Sebastian Relitz (Ed.)

INSIGHTS FROM YOUNG SCHOLARS AND PEACEBUILDERS FROM THE CAUCASUS

CORRIDORS PROCEEDINGS VOL. II

CORRIDORS

DIALOGUE THROUGH COOPERATION

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SEBASTIAN RELITZ — INTRODUCTION

INSIGHTS FROM YOUNG SCHOLARS AND PEACEBUILDERS FROM THE CAUCASUS

The year 2020 was an incredibly turbulent and difficult one for the Caucasus. Here, like all around the world, the global COVID-19 pandemic marked every aspect of life. Moreover, the Caucasus was hit by several political, social, and economic crises and, particular devastating, by a bloody war. Many of these events, such as the political crisis in Georgia after the disputed parliamentary elections or the president's resignation in Abkhazia after massive public protests and the subsequent turbulent elections in the spring, received little international attention. Internal political instability has again become a key characteristic of many regions in the Caucasus, highlighted in the current political crisis in Armenia. Georgia, Abkhazia, and Armenia have also been hit hard by the collapse of tourism, which exposed structural weaknesses in their economies. However, all this was overshadowed by the escalation of the long-running conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. At the end of September, Azerbaijan launched a large-scale military offensive of the disputed region. The fighting rapidly developed into the most intense and bloody combats since the 1990s, which caused immense human suffering on all sides and particularly among the population of Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding regions. After six weeks of intense fighting and a progressive Azerbaijani military advance, a ceasefire agreement negotiated under Moscow's leadership brought the fighting to a halt. The war and the implementation of this ceasefire agreement have enormous ramifications for the people directly affected by the conflict, the parties' positions in the conflict, and future conflict management. Furthermore, these developments change the regional power balance with an increased Russian and Turkish presence. Finally, the outburst of violence and the extreme polarization and radicalization of political and public discourses destroyed many human relations over the divide and silenced peacebuilding initiatives.

Promoting peace in the Caucasus's various protracted conflicts has been a challenging endeavor for nearly thirty years. During this period, regrettably, the prospects for a peaceful resolution have continuously deteriorated; similarly, conflict has been solidified as a normality, and the polarized division between neighbors and within societies has been institutionalized. Two developments are particularly evident: (1) the increasing tensions at different levels of conflict, the collective alienation and (self-) isolation of societies, and the shrinking spaces for dialogue and cooperation over the divide, and (2) the restricted knowledge exchange between the societies in conflict and the narrow understanding of the complex conflict structures and dynamics. The

last point has been reflected in the current coverage and debate on the Karabakh conflict. International scholars and experts have dominated the debate. Although many of them are proven specialists on the subject and the region, a lack of knowledge transfer from the Caucasus to international discourses is evident. The sidelining of local expertise can lead to a narrow understanding of the conflicts, which focuses almost exclusively on their international and geopolitical dimensions. Even though these dimensions are vital, all of the Caucasus's protracted conflicts are multilevel disputes with a deeply rooted local dimension. Therefore, paying closer attention to the local and regional dimensions of the conflicts is crucial. In these dimensions in particular, most expertise lies with local stakeholders and in the region itself. This edited volume aims to support the knowledge transfer from and within the Caucasus, promote local expertise in international discourses, and shed light on often overlooked, yet crucial, aspects and outcomes of the unresolved conflicts.

These **CORRIDORS PROCEEDINGS VOL. II: INSIGHTS FROM YOUNG SCHOLARS AND PEACEBUILDERS FROM THE CAUCASUS** are the outcome of a collaborative project that addresses several of the above-identified challenges for peacebuilding in the region. The project called **ADVANCING YOUNG PEACEBUILDER CAREERS** was developed and implemented by CORRIDORS in cooperation with regional partners from Abkhazia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Russia. Located at the interface between academic conflict research and civil society peacebuilding, the project attempted to combine the potential of both spheres. Sixteen young participants from these regions, plus Nagorno-Karabakh, actively contributed to the project, which combined academic input, practical training, and regional exchange. They learned vital concepts of peacebuilding and conflict studies and strengthened essential skills in academic writing and mediation. In particular, the participants developed their own research articles or policy and opinion papers, applying the learned skills and knowledge. They were supported and mentored by experienced international scientists and peacebuilding practitioners. Our special thanks go to our lecturers and mentors, Stefan Wolff, Tanja Tamminen, Laurence Broers, Vera Axyonova, and Stéphane Voell, for their valuable feedback and guidance. The participants also had the opportunity to present and discuss their research with their peers. They exchanged knowledge and views on conflict-related topics within several online sessions and discussions throughout the fall of 2020. Thus, we managed to build a digital space for dialogue over the divide.

The shrinking space for dialogue and exchange over the divide is a critical obstacle to peacebuilding in the Caucasus, and the global pandemic and the war in and around Karabakh have further catalyzed this trend. In 2020, many peacebuilding initiatives had to be canceled or moved to the digital space as international mobility was re-

stricted, which posed new challenges to facilitate meaningful exchange. Our project also had to be moved into the digital space and changed substantially as a result. Even though the one-week workshop in Germany, the heart of the project, could not be held and was instead organized in several online workshops, almost all of the selected participants remained in the project. Moreover, the war placed enormous pressure on individual peace activists and peacebuilding initiatives that involved stakeholders from Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Azerbaijan. On the individual level, some faced existential threats through the large-scale violence, and the radicalized discourses within their societies or the pressure from authorities silenced others. Some joined these radical discourses, which caused astonishment, regret, and sadness among colleagues in the region and beyond. Our project was significantly affected by the war, as many participants and partners came from all sides of the divide. Thus, we had to adapt to this challenge in several ways, and some participants could not finish their work under the extreme circumstances. Nevertheless, we are very happy, proud, and thankful that together we managed to secure a space for exchange and dialogue over the divide, even in times of active fighting. We are incredibly grateful that our inspiring participants managed to persevere in the process and stay engaged in times of war and uncertainty, particularly our courageous colleagues from Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Azerbaijan.

As mentioned, only a few local experts manage to make themselves heard internationally. Moreover, they are frequently the same senior experts. In a similar vein, the same actors can often be identified in dialogue and peacebuilding projects. Of course, many years of experience and expertise, as well as resilient relationships among such stakeholders, are essential. However, this largely excludes the younger generation of peace researchers and civil society activists. But it is primarily the Caucasian youth who are affected by the negative consequences of the unresolved conflicts. Their socialization is shaped by the conflict narratives, their future opportunities are curtailed by militarization and isolation, and ultimately, their lives are lost in military escalations. Thus, enlarging the circle of people being heard beyond the usual subjects, more adequately including the younger generation, is imperative. We need to diversify conflict-related discourses and peacebuilding processes and strengthen the youth's voice and role. This publication aims to make a modest contribution to this end and to make new voices heard.

This publication consists of ten selected papers that have been developed, presented, discussed, and reviewed during the project. It provides the reader with firsthand insights, analyses, and opinions from young scholars and peacebuilders from the Caucasus. In this way, the edited volume facilitates the exchange of knowledge both within the region and internationally. As a result, the publication brings issues and

questions into focus that are otherwise largely ignored. That is the case with our first contribution from **Aynura Babayeva** (Baku). She explores what home and belonging means for internally displaced people (IDP), based on a qualitative study with women displaced from Karabakh three decades ago. The subject of self-identification of forcibly displaced people is particularly relevant due to the current refugee and displacement processes in and around Karabakh. In her article, Aynura comes to the critical conclusion that the sense of home and belonging for urbanized female IDP in Azerbaijan is transitory, temporary, and shaped by personal experience rather than national discourses. This can lead to a discrepancy between IDP's individual desires and national agendas of repatriation and return. A second topic that is little discussed internationally is religious conflicts in the Russian North Caucasus. **Azamat Tatarov** (Nalchik) sheds light on the relationship between the recentralization and stabilization of state rule in Russia and the development of religious conflicts and Islam's institutionalization in the North Caucasus. He argues that strengthening the state's monopoly of power and increasing control over religious institutions are often-overlooked elements. Using the case study of Kabardino-Balkaria, he shows the correlation between state transformation and religious conflict. In doing so, the article expands our understanding of how the transformation of the state in Russia since the late 1990s influenced the development of religious conflict and the institutionalization of Islam.

A central concern of this edited volume is the opportunity to build long-term initiatives, structures, and capacities that promote the peaceful coexistence of all people in the Caucasus. Several contributions address the difficult issue of supporting a peaceful transformation of the Caucasus's protracted conflicts. **Ketevan Murusidze** (Tbilisi) highlights the potential of local capacities for peace in the Georgian-Abkhazian context. The article analyzes four cases of practical cooperation between Georgia and Abkhazia that have emerged locally, albeit often with international stakeholder support. It identifies three factors essential to facilitate collaboration over the divide: an inclusive approach, interdependence, and shared ownership. The author argues that despite the lack of a systemic approach and limited spillover effect of these cases on a wider peace process, they illustrate that some local capacities have the potential to reinforce positive changes or at least create possibilities for collaboration. Quality higher education is a crucial challenge for the sustainable development of societies and a precondition for enhancing local capacities for peace, argue **Salima Dzhikirba** (Sukhum/i) and **Sebastian Relitz** (Berlin). Their paper illustrates that the internationalization of higher education, which is a vital step to strengthening educational capacities and relations between societies, presents many challenges in Abkhazia because of its disputed status and the unresolved conflict with Georgia. The authors analyze how these challenges restrain internationalization on

different levels and identify several programs that have managed to, at least partially, overcome the challenges. The authors outline the potential for further internationalization of higher education and formulate concrete recommendations for international and local stakeholders to better utilize its peacebuilding and development potential. **Lusine Vanyan** (Stepanakert) discusses the peacebuilding potential of education from another perspective. Her paper elaborates on the potential of Community Service Learning (CSL) to promote an encompassing, inclusive, and empowering culture of peace in Nagorno-Karabakh. She argues that by systematically implementing CSL in formal higher education, vital skills and competencies in peace education could be strengthened in the region. Finally, the article assesses students' and faculty's attitudes from local higher education institutions toward implementing CSL and outlines potential projects. **Seda Shekoyan** (Yerevan) points out the often-unused potential of cultural diplomacy and art in conflict transformation approaches. In her paper, she reflects on practical experience in this sphere within the Armenian-Turkish Normalization Process. She argues that by reconceptualizing the role of art institutions, cultural diplomacy can support the development of attitudes and structures that build peaceful societies in the digital era. To live up to this potential, museums and other cultural spaces need a new form of governance, agency, and autonomy. The paper concludes that more cultural practitioners, not primarily professional peace researchers and civil society activists, should be involved in and should shape peacebuilding activities to support this development.

A comprehensive understanding of the obstacles to peacebuilding is critical to effectively harnessing the potential of peacebuilding interventions. As our authors reveal, these obstacles can lie both within societies experiencing conflict and external actors' policies or limitations. Two authors address the significant obstacle of selective conflict narratives within their societies. The first article is written by an Azerbaijani author originally from Baku but who must remain **anonymous** (Baku) due to the current situation in the country. Considering the latest developments in Nagorno-Karabakh, the article discusses whether Armenians' and Azerbaijanis' peaceful coexistence in the region is possible. By evaluating official government declarations and statements of the Azerbaijani president, the author identifies a lack of coverage in official discourses of the period of coexistence within the Soviet Union. He argues that this lack of acknowledgment and the established narrative in Azerbaijan, suggesting the conflict started entirely because of the Armenians' maligning and separatist intentions, negatively affected the perspective on lasting peace and peaceful coexistence. **Darejan Tsurtsumia** (Tbilisi) also identifies a narrow and selective perception of the unresolved conflicts as a key obstacle for reconciliation in the case of Georgia. She argues that, since the Georgian-Russian war of 2008, the prevailing discourse of Russia as the occupier, the only obstacle to conflict resolution, sidelines

and ignores the Abkhazian and South Ossetian communities as well as IDP from those regions. This study examines how this anti-occupation discourse influences public Facebook discussions about possible dialogue and peacebuilding processes with Abkhazia. It displays how the dominant anti-occupation discourse facilitates hate speech and silences dissenting voices or nuanced perspectives. Finally, the author discusses how the social media platform may or may not be a suitable one for this discussion. The following paper aligns with the perspective on the unresolved conflicts in Georgia, which has been distinctively criticized by Darejan Trustsumi in her contribution. **Ani Kintsurashvili** (Tbilisi) argues that those protracted conflicts are linked mainly to Georgian-Russian relations rather than Georgian-Abkhazian or Georgian-South Ossetian relations. Based on this assumption, the paper explores the emergence of the conflicts and explains them with Russia's foreign policy interest. The author also focuses on whether the policies and activities of international organizations can support the peaceful resolution of the conflicts. She argues that due to the limitations set by Russia, the peacebuilding measures taken by international organizations have limited effects. A different perspective on Russia's role in the unresolved conflicts of the South Caucasus is examined by **Hovsep Babayan** (Yerevan) in his article on Russia's foreign policy toward the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The article, which was written before this year's war, follows the argument that Russia is interested in conflict resolution while securing its policy objectives. Such objectives include maintaining stability in the region, ensuring Russia's presence in the negotiations, and preserving Russia's relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan. By analyzing Russian foreign policy toward military and political aspects of the conflict between 1991 and early 2020, the author argues that Russia does not possess the necessary capacity and leverage to facilitate a peaceful conflict resolution while securing its interests at the same time.

The ten articles published here were written by authors from almost all regions of the Caucasus. They offer a comprehensive and diverse view of this region and make the **CORRIDORS PROCEEDINGS VOL. II** an unique publication. Unfortunately, it is far from common for young scholars, activists, and experts from Abkhazia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Russia to share their views and expertise in one publication. Therefore, the authors and other project participants deserve our respect and appreciation for their openness and commitment to the project. The project's implementation would also not have been possible without the support of our local project partners. Therefore, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to our colleagues from Respublika Idei (Sukhum/i), the Youth and Community Action Club (Samakhbyur), the Humanitarian Research Public Union (Baku), Civic IDEA (Tbilisi), and Kabardino-Balkaria State University (Nalchik). We look forward to continuing and deepening our dialogue and cooperation in the future. Finally, we would like to

thank the German Federal Foreign Office for their generous funding of our project, Advancing Young Peacebuilder Careers, and this publication. Its Civil Society Cooperation program demonstrates that dialogue and cooperation over the various divides in the Eastern Partnership region and Russia are possible. Precisely, the facilitation of cross-regional dialogue and cooperation around protracted conflicts is a key competence of **CORRIDORS**. We develop and implement projects that enhance knowledge transfer and create new opportunities for direct people-to-people contact across the conflict divide. **CORRIDORS** also aims to enhance awareness and understanding of the context and dynamics around protracted conflicts in the region and internationally. This publication seeks to facilitate an open exchange of knowledge and views. In this spirit, I wish the readers a stimulating and informative read.

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THE AFTERMATH OF FORCED INTERNAL DISPLA(Y)CEMENT: UNDERSTANDING HOME AND BELONGING AMONG INTERNALLY DISPLACED WOMEN

This research proposal is intended as a contribution to the current body of literature on peace and conflict studies in an interdisciplinary manner. It addresses the women's experience of home and belonging[1] *in post-war era Azerbaijan. The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh is briefly addressed as a cause of forced internal displacement; however, the historical details and narratives of either country are not explored in depth. In doing so, the aim of this project is to set a clear tone for the research, targeting understandings of "home" and "belonging" in forced displacement. A qualitative research model is used in this study to explore how internally displaced women born between 1988 and 1990 in Karabakh are experiencing home and belonging after three decades of displacement. This study is a contribution to the academic work on the South Caucasus region, which makes it particularly suitable to the field of interdisciplinary studies.*

KEY WORDS: *Armenia, Azerbaijan, belonging, conflict, forced internal displacement, home, gender, Nagorny-Karabakh, post-war spaces*

INTRODUCTION

Typing "Nagorny-Karabakh"[2] into any internet search engine will bring up a wide range of information about the conflict is reached. One can debate which parts are "true" and which are not; however, those interested in the conflict's history can at least access similar chronologies of it. The political discourse of the conflict as such is beyond the scope of this study, which does not aim to give any amount of importance to or analyze the shared and differing aspects, agreements, and disagreements in academia over the Nagorny-Karabakh issue. The aim of this work is not to deconstruct "well-known" approaches (e.g., state-building after the collapse of the Soviet

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1 Please note that in this article *home and belonging* are not distinguished as two distinct concepts; on the contrary, they are inseparable and appear in the texts as a single term.

2 In this article, the name Nagorny is used instead of Nagorno, following Thomas de Waal (2003, p. 8).

Union, neither society being ready to make peace, non-democratic states being unable to achieve sustainable peace, etc.) that seem to be the blueprints for many who study the region in an effort to showcase what is happening at the internal/local/societal level in Azerbaijan and how this changes or could change the discourse of peace politics. Today, most of the literature written on this issue neglects the human factor of this stagnant conflict of the South Caucasus. The human face of the conflict is portrayed primarily as the victimization of the internally displaced people and their impatience to return to their "homes."

Figure 1

U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, University of Texas Libraries:
Nagorno-Karabakh (Political Map) 1993
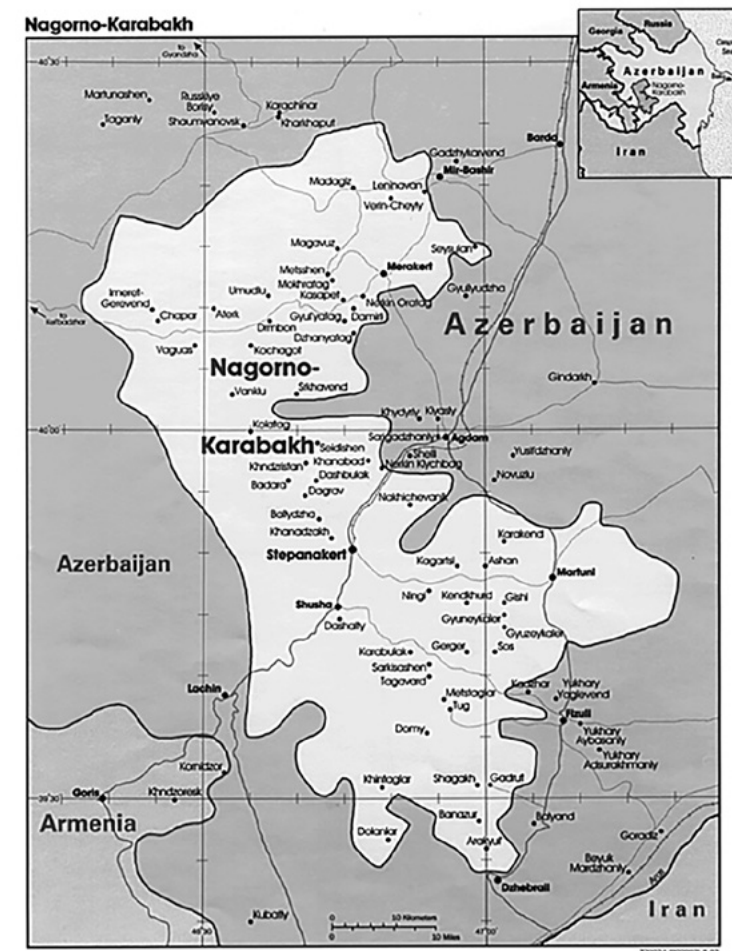
The Nagorny-Karabakh conflict[3], also referred to as Nagorno-Karabakh, *Dağlıq Qara-bağ* (in Azerbaijani), and Artsakh (in Armenian), began in February 1988. Heavy fighting continued throughout 1992 and 1993, and this conflict has become a landmark episode in the bloody history between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the mountainous region of Nagorny-Karabakh (Sayfutdinova n.d.; Wall 2003). The outcome of this conflict was the signing of the Bishkek cease-fire agreement in 1994, where the parties met each other around an OSCE Minsk Group-lead negotiations table (Wall 2003; Najafizadeh 2013; Jalilov 2019). Some authors described it as an ethnic conflict and some as a territorial conflict, but few, if any, have described it as a religious one (Wall 2003; Najafizadeh 2013). In this study the conflict is examined as a ethno-territorial dispute, rather than solely ethnic (see Figure 1), the aftermath of which, in the living memory of Azerbaijanis, is characterized by the forced internal displacement of approximately 600,000 people, 14 percent of the country's territory being lost, and the mass killings committed in Khojaly on February 26, 1992 (World Bank 2010; Crisis Group 2012; Jalilov 2019).

The "memory landmarks" of the Nagorny-Karabakh conflict are kept fresh in the daily lives of Azerbaijanis by constant reminders, the most prominent one being the living conditions of internally displaced persons (IDPs).

Given the scope of this paper, I do not go into great depth in analyzing the conflict, its history, the economic wellbeing of IDPs,[4] or their (non-)integration. However, I do use these elements as tools to explore the understandings of *home and belonging*.

THE AUTHOR'S PERSPECTIVE, RESEARCH THEORY, AND METHODOLOGY

It is uncommon in academia for researchers to provide information on their personal background. Fortunately, or unfortunately, in this study I have done so to clarify the relevance of the project. The topic of this study was not chosen by coincidence, because I, as an author, experienced the war and its consequences, one of them being

displacement. There was always an *uncomfortable* feeling or short silence after I would introduce myself, especially during the first few months after I was displaced. My intention in this study is not to intensify the discussion on victimhood that the conflict and displacement imposed on those who escaped the war zone, but to explore its socio-anthropological aspects, which are situated in the notion of *home and belonging*. IDPs are often asked whether they would return to their "homes" when the conflict is resolved, and the anticipated answer is always *yes* – the opposite is un-imaginable. Following that notion, a significant aspect of this study is its focus on the lived experiences of internally displaced women, a majority of whom are settled in Baku city.

The relevance of this project also lies in its empirical and conceptual contributions., Like its neighboring countries, Azerbaijan entered the so-called "transition"/"state-building" chaotic yet very 'hopeful' phase after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Despite the war, this phase was characterized as development, democratization, free-market, and abundance (Féaux de la Croix and Ismailbekova 2014). Old post-Soviet thinking was off the table, and everyone hurried to be "Westernized" in all aspects. A new sense of space emerged during the chaos as an alternative to the Soviet one (Féaux de la Croix and Ismailbekova 2014). Several international, humanitarian, and relief organizations, as well as oil companies and NGOs, opened offices, thus establishing a path to settle the conflict and promote the development that the oil money was expected to bring. Under such an umbrella, this article employs a *guided-intro-spective* method alongside *interview-based qualitative method* to draw conclusions when it comes to the effects of war (particularly being forcibly displaced) as experienced by female respondents.

In doing so, the notion of home and belonging is explored primarily using Henri Lefebvre's (1991) Spatial Triad theory. As elaborated by Watkins (2005, 209), this theory is rich due to its triad composed of representation of space (conceived space), spatial practices (perceived space), and spaces of representation (lived spaces).[5] This study focuses mainly on human experiences, so informants' interviews and the relevant literature collected are analyzed using Lefebvre's Spatial Triad theory. Although this model is used most often in city planning and urban studies, in this article it is applied to the study of displacement. The data collected using the qualitative and introspection methods is studied using the abovementioned triad. Under representation of space, in this research, *conceived home* is studied via government policy that allocate such *space* as possible while, the spatial practices referred to here as *perceived*

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3   Please note that this article was written during and after the so-called second Karabakh war (September 27 – November 10, 2020). It does not shed light on any political development of or the territory regained by Azerbaijan during this war; however, these developments were addressed in the questions the respondents were asked regarding their understanding of *home and belonging* during the interviews.

4   The 1998 UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement defines an IDP as someone who has been "forced or obliged to flee or to leave his/her home or place of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or man-made disasters, without crossing an internationally recognized State border.

5   Organizational space as presented by Henri Lefebvre encompasses not only one aspect of space; it is an approach that facilitates contemplation of social, physical, and mental spaces for an integrated view (Watkins, 2005, p. 209).

home look at the production and re-production of physical *spaces* (Watkins 2005). When it comes to spaces of representation per se, *lived spaces* directly address IDPs' experiences of displacement. These parts of the triad are not studied independently; on the contrary, they are intertwined, and the distinctions between them have been defined for the sake of clarity.

Figure 2
The spatial triad and its parts (Adapted from Lefebvre, 1991, p.32–33)

Spaces of representation / Lived spaces
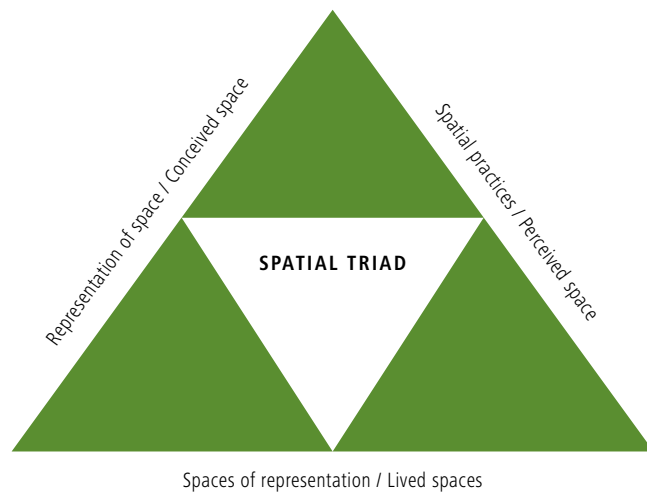
As an author, I have placed myself at the center of the study using *guided introspection* (human-centered design) (Xue and Desmet 2019), a method that allows researchers to design the study as one driven by real-world experiences. To be specific, I am a female IDP who was born in 1988; I have lived in temporary 'homes' myself, and in the course of this research I have asked introspective questions regarding "home" and "belonging" under the spatial triad of the production and re-production thereof. As put forward by Xue and Desmet (2019, 39), self-experience (subjectivity) is as crucial as objectivity when it comes to research, and therefore subjectivity should be seen as a balancing factor rather *unscientific*. Therefore, this research employs *guided introspection* rather *self-introspection* due to its broadness. Guided introspection allows in-depth interviews to be conducted without limiting the research to self-reflection alone.

As the interviews were conducted during an active war period (dubbed the Second Karabakh War, 2020) and under COVID-19 conditions, all of the respondents were ap-

proached via phone calls, as internet connections were unreliable at that time. Overall, nine female informants from adjacent districts of Karabakh (Fuzuli, Agdam, Zengilan, Kalbajar, and Gubadli) were interviewed. It was challenging to reach out to these respondents, which in itself is an important element of this study. I have found that women are less vocal than men on this matter, which is one of the reasons I chose to interview them for this study. Hence, when I shared social media posts, I found that male users were more responsive than female ones and were willing to be interviewed, even though the posts clearly stated that women were the target group.

The questions I asked during the interviews were divided into the categories of *technical* (birth of year, place, and displacement trajectory) and *main body* (on *home and belonging*, the meaning of IDP status in every possible level that it was experienced, and upon a return that became real with the second Karabakh War, which took place from September to November of 2020). Those female respondents who did participate in the interviews were born between 1988 and 1990, in the districts mentioned above. Of the nine informants, all hold higher educational degrees, one has a Ph.D., and one has studied and recently moved abroad, three of them are married with kids; seven of the nine still live in Baku, although only one still resides in a collective center in Baku. The average time spent on the interviews were around 40 to 50 minutes. In order to establish trust, before each interview I introduced myself and the purpose of the interview: I explained that I was not a government agent and reassured the respondent that I would maintain the confidentiality of their data. I was glad that respondents were receptive and opened up, even though the *space* we were in was created via a phone call. The interviews often provoked emotional responses during the *main body questions* relating to being an IDP and the economic, social, and psychological effects and challenges of such circumstances. Women in this age group were chosen because they were most likely to have spent the majority of their life as IDPs, compared to those who were displaced around the ages of ten and fifteen or even older. They share fragmented memories of their birthplace, and most of them remember the day of displacement, particularly *the "how" question of forced displacement, not the "why" question.*

These individual interviews were conducted and recorded as part of the data collection process and are substantial in two ways: first, they are gendered and personal narratives of displacement (Farzana 2017) and second, they created the possibility to analyze such data using a space and spatiality tool. Another reason why women were chosen as the focus group for this research is the lack of such resources in academia. Women's experiences (and human experiences in general) of the Karabakh war (1988–1994) have not been researched in depth by either Azerbaijani or international researchers.

Moreover, spatiality is contested in this article as relational rather than "native" or "by birth" (Malkki 1995). Given the fact that IDP communities are vulnerable populations who share a particular group identity, I aimed to explore the relationality of how space (physical and non-physical) and spatial elements form their understanding of *home and belonging* (Ngwato 2012).

D'ARTAGNAN: SPACE AND HOME-BELONGING-PLACE IN *THE THREE MUSKETEERS* [6]

Humans' mobility has been studied thoroughly ever since it was identified as *problematic*. Such activity is to be encouraged by all means, unless and until the first world makes an effort to more effectively support and assist refugees and IDPs. Humans are mobile (with negative or positive outcomes) despite restrictions such as tighter borders, migration policies, visa procedures, etc. Some have argued that in the *post-modern* and *globalized* world such restrictions are inadequate, that *globalization* and *localization* are inherently contradictory, and that global identities represent a new order of identity (Kibreab 1999). The juxtaposition of these notions undermines the corollary of identity and place and goes beyond the scope thereof by overlooking the millions of people who become refugees and displaced every year: these individuals spend their life in exile, and thus concepts such as *home*, *belonging*, *territoriality*, and *identity* are significant to them (Kibreab 1999, 386).

What and where is home are perhaps the first questions that come to anyone's mind when these matters are discussed. Is home a local and/or a global phenomenon? If so (i.e., if both are valid answers), why are seeking refuge and displacement cast as problems that can be "solved" only locally by apparently simple but in fact more complicated measures such as "return" and repatriation? Or does the global solution lie in a local remedy? Warner (1994) postulated this as an asymmetrical solution that is reduced to the issue of mobility alone (Warner, cited in Kibreab 1999). Appadurai (1996), on the other hand, identified it as a tension between the traditional (local) and modern (global) understandings of home and its intrinsic component space. It is local when looked traditionally and global when looked through a *modern lens* (Appadurai 1996). This tension transcends physical borders and comes between people and is thus used to create categories of people (mostly rooted in dualities): displaced vs.

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6   The Three Musketeers series is a set of historical novels by the French writer Alexandre Dumas (1802– 1870). The name came as an inspiration while thinking about the title for this section. Almost all of the literature I have encountered during my research for this article approached the home-belonging-place triad as a single concept and then discussed the meanings of space; I have used D'Artagnan as a symbol for this idea in this paper. For more on Dumas, see https://www.biography.com/writer/alexandre-dumas

non-displaced, vulnerable vs. privileged, and many more. However, the issue of *home and belonging* not only transcends physical borders but also creates space in non-physical places (Casey 1997). Space, as well as memories attached to a certain place, is intrinsic because it highlights the notion of home and belonging, the latter being a universal need of humankind (Appadurai, cited in Eigler and Kugele, 2012).

In this article, *home and belonging* are thought of as a common history and experience that extends itself to the present as enduring closeness (Féaux de la Croix and Ismailbekova 2014). Future-oriented belonging is contested but also constitutive; thus, the future of *home and belonging* in this article was perceived as return by the interview respondents.

> *…space and space language convey a culture's meanings about the immediate world, while place carries …sentiments of attachment and identity that emerge out of the lived experience. Space is …one of the three dimensions of space-time-culture within which human life is immersed, and that are at once universal and yet variously conceived and experienced by different cultures.*
> (Aucoin 2017; 398)

Moreover, in this article, the notion of space is well suited to anthropological studies. Anthropological studies of space recognize place (i.e., territory, landscape, or body) and its importance not only in cultural sites but also in social, political memory, and political discourses on them (Aucoin 2017, 395, 404). In anthropology, the Cartesian logic of *scientific space* – space as being mathematically or scientifically formed – is absent (Lefebvre, cited in Whaley, 2018; Watkins, 2005, 210), as is Euclidean space, the philosophical thought that spatial borders within a given place are exclusive (Watkins 2005). If humans are seeking meaning in philosophy, they are *bestowing* it in anthropology (Aucoin 2017, 397).

