Local Dimensions of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

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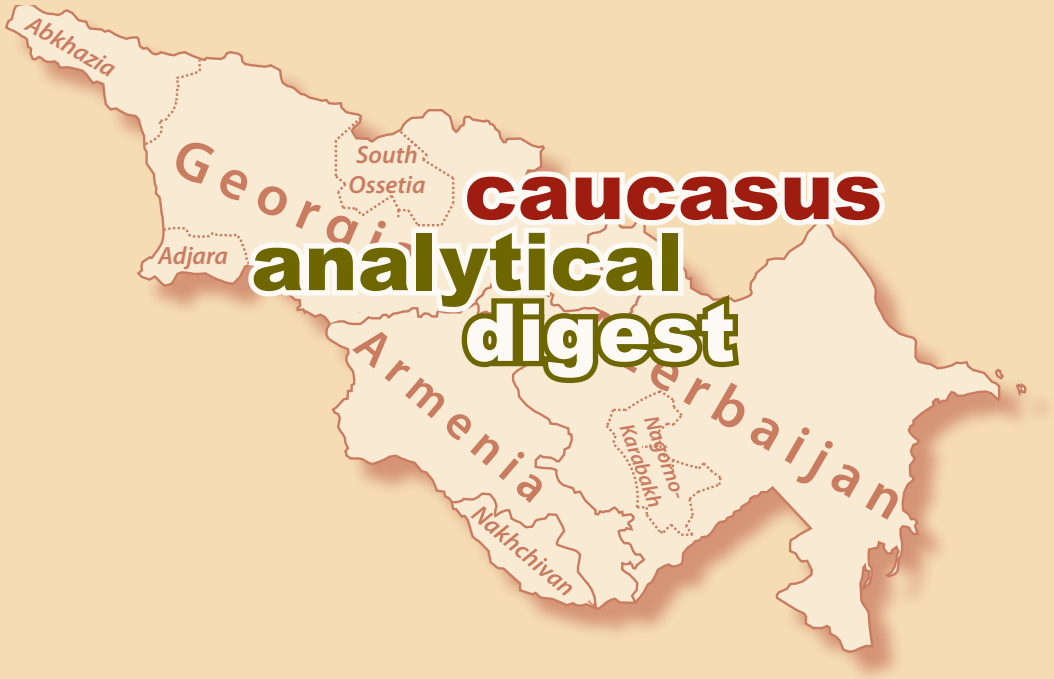

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LOCAL DIMENSIONS OF THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT

Special Editor: Franziska Smolnik (German Institute for International and Security Affairs)

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Three Perspectives on Local Dimensions of the Conflict in and around Nagorno-Karabakh

Introduction by the Special Editor, Franziska Smolnik
(German Institute for International and Security Affairs)

On September 27, 2020, the conflict in and around Nagorno-Karabakh escalated into war. It was the most severe escalation of the protracted conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis over this disputed region since the early 1990s. The 2020 war was ultimately halted after six weeks of fighting by a Russian-brokered trilateral agreement in the night of November 9/10, 2020. During and after the 2020 war, many commentators and analysts have concentrated on mulling geopolitical gains and losses as well as regional (re-)configurations, in particular as concerns Russian and Turkish influence in the South Caucasus. Regional actor constellations, however, represent only one dimension, on which the conflict has an impact. Given its protracted entrenchment, an Armenian–Azerbaijani "enduring rivalry"[1], the conflict reflects on multiple levels, ranging from the (extra-)regional and international, the domestic and societal, to the individual. The three perspectives assembled in this special issue share a gaze that goes beyond the balance of power in the region. By bringing together approaches that zoom in on local effects and socio-political dynamics, this special issue highlights dimensions of the conflict that easily escape a lens of regional power competition. The contributions each follow an individual approach; accordingly, each boasts a distinct angle, which is not least grounded in the authors' specific disciplinary backgrounds. Responsibility regarding terminology used lies with the individual author/s. As with all issues of the Caucasus Analytical Digest, the views expressed in these essays are solely those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the editors.

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1 This concept was introduced into the academic debate on the conflict by Laurence Broers, cf. Broers, Laurence (2019): Armenia and Azerbaijan: Anatomy of a Rivalry, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

"Securitization/De-Securitization" and Attitudes in Azerbaijan in Reaction to the Karabagh Conflict

By Leila Alieva (University of Oxford)

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Abstract

The article explores the securitization/de-securitization processes and attitudes towards the conflict in Azerbaijan in the periods before, during, and after the 2020 conflict in Karabagh. An earlier study (Alieva and Aslanov, 2018) revealed that even under conditions of strict autocratic rule, there has been a diversification of societal attitudes depending on sets of views and ideologies – from conservative and (pre)modern to liberal and post-modern – during the "status quo" period, demonstrating de-securitization potential from civil society actors (NGOs, political opposition, independent intellectuals). The recent flare-up in Karabagh shows, however, that neither favorable attitudes towards peace among the Azerbaijani elite, nor democratic changes in Armenia automatically immunize society against military/political mobilization and securitization if they are not indicators of deeper human and political emancipation and if the grievances, such as human rights violations, ethnic cleansing, violation of international borders, and/or war crimes, are not legally redressed internationally and/or domestically. In turn, the unsustainable nature of the attempts at "top-down" de-securitization, or that from formal authority, is affected by the fact that it does not "unmake securitization's non-democratic, exceptional and exclusionary logic" (Aradau, 2004), but rather replicates it. The official "speech acts" reflect the utilization of the external threat against domestic opponents for purposes of blame avoidance[1] and, while calling for peaceful reconstruction, hint at the possibility of future war. Yet, even under conditions of strict autocracy, the internet and social networks provide for the silenced voices and for the multiplicity of agents challenging the monopoly on (de-)securitization of the formal authority, reinforced by the infelicities (amounting to flaws) of the post-war governance.

Introduction

The most recent flare-up of military conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, starting on 27 September 2020 and referred to as the "Forty-four Day War" or the "Second Karabagh war", has been unprecedented in its scale, the weapons used and the loss of at least 6,000 lives on both sides. Many factors contributed to the outbreak of hostilities, including the failure of the peace talks within the OSCE Minsk Group, which has made no substantial progress in 26 years and has rather preserved the status quo, the non-implementation of the UN resolutions on withdrawal of Armenian troops from the occupied territories[2], legitimization of the military gains in the negotiations process as a bargaining tool (Alieva, 2020), intense acquisition of weapons and boosting of military budgets on both sides, a diminished role of the US and passive role of the EU, increased activities of Turkey as an independent actor in the Middle East, and Russia's ambitions as a critical factor in the region. One of the most profound changes in the region was the "velvet" revolution in Armenia, which brought to power the younger and more popular Nicol Pashinian (Alieva, 2018; De Waal, 2018), whose policy after the initial "thaw" in rhetoric has increasingly contributed to escalation of hostilities. Seeking to sustain popular support, but at the same time having to compete with hardliners (such as Karabagh clans), in the escalating cycle of securitizing moves he eventually resorted to even more nationalist rhetoric and policy, reinforced by a statement from then Defence Minister David Tonoyan calling for "more wars for more territories" (Aravot, 30 March, 2019). In addition, the domestic factors of the flare-up in Azerbaijan – accumulated problems caused by the combined effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the sharp fall in world oil prices (Alieva, 2020, Guliyev, 2021) – were "re-directed" to the liberation of lands, the occupation of which in the 1990s caused nearly 700,000 people to be internally displaced.

