

cultural diversity մշակութային

բազմազանություն мәdəniyyət müxtəlifliyi

კულტურული მრავალფეროვნება

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CONFLICT VOICES

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THIS PROJECT WAS CREATED BY ONNIK KRIKORIAN, A JOURNALIST, PHOTOJOURNALIST AND ONLINE MEDIA CONSULTANT FROM THE UNITED KINGDOM BASED IN YEREVAN, ARMENIA, FOR THE PAST 12 YEARS. IN ADDITION TO WRITING AND PHOTOGRAPHING FOR THE MAINSTREAM TRADITIONAL MEDIA, HE ALSO FIXES FOR THE BBC, AL JAZEERA ENGLISH, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC AND THE WALL STREET JOURNAL AMONG OTHERS,

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FRONT COVER PHOTO: ETHNIC ARMENIAN, TSOPI, GEORGIA © ONNIK KRIKORIAN 2011

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THOMAS DE WAAL

Introduction

Anyone who works with the conflicts of the Caucasus learns to live with contradiction. If you watch state media in Armenia or Azerbaijan or hear some politicians speak, you could believe that these two nations are implacable enemies on the verge of war. One Azerbaijani friend told me that nowadays whenever he hears the word “fascist” he expects to hear the word “Armenian” attached to it. In many ways the modern identities of independent Armenia and Azerbaijan and of the small statelet of Nagorny Karabakh are defined by rejection and hatred of the other.

Yet as soon as you probe deeper strange things start to happen and this picture begins to blur. A long conversation with an Azerbaijani about how terrible the Armenians are ends with the admission that his grandmother was actually...Armenian. A Karabakh Armenian talks about the crimes of the Azerbaijanis and

then casually lets slip that he had Azeri friends at school and still remembers a lot of the language.

Move outside the conflict zone and these hidden signs of compatibility come out into the open. In the territory of Georgia, Armenian and Azeri villagers live side by side. There is trade and even inter-marriage. Armenians and Azerbaijanis often prefer to do business with each other than with Georgians.

We hear far too little of what I call this “third narrative” of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, a narrative of peace. It spins the idea that the two peoples are capable of getting along fine, have lived together in the past and, if politicians are able to overcome differences on the Karabakh conflict, can live together in the future. International mediators are too timid to speak this

narrative or feel that it is not their business. The media in both countries suppresses it.

This is why I congratulate Onnik Krikorian for the work he has done over the past few years, both in print and in images, and which is published here. He has given a voice to these alternative points of view and given a vivid picture of the different and much more positive Armenian-Azerbaijani reality that still exists in ordinary people and in Georgia.

Look at these pictures and descriptions of villages such as Tekali and you see that the problem there is not ethnic incompatibility or historical injustice, but poverty — poverty that will have a much better chance of being fixed if the Karabakh conflict can be overcome and money can be diverted from buying expensive

weapons. It is a totally different and refreshing approach and he has done it pretty much by himself.

Send this collection to anyone who thinks they understand the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict and be pleasantly surprised by their reaction.

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ETHNIC ARMENIANS, TSOPI, GEORGIA © ONNIK KRIKORIAN 2009

ONNIK KRIKORIAN AND AYGUN JANMAMMADOVA

Culture That Unites Rather Than Divides

TBILISI, Georgia – An Azeri teahouse, and naturally Azerbaijani can be heard spoken inside. A dozen men, identical in appearance, sit at tables, chain smoking and drinking cups of çay (tea). “Salam,” we say, before approaching the waitress. The owners of another Azeri teahouse, ironically run by ethnic Armenians just around the corner, directed us here, saying that the waitress too is Armenian. She is, even though the teahouse is owned by an ethnic Azeri. Anyway, we take our seats at a table with the intention of once again exploring the reality of peaceful coexistence in at least one part of the South Caucasus.

Considered neutral ground by international organizations and local NGOs engaged in regional cooperation, communication and peace-building activities, the situation is, of course, very different than in Armenia and Azerbaijan proper. A recent survey by the Caucasus Resource Research Centers (CRRC), for example, found

that 70 percent of Armenians disapproved of forming friendships with Azerbaijanis. That figure is alarmingly high, but the situation is even worse in Azerbaijan. There, 97 percent of Azerbaijanis said they didn’t look favorably on friendship with Armenians.

True, thousands of ethnic Armenians, mainly the wives of Azerbaijanis, are believed to still live in Baku, the capital, but they do so with some difficulty, maintaining a low profile to avoid discrimination. The same is true to a lesser extent for significantly fewer Azeris in Yerevan, although their ethnic kin from Iran do indeed operate more openly in the Armenian capital. Of course, locals don’t view them with quite as much hostility as they might if they were from Azerbaijan. Indeed, even a festival of non-political contemporary films from Azerbaijan had to be canceled recently after strong local nationalist backlash.

In both cases, however, it's probably no wonder. Armenia and Azerbaijan fought a bloody war in the early 1990s over the disputed mainly Armenian-inhabited territory of Nagorno Karabakh. Over 25,000 were killed and a million on both sides were forced to flee their homes. Despite a tentative peace, the frontline remains tense, with dozens of young conscripts on both sides dying each year. Moreover, with the mutual massacre of civilian populations throughout history selectively taught in schools and kept alive by the local media, once could hardly expect that an environment for mutual understanding could exist.

Arpine Porsughyan, the co-author of a CRRC report on media bias in Armenia-Azerbaijan relations, notes the role the media plays, but also says that the general public is to blame too, especially as consumers are eager to digest such information. "Some argue that those with a strong interest in politics and access to various sources of information are subject to 'biased processing,'" she says, explaining that people tend to filter information based on already existing views even if they otherwise say they would prefer a more unbiased media.

In Georgia, however, the situation is very different. Free from the nationalist rhetoric of Armenian and Azerbaijani political forces, and isolated from the negative stereotypes and propaganda usually disseminated on an almost daily basis in the local press, ethnic Armenians and Azeris coexist quite well, and do so without regrets and by no means reluctantly. As in Moscow or elsewhere outside of the conflict zone, they naturally congregate together, recognizing a similarity in terms of culture, cuisine, and mentality. Back in the teahouse, examples sit before us at nearly every table.