CONCEIVED, PERCEIVED, AND LIVED *HOME AND BELONGING* IN FORCED INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT [7]

> *To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognised need of [the] human soul*
> (Weil 1987, 41, in cited in Kibreab 1999, 1)

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7   This title corresponds to the Spatial Triad of Representation (Space, Spatial practices, and Spaces of Representation) (Lefebvre 1991).

According to UNHCR data, today in the world there are 79.5 million forcibly displaced people, of whom (45.7) million are IDPs.[8] In Azerbaijan alone, 7 *percent* of the population was forcibly displaced between 1988 and 1994 as an outcome of the Nagorny-Karabakh war (UNHCR 2009). This displacement happened in three stages: 1988–89, when 200,000 ethnic Azerbaijanis were forced from Armenia proper; 1992, when Azerbaijanis living in Nagorny-Karabakh were expelled; and October 1993, when the seven surrounding districts were occupied by Armenian armed forces (McLaughlin, 2020).

Conceived Home and Belonging

The purpose of this section is to explore how *home and belonging* have been interpreted in government policies since forced internal displacement was implemented. Here, "conceived home" is a part of the Lefebvre spatial triad and is also presented as a representation of space (1991). This approach is an organizational analysis of space that contemplates social, physical, and mental spaces as integrated parts of the triad (Watkins 2005).

In creating the phenomena of *conceived home and belonging*, the Government of Azerbaijan (GoA) implemented two important laws in May 1999 (on the Status of IDPs and on the Social Protection of IDPs), issued as presidential decrees and orders/decisions of the Cabinet of Ministers (UNHCR 2009, IDMC 2008, Amnesty International n.d.) that support the IDP identity. This identity is important in constructing and maintaining the notions of conceived *home and belonging*, and thus it is linked to particular *physical places (occupied territories)*, territories that are an integral part of Azerbaijan proper (Kabachnik, Regulska, and Mitchneck 2010).

As a vulnerable group, IDPs, whose lives happen in the interval between *temporality* and *spatiality*, seem to be more *out of category* than refugees (Malkki 1995; Lundgren 2014). Otherwise, as Wimmer (2008) postulated, as a group IDPs are *included* within *exclusion* and are thus simultaneously *insiders* and *outsiders* in any given space. IDPs are an internal matter for a country, and utterly dependent on state politics (Kibreab 1999; Watkins 2005; Farzana 2017). IDPs in Azerbaijan are no exception, and their "fate" totally is on conscience of the state: *"The spatialisation of state relies on two key principles 'verticality' …the idea of the state being above all, and 'encompassment' … the idea that state is wider anything else (society, family, community and so on)"* (Stavrevska 2016, 144). In the conceived home practices of the state, the GoA acts on these principles when it comes to resettling IDPs in different regions and in new

settlements outside of Baku by not involving IDPs in the decision-making process and never asking their consent (Amnesty International n.d.; IDMC 2008, UNHCR 2009). Another top-down decision is reflected in the difficulties of registration *(propiska)*[9] in Baku city.

> *"Imagine, I have to travel to Agdam, to the part of district that is not under occupation, to get driving license and I have never lived in Agdam as my village is under occupation."*
> (Female respondent from Agdam; 30 years old, Baku; October 2020)

> *"I understand the demographic politics of the government in dealing with IDPs, but I think, politics aside, the assistance could have been organized better."*
> (Female respondent from Fuzuli; 30 years old, Baku; October 2020)

Such bureaucratic practices are directed at keeping IDPs in a single place together, as a symbol of *national identity*, a *landmark of the past* and a *defining* component *of future*, and foster marginalization, unemployment, and exhaustion. IDPs see any given place as temporary and long to return to their former place of residence. There is no debate or doubt that such *home conceiving* ties this group to one place, which is "rewarded" by a monthly allowance; such rewards are subject to continuity in one place – the registered address determined by the government (UNHCR 2009). This rule applies to all of the IDPs resettled in other regions or who are "temporarily" registered in abandoned buildings in Baku or waiting to be resettled outside of Baku. Even though the year 2008 was marked by the elimination of the last "tent-camp" (Gureyeva-Aliyeva and Huseynov 2009), 33 percent of IDPs in Baku still live in collective centers and only 12 percent in new houses (IDMC 2008). In the state agenda, resettlement of IDPs is not equal to losing their status unless an IDP requests it (IDMC 2008, 4). An IDP who is resettled in state-built building/house does not own the property and understands that it is a temporary shelter that will be provided only until *return* is possible: *"I ordered a bookshelf to install in the apartment where we are resettled, in Gobu, since 2018, but with the start of this war, I stopped it. It reminded me that this apartment is temporary too"* (Female respondent from Fuzuli, 30 years old, Baku, October 2020).

A life that is rehearsed in the intersection of past (homeland) and future (return) is played as a *"national duty"* when it comes to seeking *justice* for territorial loss (Conciliation Resources 2009). In this regard, the state politics involved in conceiving *home and belonging* among IDPs is very much rooted in the shared memory of the first Karabakh War (1988–1994).

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8   The UNHCR data on the current number of refugees around the world can be found at
    https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html

9   *Propiska* is similar to a residence permit. The practice was inherited from the Soviets and has not been reformed, especially when it comes to registering in Baku city.

PERCEIVED AND LIVED HOME AND BELONGING

"No border is more closed than this one."[10]
(de Waal 2003: 1)

Following the 1994 ceasefire agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan (known as the Bishkek Protocol), no border was more tightly closed than this one until September 2020, when the beginning of the second Karabakh War change it. This border was drawn not only physically but also emotionally in the memories of Azerbaijanis. In this section the experiences of female IDP respondents who have and continue to perceive and live *home and belonging* in the framework of *conceived home and belonging* will be addressed. Perceived and lived *home and belonging* are the other parts of the Spatial triad. Different from the *conceived home*, or, as Lefebvre (1991) put it, a *representation of space*, the remaining parts of the triad are for the most part well-suited to describe human experiences. Watkins (2005) explained this triad as a stage play: if a script is a representation of space (conceived), then an actor or actress is in charge of playing the (perceived) spatial practices and (lived) spaces of representation. The logic is the same here: If the state is the scriptwriter, then the IDPs are the "role-players" who perceive and live the play. In addition to the state's housing policy, which is the main element of the "script," there are other elements – e.g., IDP schools, executive communities, various administrative bodies – that draw the line between IDP/state and IDP/host relations, all of which put this group in the neither/nor and insider/outsider dichotomies.

> *"Being an IDP is [to have] a double identity, different from 'locals' wherever you go. You have to carry the document that proves your status, additional to the usual ID card. This happens especially for administrative matters."*
> (Female respondent from Zangilan, 32 years old, Baku; November 2020)

> *"Being an IDP is not having an attachment to any physical place. I consider my family as my father, grandmother, uncle's family as I grew up with them. When I travel to Baku, [I almost never say] I am going 'home'; [I say that] I am going to my family."* (Female respondent from Fuzuli, 30 years old, Baku, October 2020)

The female IDPs interviewed for this article perceived *home and belonging* as memories attached to places and unpleasant experiences during exile. First of all, even though they were only children aged between three and five years at the time, a few respondents described at least one robust memory of the day they were displaced:

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10 "Than this one" refers to the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan on the line of contact (the district of Terter).

> *"I was three years old when we left Kalbajar, I remember how my sister was crying [for] my father, as he did not come with us and stayed to help others to leave Kalbajar."* (Respondent from Kalbajar, 30 years old, Baku; October 2020)

> *"I remember we were taken on a military helicopter. I was five years old and remember soldiers lying on top [of] each other. I did not see their faces, but [I saw their] feet, some [were] covered in blood and some [were] bandaged."*
> (Respondent from Gubadli, 32 years old, Baku; November 2020)

These are *place*-related memories that directly contribute to group identity, and as such represent possible experiences of urban life, where their families' economic struggle was worst, they lacked access to education, and their housing and basic needs were not met.

> *"I was relieved [to go to] IDP school, as the local/city school kids were pointing [at me] and bullying, calling us qaçqın [a word that means 'refugee' and has all possible negative connotations]. The IDP school was a safe space where I did not need to worry about my torn shoes [or] explain my identity."*
> (Respondent from Fuzuli, 30 years old, Baku; October 2020)

None of the respondents understood home and belonging as being essentially sedentary. It is evident that this generation, born right at the beginning of the war, still feels *out of space*, and the act of returning is thus seen as a personal search, rather going to a specific place.

> *"We lived for two years inside a bus, slept under plastic blankets, and played with scraps. Once, I decided to visit that place and it was gone. We have lived in so many different places that I struggle to call them home, [but] neither I am sad about them. Those places made me stronger. Today, my own family is my home and I belong with them."*
> (Respondent from Gubadli, 32 years old, Sumgait; November 2020)

> *"[The] 'homes' we lived in were poor, socially known as displaced people's buildings. Physical constructions are not home; they are temporary residences. Perhaps that is why I have no sense of home and belonging, and [to] return is a way to find out where I belong. But sometimes I am afraid [that] I [will] not find that sense, even when return."*
> (Respondent from Fuzuli, 30 years old, Baku; October 2020)

"I feel incomplete in Baku. I am from Zangilan but I have no contact with the location. It is in [my] memories … and [the] stories I heard growing up, mostly from my parents. Home and belonging for me [has] become [the same thing], and I hope returning will bring it [back to me]."
(Respondent from Zangilan, 32 years old, Baku; October 2020)

This collection of interviews demonstrates that after almost three decades, a generation who grew up experiencing war and its devastating experiences still struggles to identify their sense of *home and belonging*. It also demonstrates that this sense is not necessarily an urge to settle permanently, but a human urge that was taken away from them. *"Belonging is a right to claim,"* said a respondent from Fuzuli, who thinks this right must be restored for her not to feel like *"an autumn leaf that is taken away by the Baku wind,"* as she put it (phone call, October 2020). The interviews also revealed that *home and belonging* as such did not necessarily include an element of security, but the respondents did emphasize the importance of economic (in-) stability, marginalization, and feeling like an outsider. None of the respondents found state politics or the politicization of the IDP issue problematic, but they did report that their host communities made their experience of exile difficult: *"Our clothing was poor. I used to wear my brothers' cloths, which I think affected my taste as a woman. I remember one day we were waiting for a bus and locals did not allow us to get on the bus because we were IDPs"* (Respondent from Gubadli, 32 years old, Sumgait; WhatsApp call, November 2020).

Regarding the question of returning that has been posed rhetorically for the past three decades, only two respondents said that they would not do so even if they could:

"I was born in Agdam but grew up in hardship in Baku. It was not easy with all the discrimination [and] economic hardship, but I have my life … here. If this collective center is demolished, I will rent a place and stay in Baku, as I cannot imagine starting over again."
(Respondent from Agdam, 32 years old, Baku; October 2020)

"My husband is not an IDP, [so] it would be difficult for me to return, but I will visit the town [where] I was born at any cost."
(Female respondent from Zangilan, 32 years old, Baku; October 2020)

This section of this paper has presented a deconstruction of the understanding of *home and belonging* among female IDP respondents. The collected interviews and articles were studied using the lenses of introspection and the Spatial Triad model.

The findings are well situated in the government policies and host communities where IDPs interact. In general, it is plain that IDPs who fled war and settled in Baku had more difficult experiences with their host community than those sent to other regions. One apparent reason for this is that the populations of Karabakh and Nagorny-Karabakh were not urban: They were mostly rural people who found themselves in the oil and wind city of Baku. The host community in Baku perceived them as illiterate and uncultured: *"Some of the IDPs [threw] garbage from [their] balconies, which [supported the] image [that they were] 'uncultured'"* (Respondents from Kalbajar and Agdam, Baku; phone call, October 2020). On the other hand, the IDPs who settled in or near Baku had relatively easier access to humanitarian aid delivered from international organizations at the beginning of their displacement: *"I remember ICRC cars bringing blankets and [the] Red Cross and Crescent sign stayed with me forever. Sometimes I joke … that ICRC was my Santa Claus"* (Respondent from Fuzuli, 30 years old, Amsterdam; Zoom call, October 2020).

Finally, these interviews show that people's understandings of *home and belonging* are complex, especially when dealing with a generation who came from a rural area and grew up in poor urban areas as a result of conflict. The interviews revealed that at some level IDPs make clear distinctions between place, *home*, and *belonging*, the latter two concepts being symbols of the past and the future while the former represents the present (Kabachnikov et.al., 2010).

CONCLUSION

"I am out [of] that hut [the collective living center], but I don't know if it is out of me."
(Respondent from Agdam, Baku; September 2020)

Conducting this research during a war and the COVID-19 pandemic was a good deal more challenging than I expected. I tried to connect with the respondents in times and spaces when human interaction was limited and not always possible; the active war was just the "salt and pepper" this time. Despite all the technical difficulties, the respondents who participated in the study were receptive and trusting. The findings can be seen in the categories of the same spatial triad model as presented earlier. The triad chosen for this study was revealed to be more of a circle, where the governments use IDPs for their own political ends and the consequences are borne by generations of people. Similar to the arguments of Farzana (2017), Kibreab (1999), Malkki (1995), and Jansen (2010) that a sedentary solution for refugee and internal displacement issues was problematic due to the non-sedentary nature of such individuals' lives, excluding a group of people for different purposes of inclusion is not transformative but creates a vicious circle. Offering options such as repatriation or re-

turning a group of people to their original homes makes those people pawns in the hands of governments. In such situations people are moved in a game of *refuchess* [11] to meet (or fail) long-lasting expectations of belonging in a different socioeconomic-political time-space arrangement (Massey 1994; Jansen 2010).

It is worth mentioning that, until 1998, there was no international reaction to the protection of IDPs that highlighted such repatriation/return. Although it was not binding, international concern did arise in response to the UNHCR *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* 1998 (McLaughlin, 2020), which, in a way, confirmed countries' spatial practices in dealing with internal displacement. The Principles call on states first and foremost to produce and enact a sustainable solution – the repatriation/return of displaced people before integration and resettlement (McLaughlin, 2020). Given the fact that the UN and its bodies are comprised of nation-states, such encouragement is understandable in its privileging of territorial integrity over human rights protection. Protecting human rights, providing basic needs and security, and ensuring such people's future is solely the responsibility of the state, given that displacement is an issue internal to a state.

While states deal with issues of home and return in the sense of spatial practices (e.g., concentrating the group in one place, grouping and re-grouping them by districts), for the displaced group *home and belonging* become temporary conditions and exist only in the past and the future, most often leaving the present moment crystallized (Kumar 2014). Therefore, an IDP – not only in Azerbaijan but in any conflict-driven context – shares the same pattern of experience when it comes to understanding *home and belonging*. They are people who are *out of categories*, pawns, and *out of space*, denied the right to make decisions about their fate (Massey 1994; Malkki 1995, Jansen 2010).

Home and belonging as experienced by the women interviewed is transitory and temporary. This sense of impermanence is held closely alongside their spatial identity, such as being from Karabakh, especially among those who live in compact spaces. For a generation of urbanized IDPs, identity is more personal than national. This personal understanding of one's place identity sets IDPs on a "self-journey" to understand *home and belonging* over a lifetime (Kabachnik et al., 2010).

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11   The term *refuchess* was coined by Jansen (2011).

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AZAMAT TATAROV

RULING OVER CEREMONY: THE POST-SOVIET STATE AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF ISLAM IN KABARDINO-BALKARIA

Since the 1990s, the North Caucasus has experienced various conflicts between state and religious actors, sometimes with dreadful consequences. A comprehensive perspective on these outbursts of conflict is often constrained by the sole focus on the revival and internal dynamics of Islam in the post-Soviet period. The changes in the Russian state since the 2000s, which were in the nature of recentralization and strengthening of the state's monopoly over violence and the state's control over organizations, can be considered as an important factor influencing the legal existence of opposition groups or organizations. The case study of Kabardino-Balkaria, traditionally a stable republic of the North Caucasus, contributes to understandings of how the transformation of the state in Russia since the late 1990s influenced the development of religious conflict and the institutionalization of Islam.

KEY WORDS: ***North Caucasus, Kabardino-Balkaria, basic natural state, Islam, institutionalization***

Map 1

The administrative division of the North Caucasus [1]

1   Barbashin, Maxim. 2008. Informal Power Structures in Russia and Ethno-Political Conflict in the Northern Caucasus. In Ethno-Nationalism, Islam and the State in the Caucasus: Post-Soviet Disorder, edited Moshe Gammer, 1–18. London and New York: Routledge.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the North Caucasus has been consistently associated with violence and ethnic and religious conflict. The remarkable diversity of languages, cultures, and religions represents a grave challenge to the security concerns of this area. Such diversity contributes to the risk of violence, and the societies of the North Caucasus encompass a fragmented institutional framework in which informal traditional institutions not only tend to run counter to the formal rules and norms, but also may contradict each other.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rapid revival of religion in public spaces, the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic (KBR) faced a conflict between two alternatives to Islamic development in the late 1990s to early 2000s. The Spiritual Administration of Muslims (DUM) adhered to a position of moderate Islam, mild desecularization, and keeping religion in the private sphere. Radical fundamental Muslims conceptually united around unregistered organizations and a united *Jamaat*. The leaders of the latter preached the need to spread pure Islam and Sharia law, and opposed ethnic Islam and a compromise between ethnic traditions and religious rites, set in previous decades. Sharp disputes arose over issues of religious education, funeral and wedding ceremonies, "correct" mosques, and the preservation of non-Islamic elements in culture. Structural and institutional changes had been taking place in the Russian state, parallel to the growth of religiously-oriented violence, which led to an increase in Moscow's control over processes in the Russian regions, especially in the troubled North Caucasus.

Here, I will first touch upon the problem of the state in post-Soviet Russia, which, in the twenty-first century, has regained assertive control over violent non-state actors and regional public organizations it had lost in the disorder of the 1990s. I will describe the development of the conflicts between the state and the official legal Muslim organization, the DUM KBR, on the one hand, and the state and the Jamaat KBR, the organization that turned out to be beyond the limits of state control, on the other. This case study contributes to understandings of how the transformation of the state in Russia since the late 1990s influenced the development of religious conflict and the institutionalization of Islam in Kabardino-Balkaria

DIRECTIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE IN THE RUSSIAN STATE SINCE THE LATE 1990S

The Russia of the 1990s could be said to have been in a state of decentralization, in which chaotic liberalization accompanied a weakening of the social performance of the state and temporary loss of control by the center over national politics. One of

the decentralization effects was the growth of separation tendencies in the regions, especially in ethnic republics, with the growing mistrust of citizens toward the state and its institutions, and their preference to resort to "non-state" violence as the best way to protect their interests.

In the 2000s, the state reasserted its control over administrative and economic resources in the Russian regions and the involvement of sub-national elites in the ruling coalition. It was not only informal institutions that began to actively penetrate the structure of regional power. The central unfolding processes of structural political changes in Russia are associated with the formation of a system of vertical distribution of power, the so-called vertical of power. In a crisis of centrifugal tendencies, by the end of the 1990s the ruling coalition faced a drastic challenge to create mechanisms that could turn these trends in the opposite direction and bring together the interests of federal and regional elites. The immediate post-Soviet years demonstrated that formal institutions in the structure of power were less effective than informal rules and networks of trust.

At the end of the twentieth century, the process of re-centralization began, and the state gradually returned to fulfilling its functions, and to a more complete control over power resources, which is historically customary for the Russian state. In contrast to the 1990s, a period that began with active economic transformation, the 2000s marked the reorganization of the government system, which provided a fast and vigorous transformation and ideological consolidation that, in turn, increased federal control over regional resources.

To frame the analysis of institutions and their dynamics in post-Soviet Russia and the North Caucasus we refer to research of North et al.(2009). All countries in the world are either open-access states or, and more often, natural states. The latter can be divided into fragile states (unable to support any organization except the state itself), basic states (able to support organizations but within the framework of the state), and mature natural states (able to support a wide range of organizations outside the immediate control of the state patron–client networks among the ruling class, based on personal relations emerging in the conditions of a fragile natural state, and aspiring to *"structure the creation, gathering, and distribution of rents that can limit violence"* [North, Wallis, & Weingast 2009, 21].) This analysis implies that the transition to a more mature form of state leads to a greater monopolization on violence on the part of the government, while rents provide economic incentives for elites to reduce violence, cooperate in the ruling coalition, and maintain social stability. Being limited-access orders, natural states are organized in such a way that access to rents is limited to non-elite actors and organizations.

The Soviet Union was an exception among basic natural states since it monopolized violence to the extent that is typical of mature natural states (Starodubrovskaya & Sokolov 2016, 21). Russia returned to being a fragile state after the collapse of the Soviet Union. At the beginning of the 2000s, however, it retransformed into a basic state. This process was particularly difficult in the conflict-ridden regions of the North Caucasus, where the level of violence became greater than in the rest of the country.

Researchers attribute today's KBR and postwar Chechnya to the basic natural state. Concurrently, a number of features of a fragile natural state are still visible in Dagestan (Starodubrovskaya & Kazenin 2016, 67– 8). The "fragility" of the system can be an advantage as it reduces the risk of violence through bringing about more economic advantages. The level of business development, freedom of expression, and diverse social activity in Dagestan compared favorably with the more stable postwar Chechnya, until recently.

Regional and local elites consider government subsidies to be the main access to rents and are prone to organizational and financial dependence on the center, so the state has the opportunity to increase its influence at the local level. In Chechnya and Ingushetia, there was an almost complete renewal of regional elites in 1990s, while in Dagestan power was taken by representatives of new national movements and businesses. In Karachay-Cherkessia, entrepreneurs from the world of the shadow Soviet economy *(tsekhoviks)* came forward. But, in the KBR, late Soviet elites continue to dominate in the twenty-first century (Starodubrovskaya & Kazenin 2016, 22). The mechanisms and forces that ensured the renewal of elites in the 1990s were largely dependent on regional changes and the struggle of local elites, but in the 2000s and 2010s, state strategies and decisions changed to be increasingly decisive.

THE ROOTS OF RELIGIOUS SCHISM IN THE KBR

The dynamics of social order imply the consolidation of adapted changes among institutions rather than the change of old institutions by new ones. A conflict offers a convenient presentation of the applicability of adaptive changes as criteria for accomplished institutional change. A single conflict can also contribute to the status quo in any institutional space, or to returning to the arena of those institutions that once lost their applicability. The confrontation between the Jamaat KBR and the DUM KBR reflects the opposition between the institutions of a newly resurgent Islam striving to its fundamental origins and that of traditional Islam that seeks to preserve its internal order.

In the North-West Caucasus, traditional Islam alone cannot provide an organizational alternative to fundamental Islam. Despite the fact that this role is sought by state-oriented spiritual boards as well as national intelligentsia calling for moderate religiosity and a return to the ideals of ethnic culture and ethical attitudes, the state and power structures are the main opponents of fundamentalists and, concurrently, investors in traditional Islam.

With the fall of the Soviet Union, new trends in Islam rapidly became popular against the background of traditional settings of beliefs such as Sunni Islam, for instance, and giving "plain and concrete answers to terrestrial problems" these trends gained success in the new "spiritual marketplace" (Pelkmans 2009, 2). Although the republics of the North-West Caucasus did not remain aloof from the impressive and rapid growth of Muslim identity, their starting positions were less advantageous than in the east. In Chechnya, Dagestan, and Ingushetia, the pace and scale of Islamization was significantly greater, largely due to the more stable resistance of Sufi communities to the Soviet anti-religious policy, as well as geographical and other factors. Yarlykapov (2006) points out that in the North-West Caucasus (Adygea, the KBR, Karachay-Cherkessia), it is more appropriate to speak not about rebirth but about the re-establishment of Islam; that is, re-Islamization.

By the early 2000s, there were two parallel options for the future of Islam in the KBR. The first was to maintain the status quo; that is, to keep religious institutions closer to the private sphere and allow a combination of national traditions and Islam. Despite the various organizations and commissions in the sphere of state– confessional relations, it was the DUM system that was destined to play the key role of intermediary between the power system and Muslims of all types at the regional level. However, the official clergy could not, and still cannot, gain the trust of all communities in the short run. If too closely identified with the state, official Muslim figures always risked *"losing religious authority in the eyes of some Muslims and being accused of working in the interest of the state rather than representing Muslim communities"* (Braginskaia 2010, 51).

The priorities of the DUM are more likely connected not with gaining prestige in society, but with trusting relations with the authorities. The reliance of government authorities on legal religious institutions leads to the latter aiming to satisfy their own corporate interests, rather than to any protest against the political system and its ideological basis (Filatov 2007, 43). This opens spiritual boards up, as non-profit organizations, to access to government grants and funds, as well as the support of private sponsors.

The second option for the future of Islam in the post-soviet KBR was fundamental Islam that looked more attractive to those who aspired to establish "pure" Islam. In parallel with the formation of the DUM system in the public life of the entire North Caucasus in the 1990s, radical religious movements are becoming increasingly powerful in public spaces, receiving various names in research, the media, and official state rhetoric (Wahhabists, Salafis, fundamentalists, etc.). Basically, ambiguous terms in religious discourse in the North Caucasus reflect the region's diversity, including the dissonance between the theological foundations of a particular religious movement and its practice in society. For some scholars the case of fundamental Islam requires a sensible and even meticulous approach to terminology, as the abandonment of a "theological" approach to understanding Wahhabism (Kisriev 2007, 107; Starodubrovskaya & Kazenin 2016, 5), or understanding the regional specifics of Islamic fundamentalism in North-West Caucasus (Yarlykapov 2006).

In the case of the North-West Caucasus, the term "Young Muslims" is widely used, carrying both an age aspect and one of identity, opposed to "popular" Islam. An unexpected emergence of groups consisting predominantly of young people seeking to purify Islam from "superfluous" and imported traits was primarily caused by the return to the KBR of Muslims who studied at Arab universities. They often identified as "praying Muslims," setting themselves against Muslims who stay outside the mosque and the community most of the time.

An analysis of Islamic fundamentalism in the North Caucasus shows it can have radical and moderate facets and depend not only on the adopted configuration of values and priorities in various groups of communities. Berger considers religious fundamentalism as a "hard-to-explain thing" but, in any case, "passionate religious movement" (1999, 2). In some social conditions, fundamentalists can quite successfully and organically adapt to the surrounding reality while maintaining their specific identity, while in other cases they become irreconcilable opponents, choosing a path of armed confrontation against the state and political power (Starodubrovskaya & Kazenin 2016, 19).

The Young Muslims in the KBR have been able to substantially challenge the dominant perspective of Islam, but it continues to prevail today. However, the move to streamline relations between the center and the regions did not become a guarantee of stability; conversely, it provoked an escalation in violence. The KBR that relatively peacefully survived the 1990s faced the threat of religious split in the following decade, and armed radicals even attempted to seize power in Nalchik in 2005. According to Luckmann, institutionally specialized religion may become a dynamic social force, causing tensions *"between religious experience and the requirements of everyday*

affairs. Specifically religious communities may emerge, claiming loyalties that place their followers in conflict with 'secular' institutions – or the members of other religious communities" (1967, 117). But the dynamics of the competition or violent conflict between religious movements and organizations remains an unclear issue without understanding the influencing factors, and in the case of Kabardino-Balkaria, the influence of changes in political institutions on this dynamics.

CONFLICTS OF RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS AND THE STATE'S REACTION

During its formation between 1998 and 2005, the Kabardino-Balkarian Jamaat (the Jamaat KBR) became one of the republic's largest organizations. It came close to autonomous development and to influencing political discourse and the legal system without being controlled by the system-forming vertical of power. The word jamaat has, since the early 1990s, been increasingly applied to a union of Muslims living in the same block (quarter) and attending the same mosque or prayer house (Babich & Yarlykapov 2003, 67).

With the spread of fundamental Islam, the jamaats became more associated with the Young Muslims. Being an unregistered association, the Jamaat had a structure in which a rigid vertical was built; that remarkably resembled the internal structure of the DUM. The organizations bore similarities in having been impacted by the general concept of territorial administration and decision-making through the councils of religious leaders.

There were both external and internal factors related to the transformation and radicalization of the Jamaat and other similar regional and supra-regional organizations. External influence accounted for the spread of radical Salafist ideology that *"prioritise[d] a Muslim over an ethnic or national identity, also provide[d] a connection with the global dynamics of radicalisation in Islamic thought and practice"* (Dannreuther 2010, 122). In this context, the Kabardino-Balkarian Jamaat was *"a new religious group that turned violent as a result of a complex evolution,"* whereas some other organizations – such as Caucasian Emirate (since 2007) – were initially *"designed to implement their ideology through violent means"* (Shterin 2011, 321).

The 1990s saw a spontaneous emergence of various religious groups and organizations that were not initially opposed to each other. So, it is quite easy to confuse the Islamic Institute at the DUM (since 1993) – from where the future head of the DUM, Pshihachev, graduated – with the Islamic Centre opened with the DUM's approval in

1993 and headed by Mukozhev, proclaimed by the Young Muslims as an Amir of the Kabardino-Balkarian Jamaat in 1998.

The transition from a fragile limited-access order to a basic one in the early 2000s narrowed the possibilities for organizations to exist outside the immediate control of the state. The campaign to register religious associations – stretching for several years after the adoption of the federal law *"On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations"* (1997) – was the first stage in legalizing those organizations that fell under the definition of "traditional" for Russia, and in dislodging those organizations that did not fit into the post-Soviet institutional framework. In official Russian doctrine, Russian Islam communities are not restricted to represent themselves as a part of the Muslim world. But, throughout the 2000s, Muslim communities had less and less opportunity to obtain funding from abroad and access to study in universities in Arab countries.

In the early stages of the Islamic revival, the DUM had neither the intention nor the resources to prevent the emergence of alternative structures. In the republic there were not enough qualified and educated spiritual figures. Organizational and resource weakness in management and consolidation frameworks, and the simultaneous strengthening of opposition structures among Muslim communities, led the DUM to appeal for the support of secular authorities. The active discreditation of the Jamaat and its leaders began, to return the positions of status that were lost to the official clergy (Shogenov 2011, 117). Members of the Jamaat, in turn, opposed themselves to the incompetence of the official clergy in matters of Islam, and to the ineffectiveness of the activities of the DUM. Rather than being of a theological nature, the ripening conflict took the shape of a struggle for influence over Muslims, encompassing personal confrontations.

Control over the activities of oppositional communities proved difficult. In 2005, there were about 150 mosques that were influenced simultaneously by the Jamaat and DUM supporters. As of January 2006, 110 Muslim religious organizations were registered in the republic, most of which had appeared since the beginning of the 2000s (Karov 2008, 394, 448). Concurrently, by the end of the Kabardino-Balkarian Jamaat's existence in 2005 it united about 40 communities and, according to some data, extended its influence over several thousand people (Zhukov 2008).

In April 2004, the DUM's chairman, Pshikhachev, started the process of centralizing the organization he led. From then on, the DUM reserved the right to appoint, control, and dismiss imams in any mosque of the republic, thereby knocking the Jamaat out of the legal field on the ground. Increasing insurgency among the Young Muslims,

coupled with violent clashes with law enforcement agencies, eventually resulted in the organized attack by the most radical segments on a number of objects in Nalchik on October 13th and 14th, 2005, making "underground" Islam an inevitable manifestation of protest.

