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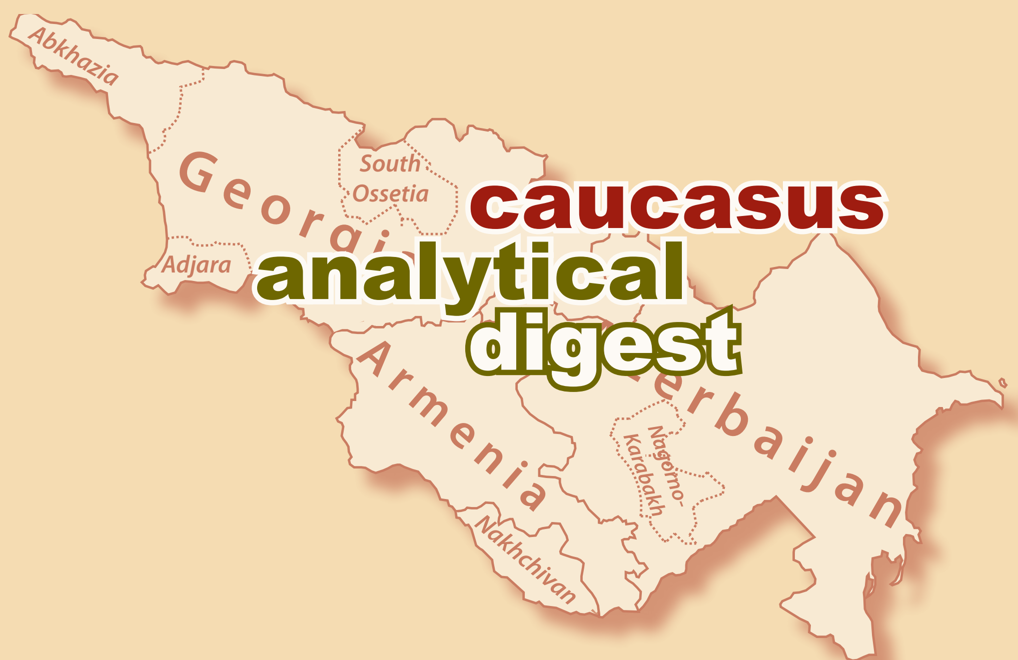

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RAMIFICATIONS OF THE ARMENIAN–AZERBAIJANI RIVALRY BEYOND THE SPOTLIGHT

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

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Conflict/ed Societies: Ramifications of the Armenian–Azerbaijani Rivalry beyond the Spotlight

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

Roughly a year after the 2020 Armenian–Azerbaijani war ended, Yerevan and Baku started to engage in EU-facilitated talks, which came to be known as the "Brussels track". Separate from the "Moscow track" but flanked by U.S. efforts, these talks eventually included negotiations on a bilateral peace agreement. While there have been instances of significant momentum, the post-2020 Armenian–Azerbaijani peace process has also faced serious setbacks. Statements of progress have often alternated with those about renewed incidences of violence.

Broader (international and media) attention towards the conflict has largely been linked to instances of severe escalation. This was the case in what came to be known as the four-day war of 2016 or most notably in 2020 with the so-called 44-day war. However, as a protracted conflict or enduring rivalry (Broers 2015, Colaresi/Thompson 2002), the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict, which has lingered for over three decades, has had far-reaching repercussions beyond direct and open military confrontation.

In the relevant literature on protracted conflicts, one of the central features associated with protractedness is how a conflict becomes entrenched and salient for large parts of society, if not whole societies, to the extent that even everyday routines are affected. As such, protracted conflict is said to impact societal fabrics, to feature centrally in (social) identity processes, and to shape governance dynamics as well as societal beliefs and value systems. Protracted conflict often fosters extensive militarization as well as securitization, including in civil and private domains, and it conditions particular conflict-adjusted psychological infrastructures. Protracted conflict thus becomes institutionalized—which feeds back into conflict perpetuation (see, e.g., Bar-Tal 1998 and 2007, Gusterson/Besteman 2019).

This special issue shifts the focus beyond the spotlight of elite-level interaction or escalations of violence in the context of the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict by assembling three distinct, stand-alone contributions, each of which focuses on the societal level and explores different aspects of how this level has (inter)related with the conflict. The special issue thus aims to add salience to the notion of protractedness in the particular context of the Armenian–Azerbaijani rivalry. While the perspectives provided here are by no means exhaustive, they may contribute to gauging the (potential) breadth of how a longstanding conflict inscribes itself in the affected societies. Thus, this special issue may also be read as trying to elucidate and exemplify the context and conditions for the ongoing peace process and the implementation of any future peace agreement.

In her contribution, *"National Identification and Regime Legitimation: The Societal Impact of War in Azerbaijan"*, Sofie Bedford demonstrates how the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict has shaped Azerbaijani national identity and, interrelatedly, political regime dynamics in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. The article draws attention to how the protracted conflict and a dominant narrative of restoring territorial integrity has fostered the militarization of both the Azerbaijani state and society, which in turn, as is argued, has contributed to the legitimation of authoritarian rule. Ulrike Ziemer's contribution "*The Impact of Conflict and Militarization on the Lives of Women and LGBT Persons in Armenia*" explores how militarization, linked to the protracted conflict, has impacted Armenian society, specifically gender issues and LGBT rights. The article highlights a nexus among military, war and (heterosexual) masculinity and draws attention to how such understanding has strengthened heteronormative beliefs and patriarchal values to the detriment of gender equality norms. Looking beyond the confines of the Armenian and Azerbaijani states, in her article, *"Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Georgia: The Role of Religion, Religious Institutions, and Networks in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War"*, Anna Cieślewska examines the salience of this conflict among the Armenian and Azerbaijani minorities in Georgia with a specific focus on religion. Concentrating on the period during and after the 2020 war, this contribution considers religious networks, religious institutions and related public opinion, which yields a refined picture of how religion has played a role in and with regard to the conflict.