Autocracy/Democracy and De-Securitization Potential from Below

The lack of substantial progress in negotiations led to a number of publications pointing to the absence of democracy as one of the impediments to resolving the

1 For instance, in his recent speech, President Aliyev accused the National Council (the main opposition bloc) of being "foreign funded" and "serving Armenians." https://www.turan.az/ext/srch/2021/3/free/politics_news/en/2000.htm/1616152601_nySLRnkJ-1.htm/20/opposition

2 1993 UN Security Council resolutions: https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/or/13508.htm

Karabagh conflict. Developed in the area of security studies and from a constructivist point of view, the securitization theory stated that "in naming a certain development a security problem the "state" can claim a special right, one that will in the final instance always be defined by the state and its elites", and extended the concept of securitization to the other sectors, first of all to society. It argued that "power holders can always try to use the instrument of a securitization of the issue to gain control over it" (Waever, 2007:73). Aradau (2002, 2004) points to the inherently undemocratic nature of securitization as a "speech act", which elevates the issue from everyday politics to the level of the exclusionary and suggests understanding of de-securitization as "emancipation", or radical "democratization" of security. In such context, the emancipation "tackles the concept of democratic politics and the issue of institutional authority in claiming the voice of the silent" (Aradau, 2004:397). Our study from 2018 (Alieva and Aslanov, 2018) is based on in-depth interviews aimed at exploring how autocracy/democracy affects attitudes towards conflict in the process of securitization/de-securitization. We argued [3] that – to borrow an expression from Aradau – a "democratic politics of emancipation" unleashes the societal processes leading to de-securitization, and we examined this de-securitization through social transformation and changes in ideology. The latter transforms the perception of threat from its pre-modern and modern forms into a post-modern one, which is one of the ways to transfer a problem from one level of discourse and threat perception to another, partly resonating with a shift of Ingelhart and Welzel's (2007) classification of values to materialist and post-materialist. Here, the role of human emancipation is also stressed as primary, which can be understood as socio-cultural changes, leading to changes in public values, which in turn press for democracy. In other words, we argue that it allows the reduction of tension caused by confrontational and exclusive logics, themselves the result of rigidity of narratives, through transforming those logics and narratives, moving from enmity and win-lose thinking to viewing conflict through more universal, forward-thinking and global perspectives.

The in-depth interviews we conducted among members of civil society, politicians and average citizens allowed us to distinguish between groups of respondents based on their attitudes towards physical borders, geographical symbols, and exclusivity/multiplicity of identity, as well as towards basic liberal values such as women's and minority rights, etc. The results showed that more liberal and post-modern groups preferred the alternative and creative solutions, moving away from "win-lose" solutions and instead preferring those which transcend borders and overcome the power of geographic and material symbols, for instance EU integration. No less important are economic liberalization and market reforms in leading to the formation of free economic groups and globalized relations, which promote the ability to look beyond the typical 'win-lose' concept and traditional understanding of threats. Yet, the majority of respondents remained sceptical of the possibility of a peaceful resolution to the Karabagh conflict, apparently resulting from the lack of progress after two decades of peace talks. The broader attitudes and transformation of the mindsets of the society creates a favorable basis for development of alternative approaches to conflict and the resolution thereof. While this transformation may help to prevent war in cases of contested territories or historical disputes, the absence of redressing of current grievances creates another level of tension. The motivation to war results from the interaction between ideology (or rationality) and emotions. Although limited by the civil conflicts, it has been shown that the combination of indignation with radical ideologies is a crucial factor in sparking violent collective action (Costalli and Ruggieri, 2015). Emotions in such cases work as triggering mechanisms. Consequently, it was easy to mobilize collective action through the act of securitization from the formal authority due to the widespread indignation with the unaddressed displacement of hundreds of thousands and occupation of seven regions bordering Nagorno-Karabagh in 1991-1994. The surveys showed unresolved conflicts to be a priority both among the public (CRRC, 2013) and for political leaders (Aslanov and Samedzade, 2017). In the absence of reliable surveys during the war and post-war periods, social networks and e-media were the study's main sources of supporting data.

Accumulated Grievances and Limited Formal Authority: July 2020 Hostilities and the Second Karabagh War

The resumption of fighting in July 2020 caused spontaneous thousands-strong public rallies in support of the army, but these did not mention or address the president. The personalized symbol of protest mobilization, General Polad Hashimov, was previously unknown to the general public, but his killing during the July hostilities (combined with his reputation as a person of integrity and decency) led to his rapid popular heroification. The mobilization did not involve any organized force and was illustrative of the degree of the accumulated grievances caused by the unresolved conflict. The absence of slogans addressing the president at the rallies also showed that the authority of the incumbent was limited. More-

3 The research conducted in 2015-2017 included structured interviews with 40 public civil and political leaders, journalists, and average citizens.

over, the rally was used by the leadership to silence its critics and launch a new wave of repressions by arresting dozens of opposition activists, many of whom did not even attend the rally.

The unaddressed issue of the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people from the occupied seven regions in violation of the internationally recognized borders (and four UN resolutions) lent popular legitimacy to the military nationalist mobilization in September 2020 and broadened support for the war across the political spectrum. This allowed – along with the limitations on internet during the Forty-four Day War – temporary monopolization of "securitization" processes by the president. The power of the factor of unaddressed grievances was also reflected in the large number and ethnic diversity of volunteers for the front and their readiness to fight (Azernews, 12.10.2020). The predominant attitudes reflecting grievances were perhaps best expressed in this Azerbaijani Facebook comment, posted in the middle of the Second Karabagh war: "Because of 140,000 Armenians, one million were deprived of their homes, not to mention the occupation and tragedies. Because 140,000 did not reconcile with cultural autonomy, 400,000 were deprived of their right to live in the villages they were born in and expelled from their homes in Armenia, while 600,000 became refugees in their own land. And there are still those who blame us. I do not need such an international justice" (10 October 2020). Other similar comments came to similar conclusions, for instance "I despise such a Western 'justice'!" (17 October 2020). The advances in regaining control of the occupied regions were cheered by many Facebook users, including Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), some of whom are prominent leaders of civil society and who left comments like "…now I am not a refugee anymore" (CNIS Digest, 26.10.2020), "I am from Khojali, but [have never seen] my homeland" (CNIS Digest, 15.10.2020), etc. The opposition parties issued statements supporting the war as being in full compliance with international law and UNSC resolutions (CNIS Digest, 29.10.2020).

The perceived asymmetry in attitudes towards the parties in the conflict on the parts of Western media and politicians was often interpreted in Azerbaijani society as being biased in favor of Armenia, not least because of its being Christian (Shafiyev, 2020). The well-known journalist and activist-in-exile Emin Milli, commenting on UNESCO's repeated refusals to send a fact-finding mission to the occupied territories, wrote on his Facebook timeline: "This is a disgusting level of hypocrisy, discrimination based on religion, nationality and ethnic origin" (FB, 28.12.2020). Indeed, some public figures and politicians in Europe called their followers to protect the "oldest Christian nation in the world" (see, for instance, the Facebook comment by Czech politician and Chamber of Deputies member Karel Schwarzenberg). The prominent human rights defender and investigative journalist Khadija Ismayil addressed her Western colleagues on her Facebook page: "Why, when the foreigners fight for Armenia, it is normal? … Your biased approach also prevents peace, guys!" (FB, 08.10.2020). The popular commentator-in-exile Ramis Yunus called the reaction to the war "a litmus test of the attitudes of many observers" (FB Digest, 29.10.2020).