The scale of this protest of the Young Muslims against the institutions of official Islam, the interference of secular figures in religious affairs, and the involvement of the tough counter-terrorist actions of the state demonstrated that the Jamaat had become a serious opposition force. It is noteworthy that in November 2004, about 1,500 people pointedly celebrated Eid al-Fitr (the festival of breaking the fast) one day before the day set by the DUM (Karov 2008, 150). Strengthening the DUM's control over mosques and madrasas, supported by the participation of security services, required the leaders of the Jamaat to focus on their own network of mosques, in which the Young Muslims would determine the internal order.

The existence and spread of the ideas of radical Islam was not just an imported trend, but a more complex process that developed in specific institutional framework. For example, nationality and language played a significant role in local networks of trust in a multi-ethnic space such as the KBR. This is due to the logic of Soviet national construction and ethnic mobilization that affected the division of interests of ethnic elites. But, in fundamentalist Islamic communities, the influence of the ethno-territorial factor can be traced, too. When outside urban areas, jamaats cover mostly mono-national quarters; on a more complex organizational level, the principle of ethnic parity affects the distribution of positions in radical religious organizations (for example, the Caucasus Emirate and its regional offices), *"although the local Islamists stand against dividing the areas by ethnicity"* (Tekushev 2015, 85).

Between 2000 and 2010, the threat of terror and murder became a daily concern against the discourse of Islam in the KBR acquiring the character of a sharp and principled confrontation, not only between structures and organizations but also between religious, ethnic, and civil identity models. Three resonant murders occurred in 2010: Astemirov, one of the leaders of the Jamaat; Pshihachev, the Chairman of the DUM; and Tsipinov, the leader of the national Adyge movement and supporter of the idea of Adyge identity's domination over religious identity.

In recent years there has been a marked decrease in the number of victims of religious conflict in the KBR (Figure 1). The official statement that tough counter-terrorist actions of the state, especially on the eve of the Sochi Olympics in 2014, yielded concrete results does not give a sufficiently complete explanation of this dynamic. Of importance is the wider discourse that reflects what Huntington (1996) called an

exhaustion of the primary participants of the conflict, and that is connected with the perception of the actions of direct actors – "performers" and "targets" – by "observers" (Beck 2015). Essentially, informal cultural restrictions can penetrate deeper into issues of control over religious communities than formal policies enacted by the state (Finke & Harris 2012, 56), and reflected, for instance, in the constitution or the law against religious extremism. In the KBR, forests – radical Muslims hiding in the forests and preparing another armed attack – long beards or the practice of shaving the mustache, and conflicting approaches to Islamic rituals are examples of often negatively perceived scenes in urban and rural areas. But, state institutions and official religious organizations do not enjoy high public confidence. For example, the recognition of efforts to streamline funeral rites – DUM's response to the Young Muslim leaders' attempts to eliminate non-religious elements in religious practices – theoretically promised a significant reduction in tension, but neither side found sufficient support. The "observing" party – that is, the majority of the population – still gives a choice to the old, financially and organizationally costly order, and this is due to people's commitment to the status quo and to the preservation of the existing interweaving of national and religious institutions.

Figure 1
The main interconnected stages in the dialogue process
Compiled from information on the website "Caucasian Knot." Last accessed 12.9.2020[2].
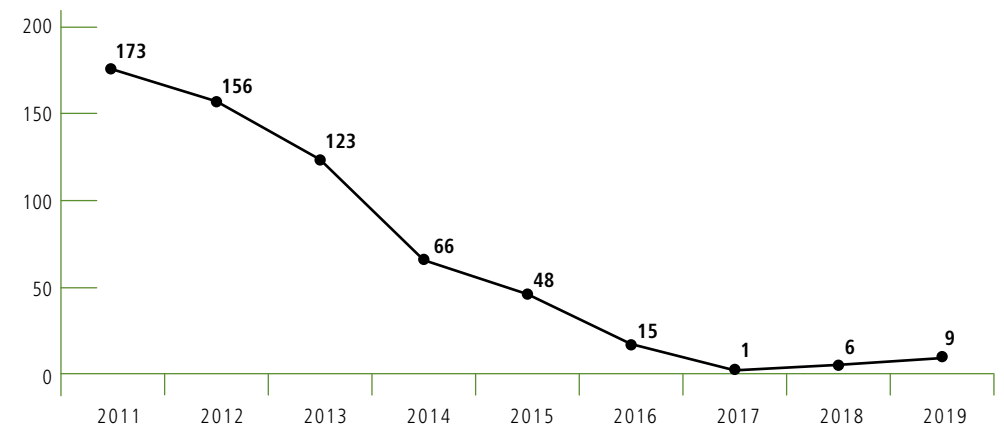
2   https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/331639/
     https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/317687/
     https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/331639/
     https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/snizhenie_chisla_zhertv_2018#n3_4

CONCLUSION

The modern Russian state positions itself as a social actor that not only wards off the danger of society turning into chaos but that also acts as a necessary external force for integration, even within individual republics, while taking into account the specificity and history of the North Caucasus. The essence of this external force lies in the institutional differences between sub-national building and national state-building.

The beginning of the Russian state's centralization in the early 2000s can be described, in the language of North et al. (2009), as a transition from a fragile order that cannot control the formation of organizations to a basic order. This era was marked by the fact that the vertical of power made inroads into every level of political establishment in the regions of Russia. The state sought to eliminate organizations located outside public discourse, but at the same time made vulnerable those organizations formally outside the limits of the state's penetration. The official spiritual board of Muslims was not ready to resist the new and dynamically developing alternative structures on their own, evident in the case of Jamaat.

The conflict between the DUM and the Jamaat was an entirely new level of problem for the official Islamic establishment, the solutions to which were beyond the usual institutional framework. It was the state that emerged as the main deterrent against the evolution of Islamic fundamentalism. Despite the state's increasing interest in institutions of moderate traditional Islam and their integration potential, modern religious policy is aimed primarily at depriving Muslim fundamentalists, including representatives of non-radical communities, of the ability to develop their organizational network within the legal field as a public organization. The hard power approach of the state played a role in the escalation of violence, but at the same time it influenced the reduction in armed clashes that had accompanied religious violence since the early 2000s.

The institutionalization of Islam in the Russian regions is controversial, and moderate traditional Islam still retains a major influence on Muslim communities. An understanding of the dynamics of violence in the modern North Caucasus should take into account three coexisting types of identity – civil, religious, and ethnic – that manifest particularly noticeably in the course of regulatory competition. At the turn of the 21st century the deepening modernization and the state's re-centralization in North Caucasus came across the growing Islamization of society, and also the tendency of "moderate traditionalization" associated with the preservation of a vanishing ethnic culture and language, an idea advocated by the post-Soviet ethnic intelligentsia. But, after conflicts of identities, the issue of a new, fourth identity capable

of balancing the pluralism of multidirectional tendencies and being supported by the state's policies is becoming increasingly relevant.

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KETEVAN MURUSIDZE

LOCAL CAPACITIES FOR PEACE
IN THE GEORGIAN-ABKHAZ CONTEXT

The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict has been protracted for almost three decades without a sign of its peaceful resolution. While there are more stalemates than tangible positive changes in the relationship between conflict-divided societies, there are cases of effective collaboration as well. Drawing on interviews and desk research, the article presents four case studies of the Georgian-Abkhaz collaboration on the Enguri Dam, archives and joint publications, hazelnut trade, and stinkbug pest mitigation efforts. Based on these cases, the article examines inclusive collaborative approach, interdependence, and shared ownership as some of the key factors driving the conflict-torn societies to collaborate. All presented cases emerged locally, but some of them have been sustained and advanced through international support and incentives. This article argues that despite the lack of systemic approach and limited spill-over effect of these cases on a wider peace process, they illustrate that some local capacities have the potential to reinforce positive changes or at least create possibilities for collaboration.

KEY WORDS: *peacebuilding, local capacities for peace, protracted conflict, Georgia, Abkhazia*

INTRODUCTION

Engaging conflicting sides in a joint peacebuilding initiative is particularly challenging in protracted conflicts, such as the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. However, practice shows that unilateral peace efforts are often doomed to failure, which drains the hope and incentives of local and international actors to invest in peacebuilding programmes. At the same time, organizations and practitioners working in the field are so overwhelmed by the intractability of the conflict that they often fail to recognise the importance of maintaining and reinforcing the local capacities for peace. Although there are more stalemates than achievements in the Georgian-Abkhaz relationship over the last twenty-seven years, there is some experience of effective cooperation between the conflict-torn societies. One of the most named examples is the coordination over the Enguri Dam. With the support of international organisations, projects focused on exchanging information and archive materials as well as protecting cultural heritage have also fostered positive interaction amongst field

specialists. Fighting against stink bugs and partnerships in the hazelnut trade are other examples of positive collaboration, along with the longer-term relations developed in the healthcare sector. Recognising the key factors for an effective partnership in such cases can help decision-makers and practitioners better plan their future programming. Therefore, this article aims to explore the local capacities for peace and the successful practice in the Georgian-Abkhaz cooperation. Moreover, it examines the key factors of these local capacities and how they contribute to the peacebuilding process. For this purpose, the article addresses the two main questions: (I) What are the key factors driving the conflict-torn societies to collaborate in the Georgian-Abkhaz context? (II) What are the local capacities for the Georgian-Abkhaz collaboration for peacebuilding?

To explore these issues, desk research was conducted and relevant literature and reports were analysed. Additionally, in-depth semi-structural interviews were conducted with the expert community as well as representatives of relevant governmental, local, and international organisations. Based on the research findings, the article provides a better understanding of the importance of collaborative approaches and the Georgian-Abkhaz experience in that regard. It also reveals the reasons why some of the collaborative activities are successful. Furthermore, the article draws attention to the local capacities for peace, which are particularly essential to be recognised and supported in protracted conflicts such as the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.

LIMITATIONS

There are some limitations to be considered while reading the article. Although local capacities for peace in the Georgian-Abkhaz context are discussed, the interviews were conducted only with the representatives of Georgian and international organizations due to the lack of access to Abkhaz respondents. However, mainly international authors, as well as a few Georgian and Abkhaz authors, are primarily referenced to provide more balanced perspectives. Moreover, despite the author's dedication to providing an impartial analysis, the reader should be aware that it is written by an ethnic Georgian. Nevertheless, considering the subject of the paper, the space for pro-Georgian bias is limited. Furthermore, there are additional cases of collaboration and partnership in the Georgian-Abkhaz, but due to the scale of the research only four case studies are presented.

RECOGNIZING LOCAL CAPACITIES FOR PEACE

"Local capacities for peace" (LCPs) has been identified as one amongst many approaches to peacebuilding that derives from conflict-affected societies and responds

to diverging issues within their capacities. Recognising LCPs requires a better understanding of the concept itself and each component it entails. Therefore, the first section of the following discussion provides a theoretical base for the article by defining the concepts of "peace," "local" and, overall, local capacities for peace. The second section reviews several factors that can support local capacities to transform into LCPs, which are also important to be considered by civil, state, and international agencies working on conflict issues to further advance their peacebuilding efforts.

What are Local Capacities for Peace?

Protracted conflicts, such as the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, demonstrate that the absence of war, in other words negative peace, is essential but insufficient for building peace. Although reaching and then upholding ceasefire agreements can halt armed conflicts, it cannot build sustainable peace, in which there is *"a common vision of a society, ensuring that the needs of all segments of the population are taken into account"* (UNGA 2016). Thus, the importance of understanding and working towards positive peace, which includes *"attitudes, institutions and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies"* (IEP no date), is particularly visible in protracted conflict settings. However, academics and practitioners in this field are more familiar with the techniques of dealing with conflicts and approaches for achieving negative peace, while positive peace and what it entails are less researched and analysed (Gleditsch et al. 2014). Similarly, conflict-oriented approaches often omit LCPs and key factors contributing to empowering and activating these capacities for peacebuilding purposes.

A lack of understanding of peace dynamics and what peace means for local communities takes one of its roots from the peacebuilding programming practice. A prevailing approach to designing peacebuilding programmes starts and often ends with analysing conflict. Most of the time, peace practitioners are so deeply focused on conflict analysis that they often overlook the existing capacities for peace or *"what the conflict is not about"* (Anderson et al. 2003). One of the reasons for this could be a deeper knowledge of conflict than of peace. For example, most of the guidebooks explain various ways of analysing conflict and utilising this knowledge in designing peacebuilding programmes, while there are limited tools provided for examining peace factors and dynamics.

Moreover, any project proposal, including for peacebuilding initiatives, by its nature is focused on the change, what has to be changed, and how to accomplish it (project Theory of Change, logical framework, etc.), rather recognising the importance of

maintaining and reinforcing factors contributing to peace (Anderson et al. 2003). The established practice of justifying the significance of a programme by focusing on the need for change hinders the practitioners from considering LCPs as their task to identify. As a result, they neglect LCPs because *"what we look for is what we see"* (Lederach et al. 2007). Though, those capacities are vital for accomplishing peace-building objectives more effectively and sustainably.

Another important issue is a vague conception of LCPs. The concept was developed through critically reflecting on humanitarian assistance in the conflict settings that was published in a series of seminal books by Mary Anderson, including *Do No Harm: Supporting Local Capacities for Peace Through Aid (1996) and Do No Harm: How Aid Can Contribute to Peace – or War* (1999). Amongst the significant changes in the development and peacebuilding work initiated based on the findings of the LCP project, the Do No Harm (DNH) framework draws attention to analysing not only dividers and tensions, but also connectors and local capacities for peace as well (CDA 2004). A similar call for shifting the global-local power dynamics in addressing destructive conflicts insisted a Local Turn in peacebuilding (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013). However, what or who could be considered as "local" remains contested.

There are narrow and wide interpretations of what "local" could mean. According to the narrow perspective, "locals" thus LCPs are local non-governmental organisations, associations, movements and community-based initiatives that work on peace and development issues. While the wider interpretation further includes state agencies and other formal institutions that contribute to building sustainable peace (Carl no date).

As for the Local Turn concerns, LCPs are considered as solely local actors and initiatives for peace. However, it is important not to romanticise the "local" but to maintain a realistic assessment of the opportunities and limitations LCPs face (Fischer 2009). The protraction of a conflict indicates that LCPs are not sufficient or strong enough to enforce the transformation to peace, because armed conflicts usually destroy the essential fabric of a society that ensures peaceful co-existence of the groups with diverging interests (Lederach 2005). Therefore, external support for empowering and rebuilding LCPs is often critical for bringing communities together, considering the conflict sensitivity and DNH principles. Thus, "hybrid peace" could be a middle ground whereby local peace assets are recognized as a leading force for peacebuilding" with the support of the donor community.

Hence, this article adopts a more flexible approach to LCPs which is applicable to any local initiative, actor, or organisation (governmental, non-governmental or private

sector), locally funded or supported by international agencies, that contributes to peacebuilding with its broader understanding (Peace Writ Large).[1]

Factors contributing to the effective functioning of LCPs

While discussing LCPs, it is important to note that despite a better visibility of confronting actors and dividing factors, there are a greater number of people in every society who are keen to maintaining peace and stability (CDA 2004; Lederach 2005). As Clogg et al. (2016b) observe, *"people living on both sides of the conflict divide aspire to live in safety, with their rights protected, able to prosper and develop."* However, examining the factors contributing to emerging LCPs out of this general aspiration for peace is essential for enhancing collaboration between conflicting sides.

One of such factors that can help conflict-torn societies consider cooperation as beneficial if not inevitable is acknowledging interdependence on each other. As Lederach (1997) points out, "*in all contemporary internal conflicts, the futures of those who are fighting are ultimately and intimately linked and interdependent."* For example, living in close proximity, sharing critical infrastructure, or managing natural resources all could require constructive collaboration across the conflict divide. However, the same factors are the common cause of disagreement, especially when conflicts are over limited resources (Klare 2002).

Another important aspect is ensuring inclusion of both conflicting sides and developing collaborative peace initiatives. Experience shows that limited engagement of the parties that have a different perspective in the decision-making process affects the effectiveness of peace efforts (Anderson et al. 2003; OECD 2012). Despite the challenges to achieving meaningful and active participation from both sides, unilateral approaches are doomed to overlook the needs and interests of the other side, which demotivates them to take any commitments in the implementation process.

Following the same line, adopting inclusive and participatory approaches to designing collaborative peace initiatives creates a sense of ownership, which is essential for ensuring sustainability. Local ownership has been widely recognised as a significant factor in promoting peace (UNSG 2018). However, it is important to be shared by both sides of the conflict divide, because *"as conflicts take place within societies, it is within the conflicting societies that peacebuilding measures must be rooted"* (Reich 2006). In the context of protracted conflicts where the sides demonstrate diverging

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1   Peace Writ Large refers to changes at the broader level of the society with a long-term vision.

positions on a range of issues, unilateral local ownership over the peace process can shrink the venue for effective collaboration.

The type of LCPs and key factors supporting its effective functioning vary in different contexts. Interdependence, constructive collaboration, and a sense of ownership could be some among a variety of other factors that can play an important role in developing LCPs. However, securing those factors as reliable conditions for LCPs to function is a challenging task in itself. In this regard, examining an almost three-decade-old protracted conflict between the Georgians and Abkhazians can provide interesting lessons for understanding diversity of LCPs with their key factors and challenges.

LOCAL CAPACITIES FOR PEACE IN THE GEORGIAN-ABKHAZ CONTEXT

The Georgian-Abkhaz armed conflict started soon after Georgia regained its independence from the Soviet Union. It ended in September 1993, after more than a year of military engagement. As a result of the war, around 2406 people were killed (UCDP no date), and more than 300,000 ethnic Georgians had to flee their homes (UNSC 1994). Since the end of the violent conflict, Georgia has lost control over the territory, while Abkhazia claimed independence that is recognised by a handful of countries, including Russia (since August 2008). Abkhazia's aspiration to be recognised as an independent state and Georgia's commitment to its territorial integrity and safe return of internally displaces persons (IDPs) remain non-negotiable positions for each side of the dispute. The conflict has been protracted for twenty-seven years due to the inability of the parties to reach a political agreement.

Throughout these years, many local and international organizations have worked toward bringing estranged Georgian and Abkhaz societies together through dialogue and confidence-building initiatives, such as the projects funded or led by the European Union, the Council of Europe, and the United Nations Development Programme. However, neither tangible changes in the political positions nor a long-awaited stable peace could be attained. The prolonged peacebuilding process and pending problems conflict-affected communities face every day continue to cause frustration amongst the people as well as peacebuilding agencies.

Although there are more stalemates than agreements in the Georgian-Abkhaz context, some positive experiences of collaboration can be observed. It requires further examination whether these constructive practices are LCPs or not. Moreover, exploring factors that enable both sides to cooperate on those issues, can help governmental, non-governmental, and international organizations advance their peace policies

and programmes. While there are different areas where the Georgians and Abkhazians maintain a positive partnership, this article specifically examines the following four cases: managing the Enguri Dam, cooperation on archives and producing joint publications, trading hazelnuts through the Enguri bridge, and fighting against the brown marmorated stink bug (known by its acronym BMSB).

Collaboration on the Enguri Dam

The Enguri Dam was constructed during the Soviet era in 1980 and is one of the tallest dams in the world. At the time it was constructed, nobody would think its structure and location would pose a political challenge and, at the same time, an opportunity for collaboration between the Georgians and Abkhaz.

While the river Enguri marks a natural administrative boundary line (ABL) between Georgia proper and breakaway Abkhazia (only its southern part), the Enguri dam provides a bridge for conflict-torn sides to collaborate. Its reservoir is located on the Georgian-controlled territory, while the concrete tunnel directing water to a series of power stations lies in Abkhazia (Stier 2017). Therefore, without the collaboration of both sides, the dam cannot function and provide electricity neither to Georgia proper nor to those living in Abkhazia.

Interestingly, the dam has not stopped working even during the most hostile period of the Georgian-Abkhaz relationship in the early 1990s. As far as it is known, there is no formal or signed agreement between the parties, which demonstrates a high level of trust and uniqueness of the collaboration. Importantly, all informal agreements related to sharing the electricity or managing the dam have been reached by the Georgians and Abkhaz without external involvement (Interview #3).

While the freedom of movement across the ABL is limited, the Enguri Dam management team with an absolute majority of ethnic Georgians are granted a special regime for movement and transportation of relevant equipment. They have not faced any constraints for crossing the ABL with Abkhazia while working on the dam (Mchedlidze 2003; Interview #3). Furthermore, the negotiations on the regular restoration of the dam by the Georgian side have been conducted in a constructive manner.

This collaboration benefits both the Georgian and Abkhaz sides. Georgia takes the responsibility to provide Abkhazia with electricity that amounts 40 percent of the overall annual output of the dam. The rest of the energy is distributed to Georgia proper. When Enguri is closed due to structural repairs and during the wintertime

when the reservoir is at its lowest level, Georgia supplies nearly half of the electricity needed in Abkhazia. Another half is provided by Russia, while Tbilisi sometimes pays for its importing (Stier 2017). During the summertime when the Enguri Dam output is the highest, Georgia can benefit from the electricity export. Although there are some frustrations from the Georgian side related to the inefficient use of the energy in Abkhazia, this collaboration has worked successfully throughout these years.

Archives and joint publications

Collaboration on archives and producing joint publications is another area where the Georgians and Abkhaz specialists work together. Transferring archive material from Tbilisi to Sukhumi is considered to be a symbolic reparation as well as an attempt to rebuild historical documents and literature lost when the Dmitry Gulia Institute of Abkhazian language, History, and Literature and the State Historical Archive of Abkhazia were burnt during the war in 1992.

The process started after the Abkhazians expressed interest in collecting missing pieces and restoring their archives. Since then, the Georgian and Abkhaz specialists have collaborated to find and transfer copies of historical documents about Abkhazia that were stored in the Georgian archives. The initiative was later facilitated by the Geneva International Discussion. Archive materials were also handed over to the Abkhazians at the different peace formats, such as at the joint trainings and meetings organized by the Council of Europe (Interview #3).[2]

Furthermore, based on the documents and resources preserved in the archives, the Abkhaz and Georgian specialists started joint research projects and released publications. The Council of Europe facilitated the process by organizing regular meetings, trainings, and providing funding for the research and publications in the frame of a confidence building mechanism. The process still continues, and thus far, a joint three-volume publication on The Great Terror in Abkhazia (the Abkhazian ASSR, 1937– 1938) was released and presented in Tbilisi and Sukhumi.[3] Another publication on the uprisings against collectivization in Abkhazia in 1931– 32 is ready to be distributed. The specialists also work on several topics, such as missing people from

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2   In addition, several Georgian archives and institutions collaborated to create Abkhazian Virtual Archive (AVA, available on Georgian, Abkhaz and English languages, following the link http://ava.ge/index/index. Also, archival records of Abkhaz Folk Music were released with the partnership of the UN Women and FolkRadio.

3   All three volumes of The Great Terror in Abkhazia (the Abkhazian ASSR, 1937– 1938) on Russian language are available online following the link http://archive.security.gov.ge/editions.html

Abkhazia during World War II, the criminal cases the Soviet Union brought against the monks in Abkhazia, and Mukhajirstva during the Tsarist period (Interview #2).

Importantly, preserving cultural heritage and identity is a sensitive issue for Abkhaz society. Hence, collaboration on archives and joint publications are particularly important in this sense. Although this subject is highly political for both sides, especially after the Abkhazian archives were destroyed during the war and it has yet to be investigated by Tbilisi, specialists working under the project ensured to distance the process from politicization (Kotova 2019).

Georgian-Abkhaz hazelnut trade

Economic relations between the Georgians and Abkhazians are the least developed on the official level. Legislative and political restrictions imposed by both sides hinder business interactions across the conflict divide. Although Georgia defined enhancing economic relationships as one of its strategic goals (GoG 2010), and later issued a more detailed offer as A Step to a Better Future (SMRCE 2018), concrete mechanisms to encourage trade between the Abkhaz and Georgians and a clear status-neutral approach are lacking (Chankvetadze 2019). However, informal or illicit trade is a preferable option for businesspersons to transfer commodities through the Enguri bridge, because they do not need to apply for an official permit neither to Tbilisi nor Sukhumi thus remain consistent with the political positions of the respective sides on the disputed status of Abkhazia (Mirimanova 2018). The only exception applies to hazelnuts.

The hazelnut trade had the largest share (around 46 percent in 2014) of all products transported across the ABL with Abkhazia. In 2014, an overall of 2,185 tonnes of hazelnuts value of US $9,204,000 was transported from Abkhazia to Georgia proper (Mirimanova 2015). Evidently, moving such a large amount of cargo across the ABL checkpoints was impossible without some kind of formal permission. Although restrictions applied to transporting all goods to the Georgian-controlled territories, in August 2015, Sukhumi granted a formal authorization to hazelnut cargos to cross the Enguri bridge (ICG 2018). On the other hand, Tbilisi did not require any special approval for delivering products from Abkhazia, as it considered it internal business between different regions of Georgia. Consequently, hazelnuts harvested primarily in eastern Abkhazia ended up first in Georgia proper, and the final destination was either the EU or Turkish markets (ICG 2018; Interview #3).

A half-formal trade collaboration on hazelnuts benefited both the Abkhaz and Georgian sides. Since Georgian hazelnuts have entered the EU market, which created a

potential for reaching out to 500 million potential consumers, partnership with their Georgian counterparts became appealing to Abkhaz farmers (Mirimanova 2018). Exploring new export opportunities gave advantages to the Abkhaz business sector as the purchase price for hazelnuts in the EU market was more than 3.5 times higher that of the Russian market (for a tonne of crops in Russia – US $1,174, while in Europe – US $4,212 in 2014). Moreover, the hazelnut trade in Georgia was set in dollars which secured additional benefit, considering the inflation of roubles compared to the US dollar. Thus, as scholars conclude, *"these price conditions determined the direction of movement of hazelnuts from Abkhazia to Zugdidi"* (Mirimanova 2015). From the Georgian perspective, in addition to improving economic relations with the Abkhazians, the country secured its high rank as the third-largest producer of hazelnuts in the world. In 2014, around 10 percent of Georgia's total export of the nut was supplied from Abkhazia (Economist 2017).

Stinkbug pest mitigation efforts

The invasion of brown marmorated stink bug (BMSB) in western Georgia, Samegrelo, Guria, and Abkhazia destroyed crops of several cultures, particularly hazelnut, the primary source of income for local farmers in this area. The damage caused by the pest alarmed both conflicting sides. In 2016, the Georgian hazelnut industry lost roughly 50– 60 million ($21– 24 million) just in one season (OC-Media 2017). The insect spread to around 80 percent of Abkhazia, causing damage to hazelnut orchards as well as tangerines and other crops (Zavodskaia 2017).

The nature of the crisis required the collaboration of the Georgian and Abkhaz sides. As the stink bugs do not recognize neither conflicts or ABLs, they could easily spread from one place to another. If one side or a village would not fulfil all instructions required to mitigate the spread of the pest, the effort taken by the other would be wasted, and vice versa. BMSB aimed at hazelnut plantations did not distinguish whether they belonged to ethnic Georgians or Abkhazians. It was an equal threat to both sides (Klaar 2018). Therefore, addressing the crisis required a complex approach and joint effort at all levels of Georgian and Abkhaz societies.

Initially, local authorities did not take the issue seriously. The unresolved conflict and a lack of collaboration between the Georgians and Abkhazians also affected a rapid and effective response to the problem. However, as BMSB spread to larger areas, representatives of Tbilisi and Sukhumi used the international dialogue platforms to discuss how to combine their efforts to contain the crisis (OSCE 2017). Along with several meetings and regular consultations between the field specialists, pesticide, pheromone traps, and special equipment were delivered to the most affected areas

on both sides of the ABL. Although it took several years to contain the crisis, addressing this emerging issue is considered one of the most unique and effective instances of collaboration between the Georgians and Abkhazians (Fawn and Lutterjohann 2019; Interview #1).

FACTORS SUPPORTING LOCAL CAPACITIES FOR PEACE IN THE GEORGIAN-ABKHAZ CONTEXT

The provided four case studies illustrate that positive collaboration practices in the Georgian-Abkhaz context are diverse but, at the same time, have some common features. However, what key factors drove these collaborations and to what extent those practices can be considered LCPs are important questions to discuss.

All of the selected cases are based on a collaborative rather than a unilateral approach. However, motives for engaging in joint efforts can be driven by necessity, as in the Enguri Dam and stink bug cases demonstrate, or shared goals. Importantly, the sides can approach the same process with different but compatible interests. For example, a strong desire of the Abkhazians to rebuild their cultural heritage requires collaboration with the other side, as the historical records and materials are preserved in Tbilisi archives. On the other hand, the Georgians are interested in building trust with Abkhaz society and, thus, right the wrongs done during the war. The hazelnut trade case represents more of a profit-driven collaboration that had buy-in from both sides. Tbilisi and Sukhumi have their trading partners independently, but the cooperation enhanced the benefit they could receive via such deal, particularly for the Abkhaz farmers.

Interdependence is another key factor that also led to a constructive collaboration in the Enguri Dam and stink bug cases. Tbilisi and Sukhumi relied on each other to ensure the dam continues to operate, without which neither Georgia proper nor Abkhazia would receive the electricity. Similarly, one side of the ABL would not be able to mitigate the spread of the pest if another did not implement the same instructions and vice versa.

Another driving factor for the majority of these collaborations was shared ownership. An illustrative example of this is the hazelnut trade. Georgia proposed several unilateral initiatives to improve its economic relationship with Abkhazia. However, a lack of agreement on political status and formal trade arrangements hindered any official programmes and initiatives. The Abkhaz businesspersons distanced themselves from these offers as they did not want to engage in the "Georgian project" (Interview #3), but the hazelnuts deal was a different story because Sukhumi was in

control over the process along with the Georgian side, rather than a passive recipient of the initiative. In the Enguri Dam case, *"both the Georgian and Abkhaz sides often declare their indisputable right to operate and own the Enguri station"* (Kemoklidze and Wolff 2019), demonstrating their strong sense of ownership. However, neither Tbilisi nor Sukhumi can make a unilateral decision on issues related to the dam (Basaria 2011).

Analyzing the cases further demonstrates that collaborative initiatives can emerge locally, but international support is important to provide dialogue and negotiation space and facilitate the process. For example, producing joint publications and sharing archive materials would be challenging, if not impossible, if several international dialogue formats and peacebuilding programmes did not provide much-needed assistance. The decision on trading hazelnuts harvested in Abkhazia via Georgia proper was made locally, but the benefit promised by the EU and Turkish markets were the key driving factor behind it. Similarly, the Georgian and Abkhaz farmers would have to deal anyway with BMSB, but the external aid made it more effective and efficient, while the international dialogue formats opened up a space for consultation and sharing the best knowledge. The only case where the external engagement was not needed was managing the Enguri Dam. The case is unique and combines strong factors that ensured collaboration even during the armed conflict in the 1990s.

Evidently, these cases are selected as positive collaborative initiatives between the estranged Georgian and Abkhaz societies, but analyzing the driving factors behind these partnerships explains what other issues or elements can be stimulated for peacebuilding and development purposes. For example, managing natural resources is a key factor for the Enguri Dam cooperation. To some extent, it also plays a role in the stink bug case; however, there are many more unexplored areas to collaborate to govern shared natural resources for the benefit of everyone (e.g. the Black Sea, mountains and forests, conservation of unique species and biodiversity, etc.)[4] and, at the same time, to build positive interaction and trust amongst the Georgians and Abkhazians.

To what extent are these cases local capacities for peace?

Envisioning these cases as LCPs is another issue to be addressed. As described and analysed, there is no doubt they are local capacities, but to what extent are they local capacities for peace? Do they contribute to the peacebuilding process? There are general and a context-specific answers to these questions.

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4   There could be more joint initiatives on these subjects, but they are not widely discussed and known to the public.