Responsibility regarding terminology used lies with the individual author. 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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National Identification and Regime Legitimation: The Societal Impact of War in Azerbaijan

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Abstract

Societal development in Azerbaijan has been strongly affected by the war since its independence. Such an impact can be seen in two major ways. First, the liberation of the occupied areas became the overarching vision for both political leaders and society and, essentially, one of the pillars of post-Soviet Azerbaijani national identity. Second, this gradually resulted in a militarization of state and society which strengthened the hegemony of the authoritarian regime. Azerbaijan's recent victory further enhanced the popularity of president Ilham Aliyev and, in this sense, lowered incentives for democratization within society. Both of these factors have contributed to a situation where a reconciliation process seems far away. Even after territorial integrity was largely restored in 2020, the notion of 'us' vs. 'them' is still deeply rooted in the nation's self-image and reinforced by the official narrative. Society is not ready to reconcile with Armenia, both due to the lingering trauma and the lack of any reconciliation mechanisms.

Introduction

Since the start of armed conflict, it has had a profound impact on Azerbaijani society. Parts of the population continued to be physically affected long after the first ceasefire in 1994, during the subsequent state of 'no-war-no-peace'. This notably included war veterans and those displaced from the occupied areas—many of whom came to live in a precarious and vulnerable state, deprived of political influence (Huseynov, 2005)—as well as persons remaining in the border regions where the situation continued to be unsafe due to regular ceasefire violations (Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2019). Moreover, as eloquently concluded by Valiyev (2012, 201), at a certain point, the conflict "stopped being a struggle for land" and "became an indivisible part of the political, cultural, and social development in both societies". Azerbaijan's development as an independent country has been overshadowed by the war's continuous ubiquity, which has impacted society in two significant ways. First, the liberation of Karabakh essentially became an integral part of the Azerbaijani national identity, which led to militarization as the dominant narrative. Second, the conflict contributed to the legitimation of the Aliyev family's rule and, essentially, the country's authoritarian path. These developments unfortunately give reason for a certain pessimism in regard to the possibilities for peace. However, Azerbaijan's recent victory has at least provided the prospect of changing dynamics.

Culture of Conflict and the Militarization of Society

In the context of the Soviet Union's dissolution, the war facilitated the awakening of national sentiments strongly linked to the possession of Nagorno-Karabakh (Gahramanova, 2010; Musabayev, 2005). The subsequent loss of this space and seven adjacent regions contributed to a salient 'sacralization' of Nagorno-Karabakh in the national narrative (Samadov/Grigoryan,

2022; Akhundov, 2020). This narrative became intertwined with an influential 'us versus them' dynamic that turned into a defining foundation for the relations between Armenian and Azerbaijani societies. In Azerbaijan, official rhetoric, as well as different manifestations in politics, media, religion, education, culture, and many other spheres of life, served as constant reminders of the brutality of war and human suffering, the victimization of the Azerbaijani nation, and Armenians as undisputed national enemies (Najafizadeh, 2013; Gahramanova, 2010; Garagozov, 2012). Such public representations engrained the need to reclaim occupied lands to allow internally displaced persons (IDPs) return and to make Azerbaijan "whole again" (Najafizadeh, 2013, 167). Garagozov (2012, 119) discusses how the Azerbaijani and Armenian states have been accommodating "collective symbols and collective memory of war with negative emotions and attitudes towards each other," resulting in their societies developing "cultures of conflict." His research strongly underlines how powerful this culture is in the case of Azerbaijan, showing that collective memories of the conflict, shaped by social and political context and norms rather than individual, actual experiences, has generated even more intense emotions and strong negative affect among those who do *not* actually have painful personal memories of the war than among those who *do* (Garagozov, 2016).

The restoration of territorial integrity has become an overarching vision shared by all political actors and society at large. This can be said to have shaped Azerbaijani post-Soviet national identity. In the words of Broers (2015, 558), "regaining jurisdiction over NK and the surrounding territories is a foundational moment of contemporary Azerbaijani identity, without which this identity —and Azerbaijani statehood—will remain incomplete". Over time, the conflict has remained "a powerful consolidating force and an inexhaustible source for the preservation and development of conflict discourse" (Akhundov, 2020). One important outcome of this perseverance has been militarization, reflected not only in massive state investments in military capacity but also in societal rhetorical and ideological practices conveying a belief that resolving the conflict through peaceful means is impossible (Ditel, 2022; Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2019; Akhundov, 2020). Regular deaths along the line of contact have become something "that fires up the revanchist and patriotic sentiment and supports further militarist rhetoric and mobilization", Akhundov (2020) notes. An increasing resignation, stemming from a lack of trust and belief in peacebuilding processes and a reality where the 'others' are consistently portrayed as a threat, irrevocably different, and less peaceful or willing to compromise, led militarization to be seen as the default option (Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2019). This means "that at least psychologically, Azerbaijan was long ready to begin a war" (Samadov, 2020b). The extent of patriotic mobilization and hardening of attitudes towards the 'others' during the so-called Four-Day War in 2016 seem to demonstrate that this was indeed the case, as underlined by the massive popular support for military action during the Second War in 2020, when the government, opposition, and rest of society were united by "the dominant narrative of a national duty to take back the country's lost lands" (Samadov 2020b).

Increasing Legitimacy for Aliyev's Nondemocratic Regime

Overall, this lingering state of conflict and insecurity has resulted in the delay of much needed political and economic reform. During the 'no-war-no-peace' period, many more resources went into preparing for another war in both Armenia and Azerbaijan than to institutional capacity building and economic development (Valiyev, 2012). At times, vast resources were diverted from the welfare state into the military budget, affecting the health care and education sectors in particular. As a rule, the welfare sector remained consistently smaller than the military sector (Dietel, 2022).