At one, the conversation changes as Georgian television news cuts to footage of the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents meeting in Astrakhan, Russia, for yet another high-level meeting to finally resolve the conflict. "I used to take the similarities between our nations for granted, but this war made me appreciate how similar, if not the same, we all are," says Albert, an ethnic Armenian singer, as the conversation shifts to discussion of the news on the screen ahead. Away from politics, though, he sings mainly in Azerbaijani, especially those songs written by Sayat Nova, the 18th-century Armenian troubadour.

“It’s like when you fight with your brother or sister,” adds one of his closest friends sitting next to him. “They are your own flesh and blood, but still you hit them just for nothing. This is how it is with our nations too.”

That man is 74-year-old Ramiz, an ethnic Azeri musician who prefers to sing in Armenian. He even married an Armenian while — further completing the picture of mutual coexistence — Albert married an ethnic Azeri. “My Armenian friend is worth a thousand other friends,” says Ramiz as the teahouse starts to resonate with the sound of Armenian and Azerbaijani being spoken interchangeably. The war between two neighboring countries is a political, rather than an ethnic, one, they say, before the eyes of both of them start to shine when the conversation once again turns to Sayat Nova.

Like Sergei Paradjanov, whose last film before his death in 1990 was based on an Azeri love story and filmed in Azerbaijan despite the rising tensions, Sayat Nova was very much a cultural figure for the entire Caucasus and not restrained by national ideology or borders. The legendary bard wrote most of his songs in Azerbaijani, then the lingua franca of the region. Indeed, a statue

of Paradjanov can also be found nearby, as can a monument to Sayat Nova, although it’s a mainly ethnic Azeri area of Tbilisi, and soon the location of a new Azerbaijani Embassy overlooking Heydar Aliyev Park.

In fact, it marks the approach to St. Gevorg, a 13th-century church and seat of the head of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Georgia. Sayat Nova is also buried there, but it is unclear whether Azerbaijanis will be as welcome as Armenians appear to be in Tbilisi’s Azeri teahouses. As it turns out, they are very welcome indeed, and as the conversation switches to Russian, the eyes of the Armenian woman selling candles in the church light up when one of us, an Azerbaijani from Baku, identifies herself as such. Karine says that ethnic Azeris also visit the church and some even pray.

She also has many Azerbaijani friends, many of them with Armenian spouses, and dreams of visiting her friends in Baku.

It might not be the capital of Azerbaijan, but its namesake – a restaurant just five minutes away on foot – is yet another example of peaceful coexistence in the city. Save for the substitution of pork for lamb in some dishes, the menu is nearly identical to that found



AZERI NOVruz, MARNEULI, GEORGIA © ONNIK KRIKORIAN 2011

in almost any restaurant serving national cuisine in Armenia. It's no wonder then that both ethnic groups dine here. The manager, an ethnic Azeri, says there are no problems between the two, although she does admit that not every visitor from Azerbaijan proper is happy with the situation.

Nevertheless, Tbilisi's Azeri restaurant welcomes customers, Armenian and Azeri alike.

Yelena Osipova, a student from Armenia now studying in the U.S., knows this only too well. "As a freshman at college in a country far away, I happened to attend an Azeri cultural evening," she remembers, admitting that she was unable to differentiate the tradition of music, national dress and cuisine from her own. "At a certain point, I became confused since it was very difficult to consider that it wasn't an Armenian cultural evening. The main reminder of that was the Azerbaijani flag hanging on the wall."

The situation is even more acute for those who lived in the other's country before being forced out as the conflict erupted around them. Zamira Abbasova, for example, is a 26-year-old ethnic Azeri from Armenia who recently returned to Baku from the U.S. where

she studied Conflict Transformation and Resolution at the School for International Training.

"Meeting Armenians for the first time shook my feelings and emotions up and down," she says, even though she was only four when she left Armenia and has only vague memories of her home situated close to Lake Sevan. "I made lots of friends, talked openly to them, and heard their perspective."

Since then, every time I see an Armenian, be it in the street or any other social gathering, I feel some kind of invisible tie to them and to the land in which I was born, ignoring the fact that 'they should be my enemies.' That is the power of 'good' over 'evil' which we have ignored for too long."

Although not representative of the majority in either country, another alternative voice is Marine Ejuryan, a 21-year-old student activist who has participated in many cross-border projects with her counterparts from Azerbaijan and Turkey. She too can cite other examples of shared culture and friendship, especially that which has been expressed in literature. "In 'Bayram Ali,'" she says, "the Armenian poet and writer Avetik Isahakyan wrote about

Armenians and Azerbaijanis living together and fighting against a ‘common enemy who took their territories and water.’”

Ejuryan also refers to a story by Aksel Bakunts about the friendship between an Armenian and an Azerbaijani during inter-ethnic clashes at the beginning of 20th century. She can also cite examples in literature from the other side too. “Nizami and Khagani, two famous Azerbaijani poets, speak with praise about Armenians in their works, and these are only a few examples, telling of a time when there was friendship and cooperation between our nations. Even today we still live side by side with each other elsewhere in the world.”

Scary Azeri, a prolific and well-known blogger from Azerbaijan now based in England who can count many Armenians among her loyal readers, agrees. “In Moscow, Bakuvians hang out together, and when I say Bakuvians, I don’t mean only Azeris,” she says. “As in Tbilisi, on neutral territory, many Azeris and Armenians happily co-exist. They share toasts, laughs and happy memories. They date, make friendships and forget the problems they left behind. Every war eventually comes to an end and I sincerely hope there is going to be peace in the region sometime in my lifetime.”

True, the path to peace remains as elusive as ever, especially with concerns regarding the possibility of renewed fighting increasing since the August 2008 war between Georgia and Russia. Fueled by its revenue from oil, Azerbaijan’s military expenditure looks set to hit \$3.1 billion next year, more than the entire national budget of Armenia. However, despite Armenia’s exclusion from regional communication projects which arguably hinder its future development, the majority of Armenians in Armenia and Karabakh are reportedly more content with preserving the status quo.