Top-Down (De-)Securitization: Sources of "Speech Act" failure

Certain classic examples of applied securitization theory point to the conditions under which securitization fails (Buzan and Waever, 2003), such as for instance the depoliticization of the public in the last years of the Soviet Union (Prozorov, 2009). The recent developments in the Karabagh conflict allow us to analyze how this desecuritization from above, or "speech act", is challenged by a variety of factors. The partial redress of grievances through the war, including the return of seven regions, has boosted the ratings of President Aliyev (Synovitz, 17.12.2021), who soon after declared that "the conflict will remain in the past" (Press Conference, 11.01.2021). As the statement was based on an actual change of the status quo and a certain degree of redress of grievances, it had at least temporary power of de-securitization. Yet, the word "victory" has been used in all official rhetoric, spreading to and replicated in the public domain (notably social networks), promoting the paradigm of competition, or "win/lose" logic. This dualism was further enhanced by the military uniform of the president; as well-known opposition leader Tofig Yagublu pointed out, "If the 'war went to the hell', why did the president still not take off his military uniform?" (CNIS Digest, 25.03.2021).

In addition to the already-mentioned factors, the exclusive nature of (de-)securitization imposes limits on the effect it may have on reduction of the public's perception of threat. From the very first days of the war, the mobilization against the external enemy was characterized by duality, as not just foreign but also "domestic enemies" were targeted – i.e., the opposition, which did not join the dialogue with government officials. While this exclusion might appear a shrewd strategy of blame avoidance, it deepened societal divisions in the post-war period,[4] along with other challenges to de-securitiza-

4 One of the popular public opinion makers, lawyer Aslan Ismayilov, in a video appeal to his followers stressed the alarming levels of polarization, aggressiveness, and hostility within Azerbaijani society (27 March 2021 FB post, Aslan Ismayilov); https://www.facebook.com/watch/

tion. The de-securitization understood as emancipation deconstructs the non-democratic nature of securitization by giving voice to "security have-nots" (Dunn and Wheeler, 2004) and by applying principles of universality and recognition. Thus, the conditions for "emancipation" provided by a relatively free internet in the post-war period ensured alternative voices and a steady flow of information reflecting the situation on the ground, first of all the activities of Russian peacekeepers. After their arrival, the idea of peacekeepers violating Azerbaijan's sovereignty dominated the social networks – at least the debates of the most active part of Azerbaijani society. The comments included messages like "One cannot trust Russia" (FB, 30.11.2021), "Russian flags in Azerbaijan is a tragedy for the country" (26.11.2020), and "Russia behaves like an aggressor and Baku keeps silent" (23.11.2020). But probably the most serious challenge came from the faults of the government and bureaucratic machine in addressing the social problems of the war, those who were killed or handicapped and their families. Social networks circulated the personal stories of the war's participants, videos of protests of the families of those who died in the war – victims, in the minds of Azerbaijanis, of bureaucratic indifference.[5] All of this affected the authority of the "messenger" by making part of the Azerbaijani public more open to ideas of opposition, which in turn were supported by the developing uncertainty on the ground in Karabagh.

Last but not least, the process of de-securitization is affected by the government's popular opinion polling levels, which were boosted by securitization on the one hand, and challenged by its exclusionary and extraordinary nature on the other. It is perhaps not surprising that, after a certain period of promoting the idea of peaceful reconstruction, the president warned about the probability (although in a distant future) of another war. (05 March 2021). Yet, the limited power of the formal messages is influenced by today's relatively free internet, which represents one of the acts leading to "emancipation" – release of alternative points of view which ranged from calls to regain control over the rest of Karabagh by force or to demand Russian peacekeepers out, to advocating for peaceful relations and building bridges between societies of rival nations. An increasing number of public opinion makers, civil and political leaders, bloggers, and individual e-TV channel anchors, some of which attract viewers in numbers similar to the president, challenged the monopoly on (de-)securitization by the formal authority.[6] It was in the post-war period when the social networks gave rise to peace initiatives and platforms, which turned the previously-marginalized dialogues from small groups of peacemakers and the lonely voices of writers[7] into a virtual interaction of the public and political leaders.[8] The local activists, journalists, and individual citizens, although relatively small in number, came up with initiatives from calling for the necessity of direct dialogue to critical assessment of the adversarial relations and support for cooperation between the two sides. The number of views of videos and live streams varied from 25,000 to 180,000 each, indicating high interest in direct communication with the adversary and alternatives to hostility discourses.

Conclusions

The securitization theory was developed in post-war Europe to accommodate the new, non-military threats it faced, those to society and identity, such as migration, EU integration and others. The Karabagh conflict, like other secessionist conflicts, is a military-political conflict, but the theory has become increasingly relevant at this stage, after the military "status quo" has changed and the ceasefire agreement has been signed. Further developments – whether this will be turned into a long-term peace agreement, or will give start to another war – depends, beside geopolitics, on liberalization, modernization and emancipation of domestic politics and capacity of local (and international) actors to de-securitize relations in society and with neighbours. Democratic change unleashes the peace potential of a society, but leaves it vulnerable to securitization if left without

live/?v=4080714951968368&ref=watch_permalink

5 The e-media and social networks reported both group protests of families of the war dead and individual stories told by the handicapped and their parents or relatives of such indifference. See for instance CNIS Digest 01.02.2021.

6 The number of views of the video speeches in the post-war period of opposition leaders, such as Ali Karimli, leader of the Popular Front Party (272,000 subscribers), Gultakin Hajibeyli (216,000 views, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BhmPVQ2rHpo), or Jamil Hasanli (135,000 views, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tGj4eHNawic&t=3209s), critical e-media like Sancaq TV (348,000 subscribers), Osmangizi TV (166,000 subscribers), Azerbaijan Saati (253,000 subscribers) or sites like Azad Soz (289,000 subscribers) are comparable to, if not greater than, the figures of the official sites.

7 Azerbaijani writer Akram Aylisli has been ostracized by the government due to his book *Stone Dreams*, in which the author depicts brutal episodes in Armenian-Azerbaijani relations, displaying self-criticism. See e.g. his recent interview: https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/burning-books-akram-aylisli-on-literature-and-cultural-memory/

8 See for instance the Journalists' Joint Stream Project by Yurii Manvelian, Emin Guseynov's Peaceful Media Initiative (stream reaching 130 thousand views on FB, https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLy7VQsumkiYN569k7c0lfHq__vwkNbGsD), Ishkan Verdian's Individual Peace Platform (https://www.facebook.com/Ishkhanverdyan/videos/213568596827569), and Ismayil Jalil "Duzdanishaq" interviewing leading Armenian and Azerbaijani public opinion makers (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y55TEWussZo). All of them stress the importance of direct communication – without mediators – between the two societies.

powerful pressure for liberalization and modernization, or in other words emancipation, especially in the absence of redress of grievances. Thus, conflict mobilization has succeeded in both Armenia and Azerbaijan in times of political and economic challenges to their leaderships, who resorted to "securitization" of relations as a tool of enabling extraordinary means to facilitate the elite's political survival.