In contrast, in its earliest phase, the conflict was described as facilitating democratic processes by driving the first societal mobilization for social and political reform and subsequently paving the way for the first democratically elected presidents of both Armenia and Azerbaijan (Caspersen 2012; Valiyev, 2012).[1] After a massive political crisis and losses on the battlefield, the new Azerbaijani political leadership under Heydar Aliyev instead turned the need for stability into the cornerstone of government policy. Arguing that the country's defeat in the war had been a result of domestic turmoil, this new path nipped democratic development in the bud (Musabayev, 2005). It enabled the political elites to take advantage of the conflict to consolidate power, which became increasingly concentrated in the hands of the Aliyev family and the presidential New Azerbaijan party. Any restrictive or repressive measures against those challenging the political status quo could be justified with the notion that limiting the rights and freedoms of citizens is necessary to prevent the destabilization of the country. The 'culture of conflict' and the militarization of state and society secured the ideological and rhetorical hegemony of these authoritarian

1 In Azerbaijan, the 1992 election of Abulfaz Elchibey, leader of the Azerbaijan People's Front Party, as president is often referred to as the only free and fair election in the country's history.

rulers, offering both them and their stability discourse legitimacy. In this context, organized politics in general and elections in particular came to be seen as abstract and irrelevant to most. The democratic opposition, for obvious reasons, was unable to achieve any substantial political results and became marginalized—even more so because they were not able to convincingly challenge neither the regime's ideology, nor its monopoly over the conflict's management and narrative.

The Second War dramatically increased the popularity of President Ilham Aliyev. While previously seen as protecting the stability reinstated by his father, afterwards he became the strong man who had (almost fully) restored Azerbaijan's territorial integrity—even more popular than his father, as some claim. During the war, the speeches of Aliyev, who previously had largely relied on the public's passive acceptance, took a clearly populist turn—appealing to the mood of the masses by extensively using metaphors such as 'iron fist' or 'people with an iron will' and expressions such as 'predators' and 'coyotes' when speaking of the Armenian enemy (Samadov 2020a; Şeşen, Ünalan, Doğan, 2022). Many of these quickly became part of a new vernacular (Samadov, 2020a). In this way, the conflict strengthened the country's ongoing authoritarian path. As Aliyev's non-democratic regime is gaining legitimacy through its military success, the already ostracized opposition is losing further ground, as their focus on democratization is perceived as redundant. Moreover, the fact that politically motivated harassment and arrests have continued after the war—the imprisonment of civil society activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyev is one notable example—makes it increasingly clear that even though this victory provided momentum for change, for instance, through the launch of genuine political reforms, this is unlikely to occur in the present.

Potential for Peace

Looking ahead, as well as backwards, the context of this rivalry does not appear particularly conducive to any peace and reconciliation process. Researchers have pointed to the identity needs of Armenian and Azerbaijani societies being neglected as a major shortcoming in the official peace process. The online dimension of the 2020 war underlined the importance of this. As digital media platforms and social networks were used to verbally attack their respective enemy, the extreme polarization of these societies became strikingly visible (Media and disinformation, 2021). This antagonism, Krzysztan (2021) observes, "still exist[s] as a zero-sum game without the space for reconciliation and compromise", despite the outcome of the latest war. In the case of Azerbaijan, the war has "only deepened the antagonistic nature of Azerbaijani national identity" (Samadov, 2021). Although Azerbaijan is now "whole," as the IDPs (eventually, when deemed safe) will have the possibility to return 'home' to upgraded 'smart cities' (see Valiyev, 2022) built on recaptured land, the notion of 'us' vs. 'them' remains deeply rooted in its national self-image. In accordance with the 'culture of conflict', questioning militarization has been, and remains, taboo. Those who do this risk being branded a 'traitor' and despised by their fellow citizens (Baghdasarian/Yunusov, 2005; Musayev, 2005; Samadov, 2020b; RFE/RL 2022). Nevertheless, there are individuals publicly calling for peace, primarily younger grassroots civil society activists. Needless to say, these voices are rare, vulnerable, and severely marginalized.

In this authoritarian environment, only the actual rulers have political agency. It is their policies, actions, and discourses that shape and control the public agenda. Given their hegemony, the tremendous media resources at their disposal, the weakening of their opposition, and—importantly—the fact that the population seems satisfied with their victory as it is, the government *could*, if it decides to do so, influence positive public attitudes towards a peace agreement. Yet, the president's hostile rhetoric in the past years and the territorial claims articulated against Armenia (including the statement that Yerevan was in fact 'historically' Azerbaijani) do not offer the impression that this is in the cards, at least for now (Mamadov, 2022; Fabbro, 2022; Broers, 2021). As long as the dominant narrative reinforces antagonism, it appears unlikely that it will lose its power as a national identifier.

About the Author

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The Impact of Conflict and Militarization on the Lives of Women and LGBT Persons in Armenia

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Abstract

The most recent 2022 Global Militarization Index ranked Armenia among the top ten most militarized countries in the world. During militarization, the institution of the military assumes a central role in society, with its values permeating almost every area of life. This article explores the complexities and challenges of life in Armenia's militarized society from the perspective of women and LGBT[1] persons. Militarization not only perpetuates patriarchal gender relations but also enforces trans- and homophobic environments based on cis- and heteronormative values. Thus, this article examines the impact of conflict and militarization on gender equality norms, such as the protection of women against violence, as well as the fight for LGBT rights.

Introduction—Gender Inequality and Militarization in Armenia

There are many complex and interlinked factors that can contribute to gender inequality in a country. In Armenia, however, one subtle but persistent factor is a prolonged military threat and the subsequent militarization of society. The most recent 2022 Global Militarization Index ranked Armenia among the top ten most militarized countries in the world[2]. This is not surprising considering that Armenia and Azerbaijan endured a stalemate of 'no war, no peace' over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh territory between the 1994 ceasefire and the resumption of serious conflict in autumn 2020. Armenia's military defeat in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war had profound security, political, socioeconomic and psychological consequences, which Armenian society is still dealing with today. Military tensions in the region run high with ceasefire violations and military offensives by Azerbaijan, not only in Nagorno-Karabakh but also in the border regions of Armenia.

