The very first MSGs were organized at the end of the 1990s. For example, from 1998 to 2014 MSGs called “Cəsurlar” (in Azerbaijani, “The Brave Ones”) were organized. The goal of these events was to strengthen the military-physical shape and get youth ready for the army. Students from grades 7-9 participated in these activities. This was a nationwide competition with a separate district and city stages with the participation of over 35,000 students (Ministry of Youth and Sports of the Republic of Azerbaijan n.d.). Competitions included overcoming an obstacle course, passing a minefield on a cable, crawling under electric wires, throwing a grenade, building tents, and so forth. The opening ceremony of the games took place in April of every year at the Jamshid Nakhichevanski Military Lyceum and the closing ceremony (after 2003) was preceded by a visit to the grave of Heydar Aliyev and the Alley of Martyrs (Azertac 2014).

The current MSGs called “Şahinler” (“Hawks”) follow the same pattern. The main goal of these activities is the readiness to repeat feats of heroes and martyrs. Teams are formed of students from grades 9-11, and each team includes 10 boys and 4 girls (Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2019). During four competition rounds (school level, city/region level, district level, and national level) students compete in their skills of correct handling of weapons, protection against chemical weapons attacks, removal of the wounded from the battlefield, and so forth. Children from schools assigned to areas occupied by Armenian troops are also involved in the games (Azertac 2015a).

In recent years an MSG organized by the State Border Services called “Sərhəd” (“The Border”) is gaining popularity (Azertac 2015b). For example, in 2015, 680 students from 136 schools of 28 border regions participated in these activities. In 2018, the numbers increased to 890, 178, and 34, respectively, and climbed to 1035, 207, and 36, respectively, in 2019. Furthermore, each summer a separate MPC called “Sərhədçi” (“Border guards”) is organized for students from grades 7-10 (Armiya.Az 2018). In addition to the ideological and educational program, the students are trained in assembling and disassembling machine guns, chasing and detaining, providing first aid, the art of camouflage, and drill training.

Since 2014, each summer the local authorities together with the Ministry of Defense organize MPC “Gənc Heydərçilər” (“Young Heydars”) in the Qusar district. Children of military personnel serving on the contact line,

children of martyrs, and students with outstanding academic and sports achievements are included in this camp. In contrast to other camps, this one is open only to boys who vacation here and learn about the everyday life of soldiers, learn to use weaponry and other skills. The number of boys each year ranges from 150 to 180 (Azertac 2015d; Azertac 2015c). The ideological component plays a significant role in all these processes and it is aimed at strengthening the cult of personality. All speeches made by the high-level officials and the organizers of such events emphasize the great care and concern displayed by President Ilham Aliyev and his wife, the first vice-president Mehriban Aliyeva towards the families of the martyrs (Azertac 2019a; The Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2019).

### **Pro-governmental NGOs and State Policy towards youth**

In an environment of an almost complete absence of independent civil society organizations in Azerbaijan, this section will focus on so-called pro-governmental NGOs. Few opposition youth organizations, including their headquarters often represented by opposition parties, do not put forward any alternative ideas regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Moreover, they are also involved in the deepening of the popular revenge discourse. Members of such NGOs can offer an even more radical assessment of the conflict and criticize the government for the lack of effort and unwillingness to resolve the Karabakh issue by force and for the lack of proper patriotism among the authorities. As a result of their criticism towards the authorities, they are deprived of direct access to schoolchildren and students. The activities of pro-government NGOs is strictly dependent on government allocated grants since there are no other sources of funding available to them. This automatically sets the agenda within the official national-patriotic discourse. Thus, the activities of these NGOs are not much different from the youth organization of the ruling party YAP, which is considered the largest. According to official data it has about 250,000 members.

The authorities never underestimated the youth's potential and always were very strategic in using this resource. The roots of the official youth policy go back to the Heydar Aliyev's decree on the establishment of the Ministry of Youth and Sport. On February 2, 1996, the First Youth Forum official opened where Heydar Aliyev made a speech. A year later,

February 2nd was declared Youth Day. Since then the number of youth NGOs started to grow. Currently, there are around 300 youth NGOs among almost 3000 registered NGOs (Ministry of Youth and Sports of the Republic of Azerbaijan n.d.). Among them, for example, is the Society of Young Patriots, which was established in 1998.

In 1999, the Cabinet of Ministers of Azerbaijan issued a decree to establish a program on "Strengthening Patriotic and Civic Feelings among Youth" (Cabinet of Ministers of Azerbaijan 1999). Later, the President's decree on "State Youth Policy" was issued (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan 1999). These documents provided for an action plan that included the creation of a Center for Patriotic Education, conducting thematic games and contests in kindergartens, instilling a spirit of patriotism in children, creating a children's encyclopedia, installing thematic advertising stands, and so forth. These development vectors were supported by the 2002 "Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Youth Policy."

During Ilham Aliyev's presidency, the work with youth structures gained new impetus. Several new government programs for youth were introduced. Among them, the one that presents a particular interest for the current analysis is the State Program "Azerbaijani Youth." It has been adopted three times: for 2005-2009, 2011-2015, and 2017-2021 (Office of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2017). The program entails civil and patriotic education, introduction of students to the heroes who made a contribution in the Karabakh war, improvement of the quality of military education (this subject was renamed to Pre-military training of youth), improvement of the quality of the military-sports games, creation of thematic animated movies and cartoons, and organization of seminars and conferences. After April 2016, the implementation of this program became more intense and non-stop. The Youth Fund (Azərbaycan Respublikasının Gənclər Fondu) that was established in 2011 became one of the main grant allocation sources for programs initiated by the government as well as those suggested by the grassroots. Authorities paid even more attention to youth policy, especially considering the possible negative backlash due to the socio-economic crisis, which was reflected in the creation of new specialized structures. Within the Presidential Administration, a new youth department and a corresponding committee within the Parliament (Milli Mejlis) were created in 2017.

## Youth NGOs

The number of NGOs working in the military-patriotic field constantly increased due to serious support, including financial support, shown by the state. Among the most active NGOs, "Revan" Public Association stands out. Within the framework of the project, "Learning about the national heroes and propaganda of their activities," the movement's activists organized several seminars at the schools in Baku and some regions of Azerbaijan (Teleqraf 2014). After the events of April 2016, this association organized a new project with similar goals, called "Azerbaijani Hawks in Karabakh," that told the story of officers and soldiers who participated and died during the April fighting (Koordinat 2017). According to the provided information, the mission of the association is to support the defense policy and the unequivocal and definite activities of President Ilham Aliyev to liberate the occupied territories, as well as to teach children how to follow the example of the heroes (Metbuat.az 2016).

In recent years the NGO "İreli!" ("Forward!"), established in 2005, has been gaining popularity. The declared mission of the organization is to support the implementation of the state youth policy and comprehensive development of the youth, development of civil society aimed at protection of national interests, and education of well-intentioned citizens. On that point, this organization was one of the many such organizations working within this field. After April 2016, on the wave of patriotic sentiments, the organization organized a series of events that resulted in their wider popularity. In December 2016, the members of the organization visited the Lele Tepe Heights that fell under the control of Azerbaijan after the April fighting. The area became not only a new place of memory but also a new symbol of victory (İsmayilov 2016). During summer 2018 the organization organized a military-patriotic camp "Marsh İreli!" ("March Forward!") in the village of Kuzanlı in the Agdam district (Azertac 2019b). The first camp brought together 100 people aged 18 to 20. In 2019 the second camp was organized in the border Geranboy district with the participation of 150 people aged 17 to 25 (1news.Az 2019). The participants engaged in a special social and sports program featuring extreme conditions, participated in meetings with civic activists and veterans, and visited military units and posts. The camp program

included various simulation games such as overcoming an obstacle course as part of reconnaissance, jumping from a height, launching an attack on combat positions, obtaining fire and food, shooting, topography, and tactical training.

Mir Hasan Seyidov, the chairman of "Ireli!", spoke about the importance of preparing the youth to take part in the information war as well. According to him, the youth is another military unit. There is a significant number of young people who need to be trained and prepared accordingly and who need to expand their information base. Seyidov stated that "Azerbaijan has a strong army, the state and the people are united, and our project is aimed at the further development of youth, the exploration, and realization of their potential in the military-patriotic sphere. The country should be protected not only by the military but also by the entire public, especially young people. Our youth is the vanguard of the country, devoted to their homeland, its values, traditions, and ideals! We must always be ready to free our lands from the Armenian occupiers" (Novosti.Az 2019).

### **Eyewitness stories**

What was routine life like at the typical military camp? What influence did it have on young people, and what drew them to participate in the camp? One of the participants, Ahmet Hasanov, 18, agreed to answer these questions (the name has been changed to respect the privacy and confidentiality of the respondent). The simulated military environment of the camp was the main reason he decided to attend the camp. He wanted to expand his knowledge in the military field, learn about military structure, and find his passion so that when the time came for military service he would be ready for it.

Ahmed revealed that the wakeup call was at 6 am, after which everybody needed to get ready for the drill. According to the military regulations everyone needed to be clean shaved every day; however, the participants had to shave using only ice-cold spring water. The same water was used to wash the dishes after meals. This was uncomfortable, but it boosted the sense of responsibility. Ahmet believed that they would never lose their sense of responsibility after having this camp experience.

The camp participants also met with veterans—the participants in the April 2016 fighting. They spoke about their combat experience, military operations, and their perception of Armenians. At the same time, they didn't speak about Armenians in a derogatory way. The enemy should not be underestimated and treated as weak. There are smart and skillful soldiers among Armenians as well. The main criteria used to judge the lack of intellectual development among both Armenians and Azerbaijanis was the cruelty and torture used towards the wounded. Excessive use of violence was an indicator of a low level of education. Highly professional and skilled soldiers prevent suffering and kill fast.

Besides, veterans and other professional service members conducted trainings on assembling and disassembling machine guns, martial arts, and sniper shooting. There were also competitions in shooting at a moving and standing target, throwing knives, overcoming an obstacle course, pulling a cable and other competitions. The camp program also had a built-in time for acting. As part of practical sessions, participants had to stage and act out some scene from a military movie. Day and night there were military drills, fire drills, and mine shelling drills. Participants were taught how to overcome such situations with minimal losses.

By the end of camp, it became clear to Ahmet that his understanding of military service was completely different. He stressed that they had to obey orders, but he never clarified what type of orders. "The orders are not questioned. We understood that. We also developed a sense of unity. When somebody is not feeling well, the rest rush to help him. The trainings were so intensive and took place under such a blazing sun that every day around 20 out of 150 participants would faint. This became a routine thing for us, and in such situations in the future, I think, we will be able to maintain our composure and come promptly to the rescue. We also learned how to work as a team and developed self-control and patience."

## **Concluding thoughts**

Based on the analysis of methods and ideological forms of work with youth in the area of military-patriotic education we can identify three main vectors of its implementation.



1. Ideology: The real patriot has to know his roots (history, culture, religion, national-moral values) as well as know the enemy forces that oppose them. The education system and various commemorative practices are used to promote this education. In recent years religious rhetoric has also gained popularity, which is facilitated by the cult of dead heroes, popular in the Shiite branch of Islam. This could be an important topic for a separate article.
2. Sacralization: There is a tendency toward sacralizing the image of the homeland in general and its symbols in particular. This concept materializes in the form of unaccountable, almost religious devotion and love towards the motherland. At the same time, the motherland is certainly associated with the state, which in turn means the ruling regime. The discourse introduces the concept of trinity: state power, army, and people. From early childhood, a true patriot and well-intentioned citizen should be brought up with the best human qualities, has to feel connected with his roots, accept that there are no alternatives to the ruling regime, and be ready to give his life for holy state symbols and ideals. The images of martyrs and heroes represent the highest form of patriotism. In this regard, the Karabakh conflict remains a powerful consolidating force and an inexhaustible source for the preservation and development of conflict discourse.
3. Practical training in military-patriotic education: Military competence is becoming an integral criterion of a properly educated patriot.

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## **The ‘Nation-Army’ ideology in the Armenian educational system**

**Eviya Hovhannisyan**

### **The April escalation and militaristic tendencies in the state ideology**

The escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in April 2016 created quite a frenzy in Armenian society. On the day that the military clashes started, a drive for relief supplies (food items, clothing, personal hygiene items) was organized across the country. These efforts were also accompanied by fundraising campaigns for the residents of the border villages and families of the servicemen. There was also the unofficial full mobilization of men.

Even though full-scale military activities lasted for only a few days, their consequences had a long-term impact on society. The period that immediately followed the April escalation can be described by the increased popularity of military discourse and rituals in the state educational institutions and programs. This trend became an integral part of a wider militarization of commemoration practices and the public discourse.

The Armenian Ministry of Defense became the main curator of increased militarization across all spheres and institutions. It was this state institution that introduced the topic of military heroism and the concept of “Nation-Army” into the public discourse. These ideological novelties were accompanied by a large-scale commemoration of soldiers killed during the military action and the erection of monuments and memorial plaques in different regions of Armenia.

### **‘Nation-Army’**

On October 26, 2016, Defense Minister Vigen Sargsyan introduced the “Nation-Army” concept, thus establishing a foundation for a number of advocacy clauses. He set an ultimatum and stated that the public had no right to oppose this concept and was obliged to accept it “today and with

a new vision” (Ministry of Defense of Armenia 2016). As a result of this concept, over the past three years, in the early days of April, various formal and informal events were held in Armenia, designed not only to commemorate the victims of the April 2016 escalation but also to convey the concept of “Nation-Army” to the larger public. Within the framework of this process, various symbolic reconstructions of the memory landscape took place. For example, one of the central streets of the Mush district in Gyumri was renamed Seven Heroes Street in the honor of seven servicemen killed during the April escalation (Arevshatyan 2016).

The concept gained further popularity in the mass media—television, print, and digital media—as well as through educational programs. In the December issue of the military journal of the Ministry of Defense, *The Armenian Army*, the study “Strategic guidelines for the development of the ‘nation-army’ system: From the Armenian militia to the national-democratic defense of the Republic of Armenia” was published. This work was presented as the narrative foundation for further development of the concept. However, since 2016 up until now, the concept has not been fully developed, although separate legislative acts have already been formulated within its framework.

### **The policy of military-patriotic education in Armenia**

Undoubtedly, this new concept has affected the militarization of secondary school education. On April 20, 2017, during the “Nation-Army 2017” conference, the Minister of Education and Science of Armenia Levon Mkrtchyan stated that the “primary goal of the education system in Armenia is to ensure the continuity of the Armenian nation.” He also underlined the necessity of patriotic and military education implemented through the education system. In addition, the minister noted that the registration of hundreds of volunteers from different universities to be sent to the frontline during the “April war” points to the success of the educational system. As the minister was thanking the Ministry of Defense for the cooperation he stated: “We have to be able to make the Nation-Army ideology accessible to every family. This is the main mission of the education system: we have to get to a point where at each school there are dozens of kids who dream of becoming military officers.”



The cooperation that the education minister spoke about got a new impetus with the launch of the “Nation-Army” concept. The representatives of the Defense Ministry and military officials visited educational institutions across the country and introduced high school and college students to the programs “This is me” and “The Honor is mine,”<sup>10</sup> specifically developed for propagating military education (Levon Mkrtychyan 2017).

The Ministry of Education developed a wide range of initiatives aimed at deepening the ties between the army and the education system. Back in February 2017, the press secretary of the Ministry of Defense Artsrun Hovhannisyan stated that the “Nation-Army ” concept was “work that will be done in close cooperation between schools and universities.” He also added that “first and foremost the concept concerns the educational system since education is a strategic component of management” (Ararat TV 2017).

In March 2018, the Minister of Defense Vigen Sargsyan announced the creation of a new working group in cooperation with the Ministry of Education to study the quality of teaching of the subject “Beginner Military Education” (BME). Since the subject was only taught once a week, the ministry planned to establish an additional program of summer camps that would serve as an introductory course before conscription to mandatory military service (Vrtanesyan 2018). The military games “Koryun” (in Armenian, Lion Cub) and “Combat Training Club” at Yerevan State University were held to promote the same idea, but at the high school and higher educational institution levels. According to the results of the monitoring conducted by the “Association of Informed Citizens” NGO, the number of militaristic events at education institutions has increased since the development of the “Nation-Army” concept (Union of Informed Citizens 2018). These events, developed within the “Nation-Army” ideology, gradually created strong links between the educational institution, children, parents, and army. One such example was the event that took place at one of the elementary schools in the Armavir region on December 19, 2016. The theme of the event was: “I’ll give my life for my motherland, I’ll give my love to mothers.” It was dedicated to the military personnel killed during the April escalation

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<sup>10</sup> More details about these programs will be discussed later in the article.

(Armenian Educational Portal 2016). The event began with the performance of the national anthem and a moment of silence in memory of the victims.

The title and the ritualism of such events completely reflect the content of the “Nation-Army” concept. In this particular case, the title included the main value triggers that are aimed at increasing patriotic feelings should a new war break out: motherland, mother, and sacrifice. Mother is not only a soldier’s parent but also an obvious image identified with the motherland.

### **‘Nation-Army’ at preschool institutions**

“I will give my life for my homeland  
I will give my soul to God, and I’ll keep the honor to myself”<sup>11</sup>

Even though Armenian preschool institutions were not touched by the systematic propaganda of “Nation-Army” ideology, during the three years after the April escalation various militaristically inspired events were organized with the participation of preschool children. During the April escalation in some kindergartens (as well as secondary schools) food and relief supply drives for military personnel were organized. Children were also included in these processes and were tasked to write “support letters” to the soldiers.<sup>12</sup>

On January 28, 2017 and 2018, festivities and theatrical performances dedicated to the Armenian Army day were organized in some kindergartens. During these events, preschool children were dressed in military uniforms, marched on the stage, and sang military songs. According to the principal of one of the preschools in Yerevan’s Shengavit district: “Our kindergarten puts the main emphasis on military-patriotic education. To have a decent generation we need to instill patriotism from a young age.” Kindergarten staffs often organize field trips to military

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<sup>11</sup> The inscription on the wall of the Republic of Armenia Police Academy.

<sup>12</sup> Later, after the “Velvet Revolution,” some of the collected items were discovered in the house of one of the veterans of the Karabakh war, Manvel Grigoryan. During a search of his house, boxes with supplies, including unopened letters from children intended for military units on the line of contact were found (Ashughyan 2018).

units and military education institutions, as well as to schools where there are specialized classrooms named after the heroes of the Karabakh war. Kindergarten children also participate in events organized by military recruitment services. In particular, this touches the solemn ritual of seeing off the new draftees to the army, during which conscripts take an oath to become worthy soldiers of the Armenian army.<sup>13</sup>

### **'Nation-Army' in secondary school**

A similar situation was also observed at general education institutions in the country where systematic propaganda of "Nation-Army" was carried out. Interviews and analysis of newspaper articles and publications on the pages of schools in social media outlets show that in 2017 and 2018, many different events within the framework of military-patriotic education were organized across the country. These events were not only systematic in nature but also played roles of advocacy (demo lessons, discussions, presentation of programs) and cultural-propaganda (field trips to military institutions, military-themed school events). Shooting ranges were opened at some schools with the support of the Ministry of Defense (Hay Zinvor 2017).

The advocacy (information-propaganda) aspect introduced high school students to programs of the Ministry of Defense titled "This is me," "The Honor is Mine," and "The Role and Impact of the Army, the Concept of Nation-Army." The officers of the juvenile department of the Armenian police also participated in these events with lectures on the topic "Army, Soldier, Motherland" (Union of Informed Citizens 2018). Events and lessons titled "Student, Police Officer, Soldier Devoted to the Motherland" were held in schools throughout Armenia—in the cities of Yerevan, Goris, Kapan, Abovyan, and the villages of Alvank, Gandzak, Tairov, and others. According to Zara Vardanyan, the senior inspector of the juvenile department of Kapan, "The army is considered a central part in the civic education of minors" (Vardanyan 2017).

During the military games conducted in 2016-2018, essay competitions and art exhibitions on military topics were organized at secondary schools across the country. These included the "Haykyan," military games, the

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with the principal of Yerevan kindergarten No. 127, 59 years old. September 11, 2019.

“Koryun” and “Armenian soldier” military-patriotic games, and the national essay competition titled “I am addressing my soldier” (Aravot 2017). “Improving the effectiveness of military-patriotic education and the teaching of the subject ‘Beginner Military Education’ among high school students” was stated as the main goal of the “Koryun” military-patriotic games (Ministry of Education and Science of Armenia 2017).

During the past three years, classrooms named after killed soldiers were opened in different schools across the country. In addition, new posters were installed in schools where, along with the heroes of the Karabakh war of the 1990s, the images of soldiers killed during April escalation were featured.

In addition to the events held in the context of the obsessive propaganda by the ministries of defense and education, some schools came up with their own initiatives, organizing various kinds of charity events for military personnel. For example, the students of one of the schools in Yerevan had a field trip to a military unit where they learned about the daily life of the soldiers, ate in the dining hall of the military unit, performed poems, songs, and dances for the soldiers, and gave letters, souvenirs, and sweets to the servicemen.<sup>14</sup>

### **‘Nation-Army’ in higher education institutions**

After the April escalation, the influence of the Ministry of Defense over the education institutions visibly increased. This pattern is hardly surprising given that the propaganda of the “nation-army” concept was also targeting the higher education institutions. The conventional format of cooperation between “universities and the army” included various conferences, visits to military units, meetings with military personnel, and training programs in military psychology.

By 2014-2015, military education clubs were operating in different universities. The mission of these clubs was to increase the “quality” of military-patriotic education for the students. For example, the “Nzhdeh” military-patriotic club was established at the Armenian State Economic University in 2014 (Armenian State University of Economics 2014). The club was named after Garegin Nzhdeh, the hero of the Armenian

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with the math teacher of Yerevan school 198, 63 years old. September 9, 2019.

national-liberation movement of early 20th century. In April 2018, the members of the club organized a commemorative event in the park named after the Armenian hero Tatul Krpeyan in honor of the soldiers killed during the April escalation. The Minister of Defense made a speech at the event, stating that: "Young people present here today are not grieving on the tombs of their fallen friends. They came here as the soldiers of the Nation-Army to show their confidence and readiness to fight for our values. This is the biggest lesson of the April war" (Panorama.am 2018). A similar club called the Levon Azgaldyan Club of military training exists at Yerevan State University. The club is named after a Karabakh war hero. Gevorg Manukyan, a veteran of the April war and the recipient of the Order of the Combat Cross of Second Degree, became the club's chairman in 2017 (Yerevan State University 2017). Under the "Nation-Army" concept, a new law on cancelation of deferral of mandatory conscription for university students was adopted. The new law provided for compulsory military service for all categories of students (Golos Armenii 2017).

In parallel with the new law, the Ministry of Defense presented two formats of military service for public discussion: "The Honor is Mine" and "This Is Me." According to the first program, students who sign a contract with the Ministry of Defense have to attend classes each Saturday at Vazgen Sargsyan Military University from the second through fourth years of study. After completion of the program, they will be awarded the rank of lieutenant and commence military service as conscripts. The duration of the service is three years. After completion of their service the young men will get financial assistance to continue their studies at the Master's level. During their military service, they will be paid a monthly salary of 260,000 dram (about 540 USD).

The second format of the military service is for those young men who want to serve on the front line. The duration of the service is also three years. However, during their service soldiers can spend seven months outside the military unit. Starting from the sixth month of service, the soldier should follow a specific system: one week off the military base, two weeks of preparation for duty service, and two weeks on the front line. After the completion of military service, discharged soldiers are given financial assistance of 5 million dram (about 10,400 USD) which they can spend on one of the three targeted programs: affordable housing,

mini-farm, and reimbursement of education expenses (Novoye Vremya 2017). It is important to note that the cancelation of the deferral of military service sparked the establishment of an activist group called “For the Development of Science,” which later became the “Restart of Yerevan State University” group and had a significant impact on the success of the “Velvet Revolution.”

### **‘Nation-Army’ and specialized military education**

The propaganda campaign of the “Nation-Army” concept in general education and higher education institutions was centralized in nature and was imposed from the top; however, it often got support and positive feedback from the bottom as well. The “Nation-Army” ideology was introduced at all levels of the educational system.

The expansion of specialized military education in the country requires separate attention. In 2017, a military college named after Monte Melkonyan, a freedom fighter who posthumously was awarded the rank of “National Hero of Armenia,” opened in Dilijan. Defense Minister Vigen Sargsyan spoke at the opening ceremony, stating: “Armenia is one of the countries with the highest number of military personnel in the world. Every 40th citizen of the country is a soldier. This is what the Nation-Army concept is about. Almost every Armenian family has a soldier; that’s why special attention should be paid to military education—military colleges and universities” (Ministry of Defense of Armenia 2017). Various programs aimed at supporting the “developmental quality” of army officers have been planned and implemented. For example, in cooperation with the Dilijan Center of Creative Technologies, or “TUMO” (in Armenian, a shortened form of the last name of Armenian writer Hovhannes Tumanyan), the “TUMO-army” project was officially launched. More than 200 Monte Melkonyan college students participated in this project.

### **The ‘nation-army’ concept in post-revolution Armenia**

Initially, it seemed that the overwhelming “Nation-Army” militaristic discourse would yield its positions after the Velvet Revolution and with the resignation of the old military elite. The biography of Armenia’s new leader, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, unlike all his predecessors, is not

directly connected to the Karabakh conflict. Nevertheless, after the revolution, there are no visible and profound changes in the policy of militarization of the system and educational institutions. On the contrary, Pashinyan is presenting his family as a prime example<sup>15</sup> of the powerful connection between family and army in a country that is facing a semi-war situation. Anna Hakobyan, the prime minister's spouse, is a frequent guest at different commemorative events dedicated to civil and military personnel killed during the April escalation. For example, on August 12, 2019, she attended the opening ceremony of the monument in Metsamor dedicated to Sasha Galstyan, the "hero of the April war" (The Armenian Times 2019).

At the same time, there were attempts to reframe the concept. For example, on May 22, 2019, during a conference at the National Academy of Sciences dedicated to the anniversary of the "Velvet Revolution," a suggestion was made to reframe the "Nation-Army" concept as a "nation-economy-security" concept (Infocom 2019). Minister of Defense David Tonoyan in one interview stated that previous programs developed within the "Nation-Army" concept will carry on with some changes (Safe Soldiers for a Safe Armenia 2019).

Nevertheless, despite the revolution and some attempts to reframe the concept, little has changed in the field of militaristic propaganda in Armenia's educational institutions. Militaristic discourse and rituals occupy much wider positions in modern Armenia. Even banners dedicated to the 28th anniversary of independence of the republic (September 21) are saturated with militaristic themes. The new Armenian government does not make significant efforts to abandon the militaristic discourse, which even now is a convenient resource for maintaining power in a situation of civil unrest. It is easiest to manipulate the people by threatening them with an external enemy and instability in Nagorno-Karabakh.

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<sup>15</sup> In particular he points out the example of his son who is currently on military service in Nagorno-Karabakh.

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## **Conflict and militarization of non-formal education in Ukraine**

**Katya Myachina**

### **Military-patriotic education before “Orange Revolution”**

The Ukrainian government's approach towards the concept of patriotic education changed substantially with the eruption of the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine in 2014. Sharp militarization of the political discourse in the context of the ongoing conflict impacted the education sphere as well. Patriotic education that is saturated with militaristic mottos became an integral part of not only school curricula but also extracurricular activities that were persistently carried out by the government especially in the eastern and southern regions of the country.

Active development of programs and activities of patriotic education started only after events that unfolded in the Maidan and beginning of military actions in Eastern Ukraine. However, the first attempts to introduce military-patriotic and national-patriotic education<sup>16</sup> to the middle school curricula were done already in the 1990s. With every new president, an updated concept for patriotic education was adopted that was in line with ideology carried out by the incumbent president.

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<sup>16</sup> Some confusion and apparent synonymity of these very broad concepts need additional explanation. First of all, it should be noted that the authors of such programs easily use different names to refer to essentially similar practices of militaristic education and upbringing. At the same time, military-patriotic education is often viewed as an integral part of broader national-patriotic education. Perhaps, the leaders of some schools and summer camps use this perspective to insist that they are engaged in only military-patriotic education on their "respective territories." It is not uncommon for emphasis to shift to accentuate certain differences. A good example is the camp "Azovian," which according to its organizers, was initially created as a military-patriotic one. Later, when the focus of its activity shifted from military training to the study of national history and subjects close to it, it became known as national-patriotic. At the same time, the militaristic component of the program was completely preserved.

In 1999 president Leonid Kuchma issued a decree "On measures of development of spirituality, protection of morals and shaping the healthy way of life for citizens." Based on this decree the Cabinet of Ministers adopted the National Program of Patriotic Education of the Population, Formation of a Healthy Lifestyle, Development of Spirituality And strengthening the moral foundations of society, which was operational until 2002 (Verkhovna rada 1999).