Post-conflict peacebuilding with its wider definition and as a route to positive peace integrates various characteristics. Programmes aimed at building peace usually focus on efforts such as fostering positive interaction, building trust and acceptance, finding common ground for cooperation, and changing public attitudes and perceptions so that the conflict-torn societies are more respectful and tolerant to each other. All discussed cases are to some extent in line with the listed objectives.

As for the context-specific response, the State Strategy of Georgia towards the Occupied Territories "Engagement Through Cooperation" aims at building economic relationships, preserving the cultural heritage and identity of the breakaway regions, and protecting the nature and ecosystem. In its annual reports (2013-2019), the Office of the State Ministry of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality counts some of these cases, namely collaboration on archives and joint publications and fighting against the stink bugs, as part of their efforts. However, cooperation on the Enguri Dam and hazelnut trade are included neither in reports nor in strategic documents. Interestingly, the trade component of the latest peace initiative "A Step to a Better Future" published in 2018 did not mention the hazelnut trade experience.

The major critique to recognising these cases as LCPs is the lack of a systemic approach and institutionalization of these practices in civil society and state policies (Interview #4). For example, joint management of the hydroelectric station demonstrates a high level of confidence and trust between the Georgian and Abkhaz sides. The hazelnut trade precedent further confirms the possibilities for constructive collaboration. Nevertheless, until businesses receive a "green light" from their respective authorities, it is too risky for them to seek for partnerships on the other side of the ABL (Mirimanova 2018).

Another concern relates to the lack of spill-over effects of such positive cooperation cases on other areas (OSCE 2016). For example, along with the archive and joint publications, the Council of Europe also facilitated communication and encouraged joint projects amongst teachers and specialists working on architectural heritage and museums (SMRCE 2018a; SMRCE 2019). Nevertheless, there are no reports on tangible outcomes achieved through these meetings.

However, there are other experiences where one collaboration enforces another and opens up opportunities for further interaction. It is difficult to rely on the stink bug case as an LCP because it was a response to a crisis rather than a pre-planned effort with follow-up perspectives, but it demonstrated the capacity for collaboration when such crises emerge. The Georgian-Abkhaz coordination to contain the COVID-19 virus since the earliest phase of the pandemic solidifies the argument that

such local capacities exist and are based on the previous confidence-building work (Interview #3). Moreover, the Enguri Dam transit route was also used for transporting medical aid during the pandemic (Interview #4). The same source confirms that joint management of the hydroelectric station created a space for informal communication for high-level Georgian and Abkhaz decision-makers. However, due to conflict sensitivity concerns, such interactions are carefully handled in private. Still, various sources approve that the Georgian and Abkhaz people working on the station have developed a constructive and peaceful relationship (Basaria 2011; Mchedlidze 2003).

Whether one should consider these cases as LCPs or not greatly depends on what kind of expectations one might have from the LCPs. In the Georgian-Abkhaz context, the protraction of the conflict and increasing isolation of the societies indicate that such capacities are not strong and well-integrated into greater confidence-building measures. Therefore, they could not enforce a shift in the conflict dynamics towards sustainable peace. However, the concept of LCPs is important because it helps unveil a peacebuilding potential of those local capacities and initiatives which were not necessarily programmed or designed for that purpose but can still contribute to it.

Therefore, recognizing the potential of these cases as LCPs and empowering them with local and international support is particularly vital in the protracted conflict setting, where there are more frustration stories than of success. Observing the Georgian-Abkhaz peacebuilding dynamic, Clogg et. al. (2016a) also highlighted the issue that *"the interactions that do exist across the divide are mostly hidden….Far more vocal are the hostile voices, particularly on social media, who feed the potential for destabilisation."* They further notice that acknowledging positive outcomes in the protracted peacebuilding process *"would strengthen relationships and potentially enable bolder steps to be taken, eventually kick-starting a serious peace process on the basis of mutual understanding, and taking into account each side's interests."* The examined case studies demonstrate the presence of local capacities, but a more comprehensive approach and political will are required to enforce positive changes.

CONCLUSION

Despite the protracted conflict and numerous unresolved issues widely discussed by scholars and practitioners working in the Georgian-Abkhaz context, the provided four case studies illustrate that some local capacities have the potential to reinforce positive changes or at least indicate possibilities for collaboration.

Examining the cases of cooperation on the Enguri Dam, archives and joint publications, the hazelnut trade, and mitigating the spread of stink bugs has demonstrated that initiatives obtaining buy-in from both sides have potential to be effectively implemented and sustained, while programme proposals in the same field that are not based on collaborative and inclusive approaches are often deemed to failure. Interdependence is identified as another key factor supporting the conflict-torn parties to find a way to collaborate. Constructive cooperation on the Enguri Dam and mitigating stink bugs are particularly strong examples for the acknowledged interdependence by both sides. Connected with these factors, a shared sense of ownership also played a more or less significant role in each of these cases. Furthermore, the presented collaboration practices emerged locally, but some of them were sustained and advanced through significant international support or incentives.

Recognizing the examined cases as LCPs can be contested due to the lack of a systemic approach and spill-over effects they had on other initiatives or a wider peace process. However, there are some promising examples when one initiative created a space for other types of engagement between the Georgian and Abkhaz sides. Moreover, a positive precedent of dealing with a crisis in a coordinated manner had a spill-over effect when another type of crisis emerged. However, further research and analysis are required to strengthen the claims for LCPs with more evidence-based arguments.

Nevertheless, identifying and empowering potentials for LCPs are crucial in protracted conflict settings. Such collaboration practices are often lost in the general frustration or overlooked, further diminishing possibilities for evolving them into a comprehensive and systemic approach. Even widely discussing these minor but positive steps of partnership can change the sense of helplessness and disappointment that drains essential capacities within societies, as well as hope for building sustainable peace.

To sum up this paper, the author will review the most important facts and findings regarding the protracted conflicts in Georgia, Western involvement in the peaceful resolution of these conflicts, and Georgian-Russian relations. Currently, twenty percent of Georgia's territory is internationally considered to be occupied by Russia. In order to escalate the ethnic disputes in Georgia, Russia deployed troops to Georgian regions, in which they have stayed and served to the present day. Foreign observers have admitted that these conflicts are mainly linked to Georgian-Russian relations rather than Georgian-Abkhazian or Georgian-South Ossetian relations. Russia acts according to its foreign policy intentions. The authoritative state aims to restore its status as a hegemon in the former USSR region and regain lost control over

post-Soviet countries. Despite Georgia's somewhat distant geopolitical location, it has actively strived to become a legitimate member of European and Euro-Atlantic structures since 2003. Georgia has set political, social, and economic foreign and domestic policies to facilitate cooperation with the US and with Europe. Furthermore, Georgia has adhered to Western principles and values. However, Georgia's shift toward the West contradicts Russian foreign policy goals. Therefore, Russia tries to manipulate Georgian domestic ethnic conflicts to place Georgia under its sphere of influence once again.

Without Western involvement, the resolution of Abkhazian and South Ossetian disputes appears to be unachievable for Georgia. However, due to restrictions set by Russia in the occupied regions, there is little the West can do to achieve conflict settlement. The UN and the OSCE were unable to avoid the Georgian-Russian War in 2008, and later, Russia blocked these organizations from observing the situation in the occupied territories. Prior to 2008, NATO and the EU expressed little interest in these disputes. At that time, NATO was busy with the security of Eastern European countries and thus did not grant Georgia the MAP. Furthermore, the EU maintained a partnership with Russia. However, after the war transpired, EU observers were restricted from entering Abkhazia and South Ossetia. By limiting the activities of Georgia and other third parties, Russia prevents them from establishing a direct dialogue with the Abkhazian and South Ossetian populations. Therefore, smart diplomatic actions are expected from Georgia to maintain its sovereignty and later recover its territorial integrity. However, the author believes that nothing significant can be done at this stage while the Russian propaganda apparatus is active and Kremlin-controlled authorities are in charge of the protracted regions. If changes occur in the political regime and political party of Russia, Georgia may try to negotiate with opposite sides in the conflict and reach a consensus on its territories with the aid of international mediators. In the absence of such changes, Georgia can only maintain balance with the West and with Russia to achieve its main foreign policy goals and avoid conflict escalations in the future.

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The Office of the State Ministry of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality. Online interview on June 9th 2020 [The interview was conducted by the author of this article for another research project. The consent of the respondent was acquired prior to referencing in this article].

Interview #2
Confidence Building Measures Division of the Council of Europe's Directorate of Political Affairs. Online interview on July 21st 2020 [The interview was conducted by the author of this article for another research project. The consent of the respondent was acquired prior to referencing in this article].

Interview #3
Expert, NGO. Online interview on September 14th 2020.

Interview #4
Expert, NGO. Interview on October 2nd, 2020 in Tbilisi, Georgia.

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STATUS-QUO, POTENTIALS, CHALLENGES, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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STRENGTHENING INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN ABKHAZIA: STATUS-QUO, POTENTIALS, CHALLENGES, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The limited internationalization of higher education is a key challenge to the diversification of educational opportunities and to the overall quality of education in Abkhazia. Moreover, it restricts the development possibilities for students, faculty, and the society at large and leads to a serious brain drain of skilled youth to Russia. This opinion paper will illustrate that the internationalization of higher education, which is a vital step to strengthening educational capacities and the relations between societies, faces many challenges in Abkhazia due to its disputed status and to the unresolved conflict with Georgia. We analyze how these challenges restrain internationalization on different levels and identify several programs that have managed to, at least partially, overcome them. This paper is based on the lessons learned from these activities, on interviews with participants, organizers, and donors, and on observations from the authors. We conclude by outlining the potential for further internationalization of higher education and by formulating recommendations for international and local stakeholders. These recommendations outline concrete steps to improve and diversify higher education and development perspectives in Abkhazia and to better utilize its peacebuilding potential.

KEY WORDS: *higher education, internationalization, education exchange, diversification, Abkhazia*

INTRODUCTION

Access to high-quality education opens up far-reaching personal and professional development perspectives and is a vital future resource for societies. This essential role is widely recognized in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: *"Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available, and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit".*[1] Key international documents, such as the 1960 UNESCO Convention Against Discrimination in Education (CADE), the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, support the claim that higher education should be widely accessible. Although primary and secondary education is the focus of the human rights discourse on education within the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the provision of good-quality higher education is recognized throughout as a vital part of a healthy society.[2] Moreover, it is the ultimate layer of formal education that deepens and develops expert knowledge, strengthens capacities, and stimulates curiosity, all of which empower personal and professional development.

A fundamental approach to strengthening higher education prioritizes internationalization, which has been increasingly developed in the last decades. The primary goals of this approach are (1) to enhance the quality of education and research, (2) to prepare students for life and work in an intercultural and globalized world, (3) to support the development of societies, and (4) to strengthen relations between societies.[3] The opportunities to promote the internationalization of higher education are manifold. They range from personal exchange to institutional cooperation as well as from knowledge exchange to collaborative knowledge production. Though this internationalization is a well-developed practice and universal trend in times of globalization and increased connectivity, there are several regions that have been largely excluded from these processes. Partially- or non-recognized countries like Abkhazia are particularly excluded from the internationalization of higher education.

As it is a partially-recognized country, Abkhazia faces several obstacles. The freedom of movement of its citizens is constrained, foreign direct investments are rare, and the capacity to join international organizations is restricted due to the unresolved conflict with Georgia. Abkhazian history is closely tied to this conflict. In the 20th century, Abkhazia became a part of the Soviet Union and was incorporated as an autonomous republic within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1931. This event became a cornerstone of what has been perceived by the Abkhaz as the "Georgianization" of Abkhazia. Inter-ethnic tensions grew towards the end of the Soviet Union, and the Abkhazian national movement gained broader public support.

1   United Nations, Article 26, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), last accessed 17.12.2020 https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/

2   Thomas De Waal and Sabine von Löwis, "Higher Education in Europe's Unrecognised Territories," ZOiS Report, no. 2 (2020), https://en.zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/media/Dateien/ZOiS_Reports/ZOiS_Report_2_2020.pdf

3   Uwe Brandenburg et al., Internationalisation in Higher Education for Society (IHES); Concept, current research and examples of good practice (DAAD Studies), (Bonn: DAAD, 2020), https://www2.daad.de/medien/DAAD-aktuell/ihes_studie.pdf

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After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a dreadful war broke out in 1992 that caused immense human suffering on both sides. It resulted in a victory for Abkhazia in 1993 and was followed by a declaration of independence in 1999. Nevertheless, despite these developments, Abkhazia faced an economic, political, and informational block-ade in the 1990 that made the subsequent post-war years harsh for the people. Abkhazia was formally recognized in 2008 by Russia and other countries, including Nicaragua, Nauru, Venezuela, Nauru, and Syria. Despite initial hopes that this would trigger wider international recognition, the region remains, even 12 years later, largely isolated from the global community.

The political struggle for further recognition and the unresolved conflict with Geor-gia are significant obstacles to the internationalization of higher education in Ab-khazia, and they severely limit both educational opportunities for students and fac-ulty and development capacities in the region. Moreover, we argue that the limited opportunity for internationalization has had negative consequences on the conflict resolution process. Education can become a driving force for conflict resolution, as it can form citizens who are able to address central and challenging issues. Addition-ally, educated people are more likely to overcome social and economic inequalities by using their knowledge and experience. Thus, higher education can play a critical role in promoting the culture of understanding and respect that is instrumental to addressing complex conflict structures and to advancing peacebuilding efforts.[4] Moreover, educational mobility, such as study trips or studying abroad (both of which are rare in Abkhazia), can advance understanding of cultural diversity and pro-mote self-reflection.

This paper aims to analyze the current internationalization situation in Abkhazia's higher education, to identify critical challenges, and to develop ideas to diversify education opportunities in Abkhazia through further internationalization. We will first give a brief overview of higher education in Abkhazia and of the institutional-ized forms of internationalization with Russia and Turkey. We will then identify ex-amples of further internationalization efforts and analyze their central challenges. The objective is not to present international engagement in higher education in its entirety but to identify key lessons learned. On this basis, recommendations will be developed to overcome existing pitfalls and strengthen the internationalization of higher education in Abkhazia.

There are few available publications, and little information in general, on the topic of internationalization of higher education in Abkhazia. Therefore, this study is largely based on empirical information gathered through qualitative interviews and obser-vations with a particular focus on the personal experiences of Abkhazian partici-pants. In total, ten semi-structured interviews with former students provided in-depth information about personal experiences. These interviewees all come from Abkhazia, but studied in or graduated from different universities, in Abkhazia or abroad. Moreover, interviews with international experts on educational engagement with Abkhazia were conducted in Georgia, the United Kingdom (UK), and Germany. Finally, the authors' observations concerning either participating in or implementing internationalization activities in the field of higher education in Abkhazia have been analyzed for this paper.

HIGHER EDUCATION IN ABKHAZIA AND BRAIN DRAIN

Abkhazia has two institutions of higher education, the Abkhazian State University (ASU) and the Sukhum Open Institute, as well as technical high schools, medical col-leges and several specialized art and music schools. The foremost institution is the ASU, which was founded in 1932, currently has about 2,000 students, and includes nine departments: Law, Economics, Physics and Mathematics, Philology, Agricultural Engineering, Biology, Geography, History, Teaching, and Fine Arts. Resources are mostly comprised of Russian textbooks and materials with only minor adaptation to the local context, though there are also a few books available that were written by Abkhazian researchers and that concern the Abkhazian language and history.[5] The available materials have led to a progressive harmonization and integration in the field of education policy, as the ASU has widely adopted Russian education standards. This adoption has been strengthened by a lack of the financial resources necessary to create a specialized national educational system that would benefit the personal and professional needs of the citizens. The university suffers from chronic underfunding and only benefitted from a recent renovation program due to Russia's support.[6] The ASU offers bachelor's, master's, and specialized degrees; some of the professions are taught only at the undergraduate level and do not have a corresponding master's program, forcing students to look abroad if they wish to continue their education. For example, if one studies International Relations (IR), they must matriculate abroad

4   Phyllis Kotite, "Education for Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding: Meeting the Global Challenges of the 21st Century," IIEP Occasional Papers 56, (2012), https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000217106

5   Rustam Anshba, "Multilingual Education in Abkhazia: Challenges and Opportunities," in Obstacles and Opportunities for Dialogue and Cooperation in Protracted Conflicts, ed. Sebastian Relitz (Regensburg: IOS, 2018), https://www.lambda.ios-regensburg.de/file-admin/doc/IOS-Corridors-Publikation156x219-RZ-EINZELARTIKEL-14.pdf

6   De Waal, "Education in Europe's Unrecognised Territories."

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to get a master's degree, as there is no Master of International Relations program at ASU. Moreover, several essential study tracks, such as high medical education, engineering, architecture, and some intermediate vocational education programs, are not available in Abkhazia.

Student migration is widespread in Abkhazia, especially for career education that is not available nationally. Russia has become the leading destination for Abkhazian students, and the Russian recognition of Abkhazian independence and subsequent harmonization of the field of education has standardized recognition of diplomas and led to extensive scholarship programs. However, the differences in educational standards between Russia and Abkhazia remain significant, as an interviewed Abkhazian student in Russia describes: *"We have a lot of practice here, while at home it was mostly theory. When I first came here [St. Petersburg] I was like a blind kitten, I had to study a lot by myself to catch up with innovational subjects."* This quote touches on a central challenge for the higher education sector in Abkhazia, its limited capacity.

The Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation (Rossotrudnichestvo), a Russian government agency that operates in 80 countries, has been working in Abkhazia since 2009. Every year it offers students of Abkhazia a substantial number of scholarships. Many skilled students are taking these opportunities, and few return to their country of birth after they have finished their education. This leads to a severe brain drain to Russia and further limits the development opportunities of Abkhazia. Since 2016 more than 450 students have received quotas to study in Russia. Rossotrudnichestvo organizes exams for the enrollees. According to the Ministry of Education of Abkhazia, every enterprise provides them with a list of needed professionals, and this request is then sent to Russia's Ministry of Education and Science, where the quotas are designed. Even students who study independent from Ministerial or other programs and pay for education themselves often study in Russia. Though Abkhazian study in Russia is by far the most essential and institutionalized internationalization of higher education in the country, no data or statistics are available concerning the number of participating students.

Even students studying in Russia encounter difficulties due to the peculiarities of dual citizenship. An interviewee who studies in St. Petersburg talks about the hardships she experiences because of the bureaucracy.
"While studying in Russia, you apply to universities as a foreign citizen using your Abkhazian passport. You are registered at the University using your Abkhazian ID. Although, if you also have Russian citizenship, the documents used outside University, such as urban-transport pass and health insurance, are made using

Russian ID. It is inconvenient because there may be problems during registration because the concept of dual citizenship is not clear-cut."

The second-most-popular destination for Abkhazian students is Turkey, likely because of the large Abkhazian diaspora that fled to Turkey in the late 19th century due to the Russian-Turkish war. The historic ties over the Black Sea and the active and significant role of the diaspora in the Abkhazian economy facilitate student mobility. Moreover, the plurality of choice and overall higher quality of Turkish education also attracts students. According to information from 2016, around 80 students from Abkhazia studied in Turkey,[7] but that number significantly decreased after the Turkish military coup in 2016. Thus, there were only 25 Abkhazian students in Turkey in 2018.[8] In addition to the generally transformed political conditions, Abkhazian diplomas are not recognized in Turkey.
"I had a problem with applying because my secondary school diploma did not meet the requirements of my University, I had to verify it first in Russian Consulate, and then in Turkey. It was the only problem I faced because I had Russian foreign passport."

STATUS-QUO OF INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

IThe internationalization of higher education in Abkhazia can be assessed in two dimensions, internal and external. Internal internationalization of higher education refers to teaching in the region. The internationalization of teaching is extremely limited at ASU, and very few foreign lecturers and professors come to Abkhazia. This is due to several factors, including an inadequate budget, little established institutional cooperation with foreign universities, and the limited academic prestige of the institution on an international scale. Moreover, the unresolved conflict with Georgia and the limited recognition of Abkhazia's independence create difficulties with getting a visa and entering the region. Abkhazia does not always welcome entrance from the Georgian side, and Georgia considers entering from the border with Russia to be a violation of its territorial integrity. These tensions create a situation in which, on the one hand, there are few incentives for international lecturers to teach at ASU or establish regular academic exchange and, on the other, such academic exchange is hampered by practical or political factors. In recent years there have

7   Sputnik Abkhazia, February 15, 2016 "Гицба: студентам из Абхазии не стоит отказываться от учебы в Турции, last accessed 17.12.2020, https://sputnik-abkhazia.ru/Abkhazia/20160215/1017201038.html

8   Sputnik Abkhazia, April 26, 2018 "Студенты в Турции провели ночь в абхазских семьях", last accessed 17.12.2020, https://sputnik-abkhazia.ru/Abkhazia/20180426/1023782579/studenty-turcii-proveli-vabxazskix-semyax.html

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been several incidents in which international lecturers, trainers, or consultants were denied entrance to Abkhazia without any explanation. This not only leads to avoidable problems in the implementation of educational projects and has a general deterrent effect, but also creates significant uncertainties in the planning of further activities. Despite this challenging situation, several foreign scholars and trainers have conducted courses at ASU, mostly with the assistance of international organizations.

One of the most notable of these projects was implemented in 2013 and 2014 by the Free University Brussels under the leadership of Professor Bruno Coppieters and with the financial support of the European Union. Within the project, courses led by several European lecturers were taught at ASU, and around 1,000 books were transferred to the university library. Despite its success, the project came under intense political pressure, both in Abkhazia and in Georgia. Progress was initially stalled because the Abkhazian leadership expressed that it was not informed, but the Georgian government later strongly objected to the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the two universities.[9] Due to political pressure, the project ultimately could not continue. However, implementation of the proved to be difficult and inefficient even without interference, as there was insufficient practical support and self-initiative on the part of ASU.

Smaller initiatives, carried out in 2015 and 2016 by the Council of Europe, brought in European lecturers who led workshops on topics that included the role of women in decision making and the protection of personal data. Since 2016, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has been organizing various educational trainings for ASU students and professors within the "Horizons" program, which has included two trainings on academic writing, access to Coursera courses, and language courses at a language center.[10] Similarly, in 2018 a professor from Florida International University, taught academic writing courses at ASU, and, in the same year, a three-day workshop on peace and conflict studies was presented by the German non-governmental organization (NGO) CORRIDORS. Most of these activities have been carried out at the Department for International Relations (IR). There are two reasons for this. First, IR students generally possess sufficient language skills to participate in courses and workshops in English, which is only partly assured in other departments. Second, many international projects deal with conflict-related topics, which are mainly the forte of the field of IR. This strong international focus on conflict-related topics is sometimes criticized by the department. Nevertheless, the number of

courses in English is relatively low. Most interviewees expressed the desire to invite more professors, as they will provide the students with different points of view and illustrate new techniques that are not used or studied in Abkhazia.

LANGUAGE AND LANGUAGE TEACHER TRAINING

One of the most popular programs is the free English language TOEFL course. Every year, about ten students and graduates pass the TOEFL exam to apply for the eligible educational institutions. This approach and program enhance the promotion of the English language in society. In collaboration with Women Fund for Development and Sukhum Youth House, the British NGO Conciliation Resources has been organizing training and workshops for English language teachers since 2014. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) also strongly supports English language training. These activities contribute substantially to the skills and capacities of local teachers and to cooperation between them. The connected language training and resource centers in Gal/i and Sukhum/i are also used for youth classes, and annual refresher courses are offered at teachers at Wimbledon School of English. Additionally, for two years now, Abkhazian teachers have been able to take part in the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) International Annual Conference. Such projects, aimed as they are at the proliferation of English among young people in Abkhazia, have led to the increased popularity of English study and of study abroad.

Germany has also initiated some very popular steps that are aimed at strengthening the internationalization of German language studies in Abkhazia. Since 2016 the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) has explored such possibilities during several study visits that included multiple student assessments as well as some teacher training. Individual students were able to participate in a DAAD language school in Germany, in language seminars, and in a summer school in Yerevan. However, DAAD's engagement with Abkhazian students faces many challenges. Firstly, it is dependent on a limited number of people who try to push this topic in the region. Any institutional approach or strategy is underdeveloped. Thus, the sustainability and effectiveness of the efforts are affected by staff rotation. Likewise, engagement with DAAD also requires more initiative and strategic vision on the part of ASU and its Department for the German Language in order to intensify cooperation and utilize the potential for internationalization.

External internationalization refers to the ability of Abkhazian students and faculty to study, teach, and research abroad. This dimension of internationalization is heavily affected by the limited international recognition of Abkhazia. Nevertheless, we

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9   De Waal, "Education in Europe's Unrecognised Territories."

10 UNDP, "Horizons Project; Strengthening Community Resilience in Abkhazia," last accessed 17.12.2020, https://open.undp.org/projects/00096567

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can identify certain initiatives that aim to facilitate external internationalization. The most prominent is the Chevening program, the UK government's international awards program, which is funded by the FCO and partner organizations. The recipients of the Chevening Scholarships and Chevening Fellowships are personally selected by British embassies and High Commissions throughout the world. In 2015 the UK introduced an opportunity for residents from *"the South Caucasus region who do not identify themselves with the states of Armenia, Azerbaijan or Georgia to apply for the Chevening Scholarship program for post-graduate study in the UK"* (CR 2016, 4). Introduction of the category "South Caucasus" into the list of eligible "countries," made it possible for students from Abkhazia and the other unrecognized or partially-recognized entities in the South Caucasus to apply for the program without betraying their individual, social, and political identities (CR 2016, 8). Such a creative solution was needed to find a way to engage youth in Abkhazia through education. The introduction of a regional category within the Chevening program has been positively received by students and academics, as it is one of very few ways for youth from Abkhazia to receive international education outside of Russia and diversify their educational opportunities.

Interest in the program is growing within Abkhazia due to word-of-mouth from Chevening alumni, and the number of applications increased from 12 to 20 between 2016 and 2017. One of the Chevening alumni from Abkhazia highlighted that she planned to use the knowledge she had gained for the benefit of the people in Abkhazia, and she encouraged student migration because it will equip them with refreshed ideas and give them the motivation to make changes for the better in their society.

> *"One-year Master course allowed me to expand my understanding over many issues, I have discovered new things and realized how unique and incredible each culture, language and nation is and how important it is to be respective to each of them."*

Each year the UK provides up to two scholarships for Abkhazia residents and around 25 for Georgia proper. Even though the number of scholarships is small, particularly in comparison with scholarship opportunities in Russia, the effect on youth in Abkhazia is strong. Chevening creates incentives to improve English language skills within the target group and supports the development of young professionals. In contrast to other education-related engagements, there is no specific peacebuilding or dialogue component in the selection or implementation of the program. The UK's approach is to empower local stakeholders (especially youth) through education, increase educational capacities on the ground through trickle-down effects, and thus increase the skills of potential dialogue stakeholders in the future. Although the intervention is considered to be a success, the limited English language proficiency of

applicants and strict Chevening criteria are notable obstacles. Thus, the UK is focusing on strengthening English language proficiency through teacher training, thereby enlarging the number of Chevening applicants from Abkhazia.

Another initiative for longer-term mobility is the Rondine Cittadella della Pace in Italy. This organization, which gives Abkhazian students the opportunity to study and live in Italy, is committed to reducing armed conflicts around the world and to advancing capacities for creative conflict transformation. The Rondine approach is remarkable, as it combines learning and living together for a global community. To apply, Abkhazian citizens must have a Russian diploma; Italy sends requests for proof of a diploma to the country of residence, and Italy has not recognized Abkhazia's sovereignty. Additionally, the Swiss Foundation for Art in Regions of Conflict, known as Artasfoundation, with the aim to promote cultural and public dialogue and exchange, has organized workshops and international summer schools for art in Zurich, Chisinau, and Sukhum/i since 2017. In the autumn semester of 2015/2016, the first student from Abkhazia received a scholarship to attend courses at Zurich University of Arts. The project is called Art Semester, and it is now being developed into a regular scholarship program that will allow two students from Abkhazia to travel to Switzerland for a semester of art studies.

Besides these very few opportunities to study abroad, there are several possibilities for short-term mobility and training. Every year the fourth-year students of IR department of Abkhazian State University have a study trip to Turkey, as a week-long internship. Moreover, the Council of Europe's annual Youth Peace Camp in Strasbourg and the OSCE Summer School in Vienna and Bratislava regularly involve participants from Abkhazia. Likewise, the **CORRIDORS** Summer Schools at Jena University include a significant degree of ASU students and graduates. These initiatives share a focus on the thematics that are connected to peacebuilding and dialogue facilitation. Several other projects in higher education, extant under the framework of the EU-UNDP Confidence Building Early Response Mechanism (COBERM), have been specifically intended for this reason. These activities make an important contribution to the internationalization of higher education in Abkhazia. For many participants from Abkhazia, they are the first opportunity to engage in joint learning activities with their international and regional peers. However, these efforts also have their limitations. Firstly, they often represent stand-alone measures for the individual participants that are not connected to a comprehensive education process; proliferation of longer-term processes could significantly increase the learning achievement of participants. Secondly, the intense focus on conflict-related topics, although highly important and needed in the region, widely excludes students whose interests and knowledge base are in other fields.

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Finally, there are also a limited number of opportunities through which scholars might engage in international exchange. For example, in 2020 the University of Zürich offered two residential fellowships at its Center for Eastern European Studies (CEES) to scholars from Abkhazia, and in 2018 one Abkhazian expert, the recipient of a CORRIDORS Fellowship, spent one month at the Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies in Regensburg. For the target group in between, the project "Advancing Young Scholars and Peacebuilders Careers" (managed by CORRIDORS), on which the article is based, and the projects funded by the Imagine Center attempt to create opportunities for internationalization and further qualification. However, overall academic exchange is minimal.

CHALLENGES TO AND RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR FURTHER INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The internationalization of higher education in Abkhazia is severely limited. These deficits relate equally to its internal and external dimensions. Apart from a few important exceptions, there is little opportunity to diversify higher educational opportunities outside of Russia and, to some extent, Turkey. This sobering result can largely be attributed to the limited international recognition of Abkhazia and to the unresolved conflict with Georgia, both of which lead to very practical obstacles to additional internationalization. For example, a lack of internationally-recognized passports is a central obstacle to international mobility and, consequently, to internationalization of higher education. Many people in Abkhazia hold dual Abkhazian/Russian citizenship and a Russian passport issued in Russia, which enables them to travel abroad. However, the situation is significantly worse for the younger generation. Many do not have dual citizenship and/or only possess a passport from the Russian Embassy in Sukhum/i (these documents are mostly rejected by international visa centers in Russia). As Germany does not recognize the nation of Abkhazia, the Russian embassy and documents issued there are not recognized, either, which means that the passport cannot be used for travel at all. Only in a few exceptional cases, when the journey is politically supported by the AA within the framework of dialogue and education projects, can a way out of this dilemma be found. In such a case, the passport holder is considered stateless and must submit a separate application for a leaf visa to the German Federal Office for Migration. This process takes several weeks longer and increases the workload for everyone involved. Like Germany, several EU member states are issuing Schengen visas in exceptional cases for participation in international conflict resolution, dialogue and capacity-building, and education activities. However, there are no established procedures or extant institutional measures that will permanently solve this problem. Apart from these few exceptions that are based upon the commitment and patience of a limited number of functionaries,

the vast majority of the Abkhazian students have no international mobility opportunities.

Likewise, the status of people traveling to and from Abkhazia is a significant challenge. Given that the socio-political framework makes Georgia an unacceptable option for Abkhaz, a practical obstacle is what citizenship students can (and should) write down in scholarship or program applications. Chevening has pioneered the use of the "South Caucasus" category, which represents a status-neutral solution, but other international actors have found it difficult to follow this example. Internal organizational resistance or disinterest and criticism on the part of Georgia are central reasons for this. DAAD, using a temporary solution, allows students from Abkhazia to choose Armenia as their country of origin. However, such a mechanism is not sustainable.