However, militarization is a larger phenomenon than war; militarization can be practised during times of peace and permeate structures not directly concerned with the conduct of war, such as educational institutions and the family. Militarization is a step-by-step process by which a person or thing gradually comes to be controlled by the military or comes to depend on militaristic ideas for its well-being (Enloe 2000: 3). It requires both women and men, but it privileges men and masculinity. Women are used as tools for the military, as they are needed to play essential militarized roles, such as boosting morale, providing comfort during and after wars, reproducing the next generation of soldiers, serving as symbols of a homeland worth risking one's life for and replacing men when the pool for suitable male recruits is low (Enloe, 2000: 44). Hence, militarization affects women's lives both in the private sphere of the household and the public sphere of states, markets and institutions. War is about violence and death, but militarization and consequent heteronormative responses are about the reproduction of life. Unsurprisingly, patriarchal attitudes and heteronormative values are a large part of these militarization processes.

Generally, in Armenia, women are underrepresented in most professions, with lower wages and fewer opportunities than men, although as of January 2022, there are more women (53% [1,564,198]) than men (47% [1,397,169]) in Armenia (The Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia [Armstat] 2022). According to UN Women (2023), although 83.3% of legal frameworks that promote, enforce and monitor gender equality under the SDG indicator are already in place, Armenia is ranked only 98th out of 153 countries, lagging behind neighbours Georgia at 74 and Azerbaijan at 94 (Global Gender Gap Report 2022). In particular, Armenia performs poorly on measures of political empowerment (Dermoyan 2023). For example, as of 2023, out of a total of 107 members of parliament, only 38 are women, with only two female government ministers (total of 12) and 10 deputy ministers (compared to 36

1 The author uses the term "LGBT" as it is the primary initialism for sexual orientation and gender identity and was mostly used by research participants in interviews during fieldwork in 2018 and 2019.

2 According to the GMI 2022, apart from Armenia, the countries with the highest level of militarization are Israel, Kuwait, Singapore, Oman, Bahrain, Greece, Russia, Brunei and Saudi Arabia. The Global Militarization Index gives the relative weight and importance of the military apparatus within a state in relation to society as a whole. To achieve this, the GMI compiles a number of indicators, such as military spending as a proportion of GDP, the proportion of military personnel within the total population, the ratio of heavy weapons systems, etc., creating a comparative measure.

male deputy ministers) (Dermoyan 2023). In many ways, this is unsurprising, as women's exclusion from political power is an outcome of the country's heightened militarization processes, including the premium placed on maintaining security.

Against the backdrop of military defeat in 2020 and the increasing unreliability of Armenia's long-standing security guarantor, Russia, efforts to build up Armenia's military capacity have increased. For example, Armenia's 2023 national budget saw a 46% increase in military spending (506 billion drams—$1.28 billion) from the previous year (Freund 2023). Generally, military service is compulsory, with a two-year period of national service for men. Male citizens aged 27 to 50 are registered in the reserve army and may be drafted into regular army units if national mobilization is declared. Women's involvement in the army is growing now as well, especially since the Defence Ministry allowed women to enter the two military academies in 2013 (Avedissian 2023).

Militarization, Patriarchy, and Dutiful Wives

A large part of Armenia's history is a history of conflict, war and militarism. Due to Armenia's short history as an independent state and the absence of statehood, the concept of 'nation-as-family' evolved in Armenian society (Ishkanian 2004: 267). Against this backdrop, women have come to play key roles in maintaining the family and its values and norms, thereby solidifying the image of the 'sacred mother' in Armenian society (Ohanyan 2009). In a highly militarized state such as Armenia, motherhood often represents for women what soldiering represents for men—an opportunity to serve the nation (Ziemer 2018). In the case of Armenia, motherhood is also processed through multiple and distinct historical events, such as surviving genocide and struggling to preserve 'Armenianness' for the diaspora after their forceful eviction from their historical homeland and the more recent wars in Nagorno-Karabakh (Ziemer 2020).

The pressure of motherhood has become even more severe as a result of the 2020 war, when approximately 4,000 men were killed in action. Owing to an increase in demand for reproductive assistance from parents who lost sons during this conflict, the Armenian government began providing fertility treatment, including in vitro fertilization, for free to veterans and the families of fallen soldiers. Previously, the program was only available to women under 42 years of age, but this limit was raised to 53 (Avedissian 2023).

Alongside heightened motherhood responsibilities, women also face pressure to produce a son. As protectors of the nation, men have a more privileged status and authority in a patriarchal society such as Armenia. For Armenian families, giving birth to at least one boy is more than just a desire to continue the family line through the surname. Although there has been some improvement in recent years, sex-selective abortions remain a pressing social issue in Armenia. In 2000, the gender imbalance was at its highest recorded level, with a ratio of 120 boys per 100 girls (Khachatryan 2022). By 2021, this rate had dropped significantly—109 boys per 100 girls—but then jumped to 112 boys per 100 girls in 2022 (Sargsyan 2023). For most countries, in the absence of gender discrimination or interference, there are approximately 105 males per 100 female births, although this can range from approximately 103 to 107 boys per 100 girls (Ritchie and Roxer 2019).

Femicide and Violence against Women

Femicide and violence against women (VAW) are pressing issues in Armenia. Research has shown that militarized societies often see higher rates of domestic violence and violence against women. Military men are socialized into thinking that their role is manly to protect women and children and that it is manly to take risks, to be active not passive, to be competitive not compromising and to use violence to neutralize a military threat. In this way, military training often nurtures an exaggerated ideal of manhood and masculinity that is accomplished through the denigration of everything marked by difference, whether that is women or homosexuality (Whitworth 2004: 242–3).