As part of this program the main emphasis was put on involvement of the youth into the work of cultural institutions, participation in the campaigns targeted to promote healthy lifestyle, support in promoting the increased "moral and spiritual qualities of the citizens" (which entailed elevating the status of the church), and finally preparation of the youth for the military service. In line with this program and with the initiative of President Kuchma the Cabinet of Ministers adopted the "National program for the revival and development of Ukrainian Cossackhood in 2002-2005." The main goal of the program was popularization of the history of Ukrainian Cossacks (the most important heroic image of soldiers-liberators in the Ukrainian historic discourse), as well as increasing the "youth spirituality" and the level of military-patriotic education (President of Ukraine 2001)<sup>17</sup>. As part of the same program, the "Cossack civilian units" were allowed to organize patrols in the cities, provide assistance to the border guards in safeguarding the border and help the Ministry of Emergency Situations in disaster management. In practice, both programs aimed at spiritual-patriotic and military-patriotic education were designed to elevate the status of church institutions and increase the attractiveness of service in the armed forces.

### **The "orange revolution", Ukrainian language and "honoring national memory"**

As a result of the "Orange Revolution," Victor Yushenko, who is known for his right-wing conservative and nationalistic positions, assumed the office. During the years of his presidency significant attention was paid to the status of the Ukrainian language and heroization of the image of the

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<sup>17</sup> For more details on memory politics and history politics in post-Soviet Ukraine see: Iekelchik, 2002; Kasyanov, 2019.

Ukrainian Rebel Army (URA)<sup>18</sup>. A working group on the issues of patriotic education of the youth was established within the Council on National Security and Defense (CNSD). The assignment of this function to this particular institution was justified by framing this type of education as a matter of national security (President of Ukraine 2006). The working group was made up of representatives of different ministries and youth organizations. Its main goal was the development of the concept of patriotic education and a system to introduce it into the education system. The concept of national-patriotic education of the youth for 2009-2015 was adopted only at the end of 2009 (Ministry of Family, Youth and Sport; Ministry of Education and Science; Ministry of Culture 2009). The declared “national-patriotic” vector implied that this policy will go beyond military education and spiritual development. For the first time within the context of the program for patriotic education, there were conversations about the preservation of the Ukrainian language – one of the most important points in Yushenko’s policies. In addition, a concept on “honoring national memory” emerged, which also brought about the first mentions of the “memory of Ukrainian rebels.” From now on URA becomes one of the most important components of Ukrainian historical myth and official narrative. For the first time, there is a suggestion to consider the mass media as one of the institutes whose activities are aimed at promoting “national-patriotic consciousness.”

### **Yanukovych era**

Even though the concept developed by Yushenko was still in legal force, in 2012 a similar document was adopted in 2012 under President Yanukovych – the “Concept of a nationwide targeted social program of patriotic education of citizens for 2013-2017.” This document had a different value orientation. There is no mention of “national” anywhere in the document and it is substituted with term “nationwide” in the title of the document. There is no discussion of the status of the Ukrainian language. Together with the representatives of the URA, the concept of

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<sup>18</sup> During the World War II URA was operational predominantly in Eastern Ukraine and was the military wing of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN). Jumping ahead it needs to be mentioned that many of the ideas introduced by Yushenko gained new life in the later policies of 2014-2019.

national memory is also taken out of the document. The goals and objectives of the program are spelled out so broadly that they include incitement of almost all “good” values in citizens. The expected results can be reduced to two extremely vague indicators: the Ukrainian of the future should be a “good and conscious” citizen and show a desire to serve in the army. With Yanukovich’s departure, the military educational vector has changed significantly again.

### **After the “Revolution of Dignity”**

After the “Revolution of Dignity” (“Euromaidan” – November 2013 – February 2014), change of power in Kyiv, the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in the Eastern Ukraine, the issues related to patriotic education gained new momentum (Shveda and Park 2016). In 2015, for the first time in the history of post-Soviet Ukraine, a department on national-patriotic education was established within the Ministry of Youth and Sport. It was headed by Mikola Lyakhovich – a former participant of local chapters of the nationalist party UNA-UNSD<sup>19</sup>, Maidan activist, volunteer and a participant of the military actions in Eastern Ukraine. In his interviews, he actively supported (and continues to support) the policies of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory. Established in 2014, this is one of the central institutions of the executive branch and is responsible for “rehabilitation and preservation of national memory” (Ukrainian Institute for National Memory 2019).

Lyakhovich publicly called Ukraine - “Russia-Ukraine”. This construct refers to the ideas of nationalist historians who insist on the direct continuity of modern Ukrainian statehood from the medieval “European” Kievan Rus’. Lyakhovich orientalizes modern Russia and calls it the “Moscow Horde”, thereby emphasizing the conqueror nature of the Russian political regime (Zamykolu.info 2019). According to him, the absence of “correct” national-patriotic education resulted in military actions in Eastern Ukraine. He suggests starting normalization of this sphere from “Ukrainization of greetings and addresses during the education process, uniform, internal decorations of education institutions” etc. Lykhovich suggests the phrase “Glory to Ukraine –

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<sup>19</sup> Ultra-right party – “Ukrainian National Assembly – Ukrainian National Self-Defense” – UNA-UNSD.

Glory to Heroes” as a formal greeting, and also proposes to address each other by using the word “druzhe” (Ukrainian “friend”).

At the end of 2015 by the decree of President Petro Poroshenko new “Strategy on national-patriotic education of children and youth for 2016-2020” was adopted (President of Ukraine 2015). The declared goals of this strategy largely overlap with the program developed during Yushenko time. The document once again highlights the issues of preservation of Ukrainian language, increasing the standing of military officers, healthy lifestyle, and spiritual-moral development of children and adolescents.

In addition, this document showcases the government’s attempts to develop a historical discourse as an alternative to the Russian historical discourse. In particular regarding the discourse about the Second World War. The part of the document that describes the urgency of national-patriotic education the name “Second World War” is used. In the previous document from the Yanukovich era “Great Patriotic War” was used instead. The authors of the strategy propose including in the education process the heroic examples of the “participants of anti-terrorist campaigns in Donetsk and Luhansk regions,” the “participants of anti-Bolshevik village uprisings,” “Ukrainian rebel army,” and “Ukrainian rebels in Stalin’s concentration camps.” It is important to note that this strategy was adopted already after the signing of the so-called “Decommunized package” of reforms that included a law on criticizing the communist regimes. Many provisions in both documents are similar to each other (Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance 2015).

Earlier in 2015, almost simultaneously the Ministry of Education and Science adopted its own “Concept on national-patriotic education for educational institutions” (Ministry of Education and Science 2015). In some contradiction with the strategy, this document included more liberal ideas and highlighted the principles of memory politics towards ethnic groups. For example, it proposes popularizing the experience of Crimean Tatars in relation to their cultural ties and military cooperation with Ukrainians. Along with installing “patriotic values in the hearts and minds of individuals” and “fight against Ukrainophobia and separatism” this concept presents the educational institutions with objectives to “develop tolerance and respect towards other nations, cultures and

traditions”, as well as “development of humanistic morality<sup>20</sup> as a foundation of the civil society.”

### **The key components of patriotic education**

Mikola Lyakhovich thinks that the organization of summer camps and extracurricular military-sports games should become one of the most important components of national-patriotic and military-patriotic education. In his opinion, the junior military-patriotic game “Jura” (Falcon) should become the central component of this process. This is a pan-Ukrainian game that has four stages and includes a wide range of competitions and events such as thug of war and “putting out the fire,” marching and song competition and “ethno disco party.” A training manual for holding this game explains why Ukrainian pedagogy should be based on the “Cossack” ideology, and also tells what techniques should be used in “Cossack-knightly education” (Transcarpathian Center of Tourism, Ethnology, Excursions and Sport among School Youth 2016). The last discussed national-patriotic education concept enshrines the introduction of the game “Jura” to the extracurricular activity in schools and universities. It is also recommended the organization of these games during summer camps.

Cooperation of the Ministry with civil society is declared one of the goals of the national-patriotic education. In 2018, for the first time, the Ministry of Youth and Sports put out an open call for NGOs and other non-governmental bodies to implement projects targeting national-patriotic education. One of the requirements of the open call was the pan-Ukrainian focus of the proposed project (at least 14 regions should be included). Four million hryvnias of state funds (150 thousand dollars) were allocated for this grant competition.

### **Key organizations**

The most notable organizations active in the field of non-formal national-patriotic education are “Youth Nationalistic Congress” (YNC), scout organization “Plast”, “Ukrainian Youth Association” (UYA) and Youth Corps.

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<sup>20</sup> This concept, as well as all others, is full of very vague and unclear categories.



Plast and UYA are the two organizations that were established at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their ideology builds on the vision of their founding fathers - the activists of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalist (OUN) of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The founders of the YNC also were the members of the OUN but of a later period – the early 2000s. YNC was initially established as the youth wing of OUN.

Among all these organizations the Youth Corps stands out. This organization was established in 2015 by the members of the Azov Civil Corps which in turn developed from the volunteer regiment Azov that was taking part in the military actions in Eastern Ukraine. All these organizations position themselves as youth national-patriotic unions. However, the history of the Youth Corps begins with the military-patriotic camp the “Azovian.”

### **National-patriotic camps**

“Plast” was organizing educational military-patriotic camps in Ukraine using the scouting system from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the Soviet Union era, the activities of this organization were suspended and moved to the countries where many Ukrainians immigrated (USA, Canada, and others). At the same time, the Soviet government proposed its own alternative – pioneer camps, military-sports games “Lightning” and so on. Thus, although in line with a different ideological system, it has essentially preserved the tradition of organizing educational military-patriotic camps.

After independence, the nationalist gradually regained access to the organization of summer camps. “Plast” returned to Ukraine already in the 1990s, and YNC started organizing activities during Yushenko’s presidency. However, despite the visible support on the part of the government<sup>21</sup>, organization of camps was included in the state program only in 2015 at the initiative of the department of national-patriotic education at the Ministry of Youth. As part of the cooperation program between the ministry and the civil society 380 thousand hryvnias (approx. 15 thousand dollars) of state, funds were allocated to the organization of patriotic camps in different parts of Ukraine (Ministry of Youth and

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<sup>21</sup> At least during Victor Yushenko’s presidency.

Sports 2019). The “Azovian” is the largest and most popular among all these camps.

The “Azovian” – national-patriotic camp is organized in the Kyiv region since 2015. Initially, the camp was designed for the children of volunteers serving in the Azov regiment and each camp session was able to recruit no more than 10-15 children. During the early years of the camp’s existence children were taught basic military skills: assembly and disassembly of a machine gun, tactical medicine, passing an obstacle course built according to NATO standards. During the past four years, the camp has grown significantly, and each camp session now has up to 90 kids. According to one of the organizers, in 2016 the initial military-patriotic camp was redesigned into a national-patriotic. It is assumed that this innovation will allow for more opportunities to influence the children. From now on it is possible to prepare “real patriots” not only through the use of tactical training but also through Ukrainian history education.

The webpage of the camp state that “Azovian” is a place where “new” (meaning “better” or “more appropriate”) generation of the nation is being educated. According to Andrey Beletsky, the chairman of the “National Corps” party (created based on the Azov regiment), the camp is home to “hundreds of young nationalists for whom honor, loyalty, family, fraternity and the Fatherland are not just words, but the meaning of life.” However, loud statements and nationalistic slogans alone are not enough to influence parents who have to consent and have a desire to send their children to the camp. Therefore, the organizers are trying to enhance the attractiveness of the camp, emphasizing also its rehabilitative functions.

According to the organizers, children in the camp will become stronger and healthier, will spend time outdoors, engage in physical activities and training (based on NATO standards) and will not waste time on the Internet and video games. Training personnel (“vikhovniki”) collect cell phones and other gadgets from children and allow children to use them only 15-20 minutes a day to contact their parents. To the question posted on the website of the Youth Corps: “Why do children in the camp use wooden machine guns?” the officially provided answer is that the essence of these activities is not in creating future fighters, but inciting responsibility in children. It is easy to lose a machine gun.

The main goal of the camp is the development of “the spirit of brotherhood” which entails the popularization of the idea of national unity. To achieve this goal different disciplinary practices that are comparable with the ones used in the army are applied. Each violation is followed by physical punishments (push-ups, sit-ups, sprint). The punishment is applied not only to the violator but also to the entire squad. In some cases, it is applied to the entire camp. According to the camp organizers, these methods incite not only personal but also collective responsibility in children.

The day begins with work out and breakfast. Children can take a seat at the breakfast table only after everyone in the camp are gathered. This is followed by a daily morning solemn ritual. Children dress into similar uniform (T-shirt with Azov logo and camouflage shorts) and line up on the parade grounds. If somebody is late, the rest stay standing and wait for him/her. At the opening, the “bunchuzhni” (the main leader of the camp and the children’s mentor) reads the “prayer of the Ukrainian nationalist.” One of the founders of the OUN, Joseph Mashchak is considered to be the author of this text, created in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Everyone who joined the OUN had to memorize “prayer”. The same rules apply in the camp<sup>22</sup>. Lining up in the early morning on the parade ground, children and teenagers collectively chant:

*Ukraine, Mother of Heroes, go down to my heart, come by the winds of Caucasian storm, by the noise of Carpathian streams, by the glorious battles of great Conqueror Father Hummel, by the triumph and loud guns of the Revolution, by the joyous hum of the Sophia’s Bells. Let my soul revive in You, light by Your glory because you are all my life because you are all my happiness.*

*Call me with the clang of shackles, the creak of the gallows in a dull morning time, let me hear the cries of those tortured in cellars and prisons, and in exile, to solidify my faith, to grow my zeal, and my strength, so I courageously go into battle as the heroes went for you, for your glory, for your holy ideas; to avenge the shame of slavery, violated honor, the torture of your executioners, the innocent blood of your tortured children, the majestic death of the heroes of the Ukrainian nation*

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<sup>22</sup> This "prayer" also starts the day for many participants of military actions in Eastern Ukraine.

*and thousands of other unknown to us whose bones are scattered or secretly buried.*

*Burn with life-giving fire all the weakness in my heart. Let me not know what fear and hesitation are. Strengthen my spirit, temper my will, settle in my heart! Bring me up for bright things. Let me find death in those deeds, a sweet death in agony for you. And I will dissolve in you, and I will forever live in you, everlasting Ukraine, holy, powerful, cathedral!*  
(The prayer of Ukrainian nationalist).

During saying the prayer, it is not allowed to make extra noise or get distracted. Such behavior is punishable. Even those teenagers that position themselves as more liberal stressed that the moment of saying the prayer was very important to them.

*“These words are so emotional that I had goosebumps every time... You learn about Cossacks from early childhood at school and you develop this enormous sense of pride and when you grow up and no matter how much you try and enlarge your world view and think that there are no nationalities and boundaries, no matter what you still feel pride and connection with your country.”*

Different activities follow the morning ceremony: tactics, first medical aid, going through an obstacle course, history of Ukraine, assembly-disassembly of a model machine gun, robotics, kayaking, and others. According to one of the organizers, the 12 days of camp are not enough to give children enough knowledge that’s why the lessons are in essence using visuals and practical demonstration:

*“... a variety of disciplines that gives you a choice. ... Since it is a national-patriotic camp the most important is to instill them with love towards the country and teach them to think critically. They learn to assess the situation, develop own opinion and draw own conclusions.”*

At the same time, the Ukrainian history teacher should not teach the same full course that repeats the school program but rather has to incite curiosity in the teenager to explore and study history on his own, as well as create an environment where the student will “understand why he is a Ukrainian.” Thus, the main goal of the instructors is to “educate good citizens.” For children to grow up as patriots not nominally but with a deep understanding of it they need to embrace...

*“...that every step that they take in favor of themselves and the country is a good thing. They need to know that they can pick up the trash and*

*engage in volunteer activities and do a lot of good even at their particular age."*

Subjects with a military focus are taught "*just in case. It is better to know than not to know.*" If in 2015 tactical medicine was one of the subjects taught at the camp, this course was later substituted with first aid course. The content of the course changes based on the age of the students. Organizers stress that they are concerned about children's psychological well-being. In their opinion, children under 14 should not be taught about death, which is a topic impossible to avoid when teaching tactical medicine.

Based on a similar conviction the camp does not focus on the propaganda of a certain enemy image whether it is a Russian or somebody else. "*These are very dangerous games with the child's psyche,*" – say the organizers. During the tactical training children are taught to navigate the terrain, military disguise, and work as part of a team. There are no drills of enemy attacks. Several years ago, as part of a game, a night attack by the enemy was staged. Every child had a detailed role that was assigned to him/her and children had to sleep with a machine gun because the "attack" could have happened at any given night. At the same time, there was no specific description of the enemy.

The organizers claim that they don't impose hatred towards Russia and just "*teach to love Ukraine.*" Instructors also mention "*that Ukraine is at war with Russia during the last classes on the history of Ukraine.*" The topic of war is also covered by veterans who are often guest lecturers at the camp but only with the consent of the children.

Children at the camp can speak Russian but all personnel speaks only Ukrainian. Participants come from all parts of Ukraine – from Volnovakha to Uzhhorod. They also represent all social classes. Among camp participants, there are children of veterans and children of parliament deputies. According to the organizers, the singular "you" address is used in the camp. The organizers insist that "*thankfully the children of separatists do not come to us.*" But how do the organizers distinguish children of "separatists"? Presumably by excluding the residents of Luhansk and Donbas. Which would mean that many residents of Ukraine are branded as "separatists" and marginalized based on their place of residence.

The militaristic environment at the camp creates competition and defines the nature of gender inequality. According to interviewed participants, the most valued qualities in the camp are power and obedience. For

example, the most honorable reward is the right to raise the Ukrainian flag in the morning. This honor is granted to those who behaved well during the previous day (was not late or tardy, succeeded on the obstacle course, helped a friend).

According to one of the participants, there is also a feeling that boys are more important than girls. For example, if someone has a comment regarding how the instructors choose the mode punishment these comments will not be taken into account. *“What can you tell them? These are men who behave according to the logic ‘I came back from the war, I know it better!’.”* And if the instructor does not apply punishment to his subjects it becomes a topic of mockery on the part of other camp personnel. This squad can be labeled with some humiliating labels (for example “hippie”). Muscular disciplinary activities are one of the most important elements of the education process. According to the organizers, many children are sent to the camp for “re-education,” and for the camp to build a “real man” out of “mama’s boy.” As participants testify, it is really difficult to get used to the camp discipline in the beginning:

*“You can’t do whatever you want there. If you do something wrong, the entire camp will be responsible for that.”*

Children do not have a right to refuse to complete an assignment or simply to oppose the will of the instructor. Such behavior will be punished. Within 12 days of the camp, the majority gets used to the strict disciplinary regime. Those who do not get used to it and continue to “live by the wrong rules” are either hazed by other participants because they have to “pick up the slack” for someone else’s rebellion, or their parents take them home before the end of the shift. This happens during every camp session.

### **The education experience after camp life**

The three pillars that support the ideology of the camp are discipline, fraternity, and love towards nation/country and are called to educate a sense of belonging to the collective community of right nationalists. All three pillars are interconnected through the spirit of militarism. Some of the participants described the rules of life at the camp as a preparation for the *“army life in the form of a game.”*

For many, the experience of Azov camp paves the way for activism. Exactly with this vision the organization of Youth Corps was created – to

provide opportunities for the youth after the camp to assume the role of organizers of similar activities during the school year. Many teenagers with the experience of education in military-patriotic camps organize trainings and competitions in the same disciplines that they studied at the camp, lead discussion clubs and excursions, and visit schools with lectures on behalf of veterans. One of the interviewees claimed that *“Perhaps they even carry out the function of our schools because they [schools] should be implementing military-patriotic education.”* According to him *“camps awaken national consciousness: we are Ukrainians, we need to appreciate our culture, traditions, and religion.”* He is concerned that the youth doesn't care about the country. They prefer to spend time with friends and alcohol instead. In contrast, for those who went through the education program at the camp, it is more important to be comprehensively sophisticated and conscious citizens.

At the same time, when I ask him about his future plans, about the importance of “patriotism” he has a hard time remembering. Like many other teenagers, he wants to continue his education at a university and build a career, be engaged in arts. Participation in the activities of the Youth Corps as an activist is important for him first of all because of the sense of belonging to a community of like-minded people. All his friends are engaged in the activities of the organization. Practically, all his family. A volunteer can be working on a wide range of social issues related to the militarization of the camp experience. For example, volunteer at an animal shelter, or participate in city clean up in his hometown.

According to the camp participants who refused to further engage and cooperate with the Youth Corps, the organization has *“many good ideas, but they often choose wrong methods of implementation.”* For example, they ensure that alcohol is not sold to underage children, however, they do this through intimidation.

Among the main goals of education at the camp is the development of critical thinking skills. However, the applied ways to achieve this goal - superseding of individual needs and desires, intimidation with physical punishment, popularization of physical strength and discipline as the main qualities of a good citizen - rather contribute to the suppression of such qualities.

## **Concluding thoughts**

The increase in popularity of such organizations and educational practices seems inevitable at this point. First of all, the ideals propagated by these organizations completely fall within education discourses dominant in Ukraine already since the beginning of the 2000s (in particular within the school history education). Second, the situation develops in a way that benefits the government to advance the nationalistic agenda among the youth to maintain the “military spirit” and thus continue the militaristic policy that benefits many of the government representatives. It can be assumed that if national-patriotic camps and educational programs were not implemented by non-governmental organizations, then it is highly likely that they would have been conducted directly by the state.

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## **Military-patriotic education in Russia: Cadets and Young Army Cadets**

**Ksenia Babich**

Already by 2013 visible changes in the implementation of state programs related to military-patriotic education of youth were brewing up. In the same year, the pan-Russian youth movement “Nashi” (“Ours”) and youth intraregional movement “Idushchiye vmyesty” (“Walking Together”) closed down. An obvious increase of militarization and references to military themes in youth education were already visible since 2014. Currently, patriotic education plays a key role in the upbringing of the youth. This transformation is clearly linked with the annexation of Crimea, conflict in Ukraine, and participation of Russian military forces in the military actions in Syria.

In the education sphere, the topic of “defending of the homeland” is usually limited to events related to May 9 (Victory Day in the Great Patriotic War) and June 22 (the day of the official invasion of German-Nazi forces on the territory of the USSR). Another relevant date within this context is February 23<sup>rd</sup> – the day when Russia celebrates as “Defender of the Fatherland Day.” This holiday is usually celebrated at secondary schools as well, in particular at the high school level. At the same time, no specific courses and subjects on military-patriotic education are included in the mandatory school curricula. If such courses or programs existed in selected schools, those usually were part of the extracurricular program.

During the period from 2008 to 2014 military-patriotic festivals and gatherings were the only events organized for school children. Usually, children who were involved in certain thematic clubs at some schools were the main participants of these events. The children were invited to a reenactment of battles that carry significance for Russian history. For example, in February 2014, students from the city of Istra participated in the reenactment of the liberation of the Istra district of Moscow region from Nazi invaders, which happened during the Moscow offensive operation of the Western Front (Forum of Military Historical Reenactors 2013).

It is important to mention that since 2000 the state started to invest significant resources into the development of a positive image of the Russian army. However, new and more consistent approaches and methods of military-patriotic education were introduced only after 2014. Some military experts stressed that such programs had a certain level of success. For example, Ilya Kramnik stated that the “image of the army has improved among pre-conscripts and older adults - almost 20 percent of 2014 spring conscripts have higher education” (Kramnik 2014).

The political regime has decided that it would be best to start improving the image of the army starting from the school level. As a result, special cadet classes were introduced in secondary schools, and many of the students became “Young Army cadets” and participated in the All-Russian military-patriotic public youth movement - “Young Army”, officially registered in 2016. “The goal of the movement is for each young army cadet to believe in his Fatherland, love his homeland, know his history, be proud of the deeds of his fathers and grandfathers, and understand what we can and should strive for” - this is how the values of the movement were formulated by Sergey Shoigu, the Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation since November 2012. (RIA *novosti* 2015)

The main document that guides patriotic education in Russia is the state program of “Patriotic education of the citizens of the Russian Federation.” This program is adopted for the period of 2016-2020. The main body responsible for the coordination of the tasks and implementation of planned activities in this context is the *Federal Agency for Youth Affairs*. The program was signed in 2015 by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. The program is being executed by the Ministries of Education and Science, Defense, Culture and the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs.

The main provisions of the program called for “ensuring Russian civic identity, continuity of education process aimed at the development of Russian patriotic consciousness in a challenging environment of economic and geopolitical competition” (Government of Russian Federation 2015). Before the adoption of the last document, during the period from 2001 to 2015, three state programs on patriotic education were implemented in Russia. After completion of these programs, monitoring of their effectiveness was conducted. Based on monitoring results one of the main forms of engagement with the youth of pre-conscription age was developed. The main form of engagement is organization of defense-sport

camps. Around 2000 of such camps are operational all across the Russian Federation. In addition, centers of military-patriotic education and youth military training operate in 78 regions of Russia. As part of the same program, a process of gradual renaming of organizations engaged in such activities in honor of the heroes of the Soviet Union and the heroes of the Russian Federation is underway. At the time of writing of this article, there were 4870 such organizations in the country. According to the official data, annually on average, 21.6% of youth is involved in the program of military-patriotic education.

By 2020 321 509 thousand rubles from the federal budget and 18 350 from extrabudgetary sources will be allocated for implementation of events envisioned by this program (Government of Russian Federation 2015). The “Young Army” attracts a wide range of sponsors who are ready to finance the events of the movement and the production of specialized uniforms.

The movement has developed ongoing contacts with the leading enterprises of the military-industrial complex of Russia. For example, at the “Techmash,” which is part of the state-owned Rostec group, a new Young Army center is being built. In the future, the center will be used to train Young Army cadets on the professions that are in high demand within the military-industrial complex (*Obshaya Gazeta* 2019).

The state program stipulates that all the above-mentioned activities are designed to “develop moral, psychological and physical readiness among young Russian citizens to defend the homeland, demonstrate a commitment to constitutional and military duty during wartime and peacetime” (Government of Russian Federation 2015). Development of sport-patriotic education, cooperation between military-patriotic clubs and veteran organization to prepare the youth for the military service and to defend the homeland, introduction of advanced experiences into the military-patriotic education of the youth, and development of positive attitude towards military and state services are aimed at the same goals and objectives.

The program envisions various physical and sports activities that involve large numbers of school children. This approach allows making this program attractive to more students and their parents. For example, one of the interviewed parents, a mother of a female student of a cadet class, stressed that enroller her daughter in this class “not because of patriotism, but because of extra sports activities.” A mother of another student explained

that for her it is important that her child is part of “right” (in her own interpretation) community and values: *“Let it be kids with patriotic feelings and not those that represent subcultures that I don’t understand.”*

The most popular events that are part of the military-patriotic curricula of activities are the search parties. Students are engaged in search of the remains of Soviet soldiers who died during the Second World War. There are about 141 search parties in Moscow and Moscow district and over 2.5 thousand students are engaged in these activities.

So, when considering the nature of military-patriotic education in RF, we need to focus on the two main state institutions in this field: *cadet classes* in secondary schools and *patriotic movement the “Young Army.”*

### **Cadet classes**

At the beginning of the 2014-2015 school year, more than 7000 cadet and Cossack classes were operational in Russian secondary schools (Government of Russian Federation 2015). These classes follow the regular school curricula. The main difference is the involvement of a mentor-officer who is working with the students after the end of a regular school day. Schools recommend these “cadet classes” to parents in certain situations: for hyperactive kids, for kids who come from single-parent families or if the family is going through a difficult life situation, as well as kids from low-income families. The students in these classes are called *platoons*, and the lead student is called the *Capitan of the class*. In Moscow and Moscow district the competition to get into such classes is 2-4 children per each available slot. Only students that are residents of Moscow are eligible to be accepted to cadet classes in Moscow. The graduate of such a class can later apply to continue education at a military school (*“Education in Moscow” Magazine 2019*).

A student of cadet class E. (female, 13 years old) talking about the education process in a cadet class with specialized English language course stressed: *“For me, such words as conscience, honor, duty are part of the cadet vow that we must observe. I know how to act correctly in the ranks, respond to lieutenant colonels and people above me in rank. I like the everyday school uniform. For us, it is a green, camouflage uniform.”* The difference between these cadets and Young Army cadets is significant. The same student underlined: *“I am afraid to interact with the Young Army cadets at school and I don’t plan on joining their organization.”*

The cadet classes emphasize the study of Russian history and certain subjects such as math, physics, and foreign languages. Different students can get interested in various historical topics. Answering the question on the favorite topic of History of Russia student E. mentioned that she is most interested in the history of the family of the Emperor Nikolay Romanov. The cadet classes in Moscow can be either only all-boy classes or only all-girl classes. However, they can also be mixed-gender classes. After the regular school day is over, cadets march to the cafeteria and then practice drills.