Recent town hall meetings conducted by the Yerevan-based International Center for Human Development (ICHD) indicate that, at a little over 50 percent of respondents, this is currently the most popular position, with only about 17 percent of Armenians supporting the return of territory surrounding Karabakh in return for its independence. In Azerbaijan, only 0.3 percent of Azerbaijanis were willing to accept such a development although 32.9 percent were prepared to consider Karabakh determining its own status sometime in the future after the return of other territory currently under Armenian control.

In such a situation, is there any hope? First, says regional analyst and London School of Economics PhD candidate Kevork Oskanian, attitudes in Armenia and Azerbaijan towards each other have to change. “There is no doubt that most people in both Armenia and Azerbaijan desire peace,” he says, “but the difficulty in coming to an agreement is due to the limitations in any ability to shape their social environment as they please. This ability is limited as it collides with the values that govern appropriate behavior within a given society as it contradicts powerful interests in the status quo.”

“Some citizens and politicians might want to change the situation, but soon enough they would be counteracted by the nationalist norms that still govern their societies. Ordinary citizens have it in their power to help fashion an alternative narrative that emphasizes the many commonalities within the different ethnic groups of a once culturally unified region,” he continues, “but perhaps the greatest key to becoming an agent, rather than a victim, of history, lies in that elusive thing called ‘visionary statesmanship.’ And that is in very short supply on all sides in this long-suffering region.”

Ejuryan is more direct when it comes to promoting dialogue. “Many years of war, enmity, and negative propaganda have resulted in the current perceptions of the ‘other’ in our societies,” she says. “Without a doubt it is now time to break the stereotypes Armenians and Azerbaijanis have. The idea that Armenians and Azerbaijanis are ‘ethnically incompatible’ is certainly nothing but pure fallacy. We used to live together in peace and still do on neutral ground, which means that it’s possible in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Karabakh too. What we need to do first is to end the propaganda wars on both sides.”

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ARMENIAN CHURCH, TBILISI, GEORGIA © ONNIK KRIKORIAN 2011

READER IN BAKU

A majority of minorities and a kaleidoscope of culture

*“Why should we be enemies at the whim of some politician?
You cannot separate a nail from your finger without bleeding
and causing yourself severe pain. We cannot do without the
other. This is how we were and how we will always be.”*

— Nazkhanim, Khodjourni, Georgia

A rainy Easter Monday morning in Tbilisi, Georgia, and the weather has already managed to disrupt sightseeing plans while I instead concentrate on jumping over the puddles. But, coming from a predominantly Moslem country, I could not help but satisfy my curiosity once again when I find myself in front of an Armenian Church. A dim and almost medieval building, a priest stands in a black robe while women whisper prayers as candles burn intensely before them. Instinctively following the crowd, I light a candle too, ushering in a whole new experience among a

congregation that reminds me of Azeris simply practicing another religion.

A few days later, however, another journey offers additional insight into coexistence among the two largest ethnic minorities in Georgia. Heading to Marneuli, mainly inhabited by ethnic Azeris with an Armenian minority, I had already heard much about this hybrid town from others contributing to this project and was eager to witness this symbiosis in reality. A boy named Luka with the face of an angel was sitting next to us, identifying sights through the window in Georgian and Azerbaijani. Born to a Georgian father and Azeri mother, Luka was travelling to Marneuli, hometown of his maternal family. That was already a good sign.

Arriving in Marneuli, it felt like Azerbaijan. The faces, colors, sounds and smells from the local market were all so similar albeit

with some significant differences not to be found back home. An Azeri man was playing Azerbaijani music from a stall which also sold Armenian CDs while an Armenian woman spoke to a customer in my mother tongue albeit with a slight, pleasant accent. Ruzanna, a 60-year-old ethnic Armenian has been working in this market for 30 years, selling spices and dry fruits used in Azerbaijani cuisine. Having lived through so many days of Armenian-Azeri coexistence, questions about this situation were met with puzzlement and confusion.

For her, the fact that Armenians and Azeris lived and worked together was not extraordinary. “There are a handful of villages here where this harmony exists,” she said smiling. Unlike Ruzanna, however, the majority of sellers at the market were Azeri, as you might expect in a town where they form the majority, and many eagerly posed for the camera.

Our main destination, though, was to visit two Armenian-Azeri co-inhabited villages, and first up was Tsopi, a rural settlement where ethnic Azeris form the overwhelming majority, but live side by side with ethnic Armenians. For them the war [over Nagorno Karabakh] never really happened. It was an artificial, imposed

game and a conflict they could not grasp. Continuing to live together on friendly terms, they share the same land, similar traditions and a rich culture that is almost a mirror reflection of the other. Aside from two mischievous ethnic Azeri boys who followed us around the village, Tsopi was remarkably relaxed and calm.

On learning that one of us was from Azerbaijan, Olya, a 62-year-old ethnic Armenian, invites us in for coffee. Despite the poverty and hardship the family is going through, delicious homemade sweets including walnut jam is laid out on the table. Her neighbor, a half-Greek half-Armenian woman named Maria shared the magic recipe. Considered the sole preserve of Azerbaijani cuisine, and likely considered the same way in Armenia, the walnut jam was instead a regional specialty as you might expect given the way both cultures overlap or have influenced each other.

Olya, however, did not join in. She couldn’t. Suffering from diabetes, her meager pension is not sufficient to purchase her medication. She continues to hope that the Georgian government will one day turn its attention to people like her.



ROUZANA, MARNEULI, GEORGIA © ONNIK KRIKORIAN 2011



ETHNIC AZERI TRADER, MARNEULI, GEORGIA © ONNIK KRIKORIAN 2011

The lack of adequate health care is not the only problem in the village. The same is true for education and there have been no employment opportunities since the closure of the local quarry when the former Soviet Union collapsed. Depending on their ethnicity, young men have to instead leave to work abroad in neighboring countries such as Armenia, Azerbaijan or Russia. Like elsewhere in the region, girls generally marry at an early age and most do not bother to pursue a career in what still remains a patriarchal society. Dinar, a 15-year-old ethnic Azeri, however, was different.