In Armenia, the Istanbul Convention[3] has yet to be ratified by parliament (despite being signed by the previous government in 2018) and is still debated in public and opposed in some conservative quarters of society, notably the Armenian Apostolic Church (Meljumyan 2019). The issue of VAW and the ratification of the Istanbul Convention is often presented as a clash of values in public discourse, as conservative groups (some pro-Russian) seek to oppose this introduction of European regulations by framing them as 'alien' norms that threaten Armenian society. In this respect, these oppositional actors seek to discredit the current more 'pro-European' government by appealing to a deeply conservative society (Ziemer and Roberts forthcoming). However, as in Armenia, these types of anti-gender mobilizations are active across Europe (Graf and Korolczuk 2022).

3 The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence is better known as the Istanbul Convention, deriving this abbreviation from Istanbul, Turkey, the place where the treaty was opened for signatures in May 2011. It is a human rights treaty of the Council of Europe that legally defines and opposes violence against women. Therefore, it is an important step towards the protection of women from discrimination and abuse.

In 2022, 16 women were killed as a result of male violence in Armenia. According to the Investigative Committee of Armenia, during the first half of 2022 alone, there were 391 domestic violence criminal cases, comprising eight murders, including one due to negligence, 183 assault cases, 11 cases of committing severe physical pain or severe mental abuse, and 51 cases of murder threats or serious harm to health or destruction of property (Khachatryan 2023). In 2021, a study on domestic violence against women conducted by the Statistical Committee of Armenia showed that 31.8% of the respondents were subjected to psychological abuse by their husbands/partners, 6.6% were victims of sexual abuse, and 14.8% were victims of physical abuse (Khachatryan 2023).

These figures are striking in terms of the relatively small population of Armenia (a total population of 2,961,367 as of 2022 (Armstat 2022) but also in light of the significant underreporting of VAW. In Armenia, women are reluctant to report domestic violence, particularly because domestic violence is mostly considered a private family matter (UN Women 2018, Ziemer 2020); therefore, the incidence rate is likely to be much higher. According to the 2021 Armstat survey on domestic violence against women, only 5% of women who experienced physical or sexual violence said they sought help from the police, and 53.5% said that help is not expected from anyone (Khachatryan 2023). As per a public opinion survey conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) in September 2020, 31% of those surveyed agreed that women should tolerate violence to maintain family unity. Close to 50% of respondents also indicated that they are unlikely to report a case of domestic violence if they see one, with 71% of men and 76% of women supporting the position that a family should "sort out its own problems".

These attitudes indicate that discussing domestic violence and VAW publicly is a very difficult venture, often attracting criticism, as the issue continues to be viewed as a private rather than public matter (Armenian women's rights expert interview, Yerevan, July 2019). However, women's rights organizations have had some success with their work. In April 2021, a state-sponsored campaign against domestic violence was launched, displaying posters in public places exhorting women to speak out: 'Don't be silent. Nothing justifies domestic violence'. This was the first such women's rights campaign in Armenia, and it constitutes significant progress.

LGBT Persons and Discrimination

In Armenia, the protection of LGBT rights remains contentious on all sides of the political spectrum, with public discourse remaining overwhelmingly silent on the issue of diversity. Homosexuality was decriminalized in Armenia only in 2003. In 2007, the first Armenian LGBT community-based organization, "Pink Armenia", was founded. Currently, Armenia does not have comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation, and the state is yet to allow same-sex marriage or adoption (Human Rights Watch 2022). Widespread prejudice among the population remains, and people with a different sexual orientation often face intolerance and rejection from their own families (Chairperson at the Human Rights House, Yerevan, July 2018). IGLA-Europe's Rainbow Index ranks Armenia 47th out of 49 countries in Europe and Central Asia for LGBT rights, and society remains overwhelmingly hostile to same-sex relationships. According to the World Values Survey (2017–2020), 92.8% of respondents in Armenia thought that homosexuality is not justifiable. In addition, 82% of respondents would not like to have homosexuals as their neighbours (Equaldex 2023). Such attitudes are not uncommon across the region. Although slightly ahead of Armenia in terms of the legal protection of LGBT persons[4], neighbouring Georgia, for example, also shares these viewpoints, with 91.4% of survey respondents answering that homosexuality is not justifiable, and 61.7% rejecting homosexuals as neighbours (Equaldex 2023).

At the onset of the Velvet Revolution in spring 2018, Nikol Pashinyan was the first leading political figure to promote inclusivity in public, although often refraining from using the term LGBT in his public speeches (Human Rights Activist interview, Yerevan, July 2018). Once in power, the government under his leadership has been generally supportive of LGBT initiatives, such as the partial financing of the film *Mel,* which documents Mel Daluzyan, a famed transgender Armenian weightlifter and triple European champion (Ghukasyan 2019). In addition, Lilit Martirosyan was the first trans activist able to speak out in public at the National Assembly in 2019 and thus achieve some visibility for LGBT issues in the country (Matirosyan 2022). However, to date, there is still no hate crime law, legal gender recognition or access to trans health care in Armenia.

In Armenia, political homophobia is mostly associated with representatives of the old elite, the Republican Party, as well as the right-wing fringe group *Adekvad*. While *Adekvad* uses aggression and violent behaviour to contest liberal norms, the old Republican representatives use the strategy of fake news to the same end (Khandikian 2019). The political opposition manipulates LGBT issues to gain support and undermine or weaken the current government, as it seems generally supportive of

4 In 2014, Georgia adopted a widely debated law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination (Gvianshvili 2020: 209).

LGBT issues (Ziemer and Roberts forthcoming). Often, in public discourse, homosexuality and alternative sexualities are framed with a friend/enemy dichotomy, which can serve as a polarizing political strategy intended to alienate the population from the current government.