A student of cadet class E. (female, 13 years old): *“I like taking part in parades, memory watch and military drills. I enjoy being with the class when we leave the school premises. Usually, we visit Poklonnaya Hill or even Red Square.”* However, some cadets may express dissatisfaction with the level of preparation of such field events. M. (female, 14 y.o.): *“Usually these events are painfully long. They don’t feed us enough or good enough food.”*

Moscow secondary school N1631 is one of the schools that established cadet class in September 2014. Many students enrolled in this class dream of a future military career. A student of school N1631 D. (male, 15 y.o.): *“I like history and foreign languages – German, French, and Spanish. I decided to become a cadet because I want to serve at tank corps.”*

Often these are kids from military families. One of the students of the same school E. (female, 14 y.o.): *“I am interested in military topics and I like tanks. I decided to join the cadets. My grandfather was in the military and I also want to be in the military.”* Another student from the same school A. (male 15 y.o.) shares his story: *“I train in boxing and soon will be competing for a third-level class. I joined cadets because I want to continue the family tradition and join the military.”*

Another student of school N1631 A. (female, 15 y.o.) also points to a future career in power structures: *“I enjoy walking around the city with my friends. We like visiting new places. I decided to become a cadet because I want to work for law enforcement agencies in the future.”* A male student of the same school K. (13 y.o.) shares: *“I like video games and I think they help to develop logic and thinking. I decided to join cadets because in the future I want to serve at the Ministry of Emergency Situations. I want that helping people becomes my profession.”*

Sports and militaristic style draw students to such classes. A 13-year-old female student from the same school A. stated: *“I attend swimming classes*

*as I think that this particular sport helps to maintain good posture. I decided to join cadets because I am attracted to the military uniform.” Similarly, another female student D. (13 y.o.) said: “I like music and I learn to play on a cello. Why did I join the cadets? I like the uniform.”*

Based on the conversation with one of the instructor-mentors of cadet classes at a Moscow secondary school it is clear that students take additional military-oriented classes (after the regular school program): fire and drill training, medical, radiation and chemical safety. Teacher, 50 years old, male: *“I am a veteran of military service. I curate all the usual tasks related to the preparation of adolescents for service in law enforcement agencies. As for the teaching staff, then each teacher undergoes a special pre-training and receives a certificate. We engage in a lot of extracurricular activities with children. We also are responsible for kids from 8 am until 5-6 pm hours when they are attending a regular school.”*

According to the instructor, an additional subject on etiquette is introduced to the cadet classes. The instructor believes that he carries an extra workload compared to a regular full-time position. *“I participate in getting children prepared for parades and honor guards at the eternal flame, cadet and art competitions. I train them to pass the preparedness exam, swimming, driving and horseback riding. We participate in different university projects. In addition, I lead the youth musical ensemble and I am responsible for the webpage of the class.”*

The instructor of the cadet classes says the following about his personal preferences: *“I like the May 9<sup>th</sup> celebrations and participation in cadet competitions.”* The discussions with the students of one of the Moscow schools revealed that teachers get a 20% pay added to their paychecks for their involvement with the cadets. At the same time, students that participate in the movement or are enrolled in cadet classes get extra 20 points added to their Unified State Exam (USE) for college admission.

## **The Young Army**

The “Young Army” movement was established on October 29, 2015, at the initiative of the Defense Minister of RF Sergey Shoigu. The children and youth organization “The movement of young patriots” that was operational since the late 1990s until 2016, became the foundation of this new movement. According to the official data by 2016 more than 140



thousand Russian students ages 8 to 18 were members of the “Young Army.” According to the official webpage as of 2019 506 thousand children and teenagers are members of the “Young Army” (“The Official Webpage of the ‘Young Army’ Movement” 2019).

Interaction with children who are currently members of the “Young Army” is strictly regulated by the teacher. The children themselves refused to discuss the experience of military-patriotic education without the supervision of adults and parents. The movement is especially relevant for the Moscow district, however, it is popular also in the regions of Russia. A student can attend a regular school and enroll in the “Young Army” on his own, and in addition to the regular school curriculum, he will get an extra workload.

The movement attracts students by its paraphernalia, as well as various types of events. These include volunteer movements, military-patriotic clubs and other types of associations, ecological activism, information security that includes IT security, journalism and blogger activity.

All “Young Army cadets” in the Moscow region take mandatory participation in all patriotic events that take place on the territories of military units, in the village of Monino, at the Central Museum of the Air Force and the Military Technical Museum. In addition, there are three bases in the Moscow region where gatherings of Young Army cadets are held: Chernogolovka, Kubinka, Stupino (“The Official Webpage of the ‘Young Army’ Movement” 2019).

The main events are decided a year in advance. They include annual military-sport games and competitions: “Lightning,” “Victory,” “Eaglet,” “Star,” “Young Army Cadet,” “Navy Lightning,” and “Siberian Shield.” Additionally, there are separate military-tactical field training events “Dawn,” and “The Race of Heroes” taking place on the military ranges of the Ministry of Defense. School children participate in military-field gatherings, camps, and expeditions. Many Young Army cadets go through a special selection process to spend time at former popular pioneer camps “Artek,” “Eaglet,” “Ocean” and “Change” for special camp programs organized for them. Additionally, other patriotic events are being organized. These include the festival of children’s essays “Letter to the Soldier,” the children’s drawing contest “The Young Army” is walking around the country,” such projects as “Learn to Remember,” “The Road to the Obelisk,” “At Home of the Hero,” special campaigns the

“Draftee Day,” “Memory Watch,” “St. George Ribbon,” and “Heroes of the Fatherland Day,” and historical quests from “Victory Volunteers.”

The paraphernalia of the movement was approved by the Ministry of Defense. It includes patches (for backpacks and T-shirts), badges that are given for achievement at school. All badges are recorded in the cadet’s record-book. Immediately after joining the organization a teenager is promoted to the third rank and is given a patch. Later, based on the performance on the tests and the regularity of participation in the activities of the movement the teenager can be promoted to the second and first rank. This promotion happens after the first and second year accordingly. After the third year, the Young Army cadet receives a “star” and the teenager becomes an instructor. From that point forward he can initiate and organize events within the movement. Special badges are given out for special achievements: parachute jumping, participation in a regatta and etc. (*The Official Website of the Clothing Supplier of the Movement “Young Army n.d.*). Additional lessons, classes, and participation in the public activities are listed in the school schedule of the Young Army Cadet.

Student V. (male 14 y.o.) Gymnasium. Currently holds a rank of an “instructor” and plans to become a military doctor and continue his education at the Kirov Academy in St. Petersburg. *“Patriotic education for me is a process of imparting love towards the homeland into a person. For me, it means that I am capable of loving my homeland and I am ready to create necessary conditions for its existence. Within the Young Army, I like all the events that are featuring important events in Russian history. There is no separate section of participation that I would single out. I like the overall activities and I participate in all of them.”*

As for favorite places in Moscow, the student and Young Army cadet mentioned Patriot Park and the Central Museum of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. On weekends he is leading additional classes with junior Young Army cadets. He feels specifically strong about the “Victory Day” (May 9) holiday. The mother of this student (female, 43 y.o.) does not share her son’s enthusiasm. *“I did not enroll my son in a special class. I chose a class with good teachers, and my son enrolled himself in the “Young Army.” I don’t see any advantages. They wear a uniform and often miss classes because of the Young Army events.”*

Not all the parents are happy with such an additional load. *“Everything related to patriotism is not my cup of tea. But I have to let my son attend the “Young Army” camp and take into account his interests and respect his choices. The kid knows that I have extremely negative views of his military-patriotic focus.”* The parent points out that for her son participation in the Young Army is equated to belonging to a certain subculture. *“Very often all the participants of the movement are taken out of the classes to participate in trainings and it negatively affects the academic performance and the grades get lower. His passion for this movement worries me. I would like to mention, that a year ago when my son was not allowed to participate in Young Army’s away event he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown because of anxiety. Teachers had to watch him closely because they were worried that he would hurt himself.”*

Not all students are happy with the rules presented by the “Young Army.” For example, in some schools unions are being formed that oppose the militarization of education. The most famous case of public protest is related to Leonid Shaydurov - a student of gymnasium N622 in St. Petersburg. In June 2019 he went on a hunger strike and started a solo protest at the building of the St. Petersburg state committee of education. He said that together with some part of the students from his school he does not support *“abstract patriotism.”* (Lenta.Ru 2019)

*“The Young Army is a voluntary-obligatory organization, not to mention the classes that are taking place instead of regular classes. During these classes, we are taught very abstract things. I don’t like that students are prepared to directly join National Guard of Russia,”* – says 16-year-old Leonid. *“According to my observations, I notice that during the patriotism classes we talk about the annexation of Crimea, about the new greatness of Russia. This topic is further developed during these classes. We talk very little about Syria, and only in a fragmented way.”*

Leonid points out that his attempts to influence the Young Army cadets were not successful. *“I know for sure that members of the Young Army are not ready for dialogue. In the eighth grade, I realized that I sympathize more with the ideas of socialism and tried to convince the members of the movement to leave the Young Army. I did not succeed,”* says Leonid. He established a union called “Student” and demanded to ban the activities of the Young Army at schools, end the persecution of students for their political views and provide students with free meals. *“In regular schools, some classes were replaced with patriotism classes. This was done to*

involve in the militarization process those who were not part of the Young Army movement. Many of these classes were skipped and boycotted, "Leonid explained.

Heroes of Russia, Heroes of the Soviet Union, Heroes of Socialist Labor, veterans of the Great Patriotic War, participants of military operations in Afghanistan and Syria, as well as counter-terrorism and peacekeeping operations participate in the ceremony of initiation into the ranks of the "Young Army."

The authorities apply more and more consistent efforts to attract a larger number of students to the movement. Often direct pressure is exerted on certain youth groups. In February 2019 the Ministry of Defense of RF circulated a letter that stated that children of all military personnel at the "officer" rank have to be enrolled in the Young Army (Mironova and Sinergiyev 2019). In addition, in March 2019 the Children's Rights Commissioner for the President of the Russian Federation issued an order and launched a project called "Young Army – Mentoring" which was going to be implemented at orphanages. In practice, we are talking about militarized reform of orphanages implemented by two official institutions: the Young Army movement and the Children's Rights Commissioner for the President of the Russian Federation. The target groups are orphans aged 7 to 17 and teenagers with deviant behavior (Tarasov 2019).

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## Conclusions

Constrained by the word-count limits, the co-authors of this article only briefly touched upon the most important components of the militarization of secondary education in Azerbaijan and Armenia; Ukraine and Russia. Undoubtedly, the subjects of national history and literature in schools play a paramount role in the process of military-patriotic education of future citizens. There are also other channels for dissemination of militaristic and revanchist discourses, such as mass media. Caucasus Edition had engaged in the discussion of this topic previously, and considering the scope of the issue will continue to this discussion in the future as well.

In addition, the authors also touched upon the important issue of the “effectiveness” of the programs, practices, and discourses of military-patriotic education and related extracurricular activities persistently carried out at the secondary school level. How “successful” are the political regimes that sponsor cooperation between institutes of secondary education, the army and the Ministries of Defense in the endeavor to implant militaristic patriotism? How “effective” can different (semi) independent social agents be who participate in this process? To what extent can these agents’ ideas about “right patriotism” differ from the policies of the ruling regimes? All these important questions require further research.

Despite these limitations, this review points to an alarming trend. Not only the government but also various (semi) independent social groups, organizations, and agents heavily invest significant financial and symbolic resources in the propaganda of militaristic and revanchist ideology. Militaristic components and nationalistic discourses play an increasingly central role in education of all four countries. War and military escalation are presented as normal and the only right way of achieving “just peace.”

As this article was getting ready for publication, two other trends emerged that give reason for cautious optimism. In September-November, 2019 the new Ukrainian government showed signs of attempting to achieve de-escalation on the contact line and establish a

dialogue with the Russian political regime. And in 2018 and parts of 2019 there has been optimism raised around the possibility of revival of a meaningful peace process around Nagorno-Karabakh. The recent developments, however, suggest the prospects for renewed negotiations and dialogue did not materialize.

The increasing militarization of secondary education indicate that the governments are preparing the societies not for peace but for the future military escalations and wars. The significant investments into the propaganda of enemy image and military-patriotic education is countered by only weak and unpersuasive attempts to develop dialogue process on the political level.

# Beyond the Abstract Political: Peace as Intimate and Relational

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Milena Abrahamyan, Vahid Aliyev,  
Sophio Tskhvariashvili

## Why Place Feminist Next to Peace?

Peace and feminism as fields of intersecting inquiry have been theorized for over four decades now, yet an agreed upon ideology for what constitutes feminist peace remains an open question. Firstly, the kind of feminism through which peace is theorized makes a difference in whether we are problematizing or reproducing normative gendered associations of women with peace. Secondly, the concept of peace has been theorized under multiple ideological frameworks according to which peace can be merely the absence of violence or it can be a much wider process and phenomenon encompassing the elimination of all types of violences - whether visible or invisible.

In preparing this paper, we have asked ourselves, as independent scholars, activists, and practitioners of peace *and* feminism, why we want to place feminism next to peace and co-create knowledge regionally on how we envision feminist peace. Through much contemplation, discussion, and sharing of our observations and experiences in the field of peace-building, we understood and agreed that current modes of peace practiced not only in our wider context of the South Caucasus but also internationally are, in fact, constitutive of various invisible violences that would render it as “non-peace” when looked at from the margins. We have observed how formal peace processes are more or less exclusively dominated



by male political and diplomatic figures, rendering peace as an elite male endeavor. We have observed how international (and sometimes national) peace-building organizations with large budgets tend to allocate a small percentage of their budgets toward local organizations and groups doing the most difficult work on the ground, while at the same time very little money is spent advocating their own national governments or companies to stop promoting and growing the military industrial complex globally. We have observed the contradictory nature of peace platforms or initiatives being established by prominent leaders in both Armenia and Azerbaijan with Russian diplomats, businessmen, or politicians as partners in the promotion of peace without any mention of how Russia is the main supplier of weapons to both countries. Even the discourse of Armenia's peaceful "Velvet Revolution" was contradictory when taking place in parallel with the militaristic symbolism of the camouflage t-shirt that its leader turned Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan kept on wearing for days during the 2018 mass protests. We have also experienced at firsthand how calling on us as agents of change in our contexts to be peaceful, whether by police in street demonstrations or by colleagues, professors, or so-called intellectuals and others with power over us, has often meant to silence us or minimize our anger toward unjust structures and systems. We hold firmly the conviction that any discourse of peace that is used as an instrument, whether symbolically or actually, to normalize other kinds of violence cannot be considered feminist peace.

As women or gender non-conforming, queer, and critically minded people, we are often on the margins of dominant discourse and methodology. As such, we also tend to have access to an alternative ground from which to sense and know the world. We see that the frame influencing upon peace in the region and perhaps the larger world is often shaped by the dominant patriarchal, capitalistic, and militaristic modes of perceiving, being, and doing. As activists engaged in peace-building projects in our region, we see this first hand when donors funding "peace" are also indirectly involved in any part of the military industrial complex, including the more invisible aspects of this through exploitative and extractive practices in the mining industry, training of police or special forces, support of corrupt governments, and perpetuation of various forms of violence within their own contexts (i.e., police brutality, economic

inequalities, racist policies, etc.). We also see this when actors—whether local, regional, or international—that implement peace-building projects overlook the work of connecting intersecting systems of gender, violences and war, which often leads to narrow conceptualizations of women in peace reproducing gendered nationalistic and militaristic narratives (Tskhvariashvili, Mammadova and Abrahamyan 2018).

We see that peace seems to be in crisis, both in terms of practice and theory. In this paper we try to understand how we can deconceptualize and reconceptualize peace(s) from the standpoint of feminists in the South Caucasus by incorporating the voices of women identifying as feminists in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. It is clear that there are a number of standpoints on what feminist peace is in practice and how it can be envisioned. Many of the feminist voices we listened to found it difficult to go beyond the limitations that patriarchy and capitalism place not only on possible actions that can be taken for a world based on feminist peace, but also on the imagination. Nevertheless, we encountered a number of inspiring and powerful perspectives and visions for a just feminist peace, including a focus on the senses and the body as locations from which peace can emerge and be known, a deep knowing of what feminist peace can be based on what it is not in the dominant reality, a vision of peace based in feminist modes of relating to oneself, to others, and to the world at large, and a reconceptualization of peace as emergent responses to acts of patriarchal violence based in feminist self-defense modalities.

## **Conceptualizing Feminist Peace**

Much of the literature on the topic of feminist peace tends to highlight the ways in which women's contribution to peace processes can affect durable peace agreements, stronger democracies and equality between the sexes in a given society. The links between feminism and peace have most prominently been made in practice by Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILFP) founded in the early 20th century as a response to World War I. Although the organization has undergone an evolution in its thinking around these themes, their positionality as a white and western women's organization has mostly subscribed to a liberal peace model highlighting the notion that where there is inequality in a society,

especially between men and women, violence is prone to continue and can ultimately escalate into violent conflict (Cecilia Confrontini 2011). The United Nations has offered a number of tools under Security Council Resolutions, most prominently UNSCR 1325, to ensure gender equality, tackle gendered effects of war, and foster democratic participation in peace processes, which have been advocated by women's organizations internationally, including in the South Caucasus. Yet this tool in practice often equates "women" with "gender" and assumes "equality" as a priority in the struggle to end gender-based discrimination, an approach which has come under criticism by feminists who aim to dismantle relations, structures, and systems of power that reproduce women's oppression. Among these criticisms are the tendency of the resolution to assume women either as peaceful or as victims in need of protection, its failure to focus on ending wars in the first place, and its lack of depth in terms of analyzing and addressing power in structures and systems that perpetuate violence and violent conflict in the world (Nikoghosyan 2018).

More recent discussions and academic work by feminist peace and conflict scholars conceptualize feminist peace research as a transdisciplinary field encompassing gender studies, feminist critical theory, psychology, post-colonial studies, international relations, political science, and more. As such, feminist peace is conceptualized as an ongoing process of undoing binary systems and dichotomies such as male/female or peace/war while "paying attention to questions of social justice... as well as the level of the interpersonal and intercorporeal" (Wibben, et al. 2019). In this sense, feminist peace research aims to "explore the sexual and gendered social orders, which re/produce violence exactly because of attempts to make the world fit into the binary hierarchy of male/female, masculine/feminine" (Wibben, et al. 2019). In so doing, assumptions about the nation-state and all manifestations of patriarchal normativity are questioned and problematized, including how one studies and analyzes war, violence, and conflict. For feminist peace research, this often means that marginalized voices and experiences of people directly affected by violence must be given primacy in order to co-resist attempts at casting responses of anger, hopelessness, grief, and the need to fight back as illegitimate modes of behavior in the face of injustice and violence (Wibben et. al. 2019).

Furthermore, in seeking the voices of those at the margins of power, the everydayness of conflict and the non-violent responses that are given to conflict in day-to-day interactions provide possibilities for an understanding of peace that is already a part of our existence and daily lived experiences, which can be incorporated in all areas of life (Wibben, et al. 2019).

Perhaps most important of all is how feminist peace research places an emphasis on imagining and envisioning peace through the practice of prefigurative politics as a means to achieving a “future of emancipation, [including] a peaceful and just social order” (Wibben, et al. 2019). Prefigurative politics are defined “as experiments in living, laboring or provisioning that are alternatives to ‘what is’ and prefigure ‘what could be.’” (Lin, et al. 2016). Often this implies that one not only imagines utopian alternative worlds, but also experiments in the day-to-day living, interactions, and practices to bring about this world. The work of Elise Boulding in facilitating processes for people to imagine a world without weapons has been integral for the peace movement and for peace research in order to “provide the imagination of the people, of a society, of the polity, of the citizen, that things can be different, that they don’t have to be the way they are” (Boulding 2018). Through this work, new spaces are opened up within the imagination where the possibility of non-violent modes of existence begin to seem attainable, leading to discursive spaces for negotiating possibilities for integrating peaceful practices into the micro and macro level of the personal political realms. In this paper, we have worked to open up our own imaginations and we have also invited feminists in our contexts to do the same so that we may dream together what feminist peace can look, feel, and be like in both our day-to-day and political lives.

## **A Feminist Process of Envisioning Peace**

Prior to presenting our findings with regards to how feminist peace is conceptualized and envisioned among feminists in the South Caucasus, let us begin with the question we chose to explore and how we as co-authors and agents of change in our respective societies are situated in relation to the question. Each of us has been involved with peace-building initiatives alongside intersecting issues around the environment, women’s rights and LGBT rights. All of us self-identify as feminists and bring a feminist lens to our own lives and the

subjects we study both in terms of peace and conflict as it relates to the world at large on a macro level as well as to the micro, personal, and interpersonal levels of our immediate worlds and realities. The question we explore in this paper is first and foremost a topic of interest for us and this is the main motivation which drives our process. We have all had the experience of working with different groups in our contexts whether through research or through non-formal educational activities or cross-border dialogue where people are asked to imagine peace and find that it is rather difficult for them to imagine it in reality. As we embarked on this journey, we were driven by the desire to go beyond the difficulty of imagining feminist peace in our region and to co-create the space to imagine, dream, and theorize together with feminist peers in our respective contexts as well as together as co-researchers.

Precisely because we have had the experience of finding it difficult to imagine peace both on a personal level as well as in conversations with others, we incorporated a process of meditation and art into our approach when speaking to peers in order to access spheres of knowledge outside of our immediate cognitive minds. Drawing from participatory action research and feminist oral history methodologies, we implemented three focus group conversations in each context (a total of nine focus groups), including nine participants from Azerbaijan, eight from Armenia, and 13 from Georgia—a total of 30 participants (not including the co-authors). Prior to implementing these focus group conversations with others, we as co-researchers held a focus group with ourselves as three participants using the method we have designed to collectively envision feminist peace. We decided to focus on the process of envisioning peace with women only for two reasons: firstly, we wanted to create a space where women could feel free to openly discuss about their socialization and experiences of the world as women and how that might have affected their imagination with regards to peace. Secondly, we wanted to give priority to women given that the study is limited in terms of scope and we could not have a bigger number of participants in order to include men identifying as feminists. However, the women we spoke to cannot be said to represent *only* women, as there were a number of differences in where they came from, their age, their professional and

educational backgrounds, and how they have been affected by conflict.

Among the interviewed women there were refugees and displaced women, lesbian, bisexual and queer women, feminist activists, environmental activists, feminist academics, and women who come from cities and towns outside of the capital cities of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. We also carefully selected the participants for each focus group based on relations of participants among each other and aimed to bring together those people who share similar values and worldviews. This approach was chosen so as to enable an environment where people would open space for themselves and for one another in order to dream together and envision peace, instead of debating and critiquing each others' views.

We started each focus group with a 10-15 minute meditation and asked participants to delve into their memories and remember the first time they had felt peace and the last time they had felt peace. Following the meditation, we opened the floor for participants to discuss where their journeys into their memories of peace took them, including what made the experiences peaceful and the reason for remembering that experience. After everyone had the chance to talk about their first and last memories of peace, we asked them to talk about their associations with the word "peace" in a larger sense. This created the opportunity to go from the inner world to the outer and speak about not only the personal, but also associations of peace within the wider social and political spheres.

Because we were speaking to women who self-identify as feminists, we trusted that any perspective of peace they would bring to the table would also be framed through their feminist politics regardless of which feminism they subscribed to. As part of our process, however, we did include a discussion on how we as co-researchers had chosen to place "feminist" next to "peace" and make the assumption that a feminist peace would contribute to a discussion on peace different from dominant discourses of peace. In the final part of the focus group we asked participants to draw feminist peace as they would envision it in order to open up a space for formulating and expressing the concept through a method other than speech. Following this exercise, we held a discussion on what participants had drawn (if they wanted to explain) and how they would describe their vision of

feminist peace as it came to them in the process of drawing. Some of these drawings are available with this article.

Once we had held all of the focus group discussions we went back to the transcriptions and reviewed them to make summaries of all that was said with a focus on what peace was imagined (or not imagined) to be, as well as how a feminist peace was articulated in the process. We presented the findings back to some but not all of the focus group participants to ensure that we had understood what had been said correctly. All focus groups participants had the opportunity to see the paper in its entirety and give input after we had put together all of the findings from the three contexts. Finally, we as the co-researchers shared the findings from each context through a joint Skype call and made an analysis to combine our findings in order formulate an overall concept of feminist peace. These findings are presented in the following section of this paper.

## **Remembering Peace**

*“I was trying to understand whether we were talking about peace that is inside me—inner peace—or about world peace? There was confusion because they seemed very different to me... The peace that I think about regarding countries or in the context of war... is something difficult to understand, it is without shape and a strange thing for me, which I could not feel at all.” Focus Group Participant, Armenia; March 2019*

At the very beginning of our research we found ourselves worrying about whether the method we chose to conceptualize feminist peace with feminists of our region would lead people in a direction focusing more on inner peace rather than peace as a political and societal phenomenon. We were worried that the women we would interview might end up talking more about inner peace, their feelings, and personal approach as opposed to what we assumed one should talk about when asked to reflect on peace as a feminist, such as political issues, conflict in the region, and more or less the topic of peace as it relates to the external world. In retrospect, it is strange that we separated so strongly between the inner and outer—inner peace and regional peace. Even as feminists, we found ourselves for a brief moment affected by the very dichotomous approach that systems of oppression instrumentalize in order to dissociate rational from irrational, mind from body, femininity from masculinity, and war

from peace as if one is not connected to or even dependent on the other. As explained by one of the women interviewed in Georgia, the concept of peace was different from the concept of peacefulness, where “peacefulness is personal, and peace is something that is happening beyond me. I can search for peacefulness within myself and I can search for peace outside” (Focus Group Participant, Georgia; February 2019).

Yet it takes something as simple or perhaps as complex as meditating on the question of peace in order to remember how the external world influences upon the inner world. The mere presence of military personnel, attire, or even advertising, for example, has an effect on the sense of insecurity one may feel (internally) when walking down the street (externally). Yet often we are sold the myth that the military is there for us to feel secure within our borders, assuming that the borders drawn up by the nation-state contain rather than impede upon our freedom of movement as a whole, especially if we move through the world as women. Perhaps it is this dissonance between the public/private divide, traditionally allocating the public space of politics for men and the private space of the home for women, which places limits upon the imagination inside of patriarchy to conceive of peace as a dynamic and relational process encompassing both the inner and outer spheres of knowledge as well as what stands in between.

Not surprisingly, it was difficult for many of the women we spoke with to recall times when they felt peace and even more difficult to envision what a feminist peace may look like. Most of the time the difficulty to imagine peace was connected to the clash of the seemingly utopian concept of peace and what interviewees kept describing as “reality,” which was perceived as the violent continuousness of the world. This often meant that the first association with the word “peace” was war and violent conflict, an association often steeped in the experiences of displaced and refugee women. In one case a woman displaced from Abkhazia explained: “For me the term ‘peace’ brings fear and I don’t know how to connect with it, anyhow. Peace is always temporary, followed by some mess and disturbance” (Focus Group Participant, Georgia; March 2019). Beside the difficulty in imagining peace when reflecting on the experience of war as something that takes away one’s sense of peace,



another difficulty in imagining peace came from the struggle one becomes a part of as a feminist activist. A group of feminists we spoke to in Armenia referred to existence and being as already a conflict in itself, explaining that: “If there is feminism then there is struggle, then there is no peace.” One feminist activist in particular articulated the tension between what we can envision as peace and what actually exists in reality as non-peace in terms of the unrest it creates. In other words, the space between idealized peace and realized violence forms a gap, an anxiety that rises once we face the limitations of how far we can struggle to bring about a feminist peace in the face of patriarchal violence.

### **Does the Political not Touch the Body?**

*“...but what is peace outside of my body—I don’t know.” Focus Group Participant, Armenia; March 2019*

The woman quoted in the beginning of this section refers to peace in the context of war as something abstract, something she cannot touch and thereby know. Yet when she tried to recall the first time, she felt peace she referred to her body to remember peace, explaining that: “When the question was about the first time we felt peace I immediately went into my body.” The task we place upon ourselves to separate the internal and external realms of being in order to reflect on peace seems to make sense given the tension of public and private domains we often navigate from. Yet to know feminist peace requires a non-dualistic way of perceiving the world and centering the body as a significant locale of knowing. As such, we can say that feminist peace is to remember peace through the body, as if peace is a piece of the body, something tangible and possible to know instead of abstract and unknown.

In one case an interviewee from Armenia even went so far as to question whether peace was something that existed or exists prior to our ability to remember: “I couldn’t remember the first time I felt peace because I assume that in the time prior to my memories I always felt peace, maybe when I was very small and don’t remember” (Focus Group Participant, Armenia; February, 2019). In a sense, peace is something that happens when one cannot remember, meaning one has no recollection of the memory of peace, and at the same time peace is something that one feels all the time preceded by

memory, or rather, peace is what we know when we un-remember. If we were to approach the question of recalling from memory as similar to unearthing knowledge from the unconscious to conscious awareness, perhaps the conceptualization of feminist peace is also something that requires unknowing. When we unknow what we have been taught as knowledge about peace through a patriarchal lens, we may come to know feminist peace.

