Perceptions at War: Exploring Public Attitude Formation in the Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict

Abstract

The post-2020 escalations in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, culminating in the Azerbaijani military offensive of September 2023 and the subsequent mass exodus of the Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh, once again underscored the persistent deadlock in the peace process and the failure to achieve a compromise. This article aims to analyze the genesis of maximalist attitudes within Armenian and Azerbaijani societies in the years preceding the 2020 war, as well as the factors contributing to the endurance of these attitudes in the post-2020 period. Drawing on the analysis of maximalist attitudes formation during the interwar period (1994-2020), the research delves into the obstacles encountered by peace activists and peacebuilders in their efforts to counter dominant nationalism, alongside other challenges and structural impediments in the peacebuilding process. Finally, the study investigates the determinants that shaped the post-war attitudes in Armenia and Azerbaijan preceding the pivotal events of September 2023.

Keywords: Conflict; peace; Nagorno-Karabakh; Armenia; Azerbaijan; narrative; culture of conflict; public attitudes.

Introduction

The September 2023 military offensive by the Azerbaijani army in Nagorno-Karabakh, followed by the mass exodus of the Armenians from the breakaway region, became a turning point in the post-2020 phase of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. The events once again underscored the decades-long deadlock in peace efforts aimed at fostering coexistence between the two communities of Nagorno-Karabakh and the wider Armenian and Azerbaijani societies. While numerous challenges to peacebuilding efforts existed in the pre-2020 phase of the conflict, the war and its aftermath exposed the extent of marginalization of the peace activists along with the structural problems in peacebuilding efforts. These challenges led to the failure of the peacebuilding community to mobilize mass support for anti-war voices and to resist the dominance of nationalist narratives in Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Against the backdrop of prevailing maximalist attitudes, as evidenced in the 2023 public opinion surveys (Agora 2023, CRRC 2022), the article aims to analyze the process of the

construction of such attitudes in Armenian and Azerbaijani societies during the interwar period and the reason for their persistence after the 2020 war. In addition, the research elaborates on the challenges faced by peacebuilding actors in countering prevailing nationalist discourses during this period with a timeframe of the research limited until the September 2023 events. The theoretical basis of the research lies in the works of Bar-Tal (2010a, 2010b) and his conceptualization of the "culture of conflict," which expresses the intricacies of the formation of polarized public opinions and the permeation of the conflict culture through official rhetoric and societal discourse. This framework serves an instrumental role in analyzing the impacts of social attitudes on the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, while the geopolitical implications, though significant, remain beyond the scope of the study.

The structure of the article includes the theoretical analysis of the concepts of "culture of conflict" and peace narratives in identity-driven conflicts, followed by three sections applying these concepts and analyzing the persistence of maximalist stances in the Armenian and Azerbaijani societies. The first section analyzes the public attitudes and the impact of the uncompromising stances of governments and societies in the promotion of antagonism, nationalism, as well as the cultivation of victimhood narratives during the interwar period (1994-2020). The next section discusses the structural impediments within the peacebuilding community, including elitism and the failure to engage broader audiences, as well as the following crisis and marginalization of peace activists during the Second Karabakh War. The final section of the article looks into the post-2020 war public opinions in both societies leading to the conclusion of how, coupled with the rise in nationalistic rhetoric, these sentiments have impeded peacebuilding efforts and exacerbated the risk of further escalation, as underscored by the recent takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh and another cycle of displacement.

Considering the above-presented structure based on the analysis of societal dynamics, the article highlights the multilayered complexities of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. Particularly, it reveals entrenched cultures of conflict in both nations, where historical grievances and traumas perpetuate a sense of victimhood tied to national identities, while political leaders have long viewed compromise on Nagorno-Karabakh as politically risky and potentially jeopardizing their legitimacy. Consequently, peacebuilding initiatives faced marginalization, public resistance, and limited institutional support amid fragmented civil societies. The persistence of dominant narratives and the culture of conflict hindered the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process, exposing the necessity for a detailed analysis of the concept and its application in the enduring Armenian-Azerbaijani antagonism.

Methodology

The methodology is based on comparative analysis of state policies in Armenia and Azerbaijan referring to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and the main directions of official and media rhetoric that have underpinned dominant nationalist narratives. To round out a comprehensive knowledge on the challenges impeding peacebuilding efforts and the failure of peace activism to transform dominant narratives, the research was supplemented by semi-structured interviews conducted with 18 individuals involved in the field. Thematic analysis was used as a method to identify recurring themes and ideas in the answers of the respondents. The range of interviewees comprised three researchers from Armenia and three from Azerbaijan, five anti-militarist activists from Armenia and two from Azerbaijan, and two members of dialogue initiatives from each country. The different backgrounds of the interviewees were prioritized to get a more representative picture and a variety of perspectives. To safeguard anonymity, the names of all respondents were anonymized through the use of pseudonyms.

The interviews were conducted within the timeframe from November 2021 to April 2022, either orally through Zoom, or in written form via email correspondence. A predetermined set of two clusters of open-ended questions were supplemented by spontaneous follow-up questions. The first cluster was aimed at exploring the understandings of the concepts of anti-militarism and pacifism by research participants, as well as their self-identification as anti-militarists before, during and after the 2020 war. The second cluster of questions aimed to delineate the factors that contributed to the failure of peacebuilding efforts and peace activism in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, alongside the lessons learned for future activity in the field.