A militarist understanding of the nation and national survival embraces reproductive heterosexuality, where nonheterosexual individuals are conceived as "immoral" and "foreign" to an imagined national tradition and essence (Nagel 2003). Hence, this emphasis on traditions, family and marriage, which are a large part of the discursive strategies of political opposition groups in Armenia, emphasizes the patriarchy and masculinity in defending "our" nation from enemies' nations. Thus, the relationship between the military and war (perceived as defending the nation) and masculinity is crucial in understanding the ways in which gender equality norms promoted by the European Union become contested in political discourse in Armenia (Roberts and Ziemer 2018, Ziemer and Roberts forthcoming). This construction and framing of masculinity as heterosexual and symbolically "natural" by referencing same-sex relations as "unnatural", consequently rendering "queer" people as enemies of the nation, demonstrates how militarized thinking can become part of public discourse.

Conclusion—What next?

As Armenia has an ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the nation remains in a state of military preparedness. This militarized perception of a nation under threat has been normalized by the population in everyday life, and therefore, privileging men as defenders of the nation helps to maintain a patriarchal social order. Although solving the ongoing conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh region would certainly help accelerate the demilitarization of society and perhaps reduce militarized thinking and structured ways of life, it would not automatically improve the status of LGBT persons and women in society. Instead, and as highlighted in many feminist accounts, an empowerment of women in society will eventually reduce incidents of war and conflict. Multilateral agencies and international NGOs need to continue their work in peace building and expand peace education. Armenia certainly would benefit from increased levels of international cooperation and solidarity to make a transition from militarization and conflict to peace and stability, where women take a front role in peacebuilding and the demilitarization process.

About the Author

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Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Georgia: The Role of Religion, Religious Institutions, and Networks in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War

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Abstract

This article examines the influence of religion, religious institutions, and networks on Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Georgia during and after the 2020 Karabakh War. It analyses the opinions of members of both communities on the role of religion in the Karabakh conflict and how religious institutions used their resources during and after the 2020 war. It also examines how Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Georgia have accommodated religious symbols and rhetoric in the context of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War.[1]

Introduction

This article focuses on Azerbaijani–Armenian relations in Georgia concerning the role of religion and religious networks during and after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. While the 2020 war impacted Armenian–Azerbaijani relations in Georgia, the Georgian state failed to develop a strategy for interethnic dialogue. As a result, both communities turned to their kinstates to support their ethnic groups. Religion and religious leaders were important during and after the 2020 conflict.

Based on an analysis of primordialism, Fox (2018, 34) indicates that religious issues are deeply embedded in the historical identities of the groups. Religion has been relevant in politics for so long that only historians can say when it became essential and why. Consequently, religious identity is valid today because it was significant in the past. Conflicts rooted in primordial grievances can continue for generations. Hatred between groups is based on imaginary injustice, and a spiral of violence and revenge can go back centuries. For example, long-term animosities such as Armenians' claims against Turks, conditioned by the policy of the Ottoman Empire towards certain religious/ethnic minorities, culminated in genocide and the expulsion of Armenians in 1915–23. It became a basis for the Karabakh War being presented as a conflict between Christianity and Islam in some Armenian circles (Yemelianova 2017, 130–36).

Comparing language and religion, Brubaker (2013:3) writes that both qualities are constitutive of most ethnic and national identifications. They often constitute the "key diacritical markers, emblems or symbols of such identifications." However, he also indicates that neither religion nor language is fixed in its form. Religion and language are transformed by political, economic, and cultural processes in response to changing circumstances. Therefore, religion is one of the markers distinguishing Armenians and Azerbaijanis, and their historically grounded grievances are partly rooted in religious differences. Nevertheless, as far as Karabakh is concerned, the conflict started because of a dispute over land based on territorial, economic, and historical claims, and religion *per se* was a minor factor. Religion came into play later, reinforcing social and emotional solidarities in the period of instability after the collapse of the Soviet Union and with the onset of a full-fledged war in Karabakh. At that time, religious leaders influenced politics and people's opinions on the conflict (Tonoyan, 2018).

Fox (2018, 67) further notes that religious language supports and legitimizes certain political activities, views, and persons in a political context. The new political elites of Armenia and Azerbaijan incorporated religion and ethnicity to obtain legitimization for the emerging nationalist discourse. They use religious motifs, metaphors, and symbols to present the Karabakh issue as a struggle "between Islam and Christianity." Both sides adopted religious rhetoric in political discourses, even if the conflict is not religious, since Armenians and Azerbaijanis do not kill each other in the name of religion (Tonoyan 2018, 17).

As far as Georgia is concerned, until the 2020 war, the relationships between Armenians and Azerbaijanis were relatively good. Nevertheless, they were constantly exposed to the political propaganda of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Consequently, when the hostilities in 2020 began, Armenians and Azerbaijanis were caught up in the conflict happening in a place other than their homeland, Georgia. Informal and formal institutions and networks (including religious ones) played a significant role in the people's mobilization. In this con-

1 In this article, I use the terms Nagorno-Karabakh war/Karabakh war/conflict interchangeably while being aware of the fact that the conflict occurs on the territory and surroundings of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (Armenian: Artsakh, de jure within Azerbaijan, de facto semi-independent entity), not in the entire geographic region named Karabakh.

text, I apply a primary assumption of social network analysis: social ties function as channels for disseminating material and nonmaterial resources (Everton, 2015).

Paradoxically, the level of religiosity of individuals was not always at stake. Religious institutions were important for resources and the consolidation of people. Armenian priests gave psychological support to believers after losing the 2020 war. Muslim religious leaders prayed for the killed, termed "martyrs," which gave their death a religious dimension. There were also some reconciliation initiatives, such as the interconfessional collective prayers for peace in Karabakh held on the premises of the Peace Cathedral, Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia in Tbilisi. However, it was a niche initiative that was not supported by all Azerbaijani and Armenian religious leaders and masses. After the hostilities ended, the importance of religious symbolism and religious clusters has not lost its significance; it only changed dynamics and direction.