As the analysis shows, in the post-war period the top-down (de-)securitization has been challenged by several factors, first of all by its exclusionary nature, which replicates the "friends vs. enemies" logic of securitization as well as excluding domestic opposition along with external "enemies". This process is further challenged by alternative narratives from below as a result of partial "emancipation" enhanced by the relatively free internet and opportunities for free expression provided by social networks. The official "speech act failure" is also caused by the temporary nature of the ratings boosts provided by military rhetoric and action. The continuation of framing of the return of seven regions in terms of "victory" may for some time sustain the president's popularity, but cannot prevent its decline due to policy failures in times of peace. Thus, while the president succeeded in gaining public support for the military action in the process of securitization of Azerbaijan's unaddressed grievances, the diversity of the post-war views, reflecting controversy over the situation on the ground and the shortcomings of governance, challenged the official narratives, or "speech acts". Similar to the pre-war period, public attitudes show a diversity of views – from appeals to build long-term peace to calls for the completion of the establishment of state control by force over the whole territory within Azerbaijan's recognized borders.

The fact of the return of the seven regions adjacent to Karabagh, combined with the de-securitization from formal authority, which presented the war as redress of grievances, gave (at least temporary) rise, along with the trend of competition, to processes of reconciliation. One should be cautious, though, to not overestimate the role of a speech act of "de-securitization" as compared with the effect of the liberation of the occupied regions and the opportunity for IDPs to return to their homelands – at least partial redress of grievances as a result of war. Overall, there is no direct or linear dependence of securitization/de-securitization on the one hand and democracy/autocracy on the other. Neither does democratization lead automatically to de-securitization, conducive to peace, nor does autocracy necessarily promote only securitization or have a monopoly on this process. Public attitudes thus remain open to the influence (although to different degrees, depending on their authority and resources) of the multiple actors promoting securitization/de-securitization, which is facilitated by the relatively free internet giving voice to "security have-nots". One of the important conclusions for the "bottom-up" de-securitization in the pre-war and post-war periods is that it opens opportunities for transfer of discourse and threat perception to the non-confrontational level in accordance with the contemporary nature of international relations, its virtualization and globalization reinforced by the specifics of the pandemic situation, further removing the obstacles of physical borders and geography.

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Post-War Spectres: The Ghosts that Haunt Armenia in the Aftermath of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabagh War

By Tamar Shirinian (University of Tennessee)

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Abstract

As the 2020 war came to a ceasefire agreement on November 10, 2020, through which Armenia made massive territorial concessions, feelings of grief and anger emerged to haunt Armenia through two spectres: soldiers who are missing or who have died in action and the old political economic elite who now threaten to regain power. The Nagorno-Karabagh conflict has had a major impact on the workings of political power in Armenia since the early 1990s, one that now threatens the democratic possibilities that were already fragile prior to the war. In this article, I discuss the affective connections between these two spectres and the political implications of national trauma on Armenia's post-war futures.

Introduction

During the first week of December 2020, Arev, a friend of mine in Armenia, had just returned home from Vahan's funeral. "All of the graves were so fresh. There are at least four or five funerals a day in that graveyard," she wrote into our Skype chat box. This was an update. A month before, Vahan had been missing in action for a week. His sister, Susanna, had not eaten or slept in that week, calling every hospital and every office in Armenia and Karabagh to inquire about her brother. Susanna was a friend of mine and I was worried about her. I did not know Vahan, but at the time when Arev found out that he was now presumed dead, we happened to be talking about the logistics of a fund for Nagorno-Karabagh refugees in Armenia. Although the military had not yet found Vahan's body, the group that he was supposed to have been with at the time he went missing had been confirmed dead. "He was supposed to be in a group that was hit from a plane [by a bomb, presumably, although she did not clarify] and if so his body is in pieces and they might not be able to identify him. They are 90% sure he is dead," Arev told me. Arev's mother had found out about Vahan's death first and Arev, in her state of grief, had the responsibility of now relaying this information to Susanna. Discussions of Vahan, the fate of his body, the turmoil and grief of his family, and the uncertainty and the inability to properly grieve without a body and burial framed my discussions with Arev for over a month. In the meantime, the war had ended and political battles on the domestic front were being waged.

About a week before the funeral, Arev notified me that they had found Vahan's body. After the burial was done, we continued to reflect on the impossibility of logic, of rationality, and of language when it comes to the catastrophic loss that war creates. In these times of trauma, various spectres haunt Armenia's domestic political space. In this article, I take up two of these spectres. The first is the silent one of dead or missing soldiers, who themselves do not speak but speech in whose name has cultivated a relentless anger within public and private domains of everyday life. The second spectre, that of the pre-2018 political economic elite, is less silent. The oligarchs and sovereign authoritarians, who were previously on trial, out on bail, or in exile following the "Velvet Revolution" now threaten to return to the political landscape. Making an opportunity of loss and anger, they haunt the possibilities of the nation's post-war futures.

My approach to these two spectres—which I have selected for analytic purposes as ones I see as most affectively vexed—is an ethnographic one. While there are other critical public discussions taking place in everyday political discourse, especially the role of Russia and its attempt at forming a new empire through its presence as "peacekeeper" in the region, affective emphasis within everyday discussions amongst leftists and progressive activists in Armenia most frequently revolves around the loss of loved ones as well as the loss of democratic possibilities. In regard to the latter, my leftist interlocutors, whose voice is frequently missing from discussions of political analysis in national as well as international mediascapes, emphasize democracy as the necessary pathway in forming an Armenia that works to serve its people rather than larger geopolitical interests. The question of democracy is thus one of sovereignty. In taking up the spectre of the old guard—rather than focusing on Russia's new role as "humanitarian peace police" (as some of my interlocutors have referred to it)—my aim is to highlight how political discussions are charged with accusations of Armenian elites whose return is not only propped up by Russian interests, but would also fail to govern in a way that takes Armenian citizens' needs, security, and futures into consideration.

Ethnography—a form of "writing culture"—emphasizes literary approaches to making sense of the world; that representation is always interpretation that can only ever form "partial truths," not because of ethnography's own deficiency, but because all other forms of representation are also partial without reflexive attention to their partiality (Clifford 1986). Ethnography, furthermore, does not seek to hide emotions, attachments to particular spaces of intervention, and the situated positionality of the writer that led to a particular analysis and interpretation, but accepts all of these as parts of the analytic process (Povinelli 2006, Probyn 1996, Besteman 2015, Ali 2015). As such, what follows is my own interpretation of how progressive and leftist activists, amongst whom my participatory research in Armenia has been situated over the last decade, as well as some others make sense of a precarious emergent post-war politics in Armenia.

The Silent Spectre of Dead and Missing Soldiers

By official counts, as of February 13, 2021, 3,577 Armenian soldiers died during the war, while 428 samples continued to be in the process of undergoing DNA examination, bringing the total loss to 4,005 (News.am 2020). Each of these soldiers had a mother, a father, a sister or brother, friends, relatives, and neighbours and others who loved him. Each dead and now-silent soldier has produced a cacophony of grief. The dead haunt Armenia. But Armenians are also haunted by other silent soldiers—those who are missing, those who have been captured, and those who continue to remain at the front by way of military order. During the war and continuously thereafter, videos of Armenian soldiers as well as civilians being beheaded and executed at the hands of Azerbaijani soldiers have circulated online. Each time one of these videos is released, my Armenian Facebook is abuzz with condemnations of any Armenian who shares them. "Don't you understand that each one of these people has family? Out of respect for their family, stop reposting these videos!" reminds one Facebook acquaintance. Another one comments on the necropolitical violence these videos were made to produce: "The Azeris want to degrade us and you are just helping them when you repost the video." It would be important here to note that international human rights organizations—such as Amnesty International (2020)—as well as the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (2020) have pointed out that war crimes were committed by both sides of the conflict. Furthermore, both Armenian[1] as well as Azerbaijani activists[2] have condemned the war as well as violence against prisoners of war in their own countries.