The objective of the interviews was to learn insights from those engaged in the field on the existing challenges and opportunities of peacebuilding, based on their lived experiences and practices. The interviews sought to discern whether marginalization posed a significant challenge to their activities, especially amidst the prevalence of maximalist stances. Questions were designed to define any potential post-war shifts in the respondents' attitudes toward anti-militarism as an ideology advocating for a non-military resolution of the conflict. Selected interview excerpts were incorporated into the article to provide a more nuanced explanation of the perspectives of research participants.

Setting the Frames: Culture of Conflict and Peace Narratives in Identity-Driven Conflicts

While in conflicts driven by the security dilemma, the absence of mutual hostilities in history can alleviate the confrontations between enemies (Abushov 2022, 544), in ethnic and identity-driven conflicts, historical memories of confrontation intensify negative or hostile attitudes towards the “other” side. These conflicts are deeply ingrained within individual and group consciousness (Bush and Keyman 1997, Horowitz 1985, Kaufman 2001), being considered as

core elements of identity that cannot be compromised. In many cases, they interpret the disputed territory as “an irreducible component of ethnic group identity,” where control over it may become a matter of survival and thus, an indivisible issue leading to a conflict (Toft 2003).

Bar-Tal (2010a, 183-84) elaborates on the specifics of intractable conflicts characterized with uncompromising adherence of the parties to the initial goals and their persistence for a long time, while being perceived as irresolvable and indispensable for the society’s existence and survival. They harbor a well-organized system of societal beliefs and attitudes, shaping a “culture of conflict” that permeates various aspects of social life, making it particularly difficult to overcome entrenched beliefs in public opinion (Bar-Tal 2010a, 186-94). Unlike the Gramscian “cultural hegemony” (Gramsci 1971) based on the dominance of a certain narrative being the product of state and ruling elite-led propaganda, the concept of “culture of conflict” encompasses a comprehensive understanding of conflict-related narratives disseminated through top-down and bottom-up channels, shaping dominant culture within conflicting societies.

As the developing culture of conflict eventually becomes its primary driver, hostile actions of the opposite side reinforce existing negative beliefs about it and motivate the continuation of antagonism between parties. Since the image of opponents and beliefs about them are strongly attached to one’s worldview and identity, they tend to persist even when opponents overtly change their behavior (Stein 2005, 372). Finally, as the continuous demonization of the other justifies aggression and employs moral disengagement and self-centeredness, groups may resort to violence, up to the level of ethnic cleansing and genocide (Bar-Tal 2010a, 189). In these circumstances mobilizing support for violent conflict becomes easier than rallying

efforts for negotiation, as psychological roots and collective memories endure, being regularly activated by perceived threats (Bar-Tal, 2010b, 15-22).

Traditionally, wars and conflicts strengthen ingroup cohesion and outgroup hostility (Campbell 1998, Schmitt 1996). However, intractable and identity-driven conflicts are characterized with particularly strong societal solidarity against alternative opinions being interpreted as the ones undermining the pillars of people's identities. Brewer (2001, 25-27) explains the consolidation of societies through the concepts of "ingroup love" and "outgroup hate," wherein the public supports the dominant narrative and interests while harboring negative sentiments towards the perceived threat posed by the "other." This process of otherization may extend to those members of ingroup who sympathize with the "enemy" and to political groups who place "less emphasis on national identity" in their rhetoric (Shamir and Sagiv-Schifter 2006, 574). Those who resist the prevailing conflict narrative have their patriotism questioned in the respective societies; in extreme cases, they are labeled as traitors (Mac Ginty 2021, 53) and might face risks of alienation, job loss and other penalties (Schwebel 2005, 403). Consequently, individuals experiencing social pressure may opt for silence and refrain from public engagement, particularly during the active phase of conflict, when the fear of perceived threats consolidates societies around a common national idea.

Nevertheless, the transformation of deeply entrenched conflicts is possible through the spread of peace narratives, which challenge polarization, validate grievances of different groups, and encourage parties to take shared responsibility in addressing the conflict (Institute for Integrated Transitions 2021, 6). Unlike simplified conflict narratives strengthening polarization, peace narratives are complex, introducing nuances that might undermine the fixed perception of the conflict and be accepted with resistance in conflicting societies (Institute for Integrated Transitions 2021, 6). These narratives aim to transform negative

attitudes by evoking references to the history of peaceful coexistence, promoting positive memories, re-humanizing the opposite side, reciprocally recognizing grievances, criticizing irredentism and other destructive ideologies, as well as fostering compromise and mutual concessions. Constructing such narratives would imply evolving dialogues, acknowledging alternative and marginalized perspectives, thereby contributing to a richer narrative landscape that would create new opportunities for the prevention of future violence (Institute for Integrated Transitions 2021, 6).

While peace and conflict narratives can be designed both at a government and grassroot levels, top-down narratives shaped by policymakers, academia and media sources, may overwrite the narratives used by people in conflict-affected areas (Mac Ginty and Firchow 2016, 313). This argument has a particular significance for intractable conflicts characterized by deeply-rooted "cultures of conflict" that can only be transformed by relevant state policy and official and public rhetoric. Bar-Tal (2010b, 22) argues for the necessity of political leadership and media to adopt pragmatic approaches and restructure entrenched psychological frameworks to ensure the success of the peace process. To lessen the harmful impact of aggressive rhetoric spread by the groups "spoiling" the process, governments have the potential to denounce their actions and reaffirm commitment to peace goals (Bar-Tal 2010b, 22). As the process of narrative transformation brings risks and challenges, it requires a nuanced approach in taking gradual reorientation of rhetoric to minimize negative consequences. Subotić (2016, 624) suggests that choosing the strategy of selectively activating and deactivating certain elements within existing narratives and maintaining the overall narrative framework would preserve a sense of order, stability, and ontological peace.

