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National Identification and Regime Legitimation: The Societal Impact of War in Azerbaijan

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Abstract

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

Introduction

Since the start of armed conflict, it has had a profound impact on Azerbaijani society. Parts of the population continued to be physically affected long after the first ceasefire in 1994, during the subsequent state of ‘no-war-no-peace’. This notably included war veterans and those displaced from the occupied areas—many of whom came to live in a precarious and vulnerable state, deprived of political influence (Huseynov, 2005)—as well as persons remaining in the border regions where the situation continued to be unsafe due to regular ceasefire violations (Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2019). Moreover, as eloquently concluded by Valiyev (2012, 201), at a certain point, the conflict “stopped being a struggle for land” and “became an indivisible part of the political, cultural, and social development in both societies”. Azerbaijan’s development as an independent country has been overshadowed by the war’s continuous ubiquity, which has impacted society in two significant ways. First,

the liberation of Karabakh essentially became an integral part of the Azerbaijani national identity, which led to militarization as the dominant narrative. Second, the conflict contributed to the legitimation of the Aliyev family’s rule and, essentially, the country’s authoritarian path. These developments unfortunately give reason for a certain pessimism in regard to the possibilities for peace. However, Azerbaijan’s recent victory has at least provided the prospect of changing dynamics.

Culture of Conflict and the Militarization of Society

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

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

The restoration of territorial integrity has become an overarching vision shared by all political actors and society at large. This can be said to have shaped Azerbaijani post-Soviet national identity. In the words of Broers (2015, 558), “regaining jurisdiction over NK and the surrounding territories is a foundational moment of contemporary Azerbaijani identity, without which this identity—and Azerbaijani statehood—will remain incomplete”. Over time, the conflict has remained “a powerful consolidating force and an inexhaustible source for the preservation and development of conflict discourse” (Akhundov, 2020). One important outcome of this perseverance has been militarization, reflected not only in massive state investments in military capacity but also in societal rhetorical and ideological practices conveying a belief that resolving the conflict through peaceful means is impossible (Ditel, 2022; Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2019; Akhundov, 2020). Regular deaths along the line of contact have become something “that fires up the revanchist and patriotic sentiment and supports further militarist rhetoric and mobilization”, Akhundov (2020) notes. An increasing resignation, stemming from a lack of trust and belief in peacebuilding processes and a reality where the ‘others’ are consistently por-

trayed as a threat, irrevocably different, and less peaceful or willing to compromise, led militarization to be seen as the default option (Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2019). This means “that at least psychologically, Azerbaijan was long ready to begin a war” (Samadov, 2020b). The extent of patriotic mobilization and hardening of attitudes towards the ‘others’ during the so-called Four-Day War in 2016 seem to demonstrate that this was indeed the case, as underlined by the massive popular support for military action during the Second War in 2020, when the government, opposition, and rest of society were united by “the dominant narrative of a national duty to take back the country’s lost lands” (Samadov 2020b).

Increasing Legitimacy for Aliyev’s Nondemocratic Regime

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

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

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

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

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

Potential for Peace

Looking ahead, as well as backwards, the context of this rivalry does not appear particularly conducive to any peace and reconciliation process. Researchers have pointed to the identity needs of Armenian and Azerbaijani societies being neglected as a major shortcom-

ing in the official peace process. The online dimension of the 2020 war underlined the importance of this. As digital media platforms and social networks were used to verbally attack their respective enemy, the extreme polarization of these societies became strikingly visible (Media and disinformation, 2021). This antagonism, Krzysztan (2021) observes, "still exist[s] as a zero-sum game without the space for reconciliation and compromise", despite the outcome of the latest war. In the case of Azerbaijan, the war has "only deepened the antagonistic nature of Azerbaijani national identity" (Samadov, 2021). Although Azerbaijan is now "whole," as the IDPs (eventually, when deemed safe) will have the possibility to return 'home' to upgraded 'smart cities' (see Valiyev, 2022) built on recaptured land, the notion of 'us' vs. 'them' remains deeply rooted in its national self-image. In accordance with the 'culture of conflict', questioning militarization has been, and remains, taboo. Those who do this risk being branded a 'traitor' and despised by their fellow citizens (Baghdasarian/Yunusov, 2005; Musayev, 2005; Samadov, 2020b; RFE/RL 2022). Nevertheless, there are individuals publicly calling for peace, primarily younger grassroots civil society activists. Needless to say, these voices are rare, vulnerable, and severely marginalized.

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

About the Author

Dr Sofie Bedford is an associate professor in Political Science and an affiliated researcher at IRES Institute for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Uppsala University. In 2002 she worked for the International Rescue Committee in Imishli, Azerbaijan in a community building project focused on supporting the IDP communities.

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