## **To Know Peace is to Know What Peace Isn't**

*"The feminist world I imagine is freed from violence." Focus Group Participant, Azerbaijan; March 2019*

One of the major themes we observed in almost all focus group discussions was how the task of remembering peace brought to mind cases of non-peace. Everyone was able to say what peace is based on what it is not. Most of the examples revolve around what peace would be if there was an absence of violence, danger, and threat. In some cases, it was articulated more in depth as a condition of lacking fear. One of the feminists interviewed in Azerbaijan recalled a childhood memory of the first time when she felt peace, when she was on vacation with her parents who were on talking terms. This moment was related to peace for her because she was used to her parents fighting every day and she explained that: "At that moment I thought to myself that it can happen this way, too—they can talk to each other normally [instead of fighting]." A feminist from Georgia referred to peace as any "moment when you feel no fear, threat, or challenges." Another feminist from Armenia spoke about her experiences with the catastrophic earthquake of 1988 as well as the war over Nagorno-Karabagh in the early 1990s. She explained that peace for her was "when there is nothing falling on my head" (because of the earthquake) and "when no one is throwing rocks at us" when passing through an Azerbaijani village during the war.

Peace in a sense becomes something that exists in the space where expected violence or danger could have been. We can even go as far as to say that feminist peace is about what is missing, including what is missing from the spaces where peace is spoken about. To imagine feminist peace, we must ask what is missing from the narratives, discourses, and general stories we hear about war, especially with regards to the details of women's lives during war. For many of the

feminists interviewed, the theme of what should not be in order for peace to be was telling of the experiences they had living as women in their immediate families, communities, towns, regions, and the world at large. In their own words, for peace to exist there should not be a feeling of danger; there should be no gender and no perceptions of what is male or female; there should be no social constructions; there should be no discrimination; there should be no defined sexuality; there should be no states, no flags, and no visas; and, most importantly, there should be no violence, whether direct or indirect. This is not the same as negative peace, however, because what we are articulating by the concept of feminist peace as something that exists in the space where violence is missing is ultimately about the expectation of violence as the norm, and when that violence does not take place, a space for relief opens up in our bodies, minds, and worlds.

## **Feminist Peace as a Culture of Deep Listening**

*"Telling one's story has the effect of putting it in a bigger context and having the story make a difference within that context." Focus Group Participant, Armenia; April 2019*

After listening to some of our peers, we understood the significance that speaking and being heard can have in efforts to achieving feminist peace. As such, speaking is not only about an action one performs to express their experiences and stories but is also an act that depends on a space for being heard. Being able to relate to the one speaking by providing a space and an opportunity for them to speak is crucial to challenging normative discourses on war, violence, and peace because it enables women on the margins and often the most affected by displacement, whether from violent conflict or patriarchal violence, to reveal the roots of non-peace. According to some of the women that work specifically with oral history, being able to speak has an important role to play in letting out aggression, pain, and hopelessness from not being heard, which in turn contributes to a sense of calm and release. This not only challenges normalized narratives of violence, but also supports women who have been silenced as a result of traumatic experiences to reflect, analyze, and re-signify those experiences in an attempt to achieve inner peace.

Contrary to patriarchal notions of being rational as a strength versus being emotional as a weakness, feminists in the region express the need to reflect on internalization of violence and dealing with internal conflict as a means to create peace in their lives. As expressed by one of the women we interviewed: “For me the solution of conflict is not about strength, but about approaches to communicate that are feminist” (Focus Group Participant, Armenia; April 2019). However, recognizing the connection with internal conflict and structural violence means that one has to be in conflict with oneself and with others as a feminist, meaning that there is both a struggle internally to challenge internalized norms as well as a struggle externally to bring about social change. Some feminists have a pessimistic perspective of how this means that structural systems gain from this constant fight.

One example that was given in a debate between feminists in a focus group taking place in Armenia was regarding how notions of “caring” connected to femininity were in fact attributes that have been exploited by patriarchy for its own gain. One way of caring that was discussed in another focus group of Georgian feminists was by giving space and staying silent so as to allow others to speak who might need more time to build up the confidence to take up space. Yet this concept and practice of “giving space” was contested by some as a mere reproduction of patriarchal ways when considering relations of power with regards to who has the power to give space and who does not. An open question that remains from this discussion is whether a culture of caring can exist alongside patriarchy, which does not become appropriated by patriarchy.

## **Feminist Peace as Non-Patriarchal and Non-Capitalist**

*“A lot of work needs to be done here [in terms of] imagining peace outside of patriarchy and capitalism.” Focus Group Participant, Georgia; April 2019*

One major dilemma we encountered in discussions across all three contexts had to do with schools of feminist thought that essentialize women’s biology and schools of thought that deconstruct gender. In trying to envision feminist peace, some feminists referred to characteristics and ways of relating, which are often associated with femininity and women. One of our peers directly stated: “I associate

that which is feminine with peace—that is caring, collaboration, not competing with each other but rather collaborating. We are concerned about each other, we take care of each other—all of these things that are feminine, that I perceive as feminine, and what I see in women’s circles. I see peace in that” (Focus Group Participant, Armenia; February 2019). This perspective received responses by other feminists as a perspective that essentializes femininity in opposition to masculinity, thereby reproducing gender dynamics and stereotypes, which in turn foster the strengthening of patriarchy as opposed to its demise.

In some feminists’ experiences caring was a burden placed upon them as a result of their perceived gender. Caring was something they did not consider as an innate characteristic coming from their nature as women but rather as something they have been socialized and, in a sense, forced to be. In the words of one of the feminists who was part of this discussion on women being caring and collaborative: “Woman is permanently under threat under patriarchy, so women collaborate because they have to” (Focus Group Participant, Armenia; February 2019). In a sense, when we perceive women’s environments to be more peaceful than male environments, that says more about how women are socialized to be less violent and more caring, as opposed to women being innately caring and collaborative. Furthermore, it is not a certitude that women’s environments are always and only caring and collaborative, as voiced by some of the feminists who spoke of their experiences in women’s spaces where patriarchal mechanisms of competitiveness and exclusion were reproduced in practice.

As one of our peers put it, “Maybe it is more about terming it [practices] as feminist rather than feminine.” As such, a constant practice of analyzing gender in our relations, within ourselves, and within the systems in which we struggle as feminists can divert us from becoming stuck in essentializations and limitations upon how we expect ourselves and others to be based on our perceived genders. Ultimately, such an approach becomes more about ways of living, being, thinking, and doing in the world that are disrupting binary systems, instead of reproducing them. Yet, because there were differences in strategies among the women that were discussing these issues, another dilemma arose with regards to the “what is” and the

“what could be” as was discussed in an earlier section of this paper on conceptualizing feminist peace. The perspective that was positioned as “women-only” concerned having to “oppress [one’s] caring side,” which, in turn, was perceived as being part of one’s femininity in the fear that it could or would be exploited by patriarchy. Instead, a world was envisioned where we can “direct that care toward women only and also receive care from women.” Another perspective considered it impossible to separate women from the rest of the world and the reality of patriarchal, capitalist exploitation and found it important not to divide care by sex, but to have an alternative system where everyone can care for one another. Two distinct barriers exist here: one is the difficulty to imagine feminist peace taking place within the same space where patriarchy and capitalism are taking place, and the second is the difficulty to imagine patriarchy and capitalism not taking place if feminist peace is a process that takes place without clashing with these oppressive dominant systems. In both cases, however, there is a difficulty in imagining reality freed from patriarchy and capitalism. Feminists in Georgia delved even deeper into the dilemma to conceive of feminist peace:

Feminist peace? How can peace be feminist? Feminism itself is in conflict with patriarchy. If nothing worries us and we are not in conflict with patriarchy, then why do we need feminism at all? I am saying that I am feminist because I am in conflict with the whole system and I don’t want peace at all. In post-patriarchy why would I need feminism at all? (Focus Group Participant, Georgia; March 2019)

Perhaps it is not possible to achieve feminist peace or even to speak of it as long as the obstacles that patriarchy and capitalism create continue to hinder our efforts to live free from violence and coercion. If feminist peace is something that is outside of patriarchy and capitalism, then how do we begin to speak and imagine our bodies, selves, and lives as the liberated “what could be” of intimate and relational politics?

We found a disparity and a sense of despair in the two-fold experience of writing this text in the context of the South Caucasus after having listened to feminist perspectives from the region, while

we read academic literature on feminist peace, mostly realized in western contexts. As we read the proposals of feminist peace scholars to “deconstruct the type of strategic thinking that informs the discourses within which we live, act and form our subjectivities... and create new discourses, thus moving into the realm of desire and the imaginary” (Molloy 1995), we reflect on one of the statements made by the feminists we spoke to: “...when we are involved in systemic everyday routine, we do not have time to give our minds space for thinking about peace... The system should be set up differently if we want to talk about peace” (Focus Group Interview, Georgia; April 2019). Making the connection between patriarchy and capitalism provides an important insight into the abovementioned reflection as well as other reflections we heard from many of our feminist peers regarding the exploitative nature of capitalism when combined with patriarchy.

To be involved in systemic everyday routine as women often means that wherever the work of caring and taking care of others is left out of work that is given value, it is always women who are expected to and often take on the task of physically, mentally, and emotionally caring for others. And even where men take on work in the care industry, this work is often effeminized and deemed as part of women’s gender roles, placing men who care on the margins of society. Capitalism’s exploitative power takes advantage of the patriarchal notions of gender roles and creates monetary value out of beauty standards that women should aspire to, body structure that men should aspire to, and a number of other gendered expectations one should fulfill in order to fit within societal standards for each gender. As mentioned in the beginning of this section, a lot of work needs to be done to begin imagining peace outside of patriarchy and capitalism. Perhaps before we can find space in our imaginaries to envision feminist peace, we must first envision a reality freed from systems of oppression such as patriarchy and capitalism that maintain non-peace in our relations with others, with ourselves, and within institutions and structures that maintain the exploitation of women’s and effeminized bodies.

## **Feminist Modes of Relating as Peace**

*“An embrace for example. What is an embrace? It is safety, it is love, unity... it is about living, being able to live.” Focus Group Participant, Armenia; February 2019*

The question regarding why the political imaginary does not include the intimate, relational, and emotional aspects of our day-to-day living kept coming up throughout several focus group discussions. In one of the focus groups there was a discussion on the politics of embracing and relating an embrace with peace and a sense of peacefulness. In more than one case, people spoke about an embrace as being an act that regulates difficult emotional states such as anxiety, deep sadness, and “to come back from having lost your breath... if there is something that took you out of rhythm” (Focus Group Participant, Armenia; February 2019). To place the image of embracing in the patriarchal, masculine, and militarist sphere of politics then becomes impossible, because as mentioned by one of our peers: “How can a soldier with a weapon be something that can fit inside of an embrace? He is not someone who embraces, not someone who gives life” (Focus Group Participant, Armenia; February 2019). Not only do soldiers not “fit inside of an embrace,” they are also trained to be anti-embrace, for anything that can give one a sense of calmness and peace makes one “weak” and at risk of being demolished by one who is “stronger.” Yet if we are talking about peace as an action that maintains life, then an embrace is a strategy and approach that can break the ascribed norms of relating in a patriarchal reality, which expect disconnection, desensitization, and dissociation from ourselves, others, and our surroundings.

Embracing was a memory that came up in many of the focus groups when recalling the first- or last-time participants had felt peace, which was often connected not only to the emotional sense of security one received from the embrace but also a physical state of calmness and ease. Returning to the body, then, is one of the mechanisms through which an embrace acts upon the systems of oppression that make it seem impossible to imagine feminist peace in our lives. In the words of one of our feminist peers: “I imagine feminist peace as a walking house that is also the body and nature and security—security in the body and in the home” (Focus Group Participant, Armenia; April 2019). Nature was a theme that kept coming up as



peace in the memories of the women interviewed across all three contexts with mountains, bodies of water, the wind, and other elements mentioned. For many, this sense of peace as safety and calmness was both individual as well as collective, meaning that inner peace was perceived as equally important as co-existing with others collectively. One of the feminists we interviewed described it as everyone having their own space where they feel safe, with “these spaces [being] connected to each other not by force, but willfully” (Focus Group Participant, Azerbaijan; April 2019).

Relating and interacting with oneself, with others, and with one’s environment in a way where trust abounds was pointed out as a significant condition necessary for being in harmony and peace with one’s surroundings and in one’s relations. In this case, trust is not only about feeling that one will not be harmed physically, but also about trusting the process— “trusting the trees, the breeze.” It is something that takes place “when all our senses are not in dissonance” (Focus Group Participant, Azerbaijan, March 2019). The idea that one needs to be in one’s senses to find peace and that peace is itself a sense and a feeling is important to take forward as an indicator of peace in a given space or situation. How often are our senses not in dissonance, meaning in harmony, in a peaceful condition, when we are relating to ourselves and others inside of institutions, whether those are academic institutions, work environments, family gatherings, heteronormative relationships, or patriarchal and capitalistic media? How often do we feel subjugated by oppressive structures we operate in and through, whether by force or by choice, and further oppress ourselves by suppressing our emotions of anger, frustration, humiliation, hopelessness, and powerlessness because emotions threaten to usurp so-called rational and objective reality? These are mere examples of micro-effects of macro-systems of violence that comprise the politics of all our daily relations under a patriarchal, capitalistic, and militaristic paradigm. Once we begin to deeply sense these effects bodily, we may come to resist internalizing oppression and domination and shift the dynamics of all our relations toward more just and peaceful ways.

## **Feminist Justice as Feminist Peace**

*“For now, feminist peace remains a struggle because we live in a system that is not peaceful at all.” Co-author in Focus Group between Co-authors, February 2019.*

As was previously discussed, feminism exists because patriarchy creates a conflict for us to live in a just and peaceful world. One of the Georgian feminists expressed the frustration she felt when people are told that “conflict and violence are bad, yet the reality remains that we are already living under conditions of unequally distributed resources, and we are in conflict with systems and groups who own these resources.” The need to struggle for equality was voiced among feminists across all contexts in order to achieve concrete results, such as basic income, access to healthcare, education, and so on. Particularly, women who had the experience of displacement mentioned that they “cannot imagine peace without any social guarantees” (Focus Group Participant, Georgia; March 2019). Although in some cases the connection with equality and peace reflected a more liberal feminist ideology, ultimately the need for justice brought the discussion toward a more radical feminist position about fighting back in the face of patriarchal violence.

One of the feminists struggled with the language of war when explaining the need she has to fight back using violence if she must in order to defend herself when her bodily integrity is violated. In her own words: “I am more at peace when I talk about how to defend myself... because in those moments when I need to protect and defend myself [I have been taught to be passive], but I can’t let my weapons go” (Focus Group Participant, Armenia; March 2019). And although we heard within different discussions the perspective that weapons cannot bring peace, the dilemma faced by some feminists remained with regards to how to push back against patriarchal violence non-violently. None of the women we spoke to were praising weapons or the military industrial complex, but peaceful means as a response to the violence of a militarized masculine patriarchal culture could not fit inside the feminist imaginaries of some feminists from the region. As put by one of these feminists: “I think that my attentiveness and readiness is lost from talks about non-violence” (Focus Group Participant, Armenia; March 2019). Perhaps feminist peace is a method of staying attentive to the

necessary responses that emerge in the face of violence and acting in accordance to those as they emerge. In any case, we must stay aware about what is happening at any given time and work on creating alternative spaces to cultivate feminist peace ideology and practice visibilizing and responding to normalized, often invisible, violence.

## **Imagining Feminist Peace**

*“Everything has a different form but lives together collectively.” Focus Group Participant, Azerbaijan; April 2019.*

The process of envisioning peace collectively with feminists from the South Caucasus was both a difficult and rewarding experience for us, the co-authors of this paper. Throughout the discussions we held in our three contexts we found feminists expressing that they could not imagine peace, while at the same time being willing to use the statement “I imagine...” to dream together. Despite the clash that kept being brought up between the existing reality of hegemonic patriarchal and capitalistic systems oppressing all spheres of life and the need to live free from systemic violences, the feminists we spoke to persevered in stretching the bounds of their imaginations to envision a utopian future of feminist peace. This in itself is a significant indicator of the power that we hold to spawn an alternative future in the present. According to Cynthia Cockburn: “Imagination, then, becomes itself a political practice” (Cockburn 2015). For feminists based in the South Caucasus, an alternative vision for a more just and peaceful world encompasses a reality without authority and nation-states, without greed and capitalism, without a culture of violence, and without patriarchal misogyny.

The awareness among feminists for a politics steeped in the formation of coalitions “in which the differential positionings of individuals and collectives involved will be recognized, as well as the value systems which underly their struggles” (Yuval Davis 1997 as quoted in Cockburn 2015) is indicative of the transversal politics many feminists already practice among each other in the region. One feminist activist in a focus group that took place in Azerbaijan even phrased it as “a peace [that is] an ‘aware cacophony’ of multiple standpoints, calling for solidarity across differences, for ‘empathetic cooperation,’ without considering it at the expense of peace itself.” Indeed, we concluded from the discussions we held with our feminist

peers in the region that there are more methods and approaches to envisioning feminist peace based in the different experiences of feminists themselves than there are outcomes for peace. It is these methods and approaches envisaged by feminists in the South Caucasus that helped us put together the ideas articulated by our peers and come up with some of the building blocks of a regional conceptualization of feminist peace.

The first thing that we take away from this collective conceptualizing of feminist peace is that there is a real tension between the effort to imagine and envision peace as (a) feminist and the clash with the reality of daily, visible and/or invisible, structural violences, that manifest, whether materially or immaterially, in our lives. Following this tension between the “what is” and the “what could be” of prefigurative politics, the second thing we take away from this collective conceptualizing of feminist peace is that to know feminist peace requires a non-dualistic way of perceiving the world by centering the body as a significant location of knowing. As such, we cannot separate the personal from the political in envisaging peace, which means that we can and must bring the body, senses, emotions, and intuition into all conversations regarding conflict, violence, war, and peace in national, regional, and international relations.

Another important understanding we take away from our collective feminist peace envisioning process is that feminist peace exists in the space that is created, or perhaps allowed to expand, when violence as the expected norm does not take place. In this sense, we heard many of our feminist peers discuss instances in their lives where violence was expected but did not take place as instances where they felt peace and/or understood what peace was or could be. We understood that for many of us, peace does not actually contain its conventional meaning of serenity, calm, and quiet, but is rather more loaded with reminders of violence and violation given that we relate to these terms from our lived experiences as women living, speaking, and relating from queer, feminist, activist, displaced, and marginalized standpoints. From this perspective feminist peace was also envisaged in terms of feminist justice, which according to some of our peers encompassed an active struggle, including self-defense, against systems of oppression violating our being, our work, and our dreams.

One major challenge that feminists in the South Caucasus find in the practice and envisioning of feminist peace is the patriarchal and capitalistic context in which we live, and which poses an obstacle in actually imagining feminist peace, much less living it. Many of our peers felt that as long as these systems of oppression continue to impact our lives and realities, we cannot live in peace, but rather we must stay struggling against these systems. Nevertheless, the dream of feminist peace is articulated as one of non-patriarchal and non-capitalistic modes of relating to ourselves, to others, and to the general environment. The additional complexity here is in coming to agreement about how we see non-patriarchal and non-capitalistic approaches in practice, given that some feminists argue for women only spaces as one solution whereas other feminists perceive a more queer, non-binary system of relating to self, to others, and to the world.

Perhaps as long as we come up against the hindering factors that oppressive systems enforce upon us, it would be difficult to see how there might come a day where we will no longer need to fight against, use self-defense, or protect spaces for women only. Perhaps without these systems of oppression that limit our conceptions of ourselves and others, we will no longer even need to categorize ourselves as “women” in order to define common struggles. In many ways, such subversive realities seemed to materialize in some of the conversations where feminist peace was envisaged as intimate and relational, encompassing touch, an embrace, trust, and harmony of the senses and body as a whole. According to feminist peace researchers Tarja Väyrynen and Eeva Puumala, “...it can be claimed that people experience political processes as felt, corporeal memories as the body is exposed to those processes and as it withdraws from being completely captured by those processes” (Väyrynen and Puumala 2015). As such, it suddenly became possible through simple gestures, shifts in perception, and coming back to the senses to combine envisioning and embodying peace as a feminist process of “withdrawing from being completely captured” by oppressive political processes.

In conclusion (albeit a continuous one), the prefiguration and practice of feminist peace depends on feminist approaches to relating to oneself, others, and both the dominant oppressive structures and

systems as well as alternative processes of liberation existing in emergence. These are envisioned to be based in a politics of solidarity, collective existence and being, a constant creation of spaces for analysis and exposure of invisible violence, and a practice of affirming our collective bodily integrity in unison with our self determination. Ultimately, feminist peace is a process, which is also attested to in feminist peace research, which transforms and is transformed as it becomes envisaged and practiced beyond the abstract political in our everyday lives.

*The authors of this paper would like to express their deepest gratitude to the women who shared their memories of peace, their practices and dreams for a feminist peace, and their frustrations and disappointments with regards to movements, ideologies, realities, and politics. We consider this paper a co-creation and production of knowledge by all the voices that contributed to this collective brainstorming on feminist peace as envisioned by feminists in the South Caucasus. We consider this a beginning to collectively imagining feminist peace in our region, but there are still more voices that can be included here. We hope that this work will inspire those voices and other voices to embark on a similar process of envisioning feminist peace so we may eventually have a constellation of "what could be-s" with the potential to make the world a more peaceful, just, and kind place in which to live.*

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# Opportunities for Fragmented Nagorno-Karabakh Peace Process: Intercommunity Dialogue and Safety of Borderlands

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**Vadim Romashov**

## **Introduction**

The Nagorno-Karabakh peace process has received an observable impetus following the change of political power in Armenia in April 2018. The contacts between Armenian and Azerbaijani officials mediated by third parties have noticeably intensified. These meetings were in the spotlight of regional and international journalists and political analysts. At the same time, some non-trivial political developments have not attracted that much attention and maybe for a good reason. However, they might contain a certain transformative impulse for the peace process, and therefore I find it important to shed light on these developments.

This paper describes and analyzes recent changes in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settings, thus outlining a context for other articles in this issue discussing prospects for the peace process. The article particularly focuses on developments potentially leading towards a dialogue between the Nagorno-Karabakh communities and improvement of security along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border. I acknowledge that the main analytical material for this article—official statements and media reports—are highly politicized and



cannot be taken for granted. Moreover, the situation on the ground can be significantly different from the picture presented by politicians and media.

As an analytical value of this paper, I present original thoughts on implications of the observed changes as well as factors hindering further progress in the peace process within this extremely complex conflict environment. Nevertheless, I do not intend to display my interpretations as only truthful representation of the recent events. There are plenty of other dynamics influencing the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process that cannot be covered within the scope of this brief analysis. Furthermore, the main puzzling question how in practice the changes since April 2018 can enlarge a room for the (re-)engagement across the conflict divide and transformation of antagonized attitudes is explored in the respective articles published in this issue (Romashov, Danoyan and Giyasbayli 2019). In the conclusion, I argue for “fragmentation” of the official peace process in order to foster the transformation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict setting.

## **Dialogue between Nagorno-Karabakh Communities**

April 2018 marked change of political power in Armenia. The uprising, which came to be referred as the “Velvet Revolution,” was characterized by the uncertainty of how these new circumstances will affect the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process. Particularly in Azerbaijan, the policy-makers were caught off guard by the effective and large-scale protests led by a former journalist turned politician Nikol Pashinyan that eventually overthrew Armenia’s ruling elite. They had therefore no clear vision on the implications for the negotiations over the Nagorno-Karabakh issue and actions Baku should take in order to benefit from such developments (Shiriyev 2018b). Different options were proposed for Azerbaijani policy-makers to proceed further with the new political reality in Armenia, ranging from active military undertakings to the strategy of waiting and observing (Shiriyev 2018b, Shiriyev 2018a).

At the end of April 2018, military sources from Nagorno-Karabakh actively reported on the increased military activities of Azerbaijani forces on the Line of Contact (LoC) (Sputnik 2018a; Sputnik 2018b; Ministry of Defence 2018). Azerbaijan’s Defense Ministry denied these reports and linked them to the political processes in Armenia, hinting that the reports were supposed to distract public attention from the protest movement (1news.az 2018). Nevertheless, such reports led to the agitation of the OSCE Minsk Group (OSCE MG), as it feared that an unprecedented violent conflict escalation that occurred

two years before, in April 2016, would repeat. As a warning, on April 23, 2018, the OSCE MG Co-Chairs issued a joint press statement, in which they underscored “the critical importance of the sides respecting the ceasefire at this delicate time” characterized by “political developments in the region and the possibility of escalation along the Line of Contact.” They expressed hope for a “meeting as soon as possible to renew intensified negotiations” (OSCE 2018a). Apparently, the mediators were also troubled that the political talks could be undermined and in light of the new political conditions.

Pashinyan’s statements during his visit to Nagorno-Karabakh on May 9, 2018, the day after he was elected prime minister by the National Assembly, were remarkable for the peace process, as they showed his determination to include the present-day government of Nagorno-Karabakh in the negotiations. For some political observers this rigid stance of the Armenian government signified the beginning of “complete stagnation” (Markedonov 2018) or at least a pause (Tariverdiyeva 2018) in the negotiation process. Zaur Shiriyev (2018b), an Azerbaijan expert, saw a causal relationship between the new Armenian leadership’s “hardline rhetoric” and small-scale military actions on the border of Armenia and Azerbaijan’s exclave, the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, initiated by Baku. According to Azerbaijani analysts, the idea behind this military movement was to send a signal to the Armenian side that “war is still on the table if the current rhetoric on Nagorno-Karabakh becomes policy” (Shiriyev 2018b). Nevertheless, Armenia’s new position has been continuously restated by Pashinyan ever since and was even included in the Government Program of the Republic of Armenia for 2019 adopted by the National Assembly on February 8, 2019. Thus, these declarative statements did eventually become a policy.

Even though Pashinyan’s initiative was strongly opposed by Baku, it may (in an ideal scenario) also bring along the displaced Azerbaijani community of Nagorno-Karabakh to the talks, and so the official peace process could acquire a new or additional format. Shiriyev (2018a) notes, “For Baku, the participation of Karabakhi Armenians in talks about the territory’s status is acceptable only if Karabakhi Azerbaijanis displaced from their homes by war are also present on an equal footing.” According to his survey, a major proportion of Azerbaijani experts agreed that Baku should react to this Armenian government’s policy by “strengthening the institutional and human capacity of Nagorno-Karabakh Azerbaijanis and proposing their participation in negotiations with Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians” (Shiriyev 2018b).

The OSCE MG Co-Chairs ostensibly are not against changing the format of negotiations if the sides agree to it. For instance, Russia's foreign minister in this regard said, "If at a certain stage the parties agree that Nagorno-Karabakh should be represented at the talks again, it will be their decision and we will respect it" (Lavrov 2018). Perhaps, to address both Pashinyan's initiative and the precondition set by the Azerbaijani side, the OSCE MG made the first steps towards preparations for a dialogue between the Azerbaijani population from Nagorno-Karabakh and the Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh. On October 31, 2018, in Baku, the OSCE MG Co-Chairs met with representatives of the Azerbaijani community affected by the conflict (OSCE 2018b). Later, the Azerbaijani side started the process of "strengthening the institutional capacity" of Nagorno-Karabakh Azerbaijanis that would allow them to have an official representation in possible talks with Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians. On December 20, 2018, the organization that represents the Azerbaijani community of Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan elected its new head, Tural Ganjaliyev, who also occupies a diplomatic position in Azerbaijan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Rustamov 2018). The statements coming from this organization (JAMNEWS 2018, Azərbaycan24 2018) as well as comments made by a spokesperson for Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry (Kucera 2019) following the appointment have indicated the willingness of the Azerbaijani side to establish contacts between the two communities of Nagorno-Karabakh.

On March 5, 2019, Miroslav Lajčák, the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office, met with representatives of the Azerbaijani community of Nagorno-Karabakh. As reported, he reaffirmed the OSCE's continued support for "small, tangible steps to promote co-operation and dialogue." Lajčák also expressed his conviction that "step-by-step and through continuous and increasing dialogue, small improvements to the lives of the people most affected by the conflict can be made" (OSCE 2019a). On March 13, 2019, the senior official visited Yerevan where, in addition to "the political leadership" of Armenia, he also met with "representatives of the de facto authorities of Nagorno-Karabakh" (OSCE 2019f). During their regional visits in May and October 2019, the MG Co-Chairs, together with the Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office (PRCIO), met separately with both the de facto authorities of Nagorno-Karabakh and the chair of the Azerbaijani Community of Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan (OSCE 2019c, OSCE 2019i).

However, one should avoid misinterpreting these developments and active shuttle diplomacy of the mediators as a progression that inevitably will result in

the (re)establishment of the dialogue between the Armenian and Azerbaijani communities of Nagorno-Karabakh. The process requires long negotiations and coordination, and there is no plain evidence that in the end it will be successful. Probably, a clearer picture could be formed after the presidential elections in the non-recognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, which are scheduled for spring 2020 and will be held in accordance with the new constitution adopted in 2017 that brought more power to the president. So far, the de facto authorities in Stepanakert have not supported the idea of inclusion of the Azerbaijani community of Nagorno-Karabakh in the negotiation process, though neither they rejected civil dialogue. On this matter, Masis Mayilian (2018), who is responsible for foreign affairs in Nagorno-Karabakh, said, “I believe that no party should create obstacles, if representatives of public organizations of refugees from Artsakh, Azerbaijan and Armenia decide to discuss their problems within the framework of Track II diplomacy.” It should be noted that Azerbaijani officials have opposed any changes to the official negotiations format (Moscow-Baku.Ru 2019, Seidova 2019, Haqqin.az 2019), and seemingly would prefer a less formal organization of the intercommunity dialogue.