While these videos themselves are traumatizing, the violence they evoke goes far beyond the images captured on the screen. As hundreds of soldiers continue to be missing, these videos remind the families and loved ones of missing soldiers that their son, brother, or friend might have been violated in the same manner. Parents of missing soldiers staged protests almost daily between November and January at the Ministry of Defense in Yerevan, calling on the Armenian government as well as Russia to do more to find their children (Asbares 2020b). A deafening and haunting silence is further heard from soldiers who continue to remain at the front by military order. Parents continue to protest, calling on the military to return their conscript sons back to Armenia (Caucasian Knot 2020). The burials of dead soldiers, as well as stories and images of captured soldiers, haunt their imaginations. Remaining in Nagorno-Karabagh means that their sons might also, at any instant, become victims to a war that is now over. These silent soldiers—the living and the dead—speak and speak incessantly in their state of absence.

On November 12, 2020, two days after signing the "notorious agreement" with Azerbaijan and Russia, through which Armenia forfeited the war as well as many of the territories gained in the 1990s, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan addressed the Armenian public. It was clear that Pashinyan was aware of this anger fomenting within the hearts of his people, the anger of the parents and other loved ones of the soldiers who had died. He was also aware of the larger anger regarding the loss of lands. Pashinyan justified his decision to sign the agreement with this anger as well as the spectre of the silent dead in mind:

1 See for instance the following statements against the war authored by Armenian activists: "Common Land: Anti-War Statement [*Yndanur hogh. Hakapaderazmakan haydararutyun*]." *Epress.am*. October 19, 2020. Available from https://epress.am/2020/10/19/common_land_karabakh_1501.html?fbclid=IwAR0Fz_ZXTesRcTHxRwf6N2nxRpt6YNslsNX4xaLCUkvy0EHrZdwLAr8-6s8 (accessed on October 19, 2020); "Against War in *Artsakh/Qarabag*: Decolonial, Antifascist and Ecofeminist Statement from Armenia." *Medium*. October 13, 2020. Available from https://medium.com/sev-bibar/against-war-in-%D5%A1%D6%80%D6%81%D5%A1%D5%AD-qaraba%C4%9F-2baaecfbad5e (accessed on October 20, 2020).

2 See for instance the following statements against the war as well as against violence against prisoners of war: "Anti-War Statement of Azerbaijani Leftist Youth." September 30, 2020. *LeftEast*. Available from https://lefteast.org/anti-war-statement-of-azerbaijani-leftist-youth/?fbclid=IwAR0Nl9yCEYAiLatVSZfzlgfH4r3DRFKedVHxUyGRnu6nwsxqJuppX4UynKg (accessed on September 30, 2020).; Bahruz Samadov (2020) "Opinion: To stand for peace, in spite of everything." October 2, 2020. *OC Media*. Available from https://oc-media.org/opinions/opinion-to-stand-for-peace-in-spite-of-everything/?fbclid=IwAR228CMh08vE_IOML36CgY4cxK_2zhs-tANJZEfyskVLbr84oa0yCXgqqyg (accessed on October 2, 2020); Zaur Shiriyev's Twitter thread, calling for investigations of violations of humanitarian law, posted on October 20, 2020, available from https://twitter.com/ZaurShiriyev/status/1322101876129751040 (accessed on March 23, 2020).

> "when I signed that document, I realized that I was facing the threat of my personal death, not only in a political but also in a physical sense. But the lives of 25,000 soldiers were more important, I think, for you too. Under threat were the lives of our soldiers who had rendered full service to the homeland… [T]herefore, it was time for the commander to risk his own life for the sake of these soldiers, both physically and politically. It was time for the homeland to make sacrifices for those soldiers who spared nothing for the sake of the homeland, and I signed that document with this in mind." (Asbares 2020a)

These comments did little to appease the anger growing through the silence of dead and missing soldiers. As one friend in Armenia, who had been advocating for peace since the beginning of the war in September put it, "I am not mad at Pashinyan for signing the agreement. I am mad at him for not having signed an agreement a month ago." During the war, Pashinyan, Armenian Defense Ministry Representative Artsrun Hovhannisyan and Artsakh President Arayik Harutunyan gave daily updates assuring the Armenian people that they would win and that they were making great territorial gains. It became clear after the signing of the ceasefire that victory had not been as attainable as the authorities claimed and that these updates had been lies constructed to give false hope, to produce more willing soldiers, more willing parents, and to put off an anger that would inevitably emerge. As another friend reasoned, "He was afraid that he might die so he continued to send soldiers to die in a war that he knew they were not going to win? This is how he justifies his actions now? He could have prevented this by just signing an agreement in September and then fleeing the country."

While Arev and many of my other interlocutors and friends in Armenia feel a sense of relief that the war is over, the war's lack of rationale, its senselessness and purposelessness, has produced a catastrophic mourning. On the day of the funeral, Arev tells me that Vahan's mother was enraged, screaming as her son was being buried, trying to make sense of a nonsensical phenomenon. "Do you realize what is going on here?" she had wailed, "Old men are burying young children, lowering them into the ground. Do you see this? Do you understand?" What does it mean that hundreds of parents a day are involved in lowering their sons' bodies into the ground? Arev also told me that during Vahan's wake, his uncle called for a toast and began by saying that "To be honest, none of us understands why our Vahan died." For what did Vahan and thousands of others die? These questions permeate everyday life in post-war Armenia, inspired by the spectre of the dead's silence. These ruptures in rationality and a catastrophic mourning have become fertile ground for the return of the old guard.

The Spectre of the Old Guard

Within a few hours after Pashinyan had signed the agreement—on the early morning of November 10, 2020—protesters had gathered in front of the National Assembly (NA) building to demand that the Prime Minister resign, some entering the building and breaking into Pashinyan's office as well as a conference room in the building, where they began throwing furniture out of rage. Some of these protesters were angry that their loved ones had died only for the war to be forfeited and for the nation to lose its lands. Some wanted to continue the war, and demanded that Armenia break the ceasefire agreement, organizing themselves around the hardline ideology of "not one inch" of land to be conceded. During these protests, as the President of the NA, Ararat Mirzoyan, was stepping out of a car in front of the NA building, he was dragged into a crowd and beaten, sustaining massive injuries.

The protest itself had been organized by a union of 17 political parties, likely headed by Robert Kocharyan, Armenia's second president, who is facing charges of overthrowing the constitutional order of Armenia in 2008, when he ordered the military to fire on civilians during protests. In June 2020, Kocharyan was released on a $4 million bail bond. After two years in office, Pashinyan had made many attempts at systemic change and to bring the old guard to justice, only to be constantly thwarted by internal governmental sabotage by those who remained loyal to the old guard or who had otherwise been bribed or threatened by them. The signing of the concession and the post-war context of rage and grief now threatens to be the last nail in the coffin of an emergent democratic possibility. The old guard, which has continued to haunt Armenia's political landscape since 2018, has now transformed a tragic turn of events into an opportunity to make a play for power. Since November 10, 2020, rallies, political statements, and petitions have called for Pashinyan to resign. Some of my interlocutors fear civil war or an armed coup if Pashinyan does not resign.