For local Armenians, some stressed that Georgia should support Armenia because it is also a Christian state in the Caucasus, bordering Muslim-majority territories. Some of them emphasized the struggle between civilizations and religions as one of the motives of the conflict, repeating the rhetoric promoted by Armenia. However, the situation in Georgia has one more aspect, as Turkey is her first trade partner, and Georgia has good relations with Azerbaijan. Consequently, some Armenians believed that Georgia's neutrality meant indifference to the cause of Christian Armenia. In addition, Turkey's support for Azerbaijan fuelled various conspiracy theories, such as rumours about mercenary terrorists helping in Karabakh. Still, Georgian Armenians were not the only ones who questioned Turkey's role in the 2020 war. Shiite religious leaders in Georgia also criticized Turkey for supporting Azerbaijan during the conflict. They believed that in this way, Turkey interfered with the internal affairs of Azerbaijan.

Based on the analysis of my field data, in this article, I discuss the influence of religion, religious institutions, and networks on Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Georgia during and after the 2020 Karabakh war. What is the people's opinion regarding the role of religion in the Karabakh conflict? How did religious institutions use their resources during and after the 2020 war? How have religious symbols and rhetoric been accommodated by Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Georgia considering the conflict in Karabakh?

According to the results of the 2014 census, Armenians comprise 4.5 percent of the Georgian population (168,000 people), and Azerbaijanis comprise 6.3 percent (233,000 people). Armenians constitute the main population of the Samtskhe-Javakheti region (54.6%). Some groups also live in the Kvemo Kartli region. Most Azerbaijanis live in Kvemo Kartli (42%), Kakheti (10%), Shida Kartli (2%), and Mtskheta-Mtianeti (2,5%). Some Armenians and Azerbaijanis settled in Tbilisi and other regions of Georgia. Although both groups have lived in Georgia for centuries, their level of integration into Georgian society varies.

Their area of residence, economic and social status, age, and knowledge of the Georgian language largely determine their level of integration, which is also subject to government policies concerning minorities. Most Armenians, 109,000 people (2.93% of Georgia), belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church, and some follow Catholicism (Geostat 2014). According to most estimates, Shiite Islam is followed by 60 to 70 percent of the Azerbaijani population in Georgia; others are adherents of Sunni Islam (Prasad 2012, 5). However, the cases of conversions from Shiism to Sunnism (the opposite is less frequent), especially in the 1990s and 2000s, and the emergence of nontraditional Muslim groups may have changed these proportions.

Methodology

This article is based on field research I conducted during the 2020 Karabakh war in Georgia (the first stage). The second research stage was completed between 03–09.2022 in Kvemo-Kartli, including the municipalities of Gardabani, Marneuli, Kvemo-Kartli, and the region of Samtskhe Javakheti. Some information was collected in Tbilisi. Altogether, I conducted approximately 50 interviews and conversations with village residents, people in the town of Marneuli (the centre of the Azerbaijani minority in Georgia) and the town of Akhalkalaki (a hub of Armenians in Georgia). I also spoke with Azerbaijanis and Armenians working at the Lilo Market in Tbilisi, social activists, journalists from both communities, and religious leaders. Most of my conversations and interviews were informal, some lasting half an hour, some a full day or more. Only some interviews were recorded. I kept notes of the rest of the conversations. I also participated in communal, religious, and political events. I obtained additional information on religion and the Nagorno-Karabakh war during four focus groups, two of which were organized in Marneuli and the village of Vakhtangisi with the participation of Azerbaijanis (Kvemo-Kartli region, Gardabani district). The two other groups took place in the Samtskhe Javakheti region, in the town of Akhalkalaki, and in the village of Sulda among Armenians.

Armenians from Samtskhe-Javakheti

There was a high political mobilization of Armenians from Samtskhe-Javakheti during the 2020 war. Shortly after hostilities began in September 2020, Armenians

from Javakheti organized rallies to support Karabakh (Ajvazjan 2020). As the 2020 war erupted, Armenian activists from Akhalkalaki established the Javakhk NGO (*Russian:* Fond Dzhavakhk riadom s Armianami; *English:* Javakhk together with Armenians) to provide help to Armenians fighting on the frontline. Parishes played an essential role in coordinating humanitarian aid collected on the premises of churches and in the office of the Javakhk NGO. Then, transports were sent to Armenia; Armenians from across Georgia donated 500 tons of humanitarian aid and approximately 370 000 USD (Cieślewska, 2022).

According to a priest from the Surb Khach Church (Holy Cross Church) in Akhalkalaki, volunteers stayed on the church's premises during the war and collected what people brought. In his opinion, most of the local Armenians hoped for victory. However, the war ended with the defeat of Armenia, and priests had to work with people to restore their emotional balance[2]. The church cultivates the memory of the war and fallen soldiers. A memorial service for those who were killed in the 44-Day War in 2020 is held annually on September 27 at the Surb Khach Church (Armenian church.ge, 2021; research 2022). Armenian activists founded a khachkar[3] commemorating the Second Karabakh War that is located at the front of the Surb Khach Church. Occasionally, the events in Karabakh are remembered at local shrines (*surb*, Armenian: sacred) during various ceremonies.

Nevertheless, opinions on the place of religion and religious institutions in the conflict varied. Some interlocutors believed that Karabakh is a war between Christianity and Islam. It has a historical background dating back to the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries when Armenians were persecuted in the Ottoman Empire. According to some interviewees, "all countries should help Armenian against Muslims, 'dushmans[4]'" In their view, Armenia is the bulwark of Christianity, as it is the oldest Christian country in the world, bordering three Muslim-majority countries. According to this logic, Georgia and other European countries should help Armenia defend against the invasion of Muslims. However, some of my Armenian interlocutors assessed Georgian's role ambiguously. One interviewee stated, "Georgia's neutrality comes at a price. Turkey may one day claim Adjara once it is established in the Caucasus. 'Sultan' Erdogan policy has a religious background. 'The Sultanate' cannot be multi-religious. Christians have no place there"[5].