Therefore, I expect that in such circumstances a possible arrangement could be a semi-official dialogue between public representatives appointed by the de facto authorities of Nagorno-Karabakh and the organization known in Azerbaijan as the Azerbaijani Community of Nagorno-Karabakh Region. This dialogue can be organized under the auspices of the OSCE, namely the OSCE PRCIO. The PRCIO’s office in Tbilisi, as “a neutral territory,” could host this dialogue on a regular basis and the OSCE Conflict Prevention Centre could provide professional facilitators for this process. Perhaps, a similar kind of arrangement was discussed during Lajčák’s visit to Azerbaijan, where he stated, “The OSCE is encouraged by the informal dialogue we have seen so far. We are watching closely for signs of constructive progress and real commitment, and stand ready to facilitate when needed” (OSCE 2019a). Such a dialogue between the Nagorno-Karabakh communities would not acquire official negotiation status but would be still “higher” than a Track-2 process and serve as a complementary platform for Track-1 political talks as well as a backchannel for transmitting messages between Baku and Stepanakert. The status of Nagorno-Karabakh should not be necessarily the main theme for discussions on this platform, and the participants may concentrate on myriad other concerns, problems, and aspirations they might share (or not). Since this process would certainly attract a lot of public attention, it could also considerably contribute to

a long-standing appeal from mediators and peace activists to prepare the populations for peace.

## **Safety along the Border**

The call to “prepare the populations for peace” has continuously appeared throughout the OSCE MG statements following the recent dynamic way in official meetings (OSCE 2018c, OSCE 2019d, OSCE 2019e, OSCE 2019f). Seemingly, the new Armenian government has tried to address this appeal. At the meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council on December 6, 2018, the then acting Foreign Minister of Armenia Zohrab Mnatsakanyan urged for “genuine efforts to prepare the populations for peace on all sides of the conflict” as a significant prerequisite for the process of negotiations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia 2018). Perhaps, one of such “genuine efforts” was an Armenian Public Television’s report entitled “The Friendship of Past and the Hostility of the Present” and aired several times on January 21, 2019 during news programs. The report featured interviews with residents of a village on the border with Azerbaijan, called Aygepar, who reminisced about their friendships and work-related ties with Azerbaijanis from a neighboring border village, Alibeyli, before the war over Nagorno-Karabakh. The report discussed the possibilities of restoration of this relationship. According to Armenian experts, the report was an unprecedented occurrence on Public TV, the content of which is allegedly highly monitored by the government and can be seen as an expression of official position (Aysor 2019a, Mejlumyan 2019).

It is remarkable that Alibeyli is located in the Tovuz District of Azerbaijan, which is adjacent to the Agstafa District, where the border control was reportedly transferred from the army to the State Border Service of Azerbaijan. In December 2018, the Chief of State Border Service, Elchin Guliyev, announced the order of Ilham Aliyev to transfer the military posts on the state border with Armenia in Gazakh and Agstafa districts—important bordering regions with their critical transportation arteries—from the Ministry of Defense to the State Border Service. Reportedly, this instruction has been already implemented (Azərbaycan Respublikası Dövlət Sərhəd Xidməti [State Border Service of the Republic of Azerbaijan] 2018a, Azərbaycan Respublikası Dövlət Sərhəd Xidməti [State Border Service of the Republic of Azerbaijan] 2018b). If so, for the first time in the history of the military conflict, border troops control part of the dividing line between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, at least on one of the sides. Albeit officially not framed in such way, this arrangement can be viewed as one

of “possible confidence-building measures” and “additional steps to reduce tensions” that had been considered by the sides as stated in the press releases by the Co-Chairs of the OSCE MG issued on July 12 (OSCE 2018c) and September 27 (OSCE 2018d). Such an idea of transferring control of the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, where it remained unchanged since the Soviet period, to border troops on both sides, as an option to relieve tensions, has been discussed since the mid-1990s (Sputnik 2018c). In the changing political environment, it can receive new momentum for realization. Especially so, as in January 2019, the Chief of Armenia’s General Staff, Artak Davtyan, said, as reported, that the Armenian side will welcome possible negotiations on the demarcation of the border with Azerbaijan as well as the joint organization of the border service (Sputnik 2019).

The conflict zone’s borderlands were also the focus of the meetings in April 2019, when the Armenian and Azerbaijani sides agreed to undertake “measures in the humanitarian field” including “stabilization of the situation in the conflict zone, in particular during agricultural activities” (OSCE 2019g; OSCE 2019h; OSCE 2019b). The OSCE PRCIO on the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement, Andrzej Kasprzyk, visited Armenia in March and May 2019 to meet among others with the Defense Minister apparently about substantializing the diplomatic agreements on the situation in the LoC and the Armenian-Azerbaijani state border (Aysor 2019b, Aysor 2019c). At the end of May, the OSCE MG Co-Chairs visited the region and held consultations with foreign ministers and defense ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan “to assess the evolution of the situation on the line of contact and the international border” (OSCE 2019c).

Since the first formal meeting between the Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev in Dushanbe on September 28, 2018, the security situation on the borderlands and along the LoC has considerably stabilized primarily thanks to the establishment of a direct communication line between the sides upon which the two political leaders agreed during the meeting. After reaching this agreement, the OSCE has continuously noted the significant decrease in ceasefire violations and reported casualties (OSCE 2018b, OSCE 2018c, OSCE 2019e, OSCE 2019a, OSCE 2019j, OSCE 2019f). However, the security situation on the borderlands and along the LoC remains vulnerably exposed to belligerent and maximalist rhetoric of both sides and in general, to the swings in the overall political negotiations on conflict resolution. Since the end of May, after an extended period of relatively reduced violence, there has been a noteworthy increase in deaths and injuries on both

sides. Not only have the lives of military personnel been recently endangered. For instance, on October 2, 2019, an excavator driver was killed in Azerbaijan after shooting from Armenian positions (Medzhid 2019), and the next day an Armenian tractor driver was injured during firing from Azerbaijan (Martirosyan 2019). These two recent incidents of violence occurred on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, although in different sections.

Increased safety of people residing and working in borderland regions of Armenia and Azerbaijan would be an important element of trust and confidence building that would give certain impetus to a wider conflict transformation process. Since the LoC essentially is the immediate field of military confrontation (“frontline”), and moreover because of the shift in responsibility from Yerevan to Stepanakert to decide the future of the Nagorno-Karabakh population, as announced by Pashinyan, the issue of demilitarization of the international border should be detached from the largely stalled Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution negotiations. Eventually, the borderlands can become a setting where the conflict issues between Armenia and Azerbaijan can be gradually overcome without being linked to the standstill in the overall conflict resolution process.

I should stress that the blockade of Armenia’s borders is a strong bargaining chip for Azerbaijan in the political negotiations on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. However, the proposed parallel discussions on the international border does not mean that Baku will relinquish this leverage, as the process does not automatically lead to opening borders and economic de-isolation of Armenia. Initial discussions should be inspired primarily by the human security approach, meaning that the borderland communities must be freed from overwhelming fear of violence associated with skirmishes across the border. Replacing soldiers with border guards along the border (at least on those parts that are not adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding districts) together with the demarcation process can be reasonable steps toward improving the safety of borderland people on both sides without senselessly linking these advances to the overall resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Furthermore, the use of threat of an effective war across the international border is pointless as long as Yerevan has security guarantees from Russia within the frame of the Collective Security Treaty. The stable security situation on the border would contribute to the development of often deprived borderlands on both sides and ensure protection of the crucial transportation links connecting Armenia and Azerbaijan to Georgia and the outer world. At the same time, the

people living on the borderlands might feel that their socio-economic problems and safety concerns are better addressed, and that their traumas and anxieties caused by the conflict are not muted by the Karabakh-centered discourses (Romashov, Danoyan and Giyasbayli 2019). Consequently, being less preoccupied with a potential warfare along the state border, the governments on both sides could concentrate their efforts on more complex and difficult political negotiations over the Nagorno-Karabakh issue itself.

## **Conclusion**

The proposed parallel processes are hardly a new initiative and have been long discussed in various forms by experts and facilitators. However, I believe that every alteration in the socio-political context surrounding the conflict setting—and certainly the change of power in Armenia—is one of such transformations. There is potential to open windows of opportunities for transforming the conflict setting as such. Therefore, the impetus created by the recent political developments in the region should be preserved and re-directed towards conflict transformation. Indeed, reaching a comprehensive agreement would be too idealistic to expect, but the transformative potential could be effectively realized if the official peace process becomes “fragmented,” or less centralized.

From this perspective, the “fragments” signify parallel processes supporting the formalized searching for a solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. They are not Track-2 or bottom-up initiatives of conflict transformation since, in the current environment, the launch of a sustainable public dialogue between Armenian and Azerbaijani communities of Nagorno-Karabakh has to be sanctioned by the officials. The advancement of the security situation along the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan outside of the immediate conflict zone is also contingent on the joint will of Armenian and Azerbaijani authorities. However, both processes would definitely benefit from the involvement of a wider population. The Armenian and Azerbaijani communities of Nagorno-Karabakh can take part in the OSCE-facilitated dialogue, not only represented by officially appointed persons but also various diverse individuals and groups. The work on enhancing security of borderlands and demarcation of borders would be more efficient if it takes into consideration the needs and aspirations of local residents on both sides. For this reason, the borderland communities should be regularly consulted and assured that their voices are heard.

Unquestionably, these arrangements are possible only if political elites are ready to move forward with the peace process, commit to a result, and be willing to



share the appropriated “exclusive” right to conduct the negotiations. Thomas de Waal (2010) identified the fundamental limitation that conditions the mediation efforts by the OSCE MG co-chairmanship, namely the ability of the ruling elites of Armenia and Azerbaijan to “exercise near complete control over the substance of the peace process and the way it is perceived by both domestic and international audiences.” They have managed to achieve this power because the negotiation process has been predominantly conducted between the two presidents or foreign ministers in private. However, the successful peace process requires the support of the Armenian and Azerbaijani populations, including Karabakhis (de Waal 2010). I consider that the proposed “fragmentation” of the official peace process would alter one of the most privatized political negotiations in contemporary post-Soviet conflict settings into a more inclusive arrangement. After all, the recent “revolutionary” developments in Armenia were inspired by the belief in the power of citizens to jointly influence political processes, and this aspiration should be extrapolated to the negotiations on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

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# Reflections on Scenarios on the Peaceful Resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict in Armenia and Azerbaijan

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**Lala Jumayeva, Hayk Smbatyan, Nuriyya Hasanova,  
Elen Grigoryan**

## **Introduction**

For the last 27 years, the Nagorno-Karabakh negotiations have been conducted mainly on a Track 1 level and behind closed doors. The content of the peace deals proposed by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group of Mediators was rarely disclosed to the public.<sup>23</sup> Due to the lack of transparency in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace negotiations the public has never been a part of the respective process. The lack of public debate and the isolation and insufficient communication between the societies on the grass-roots level has created an image of enemy on both sides that may derail the official negotiation process in case any agreement is reached by the governments.

This analytic inquiry explores public opinions about the possible scenarios of a peaceful resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict through the following questions:

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<sup>23</sup> All draft agreements presented by the Minsk Group co-chairs as a foundation for further negotiations between Armenian and Azerbaijan in 1997-1999 were kept confidential until the presidential administration of Azerbaijan published copies of draft proposals in 2001 (International Crisis Group 2005, 11-12). The full content of the Madrid Principles has not been made public yet.

1. How do ordinary Azerbaijanis and Armenians relate to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict?
2. How do they define the conflict, as well as each other?
3. What scenarios do they discuss regarding the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict?

The study combined participatory group discussions (Fisher and Ball 2004) with young researchers<sup>24</sup> involved in the studies of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The fieldwork lasted for five months and comprised of a three-stage process following the order presented below:

1. First-round group discussions with young researchers.
2. Random inquiries by young researchers in everyday life settings.
3. Second-round group discussions with young researchers.

The two-stage group discussions were conducted with young researchers aiming to generate knowledge about the conflict and its resolution scenarios, using an initially developed group interview guide. Additionally, in the second phase of the above-mentioned cycle, the research participants conducted random, chaotic, non-standardized qualitative inquiries among their personal and professional social networks (including friends, family, random groups, taxi-drivers, etc.), in order to reveal on the grassroots level the opinion of ordinary people on the official peace deals offered since 1997, and come back into the group with another layer of reflected data.

The participants were chosen with the principle of criterion sampling. The sample involved young researchers from Armenia and Azerbaijan, who were at that time conducting or had conducted studies on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the past; this served as a selection criterion. At the same time, the study followed the principle of engaging participants from different spheres, including sociology, political science, conflict studies, history studies, peace activism, and security studies. A total of 19 young researchers from both countries engaged in the study. Around 180 random non-standardized inquiries have been conducted in two countries.

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<sup>24</sup> As the project aimed to gather the popular rather than expert opinion on the topic, the authors chose to conduct a focus group with young researchers rather than established experts.



During the informal conversations, young researchers explored the perceptions of each scenario, as well as the perception of its feasibility (i.e., How realistic is its implementation?), the public acceptance (i.e., Will their society accept the formula?), the political acceptance (i.e., Will their government be satisfied with/accept it?), the acceptance from the other side (i.e., Armenia, Azerbaijan, the Armenian community of the Nagorno-Karabakh, the Azerbaijani community of the Nagorno-Karabakh); and the durability (i.e., Will the proposed peace deal be durable? How long will it take to implement it?).

The data analysis consists of two main thematic sections, with the first one discussing how societies relate to conflict discourses and the knowledge of conflict, through the reflective analysis of the young researchers. The second one reflects on public perceptions about the official resolution scenarios for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

## **Alienation from Conflict Discourse and Conflict Knowledge**

The purpose of this research was to explore the perceptions of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and its resolution. The presented analysis is two-layered, summing up the scenarios generated by the young researchers in the group discussions, followed by reactions and reflections on these scenarios by ordinary people interviewed in everyday life situations.

The research revealed a number of similarities in the two countries. Particularly, knowledge about the conflict was very limited<sup>25</sup>. Many respondents started with a simple: “well, we don’t know much” when asked about the conflict and possible resolution. At the same time, very little attention is paid to the interests and needs of the “other” side and each individual claims to have their own solutions of the conflict, without having a wider look at the situation. This proves that the knowledge about the conflict is separated from the everyday discourses carried by ordinary individuals.

*“The perceptions on the negotiations in Armenia are limited to the level of ‘coffee talks.’”  
(Group Discussion Participant, Armenia; March 2019)*

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<sup>25</sup> The references to “society” do not claim to be representative, but rather reflect the thoughts of the young researchers and random respondents engaged in this study.

There is a common viewpoint among the young researchers in Armenia that the static knowledge of the conflict is generated through the history textbooks, while the dynamic knowledge of it is mostly learned from the media. Neither the static nor the dynamic forms of knowledge are complemented by alternative sources of information, as a result of which the new discourses do not reach Armenian society. In everyday life settings, there is a perception that the elites are the ones provoking the conflict, hence, they are the ones shaping the knowledge and narrative of the conflict through various channels, including media. A similar situation can be observed in Azerbaijan. Researchers claim that regardless of the fact that the media is widely accessible in Azerbaijan, society is not well informed about the political process around conflict and the ongoing negotiation process officially led by the government. In general, disseminated information in the local media is considered by respondents as one-sided, mainly accentuating the aggressiveness of the opposite side towards the Azerbaijanis. If one were to rely on the information provided by the local media it would seem that it is always the Armenian side who initiates the violation of the ceasefire at the line of contact. According to young researchers in Azerbaijan, people usually do not check the validity of the information presented by local media and prefer to believe in what they read in newspapers or watch on TV. Particularly the older generation does not have any inclination to double check the available information.

This is explained both by the frames produced by social structures, including the political propaganda, and by the elements of social action, especially the absence of critical thinking in both societies. This is manifested in a politically significant way; when communicating with society, the political elites usually state the “non-negotiability” of the territories, yet, not once has any president of Armenia denied the possibility of giving up some territories on an international level in regional meetings and negotiation platforms. This aspect of the discourse is not presented in the history books or media in Armenia, hence, giving space for ideological biases as well as political goals to direct and shape specific perceptions of reality in general and the conflict in particular. This is another way that information on the current situation of the conflict does not essentially reach society.

*“Reality is never presented in the history books.”*

*(Group Discussion Participant, Armenia; March 2019)*

*“Interestingly, we might receive information about Armenia or the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process and recognize and accept that knowledge. However, once we enter the society we change our opinion. Consequently, we do not express our own opinion or belief on a particular issue on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Instead, we mainly talk about what is told on the TV news.”*

*(Group Discussion Participant, Azerbaijan; August 2019)*

The ceasefire agreement has been signed more than 25 years ago; however, people are not well informed about the negotiation process. This can be a result of the undertaken policy by both conflicting states—the top down format of the negotiations. The Azerbaijani government passes a message to society that it is actually the government that conducts the negotiations and is in charge of settling the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute on behalf of the Azerbaijani society. The main disadvantage of the lack of information on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the ongoing peace process is that if the Azerbaijani people knew more details on the proposed peace scenarios they might have demonstrated more support for the peaceful settlement of the conflict rather than supporting the resolution of the conflict by means of war, which for them might seem to be the only adequate way out of this deadlock. The top-down format of the conflict settlement approach both in Azerbaijan and Armenia to a certain extent hinders public support for the available options of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict’s settlement.

The employed top-down format results in specific perceptions of the origin of conflict as well as specific definitions and perceptions of the involved parties. In Armenia, the conflict is viewed as having originated from “the other side,” particularly mentioning the Sumgait pogroms as a starting point, directing to the point that Armenian society does not feel like the conflict belongs to them and rather is the result of Azerbaijani policy.

Likewise, Azerbaijanis have an antagonistic perception of Armenians. The older generation’s negative perception of the other side has been formed as a result of their memory of war and trauma caused by the conflict. However, the older generation seems to be more willing to settle this conflict by peaceful means since they, to a certain extent, have past shared memories with their Armenian neighbors, colleagues, and friends who they peacefully coexisted with during the Soviet period. At the same time, the younger generation’s negative perception of Armenians is created and sustained by the policy led by the

Azerbaijani government, which makes sure that the hostilities carried out during the war, for instance in Khojaly, are not forgotten, as the event is being framed within the definition of “genocide.” This state policy is mainly realized through the media and the educational system—through storytelling at schools and texts in the school books, creative writing assignments, and national commemorative ceremonies.

Another important matter discussed in Armenia is the fact that the conflict belongs to the armed forces, meaning that regardless of what is going on in the political sphere, the major responsible agent of the conflict dynamics is the army, which results in a tendency of improvement of the army’s image according to several studies. In everyday life the trust in the army is expressed in the form of the model “our army will fight even without weapons.” It is substantial that, according to participants, the army breaks the myths of the official narratives of the conflict, becoming a possibly alternative source of information, despite being accessible to a limited number of people. This is becoming even clearer in the frameworks of a study conducted among army recruits, showcasing that they tend to show more military patriotism before going to the army, than after they are back to civil life with rather transformed knowledge structures and experience.

*“When they come back, everything is quite revalued for them, since they already know it is not only Azerbaijanis that initiate shootings, and thus the myths of official discourse are broken.”*

*(Group Discussion Participant, Armenia; March 2019)*

In Azerbaijan, the level of awareness of ordinary people on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as well as their vision of this dispute’s settlement can vary by region. Social perceptions of the conflict settlement vary in the southern and northern regions of Azerbaijan. In the southern regions, people (mostly the representatives of the Talysh minority group) are not very informed about the process around the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict; they support the military means of resolution and are ready to fight. In the northern regions, however, the existing tendency is the opposite to what is seen in the south—people (for instance, representatives of the Avar minority groups) believe in the influence of Russia on this conflict’s settlement outcome and prefer to stay outside of the existing problem’s frame; they just receive the information provided by the local media and prefer not to even reflect on it.

*“In Baku, for instance, many people follow the news; however, their knowledge of the conflict is still superficial. They know certain phrases and/or names of the proposed peace deals, for example the Madrid Principles, but are not really aware of the details of those scenarios.”*

*(Group Discussion Participant, Azerbaijan; August 2019)*

At the same time, societal perceptions of the conflict in Armenia are quite different from the ones in Nagorno-Karabakh. In Armenia, especially in locations far away from the borderline, people imagine the conflict “like in the movies” and they tend to frequently refer to such abstract categories as patriotism. One of the young researchers who had done a study in Nagorno-Karabakh states that the conflict has become an integral part of planning an everyday routine and life in general, essentially becoming a context. Simply put, people are unable to plan the future of their education, career, or sometimes, even half-jokingly, the end of the day, without considering the possible outbreak of violence on the border.

In everyday life settings the perceptions also differ based on the gender: women usually discuss the politics and the prospects for the resolution of the conflict, while men mostly pay attention to the politics of war and military affairs. This, according to young researchers, apparently reflects the patriarchal model of a society, where males do the rough and strategic work and females do the thinking and the stabilization.

In this regard, Azerbaijanis perceive Armenians through a dehumanized image of a predator that poses a real threat to their lives and values. The younger generation has been/is raised with this constant inculcation of hatred and mistrust towards Armenians. This negative perception of the opposite side is more likely to hinder the peace process in the future, with the lack of state-supported dialogue projects further deepening the existing gap in social perceptions.

The fact that the societies are cut off from the discursive environment, as well as the terms they use to define the conflict and its sides, cause some issues of identity and self-definitions. This is mostly observed when certain categories, such as “occupied” and not “liberated,” bring up sharp reactions among different groups.

*“During my first business trip, some Azerbaijani people told me we have occupied their territories. My first reaction was confusion, as someone having grown in this society*

*and having studied with its history books in the department of history, which is perhaps the most nationalist department in my university."*

*(Group Discussion Participant, Armenia; March 2019)*

In the view of the value system of society and the positioning of those values in the conflict, one of the observations discussed concerns the idea that the territories and social space are different in politics and in everyday life situations. Although among the state actors and power elites in Armenia, the territories have not yet managed to shift into political interests and are rather perceived in the level of values, namely "a place, where the blood of my compatriots was shed." This means that society and the political structure are located in a different social time and space settings. While society cares about the territories, the negotiations are mostly taking place around the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh's status.

Everyday life perceptions are often contradicting to the ones common among the group discussion participants. Particularly, peace has very shallow and short-term understanding and is mostly defined by the absence of war. This proves that the conflict has become an essential part of people's everyday lives and the context of social phenomena, rather than contextualized within those phenomena.

Azerbaijani society perceives the notion of a "peaceful resolution" to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as a "return of the whole Nagorno-Karabakh territory that has been under Armenian control since the early 1990s to Azerbaijan," and this perception by no means includes any compromise on any part of the Nagorno-Karabakh territory. This, per se, is also a result of the state policy. In case the sides reach an agreement for a peaceful solution of the dispute it will perhaps be a difficult task to convince the societies to reconsider the existing perception and restore the trust towards the opposite side easily.

The alienation from the discourse around the conflict, as well as the episodic nature of knowledge about conflict discussed in the previous section, also influences societal perceptions and preference on possible resolution scenarios. In a discussion of all scenarios, a few significant general conditions for resolution have been identified by both Armenian and Azerbaijani societies during the research conducted in both countries.

Participants of the group discussion in Armenia mention that one of the major preconditions is the continuous dialogue between the societies, since

deadlocked negotiations will inevitably lead to war, just like what happened in April 2016. Additionally, researchers identified that the sides need to shift from merely clarifying their official dispositions to a problem-solving approach.

*“All my research has made me sure that if we leave the conflict to the people, it can easily be solved.”*

*(Group Discussion Participant, Armenia; March 2019)*

Even though the conflict sides adhered to the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by peaceful means, the researchers in Azerbaijan indicate that the war scenario as a way of dispute resolution is popular within society. Many people who support the war scenario do not realize the possible consequences of it, and this fact is the result of misinformation on the other existing scenarios as well as the misperception of the concept of “peaceful resolution” of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In general, the public is quite skeptical about the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict—they do not believe in the soonest end of the conflict by any means. This fact is most likely the result of their mistrust towards the government, the Armenian side, and the international community.

At the same time, there is also a huge importance of the need of defining peace. The recent discussions on “preparing the societies for peace” (Kucera, 2019a) are considered vague among the researchers in Armenia, and they imagine the process of peace negotiations to include a few elements, such as allowing free access to archives, gathering human stories, republishing school textbooks, and creating truth commissions.

Alongside the peace discourse activated earlier this year, there is still a gap between the two societies caused by the pro-war rhetoric, which feeds and supports the military solution of this dispute. Both governments adhere to hostile rhetoric in their public speeches. However, in addition to the military rhetoric of government officials, the change in the perception of the conflict also worsens the current situation around the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process. This is especially exemplified in Pashinyan’s recent speech calling for the unification of, in his words, the “Nagorno-Karabakh Republic” with Armenia, stating that “Artsakh is Armenia, and that’s it” (Kucera, 2019b). This change in

the attitude<sup>26</sup> of the Armenian official leadership towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict demonstrates how the failure to settle the conflict for the last 26 years has notably benefited the Armenian side.

When looking at the everyday life level of this aspect of the issue, one common condition for peace was mentioned by the vast majority of the young researchers, namely the generation change.

## **Public Perceptions on the Official Scenarios of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Resolution Process in Azerbaijan and Armenia**

### **Reflections on the 'Package Plan' Scenario**

#### *Background*

In 1997-1998, the Minsk Group came up with several proposals for a stable peaceful settlement of the conflict. It offered three proposals known as a "package plan," "step by step plan," (also known as "phased plan") and, finally, a "common state" proposal, the contents of which were open to the public. The package plan was based on a comprehensive approach to address the existing stalemate and was developed in two agendas. In the first agenda, an end to the conflict would be marked by withdrawing troops, placing multinational peacekeeping forces, returning forcibly displaced persons, setting measures for provision of the respective populations security within the region, removing blockades and embargoes, and improving communications throughout the region (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe 1997). The second agenda considered a determination of the Nagorno-Karabakh status that would be further confirmed by the Minsk Conference (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe 1997).

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<sup>26</sup> The governments of Armenia have always stressed that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has never been a war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, rather defining it as an "INTER-state" war between Azerbaijan and the so-called Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. Whereas, the abovementioned recent developments demonstrate Armenia's involvement into the actual conflict process.



### *Research Findings: The Case of Azerbaijan*

The study revealed that the respondents' attitudes towards the "package plan" was positive since according to them this proposal would maintain the preservation of the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, which is set as the main stance of the Azerbaijani government in the Nagorno-Karabakh negotiation process. Most of the respondents were quite skeptical about a pending solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and the main reason for this belief was the duration of the conflict period in which both countries were trapped. It was mentioned that in order to settle the dispute by peaceful means both countries should commit to certain concessions; however, neither side is ready for any compromise at the moment.

The establishment of good neighboring relations between Armenians and Azerbaijanis during and upon the solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was of great concern to the interviewees. It was noted that the main problem would be a peaceful co-existence with the Armenian community in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. For instance, the Khojaly massacre, a national trauma deeply rooted in the Azerbaijani society's memory, might become an obstacle for the reconciliation of the conflict parties in the future. Hence, the level of success of the proposed settlement deal would to a great extent depend on the willingness and policy of both governments to prepare their publics for peace. An issue of security for the Forcibly Displaced Persons (FDPs) who are supposed to return to the territory of the Nagorno-Karabakh region along with the seven surrounding regions caused a great concern for all respondents. All respondents expressed their wish to return to their homeland, but they were quite skeptical about the possibility of sharing the region with Armenians simply because they believed there would be an unavoidable clash and thus a threat to their and their families' lives. This concern was mentioned by all respondents as the main obstacle for the FDPs to return to their regional homes upon the settlement of the dispute.

*"The person who has gone through war will not return because of security issues. Moreover, most of the FDPs are settled well in big cities, which might be another hassle for the government."*

*(Random respondent, high school teacher, Azerbaijan; April 2019)*

*"Only new generations raised with different values can co-exist with Armenians."*

*(Random respondent, hairdresser, Azerbaijan; April 2019)*

Interestingly, there was also a great doubt expressed about the effectiveness and trustworthiness of the possible international peacekeeping troops who would guarantee peace in the region. According to the respondents, the role of Russia in the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was indicated as very important. However, it was noted that Russia mainly plays the role of a spoiler—the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was not in the interest of Russia. This factor was mentioned by the respondents as one of the main hindrances in the resolution of the conflict. Another obstacle was the type of possible concessions that both sides should make in order to settle the conflict. The status of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was mentioned as a taboo topic for both parties—they would not agree to compromise on the status of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, which explains the everlasting deadlock in the negotiation process.