For many Armenians watching these events play out in real time—especially for my more progressive and leftist friends—there was much that made little sense. For one, these men who beat Mirzoyan and trashed the NA building wanted to fight and win a war, but they were in Yerevan and not at the front. While they could have been taking their rage out on those who had been stealing from the public as well as the military for years—hobbling Armenia's chances to win the war—they were, instead, destroying the public property of the citizens of the nation. In 2018, through a popular social movement,

hundreds of thousands of Armenians had actively participated to successfully oust Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan from power and replace him with a more legitimate Nikol Pashinyan. After years of exploitation, corruption, and uncouth treatment of the people, the oligarch class that Sargsyan represented had become massively unpopular, even if tolerated through a prioritization of "national security" (through militarization) over democracy (Broers 2020). How was it that now people were joining with that very class, those very parties, to take down a government for which they had struggled?

Pashinyan has refused to resign, claiming only partial responsibility for having to sign the agreement. On November 10, 2020, as post-war protests were just beginning, Pashinyan addressed Armenians through a live video that wavered between an apology and a condemnation. A solemn Pashinyan said "I know that there are those who are the loved ones of our brothers who sacrificed their lives. I have said this and I will say it—that I am down on my knees in front of you…," followed quickly by an angry condemnation of those who demanded his resignation, who had abandoned their posts (especially in the key city of Shushi that eventually forced the concession) and who were now in Yerevan taking advantage of the fact that the police, National Security Services, and anyone else who would be able to enforce the law were at the front (Ruptly 2020). Pashinyan blamed the old guard for what happened in the war:

> "For 25 years, we have gathered around tables raising toasts to our soldiers and our military, and that vodka, that wine served with bread… has been bought with stolen money. And we have known about this…We have eaten it with a great appetite. We have drunk with pleasure. We have drunk that toast to the soldier. And in the meantime, how have we fed the soldier? Excuse me for the expression, but we have kept soldiers on scraps; we have kept soldiers with weapons made in the 1980s. And our hope has been—you know, in a colloquial manner, let me say this, because today is that kind of day—that they will be our crutch." (Ruptly 2020)

These words were meant to remind Armenians of their true enemies. Pashinyan's emotions here reflect those of my leftist interlocutors as well as many others in Armenia, for whom the oligarchy is understood as the class of men who had sucked the nation dry, becoming wealthy by stealing from the commons and leaving the nation with little with which they could fight. Pashinyan's words also recalled the 2018 National Security Service investigation of General Manvel Grigoryan's homes in Etchmiadzin and Armavir, in which stockpiles pilfered from the military were found—including weapons (Asekose.am 2018). It was meant to remind Armenians of the 154 corruption crimes in the armed forces found in a 2019 investigation (Mkrtichyan 2020). It was meant to remind Armenians of the many soldiers who had died in the military over the last three decades—not at the hands of Azerbaijan, but through mismanagement, corruption, and the abuse of power by the military elite (Civil Net 2020).

This condemnation of the old guard also corresponded with stories about the six weeks of war: generals abandoning battalions of young and untrained soldiers, sending soldiers into unknown terrain where they would have no chance of survival; theft of military, medical, and food supplies meant for soldiers at the front. As Arev corrected me once when I tried to comfort her after the war by saying that at least no one would die fighting anymore, "What war? This was not a war. When you talk to soldiers who were there you realize that there was very little fighting happening. There was no way to fight. They were just sent there to die." This sentiment is echoed in Armenian Facebook, where popular dissent circulates around the fact that Armenia did not even fight in this war; they were sold out by their leadership as they were fired on by "terrorists, the second military of NATO, and Azerbaijan" (in Pashinyan's words—Ruptly 2020). In these intensities of feelings regarding the war on Armenian Facebook, Armenia's enemy was the "Turk," a vituperative term used to characterize Azerbaijanis but made particularly resonant in this war as Armenia was not just at war with Azerbaijan but with Turkey as well. Some scholars suggest that in the post-Cold War moment, Turkey's foreign policy has moved toward attempts to establish itself as a new world power through imperial modes and methods—pursuing a neo-Ottomanism (Alekseevich 2018) or a pan-Turkism (Murinson 2006) that reaches out to Russian borders, resurrecting an older and previously rejected will to unify the Turkic people of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Turkey's alliance with Azerbaijan in this war might thus be a part of this larger and longer trajectory of a regional power grab. It is important here to note that while Azerbaijanis speak a Turkic language and have a close affinity with Turkey, Azerbaijan also has its own national identity distinct from Turkish identity (Ergun 2021). But all of this aside, for many Armenians, the enemy in this war was also the corrupt political and economic elite of Armenia.

I have previously described Armenia as a "nation-family," through which the nation is not only imagined or metaphorized as a family, but is practiced as a family through public forms of intimate encounters (Shirinian 2018). As almost everyone in the country is now caught in a network of grief, loss, and suffering through the silence of the lost four thousand, this sense of nation-family is now reified through shared loss as well as shared anger, intensifying feelings of intimacy. If, as I have

shown elsewhere (Shirinian 2020), those in positions of authority are seen as father figures—whose responsibility is not only political but also paternal, caught up in senses of care for the people—Pashinyan's blunders are not only within the realms of national political justice, but emotionally entangled with feelings of personal and familial betrayal.

Having lost lands in Nagorno-Karabagh through his military leadership and having sent thousands of young men to die for apparently no reason have placed what fragile legitimacy Pashinyan held earlier in 2020 in massive jeopardy. Whatever Sargsyan's and the oligarchy's irresponsibility and failures in political paternalism, these losses have unearthed national traumas that go much deeper than corruption and exploitation. While not everyone is on board with allowing a return of the old guard, intense affective connections amongst the body politic oriented against Pashinyan are, at this moment, deeper than the anger stemming from the illegitimate rule of Sargsyan and the old guard.

Before the war, in early September of 2020, it seemed unlikely that Armenians would ever accept the legitimacy of the old oligarchic horde which ruled over them for nearly three decades. That has now changed. The question of Nagorno-Karabagh has always been a breaking point in political discussions in Armenia. When it comes to the fate of Nagorno-Karabagh, in other words, legitimacy becomes equated with the path that promises to be most hard-line. "Not one inch" is a powerful rallying cry, a card that trumps all other political, economic, and social questions. With this rallying cry, a completely delegitimized old guard threatens to re-emerge to their old haunting grounds.

The Karabagh conflict is the chip with which the elites have been competing with one another for decades. Pashinyan and his own government are now a part of that competition as well. This, however, should not be mistaken for genuine political competition, as those in power all put on the same show, raising only the stakes. Aside from the Armenian National Congress, led by first Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrosian, which advocated for peace toward the normalization of the Armenian state and for Karabagh to have what could be called a "multi-ethnic autonomy," no other party with power in Armenia has taken a position that strays from the hard-line on the Karabagh conflict. Significantly, Ter-Petrosian was forced to resign in 1998. While this resignation came for various reasons—his association, for instance, with an emerging oligarchy—his stance on the Karabagh conflict was one of its major precipitants (Astourian 2000). But a new generation of activists and intellectuals are demanding something radically different. As historian Gayane Ayvazyan recently stated in a Facebook post:

> "Even in the cemetery, the Nagorno-Karabagh issue pretends to be an instrument of an internal political race for power. The party members of the war were divided, some sitting in the state apparatus, others provoking riots in the squares and streets. Both promise a hot revanchism to create a stronger army, to be more vindictive, to bring Karabagh back. This is nonsense and marasmus…. [W]e need to get out of this circle. Both the former and current authorities are in the historical past; what we see are their ghosts…It is necessary to find a way out of selfishness, intolerance, and revenge, toward the path of denazification and demilitarization."