Equally important, school certificates and diplomas issued by local authorities or the ASU have limited validity outside of Russia and Abkhazia itself. Most countries that do not recognize the region's sovereignty also do not accept any Abkhazian education certificates. Therefore, it becomes difficult for graduates from the ASU to apply to international universities. The ASU is also not part of any international educational systems like the Bologna Process, which makes the assessment of local education standards challenging for international universities and restricts university systems' connectivity. On the one hand, it presents international universities with the challenge to assess whether potential applicants from Abkhazia meet the criteria for study on an individual basis. On the other hand, the lack of harmonization makes it a challenge for students from Abkhazia to acquire the necessary competencies, skills, and knowledge to study successfully in the non-Russian world. In general, few students from the region are prepared for studies abroad. Moreover, because the ASU and Abkhazia are not part of international mobility programs like Erasmus+, opportunities and resources to study and teach abroad are severely restrained. The semester abroad, which is quite common for European students, is extremely rare for Abkhazian students, and the same applies to teacher exchanges. These challenges constrain the diversification of educational opportunities in Abkhazia. As a current student in Russia highlighted, *"the biggest disadvantage is that we do not have many choices."* A graduate from ASU further stated:

> *"Non-recognition severely affects the possibilities of students and schoolchildren. There are no scholarships or grants for studying abroad. Our University does not have an opportunity to cooperate with European universities in order to organize joint programs, projects, and the exchange of students."*

SALIMA DZHIKIRBA AND SEBASTIAN RELITZ

STRENGTHENING INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN ABKHAZIA:
STATUS-QUO, POTENTIALS, CHALLENGES, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the perspective of the implementing organizations, the overall logistical work-load for projects in Abkhazia or with Abkhazian participants is massive. Due to the absence of fixed procedures, each initiative has to find ways to work around existing obstacles, which is very time consuming. The challenging conditions related to im-plementation and the potential political ramifications of the unresolved conflict cre-ate significant obstacles to scaling existing programs and gaining support for more comprehensive education and mobility activities. Without a more substantial com-mitment by the international community, individual efforts will continue to struggle to substantially affect the internationalization of higher education in Abkhazia. However, a broader internationalization might foster, on the one hand, development opportunities within Abkhazia that could reduce its dependency on outside actors. On the other hand, it might empower youth in the region to gain the experience and skills needed to constructively address the protracted conflict with Georgia. Taken together, an investment in the internationalization of higher education can be con-sidered an efficient one. The efficiency, however, depends on concrete efforts from international and domestic actors.

In the following section, we have developed recommendations about how interna-tional and domestic actors might better support and facilitate the internationaliza-tion of higher education and projects in this field.

FOR INTERNATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS

Create a wide range of internationalization opportunities in various disciplines, not only in conflict transformation.

Currently, almost all Abkhazian educational possibilities are devoted to conflict transformation. People who do not study international relations or political science have limited opportunities to participate in these workshops, summer schools, and trainings. Many students find it difficult to only participate in events that are di-rectly connected to conflict due to some personal stigmas or just because they do not want to engage in this particular field. Implementing diverse educational pro-grams could raise more student interest and diversify the areas that are studied abroad. This is especially true because there is a huge demand in Abkhazia for knowl-edge transfer, capacity building, and exchange in natural sciences, technology and innovation, linguistics, and the green economy.

Support more comprehensive education projects that can strengthen the internation-alization of higher education in Abkhazia and provide opportunities to study abroad.

To strengthen the internationalization of higher education in Abkhazia, comprehen-sive efforts are needed. On the one hand, it appears to be necessary to allow more foreign lecturers to teach in Abkhazia. This wish was also evident in the interviews with students and graduates. In order to build capacities and enable sustainable knowledge exchange sustainably, it is vital to develop structured study programs beyond one-time workshops or lectures. Comprehensive and multi-year education projects that make use of hybrid and blended formats can significantly impact the internationalization and quality of education in Abkhazia. On the other hand, more long-term mobility opportunities for students and lecturers are needed to create sufficient incentives for students and faculty. Summer schools, workshops, and study trips abroad are essential elements for the internationalization of higher education in Abkhazia, but more mid- and long-term scholarships are needed to make a sub-stantial difference and generate positive spill-over effects.

Use conflict-sensitive and status-neutral terms when designing programs.

Even amidst extensive globalization, many educational organizations and exchange programs insist that applicants or institutions assign themselves to national catego-ries. For largely unrecognized nations like Abkhazia and substantial parts of their societies, this creates many obstacles. Firstly, it is quite frustrating when, while ap-plying for a scholarship or directly to universities, officials cannot find one's home-land in the list of eligible countries. Secondly, being forced to choose another coun-try as one's place of birth or origin is humiliating. Given Abkhazia's socio-political framework, choosing Georgia as the country of origin is an unacceptable option for a sizeable portion of the populace. This sensitivity can lead people to abandon their ambitions to study abroad and might foster self-isolation tendencies. Instead, other, more conflict-sensitive, options have been proven to be effective and status neutral. The option to choose "South Caucasus" as a region of origin opens new doors for people from conflict-affected areas without any status-related implications.

Facilitate a reliable and transparent visa process for education purposes.

Even though the diversification of higher education is a central objective of interna-tional organizations such as the EU and of individual countries such as Germany, there are few established mechanisms that facilitate the necessary mobility. The visa-granting system differs from country to country, varies on a case-by-case basis, and is not always transparent to the applicants or to organizers of educational activities. This makes the process very time consuming, uncertain, and sometimes dependent on mere luck, which can lead to harmful and discouraging experiences. It is crucial to encourage more people from Abkhazia to participate in international education

activities and to encourage more international stakeholders to include students and faculty from Abkhazia in their programs. Therefore, to limit mobility obstacles and improve the overall effectiveness and attractiveness of higher education internationalization efforts, a reliable and transparent mechanism to grant visas for educational purposes should be established.

FOR ABKHAZIAN STAKEHOLDERS

The ASU could better support, coordinate, and proactively engage in internationalization efforts by appointing faculty members who are responsible for internationalization in the central departments.

Many internationalization efforts at the ASU develop out of personal relationships or based upon international organizations' initiatives. Several shortcomings result from this situation. First, it is difficult to develop institutionalized capacities, a strategic vision, and sufficient local ownership in internationalization processes at the university. Second, for international universities, NGOs, and multilateral organizations, it is challenging to identify responsible and motivated people who will strengthen the internationalization of the university. Moreover, third, it is hard for students and faculty to get a comprehensive overview of the trainings, summer schools, and scholarships that are available to people from Abkhazia. Appointment of and institutional support for faculty members in the critical departments that are responsible for institutionalization would address all of these shortcomings. Moreover, it would enable the ASU to proactively explore further ways it might strengthen the internationalization of higher education in Abkhazia.

The local authorities can better facilitate the smooth implementation of internationalization measures and can ensure access to Abkhazia for educational purposes.

International engagement in Abkhazia is characterized by competing legal frameworks, unresolved conflict, and a challenging socio-political framework. This also makes the implementation of internationalization measures in the field of higher education difficult and laborious. The local authorities can ensure that this does not become even more difficult by ensuring reliable and smooth access to Abkhazia for educational purposes. Moreover, they can support such programs by de-bureaucratizing their implementation and by strengthening the independence of the university. Further de-politicization and de-bureaucratization of higher education will improve efficiency and open new opportunities for internationalization.

LUSINE VANYAN

COMMUNITY SERVICE LEARNING APPROACH TO STRENGTHENING THE PEACEBUILDING ROLE OF ARTSAKH HIGHER INSTITUTIONS

The potential role of education in addressing protracted conflicts has been addressed in the literature and practice of peacebuilding. One particular approach that has substantial potential to promote an encompassing, inclusive, and empowering culture of peace and to strengthen vital competencies in this field is Community Service Learning (CSL). This article highlights how the peacebuilding role of higher education may be enhanced by CSL and refers to specific project ideas for Artsakh. It outlines the promising area of education in peacebuilding, which offers a range of creative actions and opportunities. The article argues, that CSL is relevant to peacebuilding, because, if implemented, it will systematically promote the skills and competencies of peace education in Artsakh by incorporating peace education into formal education. This article also reveals the propensity of students and faculty to implement CSL projects and outlines potential projects.

KEY WORDS: *peace culture, higher education, theory-praxis nexus, community service learning, tolerance development, Artsakh*

INTRODUCTION

Education paves the path for youth to become world citizens without losing their roots, to be aware of global and regional changes, to be equipped with relevant knowledge, to enthusiastically engage in their community and state-building, and to form the bedrock for civic structures and economies. Education is the first of the eight action areas underlying the "culture of peace," along with sustainable economic development, the exercise of human rights, women's empowerment, democratic participation, promotion of understanding and tolerance, independent media, and international peace and security (UNESCO 2002; Lederach 1995; Appleby 2010). Education as an element of "culture of peace" is increasingly important as it fosters inclusion and an apparent sense of participation by spreading the voices of local actors, particularly at the grassroots and mid-level, and appropriately considers context and culture (Lederach 1998).

However, what does education essentially do? Education takes a learner from their uneducated viewpoint and bring them to knowledge. It equips with systematic knowledge about nature, society, and thinking. It fosters independent and critical thinking, promotes reflection and self-reflection, creativity and contextuality. The cognition in education, as stated by Borsheva, has witnessed a transition: previously it was viewed statically, as the ability to store knowledge, currently cognition is associated with the ability to interprete and practically apply the gained knowledge, to think independently through dynamically structured systems of mental operations and to development moral-volitional qualities (Borsheva 2007). The cognition process is carried out in two directions - by the whole mankind and by every individual, who perceives already discovered and open knowledge, the levels of the universal spirit. Thus an individual's learning or cognition is a journey of rediscovery of the knowledge accumulated by the mankind, an introduction to the condensed history of the education of the whole of humanity. After this, he/ she reveal something new to enrich the universal knowledge (Hegel 1959).

Education is the incarnation of the innate desire to know. This idea started with Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. "All men by nature desire to know," implying they desire to know the truth (Aristotle, 2019, p. 1). A human being cannot escape learning; life, in this sense, is equal to cognition. An individual chooses the object with which to make contact and investigate (Karyakin 2015). Relevant education may mitigate the main causes of ethnic conflict: greed and grievance. If the desire to know is ill-satisfied due to the absence of sufficient educational capacity, it narrows students' worldview. This, combined with an absence of well-being, loss of occupation, and psychological pressure of potential warfare typical of regions in conflict often limit students' intellectual capacity and the development of their civil consciousness. Driven by survival needs and ignorance, young people may become perpetrators of crime and join rebellious groups to feel more secure (Tollefsen 2017). This may be further aggravated by the militarization of education in post-Soviet spaces (Babich 2020). Education, however, may not fulfill its role in these cases.

Education may have the opposite impact than intended, if it is not based on the desire for truth but rather, for instance, the demiurgic desire to guide the progress of all of humanity and search for the ideal human state, it may justify conflicts and bloodshed. This was said to be the case with eighteenth-century French materialism and nineteenth-century German *Vulgärmaterialismus*, which held sway over the Ottoman educated class and led to ethnic cleansing in the empire (Nash-Marsall 2017). The philosophy justifies whatever is done if it serves a higher purpose.

Education can also have an adverse effect, leading to intrapersonal and intrasocietal conflict, if it is test-centered and requires the repetition of material for a test. This can be distasteful to students, and does not transform their identity, or open their minds to the beauty of the world, teach them to distinguish the false from the true or to care for it. Instead, it may disengage them with reality and make them afraid of it. Students also do not care about anything if they do not know it is worth caring about, resulting in widespread apathy, which plagues the Western world (Nash-Marsall 2017). Thus, education contributes to peace and mitigates or prevents conflicts, except when it deviates from its main purpose, is ill-conducted, or is too formalistic.

The promotion of the transformative impact of education, namely tertiary education, may be achieved in several ways: by enhancing international cooperation between universities, joint research, training of lecturers, equipping schools, or through public service. Various public services, namely one of their varieties - Community Service Learning (CSL), has been applied in peacebuilding. CSL is a pedagogical approach that contributes to any societal need by using university academic preparation and practical application of learned theoretical concepts. CSL shares competencies targeted by peace education, including emotional intelligence, ethics, problem solving, identity building, equality, openness, communication, social responsibility, project design, peer-orientedness, participation leadership, and teamwork skills. The peacebuilding impact of CSL may be enhanced by strengthening peace education concepts and competencies while implementing CSL projects. Conducting CSL projects in Artsakh will develop peacebuilding and promote peace.

CSL TO STRENGTHEN THE PEACEBUILDING ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Education comes in different forms: primary, secondary, higher, and formal or informal. Higher education safeguards youth during severe conflicts and establishes a sense of normalcy. It also restores hope to communities, builds civic engagement and institutional capacity, promotes inclusion, affirms the role of government in students' lives, opens possibilities, strengthens resilience, and offers space for pluralist views. However, it suffers severe losses during armed conflicts because of displacement or forced migration, underfunding and loss of capacity. The pathways to enhancing post-conflict university capacity building includes collaboration between higher education institutions, research and pedagogic training for collaborative knowledge production and skill exchange, curriculum development and teacher exchange, improving facilities and supplying equipment and civic mission, among other avenues. Civic mission has been one of three pillars of higher education, along

with teaching and research (Knight 2004; Oketch 2014). It is the responsibility of faculty and students to contribute to positive changes and development of all spheres of society to manage its needs. Lecturers could usher students into society, empower them to become active citizens, and help them understand how they might contribute to societal development. Thus, lecturers expose students to experimental and life-long learning and professional orientation, develop a community-oriented attitude and social integration. Also, they engage students in democratization, regional and intra-university decision making (Astin 2000).

One example of civic mission in universities is CSL. It is *"a form of experiential education where learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection as students… seek to achieve real objectives for the community and deeper understanding and skills for themselves. In the process, students link personal and social development with academic and cognitive development … experience enhanced understanding; understanding leads to more effective action"* (Eyler&Giles 1999, p. 257). CSL involves academic preparation and is sometimes part of the curriculum, as opposed to volunteering, which is a contribution to societal needs that may be unrelated to academic knowledge. CSL helps in the understanding of specific problems of a community by practically applying learned theoretical concepts following preplanned actions, timelines, and resources. CSL is a pedagogical approach linking in-class instruction with practice through civic engagement. It entails ongoing reflection and analysis to gain further appreciation of the discipline being taught, and to enhance civic responsibility. It is followed by a measurement of the impact on the community or collaborators. It equally benefits the provider and the recipient of the service; the provider (the student) strengthens their academic skills, gains professional practice, and develops personality. Community-based competencies such as compassion, commitment, and empathy are instilled by lecturers. The recipient (the community) satisfies its complex needs at no or low cost by enthusiastic professionals-to-be (Furco 1996; Edwards 2001; Gelmon 2003; Basinger 2006; Littlepage 2012). The outcomes of CSL are:

1. Professional development of students and a strengthening of institutional capacity. It fills the gap between theory and practical applications, provides an operational understanding of theoretically conceptualized knowledge and skills, fosters affirmative teaching and personal efficacy, and promotes professionalism on an intra- and inter-university level.

2. Personality development in students. It instills commitment, empathy and sensitivity to others' needs, enhances civic responsibility, encourages more active social roles, and improves interpersonal skills.

3. Building of society. It addresses the affective, spiritual, and emotional divisions in society and meets social needs, promotes civic engagement and social cohesion, promotes diversity and social justice, and facilitates deep, longer-term engagement with community partners.

CSL was successfully implemented in Columbia, for example. Psychology students worked with former guerillas to fulfill community needs. The project aimed to reduce social injustice while training psychologists (Trigos-Carrillo, Fonseca, & Reinoso 2020). However, there has been little evidence of a CSL approach being used in Caucasus Peacebuilding Projects.

CSL resists the values of materialism, power, status, and competitiveness, which is an increasing trend, and the associated decrease in trust, altruism, and collaboration. Such an individualistic focus may lead to affective deprivation and emotional conflicts. The implementation of CSL shifts this materialistic and individualistic trend in a more social and collective direction. While the individualistic model is focused on content and one's own well-being, CSL is focused on content, application, value, and the common good. The social-orientedness and skill-orientedness of CSL are in-line with peace education capacities which are oriented towards skill-building and are a move away from knowledge-building (Galtung 1995). Similar to peace education, CSL is also transformational, *"enabling us to function as global citizens and to transform the present human condition by changing the social structures and the patterns of thought that created it"* (Reardon 1988, p. x), transforming a culture of violence to a culture of peace. Further skills and attitudes shares by both CSL and peace education include:

1. emotional intelligence, empathy, change of perspective, ethics and respect, understanding, and acceptance;

2. problem solving, building of identity, empowerment;

3. equality and openness, social responsibility, and community development;

4. project design, communication, peer-orientedness, participation, and action-orientedness;

5. leadership and teamwork skills, research skills;

6. clarity and ability to perceive linkages when problems are related to learners' experiences (Jjager 2019).

CSL is also conducive to inner peace – a natural consequence of serving others' needs within CSL projects – and social peace – achieved by societal needs and the promotion of social equality.

CSL is in-line with a holistic approach to education and peace education, and does not limit peace education to peacebuilding measures. Peace education initiatives in Nagorno Karabakh have mainly practiced this narrow understanding. Instead, in a broader sense, CSL enables an integration of peace education designs in other educational activities. Thus, CSL could also address the lack of cooperation between formal educators and peace educators, yielding long-term perspectives. The peacebuilding effect of CSL projects will be enhanced if further peace education attitudes are built into them.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study included desk research and fieldwork. During the desk research, I reviewed the literature on education and peacebuilding, and its intersection with CSL. The fieldwork aimed to reveal the potential of Artsakh higher institutions for CSL as a pedagogical approach to promote peace education. Here I employed qualitative and quantitative research methods, namely interviews. The qualitative method employed open-ended questions that allowed participants to provide their views. Respondents were not interrupted if they provided an extensive response with more information than was initially asked for, which enabled the exploration of additional points and the capturing of rich data. Quantitative data was collected through closed questions.

The survey was completed by students (n = 16), teaching faculty (n = 16), and university administration (n = five) from Artsakh State University (eleven students, twelve lecturers, four administrative staff), Shoushi Technological University (two students, one lecturer, one administrative staff member), Mesrop Mashtots University (one student, two lecturers), Stepanakert Choreographic College (one student, one lecturer), and Stepanakert State Musical College named after Sayat-Nova (one lecturer, one student) of Stepanakert. The interviews were held in the respondents' working environment; if this was not possible, they were conducted face-to-face outside working hours or by phone or Zoom. The interviews were conducted from August 20 to September 20, 2020. The interviewees were selected from my acquaintances among faculty and the student body, as well as their friends specializing in the English language, psychology, language teaching, linguistics, translation studies, law, economics, history, biology, agriculture, music, and dance. The high number of respondents from Artsakh State University is due to the large size of this university.

The open-ended question inquired:

- about students' and faculty's opinions on the purpose of education;

- how academic courses/research can be linked with the needs of respondents' communities, whether they think they have a responsibility to the community, and what they want to change in their environment;

- what the incentivization mechanisms for community service projects are;

- what advantages and obstacles respondents saw if they planned to complete collaborative projects with their peers and to pool their thoughts together;

- what collaborations may contribute to community service;

- about the ideas for CSL in Artsakh.

The closed-ended questions investigated:

- whether the students and teachers were engaged in the civic mission of the universities or had other volunteering experience/extracurricular activities;

- whether students were exposed to teaching methods that correlated with peace culture concepts;

- whether lecturers/students thought their voice could be heard;

- whether university management should organize community service or if students would self-organize;

- whether they thought the culture of peace should be promoted, and if culture of peace concepts could be introduced to CSL projects.

RESULTS

The desk research outlined the peace-promoting impact of education. It also showed the large common ground between peace education and CSL, which can be enhanced by introducing more peace education skills and competences in CSL projects.

The empirical study revealed that students and faculty are unanimous about the goals of education, which is viewed as a means for students' professional growth, improvement of living standards, supporting students to meet market demands, and to acquire ethical values. Faculty mentioned that students' purpose was doing better on tests, which is probably the result of test-centered education at the university. The education goals expressed did not include community service. Nevertheless, the majority of interviewees agreed that they have a social duty and were eager

to contribute to it. A small number of interviewees did not find community service relevant as they were already performing a similar service to people in their immediate environment.

The percentage of respondents who were willing and eager to contribute to society included those with prior volunteering experience at university, members of Artsakh Volunteer Union (35 %), and / or respondents with a family tradition of volunteering. These respondents already experienced the contentment of meeting others' needs and had developed a more empathic and open mindset. Their volunteering at university included visits to institutions for children, elderly, and socially vulnerable people (such as the disabled and the lonely).

University CSL attempts included students teaching English, physics, and mathematics to schoolchildren and providing legal advice at the Legal Clinic. However, only the Legal Clinic practice occurs regularly. Community service was performed by 20% of interviewees, as opposed to 80% in US schools, as stated by the National Center for Educational Statistics (United States Department of Education 1996).

The CSL ideas proposed by students and faculty are listed below. The numbers in brackets show the number of times a particular idea was suggested.

1. Teaching and training
   - teach law and ethics to schoolchildren (3)
   - fitness sessions for elderly women held by dance college students (1)
   - singing lessons in villages (2)
   - tutor English to schoolchildren and teach drama to preschoolers (5)
   - teach English to kids online (2)
   - hold presentations on research findings (3)
   - introduce schoolchildren to the basics of eco-science (1)
   - host a non-formal education platform (2).

2. Translation and broadcasting
   - translating for Artsakh TV and foreign doctors who occasionally visit Artsakh (4)
   - taking part in the translation and editing of books in a publishing house (3)
   - creating a radio-drama series (4)
   - reciting psalms on the radio (2)
   - broadcasting/preparing TV programs for children (2).

3. Professional advice and consultation
   - psychological consultation at university (2)
   - provide advice to farmers (2).

The respondents could link CSL with their academic course or research if it had a practical application. Highly theoretical academic courses and research could be linked to community service in 40% of cases in the form of presentations. The brainstormed ideas varied both within and between the student and faculty groups; however, respondents from the same profession or area of study gave similar answers. They developed these ideas on their own without being given options to choose from. Several respondents presented ideas for volunteering because they had difficulty differentiating CSL and volunteering. These volunteering ideas were not considered.

The idea to join in collaborative projects with peers aroused enthusiasm among students. This was probably the first time they had considered cooperating with peers and faculty for the common good, following their own ideas. The obstacles to the implementation of their ideas were their overloaded schedules, low motivation, absence of arrangements with internal and external stakeholders, and low participation from the public, as stated by the respondents.

The students were thrilled to state that 50% of lecturers introduced peace education concepts – inclusivity, non-hierarchical relations, diversity, participation, deep listening, et cetera – and used an interactive, student-centered approach during their courses. However, it is challenging to reconcile a student-centered model that incorporates elements of peace education with the existing academic curriculum requirements and textbooks. Such an approach was, therefore, less welcomed by the faculty.

All respondents were pleased to have peace education courses, or aspects of peace education integrated into CSL projects. Of the respondents, 25 % had been exposed to peace education. Half of lecturers and students believed their voice could be heard and that they could make a change into the peacebuilding field. A good impetus for CSL is external funding and cooperation with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the public sector. Another source of inspiration is meeting the needs of others within CSL, and satisfaction with the results. The majority of respondents stated that the efficiency and feasibility of CSL would be enhanced if it was organized by the university administration.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed that education has a peace-promoting and conflict-mitigating impact unless it deviates from its main purpose or is intentionally manipulated. An education approach, CSL, may enhance the peace-promoting function of education as it shares the majority of skills and competences with peace education. The impact of CSL may be strengthened if more culture of peace concepts are actualized during CSL project implementation. CSL is a tool that integrates peace education into the holistic picture of formal education and is not limited to peacebuilding projects for implementation in Nagorno Karabakh.

Fieldwork showed the necessity of strengthening peace education in Artsakh, as well as the high potential of Artsakh higher education institutions to perform community service. Students and faculty are enthusiastic about collaboratively implementing CSL projects and produced numerous ideas. The majority of these concerned teaching and training, following by translation and broadcasting, with professional advice and consultation mentioned less frequently. These ideas may serve as a basis for CSL projects to incorporate culture of peace concepts in their design and implementation, which may eventually penetrate to formal classes. The projects are feasible as they are low-budget and minimally dependent on external resources. Their realization requires arrangement, supervision, and reward by university management; cooperation with NGOs and funding will also be an asset. The contentment gained from implemented projects will itself become another source of motivation that will increase lecturers' and students' confidence in making change.

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LUSINE VANYAN

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SEDA SHEKOYAN

SPACES FOR TALKING ABOUT PEACE:
REFLECTIONS ON THE POTENTIAL OF CULTURAL EXCHANGE
IN THE ARMENIAN-TURKISH NORMALIZATION PROCESS

With this text, I present my theoretical reflections and practical experience in arts and cultural diplomacy as a space for protracted conflict's transformation in the Armenian-Turkish Normalization Process. The reflection paper aims to show an additional path to the general peacebuilding and normalization process between both countries by strengthening the role of cultural platforms. It argues that by reconceptualizing the role of art institutions, cultural diplomacy can support the development of attitudes and structures that build peaceful societies in the digital era. To live up to this potential, museums and other cultural spaces need a new form of governance, agency, and autonomy. The paper concludes that more cultural practitioners, not primarily professional peace researchers and civil society activist, should be involved in and shape peacebuilding activities to support this development.

KEY WORDS: *cultural diplomacy, museums and art, protracted conflict, Armenian-Turkish relations, normalization process, peacebuilding*

INTRODUCTION

When the Republic of Armenia proclaimed its independence on September 21, 1991, the Armenian-Turkish joint newspaper Zhamanak dedicated the special issue of the following New Year to the reestablishment of Armenia's statehood. The famous paper celebrated the announcement of rapprochement by adding an image of a handshake in the corner of the newspaper's old photo of a Turkish and Armenian flag. Obviously, the declaration and existence of a newly independent state was a major historical event for Turkey. There was an expectation from the general public, politicians and diplomats that friendly relations would be established between Turkey and Armenia, as seen in the documentary film "Closed Border Dialogue", produced by Armenian Versus Studio in partnership with the Turkish History Foundation. In its turn, Armenia wanted normal relations with its neighbors as a component of national security.[1]

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1   Tigran Paskevichyan, and Ara Shirinyan, "Closed Border Dialogue (In English)", Versus Studio, May 25, 2017, YouTube video, 55:15, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OidJE4 TjTYU&ab_channel=EPFArmenia

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Around 30 years has passed since the first official contact between Armenia and Turkey. Over the years, the world has witnessed many changes, and yet, the border between two neighboring countries remains closed. Though general interest in the normalization process is not very high among Armenian citizens, most people acknowledge that closed borders and the absence of diplomatic relations with Turkey hinder Armenia's development and prosperity. This situation is also largely affected by the inability to acknowledge and appreciate the various corridors for normalization of relations between the civil societies of both countries. For instance, numerous sectors of civil society, such as cultural diplomacy and relations, visual arts and creative industries, continue to remain unidentified fields of constructive potential for conflict resolution between Turkey and Armenia.

Considering the previous statement, this text aims to present my theoretical and practical experience on issues related to arts and cultural diplomacy as a space for transformation of protracted conflicts, as well as to discuss contemporary examples of scenario-building in the process of reconciliation between Armenia and Turkey. The purpose of these reflections is to make a contribution to the "Advancing Young Scholars and Peacebuilders Careers" regional exchange program organized by the "CORRIDORS – Dialogue through Cooperation" NGO.

This investigation attempts to demonstrate the general peace-building process between Armenia and Turkey by employing the perspective of art platforms and cultural spaces. The latter, in its turn, involves rethinking the role of art institutions and community peacebuilding in the digital era. This study considers umbrella topics such as unidentified fields and spaces for protracted conflict transformation, the Armenia-Turkey normalization process as a separate case study, and successful examples of spaces for talking, negotiating and constructing durable peace in the region.

ART AND CULTURAL SPACES AS POTENTIAL FIELDS
FOR PROTRACTED CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

The notion of considering art, cultural spaces, and territories as a parliament of ideas to negotiate different political agendas and societal demands is not new. In addition to being considered as a space of art history and as a classifying cabinet of artworks and practices of the past, museums are often perceived as agents of statecraft and models of governance, self-governance and autonomy. Today museums are places where different worldviews and strategies of governance are materialized, circulated, invented and negotiated (Shekoyan, 2018).

The reader is then invited to think about the following questions: What is the role of museums today and their long-term expediency in a digital and interconnected world? How can museums and their collections be used as agents of statecraft and new social models for community engagement and peacebuilding? Should museums remain as institutions based in archiving and researching art, cultural artifacts, and ensuing practices, or should they become centers for stimulating civic engagement, international cooperation and community-driven projects?

Artistic and cultural components of the peace process in Armenia, Turkey and elsewhere encompass not only civil society and grassroots activities, but also various types and structures of cultural organizations – museums, archives, galleries, art spaces, libraries, art journals, and related periodicals. Public forums, debates and discussions on widely diverse opinions and approaches toward the current situation and the future possibility or achievement of peace are activities that the art and cultural sector may initiate. Art and cultural cooperation itself does not resolve protracted conflicts, but creates preconditions for their settlement and resolution in the long-term perspective. The higher the level of cultural cooperation between two societies, the greater the possibility of conflict resolution by peaceful means.

The lack or misuse of cultural and creative diplomacy as a tool for peaceful conflict transformation is a result of the narrow understanding of complex conflict structures in the region. There is a rising need to change perceptions about art and cultural platforms as mere tools and instruments for implementing peace processes and rather reinvent them as open and unpredictable spaces for talking about normalization of relations as a possibility in the long run. The digital age comes with new tools to present, collect, access, research, manage, and visualize data. German art historian, curator and media theoretician Oliver Grau sees both museums and archives as meeting points for complex negotiations between several fields: "Museum and archive are on the way to becoming a space addressing the needs for complex negotiations between cultural production, heritage protection, societal demands, and audience engagement."[1]

The same idea can be applied to archive and documentation policies, since nowadays we find ourselves not only with a newly created digital heritage, but a non-digital cultural heritage that has now been digitized and made openly available. The latter not only entails building enriching experiences, but sustaining significant digital projects.[2]

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1   Oliver Grau, Wendy Coones, and Viola Rühse, Museum and Archive on the Move: Changing Cultural Institutions in the Digital Era, ed. Oliver Grau (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 10.

2   Oliver Grau, Wendy Coones, and Viola Rühse, Museum and Archive on the Move: Changing Cultural Institutions in the Digital Era, ed. Oliver Grau (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017).

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REFLECTION ON THE ARMENIA-TURKEY
NORMALIZATION PROCESS THROUGH CULTURAL EXCHANGE

The art, cultural and creative industries have attained considerable achievements in moving the Armenia-Turkey normalization process forward. International creative writing camps for young Armenian and Turkish writers, meetings between literary publishers and translation workshops, and fellowships for narrating and visualizing peaceful dwelling experiences and multicultural communities in Istanbul are some of the most creative projects implemented in recent years between the two neighboring societies. This process became possible on a large scale after the Armenian and Turkish governments and civil societies became supportive of these initiatives and dialogues, or at least refrained from creating serious obstacles for them. Furthermore, even though the official normalization process has terminated, Armenian-Turkish cultural diplomacy continues to overcome negative stereotypes, tunnel vision and selective perception.[3]

Since 2014, both societies in Armenia and Turkey managed to take steps forward in the larger field of public diplomacy, which includes, but is not limited to, the fields of media, journalism, law, art, and cultures. I was a guest scholar, museum practitioner and curator at the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art from October 2014 to April 2015 in the framework of the program "Support to the Armenia-Turkey Normalization Process", established by the Hrant Dink Foundation and financed by the European Union. This large-scale project continues to remain one of the best examples in community peacebuilding, which may positively serve regional cooperation and future scenario-building.