#### *Research Findings: The Case of Armenia*

The study revealed that none of the respondents found the Package Plan proposal realistic to implement today, mentioning various reasons to be discussed below. On the list of the reasons mentioned, it is worth highlighting the main deal-breaker: the respondents stated that the proposal is one-sided, pointing out the issue of the status of Nagorno-Karabakh. As mentioned in the proposal, “Nagorno-Karabakh forms a state-territorial entity within Azerbaijan [...]” (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 1997). The overall opinion was that neither Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh nor those living in Armenia would accept that, as the status of Nagorno-Karabakh has always been the core of the conflict.

Among other reasons, it was stated that the proposal is detached from today’s reality, because while it proposes the right to return of forcibly displaced persons to their original places of permanent settlement (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe 1997), the violent past, lack of communication between communities, and widely spread hate speech over the past decades have made it impossible for the Armenian community of Nagorno-Karabakh to live together with the Azerbaijani community. According to a respondent, a change of at least two or three generations would be needed to have a reality where this deal could be workable. The need to prepare societies for peace was mentioned a few times.

The respondents also mentioned mutual lack of trust and lack of sense of security between the sides, which would prevent Armenia from withdrawing its armed forces from Armenian-controlled territories surrounding the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO). According to them, those territories secure Nagorno-Karabakh. Another reason for not returning Armenian-controlled territories, according to the respondents, was that over the years the Armenian community has become so antagonistic towards the so-called “territories for peace” concept that this proposal would encounter opposition.

There was overall skepticism towards the rights and privileges given to Nagorno-Karabakh according to the proposal. The respondents claimed that there was no guarantee that Azerbaijan would commit to giving the rights and privileges to Nagorno-Karabakh stated in the proposal. They mentioned that because Azerbaijan is a non-democratic state, like Armenia used to be, the commitments would not be met. They also argued the rights of the population of Nagorno-Karabakh to elect representatives to the parliament of Azerbaijan and their right to participate in the Azerbaijani presidential elections as stated in the proposal (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe 1997) to be pointless.

A few respondents questioned the possibility of having two constitutions (one of Nagorno-Karabakh and the other of Azerbaijan) in one state (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe 1997), stating that according to the principal of supremacy of constitutional law, the Constitution of Azerbaijan would have supremacy over the Constitution of Nagorno-Karabakh, causing the latter to lose its constitutional power.

When asked whether the current Armenian government would accept the proposal, the majority of respondents claimed that, following the Velvet Revolution in Armenia in 2018 and the recent democratic developments in the country, the Armenian government would act according to the will of the public. It was mentioned that the Armenian government would most likely put the proposal up for a referendum, and the majority of the public would be against it.

Regarding the attitude of the Nagorno-Karabakh government about the proposal, most of the respondents did not separate the position and the approaches of Nagorno-Karabakh authorities from the position and approaches

of the Armenian government. According to them, neither the government nor the public of Nagorno-Karabakh would accept this proposal. They also mentioned that the Nagorno-Karabakh authorities would never express their own position without coordinating it with the position of the Armenian government. They were mostly confident that the Azerbaijani government and the public would be in favor of the proposal, as it is largely in their interests.

All the respondents found that even if the proposal was hypothetically approved by all the parties to the conflict, it would not lead to a long-lasting peace.

## **Reflections on the ‘Step by Step’ Scenario**

### *Background*

In September 1997, the Minsk Group altered its strategy and replaced the failed package proposal with a new step-by-step (phased) approach. This proposal suggested the withdrawal of Armenian military troops from the six Azerbaijani regions surrounding the Nagorno-Karabakh region (except for Lachin) and a discussion on the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh after the withdrawal. The Lachin region would remain under the military control of Nagorno-Karabakh, all territories freed by the Nagorno-Karabakh army would be demilitarized, and at the first stage, an initial buffer zone, in which all forces along the line of contact would leave to specially delineated positions, would be created. The final buffer zone would be established along the 1988 borders of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast as well as the northern and southern frontiers of the Lachin corridor (Zourabian 2006, 258-259). Additionally, this proposal envisaged the deployment of international peacekeepers to the so-called “zone of separation” formed as a result of freed and demilitarized territories (Conciliation Resources 2005, 79-80). The key purpose of this proposal was to give the disputing sides a chance to agree on smaller issues at first and, then, upon establishing mutual trust, to deal with more substantial issues (Svensson 2009, 10).

### *Research Findings: The Case of Azerbaijan*

One of the main concerns noted by respondents within the “step-by step” proposal framework was the security dilemma within the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process. The return of Azerbaijani FDPs to their hometowns in the Nagorno-Karabakh regions upon the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh

conflict might cause denial and aggression by the local Armenian community of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, and this, in its turn, might resume the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

*“There is no one who would guarantee the secure return and habitation of those FDPs back in the Nagorno-Karabakh region.”*

*(Random respondent, FDP, Azerbaijan; May 2019)*

If this security dilemma is not settled, the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by peaceful means does not seem possible. The respondents demonstrated a maximalist position regarding the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute by stressing that any kind of compromise made by the Azerbaijani side would contradict its political and legal interests. Moreover, any concessions made by either side might cause public condemnation in the respective countries. Even the idea of a possible chance granted to determine the status of the Nagorno-Karabakh region as part of the respective resolution package might not be supported by the majority of the population in Azerbaijan. However, it was also noted that the chances that the older generation in both countries would accept this condition is higher than its acceptance by the young generation. The 2016 April fighting also recharged the hardliners in Azerbaijan, who were always against any type of compromise and supported a military solution to the conflict. Hence, since 2016 the number of people who favor a military solution seems to have increased.

#### *Research Findings: The Case of Armenia*

Although the majority of the opinions about the so-called “step by step” proposal were negative, the respondents were more amenable to this proposal compared with the “package plan” scenario. Some of the arguments repeated those of the first proposal, such as the lack of guarantees for security, if the Armenian-controlled territories are returned. It was noted that at the moment Armenian-controlled territories surrounding the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast territory form a security zone, and if those territories are returned, Nagorno-Karabakh would become very vulnerable. A respondent mentioned that no one could guarantee that after the return of territories a war would not break out, especially considering the war rhetoric of the current Azerbaijani government, and thus there was a lack of trust. The proposal was also labeled as one-sided, pointing out that in case the Armenian-controlled

territories are returned to Azerbaijan, the status of Nagorno-Karabakh at least must be determined, while the proposal does not have a solution to that.

Again, it was stressed that there is still a strong perception of Azerbaijanis as being enemies, and that in such an environment of hate this proposal is impossible to implement. The respondents also found that the return of FDPs was problematic, claiming that after the war it is not realistic for the communities to live together again. According to them, this becomes especially problematic when soldiers are still dying on both sides today. Yet there was a counter argument to this. The respondents mentioned that if the communities had been able to live together for 70 years in peace, then they could do so again. The few respondents that shared this opinion believed that it would take time to prepare the communities for that.

Among the reasons for the infeasibility of the proposal, as stated by the respondents, was that there has never been a proper dialogue between the parties. The overall perception was that the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan share different value systems, noting that while the Armenian government wants to solve the dispute by peaceful means, the Azerbaijani government wants to solve the conflict through the use of force. A respondent noted that even if the Azerbaijani public is ready for dialogue, their government will continue the way it does now. The common opinion was that Azerbaijan would also be against the proposal because, when stating its claims, it does not only speak about the Armenian-controlled territories, but also about NKAO.

## **Reflections on the 'Common State' Scenario**

### *Background*

In November 1998, considering the fact that the two previously offered proposals had failed, the mediators offered a solution based on the concept of "common state" (also known as Primakov Plan). The OSCE Minsk Group's document "On the Principles of a Comprehensive Settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh Armed Conflict" determined the status of Nagorno-Karabakh in the following format: "Nagorno-Karabakh is a state and territorial entity in the form of a Republic, which constitutes a common state with Azerbaijan within its internationally recognized borders" (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe 1998). Thus, this plan considered not only the formation of a common state between Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh but also the establishment of ties between the governments of Baku and Stepanakert. The

Kocharyan administration presented this proposal as a diplomatic victory of Armenian diplomacy. Even though it involved forming a de jure unity within Azerbaijan, the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic would not have the right to form its own militia or have ambassadorial representation abroad as was stated in the package plan previously offered. In addition, the proposal did not offer any solution on the determination of the Lachin corridor which was a vital issue for the Armenian side (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe 1998).

*Research Findings: The Case of Azerbaijan*

The attitude of all respondents towards this model of conflict settlement was very negative since they claimed this peace deal was very biased towards the Armenian side. It was also highlighted that the Azerbaijani side should not make any concessions to Armenia.

*“The only compromise could be permission granted to Armenians to live in Karabakh, which is the territory of Azerbaijan.”*

*(Random respondent, peace activist, Azerbaijan; May 2019)*

However, in general, expectations and the desire of the interviewees towards the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was very positive. Even though most of the respondents supported a peaceful settlement of the dispute, it was stressed that their belief in such a solution was running short. Most of the participants believed that the war would not bring any benefit to any country involved in this dispute—quite the contrary, it would not be approved by either population in the warring parties or by any other state in the world. Notwithstanding the outcome of the military operations, the image of the country that would resume the war would be drastically damaged. The FDP representatives demonstrated a more negative attitude towards Armenia. Even though they were against the resumption of war in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, they nevertheless supported the idea of revenge and the return of territories.

Once more, the main concern of the respondents was the provision of the security for the FDPs returning to their hometowns upon the settlement of the conflict since most of the respondents rejected the possibility of peaceful co-existence of the Armenian and Azerbaijani communities in the same region. Most interestingly, the respondents questioned the will of the FDPs to return back to their hometowns in the Nagorno-Karabakh region upon the settlement

of the conflict by referring not only to the security issue but also to the hardly possible adaptation of the young generation to the new situation. However, it was also noted that once the agreement was reached among the conflict parties, the FDPs would have to follow the directives coming from the government and resettle in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The respondents also stressed that the young generation demonstrates an indifferent attitude towards the Nagorno-Karabakh problem, explaining this by the fact that, most probably, the young people have neither seen nor been to Nagorno-Karabakh. Apparently, this explains their lack of willingness to get engaged in such a crucial issue for the whole country.

#### *Research Findings: The Case of Armenia*

Similar to the previous two proposals, this proposal was also labeled as one-sided and a pro-Azerbaijani solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by all of the respondents. Most of them saw it as the fastest way to increase the influence of Azerbaijan on Nagorno-Karabakh. Some found that the scenario bears resemblance to the power structure of the Soviet Union, when all the Soviet republics had equal rights de jure. Russia had a de facto authority over the rest of the republics. It was claimed that there is no guarantee that the situation would not be the same. They claimed that if Nagorno-Karabakh formed a common state with Azerbaijan, the latter would still be bigger and stronger and try to have more authority over Nagorno-Karabakh.

The respondents also expressed fear that Nagorno-Karabakh would be fully inhabited with Azerbaijanis, accompanied by policies intended to make Armenians leave Nagorno-Karabakh. They would back their point by bringing the example of Nakhijevan, where the Armenian population gradually decreased to around zero percent. A respondent proposed two options that would have more chances to be discussed among the Armenian public, such as Nagorno-Karabakh forming a common state with Armenia or Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia, and Azerbaijan creating a common state together.

Most of the respondents believed that the current Armenian government would not accept the proposal because it would be against the will of the public and would make the act of those who have sacrificed their lives for the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh worthless. According to the respondents a huge wave of confrontation would arise and many officials would be labeled as betrayers.



*“The wound of the April 2016 war is still fresh, and parents of those soldiers who participated in the 2016 war would never accept this proposal.”*

*(Random respondent, baker, Armenia; August 2019)*

Similar to the opinions of Azerbaijani respondents, some Armenian respondents expressed lack of trust towards OSCE peacekeeping forces, adding that the proposal would endanger the security of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

*“They [the OSCE peacekeeping forces] would not care about our security the way our soldiers do; they would not endanger their lives to protect Armenians.”*

*(Random respondent, hairdresser, Armenia; August 2019)*

Most of the respondents believed that the Azerbaijani government would accept the proposal and present it as their victory. Returning the territories, they claimed, would open the gates of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan. While the respondents expressed their lack of trust towards the Azerbaijani government, blaming the latter in fueling the conflict for its private interests and being non-democratic, they were more careful with their words when giving opinions about the Azerbaijani community.

*“I do not have a problem with Azerbaijani people. They also do not want their children to die, but I do not trust their officials.”*

*(Random respondent, taxi driver, Armenia; August 2019)*

## **Reflections on the ‘Madrid Principles’ scenario**

### *Background*

In November 2007, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe presented the Madrid Principles or the Basic Principles. It was a combination of the two previous proposals, the “Package Plan” and the “Step by Step,” preferred by Armenia and Azerbaijan, respectively. It was suggested that the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh could be resolved later and the main focus should be on other issues, such as return of the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani control; an interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh providing guarantees for security and self-governance; a corridor linking Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh; future determination of the final legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh through a legally binding expression of will; the right of all internally displaced persons and refugees to return to their former places of

residence; and international security guarantees that would include a peacekeeping operation (OSCE 2009).

*Research Findings: The Case of Azerbaijan*

The study revealed that most of the respondents had never heard about the Madrid Principles or did not have sufficient information. During the interview the respondents were informed about the details of the scenario. Their attitude towards the Madrid Principles was quite skeptical since they believed the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the restoration of peace to be a complex process. Furthermore, it was mentioned that the implementation of the Madrid Principles would not provide durability and sustainability of peace. The main reason mentioned was a common peaceful co-existence with the Armenian community. Only a few respondents noted that it would be possible to live together; however, their main concern was still the issue of safety. In addition, it was mentioned that co-existence could possibly become a reason for the conflict to reemerge. It followed that a mutual co-existence would be feasible if only a selected number of people, the so-called “open-minded” ones, were chosen to live in the region.

Moreover, the fieldwork revealed that the respondents categorized as youth or young adults think that achieving peace is more significant than defining to whom the territories belong. On the contrary, the respondents categorized as adult and senior adult, also known as the so-called “older generation,” believe that the preservation of the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan is more crucial. Similarly, forcibly displaced persons did not agree with committing to any territorial concessions. On the contrary, others were ready to show limited compromise since human life is more important.

According to the respondents, a solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by peaceful means is not quite feasible. However, they are in favor of a peaceful settlement to the conflict. Nevertheless, the peaceful solution seems complicated due to long-standing hate speech in both communities. It was noted that if the solution had existed, it would already have been implemented by the respective governments. Additionally, it was noted that the resolution of the conflict should not only happen on the Track 1 level between the respective governments, but also on the Track 2 and Track 3 levels by engaging both communities. Hence, specific conditions have to be created for building trust between the communities.

### *Research Findings: The Case of Armenia*

The respondents had more diverse opinions about this proposal. There was a clear generational gap between the attitudes towards the proposal. Younger respondents were more accepting and ready to discuss different aspects of the proposal, while older respondents found it too problematic to discuss and did not find it realistic.

Most of the respondents believed that the Armenian government would accept the proposal, if the timing and modalities of the plebiscite were clarified. They mentioned that Prime Minister Pashinyan had announced a few times that Armenia was ready for compromises if they were based on mutual concessions, while there has not been an official response to those announcements from Azerbaijan.

Younger respondents mentioned that they would agree on the Armenian-controlled territories to be returned to Azerbaijan if the latter accepted the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh. Older respondents were generally against any territorial concessions. Those who found the proposal realistic to implement explained the benefits of a peace agreement, including that Armenia's military expenditures would be redirected towards education, healthcare, and other issues.

Both younger and older respondents mentioned that the Azerbaijani government makes use of the conflict by distracting people's attention from corruption and internal problems, just as it used to be in Armenia before the Velvet Revolution.

## **Reflections on the 'Land Swap' Scenario**

### *Background*

During 1999-2001, the new scenario called "Land Swap" or territorial swap was discussed during several meetings between the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan. The scenario suggested an exchange of territories that would benefit both sides. Azerbaijan would get direct access to Nakhijevan through the Meghri district and consequently to Turkey. In return, Armenia would get direct access to Nagorno-Karabakh through the Lachin corridor.

### *Research Findings: The Case of Azerbaijan*

The study showed that most of the respondents had heard about the “Land Swap” scenario; however, they were not familiar with specific details. At the same time, most of the respondents highlighted that the scenario was not feasible, since Armenia would not agree to lose its access to Iran through Meghri, and the Azerbaijani population would not agree to a compromise on the Lachin corridor. On the other hand, the respondents mentioned that Azerbaijan could have obtained direct access to Nakhijevan through the Meghri district, which would be important in improving the living standards of people in Nakhijevan . However, it was also stressed that it was not worth giving upon the Lachin corridor for the Meghri district since there were always alternative routes to reach Nakhijevan (bypassing Armenia).

*“An open Lachin corridor gives them (the Armenian side) more claims to Karabakh... Lachin is very important to us. There are flights to Nakhijevan and buses through Iran.”*

*(Random respondent, primary school teacher, Azerbaijan; April 2019)*

Hence, even though the respondents were skeptical about the feasibility of the scenario, they highlighted the geopolitical benefits of the deal for Azerbaijan by having access to Turkey through Nakhijevan, and geopolitical disadvantages for Armenia by losing access to Iran through Meghri.

*“I do not believe that the Armenian people and government would support this scenario because of the Iran factor.”*

*(Random respondent, industrial engineer, Azerbaijan; April 2019)*

Moreover, the attitudes of the respondents towards the scenario varies from acceptance to rejection since there are different groups in society, such as FDPs, people affected by the conflict, nationalists, liberals, and old and new generations.

*“The older generation is more open to compromise than the younger generation because they suffered a lot from the war.”*

*(Random respondent, tourist guide, Azerbaijan; April 2019)*

The opinions about common coexistence have also undergone some transformations.

*“Some segments of Azerbaijani society, especially FDPs, had already suffered and would not want to take the risk of living together with Armenians again.”*

*(Random respondent, financier, Azerbaijan; April 2019)*

*"We can live together because we used to live together before."*

*(Random respondent, procurement specialist, Azerbaijan; April 2019)*

However, most of the respondents mentioned that the public opinion towards this scenario could possibly be manipulated.

Regarding the political acceptance, the respondents also highlighted that it is harder to implement this scenario now than 20 years ago, and a strong political will is needed.

*"It depends who will be in power. Only a strong and wise political leader can lead this process."*

*(Random respondent, marketing specialist, Azerbaijan; April 2019)*

From another perspective, it was said that the negotiations are not open to society, so nobody was aware of what was really on the table of discussion.

Finally, the durability of the scenario was questioned by the respondents.

*"The absence of civil society in the negotiations as well as the existing discourse make any scenario proposed unendurable."*

*(Random respondent, civic activist, Azerbaijan; April 2019)*

### *Research Findings: The Case of Armenia*

All of the respondents found that it is impossible to implement the proposal today, stating that it is against Armenia's interests. They described Meghri as a piece of Armenia that could never be handed to Azerbaijan, considering how important it is for Armenia, even as an exchange for the Lachin corridor. Again, the democratic nature of the Armenian government was mentioned—it would never accept the proposal and go against the will of the people.

An argument brought up against the proposal that is worth mentioning was that swapping lands and drawing more division lines are against the philosophy of building peace. Instead, the respondents suggested that to achieve long-lasting peace, the three states need to be united, to have a common government and elections, claiming that in such a scenario there would be no reason to decide who Nagorno-Karabakh belongs to.

*"It belongs to those who were born there. Both Armenians and Azerbaijanis were born there, so it belongs to all of them."*

*(Random respondent, engineer, Armenia; August 2019)*

The respondents stated that the Azerbaijani government would accept the proposal because it would lose less than Armenia would. Instead, it would return six territories and Meghri, be able to connect to Nakhijevan, and have a border with Turkey.

Most of the respondents believed that if hypothetically the proposal was accepted by the sides of the conflict, it would never lead to long-lasting peace. Instead they were of the opinion that it would provoke war again. They mentioned that establishing peace is possible by establishing democracy in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nagorno-Karabakh, opening all the borders, and creating a "South Caucasus Union."

## **Reflections on the 'War' Scenario**

*Research Findings: The Case of Azerbaijan*

The respondents mentioned that they were familiar with the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh negotiation process; however, they did not believe it could possibly bring any results. It was noted that a so-called "war" scenario could possibly be the only alternative to the negotiation process.

All respondents expressed their anxiety by acknowledging the negative effects of the war on different levels, such as human loss and economic, emotional, social, and other costs that were witnessed during the recent decades.

*"A recent death of a soldier who was just 19 years old showed that war is not the solution; innocent people are dying."*

*(Random respondent, housewife, Azerbaijan; May 2019)*

However, it was noted that that they could accept the "war" scenario for the sake of resolving the conflict, if there was no other option.

*"The war is real and we will have to support the war if the negotiations do not solve the conflict."*

*(Random respondent, student, Azerbaijan; May 2019)*

On the contrary, some respondents believed war could not be a solution and hardly thought sustainable peace would be possible with the war scenario.

*“War or military intervention is not a solution at all, and war does not fit into the reality.”*

*(Random respondent, tractor driver, Azerbaijan; May 2019)*

*“Even if the conflict was resolved through war, it would not last for a long time.”*

*Random respondent, young specialist, Azerbaijan*

Interestingly, half of the respondents interviewed on the “war” scenario expressed their belief in the possibility of peaceful co-existence with the Armenian community.

*“As for living together, I also gave examples about past relationships with Armenians—how we picnicked in the same places, how my sister stayed with Armenians during her education.”*

*Random respondent, tailor, Azerbaijan; May 2019)*

Nonetheless, it was also noted that the generations who had encountered war should transform in order to forget the memories and be able to live together.

Furthermore, the role and impact of Russia was specifically mentioned.

*“We would return back to our lands if Russia was not an intervener.”*

*(Random respondent, seller, Azerbaijan; May 2019)*

It can be concluded that the majority of the respondents were tired of the Nagorno-Karabakh negotiations and described them as a long, unsuccessful, and meaningless process, which was the reason why war seemed to be the only existing alternative.

### *Research Findings: The Case of Armenia*

Almost all of the respondents stated that they were against solving the conflict through war as it has devastating effects. When speaking about human losses, they mentioned that war could not be acceptable, adding that soldiers standing on both sides of the border have nothing against each other and they are suffering the most from the conflict.

While some expressed optimism that the conflict would be settled through negotiations, placing trust in the pacifist rhetoric of Armenia’s current

government, others stated that only war would solve the conflict. This opinion mainly came from the fact that the conflict has been continuing for decades.

*“Throughout world history, there has never been a war that has been solved through negotiations.”*

*(Random respondent, taxi driver, Armenia; August 2019)*

A few respondents stated that they do not see a solution to the conflict, assuming that the “no peace, no war” situation continues.

Some argued that the Azerbaijani government is unwilling to solve the dispute because the existence of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is “convenient” for them.

*“The Azerbaijani authorities do not want peace, because they need to keep the society in fear, in tension to sustain their power.”*

*(Random respondent, hairdresser, Armenia; August 2019)*

It was stated that while the current Azerbaijani authorities are in power, the conflict will not be solved through peaceful means. According to the respondents, political change in Azerbaijan could lead to peace.

## **Analysis**

The analysis of the interviews showed a general alienation of the societies from the conflict discourses. In other words, ordinary people do not feel that they are part of the peace process. This was related often to the quality and character of the disseminated information on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the Armenian and Azerbaijani media as well as the absence of alternative media sources that would consider the conflict from the perspectives of both sides.

The absence of any tangible achievements as a result of peace talks lasting nearly three decades makes both societies feel skeptical about any kind of “success” in the peace process. Moreover, the top-down format of the peace process excludes the possibilities of engagement of societies on the grassroots level into the reconciliation process, hence, creating an even bigger hindrance to the settlement of the dispute by peaceful means any time soon.

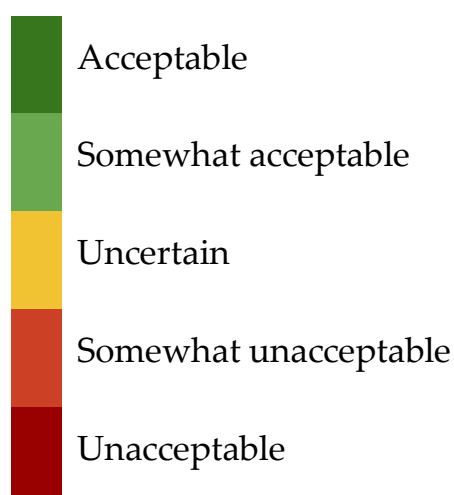
The limited dialogue between the societies as well as the existing misperception of the “other” side, the existing gap in the attitudes and perceptions of the younger and older generation both in Azerbaijan and Armenia, indicate that



people are not yet ready for peace. As revealed by this study, the existing mistrust, trauma, and security concerns can be considered the main factors that could derail the peace process. This fact, per se, can create a hurdle for the political elites who will have to sell the deal reached during the peace process to their respective societies, in case any peaceful solution is reached at all.

When looking at the resolution scenarios that have been on the table so far, it is becoming obvious that the scenarios are considered one-sided by the respondents. Moreover, in some cases, the security dilemma and guarantee for trust are the factors that majorly decide the level of acceptance of this or that scenario. The table below reflects the most commonly noted opinions about scenarios among the respondents.

	General acceptance	
Scenarios	Az	Arm
“Package Plan”		
“Step by Step”		
“Common State”		
“Madrid Principles”		
“Land Swap”		
“War”		



It is evident that the respondents from both sides have a common notion on “Common State” and “Step by Step” scenarios, both considered unacceptable on different levels. Respondents show more tolerance toward the “Madrid Principles” with an uncertain level of acceptability, as both cases divide into people either accepting or rejecting the scenario. However, when it comes to the rest of the scenarios, the public reactions differ extensively. While the “Land Swap” plan is met with uncertainty, and the “Package Plan” and “War” scenarios are at least somewhat acceptable in the Azerbaijani case, all three of them are unacceptable in the Armenian case.

The study also reveals that any scenario that consists of a component of giving up lands is usually rejected by ordinary people. It was given more consideration by younger researchers, similar to all other perspectives, as they attempted to look at the scenario from both conflict sides. The perception of the term “compromise” as a defeatist notion is a clear evidence of the stalemate in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process reached not only on the political level but also the public level.

## Conclusion

The study showed that societies in both Armenia and Azerbaijan feel cut off from the discourses surrounding the conflict and the peace process. This is manifested in several ways, including the inaccessibility and quality of conflict knowledge or public debate around it.

Although the media is widely accessible in both countries, the societies are most of the time left out of the information flow on the conflict and the ongoing

negotiation process. In general, the disseminated information in the local media is one-sided, mainly accentuating the aggressiveness of the opposite side routinely accused of initiating violations of the ceasefire at the line of contact, thus telling “stories about the past, which justify the violence in the present and in the future, since they show the history of the violence that took place in the past, where the teller is never the one who was violent, but always the others” (Cobb 2004, 294-295). The level of awareness has been noted to vary depending on the regions on physical location, with the southern regions of Azerbaijan having a much more militaristic attitude towards the conflict, while the regions of Armenia located relatively far from the conflict zone have much more abstract and exaggerated visions of the conflict.

All of this can be due to the following: (1) the way that the conflict is being framed through social structures, including political propaganda, (2) the fact that critical thinking is not encouraged very much on both sides, and (3) the negotiations are happening only at the official level without the wider layers of society being engaged. In fact, the January agreement (Kucera 2019a) around preparing societies for peace still remains dodged, with no significant and visible steps from either government towards taking a share of the existing informal peace building initiatives carried out by civil society organizations.

When it comes to the perception of possible scenarios of conflict resolution, the two societies are not on the same page. Where some peace proposals discussed at the official level are found at least relatively acceptable on one side, they are either not considered realistic and feasible or are rejected by the other side and labeled as one-sided in favor of the adversary. This makes it obvious that none of the existing scenarios have the full support of both societies. The lack of robust dialogue between the populations can hinder the progress of the peace process when the officials reach a political settlement.

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# **Communities of Practices: Prospects for the Armenian-Azerbaijani Everyday Engagement across the Conflict Divide**

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**Vadim Romashov, Marina Danoyan,  
Hamida Giyasbayli<sup>27</sup>**

The article develops an alternative approach for supporting local inter-community peace processes within the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict setting, based on Etienne Wenger's concept of community of practice. The recent developments in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process potentially open up possibilities of (re)-establishments of people-to-people contacts across the conflict divide. The article conceptualizes the initial organization of the prospective inter-community engagement and discusses the ways for practical support of inter-community engagement focusing on improving the everyday life conditions of local grassroots people. Showing its potential, but also addressing the limitations and challenges, the paper theoretically localizes the concept of communities of practice within the field of peace-related activities in a way that peace initiatives applying the concept would not repeat the typical vices of the contemporary peacebuilding. The empirical sections contain ethnographic analyses of communal practices and narratives in Armenian-Azerbaijani mixed rural settlements in the Marneuli district of Georgia and in some borderland villages in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Finally, relying on the

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<sup>27</sup> The authors would like to thank Nuriyya Guliyeva for valuable contributions to the conceptual part of this article.

theoretical developments and results of the ethnographic researches, the article presents ideas for initial substantive projects involving Armenian and Azerbaijani communities directly affected by the conflict that would enable a sustainable environment addressing the needs identified by grassroots people themselves while taking into account their local understandings of peace and conflict.