Ayvazyan's reference to the cemetery here is both literal and figural, referring both to the actual cemeteries that have become central to everyday life as well as the nation itself as a cemetery, a space of grief and mourning. The path forward, leaving these ghosts of an old national reality behind, would be a turning point in Armenia.

On the Question of Sacrifice

Gna meri ari sirem (Go and die so that I may love you) is a popular colloquialism in Armenia, referencing the cultural value placed on sacrifice. The saying, however, is one filled with irony—a sort of commentary on the injustice of a moral economy that demands an absolute sacrifice to receive love. It is quite ironic that the same political players who were for years condemned for their mistreatment of soldiers are now the ones who ventriloquize their dead silence, valuing soldiers but only in their deaths. But, in this way, the sacrifices of this war continue to be made, threatening possibilities of the future.

Many Armenians—in my calculation, based on my acquaintances and familiarity with various groups, *most* Armenians—believe that Pashinyan should resign. However, it matters a great deal how this resignation happens. On February 25, 2021, the army demanded Pashinyan's resignation, which Pashinyan has cast as a coup attempt. At the end of March 2021, Pashinyan declared that snap elections will be held on June 20, 2021. It is clear, however, that these elections risk bringing into power an authoritarian as well as highly militarized regime. The current candidate put forward by the opposition is Vazgen Manukian, who served as Defense Minister of Armenia during the First Nagorno-Karabagh War and whose most recent public statements call for Armenians and the Armenian government to stand by the army at all costs and urged the army to rebel after Pashinyan attempted to fire the chief of the army's general staff.

To return Armenia to such an authoritarian situation would be a sacrifice of democratic possibilities. The hope now is that Armenians remember that the logic of sacrifice, in which the object of love can only be embraced

after it is dead, gone, and silent, is an unjust moral economy. Sacrificing democracy to work through feelings of loss and anger, only to long for democracy again in its absence, would be the ultimate tragedy. If democratization in Armenia prior to the 2020 war was precarious, these feelings of grief and loss, made use of by the old guard to push for political reactionism, place democratization in an even more precarious situation. Progressive and leftist activists in Armenia urge us to think about how war, as well as the discourses around territorial gain and national security, are not only incommensurate with democracy, but are the antithesis of democracy. Armenia's sovereign and democratic future—within these leftist frameworks—can only be made possible through letting go of these attachments to ghostly pasts.

About the Author

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Territorial Ambitions in Nagorno-Karabakh: Survey Results Before the 2020 War

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Abstract

Territory is central to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Borders and control of lands claimed by both Azerbaijan and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic have shifted dramatically since the end of the Soviet Union. Following up on a 2011 survey, we again asked a representative sample of Karabakhis in February 2020 about their territorial aspirations and the possibility of surrendering some lands to Azerbaijan. The results are somewhat contradictory. While about half of the sample were willing to compromise on territory with Azerbaijan—in the expectation of a more permanent and peaceful settlement to the conflict—a firm majority (85%) rejected any return to the smaller lands of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) of Soviet times. This result is highly consistent with the 2011 data. Even more respondents than in 2011 aspired to extend Nagorno-Karabakh's territory to encompass all historical Armenian lands, a patently unrealistic option. While Karabakhi attitudes remained hardened against territorial compromise, the 2020 war changed the facts on the ground and reduced the Republic's control to an area even smaller than the NKAO.

Introduction

The six-week war of Autumn 2020 has redrawn the map of the South Caucasus—yet again. On paper, of course, nothing has officially changed. Azerbaijan and Armenia still have the same internationally recognized borders. On the ground, however, the situation is dramatically different. The Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR), locally known as Artsakh, endures on a territorial template that is considerably reduced from what it once held. Given initial territorial form as the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) and controversially situated within Soviet Azerbaijan, the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic was first proclaimed in 1991 amidst conflict over the region's status. The NKAO and neighboring Shaumian region was the initial territorial template claimed at that time. Victory in the subsequent intense warfare expanded that template into seven surrounding provinces of Azerbaijan in 1994. As the territory under the control of the NKR grew, so also did its justifications for holding these territories, and for claiming other areas still 'occupied' by Azerbaijan. In the most self-aggrandizing Armenian-focused narrative, as

for instance seen in the *Atlas of Artsakh* (Research on Armenian Architecture, 2018), the NKR is just a territorial fragment of a broader historical Armenian palimpsest of lands across eastern Anatolia and the Caucasus marked by the presence of Armenian churches, monasteries, gravestones and settlements.

The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh has been formative to the identities of the post-Soviet states of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Armenia suffered greatly to defend and protect what it viewed as historic Armenian land. Karabakh war fighters like Robert Kocharian and Serzh Sargsyan took power in Yerevan. By contrast, the promise of the recovery of lost territories has long legitimated authoritarian militarism in Azerbaijan. It was the victimized state, patiently building its military and waiting for the right moment to achieve its aims. Social media accounts burned with intensity during the 2020 war. The hastags *#KarabakhisAzerbaijan* accompanied its information campaign while *#Artsakhstrong* was ubiquitous among Karabakh's defenders.

But what about those who actually live in the disputed territory? Azerbaijanis were forcefully displaced from the region in the early 1990s, so those remaining, unaminously identifying as Armenian, reflected only the Karabakh they were creating as a fully Armenian place. Well aware that they lived in an intensely disputed region, what did the residents of Karabakh think about territorial issues before the six-week war of 2020 dramatically changed their living space? Serendipitously, we concluded a representative survey of 820 respondents in the region in February 2020, about seven months prior to war. The results are somewhat contradictory. While about half of the sample were willing to compromise on territory with Azerbaijan—in the expectation of a more permanent and peaceful settlement to the conflict—a firm majority rejected any return to the smaller lands of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) of Soviet times.

Survey Research in Conflict Regions

We have been surveying in unrecognized, or de facto, states in the former Soviet Union for more than a decade (e.g. Kolossov, O'Loughlin, and Toal 2014; Bakke, Linke, O'Loughlin and Toal 2018). In late 2011, we organized a representative survey of 820 persons in the NKR (Toal and O'Loughlin 2013), and our February 2020 survey included many of the same questions about territory and future status of the Republic. These questions about territory, borders and recognition preoccupy governments, policy experts, geopolitical pundits and historians, but not necessarily ordinary people. Our research seeks to document what ordinary people living within contested regions actually think about these issues. It remains an important and under-researched topic. Though the role of 'parent' and patron state governments and external state actors are important to conflict dynamics and conflict resolution—and, indeed, the question of recognition (Coggins 2014)—at the heart of the struggle are the people who live in the contested territory. Survey results are often challenged by politicians and commentators if they run counter to their assumptions about public opinion, and even the scientific motivations for the work have been questioned by the parent state representatives, who claim that such work should not be done in 'occupied' regions in supposed conditions of suspicion and fear (cf. Kuleba 2020).

Doing survey research in conflict regions, as one might expect, is not straightforward. For this one needs to have independent survey research organizations that employ the best practices in social scientific research methods. While the technical and scientific capacity exists in Azerbaijan, the guarantee of independent research free from government interference and control does not. Consequently, we were unable to survey there as part of a comparative study, though we did make a good-faith effort to do so. By contrast, our research partners in Nagorno-Karabakh were able to conduct their survey work without interference or hinderance.