One of the main features of this program was its strong cultural and artistic component: the active participation and inclusion of cultural institutions, art centers and museums as host organizations in Turkey and Armenia ("Anadolu Kültür", Istanbul Museum of Modern Art, SALT Galata cultural center, CNN Türk, Kadir Has University's Lifelong Education Centre, Yuva Association in Turkey, Civilitas Foundation, Eurasia Partnership Foundation, etc.). The project offered professionals from both countries the opportunity to participate in a special program at a host organization in the neighboring country. It aimed to enable cross-border learning opportunities in areas where further exchange of expertise and lasting cooperation is needed, such as academia, civil society, media, culture and arts, translation, interpreting, language acquisition, and law. The primary task of this program is not to find quick solutions to immediate problems between conflicting societies, but rather to generate platforms and design long-term peacebuilding techniques.

In February 2015 I organized a guided tour of Istanbul Museum of Modern Art's (Istanbul Modern) permanent collection with the curatorial department of the museum exclusively for the Hrant Dink Foundation team, the staff of Istanbul Modern, and for other Armenian fellows from the fellowship program. I highlighted 15 artworks in the collection and made a special tour for more than an hour. The chronological flow of the exhibition "Past and Future", and the exhibition of Istanbul Modern's collection, presents an overview of the evolution of modern and contemporary art in Turkey.

By featuring works from the permanent collection of the museum, my speech focused on critical topics such as the role of a permanent collection as a discursive apparatus and the artistic and cultural issues shared by two neighboring countries through videos produced by artists of different generations from Turkey and Armenia. Unlike the exhibition "Empty Fields", another important project curated at Salt Galata cultural centre and dedicated to the Armenian legacy in Anatolia, the primary aim of this guided tour was not the demonstration of the shared influence that Armenians and Turks had on one another in the cultural sphere, but the introduction of the museum's collection as a platform for dialogue.[4] How can forms of governance represented by the museum or other cultural spaces be revisited and reinvented in negotiating peace? I invited the guests of the museum tour to think about and discuss these questions.

Besides my six-month research period at Istanbul Modern, I was also involved in the development of a book project, a collection of essays on Armenian and Turkish experiences of sharing common spaces and negotiating differences from the perspectives of city planning, literature, musicology, and travel. The joint projects between Armenia and Turkey often span long periods of time and include short-term and long-term fellowship schemes for young scientists. These projects take the form of dialogue programs that aim to enhance institutional ties and to develop areas for cooperation between two societies, including collaboration between universities, academic or literary publications, translation and other field-oriented workshops, language courses, and curations of scientific exhibitions that may involve periods of extensive research and exposition.

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3   "Support to the Armenia-Turkey Normalization Process, 2014– 2020" European Union Initiative, accessed December 16, 2020, https://armenia-turkey.net/en/home

4   Emma Harper, "Conflating Histories: Two Exhibitions on the Armenian Legacy in Anatolia," Ibraaz (Ibraaz, July 26, 2016), https://www.ibraaz.org/news/156

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OVERLOOKING THE PRE-CONFLICT PERIOD:
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CONCLUSION

For each society building and development of relations with neighbors requires permanent obtainment of necessary information about their inner and foreign structures and systems. This kind of analytic and research work becomes more important when it is conducted during periods of protracted conflict. Art and cultural platforms may make significant contributions towards the construction of peaceful coexistence. They are not just tools and instruments for implementing certain political agendas, but the very spaces where peace processes are enacted. This conclusion was drawn from the initial observations. Societies achieve peace by sowing small seeds of cooperation and harvesting the outcomes only when they manage to work on common ground.

To sum up, one piece of advice concerns involvement in conflict transformation programs, not only for professional peace actors, civil society activists, and peace researchers, but also for professionals and amateurs whose work is not directly connected with peace research and regional cooperation (including curators, artists, cultural managers, museum workers, architects, etc). It is important to restate that for community peacebuilding and resolution of various protracted conflicts, especially between Armenia and Turkey, long-term cultural projects are needed in various formats – cross-border learning opportunities and exchanges of artistic expertise, dialogues between art institutions, and scientific cooperation that can place peace actors and cultural managers on different sides of the protracted conflict for a long period of time.

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The end of the so-called second Karabakh war that broke out in September 28 of 2020 and a trilateral ceasefire agreement between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia on 10 November brought to surface a crucial but often overlooked question, which is whether the coexistence of ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Nagorno-Karabakh is possible. This question, alongside the story of coexistence in the mentioned region, takes us back to the time of the Soviet Union, which was the last time we observed the actual coexistence in Nagorno-Karabakh between the two, and which I call 'pre-conflict' period in my paper. In the paper, I will argue that the pre-conflict period is forgotten in the Azerbaijani narrative of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which helps eliminate the coexistence from memory. Thus, I will also argue, given the advantages gained by Azerbaijan in the 10 November truce and the claim of victory, it is more than ever important to remember the coexistence and work toward it.

KEY WORDS: *Nagorno-Karabakh, conflict narratives, coexistence, pre-conflict, Azerbaijan, Armenia*

INTRODUCTION

The Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan is in its fourth decade, making it one of many conflicts around the world that could be said to be in a deadlock. Though the origins of the conflict date back a little more than one hundred years, the most recent active phase unfolded only in the late 1980s, around the time the Soviet Union was collapsing. A cycle of deportations and pogroms was followed by a bloody war from 1991 to 1994 which claimed about 25,000 lives, displaced hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijanis, drew condemnation from the United Nations, destroyed cities, and is still unresolved today.

After 26 years of silent deadlock – with the exception of a major military escalation in April 2016– September 28th, 2020 marked the beginning of a significant turn in the history of the conflict. A new, full-scale war erupted along the line of contact between Armenian and Azerbaijani troops. After a series of failed internationally

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brokered ceasefires, civilian deaths, and an enormous military and human cost, the situation on the ground changed drastically and resulted in a new peace agreement that confirmed Azerbaijani military victory on paper. The agreement signed by the leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia on November 9th of 2020 was in the form of announcement declaring the end of hostilities in and around NK. It brought the Russian Army in as peacekeepers, and promised corridors for Karabakh Armenians to travel to Armenia and Azerbaijanis to Nakhichevan.

The agreement, as opposed to all other peace plans and drafts previously suggested by mediators, did not mention anything about the status of NK. This led Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev to conclude, in his speech immediately after the signing of the agreement, that this document corroborates Armenia's *"capitulation," Azerbaijan's "restoration of territorial integrity,"* and *"the end of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict."* (Aliyev 2020) *"There is no word about the status of Nagorno-Karabakh here,"* he added, *"and there will be none as long as I'm the President."* (Aliyev, 2020) On the contrary, international experts following developments in the region questioned the President's conclusions and do not agree that the conflict is resolved. Indeed, there is enough of a basis for disagreement as on the Russian side, President Putin and Foreign Minister Lavrov stated that NK's status *"will be determined later."* (TASS, 2020) Additionally, the Commander-in-Chief of the Russian peacekeeping forces, Rustam Muradov, held meetings with the non-recognized president of the regime in NK, which challenged many Azerbaijanis' expectations of the restoration of sovereignty over the territory. The desired result for them would be that Azerbaijan also takes administrative control over the part of NK that the Azerbaijani Army did not advance into militarily before the peace agreement was reached. The fact that the Armenian regime operating in those remaining territories was regarded as a party to the conflict, at least by Russian peacekeepers, does not meet that expectation. Most importantly, Russian forces will be kept on the ground for five years, according to the signed announcement, and the condition for their withdrawal is objection from either side in the conflict six months prior to the expiration of the period. The public also raise questions about whether there would be political will to make the Russian Army withdraw from the region, and if so, what would happen next. The uncertainties around the agreement create the impression that there are also still questions about the resolution of the conflict, especially for Azerbaijanis, for whom the only ideal solution is the restoration of territorial integrity over NK, and for Armenians, for whom that is the independence of the same.

Throughout the modern history of the NK conflict, different regional and international scholars have suggested reasons why resolution of the conflict is impossible. For instance, Anzhela Mnatsakanyan (2020), an Armenian scholar from Yerevan State

University, argues that the leaders in both Armenia and Azerbaijan *"have become trapped by their own rhetoric".* She asserts that even if they manage to find common ground on the biggest issue for their countries, it will not be so easy for them to convince their constituencies. It can be inferred from her points that rhetoric and narratives shape people's understandings of serious issues, and once established in the media, academia, official discourse, and – most importantly – people's minds, these narratives are difficult to alter. For the purpose of this study, I scrutinize how the narrative around this conflict has been formed in Azerbaijan over the decades and shaped the official stance of the government of Azerbaijan.

Since the end of the first Karabakh war in 1994, many scholars have attempted to document the history of the conflict in Azerbaijan, particularly why it started and how the negotiation process progressed. Nevertheless, there has been little, if any, interest from the government, independent researchers, or the media in Azerbaijan in studying the Soviet period up until the start of the war in NK. There are reasons for and consequences of this negligence toward conversations about the pre-conflict period. According to the mainstream narrative employed by the government, media, and academia in Azerbaijan, the fundamental cause of the conflict was Armenians' revisionist ideas about creating "a bigger Armenia" based on historical claims. This narrative explains the conflict from 1988, but does not leave room to understand the period beforehand. Accepting this narrative, the public obviously do not see the need to find out what life was like for Karabakh Armenians and Azerbaijanis during the period of coexistence under the Soviet Union. The lack of study of the pre-1988 period leads to many shortcomings in public understandings of the conflict, as well as to the willingness for negotiations. Public opinion tends to be unanimous in thinking of the other side of the conflict as a revisionist enemy, and the official stance continues to decline any possibility of appealing to Karabakh Armenians in the resolution process. There is a lack of willingness from officials and society to listen to the official conflict narrative of the so-called enemy, and this keeps the parties to the conflict in polarized positions.

This research has arisen from the need to document, in detail, the official narrative of the NK conflict in Azerbaijan. It elaborates on how the reasons for the conflict are presented to Azerbaijanis, and when the conflict is said to have begun. It examines official statements and interviews given by the president and high-ranking diplomats on the topic of the negotiation process. My hypothesis is that the lack of coverage of the pre-conflict period of the first NK war, along with the established notion that the conflict entirely started because of Armenians' malign and separatist intentions, affects readiness in official talks to consider a variety of peace plans. As mentioned previously, this conflict has a history going back one hundred years, but has

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been through several active phases. Thus, it may sometimes be unclear what is meant by pre- or post-conflict. Here, I refer to the first Karabakh war of the 1990s as the conflict period, and the period before this as pre-conflict.

The second Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan unfolded and finished during the process of this research. Although this work is not an analysis of military or diplomatic policy, but only of rhetoric and narrative building, I believe that the importance of rhetoric was also felt during these tensions, especially in Azerbaijan, as President Aliyev gave multiple interviews to foreign media (including influential CNN, BBC, and Fox) over the course of the war, and he was repeatedly asked about Azerbaijan's stance on Karabakh Armenians. Aliyev himself touched upon this during his victory address to the nation, saying that he gave thirty interviews during this period and he *"never gave this many interviews in his life."*

To relate my research to the latest and ongoing developments, I provide my interpretation of the president's messages and on the overall Azerbaijani official stance regarding the status of NK, the future of Karabakh Armenians under possible Azerbaijani rule, and the possibility of the coexistence of Armenians and Azerbaijanis. I argue that now the war has ended and Azerbaijan claims victory, it is more necessary than ever for Azerbaijan to call for the coexistence of Armenians and Azerbaijanis, emphasize it in the official discourse, and specifically address the needs of the Armenian population in the rhetoric.

LITERATURE REVIEW & DISCUSSION

When telling an objective history of conflict, there is little choice but to present the factually accurate parts of the narratives of all parties involved. As this research addresses the Azerbaijani narrative, I begin by breaking down the Armenian version of events, and then address Azerbaijan's. If we look at the whole range of pieces written and spoken by journalists and historians representing either side of the conflict, we see that this debate encompasses ancient times and events. To avoid delving into an unhealthy and unproductive discussion, I will focus on the most frequently indicated messages that appear in official statements.

Most Armenian talking points regarding the NK conflict refer back to the early 1920s. This is when the three independent republics of the South Caucasus were invaded by the Red Army of the would-be Soviet empire. The Armenian claim follows that NK was arbitrarily given to Soviet Azerbaijan in 1921 on the order of Joseph Stalin, then-Commissar on Nationalities, following a series of decisions. As those early decisions ruled that NK was to be under Soviet Armenia's jurisdiction, Armenia claims that the

last decision to "give" the region to Azerbaijan was not legally binding or justified. The last time this was repeated was by Prime Minister of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, during his meeting with the Azerbaijani President at the Munich Security Conference in February 2020.

A large part of the Armenian narrative justifying Karabakh's secession from Azerbaijan is based on claims of discrimination and disadvantages meted by the Soviet Azerbaijani authorities against the ethnically Armenian population of NK. It is due to this perception that a couple of times under Soviet Azerbaijani rule, Armenian leaders and local Armenian officials in NK addressed the central Soviet government with complaints. In 1945, the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Armenian SSR, Grigory Harutiunov, wrote to Stalin asking for the province to be attached to Armenia SSR (De Waal, 2003). In 1965, a group of Karabakh Armenians, consisting of both local party officials and intellectuals, also addressed Moscow, arguing that they were not treated fairly by their Union government in Baku (Baghdasarian, 2013). The last war also once again brought about an emphasis on the situation of Karabakh Armenians under Soviet Azerbaijan on Armenian social media, with many sharing a link to a New York Times article from 1977 titled "Armenians Ask Moscow for Help, Charging Azerbaijan with Bias," targeted at an international audience. The caption to the story on Facebook claimed that the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh was continuously discriminated and oppressed by the Azerbaijani authorities during the entire Soviet period.

The argument follows that the divergence between the NK Armenian population and Soviet Azerbaijani leadership caused by the latter's alienation of the former was exacerbated with Heydar Aliyev's coming to power in 1969. Musheg Ohanjenian, then-Chairman of the Nagorno-Karabakh Regional Executive Committee, told Thomas de Waal that Aliyev brought with him more control and constraints on NK (2000). In 1973, Azerbaijani leaders allegedly thwarted Ohanjenian and Gurgen Melkumian, another Karabakhi party official, from organizing a celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the creation of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region. According to Ohanjenian, the duo planned to invite fifty Karabakh Armenian academics and generals from around the Soviet Union, but the authorities in Baku made them postpone the event for a few months, and eventually let them hold it only by emphasizing NK's Azerbaijani identity. All Armenian guests were uninvited. Ohanjenian mentioned that, in the same year, Melkumian was sacked from his job and he himself was recruited for a job in Baku.

The infrastructure and socio-economic standing of NK overall is another piece of the "discrimination" puzzle. The notion that the highways were in a bad condition

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overall, and in particular the lack of a proper road to Armenia, is at the crux of this argument. It was also claimed that a sanitary water system was lacking. These claims are reinforced by the fact that Azerbaijan, among all the Union Republics, possessed the lowest average salary (135 rubles per month), even lower than the average salary in the whole Soviet Union (182 rubles per month), according to 1989 statistics (Yunusov, 1997). However, the narrative also concedes that economic wellbeing was never a key factor in seeking secession, although it might have played a role. This is what Robert Kocharian, Karabakhi leader-turned-President of Armenia, had to say to Russian journalist Andrei Karaulov in 1994: *"I don't exclude the possibility that even if it had been good in Azerbaijan, then these problems would have arisen all the same. I believe that there is something more than good or bad life, that people understand and that pushes people toward independence."* (De Waal 2003, 271) What matters about this part of the narrative is the lack of roads to Armenia, which in turn means the lack of a viable connection to the country of ethnic origin, which was perceived to have been done on purpose.

Perhaps the largest portion of the Armenian narrative emphasizes what could be termed as the "de-Armenianization" of the region. Here, the focus is on the population dynamics of NK. In 1926, there were 117,000 Armenians and 13,000 Azerbaijanis in Karabakh. In 1979, the population of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Republic was 162,000, with 123,000 Armenians and 37,000 Azerbaijanis (Bruk, 1986). There are a couple of reasons why the numbers of ethnic Azerbaijanis changed drastically while that of Armenians did very little. Baku authorities' policy of settling Azerbaijanis in Karabakh, namely Khojaly and Shusha, and the fact that many Karabakh Armenians decided to leave to pursue a better life elsewhere both played major roles. However, there is a good chance that the conflict narrative of Armenia stresses the former more than the latter.

The case for "de-Armenianization" is that the Azerbaijani Union Republic worked hard to "hijack" the Armenian identity of Karabakh and nationalize it. What made Armenians fearful was a concrete example in front of them: Nakhichevan. In 1926, eleven percent of Nakhichevan's population was Armenian. By 1979, this declined to 1.4 percent, whereas the Azerbaijani majority rose from eighty-five percent in 1926 to ninety-six percent in 1979 (De Waal, 2003). The fear was of eventual extermination, a targeted disappearance of the Armenian population from NK. As part of this angle of the narrative, Armenians claim that Azerbaijan had, since Soviet times, and still continue, a policy of cultural "genocide" against Armenian artifacts and monuments. Samvel Karapetyan, who specialized in tracking and recording the traces of Armenian cultural identity beyond the borders of Armenia, argued that Soviet Azerbaijani rulers destroyed Armenian signs everywhere in Azerbaijan, but particularly in NK.

For this purpose, he traveled across NK and recorded traces of Armenian monuments he came across (De Waal, 2003).

Before progressing to the Azerbaijani narrative, it is noteworthy that, as in any other discourse, the official Armenian narrative also involves claims of historical roots and territorial possession over NK. Thus, there is no point fully refuting the Azerbaijani claim that the Armenian talking points do not rely on ancient times at all. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan of Armenia said during his speech in Stepanakert, NK: *"Karabakh is Armenia, and that's it"* (Kucera, 2019). He also continuously led the crowd in chanting miatsum, or unification, the slogan used in the late 1980s as Armenians demanded Karabakh cede from Azerbaijan and be attached to Armenia. In an interview for BBC's Hard Talk, Pashinyan doubled down on this and justified it by arguing: *"Armenians lived in Nagorno-Karabakh for thousands of years"* (BBC 2020).

An important disclaimer before going over the Azerbaijani narrative is that, as I mentioned earlier, it is always possible to find segments of the narrative from journalists, academics, and official sources that focus on either ancient times or the pre-conflict period. However, as I discuss the discourse most frequently used in writing and speech, there is more discussion of the start of the conflict and the post-conflict time.

The first aspect to look at when scrutinizing the Azerbaijani conflict narrative is whether there is any mention of pre-conflict events and figures in any discourse. The official informational platform azerbaijan.az, promoted by the president's website, has a section titled *"Karabakh issue and Armenian affair."* The very first sentence says it all: *"This politics of aggression is the essence of Armenian history."* The text in this section claims that the "Armenian affair" is an idea associated with the East of today's Turkey and is aimed at more territories, and the "Karabakh issue" is only a part of it. The piece dates what it calls "aggressive Armenian nationalism" back to eighteenth-century Turkey.

I looked up other official websites to investigate the information and style of writing. The Supreme Court website's section, titled "The Start of Conflict," begins with: *"Armenians' claims over Azerbaijani territories and especially NK are part of their strategic plan to create 'Big Armenia.'"* It follows by saying that Armenians have traditionally taken advantage of situations to enact this plan, such as when "pro-Armenian" Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in the USSR. It goes further, "proving" the Soviet leader's "pro-Armenian" actions by referring to the dismissal of Heydar Aliyev from the Politburo and the promotion of Armenian academic Abel Aganbekyan. It states that being encouraged by Gorbachev's policy, the "previously undercover" Karabakh

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Committee (a group of Armenian intellectuals demanding Karabakh's secession from Azerbaijan) turned to open activity and organized rallies in Stepanakert and Yerevan. There is only one reference to the actual pre-conflict period – if we do not consider conspiracy theories of ancient times – and it asserts that after 1945, Armenians, with the help of their diaspora, campaigned to change worldwide public opinion about NK.

The president's website, www.president.az, also has a separate section devoted to the conflict, named "Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict." It invites visitors to read a sixteen-page PDF file that includes a chronology of the events of the war and its aftermath, starting in the late 1980s, when the conflict began. It states: *"This conflict which started with Armenia's territorial claims against Azerbaijan, provocations on ethnic base, and terrorism in the late 1980s resulted in military aggression against Azerbaijan."* Subsequently, there is an attempt to portray the events of the late 1980s as Armenia *"grabbing opportunity."* It reads: *"The Armenians, who occupied high positions in the Soviet Union, the leadership of Armenian SSR and the Armenian diaspora abroad embarked on a purposeful campaign to seize the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO), which was established within Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic in 1923, and annex it to Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic taking the opportunity created by the weakening of the central government of the USSR in late 1980s."* Reference is also made to the deportation of Azerbaijanis from Armenia, and the killing of some two-hundred of them. The only reference to the pre-conflict period is of the first half of the twentieth century, and also highlights the deportations.

The meeting between Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders at the Munich Security Conference in February 2020 mentioned above was a great opportunity to observe how the leaders on both sides understand and interpret the reasons for the NK conflict. Although many analysts in both Armenia and Azerbaijan regarded the meeting as a missed opportunity for constructive dialogue, because a major part focused on history rather than the present, and I share that sentiment, it was one of the few chances to see an official discussion about why the conflict started. Answering the first question about the resolution, President Aliyev saw the need to give an explanation of how the conflict emerged, and he went back to the early nineteenth century, to 1805, when the son of the Karabakh khan and a Russian general signed a treaty, called Kurekchay. Aliyev explained why he brought this point up by saying that there was no word about the Armenian population in the treaty. He subsequently mentioned two more treaties, Gulustan and Turkmenchay, signed in the same period, and that these treaties made Azerbaijan part of the Russian empire, alongside Armenia and Georgia. His reference could be interpreted that, just like the rest of Azerbaijan, Kara-

bakh was also part of the Russian empire in the nineteenth century, and thus indifferent.

Referring to the abovementioned treaties, especially Turkmenchay, is a central part of the official Azerbaijani narrative explaining the conflict, and was visited again by the president himself during the last war. The references to these treaties happened constantly when foreign journalists asked him his opinion of the Karabakh Armenian people and their right to self-determination; Aliyev had to refer to the Azerbaijani historical explanation of the roots of Armenians in NK. For example, in his interview with German ARD TV channel, the president mentioned that Armenians were brought to Karabakh from Eastern Anatolia and Iran only after the aforementioned treaties, *"to change [the] ethnic and religious composition of the region."* (Azertag 31.10.2020)

Returning to the Munich meeting, the next part of President Aliyev's "history lesson" (as the media in Azerbaijan regarded it) covered the time of the creation of the Soviet Union's borders, specifically a decision over NK in 1923, that was mentioned earlier when discussing the Armenian narrative. Aliyev argued that the Caucasus Bureau ruled to "retain" NK in Azerbaijan. The argument is that if you retain something, it belonged to you previously as well.

It is equally uncommon to see the president and other officials commenting on the pre-conflict period. However, surprisingly, in May 2020, in his meeting with refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs), President Aliyev talked about what he thinks life was like for Karabakh Armenians under Soviet Azerbaijan, and what started the conflict. He stipulated that had Heydar Aliyev been in charge of Soviet Azerbaijan in the late 1980s, *"an inch of the Azerbaijani lands would have never been occupied."* (Aliyev 2020). He continued: *"During Heydar Aliyev's tenure Azerbaijani authorities had so strong control over Nagorno-Karabakh, even one Armenian was not able to raise voice. Yes, they were reporting to Moscow and Politburo as if they were being hurt or faced discrimination, but it was all lie. Because we have economic indicators, and they show that people living in Nagorno-Karabakh did not live any worse than those in other regions of Azerbaijan. Before Heydar Aliyev, there were incidents happening in the 60s. But from the time Heydar Aliyev began ruling Azerbaijan up until when he left for Moscow, he did not allow for even one incident to happen."* (Aliyev 2020)

The latter part of this statement, like other statements of his, reflect the "pro-Armenian" stance of those leading the Soviet Union at the time, and the active cooperation between them and the Armenian diaspora. He cited an article written by an "Armenian nationalist" for a French newspaper and argued that all these, including

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the Sumgait pogroms and Khojaly genocide, were planned and thought out in advance.

The bigger portion of the Azerbaijani conflict narrative in official discourse is built on the conflict and post-conflict period. The parts that cover the pre-conflict period either jump all the way back to ancient and medieval times or merely mention Armenia-Azerbaijan relations during the Soviet time. The examples from ancient and medieval times are essentially conspiracy theories depicting Armenians as inherently evil and opportunistic. Even if some of the statements related to these conspiracies are factually correct, they are removed from the bigger picture. In contrast, the discussion of the real pre-conflict and conflict timeline solely focuses on the deportation of and genocide committed against Azerbaijanis. Although I did not come across any mention of Armenians fleeing Baku or other parts of Azerbaijan, the case about the Sumgait pogroms essentially argues that they were also staged by the Armenians in order to outrage Azerbaijanis. This idea was also repeated in the president's speech referenced above.

CONCLUSION

There is an overwhelming lack of interest in Azerbaijan in discussing or researching the pre-conflict period of the NK war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This unproductive approach to the study of conflict has shortcomings and leads to a lack of understanding of the conflict's past and the implications for the future. It also implicitly blocks the potential for cooperation between the youth of the two countries. Although no study corroborates this, there is little doubt that the vast majority of Azerbaijani youth do not know that the majority of the population of pre-conflict Karabakh was Armenian, or even that there were Armenians in Karabakh at all. If they recognized this mere fact, the next step would be to listen to the needs of the other side, eventually transforming the conflict into cooperation to find common ground. The lack of interest in the pre-conflict period has become so deep that even the suggestion of discussion is rejected. The first question a prominent Azerbaijani journalist, Seymur Kazimov, asked Caucasus analyst Laurence Broers about his NK conflict documentary was why a film about the conflict started by describing an event that took place well before the conflict.

Again, although there is no empirical evidence to prove it, it is likely that the Azerbaijani public's willingness to discuss the pre-conflict period, honestly and in a civil manner, would bring more chances and benefits to the resolution of the conflict. The pre-conflict period is an indispensable part of the study of conflict and cannot be overlooked. Discussing it helps comprehend the full picture of the conflict. Another

main reason it should not be neglected is that this period is an example of peaceful coexistence between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, and Azerbaijan officially welcomes the future coexistence of these two communities, after the settlement of the conflict. The official stance on this issue during the second Karabakh war was a good example of acceptance in the rhetoric. During the initial weeks of the war, Azerbaijan's Ministry of Defense released a statement calling on Armenian civilians living in the conflict zone to beware of artillery attacks and, if needed, to cross to the Azerbaijani line of contact for their security. President Aliyev was repeatedly asked by the media if it is possible for Armenians and Azerbaijanis to live together, and he responded every time by giving examples of the two ethnic groups living side-by-side in Georgia, Ukraine, and Russia. He also mentioned, repeatedly, that thirty-thousand Armenians live in Azerbaijan, and the Armenian church in Baku is preserved.

The end of the conflict, as presented by Azerbaijan, makes it necessary to keep talking about coexistence – and more loudly – as the situation on the ground has changed. Azerbaijan took control of Shusha city, Hadrut settlement, and villages from the Khojavand (Martuni) and Khojali districts in NK, and ethnic Armenians living in these places fled during the war. There is the need for a special address to these people, and guarantees of their security. Today, the topic of security for Armenians is more relevant as there is a political crisis in Armenia and the government of Armenia lost the public's trust after the truce agreement. Armenians who have to come to the territories still under Armenian control, as well as those whose houses are in territories under Azerbaijani control, need an operative, functional, and responsible government. The situation is a chance for the Azerbaijani authorities to take advantage of the uncertainty for its own benefit, but with the good intention of helping people.

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HOW DOES "ANTI-OCCUPATION DISCOURSE" SHAPES PUBLIC FACEBOOK DISCUSSIONS ABOUT RECONCILIATION IN GEORGIA?

Since the war of 2008, the prevailing discourse in Georgian society and politics has come to view Russia as the occupier and the only obstacle to conflict resolution. In the meantime, other participants, including the de-facto Abkhaz and South Ossetian Republics and their residents, and internally displaced persons (IDPs) from these regions are excluded as actors. In both social and political rhetoric, the de-facto republics are called "occupied territories" that need to be freed from Russian occupation. With the intensified "borderization"[1] and the kidnapping of people living at the administrative border line, the anti-occupation messages and slogans have become more frequent, while the enemy's image has become more aggressive. This study examines how this anti-occupation discourse influences public Facebook discussions about the possible dialogue and peacebuilding processes with the de-facto Abkhaz Republic. I will explore if and how the anti-occupation discourse silences dissenting voices on Facebook and discuss in what way the platform may or may not be a suitable one for this sort of discussion.

KEY WORDS: *silencing, anti-occupation discourse, borderization, Facebook, Georgia, peacebuilding*

INTRODUCTION

Anti-Russian sentiment runs strong among the Georgian population. After the war of 2008, Russia declared South Ossetia and Abkhazia – where it stationed permanent military bases – as independent states. Tbilisi and its Western allies have denounced Russia's actions as "illegal military occupation."[2] The rage of yet another lost war was primarily focused on Russia and nurtured the ground for what I call anti-occupation

1   "Russia's Occupation of Georgia's Territories Intensifies," The Embassy of Georgia to the United States of America, April 20, 2020, last accessed December 8, 2020, https://georgiaembassyusa.org/2020/04/20/russias-occupation-of-georgias-territories-intensifies/

2   Madeline Roache. "Georgians Have Now Been Protesting Russian Interference for a Week. Here's Why," Time, June 27, 2019, last accessed December 8, 2020. https://time.com/5615726/anti-russia-protests-georgia/

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discourse, which prevails in Georgian society and politics. This discourse views Russia as the occupier and the only obstacle to conflict resolution. In the meantime, other participants, including the de-facto Abkhaz and South Ossetian Republics and their residents, and internally displaced persons (IDPs) from these regions, are excluded as actors.[1] [2]

Anti-occupational discourse was strengthened by an incident that took place on June 20th, 2019, when Sergei Gavrilov, a member of Russia's lower house of parliament, took the chair of an inter-parliamentary session between Orthodox Christian lawmakers. This angered the opposition, which sees the current Georgian government as overly friendly to Russian interests. *"It symbolizes the failure of our government to stand up to Russia, which is still our biggest challenge today,"* said Irakli Khvadagiani, a researcher and a chairman of the Board of the "Soviet Past Research Laboratory," in conversation with Madeline Roache of "Time."[3] The incident created a wave of protest among the Georgian population, resulting in a popular movement called the "Shame Movement," which named their protests "anti-occupational demonstrations" and their private Facebook group "the Freedom Spreading Society."[4]

Anti-occupation discourse has led Georgians not only to viewing Russia as the external enemy but as the enemy within Georgian politics.[5] A 2018 survey showed that eighty-five percent of Georgians viewed Russia as a political threat, and eighty-four percent thought that Russian aggression was ongoing. Sixty-eight percent of Georgians considered Russia to be a threat to the economy, and unemployment was named as the number-one problem currently facing Georgia (territorial integrity coming third), so it is clear that tensions are high.[6]

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1 Atabekyan, Tabidze. "Banality of Nationalism in the South Caucasus: Pro-violence Practices of the Society in Georgia and Armenia."

2 Zemskov-Züge. "Contrary memories: basis, chances and constraints of dealing with the past in Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue."