## **Introduction**

The recent developments in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process that followed the change of the political power in Armenia in April 2018 characterize the background setting for our article (Romashov 2019). We do not intend to speculate about further developments in the official or semi-official peace processes and create scenarios for conflict resolution, leaving that thinking exercise to policy analysts. We acknowledge that the publicly available information and media accounts about the ongoing peace process are highly politicized. Nevertheless, we should not deny the possibilities of (re)establishment of people-to-people contacts in both directions across the Armenian-Azerbaijani border and between the Karabakh communities. Even if this potential will not be realized in the near future, it is important to conceptualize the initial organization of the prospective inter-community engagement that would be based on local perceptions of peace and meet the needs of grassroots populations. The possible arrangement of inter-community interaction should not be merely a part of so-called “confidence-building measures” that often promote the satisfaction of interests of ruling elites in the region and involve foreign states and organizations. Therefore, the following statement made by Miroslav Lajčák during his visit to Armenia on March 13, 2019 ought to be more than just political rhetoric: “For peace to take hold, it needs to be accepted and owned by the people. And it requires that our efforts extend beyond politicians” (OSCE, 2019).

Keeping this appeal in mind, we make a modest effort to develop an approach for practical support of inter-community engagement across the conflict divide focusing on improving everyday life conditions of local grassroots people. The novelty of this paper is that it draws upon the concept of community of practice (CoP) and attempts to localize it theoretically within the field of peace-concerned activities. The concept importantly implies that members of a community of practice understand the need to produce shared meanings as part of their joint enterprise and act in accordance with common goals agreed

through the construction of shared meanings. We believe that peace-supporting initiatives applying the CoP concept in their engagement with grassroots people would create a larger room for transformative power of community narratives and practices. This article, therefore, develops an approach that would help divided societies to improve conditions of their everyday lives and promote local practices of peace and routine interaction across the conflict divides.

The empirical sections of this article contain ethnographic analyses of communal practices and narratives in Armenian-Azerbaijani villages in the Marneuli district of Georgia as well as in some borderland settlements of Armenia and Azerbaijan. In Georgia, the field research was conducted in 2016-2018; the respondents include residents of three rural settlements: Khorjoni, Tsopi, and Shulaveri. In Azerbaijan, the field research was conducted in July 2019, in the Gazakh district that borders with Armenia. Locals of Gazakh city, Aghkoynek, Garapapaq, Ceferli, and Bala Ceferli villages were interviewed. In Armenia, the field research was conducted in the borderland villages of Berd municipality of the Tavush region, also in July 2019. Locals of Norashen, Mosvses, and Verin Karmiraghbyur were interviewed. All the conversations with local people were held in a non-formal reflective format.

In the conclusion, relying on the theoretical developments and results of the ethnographic researches, we discuss possible substantive projects involving Armenian and Azerbaijani communities directly affected by the conflict that would enable a sustainable environment addressing the needs identified by grassroots people themselves and taking into account their context-specific understandings of peace and conflict. In this way, the article continues developing a wider conceptual framework of the communitarian peace proposed in a recent issue of *Caucasus Edition: Journal of Conflict Transformation* that critically assessed and highlighted some gaps in the current peacebuilding initiatives across the South Caucasus (Romashov, et al. 2018).

## **Presenting the Concept of Community of Practice**

One of the most challenging problems of contemporary peacebuilding is the overall design of the field that forces local organizations to compete constantly for financial resources from foreign donors that are essential for their operation and existence, and therefore adapt to the agenda of their funders rather than to the needs of local people. Over time, NGOs have become specialized in attracting funds from international donors more willingly than in implementing efficient projects that would support local peace (Dilanyan, Beraia and Hilal

2018). As a result, they enjoy better access to financial resources compared to the “ordinary” people, and eventually this imbalance enhances hierarchies and power relations inside local communities (Romashov, et al. 2018). Many regional peacebuilding NGOs have been inefficient in achieving their publicly declared objectives, facing financial as well as practical problems. Moreover, what has been considered a local organization is not usually that. NGOs are often located in capital or major cities and lack basic infrastructure to operate in regions that usually are not reached by peacebuilding initiatives (Dilanyan, Beraia and Hilal 2018). In the end, peacebuilding NGOs influence a small segment of the population and consequently public participation in peace initiatives is insignificant (Mikhelidze and Pirozzi 2008). In the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict setting, NGOs have carried out some projects on public awareness, community development, empowerment, conflict resolution, and youth work, but it is questionable whether these activities have created substantial dynamics in the overall peace process and more specifically, have resulted in effective outcomes for local communities.<sup>28</sup> In these circumstances, we are looking for alternative approaches to engage with communities, providing for the agency of local people in peacebuilding projects and supporting local communal peace processes, based on the concept of community of practice (CoP).

Etienne Wenger, the main developer of the CoP concept, defines community of practice as “a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interaction on an on-going basis” (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder 2002, 4). The activity of creating, maintaining, and participating in community, in other words, *the practice*, involves the making of meaning (Wenger 1998). In Wenger’s conceptualization, individuals come together on a voluntary basis and are willing to collaborate for a joint enterprise, simultaneously and continuously producing meanings. The CoP concept was originally developed within the framework of learning theory and emphasizes the social dimension of learning: learning through interaction, negotiated meanings, and relationships building. It offers new possibilities for negotiating *the self* and, therefore, is transformative in nature (Wenger 2011). We maintain that engaging members of assumingly conflicting communities into such a learning process can encourage and develop critical thinking as well as (re-)produce their identities with regard to the “positive” *other*. Wenger (1998, 72) distinguishes three “dimensions of the

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<sup>28</sup> For limitations of these activities, see e.g. Sotieva 2014; Mikhelidze and Pirozzi 2008.



relation by which practice is the source of coherence of a community”: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire.

### *Mutual engagement and joint enterprise*

People become members of a community, i.e., pursue shared identification with the community, through mutual engagement and everyday interaction. Even geographical distance cannot hinder the formation of a community if its members are connected through shared meanings (Anyidoho 2010). According to Wenger (1998, 74), inclusion is a key to engage in a community’s practice and engagement is what defines belonging. The members of the community do not need to be homogeneous in order to form a community. On the contrary, diversity is what makes engagement in practice possible and productive. When mutual engagement is sustained, it connects participants and creates deep interpersonal relationships (Wenger 1998, 75). Wenger does not idealize the notion of community and notes that peace, happiness, and harmony are not necessarily the features of communities of practice. Conversely, there can be plenty of disagreements, tensions, and conflicts among members of the community (Wenger 1998, 76-77).

The members of a community of practice define the joint enterprise in the process of pursuing it (Wenger 1998, 77). In this sense, it is not fixed, but repeatedly adjusted based on mutual needs and interests. It does not imply agreement in everything, but it is communally negotiated. People’s agreements and disagreements are interconnected because of their mutual engagement and shared interests, and they need to find their way while living with their differences (Wenger 1998, 77-78). The idea of the joint enterprise emphasizes the agency of participants of communities of practice, as it is based on a participant’s needs and demands that shape the practice. Wenger (1998, 79-80) believes—although the communities of practice develop in a larger historical, social, cultural, and institutional context—that external forces have no direct power over the production of practice, because the community itself negotiates its enterprise.

The members, being engaged in a joint enterprise, develop *relations of mutual accountability*: they themselves define what is important or not, what to pay attention to and what to ignore, what to justify and what to take for granted. Thus, the mutual accountability is essential to make sense of events and seek new meanings (Wenger 1998, 81). In peacebuilding terms, this would signify a way to empower members of communities, enabling them to voice and then act

on their own views, and eventually transform the opinions and actions of members of the conflicting sides (Sotieva, Inal-Ipa, et al. 2018). Wenger (1998, 85) avoids romanticizing communities of practices, asserting that they are not “in any essential way an emancipatory force” as possibilities always exist for both resistance to oppression and the reproduction of its conditions. Nevertheless, he still argues that, “As a locus of engagement in action, interpersonal relations, shared knowledge and negotiations of enterprises, such communities hold the key to real transformation—the kind that have real effects on people’s lives” (1998, 85).

### *Shared repertoire and the role of narrative*

According to Wenger (1998, 83), “the repertoire of a community of practice includes routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence, and which have become part of its practice.” The shared repertoire has two main characteristics: “it reflects history of mutual engagement” and “it remains inherently ambiguous” (Wenger 1998, 83). Wenger (1998, 83) maintains, “Histories of interpretation create shared points of reference, but they do not impose meaning.” All interpretations can be renegotiated based on the direction toward which the joint enterprise is moving. This makes the mutual engagement more dynamic and flexible (Wenger 1998, 83-84).

Since meaning is often constituted as a story, Anyidoho (2010, 326) particularly emphasizes the community narrative as the most essential part of the shared repertoire:

[Community narratives are] located in and shared through social interaction and performance. More than that, a community needs a shared narrative in order to sustain itself. A communal narrative can be a neutralizing force against disruption and destructive conflict.

She adds that community narratives can help “to communicate, for instance, the origins of the group, its original goals, its processes and procedures” (Anyidoho 2010, 326). Thus, a community narrative represents a store of resources from which new and old members of any joint enterprise pursued by the community can draw on to inform their personal stories of the endeavor (Anyidoho 2010). We view community narratives as continuously refilled overflowing receptacles that are never the same but contain elements of previous infusions. The old and new members of the community draw on resources from these receptacles to

find meanings for their (inter)actions and produce new or refresh old meanings when necessary. Thus, the shared narrative enables people to sustain their communities in the course of constantly changing circumstances of their intersecting lives. The role of jointly constructed narratives is to help people living side by side to reach situated agreements in the contexts with a potential for radical polarization of relationships, and thus neutralize possible disruption.

## **Application of the CoP Concept in Peace-Supporting Initiatives and its Challenges**

The concept of community of practice (CoP) has been widely used within organizational frameworks (though not without certain limitations) but it has been applied in education, professional associations, development projects, information technologies, and many other fields.<sup>29</sup> The CoP concept has been mostly focused on people and the social structures that enable them to learn from and with each other and opened up additional prospects for various ways of learning, such as peer-to-peer, learning partnership, and horizontal versus vertical knowledge transmission. Although the CoP concept found its application in different fields and provided a fresh insight on learning, it has been also widely criticized for a number of reasons. Firstly, the critics argue that the conceptualization is not epistemologically grounded; it is largely descriptive without a deep theoretical insight (Allix 2000). Wenger's problematic claim is that learning is something that just happens because of the independent nature of experience and practice. This claim questions the possibility to design learning. However, as Allix (2000) notes, in the educational field specific and designed learning is required, for example, in order to improve abilities of people suffering from learning difficulties of dyslexics. What such critics importantly identify is that Wenger's concept is falling into a trap of agency-structure divide as he focuses mostly on structures that emerge from practice and does not address a generative structure that conditions practice.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, while applying the CoP concept, we should be aware of the mutual constitution of practice and structure. After all, the concept of practice emerged as a corrective to the dichotomization between cultural and economic determinisms and voluntarisms and as a way of accounting for the situated activities of individuals and groups "that are both constrained and enabled by existing

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<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Joanne 2006 and Kerno Jr., 2008.

<sup>30</sup> For more discussions on this tension and its relation to the CoP concept, see (Mutch 2003).

structures, but which allow the person to exercise agency in the emerging situation” (Levinson and Sutton 2001, 3, 17).

A common line of related critique of the concept of communities of practice is that it only superficially addresses wider issues of power and conflict. Fox (2000, 857) argues that Wenger does not consider the issues of power and more specifically unequal relations of power; instead he offers a “social constructionist account which sees learning as the negotiation of meaning and the process of identity formation within communities of practice, viewed as emergent social structures in which conflict may play a part both benevolently and malevolently.” Mørk et al. (2010), also highlighting this serious deficiency, stresses that practice performs power effects within and across communities, creates asymmetries in power, and thus becomes rather political. Hazel Johnson (2007) raises an issue of participation in communities of practice as a political process that can reinforce hegemonies embedded in the design of the related spaces and practices and/or subvert the existing fragile balances of power. As a response to this critique, Wenger (2010) reviewed some of the aspects of the CoP concept and discussed power issues in a more nuanced way. He emphasized the link between the power and identity and argued that “identification with a community makes one accountable to its regime of competence and thus vulnerable to its power plays” (Wenger 2010, 189). The efficacy of power exercised from outside of the community of practice on their members, such as by state, can be undermined by the high degree of their identification with the community and its practices. The more that someone identifies with a community, the less they are affected by influence of exterior power. Wenger (2010, 190) claims, “Even the threat of violence depends to some extent on identification. For instance, once identification with the fear of death is removed, exercise of power through violence becomes very problematic.” Wenger’s recent inputs into his theory further support the idea of empowerment of communities through mutual learning (or rather through *mutual accountability to the community regime of competence*), discussed in the previous section of this article.

We believe that such aspect of community coherence should be considered by the contemporary peacebuilding projects that have claimed local leadership and ownership to be in their central focus but simultaneously should not be misinterpreted by an assumption of the existence of holistic nature of a community, where everyone shares the same values. Communities still consist of people with various stories, backgrounds, and affiliations with conflicts that are *actually* disregarded in peacebuilding projects. Moreover, when differences

are being observed within the community, a peacebuilding project tends to *artificially* eliminate (or at least neglect) them in order to achieve conformity. However, according to Wenger, the mutual engagement implies communication that allows varied interpretations of the joint enterprise but identification with a community *naturally* creates a regime of mutual accountability. Thus, there is nothing deficient in substance of a project when mutual engagement implies disagreements, tensions, and conflicts among the community members. Communal practices connect participants to each other in ways that are diverse and complex, but to avoid disruptions they are subordinated to the regime of mutual accountability. In the end, communal relations reflect the full complexity of doing things together. Hence, the homogeneity is neither the requirement for nor the result of a community of practice.

The application of Wenger's theory to peace supporting initiatives in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict faces at least three significant challenges. First, Wenger's theory has been mostly developed for organizations and implied a daily informal and task-related interaction among members of the community that have no real borders between them. Thus, applying it in the context of separated societies, such as Armenia and Azerbaijan, would require some reconsiderations and adjustments. There is a recognizable need for a third party that would convey messages and facilitate interaction between communities across the conflict divide. These facilitators should assume the roles of observers (in place of classical mediators) who listen and transmit the information in its full diversity, instead of dictating or suggesting any solutions for the sake of achieving a homogeneity. However, in case of the NGOs' involvement at both local and international levels, there is a risk of turning the process into a practice of promoting own organizational objectives and interests at grassroots people's expense, eventually silencing local populations' voices rather than empowering them (Romashov, et al. 2018). On the contrary, it should be at utmost importance to keep the focus of such initiatives on the interests of grassroots people and their needs. Thus, in order to achieve substantive results, the facilitators should be knowledgeable about the local context and be guided by willingness to address these needs and interests as local people themselves express them. This approach would help ensure the genuine "impartiality" of the third party and demonstrate its *real* commitment to the "humanitarian mission," which in the end should imply the third party's role as a convener of communities of practice rather than provider of external knowledge (Wenger 2011).

Second, as mentioned above, communities of practice are far from being harmonious societies and power relations are inevitably exercised within the groups. In his later work, Wenger (2010, 189) himself stresses, “there is nothing that says that communities of practice are egalitarian, at least not in any simple way.” Most likely, inequalities will never be eliminated within communities but the room to tackle them can be enlarged if various needs and aspirations of each community member are taken into account. The emphasis on the individual here does not suggest the neo-liberal approach to increase individual “competitiveness” to survive in the capitalist market environment that actually aims to further erode the sense of community. Within the context of communities of practice, the individual pragmatic goals are not to be achieved and needs satisfied at the expense of the communal wellbeing. Even if an individual achieved a better social and economic position compared to other members of the community due to the opportunities and/or deficiencies existing in the perceived exterior environment, they will be still considered “one among us” unless damage to the community is caused. A complex approach to deal with the hierarchies and inequalities requires a constant day-to-day interaction for understanding diverse existing and evolving needs and priorities inside the groups as well as the ways to address them collectively. However, the community members still may be involved in a conflict over defining meanings and priorities of needs and elements that constitute the communal wellbeing, but the everyday negotiations eventually aim to create a shared understanding and bring certain coherence to community practices. To facilitate this process of interaction in a situation, in which local people have been divided for three decades of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, it would require an involvement of a knowledgeable and reliable third party who does not provide prescriptions on how to make life better but genuinely supports the initiatives emerged within the mutual engagement. The difficult task of the third party would be then to observe balance of power relations within the emerging communities of practice without undermining local understandings of such balance by an externally drafted agenda with blueprints for liberal democratic society that brings along additional inequalities inherent into this system.

Third, the issues of antagonistic identifications in the Nagorno-Karabakh context should be taken into account, as (ethnic) groups identify themselves in opposition to each *other*. The perceived long history of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has affected people so deeply that it has become a part of their identity and a “normal” part of their lives, without which it is hard to imagine (co-

)existence anymore.<sup>31</sup> This normalization has led to the dehumanization of the people from *the other* side (Sotieva, Inal-Ipa, et al. 2018). However, this is exactly the space where an approach based on the CoP concept could contribute with its transformative power that might help people create their own stories and imaginations about co-existence drawing on the dimensions of practice as the property of a community. In this process, individual opinion and agency can be seen as something of value, if the positioning of individuals within their imagined social environments, or communities, is encountered by considering their multiple identities. This perspective should by no means signify that the conflict will be solved through such approaches but rather that people might become able to find a common ground within the existing framework of the conflict.

The common ground for co-existence is hard to find without respecting *the other* and the wide spectrum of intra-community differences. In this regard, an agonistic perspective in peace studies would argue for deconstruction of friend/enemy dichotomy and replace it with the opposition between adversaries. This approach implies that confronting parties still stand on opposite sides when it comes to the conflicting issues, yet primarily the relationship is built on acceptance of *the other* side's existence and respect of its position as well.<sup>32</sup> Incidentally, Shinko (2008) notes that the relational aspect of respect and recognition granted to the position of opponent are what differentiate adversaries from enemies. If practice is the source of coherence of a community, we view respect as the source for sensing this relational coherence and preventing potential polarization of communal everyday relationships. In the following section, by studying the example of Armenian-Azerbaijani rural communities in Georgia, we demonstrate the role of this particularly articulated sense of respect towards the differences of *the other*. The empirical analysis also draws attention to our main assumption that the communities of practice can be seen beyond a group oriented on concrete task or project but engaged with a wide range of everyday doings. Therefore, we find it correct to speak about

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<sup>31</sup> For some explanations on how the dramatic experiences of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict dominate over the positive experiences of co-existence of the groups, see (Broers 2005) and (de Waal 2005).

<sup>32</sup> This approach in peace and conflict research draws primarily on Mouffe's perspective on agonism and her concept of agonistic pluralism. For a detailed overview of this perspective, see (Mouffe 2013).

communities of multiple routine practices that are relatively unified by a struggle for communal wellbeing.

## **Communities of Everyday Practices: Armenian-Azerbaijani Villages in Georgia**

The aforementioned article in a recent publication of *Caucasus Edition* already discussed the simultaneously unique and mundane cases of Armenian-Azerbaijani co-living in rural settlements of the Marneuli district of Georgia (Romashov, et al. 2018). This section details the analysis of this case by employing the conceptual framework of community of practices and identifying practices of everyday peace performed in these hamlets and presents a very particular “learning model” for prospective engagement across the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict divides. We do acknowledge the specificity of every context in which an individual and community exist and by no means argue for copying and pasting the practices of everyday peace from the “realities” created in the Armenian-Azerbaijani communities in Georgia to the so-far virtually non-existent setting of interaction between the borderland people from Armenia and Azerbaijan and among the Karabakh communities. Furthermore, we do not look for “best practices” (as a managerial approach to peacebuilding would do). The notion of what is “best” varies with context, and the characterization of practice is contingent upon what meaning is assigned to it by community members from their own perspectives affected by the situation they live in on a daily basis. In any case, if or hopefully when the engagement will occur, it should be up to the local people to decide what are the best ways for them to make decisions and communicate according to the situation on the ground.

We would not like to induce a misreading of the section as if we are essentializing ethnic identities. We certainly do not argue that people in Armenia and Azerbaijan who call themselves Armenians and Azerbaijanis would act in the same way as those people in Georgia who also identify themselves as Armenians and Azerbaijanis. The present section of our article is merely an ethnographic interpretation of everyday peace variously practiced in a few Armenian-Azerbaijani mixed villages in southern Georgia. Still, we do believe that their knowledge of how to live side by side without direct (physical) violence should be shared not only within the region but also globally. At the same time, experiences of other local peace processes, say for instance, inter-communal relationships between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots, can be no less useful for Armenians and Azerbaijanis living on the opposite sides of the



conflict divide. Nevertheless, we are convinced that the presented experiences of Armenian-Azerbaijani communities in Georgia are particularly relevant for the issue, as these people have been certainly much more affected by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict itself, which remains a critical circumstance they have to deal with to maintain their co-living, than the communities in Cyprus or elsewhere.

In our analysis of Armenian-Azerbaijani rural communities, we follow the adjusted Wenger's conceptualization of three dimensions of practice as the source of coherence of a community: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. In addition, we mark that the CoP concept implies complexity of enterprise and allows for its broader definition that, in short, denote seeking to enhance wellbeing (Wenger 1998, p78; Anyidoho 2010). Thus, we stem from the following premise: the villagers jointly pursue an endeavor to enhance personal and communal wellbeing through mutual engagement in corresponding (inter)actions whose meanings are articulated in jointly constructed narratives that is sourced in the accumulated repertoire of a community including past and present discourses, symbols, rituals, and artifacts.

### *Never-ending joint enterprise*

The ethnographic research conducted in the region in 2016-2018 has accounted different local interpretations of historical processes that led to the situation when people now identifying themselves as Armenians and Azerbaijanis live side by side on the territory now called the Marneuli district of Georgia. In one way or another, the narratives produced by groups about their own histories of appearance on this territory are about improving conditions for life, whether it was the question of physical survival from atrocities on territories in the geographic vicinity or "merely" desire of material wealth that brought people to this region. Alternative indigenous narratives do not necessarily argue for nomadic origins of local people but still often associate the past with survival strategies in harsh geopolitical conditions. Yet, the prevailing narrative (re)produced by one group about the history of its neighboring group differs from (if not to say, opposes) the prevailing historical narrative (re)produced by the other. In this article, we discuss only the period that is envisaged by the immediate experiences of those interviewed people who resided at the time when the research material was collected without analyzing the narratives about the remote past, which is not covered by the lifetime of the respondents and

their close relatives and acquaintances. Thus, we focus only on the period from the Soviet time until the present.

A considerable part of research participants from the elder generation notices that the sense of community inclusive for both Armenians and Azerbaijanis during the Soviet era was stronger than in the contemporary period. They explicate this feeling by the fact that the villagers spent substantially more time together at school, work, and leisure activities. Particularly, the large Soviet agricultural and industrial enterprises established in the area providing jobs for local people had created a sense of “collectivism,” which united many people in their workplaces and beyond. In addition to numerous *kolkhozes* (collective farms), there were such large industries as a marble and limestone quarry in Tsopi or a wool-spinning mill in Shulaveri that attracted specialists from other Soviet republics. The inflow of people from different parts of the USSR, distribution of locally produced goods and commodities across the Soviet Union, widespread usage of Russian language, and the subsequent “internationalization” of everyday life of local residents led to the occurrence of discourses that emphasized the particular importance of their hamlets. For instance, the residents of Tsopi used to call their village “the center of the world” and still proudly stress that the stones extracted from the quarry were used for decorating metro stations in Moscow and Leningrad. Even though the rapid industrialization had a negative impact on environment and some cultural sites in the area, the local residents reminisce with nostalgia the developed transport infrastructure, utilities, educational facilities, recreational zones, and other everyday services. These dense socio-spatial ecologies created during the Soviet period and intensified with strong traditions of hospitality and sharing of space in local rural settings produced a vivid everydayness deeply memorized by the people lived that time.

During the Soviet period, the communal and individual (relative) welfare of the hamlets has been primarily secured by the state support and the advancement of local industries and *kolkhozes*. The disintegration of the Soviet Union has created a new social, political, and economic situation in which the state- and organization-sponsored shared spaces for jointly practiced everydayness were largely destroyed. The local people had to rely on their own individual and communal resources for maintaining the rapidly declining wellbeing of households and villages. While the breach along ethnic differences widened leading to the radical ruptures between Armenians and Azerbaijanis living in Armenia and Azerbaijan, the long-established ties of friendship and

neighborliness between Armenians and Azerbaijanis co-living in the rural areas of southern Georgia were maintained, allowing them to jointly struggle for subsistence in difficult times of their diverse communities. Remarkably, according to the assertions of residents in Tsopi and Shulaveri, Armenians and Azerbaijanis together organized local defenses of the villages from possible raids by Georgian militarized nationalist groups in the early 1990s.

The rapid de-industrialization of the region forced the local people to rearrange their activities of earning income. The state-owned enterprises that used to be the main driving force for regional development and the main source of earnings were closed down. A significant number of local residents became peasants and/or started trading at the rapidly expanding markets in Sadakhlo, a village on Georgia's border with Armenia, Marneuli, the district capital, and along the main roads connecting Tbilisi with Armenia and Azerbaijan.<sup>33</sup> Another considerable portion of the local population went to work abroad, mostly to Russia. There are some accounts telling how the old neighborly connections between local Armenians and Azerbaijanis in different ways have helped them to run their businesses both in Georgia and Russia. The villagers continue relying on their longstanding friendly and neighborly ties across ethnic boundaries when it comes to helping each other in their ordinary needs, such as fixing a broken car or roof, borrowing products, tools, or money, preparing and holding weddings and funerals, getting an injection or medical advice from a neighbor who is a professional nurse, and so forth. Furthermore, the local residents arrange joint actions for solving the problems shared by the majority of community members. Together, they try to reach out to authorities and large businesses for resources to reconstruct schools, build roads, or improve water supplies.

To put it briefly, these Armenian-Azerbaijani rural communities live a difficult life, similar to many villages in Georgia and other countries, albeit with their own distinctions. From this perspective, their long-term joint enterprise is an endeavor to enhance personal and communal wellbeing through individual and collective struggles with everyday challenges transcending ethnic and religious boundaries. The mutual help and joint activities founded on established neighborly relations are important sources for this lasting struggle that represent one of the dimensions of practice bringing coherence to these communities.

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<sup>33</sup> On the trading community formed in this area, see (Dabaghyan and Gabrielyan 2011).

### *Conflict-provoked rituals*

This representation of communal co-living between Armenian and Azerbaijani groups is not to say that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in its broader historical perspective has not affected their lives and interaction. Many respondents noted the heightened anxiety of the spillover of violence across the border in the early stages of the conflict's violent developments, and there were actual signs for this possibility. In 1988, the Azerbaijanis were forced to leave Bagratashen (known among local Azerbaijanis as Lambalu, which was the official name until 1960), the closest village located on the Armenian side of the border. This sizeable Azerbaijani-Armenian village played an important role for the Georgian borderland settlements. The local people enjoyed friendly and family relationships with Bagratashen residents across the river of Debed, which is now a securitized border river. Many children from smaller borderland hamlets in Georgia went to school in this village as it provided a full-cycle education and was renowned for its high quality teaching. When Azerbaijani inhabitants of Bagratashen involuntarily left the village and began to settle in other places, including the Marneuli district of Georgia, this previously multicultural border village began representing a possible dramatic scenario for the residents of its neighboring ethnically diverse villages located in Georgia. This projection was intensified by some local testimonies about failed attempts undertaken by alien groups who crossed the Somkhet range to force Azerbaijanis to leave Khojorni, a village with a prevailing Armenian population, and that created a gloomy atmosphere in the village and considerably deteriorated the trusting relationship between the local residents. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has greatly contributed to the augmentation of distrust and fears among the local Armenians and Azerbaijanis toward one other. The distrust and fears are particularly evident when the increasing unevenness in the proportion of Armenian and Azerbaijani populations in the respective mixed villages is discussed or when the attitude towards the appearance of "new faces" in the villages is observed and analyzed.

Perhaps the most important (and obvious) observation of ethnographic research in this area is that the local Armenians and Azerbaijanis recognize (and accept) each other's differences, while at the same time publicly deny or put aside their significance when interacting with each other and foreigners, including journalists and researchers. Even though the households of Armenians and Azerbaijanis are relatively spread throughout the villages, the residents still can point to the historical and contemporary Armenian and Azerbaijani parts of

hamlets. The destruction and privatization of Soviet-time public services together with the ethnic solidarity, amplified following the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict developments, have contributed to further division of spaces of everyday interaction. In customary circumstances, the ethnic solidarity dictates preferences of local residents when it comes to private services, i.e., an Armenian or Azerbaijani usually goes to a grocery shop or chooses a transportation service that is run by an Armenian or Azerbaijani entrepreneur, respectively.