As in our 2011 survey, the sampling design and the face-to-face interviewing in 2020 adhere to best survey practices (stratification by urban/rural residence, random selection of primary sampling units, random selection of respondents in these units, follow-up controls by supervisors, and protection of data) in gauging local opinions. We present results on two key dimensions here: people's willingness to compromise on land returns to Azerbaijan and their views on two territorial options at opposite ends of the minimalist to maximalist spectrum.

The territorial questions from our 2020 survey are particularly relevant, and somewhat poignant, given the subsequent war and NKR territorial losses. The NKR now exists on a territorial footprint that is smaller than the NKAO, with both the symbolic city of Shusha/i and other major centers like Hadrut (Khojavend) lost to Azerbaijani forces. Once again, Karabakh is a small enclave surrounded by Azerbaijani-held territory, now monitored by 2,000 Russian peacekeepers (Baku, of course, sees it as part of Azerbaijan). Our first question asked residents about their willingness to trade territories for peace in Nagorno-Karabakh. The extra territories seized in 1994 were not part of the initial NKR territorial declaration in 1991 but rather, were lands acquired in the course of the subsequent fighting for reasons of military expediency and defense. International negotiations, namely the OSCE-sponsored Minsk Process, have focused on the possible return of these lands, so we wanted to find out if there was any support for a 'land for peace' trade among Karabakhis.

The second question we asked followed up on our 2011 research about prevalent territorial visions within Karabakh. A decade ago, we discovered that there was considerable support for the most expansive territorial vision in Karabakh, one which viewed any place with evidence of historic Armenian artifacts and religious sites as legitimate Armenian land. We wanted to see if this view was still popular with residents in 2020. We also wanted to see if the border of the NKAO was no longer accepted by Karabakh residents. This last question is particularly significant given the territorial realities of today, in which the Soviet-delimited border is a ghostly presence in the background of conversations about any long-term settlement of the conflict.

Nagorno-Karabakh was homogenously ethnic Armenian at the time of the 2020 survey, before people fled lands now recaptured by Azerbaijan (between 75,000 and 100,000 left but about 40,000 have subsequently returned under the protection of the Russian peacekeepers). Because of this sample homogeneity, the sizable nationality divides on geopolitical questions (including territorial ambitions) commonly seen in the post-Soviet space are absent. We also note that significant demographic differences in the answers (according to age, gender, income, current mood, and education) are also non-existent. In a previous article, we highlighted this discrepancy with similar surveys that we have conducted in the region (Toal and O'Loughlin 2013).

Results

A pervasive mistrust of Azerbaijan's intentions and actions characterizes the overall Karabakh sample, with 88% listing that country in an open-ended question enquiring about the "main enemy of the NKR" (any country or group could be chosen). The survey does, however, show conciliatory attitudes on the question of land return, with notable differences according to the respondents' optimism about the republic's direction.

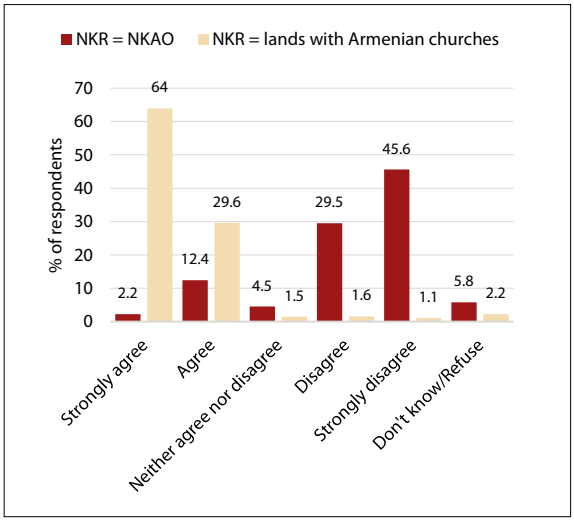
A general question that preceded and framed the specific ones about NKR territorial extent asked respondents if they agreed with the statement that "some lands of NKR should be returned to Azerbaijan". We can view the answers to this proposition as a general measure of territorial compromise, a sense of whether residents of the NKR were willing to give back some of the lands that were added to the NKAO in the early 1990s. Much of this acquired territory was in lower elevations in the south and east of the expanded territory as well as in the northwestern Kalbachar (Karvachar) region, which had been populated mostly by Azerbaijanis.

At first glance, the responses to this land-return prompt are quite conciliatory. Almost half of the respondents (46.1%) accept the proposition (strongly agree, 22.1%; agree, 24%) and 38.9% reject it (strongly disagree, 22.7%; disagree, 16.2%), with the remainder (14%) sitting on the fence. This split opinion does not show any clear demographic correlates within the sample.

However, we observe a difference among the Karabakhi respondents on the 'land for peace' prompt based on whether respondents think that the republic was heading in the right or wrong direction. In many surveys in the former Soviet Union, we have found that this simple but insightful measure of general satisfaction with local conditions correlates with political preferences. In early 2020, a majority of those who thought that the republic was on the right track agreed to return lands to Azerbaijan (59%), but among those who thought it was on the wrong track, less than half (42%) agreed to return lands to Azerbaijan. Satisfaction with current circumstances is therefore associated with a more conciliatory position on the thorny issue of land changes.

The second question we report here measured the degree to which residents subscribed to an expansive or restrictive vision of Karabakh. We asked respondents to agree or disagree with two question prompts describing an imagined normative territorial vision of Karabakh. The first defined the territory as equivalent to the NKAO, an entity whose borders were no longer demarcated on the landscape in Karabakh and may only have been meaningful for the entity's older residents (in effect, it disappeared about 30 years earlier). The second prompt was the claim that Karabakh was equivalent to all territories with historical Armenian churches. Which vision of Karabakh is more popular, the smaller Soviet delimitation or an expansionist conception of Karabakhi/Armenian space?

Figure 1: Where is Nagorno-Karabakh 2020?



Source: Authors' own survey 2020

The figure shows strong rejection of a hypothetical return to previous borders (only 14.6% agree or strongly agree)

and an equally strong acceptance of an undemarcated but greater Armenia (94% agree or strongly agree). Our interpretation of these results is that, while the NKAO borders are remembered (and rejected as too restrictive), the expansionist version was a broadly-shared aspiration in the NKR, even if it is highly unlikely in practice. When we asked about the same territorial options in 2011, the results were similar for the rejection of the NKAO option (only 14% agreed) but the ambition of NKR expansion to all historic Armenian lands had gained support from 'only' 71% of respondents in 2011.

We titled our earlier article "Land for Peace" and emphasized the practical intransigence of NKR residents when it came to support for any territorial compromise. The 2020 results continue to show such obduracy in terms of actual territorial remappings. But there was significant support (nearly half) for a policy that would cede indeterminate lands to Azerbaijan. One could interpret these seemingly contradictory positions as a contrast between the amorphous and the concrete, between an acceptance of the principle of 'land for peace' and a rejection of any settlement that would cede too much territory gained as a result of the 1992–1994 war with Azerbaijan. The six-week war of 2020 was the bitter fruit of the failure of Armenia and Azerbaijan's leaders to find territorial compromise and a 'good enough' settlement that both sides could live with. Now power lies in the hands of Russia and Azerbaijan (supported by Turkey) as Armenia is rocked by political instability. Azerbaijan has recovered land through war but it has not won a sustainable peace. That remains elusive.

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