A bright teen hoping to study journalism at university, Dinar has many Armenian friends at the local school. Armenians and Azeris are taught in separate classes in their own languages, though, and Georgian proficiency remains a problem. Higher education in some subjects is available in Azerbaijani in Marneuli, but universities in Tbilisi effectively remain off-limits as a result. Meanwhile, the school in Tsopi is seriously dilapidated and in desperate need of repair.

Next stop is Khodjourni, a village the reverse of Tsopi. Here the overwhelming majority of the 350 homes are ethnic Armenian

with a small number of ethnic Azeris living among them. Two of them sit on a bench on the approach to the village while another reclines against a green shack. All three speak Armenian as well as Azerbaijani and an elderly Azeri woman appears from her house to offer her village's foreign guests freshly baked bread. About 20 meters away, a group of young men sit idly on benches, while others kill time by playing cards. They greet us in Armenian although at least two are ethnic Azeris and another half-Greek.

Again, like Tsopi, unemployment has blighted the village. "Work?" one responds jokingly. "That's what we're doing sitting here," he says, explaining that Russia is not an option for finding temporary work as it is in Armenia proper because everyone has Georgian passports.

Unlike Tsopi, however, there are no women outdoors. One Armenian says that the situation is natural given that in his opinion women should spend most, if not all, of their time at home looking after children or doing the housework. What else would they be interested in, he rhetorically asks. Nevertheless, on a nearby street another ethnic Azeri woman invites us in. Nazkhanim, 66 years old, has fond memories of her teenage years

spent at the house of an Armenian family who worked with her parents.

In later life, an Armenian doctor was the only one trusted enough to circumcise her son while this year Armenian friends joined her for the Novruz celebrations while they in turn brought special holiday bread to her for Easter. “Why should we be enemies at the whim of some politician?” she asks. “You cannot separate a nail from your finger without bleeding and causing yourself severe pain. We cannot do without the other. This is how we were and how we will always be.”



ETHNIC AZERI TRADERS, MARNEULI, GEORGIA © ONNIK KRIKORIAN 2011



ETHNIC AZERIS, TSOPI, GEORGIA © ONNIK KRIKORIAN 2011

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Marneuli, Tsopi and Khodjourni



ETHNIC AZERIS, TSOPI, GEORGIA
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ETHNIC ARMENIAN, TSOPI, GEORGIA
© ONNIK KRIKORIAN 2009

*“Here life is very difficult ,
but we live here quietly, calmly...”*

Armenian, 50 years old, Tsopi

Positive Examples of Coexistence from the History of Peoples and States of the South
Caucasus, Analytical Centre on Globalisation and Regional Cooperation, Yerevan 2009



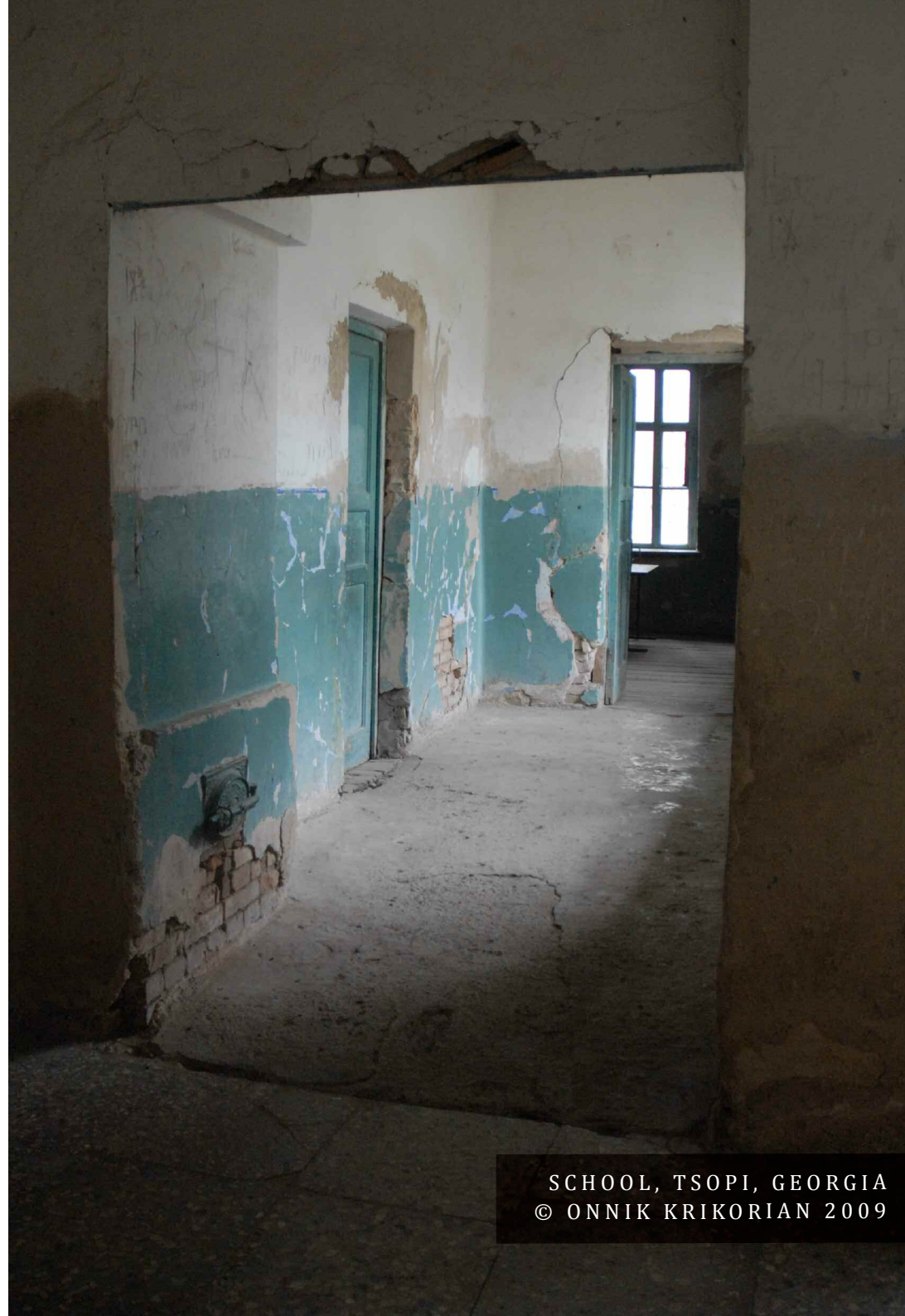
ETHNIC AZERI, KHODJOURNI, GEORGIA © ONNIK KRIKORIAN 2011