The Construction of Public Attitudes in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict in 1994-2020

The socio-cultural fabric and prevailing narratives of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict have been deeply influenced by more than three decades of interethnic animosity. Some scholars define the onset of this process as starting from the late 1980s with the appeal of the Soviet of People's Deputies of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) for unification with Armenia (de Waal 2013), while others characterize the rise of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict as the retaliation for "the defeat of the Armenians at the hands of the Ottoman Turks during World War I" (Uzer 2012, 247-8) referring to the trauma of the Armenian Genocide, thus, equalizing it with the "Armenian-Turkish" conflict (Chorbajian, Donabedian and Mutafian 1994, 11). Additionally, some scholars refer to the cultural and religious differences that shaped the attitude of the peoples since the Middle Ages gradually leading to intermittent confrontations and a full-scale conflict (Garagozov and Kadyrova 2011). We find it relevant to focus on the formation of the enemy images in Armenia and Azerbaijan during the interwar period of 1994-2020 in order to analyze the impact of the policies of the two sovereign states, as well as social factors that shaped conflict narratives in the years of relative stability at the frontline paving the way to war in 2020.

Since the early years of independence and the end of the First Karabakh War in 1994, the cultivation of nationalist sentiments has played a critical role in building and sustaining a distorted perception of the "enemy" in Armenia and Azerbaijan. This solidified the maximalist stance of the two sides (Aliyeva, Minasyan, interviews) and became one of the main barriers to the peace discourse (Özkan 2008, 594). In many aspects, the state narratives mirrored each other, often relying on the utilization of conspiracy theories (Kucera 2019) and following the logic of "selective memory" to accentuate their own suffering, while ignoring the losses of the opposite side (Shafiyev 2007, Trupia 2017). Popular art and media promoted dehumanizing depictions of the "enemy," while the terms "Turk" or "Armenian" were widely used in a derogatory manner in local languages (Khachatryan 2010, Yusifli 2010). As the

“winner” and “victim” identities were deeply entrenched “both by the outcomes of war and the passage of time” (Broers 2019, 150), they intensified the existing stereotypes of the other side, while rarely being challenged or widely discussed in public (Aliyeva, Javadov, interviews). Within Bar-Tal's (2010b, 11) exploration of the characteristics of intractable conflicts, the evolving exclusionary narratives in both societies justified the outbreak and development of the conflict, delegitimizing the perceived rival society, and depicting one side as a single victim of the conflict. Yet the outcomes of the 1992-94 war, local political systems and historical background shaped this process in a specific way for each society with its own socio-psychological peculiarities.

In Azerbaijan, the manifestations of the evolving “culture of conflict” permeated nearly all the aspects of social life. The defeat in the First Karabakh War signified the country’s “national humiliation, wounded national identity, shattered ideals of territorial integrity, and the failure of their state project” (Yavuz and Gunter 2023, 5). The loss of territories fostered narratives portraying Armenians as existential threats to Azerbaijani statehood and national identity (de Waal 2013, 31; Javadov, interview). At the same time, the extensive number of refugees and IDPs (Yunusov 1997) and their dreadful living conditions recalled the scope of defeat in the national consciousness. According to Huseynov (2005, 26), the “defeat complex” and the victimization of the nation repeated those trends experienced earlier in Armenian society and shaped the dominant nationalist attitudes. The radicalization of such attitudes could be observed since the first months of the First Karabakh War, when the absolute majority of independent media spread the maximalist rhetoric supporting the expulsion of the Armenian population from Nagorno-Karabakh (Grigoryan and Rzayev 2005).

In the years following the war, the defeat and the loss of massive territory formed a strong belief in the necessity of a retaliatory war, which was channeled through government and

independent media (Grigoryan and Rzayev 2005), art and music using radical slogans and gaining wide popularity (Alakbar and Mirzayeva 2020). Finally, in 2001 the so-called "Charter of Four" published by the country's leading diplomats and supported by the majority of political parties defined the highest level of autonomy for Nagorno-Karabakh as the "red line" of the Azerbaijani compromise (Musabayov 2005) and stressed the necessity to resort to military actions in case the control of Baku over the lost lands was not restored through diplomatic means. With its patchwork geography of ethnically mixed settlements, Nagorno-Karabakh was seen as an "indivisible territory," while the city of Shusha/Shushi was considered as the cradle of Azerbaijani culture having a valuable place in the country's history and national identity (de Waal 2013, 197). Due to Shusha/Shushi's symbolic importance, the return of Azerbaijani refugees to the city and granting it a special status could serve as a potential confidence-building measure, which was discussed in academic circles (Yamskov 1996), but never implemented in practice.