Moreover, information about the alleged jihadist mercenaries sent by Turkey to Karabakh during the 2020 war stirred emotions. Some interlocutors showed me videos disseminated on the internet about Azerbaijanis supposedly destroying Armenian religious sites in the territories gained by them in 2020. However, confirming the authenticity of these videos with reliable sources is difficult, as both sides widely spread fake news. Notwithstanding, some people said religion had no significance in the Karabakh war, which is a typical territorial conflict. They indicated that Iran, a Muslim country, supported Armenia in the Karabakh War, while Christian countries left Armenians to their fate in 2020.

Azerbaijanis from Kvemo-Karli

Azerbaijanis organized demonstrations in Marneuli and Tbilisi and one in Gardabani during the 2020 war. Religious leaders participated in rallies, and people prayed in mosques for victory, soldiers, and those who were killed. However, there was no organized humanitarian effort as in the churches of Samtskhe-Javakheti, although some mosques helped in the logistics of organizing various events related to the war.

At the demonstration in Marneuli set up on October 10, 2020, one of the banners read: "Martyrs never die. The country is not divided" (Az: *Şəhidlər ölməz. Vətən bölünməz*). There were also photographs of two Azerbaijanis from Georgia who died in the war displayed on the main stage for speeches. Elevating those killed in Karabakh to the status of martyrs appeared in the discourse regarding Karabakh in Azerbaijan. As Karabakh is included in the national identity-building mechanisms, religious elements such as comparing Imam Husain and his people who died during the battle of Karbala in 680 and deceased soldiers fit into the general concept of a new national identity (Cieślewska and Kosicińska, no date). Despite being citizens of Georgia, most of my Azerbaijani interlocutors are influenced by the political propaganda of Azerbaijan. They accept discourses promoted by the government of Azerbaijan, including religious discourses.

For instance, during the celebration of Ashura in 2022 in the village of Jandara (the Gardabani Municipality), a local akhund (a Shia religious professional) referred to those who died in Karabakh in the context of Karbala. In the words of some interlocutors, "Husain's martyrdom is exemplary for people fighting for their land and freedom. The soldiers killed in Karabakh are martyrs because they fought and died

2 The author's interview with a priest, Akhalkalaki, 28.04.2022.
3 Khachkar (Armenian cross-stone). It is a carved memorial stele with a cross and often additional motifs.
4 In Persian, Turkish, and Azerbaijani the word dushman means "enemy"; some Armenians also used it in conversations in the context of "Turk, enemy, terrorist."
5 The author's interview with a journalist, Akhalkalaki, November 2020.

for their land; in this sense, Karabakh has a religious dimension".

Nevertheless, as in the case of the Armenians, opinions on the role of religion in the Karabakh conflict were divided. Fewer people associated the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with religion. Most people supported the view that territorial disputes are a significant cause of the war. Those who argued in favour of the importance of faith in the Karabakh conflict referenced examples of religious spots allegedly desecrated and destroyed by the Armenian side. Horák and Hoch (2023) note that the cultural and religious symbols and places belonging to one party of the conflict are permanently neglected, desecrated, or transformed by another party currently controlling them. Armenia and Azerbaijan use religious symbols to promote their national ideologies. In this way, religion became a tool to evoke negative emotions that fuelled animosity between Armenians and Azerbaijanis.

With this in mind, the opinions of some Shiite leaders in Georgia seem particularly interesting. While assessing the role of Turkey and Iran in the Karabakh conflict, they indicated that Iran's aid to Armenia is overestimated. According to them, it is a manipulation by Sunni Turkey to discredit the Shiites and Iran. They blamed Turkey for spreading "false information" regarding the pro-Armenian stance of Iran. In their opinion, this is why Shiites are persecuted in Azerbaijan[6]. The last statement applied to Aliyev's religious policies and the detention of some Shiite religious leaders accused of collaboration with Iran.[7] It is unlikely that they would be able to express such a view in Azerbaijan without fear of persecution.

Conclusions

Although the context of Georgia gives new dimensions to the relationship between religion and the Karabakh war, Armenia's and Azerbaijan's propaganda strongly impacts the views of Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Georgia.

For Shia Azerbaijanis, the death of Imam Husayn and his people at Karbala is used to present the Karabakh issue as a national cause. At the same time, Georgian Shiites criticized Azerbaijan's religious policies towards Shiism and Iran and pointed to the alleged Sunni (Turkish) influences over Azerbaijan's internal affairs. Some Sunnis also perceived the religious perspective as relevant to the Karabakh cause. Some Armenians of Georgia presented the Karabakh conflict as a war between Islam and Christianity, calling on Georgians to support Armenia against the "common enemy."

However, some people in both communities believe that the religious factor in the Karabakh conflict is insignificant. Moreover, a level of religiosity or even a place in religious structures does not always influence someone's opinion. Religion is seen by many as one of the symbols rooted in historical and social identification but not a direct cause of the conflict.

Religious institutions and infrastructure were essential in the 2020 war, especially in Samtskhe-Javakheti, where Armenians constitute a majority, as the local branches of the Armenian Apostolic Church coordinated the collection of humanitarian aid. While opinions among Armenians on the relationship between religion and the war in Karabakh varied, the cooperation of the community and the church strengthened the solidarity of Armenians from Georgia during the war.

About the Author

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6 The author's interview with a Shia professional, 09 August 2022, Tbilisi.
7 The author's interview with a Shia professional and social activist, 15 April 2022, Marneuli.

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