SCHOOL, TSOPI, GEORGIA © ONNIK KRIKORIAN 2009

*"Sometimes we do our homework
together and then go for a walk
in the forest."*

Gunel Orujova, 14 years old, Tsopi





SCHOOL, TSOPI, GEORGIA
© ONNIK KRIKORIAN 2011

*"All these problems like Karabakh come
from politics. How can I say to my
neighbor you did this? As a neighbor he
has not done anything bad to me."*

Faiq Ahmadow, 34 years old, Tsopi





“I have no chance to work here. I have to support my family: my wife, my two children and my old father and mother. I am going to Baku [soon]. I hope to find work there.”

Faiq Ahmadow, 34 years old, Tsopi

“My friend is from [Armenia]. She recently came here and asked to lend her 300 \$. Of course, I gave her the money. She will return it. What else will she do?”

Azeri, 55 years old, Sadakhlo



ETHNIC AZERI TRADER, MARNEULI, GEORGIA © ONNIK KRIKORIAN 2011

ONNIK KRIKORIAN

As tensions mount, plans for an Armenian-Azerbaijan Peace Building Center in Georgia

The project of an Armenian theatrical director and actor turned peace activist to open a peace center in Tekalo, a small village in Georgia a few kilometers from the border with Armenia and Azerbaijan. "Communication is not betrayal, it is a natural human need."

This year will mark the 17th anniversary of the 1994 ceasefire agreement which put the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed territory of Nagorno Karabakh on hold. Since then, attempts to find a lasting peaceful solution to the conflict, which claimed around 25,000 lives and forced a million to flee their homes, have faltered. Indeed, following less than conciliatory speeches from the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents at the OSCE Summit in Kazakhstan late last year, and with Baku's military spending set to hit \$3.1 billion in 2011, analysts and

international observers are now increasingly talking about the need for conflict prevention rather than resolution.

The latest to ring the alarm bell was the International Crisis Group (ICG) in a report on the Nagorno Karabakh conflict released on February 8.

"An arms race, escalating front-line clashes, vitriolic war rhetoric and a virtual breakdown in peace talks are increasing the chance Armenia and Azerbaijan will go back to war over Nagorno-Karabakh," the report read. "[...] Increased military capabilities on both sides would make a new armed conflict in the South Caucasus far more deadly than the 1992-1994 one that ended with a shaky truce. Regional Alliances could pull in Russia, Turkey and Iran. [...] To start reversing this dangerous downward trend, the opposing sides should sign a document on basic principles for

resolving the conflict peacefully and undertake confidence-building steps to reduce tensions and avert a resumption of fighting.”

Naturally, the response to the report from both Yerevan and Baku wasn't favorable to say the least, with both accusing the ICG of bias in favor of the other. Local journalists and even civil society were among those critics, even if such groups could have been expected to at least objectively reflect growing fears that another war in the South Caucasus is increasingly looking likely. Others, frustrated by the lack of any real progress since the 1994 armistice, were not surprised, however. One of them was Georgi Vanyan, the 47-year old Armenian theatrical director and actor turned peace activist behind the South Caucasus Integration: Alternative Start movement.

“Many involved in peace-making initiatives don't have any interest in seeing the conflict resolved because they have a certain ‘visibility,’” he says. “The mass media is part of this too.”

Vanyan is no stranger to controversy himself, of course. At the end of 2007, for example, his organization held a Days of Azerbaijan at a school in the Yerevan. Funded by the British Embassy, it was an unprecedented move in a country locked in a bitter stalemate with an estranged neighbor. The event was momentarily disrupted by a small group of nationalist bloggers. “Holding such events are a way of making money for Vanyan,” one of those government supporters claimed. Especially known for his campaigns against Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, as well as even women's groups in Armenia, the critic went even further. “Vanyan-like elements should be taken out of circulation,”

Comments such as those, including less than veiled threats against Vanyan's life, are nothing new and were most recently voiced last November during his attempt to stage a festival of non-political Azerbaijani films in Yerevan. The event was postponed after hate messages were spread on Facebook, and the owners of venues pressurized into pulling their support. The local media was also part of the campaign, effectively branding Vanyan a ‘traitor.’ Even the fact of being regularly interviewed by the Azerbaijani media was used against him, although he isn't the only Armenian civil



society activist to speak to journalists from across the contact line. Nevertheless, he is the only one to be targeted.

What makes Vanyan different, perhaps, is that rather than be content with holding his activities at holiday resorts or five star hotels on neutral ground in third countries such as Georgia, Vanyan targets the general population. “The approach of keeping everything closed carries with it some very grave consequences,” he explains. “Armenians and Azerbaijanis are human beings first of all and have a basic desire for peace. What we need to do is to make this basic desire public and to initiate some kind of open discussion. Instead of organizing seminars, we talk to people in the markets, or in local cultural centers. It’s why we hope events such as our film festival will start some kind of discussion in society.”

A peace center in Tekali, Georgia

His latest project, supported by a small group of other civil society activists, cultural figures and journalists in Azerbaijan and Georgia, centers around Tekali, a small village Georgia, and is arguably the most interesting. Situated just 29 kilometers from the border between Georgia and Armenia, it is also 10 kilometers

from the border with Azerbaijan. Inhabited by ethnic Azeris, the largest minority in Georgia, there are also pockets of ethnic Armenians living in nearby co-inhabited villages and towns. However, there's just one problem. Tekali and the larger nearby village of Kachagan, as well as the Marneuli region in general, are impoverished and lack the necessary infrastructure to host such initiatives.