While the effect of the war and the consequent collective trauma was significant, the government played a critical role in strengthening the negative image of Armenians through official rhetoric, state-controlled media and education system (Gamaghelyan and Rumyantsev 2021). In 1998 the adoption of the law "On the genocide of Azerbaijanis" commemorating the victims of the March 1918 massacre of Muslims was aimed at building the sense of victimhood in the public discourse (de Waal 2013, 97; Altstadt 2017, 40). In the following years, the rise of authoritarianism significantly affected the construction of conflict narratives, with censorship imposed on media and historiography in topics related to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Merlin et al 2023). The study of Alieva and Aslanov (2018, 197) showed the impact of the Azerbaijani state policy on the perceptions of conflict not only through the manipulation of nationalist sentiments, but also through control over the economy bolstered by oil and gas revenues and restrained free market relations. The state leadership repeatedly

called Yerevan and other parts of Armenia Azerbaijan's "historic lands" (President.az 2018) and affirmed its readiness to restore the territorial integrity "by any means" (President.az 2014). Meanwhile, despite the diplomatic promises to provide the highest level of autonomy to the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh (Crisis Group 2019), no detailed discussion of this scenario was held either in the Azerbaijani official media or any other domestic platform. Instead, the reestablishment of control over the territory, rather than the reanimation of pre-conflict intercommunal relations was prioritized in the official rhetoric and symbolism, when the complete map of the Azerbaijani territory including Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding districts was actively used in the public space (de Waal 2015, 129).

In contrast, in Armenia, conflict narratives were spread mostly through non-governmental channels, although wider political leadership would align their rhetoric with prevailing nationalist sentiments. President Ter-Petrosyan's appeal to compromise with Azerbaijan in the late 1990s received a backlash within the society and eventually led to his resignation (de Waal 2013, 270). As Gamaghelyan and Huseynova (2024, 9) note, the official discourse adapted to reflect the dominant ethnonationalist narrative, while "realist, as well as liberal discourses and calls to compromise became associated with defeatism." In the following two decades, the official rhetoric strengthened the memory of genocide linking it to Turkey-Azerbaijan ethnic ties, while building the enemy image of Azerbaijan as morally inferior and denying the possibility of concessions with regard to the independent status of Nagorno-Karabakh (Terzyan 2018). In the 2000s the statement of Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian using the term "occupied" for the territories around Nagorno-Karabakh was met in media with strong public criticism and condemnation (Grigoryan and Rzayev 2005, 50), leading to its replacement with a more popular phrasing of "liberated territories" (Merlin et al 2023). As the state and non-state agencies started using the map of Armenia merged not only with the territory of NKAO, but also with the surrounding Azerbaijani districts giving them Armenian

toponyms (Broers and Toal 2013), the borders and differentiation between the pre-conflict status of the territories gradually faded in people's consciousness. This trend continued after the Velvet Revolution of 2018, when the democratically elected Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan resorted to nationalist rhetoric to get wider public support several months before the 2020 war (Nikoghosyan and Ter-Matevosyan 2023).

However, the conflict narratives prevalent in Armenia had deeply entrenched societal roots in the perception of Azerbaijanis as an integral "part of the 'genocidal' Turkish nation," responsible for "mass killings and the demolition of Armenian culture" (Gamaghelyan 2010, 38; Javadov, Kirakosyan, interviews). People widely saw the possession of Karabakh as a "small victory against the larger backdrop of human and territorial losses in Western Armenia," while the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh were particularly radical in regards to the concession of territories around the former Soviet autonomy (Broers 2015, 559). Many members of the Armenian diaspora in the West perceived the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as a looming threat for another ethnic cleansing, solidifying their commitment to Karabakh (Barseghyan 2007, 288; Tölölyan 2007, 120). Additionally, in Armenia itself, the victory in the 1992-94 war led to its romanticization (Hovhannisyan 2021) and belief in the invincibility of the Armenian army (Grigoryan 2024).

The maximalist stance became deeply entrenched in the social fabric, expressed in the bottom-up censorship of alternative voices through the denial of academic discussion, as well as social pressure and threats against peace activists. As Bar-Tal (2010b, 13) argues, the extent to which individuals within a society adopt and share the described infrastructure of culture of conflict varies widely depending on a range of factors. While alternative voices attempted to change the writing of antagonistic narratives through history textbooks, public resistance witnessed in Armenia against the proposed changes to the education standards in

August 2020 exemplified the deep-rooted nature of conflict narratives in the wider society. The government was criticized for the alleged inclusion of elements not aligned with Armenian identity in the educational framework, while Lilit Mkrtchyan, the leader of the reform's Armenian History working group, faced personal attacks for purportedly incorporating ‘Turkish concepts’ into the history textbooks (Titizian 2020). Interview respondents referred to widely spread accusations of betrayal and, as a consequence, self-censorship of peace activists during the Gezi protests in Turkey in 2012 (Papikyan, Andreasyan interviews), as well as threats and dangers coming from the nationalist groups during the April war in 2016 (Kirakosyan interview). The trend persisted after the Velvet Revolution, with nationalist groups associated with former governments labeling and discrediting peacebuilders as traitors (Gamaghelyan 2022, 13).

The deeply rooted character of conflict narratives created a vicious cycle wherein nationalist state propaganda intensified resistance to compromise within societies, thereby constraining governments' ability to endorse alternative narratives. The dependence of the state leadership on the images shaped by their policy created the so-called “Frankenstein effect” similar to the consequences of the protagonist’s misguided actions in Shelley's novel ([1818] 1992) that made him a hostage of his own invention. Goddard (2006, 63) frames it as the “locked-in” effect, which traps governments in maximalist positions, and accentuates that “while a different legitimation strategy might open the door to compromise, it also undermines their political authority.” In the case of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, concessions over Nagorno-Karabakh at the negotiation table were perceived as jeopardizing the political careers of Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders (Remler 2016, 114; Özkan 2008, 592), while diverting from the majority's intransigent stance could be interpreted as a sign of betrayal, incompetence or weakness.