3 Roache. "Georgians Have Now Been Protesting Russian Interference for a Week. Here's Why."

4 Official Twitter page of the "Shame Movement" of Georgia. Joined June 2019, last accessed December 8, 2020, https://twitter.com/shamemovement?lang=en

5 Open Caucasus Media: "Protesters mark 'Gavrilov's Night' anniversary in Tbilisi," June 20, 2020, last accessed December 8, 2020, https://oc-media.org/protesters-mark-gavrilovs-night-anniversary-in-tbilisi/

6 April 10– 22, 2018 "Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia," survey conducted by Dr. Rasa Alisauskiene for "Center for Insights in Survey Research," pages: 40, 66, 67, 69, last accessed December 8, 2020, https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2018-5-29_georgia_poll_presentation.pdf

Since 2008, anti-occupation discourse has found its way into the everyday lives of Georgians via businesses promoting messages like *"I am from Georgia and 20% of my country is occupied by Russia," "Abkhazia is Georgia,"* and *"Samachablo is Georgia;"* using the names of Abkhazian cities and towns (using Georgian toponymy) on t-shirts; using images of barbed wire on socks, and so on. Facebook profile frames with similar messages also became a popular way to commemorate the date of the Georgian-Russian war of 2008 and Russian aggression in the form of ongoing "borderization."[7] The names "de-facto" Republic of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have gradually changed to "occupied" Abkhazia and South Ossetia in news and political speeches. All of this is reflected on social media, especially Facebook.

According to the findings of an internal social media monitoring of one of the Georgian media outlets (private source) for 2019, the largest share of Georgian social media was allocated to administrative border line (ABL)-related issues: thirty-four percent of all 3,329 posts. Among other themes that received a rather limited amount of coverage were peacebuilding (seven percent of all posts) and issues regarding IDPs (one percent of all posts). Online media sources dominate in terms of the production of conflict-related posts on social media (eighty-two percent of all analyzed posts), and in terms of the different forms of reader engagement, compared to the posts of governmental, opposition, non-governmental (NGO), expert, and peacebuilder sources present on Facebook. My aim in this study is to see how the anti-occupation discourse influences public Facebook discussions about the possible dialogue and peacebuilding processes with the de-facto Abkhaz Republic.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

I chose to analyze engagements on social platform Facebook with the following topics:

1. IDP-related issues;

2. the issues of mutual concern/cooperation between Georgian and Abkhaz societies; (e. g. the story about Students from Gal/i studying in Georgia, the cooperation on restoration of Abkhaz archives, statements about Georgian government funded medical services for all residents of Abkhazia etc.)

3. news or articles about Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue;

4. articles about young people from both sides sharing their view of the conflict;

5. analytical articles about the conflict.

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7 The Embassy of Georgia to the United States of America, "Russia's Occupation of Georgia's Territories Intensifies."

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The platform monitored was www.netgazeti.ge. Netgazeti has a dedicated project, The South Caucasus News, funded by the Boell Foundation. *"The project aims to inform Georgian speaking audience about ongoing developments in the South Caucasus region through publishing news, analytical articles, interviews, multimedia materials, opinions and quizzes. One of the goals of the project is to increase citizens' engagement in peace dialogue."*[8] In this paper, I chose to monitor articles about Abkhazia only. The monitoring period was January 2019 to November 2020. Fifty-six posts were analyzed, with 959 comments and 3,147 total reactions. My objective was to analyze reactions and comments in terms of their emotional and rational influence on the discussion. Further, I aimed to:

- Identify the most common expressions and narratives manually and through word searches to identify the common discourse.
- Categorize the emotional tones of the reactions and comments.
- Analyze the correlation between comments (active engagement) and reactions (passive engagement).
- Analyze the comments with threads, to identify what kind of narratives are being silenced or encouraged.

The tool used was Microsoft Word.

FINDINGS OF THE QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

Table 1
Total numbers of comments, shares and reactions for all posts in all categories
Engagements: 56 posts; Total Engagement: 5,288; Engagement per post: 94.4.

Comments	Shares	Likes	Love	Haha	Wow	Sad	Angry
959	1,180	2,143	121	154	48	383	298

The most popular category, out of five, according to the engagement per post was IDP-related issues (159.3), while the least popular was news about peaceful dialogue (50.3).

Table 2
Engagement per post in a category

IDP-Related Issues	Conflict Analysis	Youth About Conflict	Mutual Concerns	News About Dialogue
159.3	101.3	94	92	50.3

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

REACTIONS AND THE "EMOTIONAL TARGET" OF THE POST

"A Like has always signified support for a message, where negative thoughts had to be expressed in comment feeds, or perhaps, not at all. Facebook Reactions (represented as Love, Sad, Wow, Angry and Laughing icons) have changed the way users can express their feelings for a piece of content" – explains Chris Kerns, a senior vice president (SVP) for insights at the advertising and marketing company Wunderman Thompson in his 2017 article "Beyond the Like: Measuring Facebook Reactions."[9] I have categorized all reactions into supportive and opposing reactions. The supportive reactions are those that correspond to the emotional target of the post. For example, in the case of IDP-related issues, Love and Sad reactions are considered to be supportive reactions as they express empathy for the stories of the IDPs. The Angry reaction, if targeted at the speakers delivering the news, was considered to be an opposing reaction in this case. The Laughing reaction, in all cases, were considered an opposing reaction because no post aimed to humiliate the content, the authors of the post or people featured in the content. I tried to understand the emotional target of the posts through not just their titles but the statuses with which they were chosen to be shared (the online media creates the status of the post; usually it's a small excerpt from the article itself. Some articles are shared without statuses). After analyzing all posts in all categories separately, here are the estimated findings for all supportive and opposing reactions:

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8 "News and Stories of the South Caucasus – 2019," Heinrich Böll Stiftung, last accessed on December 8, 2020, https://ge.boell.org/en/2019/03/15/news-and-stories-south-caucasus-2019

9 Chris Kerns, "Beyond the Like: Measuring Facebook Reactions," Marketing Land, February 13, 2017, last accessed December 8, 2020, https://marketingland.com/beyond-like-measuring-facebook-reactions-206052

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Table 3
Total number of "supportive" and "opposing" comments per category

Post Category	IDP-Related Issues	Conflict Analysis	Youth About Conflict	Mutual Concerns	News About Dialogue
Supportive	1,006	421	434	573	342
Opposing	24	25	243	30	49

Table 4
Percentage of "supportive" and "opposing" comments per category

Post Category	IDP-Related Issues	Conflict Analysis	Youth About Conflict	Mutual Concerns	News About Dialogue
Supportive	97.6 %	94.3 %	64.1 %	95 %	87.5 %
Opposing	2.4 %	3.7 %	35.9 %	5 %	12.5 %

Most reactions to posts are supportive, and likes prevail over other reactions. However, there are two categories in which opposing reactions exceeded the common range. In the case of youth about conflicts, a separate segment of Netgazeti media that aimed to get Georgian society acquainted with points of view on the conflict from both sides of Enguri, there were two posts out of fourteen that tilted the scales toward negative engagement. Both of these were about young women from Abkhazia expressing their thoughts about their relationship with Georgia.

POST #1 – 3 JUNE, 2019

The status: "I think that there are a big number of adequate and educated people living in Georgia, who understand very well, that Abkhazia is not Georgia".
The title: "Saying that Abkhazians will one day come to their senses is not correct" – the view from Sokhumi

259 Comments; 93 Shares

POST #2 – 7 JUNE, 2019

No status
The title: "I would wish for friendly relationship with Georgia" – Linda Tuzhba from Sokhumi

50 Comments; 13 Shares

In the case of the first post, both the status and the title are very informative and contradict the common Georgian position toward Abkhazia: *"Abkhazia is Georgia."* The tension in the comments reveals that the majority of commenters were concerned with the young woman being ethnically Armenian, who, in their view, did not have a right to talk on behalf of Abkhazians. It was the only post in which negative reactions aligned with negative comments in large numbers, and in which comments (active engagement) exceeded reactions (passive engagement).

In the case of the second post, the article itself said that Linda Tuzhba supported the idea of friendship contingent upon Georgia recognizing Abkhazia, which was not visible in the title or status. This might have resulted in more supportive reactions, assuming that people did not read the full article before liking it.

In the case of the second category, news about dialogue, which has posts with the least engagement, the common negative reaction was Haha (thirty-five out of forty-nine), which followed the statements of government officials and experts about new possible ways of engaging in dialogue. These reactions could be interpreted as a lack of hope and belief in the dialogue happening, or in the efficacy of it. But, in all cases except one, supportive reactions exceeded opposing ones.

POST #3 – 5 SEPTEMBER, 2019

No status
The title: The minister says, that there are more channels of dialogue with Abkhazians and Ossetians today

6 Comments; 3 Shares

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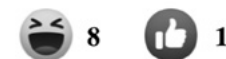
THE EMOTIONAL TONE AND INTENT OF THE COMMENTS

In this segment I categorized comments according to their emotional tone. I separated all comments into four categories:

1. **Constructive / Conciliatory:** comments that express tolerance, empathy, willingness for conciliation, curiosity, sadness, and/or intend to carry constructive/rational discussion.

2. **Aggressive / Confrontational:** comments that express frustration, cynicism, aggression, accusation, shaming, and/or intend to create confrontation in the discussion.

3. **Hate Speech:** any form of expression through which speakers intend to vilify, humiliate, or incite hatred against a person, a group, or a class of persons on the basis of race, religion, skin color, sexual identity, gender identity, ethnicity, disability, or national origin.

4. **Other:** comments that don't fall under any category because their emotional tonality or intent is unclear.

Table 5
Total number of comments classified by their emotional tone and intent for each category

Post Category	IDP-Related Issues	Conflict Analysis	Youth About Conflict	Mutual Concerns	News About Dialogue
Const / Conc	52 %	43 %	39 %	35 %	18 %
Aggr / Confr	67 %	76 %	139 %	43 %	70 %
Hate Speech	7 %	50 %	88 %	7 %	21 %
Other	10 %	16 %	24 %	6 %	12 %

Table 6
The percentage composition of comments classified by their emotional tone and intent for each category

Post Category	IDP-Related Issues	Conflict Analysis	Youth About Conflict	Mutual Concerns	News About Dialogue
Const / Conc	38 %	23 %	14 %	38 %	15 %
Aggr / Confr	49 %	41 %	48 %	47 %	58 %
Hate Speech	5 %	27 %	30 %	8 %	17 %
Other	8 %	9 %	8 %	7 %	10 %

Not all comments were analyzed as some appeared to be hidden or carried a visual message. Only visible textual comments were analyzed: 823 out of 959. The comments, statuses, and post titles were translated from Georgian to English.

This following post talks about the new chances of direct dialogue with Abkhazia in April 2020 (this post had the most engagements in the category). Out of forty comments, only five were constructive/conciliatory, while twenty expressed aggression/confrontation, ten were hate speech (mostly targeting the interviewee), and five, other.

POST #4 – 27 APRIL, 2020

The status: No matter what changes in Abkhazia, if the Georgian side is not ready to accept the changes, nothing will change.

The title: The new chance of Georgian-Abkhaz Dialogue – interview with Paata Zakareishvili

42 Comments; 36 Shares

👍 87   😠 9   ❤️ 2   😢 1   😮 1   😆 1
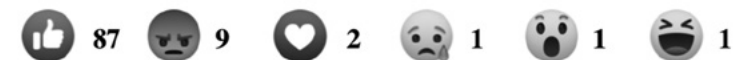
This post received more supportive reactions than opposing ones, unlike in the comments, both in numbers and percentage-wise. Eighty-eight percent of reactions were supportive (even if we count all anger and heart reactions as opposing (as heart reactions may sometimes signify irony), while only 12.5 percent were constructive. This means that active engagement comes from those who are inclined to post aggressive, confrontational, accusatory, and even hateful messages, while more reserved or rational voices choose passive engagement in the form of a reaction.

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Again, the constructive / conciliatory comments were not categorized by narratives but by emotional tonality and intent. For example, here are all five comments, categorized as such:

"How much longer do you want to live like this? The compromise can always be found if wanted. If they don't join Russian Federation, everything will be solved. If not, then there is no sense."   Nino T.

"Mr. Paata, even if Russia neglects Abkhazia and gives it a chance to have a relationship with Georgia, who has from this Government, the ability, the will, the competence and the resource to talk, straighten out the relationship and handle the situation. I really wonder."   Zurab L.

"If we don't talk, nothing will be solved. Of course it should start with the topic which we have in common, we should have meetings, get closer to each other, and it will need years. Maybe if they had started this relationship, years ago, we could have been closer by now. Then little by little the refugees would start going back and everything else that we want – the generations have to grow up differently. We scream "no!" to everything without thinking and then demand one right solution. Can we return it with war? No. Maybe with the protests on Rustaveli? No. I like Zakareishvili's idea. I don't see anything Russian here."
                                                                 Cicino D.

"When Mr. Baghapsh was in Tbilisi, Georgians also saw some kind of new perspectives, but Bagapsh then got the free electricity from Enguri and we did not receive anything. Now it's Bzhania or whoever it is.. Bzhania and Apsua…? Anyway, he plans to open a railroad and cargo. Of course, let's talk about everything, but it's not what they want. They say, recognize us first. We can recognize Abkhazia as a federative unit in Georgia, but after all Georgians return there safely."
                                                                 Dato S.

"When Bzhania came to power in the De-Facto state, he said clearly that the relationship with Georgia will be revived, if Georgia recognizes Abkhazia's independence, not otherwise!"   Nino B.

IDENTIFYING ANTI-OCCUPATION DISCOURSE

The definition I provided for anti-occupation discourse was: It views Russia as the occupier and the only obstacle to conflict resolution. In the meantime, other participants, including the de-facto Abkhaz and South Ossetian Republics and their residents, as well as IDPs from these regions, are excluded as actors.

Russia, Russians, Russian forces, or propaganda were mentioned in almost one quarter of all comments, with 194 mentions. Putin, Moscow, and Kremlin, according to the word search, were mentioned more times than Shevardnadze, Ivanishvili, Saakashvili, Baghapsh, and Bzhania together, with twenty-one mentions. The USA and Europe were mostly mentioned as military or geopolitical actors, with thirty mentions. The top geographical or ethnic mentions were: Abkhaz, Abkhazia (325 mentions); Georgian, Georgia (230 mentions); and Armenian, Armenia (77 mentions).

I selected two comments from separate posts as examples of anti-occupation discourse, both of which were marked as aggressive / confrontational:

"Everything that happened back then in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, was done by the hands of the 'Russianized' Georgians, and with the encouragement of Russia! And people running this country today are also 'Russianized!'"
                                                                 Elguja U.

"This man [referring to the political expert] doesn't quit his anti-Georgian and camouflaged pro-Russian actions, which correspond completely to the Russian political context, which demands from us to have one-on-one dialogues with the so-called Abkhaz government, as if it's not about Russia and it's time we got used to so-called 'new reality.' And this is totally unacceptable for Georgia, because it will lift the responsibility off of Russia on the real occupation of Georgian territories and will legitimize the so-called 'De-Facto' puppet government (the only fact being that Abkhazia doesn't have anything of its own, starting with finances and finished with army and it cannot survive without Russia for even several months!) on the international arena, when the latter has no chance to carry out the negotiations without Russia overlooking it and take on the responsibility on making more or less important decisions without Russia!"   Nodar L.

Other than a definite unwillingness to accept Abkhazia as the actor of the conflict, it seems hard for most of the commenters to accept the Abkhazians as a separate ethnic group. The prevailing narrative is that there are two kinds of Abkhazians: the "real Georgian" ones and the Apsua Abkhazians, who do not belong on Abkhazia's territory. The word Apsua was mentioned seventy-six times, while Abkhaz was mentioned 169 times. However, there are also comments like the following:

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"Apsua means Abkhaz in the Abkhaz language. There is Abkhaz and Mingrelian-Laz toponymy in Abkhazia. Starting from the second century, on this part of Colchety, the Abazgs and Afshils have already been living here and they did not speak Laz. So, they are not Laz-Mingrelians. The Georgian language appears in Colchis, which was then called the 'Abkhaz Kingdom,' only in eighth-to-ninth centuries. This is the history, which you probably are not aware of."

Vova L.

As for IDPs, the most active engagement is on the post that talks about the selling of previously Georgian-owned houses in Abkhazia. Stories about IDPs receive a significant amount of sympathy, but most comments are political and revolve around the narrative of the "return." This takes us to the most common meaningful words and expressions:

1. Territory/land: seventy-six mentions.

2. We will return; the return; will be returned: forty-nine mentions.

3. God; Lord: twenty-eight mentions.

4. Time will come; someday: for example, "time will come and we will return to our houses;" "time will come and Georgia's enemies will receive what they deserve;" "time will come and no one will ask you;" "someday we will return to our homeland" et cetera, fifteen mentions.

5. Abkhazians will disappear: for example, "They will disappear without Georgia;" "disappear with Russia" et cetera, seventeen mentions.

6. I hope that; hopefully: for example, "If everything happens logically, hopefully, everything will be fine;" "I hope you understand this;" "I hope that they will make the right decision," eight mentions.

These narratives have one thing in common: they imply that someday, something will happen on its own and everything will be as it should be. Then there are the following expressions:

1. Abkhazia is Georgia/Georgian Territory: eighteen mentions.

2. History; historical: thirty-four mentions in twenty-eight comments in the context of explaining the history.

3. Let's call everything by its name: four mentions.

4. You don't know: eight mentions.

5. The truth: sixteen mentions.

All of these words have been taken from the common context: they imply that the person saying them is trying to explain/state/articulate the fact (any fact, but mostly historical facts) as being truth.

SILENCING: HOW IT HAPPENS

Some commenters seemed to be afraid of expressing their thoughts:

"There are Gal teachers who teach in Gali and none of them are separatists. They don't deserve this insult. The journalists should know what they write about. Don't attack me now."
Nato K.

"The direct dialogue without the third party is essential. Don't make any conclusions beforehand. There will be people who will agree on a dialogue. Those who agree with me, please respond. I am not going to argue with those who oppose."
Barbare G.

Some commenters made direct threats to other commenters or sometimes even to people who liked the post. These threats implied the accusation of being an enemy or pro-Russian. For example:

"I wonder what is the reason for the hearts and likes on this status?! Do they agree with this girl or what?!"
Fenix D.

"Mostly the people who just read the title."
Kakha D.

"Kakha D. I hope it's the only category who likes this status…."
Fenix D.

"You are making a harmful comment and you deserve to be punished. Those who say that Georgians are wrong in this Georgian-Russian, or so-called Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, are all saboteurs …" Jabeg T.

Some aggressive comments are directed at the Netgazeti itself:

"Hey, stupid netgazeti.ge, what does this information serve? Are you trying to get us a little bit used to this stupidity or what? Go and tell Putin about it …"
Lasha M.

"Netgazeti.ge, this is not freedom of speech or objectivity or anything at all. With some kind of financed project you are trying to sell to the society the ramblings of some Eleonora Galoyan, as the vision from Sokhumi …I am very disappointed."
Zura S.

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Some confrontational comments use a different approach: shaming the commenters for not knowing anything about the pain of war. For example:

"Kaxa P. Why do you think that it has only been three-hundred years since Abkhazians settled in Abkhazia? Then who are Abazgs, Afsuas, who lived there before Christ? Did they disappear? The mix of other ethnicities is a common thing. The Abkhazians have mixed with the North-Caucasian tribes. Why, have Georgians not mixed with anyone for the last thousand years? Before insulting Abkhazians and saying that they are new arrivals … we are pushing them away from us. We are enhancing the misunderstanding between us. We cannot be reunited with force and even if we could, does it mean genocide? We need to live together."

Lasha G.

"Lasha G. After this comment I am now sure that you have no clue about the Abkhaz war and you have not seen the tortured and dismembered bodies of Georgians, otherwise you wouldn't have written that. Around 20,000 people have died then, and more peaceful population maybe than the soldiers. And how many have been molested nobody knows. Don't tell me now that Georgians did the same. They didn't do as much as those animals altogether. What reconciliation are you talking about? Have you seen anyone worry about what they've done or apologizing? They are on the way of being extinct and because of their stupid actions they lost their language and culture. The worse will happen and they deserve it."

Rezi D.

CONCLUSION

I have started this paper with a question, whether the "anti-occupation" discourse was or was not silencing the dissenting voices in public Facebook discussions. I explained the discourse in terms of the prevailing narratives that view Russia as the occupier and the only obstacle to conflict resolution, while other participants are excluded as actors. However, I failed to compose the whole nature of the discourse in which emotions play a crucial role. Yes, silencing happens and mostly because of the emotional intensity with which these narratives are being spoken.

This emotional intensity often borders on hostility and leaves other voices with the choice of passive engagement – a reaction (Like, Love, Haha, Wow, Angry). That may explain why most times the majority of reactions on the posts are supportive and comments – confrontational. Passionate accusations of being pro-Russian or shaming others for not knowing about history or for not having experienced war, as seen from the comments above, is also a frequent tool of silencing.

Most of the time, comments are reactive statements to the post made by people who choose to express their position in an emotional way. They do not intend to start a discussion but rather identify the "think-alikes" and gather followers who will share their position and legitimize their emotions. Some of the most emotional and hostile comments come from those who had experienced war and want to be heard. One commenter posted the same comment about his personal tragedy twice on two different posts. Quite a few other commenters appeared under multiple different posts.

The repetitiveness of the narratives spoken became almost chronological, in a way with which the commenters view the past, present and future of the conflict. They explain historical or quasi-historical views, identify current enemies, hypothesize about solutions and express hopes for a brighter future, where justice is served. There is very little self-criticism or willingness to learn in the comments, almost no self-reliance, and no belief in self, governmental entities or political parties. There is fear, pain, anger, sense of injustice, sadness and aggression in most comments. The comment slots are like river-beds into which these repetitive narratives and emotions pour into, creating a flow of almost ritualized complex.

Another question that I asked in the beginning was whether Facebook was a suitable platform for this sort of discussions. The common freedom of speech policy of news outlets is that they do not moderate discussions on their Facebook page. Hence, as stated above, posts are frequently hijacked by one vocal category of commenters, who instill their moral superiority and set the mood for the whole discussion. Facebook pages are not places for discussions – Facebook groups are. However, this does not mean there are groups that discuss topics related to the conflict, or that they are well-moderated. Facebook moderation in Facebook's terms is engagement-oriented: the more comments, and the more popular the post or group is, the better. Facebook group moderation in peacebuilding terms is like facilitation: creating a safe space for all people to say what they think. An absence or little awareness of such platforms may be cited as one of the reasons to why the outpouring of emotions happens on public platforms as such: there is simply no other suitable place to register one's position or emotional attitude. I've stated in the introduction that the topics of conflict and Russian aggression are very painful for Georgian society and as we see, when this pain isn't able to be expressed and heard, it generates aggression. The communication then happens mostly between the like-minded people and none of them is ready or willing to offer a respectful hearing to an alternative voice.

Public Facebook posts of news media outlets should not be viewed as a common place for discussions and their comments may not represent the overall position or

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emotional tone of all other people who have reacted to the post or remained silent altogether.

SUGGESTIONS FOR ONLINE MEDIA AGENCIES REGARDING THEIR PUBLIC FACEBOOK PAGES:

- Monitor hate speech: twenty-one percent of all monitored comments were hate speech, directed either at a person, ethnic group, or sexual minority.

- Monitor the bots: while being curious about the most aggressive comments, I started to search for some of the authors and found five possible fake accounts, so far.

NOTE: COUNTING ENGAGEMENTS

As I did not have access to the Facebook Page Manager of www.netgazeti.ge, I could not monitor the clicks on the links, which also count as engagement. Only reactions (Like, Love, Haha, Wow, Sad, Angry), comments, and shares were counted. Engagement per post was counted by combining all engagements and dividing them by the number of posts.

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CONFLICTS IN GEORGIA: EMERGENCE OF DISPUTES, MOSCOW'S FOREIGN POLICY
INTERESTS, AND THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN THEIR RESOLUTION

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CONFLICTS IN GEORGIA: EMERGENCE OF DISPUTES, MOSCOW'S FOREIGN POLICY INTERESTS, AND THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN THEIR RESOLUTION

The paper aims to increase the public's understanding of Abkhazian and South Osse-tian conflicts and combined efforts of their resolution. The downfall of the Soviet Union and disorder in the newly emerged independent states have caused several territorial disputes, including disputes in the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Remarkably, these conflicts remain unsettled, and the situation is deteriorating with the ongoing creeping occupation of Georgia and the illegal detention of Georgians. It is crucial to highlight that both of the conflicts in Georgia were provoked and supported by the Russian Federation with the aims of returning to its status as a powerful he-gemon and gaining lost control over the small state while depriving it of the right to join the West. The present empirical research aimed to identify the role of Georgia's Western partner organizations and whether their policies can affect the peaceful reso-lution of conflicts occurring at the time of Russia's presence in the occupied territories.

KEY WORDS: *Georgia, Russia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, conflict, peacekeeping, policy, EU, NATO, UN, OSCE*

INTRODUCTION

The collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR) in 1991 played a decisive role in the liberation of many nations from communist rule and the formation of independent and sover-eign nation states. Practically, this allowed Eastern European countries to begin the internal development process and establish peaceful relations with their neighbor-ing states to join powerful Western alliances, such as the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). However, the fates of post-Soviet republics differed from one another. Specific deterrent occasions involving ethnic and religious conflicts have occurred within several states after they gained their desired independence. As a post-Soviet country, Georgia has actively faced ethnopo-litical conflicts with two autonomous regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia since the 1990s. This situation impeded Georgia's political, economic, and social development

as well as its strive to join the Western institutions. Moreover, these disputes were aggravated over the past decade, resulting in the 2008 Georgian-Russian War.

These conflicts have a broader historical background involving several uprisings that date back to the beginning of the 20th century. Over seventy years of Soviet rule, the situation seemed to have been more or less stabilized. Nevertheless, the situation intensified in the 1990s in both regions. During the 1990s, Georgia lost control over Abkhazia. The Russian Federation was indirectly involved in this conflict, supporting both the Abkhazian and the South Ossetian rebels (Gerrits & Bader 2016). This argu-ment has been proven even by members of the Russian Parliament (Duma). For exam-ple, Duma member Mr. Zatulin confirmed that beginning in the early 1990s, Moscow has actively supported Abkhazians with its military and intelligence (www.Civil.ge 2020). In 2008, when Georgia was on the edge of being granted the Membership Ac-tion Plan (MAP) for further accession to NATO, it lost control over the region of South Ossetia, once again due to Russian intervention. This occasion caused the massive stagnation of Georgia's aspirations of joining the Euro-Atlantic Alliance.

This topic was chosen for the present paper because it has not lost its international relevancy and has remained in the agendas of international discussions, especially over the past several years (Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality n. d.). International organizations such as NATO, the EU, the United Nations (UN), and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) often review these conflicts and emphasize crucial goals that must be achieved for their peaceful resolution (Panchulidze 2020). Furthermore, the leaders of the world's most powerful states have debated and analyzed the issue of occupied territories of Georgia and condemned their self-proclaimed independence, which has been recog-nized by Russia (Federal Foreign Office 2008). These conflicts are modern examples of how Russia attempts to return to its previous status as a regional hegemon and uses all of its means (including the use of force to violate territorial integrity and modern hybrid war tools of disinformation campaigns) and influence to manipulate other states' domestic conflicts while preventing third-party mediators from conducting peaceful activities (European Parliament 2018).

It is important to review the aforementioned conflicts through the prism of the on-going tensions surrounding Nagorno Karabakh in the Caucasian region. On Septem-ber 27, 2020, significant fighting broke out in Nagorno Karabakh between the militar-ies of Armenia and Azerbaijan, which have struggled over this territory since the collapse of the USSR. There have already been instant escalations in recent years. However, the current developments appear to have taken more extensive forms that could lead the region to long-term war and cause a massive economic and political

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crisis (Council on Foreign Relations 2020). The current tense situation in the Caucasian, Abkhazian, and South Ossetian conflicts may attract increased attention from different state and non-state actors who monitor and measure the possibility of further escalation of these conflicts.

The problem of territorial integrity rests first and foremost in the political agendas of the occupied states. Georgia's lack of territorial integrity slowed down its development and its integration to the Western world. Inversely, this topic is also relevant to Russian foreign policy, as Russia has continued to support the independence of the two Georgian regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, by assisting them with troops and border control while claiming to maintain peace in the Caucasus. This argument is strengthened by the ongoing creeping occupation of Georgia that has occurred since 2011 with the aim of instilling fear into the Georgian population.

Abkhazian and South Ossetian disputes require constant evaluation and monitoring to ensure their peaceful resolution. Without Western involvement, it appears that it will be nearly impossible for Georgia to achieve the resolution of Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts. Henceforth, this paper reviews Georgian-Russian relations, Moscow's interests in protracted conflicts, and Western involvement in this region. The main goals of the present research were to determine whether Western mediation activities have affected the nature of Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts and to propose further strategies (i.e., information sharing, raising youth awareness/integration, and other soft power tools) for effective conflict resolution. The main argument of this research paper is the following: *Due to the limitations set by Russia, the peacekeeping measures taken by international organizations are less effective in the resolution of Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts.*

Finally, given that peaceful conflict settlement is not entirely in the hands of Georgia or international organizations, this paper assumes that in the long run, Russia's decline as a regional power could allow Georgian authorities to negotiate a reconciliation with Abkhazian and South Ossetian leaders.

The present analysis was based on empirical research of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian cases. The methods used in this research included case studies, process tracing, and data analysis. The first two approaches helped to predict the potential consequences and underline the importance of the aforementioned conflicts. Document analysis was also used to evaluate all the books and policy papers available on this topic (including sources in Georgian). Furthermore, the paper will refer to reports published under the guidance of international organizations to highlight their roles in conflict resolution and their general positions regarding the presently examined cases.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

There are many challenges that are related to the possible introduction of MTB MLE in Abkhazia: some are related to resources, others to the lack of understanding and motivation. This part of the paper will explore some of the issues and challenges and ways in which to overcome them.

The emergence of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts dates back to the beginning of the 20th century. In 1918, Georgia gained independence as Tsarist Russia dissolved. Although Abkhazians and South Ossetians had autonomous status as well as a wide variety of rights according to the 1918– 1921 constitution of independent Georgia, they had no desire to become national minorities of independent Georgia (Davitashvili 2003, 409). Moreover, the constitution stated that the Democratic Republic of Georgia would provide equal civil and political rights to all citizens, regardless of nationality, religion, and so on. However, the aforementioned regions (especially South Ossetia) were not satisfied with their given rights. In fact, three uprisings were initiated by the Ossetians in 1918, 1919, and 1920 as they demanded free will to choose whether they would stay within the borders of independent Georgia. Nevertheless, the Georgian government was able to stop these rebellions, although these actions had not yet posed any serious threats to the territorial integrity of the Democratic Republic by that time. Interestingly, the Georgian Bolsheviks (controlled by the Russian Bolsheviks) provoked these uprisings and came into power after the collapse of Tsarist Russia (Janelidze 2018). However, even though some Georgian regions did not wish to be included in the Democratic Republic of Georgia at the beginning of the 20th century, their uprisings were quickly muted before causing any severe damage to the state's territorial integrity.