Vanyan quickly counters such criticism by arguing that it is precisely for this reason that such a project is all the more important. Not only would it be beneficial for the local ethnic Azeri population in Georgia, but also co-inhabited villages populated alongside ethnic Armenians and Georgians. Such examples of peaceful co-existence in the South Caucasus are rarely if ever mentioned let alone supported. Moreover, not only would Tekali be quicker and cheaper to travel to, with cell phone signals from all three South Caucasus countries in range, but it would also create much needed employment. No wonder, then, that local [ethnic Azeri] officials, were positively inclined towards the idea.

Today, ethnic Azeris and Armenians in the area have no choice but to seek work in Armenia, Azerbaijan or Russia.

“The establishment of a peacemaking center in Tekali will be the first step for the creation of a free communication zone for citizens of the three countries,” a press release declared. “This proposal is based on our firm belief that Armenian-Azeri dialogue may take place only under the conditions of the revival of the South Caucasus region, of regional thinking, and regional integration and safety. Georgia is a part of this region, its central player,” it continued, while also calling for other civil society organizations to relocate their cross-border activities there. As part of the project, the local infrastructure including schools, cultural centers and roads, for example, would be renovated.

Vanyan also argues that, in the interest of countering bias in the media, Tekali could also be used as a base for a radio station which can broadcast to regions in all three countries. Although new and social media also offers the potential for cross-border communication, Internet use remains low, and is certainly costly and thus inaccessible to many rural communities. Moreover, such an idea of a “peace zone” has been implemented in other conflict-prone areas worldwide and promoted at international conferences, including by Armenian, Azerbaijan and Georgian

students at a symposium held at the George Mason University in Washington D.C. in February 2009.

For the Georgian government, such a project could also greatly contribute to regional development and assist in a policy aimed at integrating its national minorities. With that in mind, Vanyan says he has already established an NGO, the Teqali Association, alongside counterparts in Azerbaijan and Georgia and with the support of some other activists and organizations in the region. As a central player in the Caucasus, the initiative also hopes to encourage Georgia to seek a more active role in attempts to resolve the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. It remains to be seen how many other organizations will follow suit, but the first event to be held there is scheduled for the beginning of next month.

With the involvement of participants from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, it will likely result in more criticism for Vanyan, and especially inside Armenia, but he remains undaunted. “Communication is not betrayal,” he told an Azerbaijan newspaper in 2009. “It is a natural human need.”

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ARMENIA AND AZERBAIJAN SEEN FROM TEKALI, GEORGIA © ONNIK KRIKORIAN 2011

ONNIK KRIKORIAN

Armenia-Azerbaijan peacebuilding kicks off in Tekali

Events held in rural Georgia hope to demonstrate how grassroots peacebuilding activities can not only contribute to discussion and debate, but also have some more immediate and practical dividends as well

The roads have seen better days and probably so too have the villagers, but if events continue to be held in a small ethnic Azeri village in Georgia that might all change. Situated just 10 kilometers from the Georgian border with Azerbaijan, and 29 kilometers from the crossing with Armenia, those attempting to establish Tekali as a regional peacebuilding center certainly hope so. One of them, Armenian theatrical director turned activist Georgi Vanyan has already called on other NGOs to relocate some of their existing and future regional and cross-border projects there. If that were to happen, much needed investment could be

attracted to Tekali as well as the surrounding area and involve wider society in dialogue, discussion and debate.

And there's certainly the need. Locked into a bitter conflict over the disputed territory of Nagorno Karabakh, attempts by the OSCE Minsk Group to mediate between Armenia and Azerbaijan have failed to produce any significant breakthrough in nearly 17 years since the 1994 ceasefire put fighting on hold. Around 25,000 were killed and over a million forced to flee their homes. By the time of the armistice Armenian forces were left in control of around 16 percent of what the international community considers sovereign Azerbaijani territory. Around 3,000 have since been killed in cross-border skirmishes according to The Economist, leading to concerns that war might break out again.

In January, for example, the International Crisis Group warned of the danger of an accidental war while others question whether there is the political will on either side to resolve a dispute which arguably threatens the stability and future economic development of the entire region. For those such as Vanyan, there are also doubts that the current OSCE mediated negotiations are sufficient. Even civil society has largely been content with holding often closed meetings in hotels or holiday resorts in third countries such as Georgia although such an approach reaches only a small number of people. Rather than only involve what could be considered an 'elite' in both societies, they argue that a more open and grassroots approach is necessary.

Having already held his own events in Armenia, including a cultural project at a school in the capital as well as an ill-fated attempt to host a festival of non-political Azerbaijani films, the first event to be held in Tekali occurred on 9 March 2011 and was attended by Armenians, Azerbaijanis and Georgians. A 'moot court,' an event simulating judicial proceedings, was staged to discuss the potential role of Georgia in bringing peace to its two estranged neighbors. Intended primarily for journalists and analysts, the event also attracted and involved representatives

from war-affected Armenian communities close to the border with Azerbaijan as well as from Georgia's own ethnic Azeri minority.

The meeting was chaired by Vanyan alongside expert David Darchiashvili, Chairman of the Commission on European Integration in the Georgian Parliament.

A panel of analysts and journalists making the case for and against Georgia's involvement in the Armenia-Azerbaijan negotiating process offered their opinion with questions taken from the audience. In general, those supporting the motion believed that Georgia's central role in the region makes it ideal, especially as most peacebuilding initiatives and projects are already taking place there. Moreover, despite the animosity usually evident between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, the two ethnic groups can and do live together in peace in Georgia which also has its own experience with 'frozen' conflicts, especially after the short-lived war with Russia in August 2008 which created a new community of IDPs to deal with.