However, this does not mean that the residents would not ever use (or be denied to use) services operated by a representative of *the other* group. On the contrary, as the observations in *marshrutkas* (private minibuses connecting the villages with Marneuli) show, *the other* is usually treated particularly amiably by both the owner-drivers of *marshrutkas* and passengers. The shop owners sell products with “deferred payment” regardless of the ethnic background of a buyer but solely relying on their personal acquaintances with him or her, although this arrangement is said to be disadvantageous for the businesses’ cash flow. The dominating (in number) group occupies the center (usually the most centrally located large square) of the hamlet (here referring to Khojorni and Tsopi) where the male representatives of the group gather to discuss topical developments of the day, play board games, and have tea and other drinks. The “smaller” *other* group has its “own” less significant place in the village for such gatherings. However, again, if *the other* happens to walk next to this get-together, the dominating group sensationally welcomes him and often invites him to join their activities. The cemeteries expectedly represent the most radical separation of communal space. They are located respectively near Armenian or Azerbaijani “historical parts” of the hamlets, and funerals are mainly the only reason for *the other* to enter this space. At the same time, both neighboring groups recognize each other’s cemeteries as the most respected places.

The Armenians and Azerbaijanis are well aware about the neighbors’ important religious celebrations and traditions and do not try to prevent each other from practicing them. The joy of the most festive religious celebrations such as Novruz and Easter usually is disseminated within the entire community through sharing traditional food with the neighbors. Religious differences are locally represented as the main obstacle for intermarriages between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, which are a very rare occurrence in the region. Some old religious sites (such as churches dating back to the 5th century) of the villages became the field of contestation about their initial belonging either to the Christians (primarily Armenians) or Albanians (considered by Azerbaijanis

their predecessors). However, this dispute evokes a special attitude to these sites of both Armenians and Azerbaijanis who equally treat them as sacred. The contemporary articulation of the religious difference seems to have set the most impenetrable limits of the inter-group relationships, but these boundaries are bypassed within many other shared spaces of communication, and language mitigates possible further polarization of differences and prevents radical ruptures.

*Maintaining mutual accountability through language*

Language does distinguish Armenians and Azerbaijanis, but it simultaneously unites them for a pragmatic reason to understand and engage with each other. Therefore, they seek to learn each other's languages. One local Azerbaijani male explained,

There [in a village] were many Azerbaijanis and Armenians. These main national groups learned either Azerbaijani or Armenian languages. For example, we communicate with each other—say, you're Georgian, and I'm Azerbaijani. In your place, I would have tried to learn a word [from your language] so that we could understand each other. [...] If we're friends or something... For example, you visit me, and I go to you. If we cannot communicate, how would we talk? Gradually, we'll learn each other's language, [and this is a process of] communication. You want to tell me something, and I want to tell you. Step by step, we start to understand each other in our way.

The "our way" of the local people to understand each other in practice implies, among other things, speaking any language that would facilitate the best communication in a concrete situation. Depending on the context and language skills of discussion participants, the main language can be Armenian, Azerbaijani, Russian, and, rarely, Georgian. Russian has been taught as a foreign language practically in all local schools, and some schools had so-called "Russian sectors" in addition to the Armenian and Azerbaijani sections. Today, a few "sectors" teaching in Russian operate in the area, but they still enjoy the popularity among local Armenians and Azerbaijanis. At the same time, the state policy to promote the Georgian language among ethnic minorities has already changed the preferences of many local families who now send their children to study in Georgian schools, and this increases the possibility that the Georgian language will consequently substitute Russian in its position of the leading "foreign" language of inter-ethnic communication in the area.

The “our way” of communication is the main constituent of a shared repertoire of local communities, as through linguistic means the community narratives are jointly created and filled with pre-agreed discourses and meanings. The community narratives are also targeted at new members to help them “get used to” or, more precisely, to become accountable to the community regime. The community narratives primarily reflect history of mutual engagement. The emphasized elements of narratives (i.e., discourses) should be seen as those that are considered by the community members the most important and meaningful statements from the past to be maintained in the present and future in order to sustain the community itself. These statements typically emphasize the identity of the local community that may be referred to in the local narratives as “the culture of our village” distinguished for the absence of “national issues” and the presence of “brotherly” attitudes among Armenians and Azerbaijanis.

The community identity also relies on such discourses that signify perceived universal values as “God is one” and “we are all humans.” However, the most important value upon which the communal relationship rests is “respect.” The respect is principally associated with such modalities as obligation to protect a representative of the neighboring group from abuses that can be done by members of the own ethnic group and, in general, with responsibility to take care of the neighbor. The exaggerated feeling of respect and related explicitly articulated rituals of taking care and welcoming directed at the neighboring group emphasize a special attitude toward each other among local Armenians and Azerbaijanis, which stems from the mutual recognition of both differences and potential for tensions constituted by them.

## **Bygone Mutual Engagement as a Basis for (Re)building Bridges over the Conflict Divide**

As local people’s interests and demands are in the focus of our approach, in this section we present some of them identified by a short field study in a few Armenian and Azerbaijani borderland villages conducted in July 2019. These particular Armenian and Azerbaijani borderlands do not necessarily have histories of direct interaction between each other but they still were a part of a wider territory of everyday engagement of Armenians and Azerbaijanis prior to the Karabakh war. Through informal interaction and casual conversations with the rural population, we tried to understand what were their views on peace, how people saw their living conditions could be improved (or not) thanks to prospective cross-border cooperation, and what were (if any) their experiences

of such cooperation in the past. We asked about the issues they are currently struggling with in their everyday lives and the ways to address them. We also attempted to find out what the opinions are of the affected local population about officially stated ideas of preparing populations for peace. In this section, we analyze the results of the field study, pinpointing similarities in perceptions of peace and needs on both sides of the conflict divide. The findings outline a favorable setting for prospective joint projects involving Armenian and Azerbaijani borderland communities and applying the CoP concept so that it would not focus only on the projects as such but go beyond its task-oriented design and support practices of the local people on a daily basis.

Geographically, the Azerbaijani regions of Gazakh and Tovuz have been important transportation corridors in the South Caucasus, and this position brings along a lot of potential for developing everyday dialogue and collaboration between local Armenians and Azerbaijanis in a variety of ways. For example, the Tovuz railway station in Azerbaijan before the Karabakh war served as an important communication hub between Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. The major trade flows were organized through Tovuz, which harbored a large market where people from surrounding Armenian and Azerbaijani villages would buy various goods for their households. In the Soviet times, the Berd municipality of the Armenian SSR was also connected to Azerbaijan as well as to other Armenian towns through Azerbaijan. Thus, to get from Berd to Yerevan, cars passed through the border village of Aygepar, adjacent to Berd Airport, entered the territory of Soviet Azerbaijan and crossed the cities of Tovuz, Aghstafa, and Gazakh, re-entered the territory of Soviet Armenia into Ijevan, and continued to Yerevan and other towns (ANI Armenian Research Center 2015).

Despite the current disconnection between the borderlands of Armenia and Azerbaijan, the local people still reminisce about a long history of intercultural interaction. Those respondents, who have experienced direct interaction with either Armenians or Azerbaijanis before the war, keep largely positive memories of the times when the two ethnic communities shared a common space for trade and were involved in various engagements. Family and friendly relationships between Armenians and Azerbaijanis occupy a significant place in the memory of local people. Particularly, the older generation that had immediate experience of interaction with *the other* side before the war deeply revered the friendly



relationship. The way the stories about mixed marriages, *kirve*<sup>34</sup> relations, and friendships are told leaves an impression of something rather cherished than lost and forgotten.

At the same time, this relationship is not idealized. The Us/Them dichotomy was present also before the radical rupture, and that did not prevent establishing friendly relationships and commercial ties beneficial for local villagers. The opinions about the future expressed by interviewees signify that if one day the cooperation ties resume, there will still be a prevailing understanding that *the other* side of the border is “different,” and there is no evidence that a clear distinction between “Us” and “Them” will and can be demolished. However, as it was in the Soviet times, this should not be an obstacle for establishing neighborly relationships, which could be advantageous for both sides. Even though these relationships have not been practiced for many years now, they potentially represent a basis for building a bridge over the conflict divide. However, the pressing challenge to this development is that the young generation does not possess experience of immediate interaction with *the other* side and hardly imagines how the mutual engagement can be (re)established.

According to the interviewees, the main obstacles for mutual engagement at the current stage are lack of trust, senses of threat and insecurity, overcoming offenses of the past—especially when it comes to the victims of war—and the feeling of constantly being on alert to defend. Since the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh directly affected the lives of people in the borderland regions of Armenia and Azerbaijan, the locals were left with deep scars and distrust, which challenges future co-existence. The trauma (or rather post-traumatic disorder) resulting from the conflict, though concurring with a strong desire of peace, testifies to the emotional unpreparedness for the immediate and direct engagement across the border (and conflict divides). Moreover, since Nagorno-Karabakh has been both the main issue of contestation and the central field of warfare, the losses and traumatized past of people living on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, also immediately affected by the military combats, are almost muted by the Karabakh-centered national discourses of war. Not to conclude whether or not such a situation is conducive for conflict transformation, it certainly contributes to the feeling of the local populations that their anxieties are not properly addressed by the state and the larger populations

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<sup>34</sup> *Kirve* is a highly respected position of a man, particularly in Turkic cultures, who helps a boy being circumcised, and can be compared to a godfather in Christian traditions.

of their countries. Nevertheless, it is important that people on both sides of the border acknowledge that they have similar concerns, fears, and aspirations. An important precondition for the mutual engagement frequently underlined by the interviewed Armenians and Azerbaijanis is the safety of lives of borderland villagers—that means lasting protection from shootings. They also admit that mutual engagement is a process that can happen only in a long-term perspective.

To some extent, the concerns and fears of the borderland rural communities could be diminished if transportation links across the border are reestablished. For instance, the opening of the Ijevan-Gazakh railway and highways for transportation of passengers and goods would potentially create a space for everyday dialogue and engagement. Due to the isolation, a tangible result of the conflict, the absence of proper transportation between villages and towns as well as poor road conditions are seen by the villagers as huge obstacles for the wellbeing of the region. Thus, the opportunity to travel freely between the two countries and use short ways of travel to other countries and central locations in their own countries might have a life changing impact on the wellbeing of the region, and thus represent an aim in itself. For example, the villages within the Berd municipality are geographically isolated both from the administrative center of the region as well as from Yerevan. The interviewed inhabitants of these villages admit that the proximity to Tovuz was extremely advantageous and they believe that if the connecting road is restored, the living conditions of the local villagers could considerably improve. The interviewees, however, acknowledged that because of the lack of trust and feeling of insecurity, they see the process of reestablishing cross-border cooperation as a long-term possibility, rather than a quickly realized initiative. According to one of the Armenian interviewees, as the potential opening of the road would shorten the distance between neighboring locations, the inhabitants of the villages would certainly be attracted by the opportunity for cross-border cooperation. The road would create the possibility for daily interaction, the reestablishment of inter-personal contacts, and the gradual resumption of trade and communication ties.

Despite some small-scale projects in the fields of agriculture, tourism, and trade, the economic situation in the borderland villages remains challenging: high unemployment forces many inhabitants, especially the youth, to leave their villages and find work in large cities or abroad. The local agricultural activities are aimed at satisfying local needs rather than trade. A lack of necessary equipment is another obstacle to developing agriculture. Farmers do not want

to invest in developing their production because there is no market to sell their products (mainly due to the long distances and poor transportation links between villages and central cities). In these conditions, local farmers do not possess enough resources to increase production, and that creates a shortage of products inside the region and a dependence on expensive imports.

Soviet-era farming brought high profits to the border regions, due primarily to the developed transportation infrastructure that included railways and highways connecting Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Russia. Village inhabitants found that mutual trade with neighboring villages across the (then practically non-existent) border was very beneficial. They could sell and buy goods in the bazaars of nearby towns and in surrounding villages. Because of the different landscapes (mountainous on the Armenian side and flat on the Azerbaijani side), the farmers often had mutually beneficial joint arrangements for animal farming. For example, in the summer, when there was more grass on the Armenian side, the Azerbaijanis would take their cattle to graze in the Armenian mountains, while the Armenians would take their cattle to the Azerbaijani pastures in the winter, when there was no grass in the Armenian highlands, or simply bought hay from the Azerbaijanis. Also, the Azerbaijani plains were favorable for the cultivation of fruits, vegetables, and gourds. The Armenians did not cultivate certain types of plants on their lands (such as watermelons and, in some villages, even tomatoes), because they considered it rational to buy them directly from Azerbaijan (according to local assessments, these Azerbaijani agricultural products were “cheap and tasty”). We can logically assume that, along with the opening of the border, (re)establishing bazaars for the cross-border trade of local agricultural products would benefit the borderland regions, and in the end, contribute to the overall development of the two countries.

Indeed, the borderland communities consider peace as a basis for the neighborly relationship, but they demonstrate little trust in peace mediated by third parties. The lack of dialogue between the rural communities and authorities at both municipal and state levels, especially in the case of Azerbaijan, creates mistrust towards outsiders. According to one of the Azerbaijani interviewees, third parties have to stand aside from the conflict, and then reconciliation will be unavoidable: “We will be forced to reconcile.” An Armenian interviewee stressed that for someone living on the border, the conflict is never pleasant, and so ways would be found to solve issues. According to the interviewee, those who live far away from the border do not realize the value of peace, and so they

are more intolerant than those who are struggling with the conflict on a daily basis. At the same time, the Azerbaijani interviewees were not ready to formulate how exactly the local people themselves can initiate reconciliation processes. Most of the Armenian interviewees expressed opinions that the conflict resolution is still beyond the influence of “ordinary” people, and it is up to governments to find a solution. On both sides, reliable governments are defined as those that take into account the interests of people who are suffering as a result of the conflict. An Armenian respondent who mentioned the cross-border trade as a way out was also convinced that for that to happen, “a right type of discourse from the top is needed on both sides.”

### **Sketches for the First Steps towards the Armenian-Azerbaijani Cross-border Engagement**

In order to engage the communities in a dialogue, there should be a mutual interest and a clear positive outcome for participants from such engagement. Projects supporting engagement across the conflict divide should be implemented in the fields where communities share common interests and concerns and aim primarily at improving everyday life conditions of people and reducing poverty. One such field could be agriculture in bordering regions of Armenia and Azerbaijan, where people from both sides face similar issues related to security, lack of infrastructure, climate conditions, crop and yield problems, and so forth. Addressing those issues through joint initiatives would improve not only the everyday life of people but also contribute to creating a favorable atmosphere for sustainable peace. In fact, international peacebuilding initiatives have not been actively involved in the field of agriculture thus far.

The potential of agriculture as a means to support sustainable peace should not be underestimated. The work in conflict-affected areas is currently one of the main tasks of the UN FAO's (Food and Agriculture Organization) agenda for 2030. It aims at mitigating “the negative impacts of conflicts on people's lives and livelihoods (including men, women, youth and older persons),” among other ways, “by advancing sustainable development, including reducing poverty, addressing inequality, promoting sustainable agricultural livelihoods and natural resource management, and contributing to economic growth in countries and regions (potentially) affected by conflict(s), doing so in a conflict-sensitive manner” (FAO 2018, 10-11). Currently, the FAO has similar priority areas in Armenia and Azerbaijan, such as animal health and plant protection; improved crop, fisheries, and livestock production; sustainable use of natural

resources; and disaster risk reduction and management (FAO 2016; FAO n.d.). There are projects implemented under these priorities in both Armenia and Azerbaijan, including the bordering regions. Some of the initiatives could potentially transform into joint peace supporting projects with positive outcomes for borderland populations. However, for this to happen, peacebuilding and development aid initiatives should be converged for the efficient joint work in places affected by conflicts, and that requires negotiations at the level of international organizations and donors.

The results of these negotiations should be funding for projects with tangible outcomes that do not aim merely at “capacity-building” (read as “teaching”) of the local population to apply externally created “models of best practices” but at the improvement of material wellbeing of local populations right from the beginning of the projects. A tangibly effective project would imply a creation of spaces in which local people could engage in joint enterprises intended to improve their wellbeing in a locally defined way. The “models of best practices” need to be created exactly through this process of mutual engagement. That, however, does not mean ruling out the importance of external expertise, but rather entails that the intervention should not subvert local knowledge of doing things. A joint enterprise should be initiated based on improving everyday life conditions and addressing the needs of people living in the bordering areas, primarily as they see it, and if locally requested, the external competence can come for help.<sup>35</sup> An ethnography-like approach to identifying individual and communal needs and aspirations could allow registering the diversity of interpretations of the communal wellbeing (and peace) across borderland villages. A CoP project should be designed in accordance with the outcomes of such an inquiry. However, since needs and aspirations are not fixed and constantly evolving, the regular direct discussions with and among participants on the project goals should be ensured. The role of a knowledgeable third party is essential in registering similarities in the needs of villagers on both sides of the border that in turn would make certain the likeness and parallel development of CoP projects in Armenian and Azerbaijani borderlands.

In the absence of direct interactions across the border (and conflict divide), a sharing and communication platform for the continuous discussion among the project participants can be organized online and/or on territories of third countries. With CoP projects in the agricultural field, there could be joint

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<sup>35</sup> See the concept of “popular peace” proposed by Roberts 2011.

platforms for farmers from Armenian and Azerbaijani borderlands on which they could share and compare the results of project implementation at different stages. It would be certainly challenging to induce meaningful interactions in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, but “this is precisely the work of ‘community maintenance’—to actively encourage opportunities for the exchange of ideas under whatever circumstances” (Anyidoho 2010, 325-326). Furthermore, communal narratives created within and beyond the projects could provide a powerful alternative to ethno-centric discourses in a wider context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The narrative mediation conducted by a competent third party could facilitate this process.<sup>36</sup>

## Conclusion

The outlined framework for inter-group engagement across the Armenian-Azerbaijani border based on E. Wenger’s concept of community of practice may represent a promising approach, since it relies on horizontal rather than vertical social structures for integrating knowledge and practice across spaces and actors. In a long-term perspective, the implementation of this approach may help to transform antagonized identifications of various groups. Agriculture seems to be a promising field for the application of the CoP concept. However, further research is needed to explore the application of this approach in this and other areas, in which local citizens share common interests and concerns, in order to support everyday practices of peace in the Armenian-Azerbaijani borderlands that would eventually have a positive spillover effect for larger groups of both conflict-affected societies.

At the same time, one should not be blind to the complex power dynamics within the borderland communities and in their relationships with authorities that have a significant influence on the implementation of peace initiatives in the area. Trustful relations should be maintained not only across the border but also, and primarily, within the local communities themselves. Even though community of practice does not (and should not) represent a harmonious social environment, it potentially provides a space for enhancing trust among its members whose co-existence and cooperation is ensured by the shared repertoire and adherence to the regime of mutual accountability. Similarly, the emergence and maintenance of community of practice does not automatically lead to the emancipation of its individual members from the power of an

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<sup>36</sup> On this approach, see (Winslade and Monk 2008).

oppressive system with its overwhelming discourses and practices of domination, but it does provide a platform for empowering its members against *the exterior*. Community of practice in one way or another (re-)produces hierarchies but, in relation to *the exterior*, it has its leaders delegated to conduct negotiations with outsiders. Back to our case of borderland rural communities, these delegates can be same traditional authorities, such as village elders, but in the context of community of practices, they may become more empowered in the negotiations with municipal authorities, governments, and international interveners.

Therefore, it is reasonable that in the CoP projects sponsored by converged international peacebuilding and development actors, the communities are strengthened within themselves first before engaging them into the consequential process of interaction across the border (conflict divide). The communities should explicitly state their preparedness (and the statement should be heard) for the latter stage that ultimately implies establishing a network of the communities of practices “trespassing” borders and conflict divides. A CoP project would not be effective if the demand for it was created artificially and without the unequivocally indicated willingness of the local population for being involved in this process, as it happened with some international development projects that applied the concept.<sup>37</sup> These ethical concerns should be carefully addressed with utterly equitable approaches, if only it is possible in the contemporary peacebuilding and development interventionism that is just slowly entering the period of radical reformation.

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<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Johnson and Khalidi 2005.

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# Authors

**Milena Abrahamyan** is a feminist peace and justice activist. She has a wide range of experience in the international and local NGO sphere. She holds an MA degree in Peace and Conflict Research and has been a recipient of the Rotary Peace Fellowship as well as the Atlantic Fellowship for Social and Economic Equity. She is one of co-founders of the Beyond Borders: Linking Our Stories Turkish-Armenian feminist solidarity building initiative.

**Jafar Akhundov** is a Historian and Independent Analyst based in Baku.

**Vahid Aliyev** is an LGBTI rights activist from Baku, Azerbaijan. He is currently completing a Master's degree in Queer History at Goldsmiths, University of London. He works as freelance social researcher and translator. Most of his professional and activist career is devoted to understanding gender, queerness and other gender/sexualities related issues.

**Ksenia Babich** is a Russian journalist and graduate of Moscow State University. She has previously worked for "RBK", "Snob", "Argumenty i Fakty" and "Trud". Ksenia has been working at the Ukrainian TV channel 112 for five years, where she focuses on human rights in Russia. From 2016 to the present, she has been working with the "Stitching Justice Initiative" NGO, which is dedicated to the legal protection of victims of human rights violations connected to armed conflict and counter-terrorism operations, torture and gender-based violence in the post-Soviet territory.

**Laurence Broers** is an associate fellow at Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House and Caucasus Programme Director at Conciliation Resources. Between 1997 and 2004, he completed doctoral studies in political science on Georgia, and also worked as one of the editors of the first comprehensive Georgian-English dictionary to be published since Georgian independence. He has published numerous articles on the politics of ethnicity and democratization in post-Soviet Georgia, and was editor of Conciliation Resources' 2006 publication on the Nagorny Karabakh peace process in its Accord series.

**Marina Danoyan** holds a Master's Degree from the University Paris 12 Val de Marne in "International Trade with Eastern European Countries", as well as a

degree in French linguistics and Management from Yerevan State Linguistic University after V. Briussov. Currently, Marina is completing a Master's Degree at Tampere University, specializing in Global and European Politics. Since 2009, Marina has been working as Project Officer at the Eurasia programme at CMI (Crisis Management Initiative) Martti Ahtisaari Centre, a Finnish NGO that works to prevent and resolve violent conflicts. Marina is the Vice-Chair of Finland-Armenia Association since 2016.

**Hamida Giyasbayli** is a practicing Peace & Conflict worker with a thorough training in holistic approaches to peace and considerable experience in human rights advocacy. She is mainly occupied with understanding the importance of self-regulating intentional communities across the globe and the potential it has for the societies of the modern world, as well as designing spaces for multi-format dialogues within and between societies. She holds a Master's degree in Peace Studies MA from the University of Innsbruck, Austria.

**Elen Grigoryan** works as an assistant to the member of parliament at National Assembly of Armenia. She holds an MA degree in international relations and European studies from the European Institute of CIFE (Centre International de Formation Européenne) in Istanbul, Nice, and Berlin. Her thesis focused on the EU's soft power in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. She has been actively involved in conflict research, and her interests include nationalism, ethnic conflicts and human rights. She has also been engaged in coordinating peacebuilding projects, such as the "Peacebuilding through Capacity Enhancement and Civic Engagement" (PeaCE) project at Eurasia Partnership Foundation and the "Turkish-Armenian Civil Diplomacy Dialogue" project at the Analytical Centre on Globalization and Regional Cooperation NGO.

**Nuriyya Hasanova** holds BA in International Relations and currently pursues her Master's degree in Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding at Durham University in UK. She is also an alumna of Study of U.S. Institutes (SUSI) on Local, State and Federal Public Policymaking at the Southern Illinois University, USA and Viadrinum BorderLab program at the European University of Viadrina in Germany. She coordinated youth initiatives in the scope of the 'Peacebuilding through Capacity Enhancement and Civic Engagement' (PeaCE) programme.

**Eviya Hovhannisian** is a Project Coordinator at the South Caucasus Regional Office of Heinrich Boell Foundation. She graduated from European University at Saint-Petersburg (Russia) and holds a Master's degree in Social Anthropology. She also completed a Master's program in Medieval Studies at Yerevan State University (Armenia). Eviya was a Visiting Fellow within Ira.urban project at the Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography (Germany) in 2015. Before joining the Heinrich Boell Foundation, Eviya worked at the Institute of Ancient Manuscripts - Matenadaran and the Centre for Independent Social Research in Saint-Petersburg. Eviya's research interests lie in the intersection of memory studies, nationalism and conflict studies, migration and refugee studies, as well as gender studies.

**Dr. Sevil Huseynova** holds a PhD degree from the Institute for European Ethnology, Humboldt University, Berlin. Her main research interests include urban anthropology; ethnicity; and diasporic, transnational, and trans-local communities. She co-authored the book "Beyond the Karabakh Conflict: The Story of Village Exchange" and has authored numerous other publications. She is a member of the Editorial Board of the Journal of Conflict Transformation – Caucasus Edition and has previously worked as the Azerbaijan Country Director of the Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation. Sevil is currently working with the Centre for Independent Social Research (CISR) in Berlin as a project manager.

**Dr. Lala Jumayeva** obtained her PhD from the University of Birmingham, Department of Political Science and International Studies. Her research focuses on ethnic conflicts, conflict resolution, conflict transformation, and mediation. Dr. Jumayeva has several years of experience teaching courses in politics and conflict resolution in Azerbaijan.

**Katya Myachina** is a journalist from Ukraine currently living and working in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. She has worked for a range of Ukrainian and Central Asian media covering women's rights, minorities, globalization and conflicts. Katya also teaches journalism at the American University of Central Asia.

**Vadim Romashov** is a doctoral researcher in Peace and Conflict Studies at Tampere Peace Research Institute (TAPRI), Tampere University. He received his M.Soc.Sci degree in International Relations from University of Tampere, and diplomas of a specialist in Regional Studies and an economist in World

Economy from St. Petersburg State Polytechnical University. He is currently involved in the projects “Neighborhood Yurt-Naapurijurta” (funded by the Kone Foundation) and “Cross-Regional Corridors of Dialogue: Developing a Complementing Track for Transforming Long-standing Conflicts” (funded by the OSCE-Network). He has participated in several TAPRI-based research projects on post-Soviet conflict processes funded by the Academy of Finland and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland.

**Hayk Smbatyan** is an independent researcher. He holds BA and MA degrees in sociology and research methodology. Hayk is also a graduate of the "Peace Research" MA course at the University of Oslo. His main research interests include studies of conflict and peace, human rights, disability rights, youth issues and media. He is involved in non-formal educational activities in the fields of conflict transformation and peace education.

**Sophio Tskhvariashvili** holds an MA degree in Social Sciences – Eurasian and Caucasus Studies from Tbilisi State University. Working as a freelance social researcher, she has been involved in various research projects concerning human rights, gender, equality, minorities, ecomigration, and environmental issues. She has been a member of the activist organization Georgian Young Greens since 2013. She is the Georgia Country Director of the Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation.

## Editors

**Dr. Philip Gamaghelyan** is an Assistant Professor at the Kroc School of Peace Studies at the University of San Diego and the Director of Programs of the Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation. He works in the post-Soviet states as well as Turkey, Syria, and other conflict regions, engaging policy makers, journalists, educators, social scientists, and other discourse-creating professionals. His research is focused on politics of memory in conflict contexts as well as critical re-evaluation and design of conflict resolution interventions.

**Dr. Pınar Sayan** is a Visiting Researcher at Stockholm University Institute for Turkish Studies and an Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Beykoz University. She is also Turkey Director of

Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation; co-editor of *Caucasus Edition: Journal of Conflict Transformation* and the co-founder and co-director of *Roman Medya*. She takes part in civil society projects addressing conflict transformation, human rights and minority rights as coordinator, consultant, trainer or facilitator. She is a recipient of the Jean Monnet Scholarship, Humanity in Action Pat Cox Fellowship, Swedish Institute Fellowship, Georg Eckert Institute Fellowship among others.

**Dr. Sergey Rumyansev** is the co-founder of the Centre for Independent Social Research (CISR) in Berlin, Methodologist at the Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation. He also serves on the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Conflict Transformation - Caucasus Edition*. Previously he was a Research Fellow at the Institute of Philosophy and Law of the National Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan. His areas of research include nationalism, diaspora and migration, conflict studies, and Soviet studies, with a focus on conflicts in the post-Soviet space.

**Sona Dilanyan** holds a BA degree in Arabic Studies from Yerevan State University and an MA degree in Cultural Studies from Sabancı University in Turkey. She has worked for a number of NGOs focusing on peacebuilding, including the Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation and the Hrant Dink Foundation. Her research interests focus on the intersection of conflict and gender.

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.

The Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation is an independent, non-political organization that is dedicated to positively transforming relations and laying foundations for lasting and sustainable peace in conflict-torn societies.

[www.caucasusedition.net](http://www.caucasusedition.net)  
[www.imaginedialogue.com](http://www.imaginedialogue.com)  
[info@imaginedialogue.com](mailto:info@imaginedialogue.com)

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