Compromising on the elements of identity might be politically costly for a state leadership (Freyburg and Richter 2010, 268–9) forcing governments to resort to nationalist rhetoric to strengthen their popularity and public support. As Nagorno-Karabakh holds symbolic significance for the modern national identities of both Azerbaijanis and Armenians (Cheterian 2008, 89), governments exhibited reluctance to transform elements of identities that could undermine their popularity in society. Instead, the inseparable attachment of identities to Nagorno-Karabakh determined political discourse and was used by the ruling elites as a tool not only to legitimize their authority, but also to restrict alternative narratives and the freedom of expression (Ayunts et al 2016, 548; Özkan 2008, 592; Tagiyev, Harutyunyan, interviews), becoming one of the main challenges to peacebuilding initiatives during the interwar period.

The Crisis of Peacebuilding Efforts Before and During the 2020 War

In the period preceding the Second Karabakh War, the formation of attitudes in Armenia and Azerbaijan was significantly influenced by governmental repressive policies, public censorship on peacebuilding endeavors, and institutional problems of local organizations. The marginalization of peace activists and the gradual debilitation of the foundations of local civil societies in the periods of authoritarianism, coupled with the structural misgivings of peacebuilding initiatives affected the limited discussion of alternative narratives within local societies. These attitudes manifested prominently during the 2020 war, with overwhelming public support for military actions in Azerbaijan and a prevailing stance in Armenia favoring the uncompromising status quo. Finally, as the war underscored the negligible impact of peacebuilding projects on local societies, it also revealed different stances towards the military actions among the peacebuilding community, necessitating the reevaluation of its engagement in the region.

The marginal character of peacebuilding and peace activism during the interwar period was shaped by several factors. On the one hand, throughout the three decades of the conflict, the nationalist narrative enjoyed robust institutional backing and wielded different instruments of propaganda, from education systems, academia and historiography to state and non-state media, cinematography and literature (Gamaghelyan and Rumyantsev 2021, 323; Minasyan interview). In the study on the evolvement of the culture of conflict, Bar-Tal (2010b, 18) highlights those constructs as highly important tools to create mechanisms that ensure societal adherence to conflict-supporting narratives, maintaining collective memory and shared emotions while rejecting alternative peace-promoting narratives. Similarly, in the case of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, peace practitioners had no access to mass media and other widespread mechanisms of knowledge production and dissemination. According to Abbasova (interview):

> *Peace activism in both of the countries failed, because it was happening on the sidelines, not reaching bigger masses, and because the peace narrative can only survive if it is accompanied by decision makers following the same path, sharing the challenges, and addressing the needs and fears of the communities involved.*

In the following years, social media exacerbated the dehumanization of the 'other' on a wider scale, considering its outreach capacity (Geybullayeva 2012). Despite a number of academic publications and objective research on the conflict questioning antagonistic narratives, they could not attract the attention of a wider audience or influence the state-controlled peace process. The efforts of some intelligentsia representatives to "rehumanize" the opposite side not only failed to receive popular support in their home countries, but led to accusations of betrayal of their own people's interests. In a broader sense, public and peer pressure was one

of the reasons aggravating the weakness of peace activism (Azizov, interview). According to Dallakyan (interview):

> *Through the transgression of boundaries such as questioning the status quo and the rationality of the state approach to the conflict, problematizing the nationalist ideology, demanding transparency and accountability from the state for the closed decision-making process, an anti-militarist person turns into an "internal enemy," which is even worse than the external enemy, since s/he is "one of us" and s/he threatens the posed necessity for warfare.*

The limited and fragmented activity of civil societies in the region caused another obstacle to the transformation of the dominant opinions in the conflicting societies. While civil societies typically play an important role in the process of conflict transformation (Paffenholz 2010), in Azerbaijan and Armenia, political and structural constraints hindered the activity of civil society organizations, including those related to peacebuilding. Although the short period of democratization and the development of civil societies in the 1990s paved the way for grassroots initiatives and succeeded in a number of humanitarian efforts, including the exchange of prisoners of war (Gregorian 2020), the following decades of authoritarian regimes curbed this process, bringing the intensity and content of the informal dialogue between the conflict parties in the 2010s to its lowest level since the onset of the conflict (Yerevan Press Club and Yeni Nesil 2019, 4). In Azerbaijan, 2014 legislation imposed heavy restrictions on the registration of civil society organizations (De Mares 2023), limiting the foreign funding of civil society and peacebuilding activities in particular. In the following years, several cases of accusations of cooperation with the Armenian government were leveled against some peacebuilders (Abbasov 2014), extending the "otherization" strategy to the civil society sector. At the same time, in Armenia, while the 2018 Velvet Revolution

deepened the gap in the democratic development of the two states, general progress in the activities of civil society organizations had a limited effect on peacebuilding initiatives. In the aftermath of the 2020 war, Armenian civil society organizations received accusations from local politicians and public figures of undermining statehood and acting as "foreign agents," which ultimately forced local organizations to maintain a low profile and evade connections with public and state officials (Freedom House 2021, 26-29).