However, those opposed to Georgia's involvement pointed out sour relations with Russia could instead increase tensions in the region. It was also considered that Azerbaijan might be more



ETHNIC AZERI, TEKALI, GEORGIA
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inclined towards Georgia's involvement than Armenia, which traditionally sees Russia as an ally. Even so, 27 people from the mixed audience voted for Georgia taking a more active role with 7 against and 2 abstaining. More importantly, even if few expect such a likelihood to come to fruition given the geopolitical tensions in the region, the event and the issues raised were covered extensively by the Armenian, Azerbaijani and Georgian press perhaps more so than any other civil society initiative in this area before it.

Vanyan was especially pleased with the event in Tekali. "The most important thing is the inspiration offered by the participants here," he told Osservatorio. "They also believed that holding of the hearing in such a venue did not happen on a whim. I honestly did not expect such support, positive feedback, and such an enjoyable experience. The results of the voting were also unexpected. Sound and grounded expert arguments about how unlikely the prospect for Georgian mediation in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict is actually made people vote guided by pure emotion instead. It was a protest vote against the reality, and it was an optimistic one at that."

What happens next in Tekali remains to be seen, but Vanyan hopes to establish a print and online newspaper dealing with the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict in Armenian, Azerbaijani, Russian and English. A radio station based in the village, which will broadcast to audiences in the regions of all three countries, is also planned along with a cinema, library and Internet café. Cultural activities would also be included. One idea, for example, is to stage a localized version of Romeo and Juliet with an Armenian and Azerbaijani playing the lead roles. Even if unrelated to Tekali, others such as Azerbaijani film director Rustam Ibragimbekov are already hoping to secure funding to film the famous fictional love story in the context of Armenia and Azerbaijan.

“I want to show the tragedy of two lovers whose lives were tragically changed by the conflict,” Ibragimbekov told EurasiaNet in early March. “When shooting stops, people-to-people contacts get back onto a peaceful path, as they understand that the conflicts are started by governments and radical groups, not by ordinary people.”

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NIGAR HACIZADE

The Things I Want

"Write the first thing that comes into your head & send it off immediately before another thought occupies you. That's all I ask." This is the task Onnik gave me because I have started too many pieces on the topic of Armenia and Azerbaijan that I haven't been able to finish. I haven't been able to finish because there are nuances and complexities; there are so many points of view to empathize with; there is the weight of being from one side of the conflict; and in my case, there is the even heavier weight of needing to say the right things.

But then again, there are so many people out there that don't care about these things. People who do nothing but swallow hate, regurgitate it and spit it out. There is such little attempt at empathizing, and the weight of identity always seems to overpower whatever good will people have. And this might even be okay if it did any one of us any good, but it doesn't. So I

think it might be ok to start out with the basics and have them be said. Get them out there. We can go into the details later.

Here it is: I want peace.

I don't want to be from a country that is permanently occupied, that is permanently grieving, that has miserable refugees with forever ruined lives. Neither do I want to be from a country that is constantly considering aggression. I don't want to be from a country where the news accumulates around the enemy, what the enemy does, what the enemy says. I don't want to be from a country where the word describing the people living next door carries a negative meaning no matter what the topic is. I would like Azerbaijan to free itself from its post-war identification based on Armenia as the enemy.

On a very personal level, I am battling a learned instinct that I would like to unlearn: I would like to not constantly worry about balancing my opinions and statements everytime I criticize my own country in the context of this conflict and its consequences. I shouldn't have to match up every mistake, deficiency or atrocity on this side with one on the other side. See, I want little things understood, things that are so straight-forward to me. Such as there being no innocence in war, such as there being no black and white conflict.

I know many people would tell me I am welcome to "leave", physically or mentally. Trouble is I don't want to leave and I shouldn't have to. I love my country; I love its sounds, smells and I love its spirit, in the countless ways that I imagine it. I love its people. I want the things that I want because I want the spirit of my country uplifted.

I have never been to school in a country where I was in the majority, and it so happened that I have been taught that the destruction brought by nationalism overshadows its creations. But I have made myself into some kind of a Caucasus-nationalist. I would like to visit Armenia. I would like to stop by Lake Sevan like

my family once did on a road trip. I would like to meet more Armenians, because I have little doubt I will like them as well. I know this because from experience, despite two peoples speaking different languages and practicing different religions, there are none as alike as us.

Perhaps managing to live together, through good and great and bad and worse days for a thousand years does that to you. I would like us to forcefully reject the inhumane, cruel idea that we can't live together.

What will my parents say when they read this? What will my uncle say? What will my cousin think of me if she googles my name and finds this? What will other Azeris think? I suspect they will think something along these lines, something that I have found myself thinking in the past: Peace is great. Who doesn't want peace? But what about justice? What about our lands? What about our legitimate grievances? Why should we be the ones advocating for peace?

Well, these are the hard questions. They can't be ignored; they don't disappear just because you don't want to deal with them.



ETHNIC ARMENIAN, STEPANAKERT, NAGORNO KARABAKH
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And the attempt at answering them comes with a heavier load of history than most people on either side can handle. If you are like me, when you try to answer these questions, you will have to think about what justice means, how memory works, how history is made, how humans are wired, and if they can be rewired.

I have no concrete answers, certainly not for this piece, but I will end with one thought. I know Armenians think about these questions just like we think about them. They think about peace, justice, their lands, and their legitimate grievances. Believe it or not, they think that they are in the right; isn't that crazy? Well, it's not. Neither are we crazy. It's such a basic idea, yet such a hard nut to crack. But I believe it's the key to get out of this windowless cell we have locked ourselves in.

I know there are Armenians who want the things that I want, and I know that we have no other choice but to find ourselves a middle ground. We don't have to meet each other exactly in the middle; we just have to start walking towards each other. We have to do it for ourselves, for our legacy, for our collective dignity.

MARIANNA KARAPETYAN

Friends like Sisters

“If you received my SMS, it can mean one of two things. Either peace between our countries is really possible, or I’m now on the KGB’s list.”