No revolts or complaints arose from Abkhazia or South Ossetia during the seventy years of Soviet rule, as Georgia did not yet exist as an independent and sovereign state. During this period, these regions were mostly focused on gaining independence and full autonomy directly from Russia, which was the leading state of the Soviet Block (Davitashvili 2003, 407–409). Therefore, no serious confrontations took place during this period. However, tensions began to rise one year before the collapse of the USSR. Georgia was still a member of the USSR, but many predicted the Soviet Union's dissolution because of the many economic and political problems within it. Abkhazians and South Ossetians demanded to be separated from Georgia, as they wanted to remain within the USSR (Popescu 2010, 2). After the fall of the USSR, as in most of the post-Soviet countries, nationalist forces came into power in Georgia. The situation grew worse in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia as the first president of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, announced the creation of *"Georgia for*

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the Georgians." As the state of Georgia had never been monoethnic, this announcement was exceedingly painful for the Abkhazians and South Ossetians. Although Abkhazians have more in common with Georgians ethnically compared to South Ossetians, these tensions transformed into a war between Abkhazia and Georgia (Goltz 2009, 16). In the author's opinion, the aforementioned nationalistic claims became a straight excuse not only for regions craving excessively pretentious independence but also for Moscow to finally assist these regions, which ultimately led to their subordination to the Russian Federation.

THE ROLE OF WESTERN INTERNATIONAL ACTORS
IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

In the 1990s, when Georgia lost Abkhazia, the involvement of NATO, the EU, and the OSCE was negligible. Although these organizations officially recognized Georgia's independence as a state, they had fewer intentions to react to Georgia's occupation during this period. Nevertheless, the Georgian-Russian War of 2008 has become a major subject of discussion worldwide. The leaders of Western countries and alliances (e.g., the OSCE, NATO, and the EU) as well as the global intergovernmental organization (IGO) the UN began to condemn Russian aggression toward Georgia and search for a solution to the related conflicts. The August War, in particular, garnered enormous media coverage.

As Georgia joined the UN in 1992, the UN began to observe the presently studied conflicts. In August 1993, the UN decided to create the UNOMIG (United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia), which has attempted to achieve conflict resolution to the present day with the assistance of other UN agencies. Mediation and stabilization were the principal purposes of the UN. According to the UN's conclusions, the struggle was primarily between Georgia and Russia rather than between Georgians and Abkhazians or between Georgians and South Ossetians. Although the UN supports territorial integrity and return campaigns for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), it is not able to make any significant changes in terms of direct conflict resolution (Stewart 2003, 1–3).

The OSCE also initiated a special mission in Georgia in November 1992 to contribute to the peaceful resolution of the presently studied conflicts. Specifically, *"They urged the sides to take practical steps to improve the security situation. In particular, it submitted proposals to move forward the demilitarization of the zone of conflict and to promote co-operation between the police forces of the sides."* (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe n.d.). Furthermore, the OSCE supported the processes of monitoring on the ground and confidence-building between the sides.

Nevertheless, as in the case of the UN, the OSCE's missions were less than profitable for the current situation. These organizations criticized Russia for its ineffectiveness, claiming that Moscow ignored their actions in 2008. Specifically, Russia disregarded and disclaimed observers from both organizations. In particular, Russia blocked the OSCE mandate in the Tskhinvali region in winter 2008 and vetoed the UNOMIG in Abkhazia under the UN security council veto system in summer 2009 (Howcroft 2015). These organizations were therefore unable to conduct their activities for effective peacekeeping and peacebuilding in either of these regions.

NATO and the EU were less interested in Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts prior to the Georgian-Russian war. In fact, NATO was focused on security in Eastern Europe at that time and even refused to grant Georgia the MAP in 2008, which was crucial for the security of the state, ensuring the safety of its territory, further resulting in its accession to NATO. Only in September 2008 did the Trans-Atlantic Alliance establish the NATO-Georgia Commission (NGC) to conduct consultations regarding Georgia's political, economic, and defense reforms with the aim of ensuring its further accession to NATO and assisting the country in conflict recovery (North Atlantic Treaty Organization 2012). A NATO Liaison Office was created in 2010 to foster support for Georgia's transformation efforts. During the NATO summits in 2014, 2016, and 2018, additional action plans were introduced to strengthen Georgia's defense capabilities (North Atlantic Treaty Organization 2019). Despite all the measures taken by NATO to boost Georgia's further development and ensure its safety, and although it has been twelve years since Russian forces invaded Georgia, Georgia's membership in NATO is ambiguous and still raises many doubts.

Before the Georgian-Russian War, the EU believed that a partnership with Russia would be more important than a partnership with Georgia. Moreover, the EU's distance from the Caucasus region reduced its interest in Caucasian conflicts. The organization became more actively involved in these conflicts after the August War in 2008, but it still could not implement any significant changes due to access limitations (Howcroft 2015, 2–3). This occasion was instigated by restrictions coming from the Russian side, which limited the allowance of EU observers in the occupied territories. The second agreement signed by Nicolas Sarkozy and Dmitry Medvedev on September 8, 2008 obliged Russian forces to leave the Georgian territory within ten days and allow the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) to involve no fewer than 200 EU observers in the separatist regions. However, the Kremlin refused to allow these peaceful EU observers into these regions after the agreement was signed (Haas 2009, 1). Despite this denial, the EUMM began functioning on the Georgian territory outside the occupied regions on October 1, 2008, with the main goal of monitoring, normalizing, and stabilizing the situation while contributing to

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confidence-building between the disputing sides (European External Action Service 2012).

The aforementioned circumstances show that Western societies have tried to contribute to the process of conflict resolution in Abkhazia and South Ossetia but have been continually challenged by Russia. At the same time, not only external actors but also domestic actors have tried to neutralize the existing situation between Georgia and the occupied territories. It is important to highlight that Georgia was the first to stop the ceasefire during the August War. Moreover, a paper issued by the Government of Georgia in 2010 titled *"State Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement Through Cooperation"* affirmed that peaceful engagement is crucial in conflict resolution. Although the document itself does not apply to the final status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, it highlights that boosted diplomatic negotiations may regulate the presently studied conflicts (Coppieters 2012, 685). Nonetheless, the situation has become static over time, thus converting disputes into frozen conflicts.

Occasional clashes have continued to occur, and twenty percent of Georgia's territory is still officially considered to be occupied. Therefore, it can be said that none of the strategies applied to this situation by the aforementioned actors have been fully effective. The author believes that conflicts and wars can be avoided by moderate future relations with both Western and Russian governments. Direct negotiations with South Ossetia and Abkhazia seem impossible at this stage, as the powerful actor standing behind these territories will not easily concede them. One would expect that diplomatic negotiations between Russia and Western moderators could be an option. However, Russia has easily neglected international peacebuilding agreements by simply refusing to obey their general amendments. In general, this situation is very complicated, and a solution is nearly impossible to reach at present. We can only reflect that changes in the regime and governance of Russia could bring about positive consequences for Georgia and raise hope for direct negotiations with Abkhazians and South Ossetians in the future. However, how to maintain a balance between the disputing sides still is left as a question.

GEORGIA'S FOREIGN POLICY ORIENTATION &
RUSSIAN INTERESTS IN CONFLICTS

Western societies do not recognize the self-proclaimed independence of the Georgian regions and usually accuse Moscow of escalating domestic conflicts in the post-Soviet region (Markedonov 2019). The Kremlin's motives for involvement in Georgia's protracted conflicts go beyond the protection of oppressed national minorities in

Georgia. Rather, they are rooted in Russia's aspiration to return to its old status as a hegemon in the former Soviet territories. According to the theory of hegemonic stability described by Robert Keohane and Stephen Krasner, a state must have three important characteristics to be considered a hegemon: *"The capability to enforce the rules of the system, the will to do so and a commitment to a system which is perceived as mutually beneficial to the major states"* (Griffiths 2011, 33). In other words, a hegemon is a state that owns a political power, ensured by a strong economy and military force. Its nation must be considered as a superior, and it must have the will to establish a hegemonic regime and enforce the rules within it. Authoritarian states like Russia believe that their status depends upon whether they are leaders in their regions (Neumann and Carvalho 2014, 12).

During the Soviet period, Russia maintained dominance over other member states of the USSR. Political, economic, and social issues were asserted and regulated from Moscow. However, Moscow's role in the international arena radically changed after the dissolution of the USSR, as it lost its status as a superpower as well as its influence over the post-Soviet sphere. The fates of post-Soviet states followed different paths. For example, Russia lost its influence over the Baltic States, which joined NATO and the EU in the early 2000s (Sirbiladze 2015). Georgian-Russian relations can be considered a typical example of conflict between a great power and a small state located in the same region.

According to Russian military doctrine, there is a need to advance Russia's conventional forces to effectively deploy them to the areas of conflict on its periphery, thus preventing other states from strengthening their positions in the region (Sokolsky & Charlick-Paley, 1993– 2003). This tactic goes back to the 19th century, as Georgia was once a vassal country of Tsarist Russia. Later, Georgia fully lost its independence and became a part of Russia. After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Georgia was unable to begin the process of development as an independent state, as it was difficult for the state to adopt freedom after two centuries of obedience. Moreover, Georgia's location made the state more accessible to Moscow, as it was further away from Europe compared to, for example, the Baltic States.

In the opinion of the author, real shifts toward liberal democracy and Western values began in Georgia in 2003. Georgia is still pursuing foreign policy that will help it to achieve economic and military protection through Western alliances. Russia, which aims to return to its former status as a hegemon, has successfully used the ethnopolitical conflicts in Georgia to achieve its own foreign policy goals. In the 2008 August War, Russia tried to display its power by making Georgia change its main foreign policy goals of transformation, halt its adaptation of Western policies, and thus,

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prevent the country's integration into Western alliances (Wivel 2016, 6–8). In 2012, Putin officially confirmed with the media that Russian troops were invading Georgia, pursuant to a plan that Moscow had prepared in advance. "*The General Staff of the Armed Forces prepared the plan of military action against Georgia at the end of 2006, and I authorized it in 2007,*" he claimed during a press meeting (Felgenhauer 2012). This was the military action plan that would deter NATO from granting Georgia the MAP and thus reduce the Western presence in the post-Soviet region. Putin's Russia was not satisfied with Georgia's aspirations to join NATO and the EU in the early 2000s. Therefore, the Kremlin formulated strategies to prevent NATO's expansion into the region, considering it an existential threat. Moreover, neighboring states' close links with the EU contradict Russia's interest in reinstating its status as a regional hegemon. Therefore, it is in Moscow's interest to keep the presently studied ethnopolitical conflicts alive, as their escalation prevents Georgia's accession to NATO and the EU.

Furthermore, Russia is not satisfied with the emergence of the United States (US) hegemony. The US media and authorities mainly blame Moscow for the occupation of Georgian territories and admit that Georgia was a victim of the Kremlin's aggressive foreign policy (Bayulgen and Arbatli 2013, 514–515). Russia sees the US as an ideologically powerful opponent, even in the post-Soviet sphere. Therefore, it is apparent that Russia wishes to hamper Georgia's aspirations of attaining a US partnership in order to prevent its accession to Western institutions (Sirbiladze 2015).

Overall, Russia's military involvement in these disputes appears to be an effective way of reestablishing its hegemony in the region and keeping Georgia away from Western partnerships. Moscow finds the existing situation beneficial, as territorial disputes and problems with territorial integrity slow the entire process of Georgia's integration into the West. Furthermore, Russia has the opportunity to place the Abkhazian and South Ossetian populations under its sphere of influence.

CONCLUSION

To sum up this paper, the author will review the most important facts and findings regarding the protracted conflicts in Georgia, Western involvement in the peaceful resolution of these conflicts, and Georgian-Russian relations. Currently, twenty percent of Georgia's territory is internationally considered to be occupied by Russia. In order to escalate the ethnic disputes in Georgia, Russia deployed troops to Georgian regions, in which they have stayed and served to the present day. Foreign observers have admitted that these conflicts are mainly linked to Georgian-Russian relations rather than Georgian-Abkhazian or Georgian-South Ossetian relations. Russia acts

according to its foreign policy intentions. The authoritative state aims to restore its status as a hegemon in the former USSR region and regain lost control over post-Soviet countries. Despite Georgia's somewhat distant geopolitical location, it has actively strived to become a legitimate member of European and Euro-Atlantic structures since 2003. Georgia has set political, social, and economic foreign and domestic policies to facilitate cooperation with the US and with Europe. Furthermore, Georgia has adhered to Western principles and values. However, Georgia's shift toward the West contradicts Russian foreign policy goals. Therefore, Russia tries to manipulate Georgian domestic ethnic conflicts to place Georgia under its sphere of influence once again.

Without Western involvement, the resolution of Abkhazian and South Ossetian disputes appears to be unachievable for Georgia. However, due to restrictions set by Russia in the occupied regions, there is little the West can do to achieve conflict settlement. The UN and the OSCE were unable to avoid the Georgian-Russian War in 2008, and later, Russia blocked these organizations from observing the situation in the occupied territories. Prior to 2008, NATO and the EU expressed little interest in these disputes. At that time, NATO was busy with the security of Eastern European countries and thus did not grant Georgia the MAP. Furthermore, the EU maintained a partnership with Russia. However, after the war transpired, EU observers were restricted from entering Abkhazia and South Ossetia. By limiting the activities of Georgia and other third parties, Russia prevents them from establishing a direct dialogue with the Abkhazian and South Ossetian populations. Therefore, smart diplomatic actions are expected from Georgia to maintain its sovereignty and later recover its territorial integrity. However, the author believes that nothing significant can be done at this stage while the Russian propaganda apparatus is active and Kremlin-controlled authorities are in charge of the protracted regions. If changes occur in the political regime and political party of Russia, Georgia may try to negotiate with opposite sides in the conflict and reach a consensus on its territories with the aid of international mediators. In the absence of such changes, Georgia can only maintain balance with the West and with Russia to achieve its main foreign policy goals and avoid conflict escalations in the future.

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HOVSEP BABAYAN

RUSSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARD MILITARY AND POLITICAL ASPECTS OF THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT

Russia's role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remains a topic of academic debates. In general, two main prevailing discourses are present in the literature on this issue. First claims that Russia has a negative role and seeks to keep the conflict in the frozen state in order to use it as a leverage for its regional policy and in bilateral relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan. According to the second body of literature, Russia's role in this conflict is positive and Russia is interested in the settlement. However, it does not possess such capabilities to affect the course of the conflict. This paper aims to contribute to the second literature arguing that Russia has not been opposed to the settlement and sought the peaceful change of status quo in the conflict. The paper analysis Russian foreign policy toward military and political aspects of the conflict since 1991.

INTRODUCTION *

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remains among the major disputes in the post-Soviet area. Despite having begun with peaceful protests in 1988, this conflict eventually evolved into a bloody war. Since the 1994 ceasefire, the conflict has become an important determinant of the security of the South Caucasus. Peace negotiations, which started in 1992, have not yet shown any considerable results. Currently, the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group Co-Chairmanship – which consists of Russia, the United States (US), and France – has a mediation mandate to conduct peace negotiations among the conflicting parties in order to settle the conflict and ensure lasting peace in the region. Among the co-chairs, Russia has remained "more equal than others" due to its geographic proximity, its historical presence in the region, its leverage on the conflicting parties, and so on. For these reasons, Russia has been involved in the mediation process from the outset of the conflict, and the most significant outcome of the negotiations – the ceasefire agreement in 1994 – was materialized as a result of Russia's mediation efforts.

*   This paper was written before the war erupted on September 27, 2020.

Throughout past decades, Russia's role in the conflict has sparked many debates among scholars and experts. Does Russia have a positive or negative role in terms of the settlement of the conflict? Is it beneficial for Russia to support the maintenance of the status quo or to facilitate change? These questions have been addressed from various perspectives. One body of literature on this issue claims that the South Caucasus has geopolitical importance for great powers and that Russia thus approaches the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as an instrument to pursue its strategic interests in the region. Therefore, Russia has no interest in the peace settlement, as the status quo allows it to exercise its leverages on Armenia and Azerbaijan, sell weapons to them, and keep their integration into the West under control (Arakelyan 2019; Baev 2017; Blank 2014; Coyle 2018; Deriglazova and Minasyan 2011; Kogan 2013; Kuchins and Mankoff 2016; Souleimanov, Abrahamyan, and Aliyev 2018). Another account of Russian foreign policy toward the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict proposes that Russia is interested in the peace settlement but that its decisive role is exaggerated. Russia is bound by bilateral relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan, which limit its capabilities to impose its will on the conflicting parties (Abushov 2019; Broers 2016; Galstyan 2018; Markedonov 2013; Nygren 2010; Waal, Merry, and Markedonov 2012).

This paper aims to make a contribution to the second body of literature, arguing that Russia has not opposed the peace settlement and has constantly rejected prospects of war, thus indirectly creating a positive incentive for peace negotiations. My study of Russia's foreign policy toward the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict included the period of 1991 – 1992, when the Soviet Union (USSR) collapsed and the independent Russian Federation emerged. In particular, I focused on Russian policy toward two aspects of the conflict: the military aspect and the political aspect. The military aspect includes the Karabakh War (1991 – 1994) and the April War (2016). The political aspect consists of the peace negotiation process (1992 – present), especially the issue of changes in the status quo, which has remained a central issue in academic debates.[1]

EVERYTHING BUT WAR

The military phase of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict included the war in 1992 – 1994. After the 1994 ceasefire, a major outbreak of hostilities occurred in April 2016. Furthermore, military clashes along the Nagorno-Karabakh contact line have occurred in the pre-2016 period since the 2010s. It is challenging to define Russian foreign policy in Nagorno-Karabakh during this period of war. One reason for this difficulty is the absence of a Russian centralized state in the first years of the 1990s. Although the Russian President had a special representative in the conflict – Vladimir Kazimirov,

1   The status quo, in this context, refers to the existing matter of affairs after the 1994 ceasefire, including the territory under Nagorno-Karabakh control and its political status.

who also acted in accordance with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – there is evidence that the coordination of actions between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense suffered considerably (Kazimirov 2014). Moreover, the lack of a strict hierarchy within these two bodies sometimes allowed the conflicting sides to reach separate agreements with the Russian middle-level state and Russian military officials regarding arms sales and diplomatic activities (Interview with an Armenian Expert 2020). Another reason for this difficulty is the absence of a formulated foreign policy not only in Nagorno-Karabakh but also in the general South Caucasian region. After gaining independence, Russian foreign policy was focused primarily on relations with the West, and the post-Soviet space was not afforded proper attention. Furthermore, the challenges of state-building and transformation caused the Russian elite to concentrate its efforts on domestic issues.

Even under these circumstances, Russia was active during the war, as demonstrated by its mediation efforts and bilateral and multilateral activities. The very existence of a special representative in the conflict proves that the importance of this conflict was recognized by the Russian political elite. Throughout the war, the primary purpose of Russia was to reach a long-lasting ceasefire, which it eventually succeeded in doing in 1994. Before the ceasefire, Russia was engaged in the first attempt at mediation in 1991, when Russian President Boris Yeltsin visited Nagorno-Karabakh with Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev. In 1992, when the Conference of Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) undertook the mediation mission, Russia continued its efforts both in the auspices of the CSCE and separately. At the same time, Moscow continued to maintain its relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan, which were already independent.

It is difficult to determine whether Russia supported any particular side during the war, particularly in terms of military support. These issues are complex due to the distribution of Soviet-era military bases in the conflicting territories, the aforementioned weakness of the state and lack of control over military units, and separate arm sales to Armenia and Azerbaijan. This paper will not delve into these details, which are the objects of other research. Rather, this paper will infer that both sides took advantage of Soviet (and later, Russian) arms in various ways and different periods. However, some pieces of evidence cast doubt on Russia's constructive role in the conflict, as Russian military personnel participated in military actions on both sides (Waal 2013). Given the Russian state's weakness and its lack of full control over its military units, these actions were probably not initiated directly from Moscow.

The claim that Russia sought to reach peace in Nagorno-Karabakh is grounded in the following evidence. After the collapse of the USSR, independent Russia underwent a

phase of state-building and searched for a new role in the new world order. To implement its most vital goals, Russia primarily needed to attain stability in domestic and foreign affairs. The war in the South Caucasus posed direct threats to Russia. First and foremost, the potential for spillover of the war into the Russian North Caucasus was fertile ground for separatist movements and extremism in the South of Russia. Second, the war created a new platform for Western countries to expand their presence in the region, which was perceived as a possible threat to Russia's influence in its neighborhood. The third reason was the threat to Russia's attempts to reintegrate the post-Soviet space, namely by the Commonwealth of Independent Countries (CIS). The conflict between the two member countries, Armenia and Azerbaijan, was not a positive basis for deepening relations between Moscow and post-Soviet states.

In 1994, Russia mediated the ceasefire agreement between Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. After the ceasefire, relative peace was established along the contact line of Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh as well as the Armenia-Azerbaijan state border. This state of affairs lasted up until the first years of the 2010s, with some disruptions. Then, military clashes began to escalate and reached a peak in April 2016, especially along the contact line. Russia – along with the remaining OSCE co-chairs, the US and France – actively exercised its role as a mediator during the pre-2016 escalation and the 2016 April War (Danielyan 2016). As in 1994, Moscow reached a ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan in April 2016 after four days of large-scale hostilities (Deutsche Welle 2016). After nearly twenty-five years, Russia's interest in stability and peace in the South Caucasus remained firm. Although the motives that worked in the 1990s were transformed to some extent, Russia remained committed to the peace process and the rejection of war. In the 2000s, Russia succeeded in building a centralized state power and, step by step, revived its status as a great power. In turn, the Russia-Georgian War re-established Russia's solid presence in the South Caucasus. Under these circumstances, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is the only major point with explosive potential. The tangible activation of Russian mediation during Dmitry Medvedev's presidency also speaks about a Russian positive stance toward war and peace.

An indirectly connected but important military aspect of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the context of this paper is the issue of Russian arms sales to Armenia and Azerbaijan after 1994. Russia and Armenia are strategic allies; Russia deployed its 102nd military base in Armenia and, alongside Armenian counterparts, continues to guard Armenia's state borders with Turkey and Iran. Currently, both Russia and Armenia are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). This means that Russia's arms sales to Armenia are completely suitable to the nature of bilateral

relations. In the case of Azerbaijan, Russia began the supply of arms relatively late. Since 2010, Russia has considerably increased the quantity of arms deliveries to Azerbaijan (Aliyev 2018; Reuters 2013). According to Russian officials, these deliveries are made for economic and political reasons. For one, Russia takes advantage of arms sales and approaches arms sales as usual business (Dmitry Medvedev's Interview With Rossiya TV Channel's Vesti v Subbotu 2016). Russia's political motivation for this is the maintenance of the military balance between Armenia and Azerbaijan (RIA Novosty 2015). Thus, in parallel with mediation, Russia supplied arms to both sides of the conflict. Nonetheless, it is difficult to determine whether this contributed to the likelihood of a new war, considering that it supports the balance of power between the two sides. It is also unclear whether the role of selling arms would not have been filled by other actors if Russia had rejected this role.

Russia's main strategy toward the military aspects of this conflict was based on the rejection of war and the maintenance of stability in the region. Although it is difficult to define Russian foreign policy in Nagorno-Karabakh during the war, Russia's primary goals were to ceasefire and establish peace, which it consistently sought through its mediation efforts. After the war, Russia continued to reject perspectives advocating the resumption of large-scale hostilities. Nevertheless, Russia could not deter the outbreak of the April War in 2016 or the preceding escalations. It is highly debatable whether Russia endorsed the Azerbaijani attack, but Russia's following acts of mediation showed that long-term hostilities are against its interests, even if it does not oppose or is unable to deter short-term hostilities.

RUSSIA AND THE STATUS QUO

The political aspect of the conflict consists of the negotiation process and the path toward conflict settlement. Following the ceasefire agreement in 1994, the international community began to concentrate its efforts on supporting the fragile peace and helping both sides to reach a political solution to the conflict. As mentioned above, Russia's initial goal to establish peace in Nagorno-Karabakh was achieved. Next, we will discuss Russia's foreign policy regarding the peace process in Nagorno-Karabakh. In this sense, the aforementioned debate over the Russian approach toward the negotiations and final settlement revolves around the dilemma of whether to maintain or change the status quo.[2] I do not pose this dilemma as one of settlement versus maintenance because the history of the negotiation process showed the difficulty, if not impossibility, of instantly reaching a conflict settlement. This is why, since the 2000s, negotiations and mediators' proposals have focused on defining

2   Here, change is assumed to be carried out by peace negotiations rather than war.

the basic principles of negotiations, extracting supposed mutual concessions, and then negotiating over the issues.

Russia's firm stance on the rejection of war automatically equated to support for the peace negotiation process. Meanwhile, negotiations per se are not the same as a settlement in terms of changing the status quo. Therefore, the basic political aspect examined herein is Russia's foreign policy toward the status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh. Throughout the entire period of post-war negotiations, Russia has demonstrated several priorities through its policy. First and foremost, Russia aimed to maintain its firm presence in the negotiation process due to its strategic interest in the region. Secondly, as a mediator, Russia tried to underline its privileged role as a regional power. Third, Russia's foreign policy was inseparable from bilateral relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Russia was the first to carry on the mediation process between the conflicting sides. After the collapse of the USSR, when the conflict had already transformed from a Soviet domestic issue into a broader issue, existing tensions between the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh and the authorities of Baku threatened to escalate into large, volatile hostilities that would shake regional stability. This led Yeltsin and Nazarbayev to undertake the first mediation mission in 1991, which resulted in the signing of the Zheleznovodsk Communiqué. Then, during the war, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense drew up many proposals regarding the ceasefire. In 1995, Russia became a co-chair country of the Minsk Group. Since then, Russia – alongside France and the US – has mediated between the conflicting sides. Throughout past decades, Russia drew up proposals for itself (Primakov's idea of the common state, the Kazan Document, and Lavrov's Plan) and on behalf of the OSCE Minsk Group (phased and package deals and the Madrid Principles). All these proposals supposed that the status quo should change to some extent, showing that Russia was not entirely opposed to change.

Arguments in the literature that Russia wishes to maintain the status quo have been based on the pattern of Russia's foreign policy regarding frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space (Cornell 2005; Coyle 2018). Therefore, the generalization of Russia's approach leads to the equation of conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Moldova, and Nagorno-Karabakh. In particular, it underlines the instrumentalization of conflicts by Russia to hold leverages on conflicting sides or on only one side, which can be used to establish or expand Russia's influence, which supposes the ambitions of a great power (or aspires to become one) and engagement in great power rivalry. Therefore, this approach is supported by a realist account of international relations. According to this approach, Russia's will to maintain its role as a regional power in the South

Caucasus has motivated it to use the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan as a tool for keeping both countries dependent upon Russia to different extents, especially with respect to arms sales and preventing them from attaining deep integration with the West (Kakachia, Meister, and Fricke 2018). This has also afforded Russia a privileged role as a co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group compared to France and the US. This account might have been true for some periods, especially the first decade of the 2000s. However, beginning with Medvedev's presidency, some changes have occurred in Russian foreign policy and have persisted to the present day.

Overall, Russia's approach to the status quo varied to some extent after 1994, affecting both domestic and foreign factors. During Yeltsin's presidency, the prevention of hostilities remained Russia's most significant goal, as the severe circumstances of Russia's first years still had an impact. Moreover, a war broke out in Chechnya in 1994. The economic situation was severe, and presidential elections increased the role of economic actors (oligarchs) in 1996, undermining the strength of central authorities. However, given the optimistic view concerning the likelihood of a conflict solution that was present in the first years of the post-war period, Russia considered such a solution to be a prerequisite for lasting peace in the region (News.am 2011).

Putin's first term was a period of relative passivity for Russia. This may have been due to the lessened importance of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict during this period, as the conflict zone did not see any significant escalations in the first decade of the 2000s. Even though the post-Soviet space was declared a strategic space, Putin did not draw up any new initiatives. Another reason for this passivity might have been Putin's lack of interest in the conflict (Waal 2014). However, Russia continued to participate in negotiations and support the activities of the OSCE Minsk Group.

In 2008, Dmitry Medvedev took the initiative in the mediation process. In the same year, the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan signed a declaration at Meyendorf Castle (Kremlin.ru 2008), which was the first document signed by the conflicting parties after 1994. In 2011, the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents met in the Russian city of Kazan. It is said that the agreement on the realization of the new little-modified Madrid Principles and elements had to be signed (Hakobyan 2010). However, the negotiations failed. After Kazan, in parallel with growing escalation on the contact line, the media and experts began to discuss the so-called Lavrov's Plan, which was allegedly proposed by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in 2014 or 2015 (Broers 2016).

The chronology of negotiations showed not only that Russia did not oppose changes in the status quo but also that Russia had developed initiatives specifically aimed at

changing the status quo (Lavrov 2013). The only exception to this was Russia's relative passivity during Putin's first two terms. However, the results of ongoing negotiations during this period (which ended with the formulation of the Madrid Principles) and the involvement of the Russian Foreign Minister in these processes excluded Russia from the role of disruptor.

Currently, the proposition that Russia opposes change for its own egoistic interests has lost its weight. In this sense, the predominant argument emphasizes Russia's utilization of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to keep Armenia and Azerbaijan under its control. This might have been true in the 1990s or the first years of the 2000s. However, current Russian-Armenian relations are at the highest integrational level. Azerbaijan still strives to avoid deepening its integration with Russia. However, Azerbaijan is much further from Western integration, and Russia does not have any concerns regarding its foreign policy shift.

Since the beginning of the 2010s, given its geopolitical interests and unwillingness to press the conflicting parties, Russia has sought to ensure lasting peace in the region and moderately diminish the parties' incentives to wage war while also leaving the conflict unresolved. The basis for this statement is that Russia currently has a solid undisputed presence in the South Caucasus, which has lent Russia increased confidence in the geopolitical rivalry. Accordingly, Russia is concerned with excluding future instabilities in the region and creating a more favorable ground for Russian-led economic and security integration. Since the 2010s, Russia has promoted a semi-solution that will change the existing status quo not by settling the conflict but by satisfying both sides to some extent and therefore guaranteeing peace in Nagorno-Karabakh.

CONCLUSION

Russia remains an active mediator in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This fact has sparked and will continue to spark various debates over whether Russia honestly wants to support the conflicting parties in reaching a peace agreement or whether it is reluctant to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as this would undermine Russia's strategic positions in the region. Unlike some existing discourse, which has attached a negative role to Moscow, the present examination showed that Russia rejected the possibility of large-scale hostilities and supported the move toward peaceful settlement to some extent. Russia's priorities in this region, despite having undergone transformations over the past thirty years, still remain firm and underlie Russia's foreign policy toward Nagorno-Karabakh. These priorities include maintaining stability in the region, ensuring Russia's presence in the negotiations,

and preserving Russia's relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan. Within this strategic scope, Russia would likely conduct mediation and even agree on any changes in the status quo.

In summation, Russia's foreign policy in Nagorno-Karabakh is an important factor worthy of consistent scholarly attention. However, the exaggerated and decisive role in the conflict that is sometimes attached to Moscow should be reconsidered.

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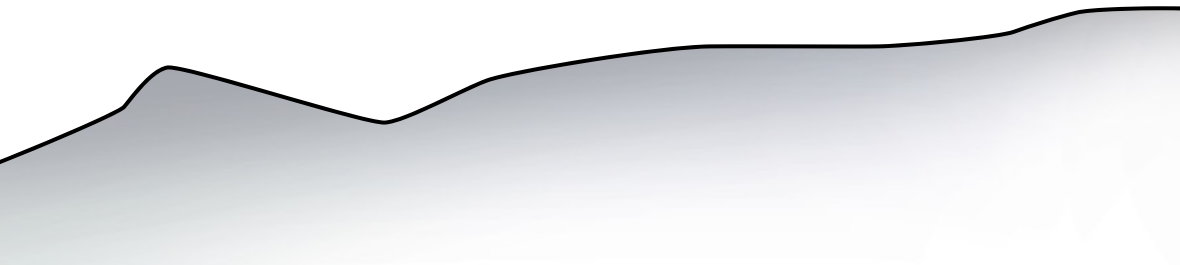Waal, Thomas de. 2013. Black Garden. New York, NY: New York University Press.

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