The institutional limitations of peacebuilding organizations became another significant challenge for their activity. The overarching technocratic paradigm inherent in global peacebuilding initiatives supported the origins of such restrictions, including the standardization of operating procedures and the privileging of bureaucratic processes over competitor processes (Mac Ginty and Firchow 2016, 311). In the Armenian-Azerbaijani context, the institutionalization of peace activism fueled tendencies to consolidate actors into large clusters and professionalized NGOs (Beraia et al 2019; Ishkanian et al 2023) and led to the "monopolization of resources by a few and the exclusion or marginalization of others" (Bath and Gamaghelyan 2023, 14-16). Such initiatives limited the involvement of independent peace activists (Javadov, interview) being constrained to a small group of Western-educated, NGO-based circles with little capacity to act on their own (Virabyan, interview). Being held mostly in English, or in a heavily sophisticated local language, the anti-militarist discourses became elitist and could not resonate with the everyday lives of the local societies (Ghukasyan, Simonyan, Yengibaryan, interviews). Javadov (interview) elaborates on the regional peacebuilding initiatives that did not seek societal transformation, but rather adhered to the donors' priorities:

> *These initiatives usually focus on abstract conceptions of peace and cooperation and not the painful discussions that we need in order to heal one another. This is*

> *further strengthened by the Western donors' lack of personalized approach to the conflict transformation. Without engaging with the complex factors and perceptions (emanating from one's background, personal experiences, lived realities and ideology), we will simply engage in (...) vague peace calls which will not have any real transformative effects.*

As the structural problems of peacebuilding aggravated the marginalization of peace activists and peacebuilders, they gradually became sidelined by prevailing warmongering narratives (Kirakosyan, Papikyan, Yengibaryan, interviews). According to Yengibaryan (interview):

> *Right-wing ideologies, or (those with a) militarist worldview, are more related to human basic demands. They have succeeded to directly connect their narratives, announcements and texts to the everyday needs of people.*

The Second Karabakh War unveiled the unconditional support for the official militaristic agendas (Gasimov, Javadov, Minasyan, interviews), along with the systemic problems of peace activism and peacebuilding. Following the publication of several anti-war statements (Azerbaijani Leftist Youth 2020, Epress.am 2020, OC Media 2020), peace activism exposed its fragmentation, as the activists identified their belonging to different ideological backgrounds, from liberals and feminists to leftists and anarchists (Ghukasyan, Kirakosyan, Simonyan, Harutyunyan, interviews). According to research participants (Ghukasyan, Harutyunyan, Simonyan, interviews), peacebuilding agents never worked together as a unified group of people heading towards the same aim, or having a common agenda (Kirakosyan, interview). The respondents pointed to the existence of different imaginaries of peace among those working in the field, and as Ghukasyan (interview) stated:

> *I almost want to say there was no community. There were individuals. There were organizations that worked and did projects, but there was no unity or a sense of unitedness towards a goal, and I think peace was not clearly defined in Armenia.*

Yet the main challenge for the peacebuilding community was related to the nationalist rhetoric of some representatives of peacebuilding initiatives delivered in their public statements and social media activities (Gamaghelyan and Rumyantsev 2021, 331). One of the Azerbaijani interviewees, who had been involved in peacebuilding since the early 1990s, explained his support for the 2020 war with the failure of negotiations or any intentions of compromise from the winning Armenian side considering the maximalist attitudes of their society and even some of the Armenian peacebuilders (Hasanli, interview). Meetings with the participation of nationalist colleagues brought many of the Azerbaijani peacebuilders to the perception of public diplomacy as a "waste of time and money" and raised the argument of the inevitability of the war (Rzayev, 2021). Yet, despite his support for the military actions, Hasanli (interview) stressed the shift in his pro-military stance after the Azerbaijani army retook control over Shusha/Shushi as "there was no more reason to continue (the fighting)."

In Armenia, some peacebuilders also used bellicose rhetoric in their statements and publications on social media. While the number of Armenian signatories of anti-war petitions exceeded the Azerbaijani ones, their stance regarding the conflict showed the complexity of peace as a concept in many cases being limited to the support for the status quo. As the signatories declared their opposition to war, in their social media posts they also called for the "recognition of Artsakh," or the de facto Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR), without differentiating the territory of the former NKAO and the surrounding seven Azerbaijani districts taken by Armenian military forces in the early 1990s and added to the entity within the framework of the 2006 NKR constitution (Kucera 2018).

In essence, public discourse observed during the 2020 war underscored the lack of critical reassessment of responsibilities of the conflicting sides. Moreover, it showed the existing differences in the interpretation of the concept of peace in both societies (Harutyunyan, Ghukasyan, Simonyan interviews), as the Armenian "winning" side was satisfied with the pre-2020 status quo, while the Azerbaijani "defeated" side demanded its revision. The interview findings demonstrate a discernible change in the positions of respondents following the outcome of the war. While some Azerbaijani interviewees admitted the shift to an anti-militarist stance after the war, some Armenian respondents interpreted the concept of peace as utopian and detached from reality. According to Papikyan (interview):

> *It is one thing when you are somehow the so-called winning side and you have some romantic ideas about peace and it's an entirely different situation when you are on the losing side and your relatives died and you still have to think about peace and there are a lot of things that make me reconsider the realities.*

Public Attitudes in the Aftermath of the War and New Challenges to Peacebuilding

While the post-war period was expected to create conditions that would bolster the Azerbaijani government's interest in establishing a relationship with the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh (Broers 2021, 15), the following developments showed the persistence of militarist constructs and nationalist narratives in the state and public discourse. Although some initial efforts for independent dialogue initiatives emerged in the first months following the war, they failed to gain widespread support in the societies. The situation was further aggravated by continuous clashes on the border, mass casualties and destruction, all of which ultimately undermined arguments in favor of reconciliation (Andreasyan, Papikyan, interviews).

As the 2020 war had different impacts on the local publics with the shifting roles of the "defeated" sides and new losses, the post-war challenges to peacebuilding had specific nuanced characteristics for each society. In Armenia, the 2020-21 series of protests also known as the "March of Dignity" demanded to nullify the ceasefire agreement of November 2020 and resume hostilities (Radio Azatutyun 2021). However, Pashinyan's reelection in June 2021 and the failure of the protests to attract wide support exposed dominant public attitudes, including social awareness of military power imbalance, as well as the growing conflict fatigue. At the same time, the return of the districts around Nagorno-Karabakh back to Azerbaijan as the immediate consequence of the war opened the space for discussion of "the topics that had remained taboo for the last thirty years" (Andreasyan, interview):

> *Before people were talking like nationalists, they would never talk about, let's say, seven districts, or Aghdam being destroyed, or Azerbaijani refugees, and so on. In just two days after this agreement* [the 9 November Ceasefire Statement] *was signed, people started talking about these issues. It was like a "Pandora's box" opening, and everything came up to the surface.*

Nonetheless, the protracted conflict and subsequent failures in trust-building between the parties led to an environment characterized by growing self-censorship and wariness towards dialogue initiatives (de Waal 2021, 16). Yengibaryan (interview) elaborates on this idea:

> *For us, at a state level I do not see the danger of repression, but the sensitivity in talking about these topics has intensified, implying that in many cases people who hold or believe in these anti-militarist ideologies do not talk about it very much because of self-censorship,* [rather] *that there are outcomes of real danger. The component of self-censorship is very important in this case, especially in the modern world with social media.*

Despite people's support and the victory of Pashinyan's government in the 2021 election, several of the prime minister's statements regarding the necessity of "lowering the bar" on demands of claiming the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh and recognition of Azerbaijani territorial integrity caused a wave of discontent in the Armenian public and opposition (Avedian 2022). Although protests demanding Pashinyan's resignation (Reuters 2022) failed to mobilize a critical mass, they once again underscored the existing challenges of peacebuilding efforts within a polarized society. The following developments along the frontline, including incursions into Armenian territories in 2022 (Crisis Group 2023a), and the September 2023 offensive resulting in the mass exodus of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh (Radio Free Europe 2023), led to another wave of protests, while the erosion of public trust towards the Pashinyan government (IRI 2024) could be explained through the prism of the post-2020 instability and its impact on the Armenian political and social life.

In Nagorno-Karabakh, the population was deeply affected by the 2020 war, as more than 20,000 Armenians had to leave their homes (Crisis Group 2021, 18), while the frontline moved from the outskirts of the Azerbaijani villages to the Armenian civilian areas (Crisis Group 2021, 9). The damage caused to the Armenian cultural monuments represented as the "heritage of Caucasian Albania" (Caucasus Heritage Watch 2023a) intensified people's fear of forced assimilation by the Azerbaijani government. Finally, despite Baku's initial engagement in dialogue with the representatives of the breakaway region in February 2023 (Isayev and Shahverdyan 2023), continuous instability, Azerbaijani rhetoric of "reintegration" without giving any clear guarantees of security, the de facto closure of the Lachin corridor in December 2022 and the imposition of a blockade limiting the free transit of people and goods through the corridor undermined the potential of confidence-building measures. At the same time, bolstered by public opinion, the leadership of the unrecognized republic announced any scenario of future integration of the territory into Azerbaijan as an unacceptable "red line"

(Armenpress 2022a). Moreover, nationalist narratives were supported by the de facto government, with the local parliament adopting a law recognizing all the lands taken during 2020, including the Azerbaijani districts outside former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast, as “occupied” (Armenpress 2022b).

Conversely, in Azerbaijan, regaining control over the territories in and around Nagorno-Karabakh after the 2020 war revealed the level of destruction and heavy looting of towns since the early 1990s, causing indignation in the local public (de Waal 2021, 15). The images of the demolished Azerbaijani cultural heritage of the region (Caucasus Heritage Watch 2023b), along with the casualties caused by the extensive number of landmines (Crisis Group 2023b) incensed domestic attitudes. The process of demining the territory, which could take more than 10 years, became the biggest obstacle to the resettlement of the displaced population, while the mine locator maps handed over by the Armenian government were only about 25% accurate (Cookman 2021). The public attitude was strengthened by the government’s policy of the glorification of war and victory, the opening of a dehumanizing Trophy Park in Baku as well as the official rhetoric sustaining the language of enmity, and other state actions showing little prospect for reconciliation (Cheterian 2021). Notably, during the post-war period Baku refused to grant any kind of autonomy to Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians, with state officials proclaiming that Nagorno-Karabakh “no longer exists as a concept” (Azernews 2021).

The 2022-23 surveys held several months before the September 2023 offensive showed the alignment of maximalist state rhetoric with public opinion. Notably, survey findings reflected prevailing societal stances on conflict resolution, with Azerbaijani respondents predominantly favoring total Azerbaijani control over Nagorno-Karabakh with no autonomy (Agora 2023), while Armenian and Nagorno-Karabakh respondents leaned towards independence or

unification with Armenia when asked on the status for Nagorno-Karabakh needed to settle the conflict (CRRC 2022). While the majority of Azerbaijani respondents expressed support for the normalization of relations with Armenia, they also remained skeptical about the prospects of coexistence in the near future (Agora 2023). Similarly, the majority of Armenian and Nagorno-Karabakh respondents answered negatively to the survey question on their readiness for peaceful coexistence with Azerbaijanis and felt "completely negative" about "interactions between the Artsakh (unrecognized Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh) officials and the Azerbaijani officials" (CRRC 2022, 13-14).

Radical attitudes stem from high levels of distrust and undesired prospects of coexistence, particularly characteristic for the Azerbaijani and Nagorno-Karabakh societies. The governments bolstered such narratives by choosing alternatives to negotiated agreements based on their calculations of strategic alliances and power imbalances. In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh's de facto authorities, belief in Moscow's support kept their stance intransigent at the negotiation table with the Azerbaijani officials, while Stepanakert/Khankendi was claiming for the international mandate to be given to the Russian peacekeepers (Stepanian 2022). In contrast, for Azerbaijan the absolute military dominance and geopolitical advantages of cooperation with major international actors involved in the region led to Baku's inflexible policy in its negotiations with the breakaway region, followed by complete blockade of the region, the establishment of the Lachin checkpoint in April and initiating the military offensive in September of 2023. The limitations in Track I diplomacy and the failure to build confidence-building measures among the societies undermined the potential for the restoration of trust between people, while the ongoing deprivations, fear and antagonism further traumatized the local population of Nagorno-Karabakh. Therefore, during the offensive, the prospects for the Armenian population to imagine coexistence were nil, and

despite the official rhetoric of Baku inviting them to live under the Azerbaijani legislation, it ultimately led to people's mass evacuation and exodus.

The failure to mitigate maximalist attitudes during the interwar period precipitated the 2020 war, the following years of political turbulence and escalations in 2020-2023. While it might be challenging to expect positive conflict transformation in the circumstances of consolidated authoritarianism in Azerbaijan and political instability in Armenia, the good faith of the winning party (Hasanli, interview), as well as the activity of peacebuilding community aimed at the stimulation of public discussions and the renouncement of "selective memory" narratives can significantly contribute to the ongoing peace process. Although seemingly minor within the prevailing context of the conflict, the package of goodwill gestures undertaken by Armenian and Azerbaijani authorities in December 2023 when prisoners were exchanged for Armenia's lifting of its veto on Azerbaijan's bid to host the COP29 climate conference (Krivosheev 2024), exemplify how collaborative efforts between the opposing sides can potentially build a basis more conducive to peace in the region.

Conclusion

The Second Karabakh War of 2020, followed by the post-war developments and the September 2023 military offensive, underscored the impasse in negotiations and the enduring crisis in peacebuilding efforts. The concept of the "culture of conflict" explains this failure with the permeation of conflict-related narratives in different aspects of social life, imposing major barriers to the activity of peacebuilding initiatives. Both government-driven processes and bottom-up social dynamics reinforced prevailing nationalist sentiments through the promotion of "selective memory" and moral superiority over the "enemy," accentuating the one-sided victimhood, while ignoring its own crimes and demonizing the "other."

In the years preceding the war, the Armenian and Azerbaijani governments employed a range of propagandistic tools to solidify the unyielding position of the societies on the conflict. The perception of Nagorno-Karabakh as an important element of identity in both societies, coupled with collective traumas such as the Armenian Genocide and Azerbaijan's defeat in the First Karabakh War, entrenched societal reluctance to pursue dialogue and compromise. However, while different channels shaped maximalist attitudes over the conflict, in Azerbaijan the process took place mostly through the top-down state policy, while in Armenia it was shaped predominantly through the bottom-up social developments.

The situation was aggravated by structural deficiencies in peacebuilding efforts, including the constraints on the activities of local civil society organizations, the technocratic turn of peacebuilding in the region, elitism among involved actors, and fragmentation within the peace activist community. Within societies, civil society representatives were labeled as “foreign agents,” while liberal peacebuilding organizations were consolidated into large clusters thus limiting the credibility of peace activists. The Second Karabakh War unveiled the existing challenges in peacebuilding activity, including the marginalization and stigmatization of peace activists and the rift in the peacebuilding community, where some of its members took openly bellicose positions. These divisions deepened following the 2020 war, as interpretations of peace diverged between the “winning” and “losing” sides of the conflict.

The war yielded different consequences for the conflicting societies, bringing new traumas and opposite understanding of the concept of peace. Azerbaijan promoted its vision of a “victor’s peace” through the glorification of the war, and enforcement of the Armenian side to make further concessions, while in Armenia the 2020 defeat rekindled the memory of genocide, and intensified perceptions of one-sided victimhood. At a social level, the options

for compromise received minimal support, as public attitudes hardened following the ongoing clashes, casualties, and cultural heritage destruction, forcing pro-peace voices to self-censorship and silence. Finally, the mass exodus of the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 underscored the deadlock in the peace processes and the failure to foster dialogue and reconciliation between the two societies.

As conflict narratives remain entrenched and peace narratives unpopular, the potential signing of a peace treaty between the parties would offer limited prospects for regional peace. Creating inclusive spaces for interaction within public and peacebuilding communities is imperative for fostering innovative strategies and broadening the dissemination of peace narratives. Critically, reassessing dominant nationalist rhetoric, meeting basic societal demands, engaging in self-criticism, and reevaluating the conflict's history are essential steps towards transforming social attitudes and cultivating a shared narrative of war and peace that will facilitate reconciliation and rebuild trust between societies.

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