I admit that I don’t remember much about the war or the incidents in Sumgait and Baku, but one memory still remains clear. We were at the house of my grandparents in a small village in Armenia with my numerous cousins playing in the yard. And I can remember drawing huge posters with red letters while screaming anti-Turkish slogans very passionately. In those years before moving to Moscow, while I never had any particular interest in what really happened with Azerbaijan, I knew that I hated them with all my heart. This completely blind hatred was injected into my blood and it came with my genes. It was an undeniable and unquestionable truth collected in one single negative emotion that defined who I was.

“Are you Marianna? The new Armenian girl?” a girl was later to ask me in class in Moscow, smiling and introducing herself as Leyla from Baku. She was in my art history class and actually the first person in months who tried to get to know me. “She can’t be Azeri, she is so nice,” was my first thought. “They should be like monsters with bloody hands and crazy eyes,” was my second, although it would have been odd to find such students in a university. It was also this moment that was the only time in all our years of friendship that I doubted her because of nationality. In fact, I am so happy because I met her. In reality, she turned out to be an adorable charming person, with an enormous range of talents, and such a huge amount of love which she shares with everyone around her.

Of course, we made an agreement promising never to discuss the situation between our countries because we knew that, as we’d

been told different things, the discussion would never be constructive and only just harm our friendship. This was perfectly convenient for me because, unlike Leyla, I knew next to nothing and I wouldn't really be able to argue. But realizing this, I was always amazed that she came to meet me first, despite all that true or false information she had been told about Armenia back home. Over time, I started researching the conflict and asking around to fill in the gaps of my knowledge and to understand what had happened. But, as I was learning and discovering more, I never felt my feelings towards Leyla changing. Instead, we became even closer as friends.

Not only that, but I also learned that during the incidents in Baku, her family helped many Armenians in different ways. They traded their apartment in Moscow for one owned by Armenians in Baku, and even though the Moscow one was way more valuable, so that they could move. Her grandma's passport was also used to transfer around 50 Armenian women across the border and her neighbor continues to help people sneak through customs in Georgia to see their abandoned homes. In fact, there are many more such stories which I would never have allowed myself to believe before.

And Leyla herself has saved me twice during my university years. I was absolutely spoiled by my family and friends back in Yerevan, but in Moscow faced the reality of being ignored by people around me. This was actually the toughest time in my life, but Leyla was the first person to see who I was, instead of thinking of me as "just another immigrant from Caucasus." Her friendship gave me the confidence to live my life, meet people and make new friends. She was the one who introduced me to other Armenians at school, and the one to teach me to understand my privileges as being "different." On another occasion she helped me with my studies.

When all of my other friends were out enjoying themselves, it was Leyla who spent several sleepless nights helping me with my presentation. Without her, I would have failed.

During the past few years so many things have happened between us that I could only imagine how unacceptable they might seem for many people back in Yerevan or Baku. Not mentioning casual things, such as my parents calling her "daughter" or her introducing me to Armenians living in Yerevan, there are tons of amazing stories. There's helping me out with a visa invitation, us both singing Armenian songs in the middle of Istanbul, or Leyla

knowing words in Armenian such as “herustatsmporik” (teletubby) or phrases from Armenian cartoons such as “mer mah@ ekele” (Mkneri Zhoghov).

So, I’m not trying to send out a sophisticated message through this post, end it dramatically, or even comment on my thoughts and hopes on the political situation between us. All I am trying to say is that these kinds of relationships are reality, they matter, and they do bring about change. That might be small, but it is meaningful and positive compared to being a person full of hate inside who posts ugly comments on the Internet or raises a child with the same negative emotions so they become a sick and incomplete person for the rest of their life.



ETHNIC AZERI, KARAJALA, GEORGIA
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ZAMIRA ABBASOVA

Expired Hatred?

A strange title, perhaps, but the only thing that springs to mind when I ask myself what happened to the hatred that once filled me until now? Perhaps I should explain...

The first time I was told that I have an enemy was when I was just four years old. That was when I was forced to flee my home in Armenia because of the conflict with Azerbaijan in the early 1990s. Since then, the image of the enemy has been a changing one, but primarily based on my own creativity after seeing photos and videos in the newspapers and on National TV.

If you want to clearly understand how that enemy looked for many years then close your eyes and imagine a scenic village surrounded by high trees and bushes. Nothing else is visible or audible, apart from the occasional sound of cheerful voices. Then, one day, someone runs out of the surrounding forest screaming,

yelling, and crying. Monster-like figures had appeared in their village and were killing, beating, and butchering people — women, children and old people alike. They were destroying everything in their path.

That's cruel, right, and the image I had when I was a kid. And it was further developed when, every time I was naughty, my Uncle used to frighten me by saying that if I won't sit still he will call the Armenians to come and kill me. What a nasty thing to do to a little kid, isn't it? And also not hard to imagine what image I then formed of my monster-like enemies: Armenians.

Years have passed since then, and so too has the image of the enemy. I also became more curious to finally come face to face with them to see what they might actually do. So, when fate took me from Azerbaijan to the United States where I could meet many

Armenians, I encountered a few during orientation meetings for my Edmund Muskie Fellowship. The bastards, I told myself. Look at them. All of them are monsters, and I'm sure they're planning to do something terrible to us. We need to be careful of them, I thought, and even though I met one girl who was very nice. With all these negative thoughts, however, I preferred to consider it an act.

Come on! An Armenian can't be good!!!

Later, a guy approaches me to raise the issue of Armenian monuments destroyed in Nakhichevan. Bingo! I told you that Armenians can't be any good! I am angry, and am once again convinced that there is not a single good Armenian to be found. If not for the others around me, I was about to beat this guy, but then also remembered I was meant to be there for a course on conflict transformation and resolution. And so I calmed down, but on campus I met yet another Armenian. Can you imagine? On my very campus? His name was Phil, a very nice guy who was an IT specialist. At first, I didn't know what his surname was, and so was unaware of his origin, but when I heard it for the first time I had chills.

My eyes were probably enlarged from the surprise and my hands shaking for the same reason or from frustration. But... but... but.. he was very nice. I even felt sorry for him being Armenian. I mean, what a sad fate, and I wondered what it must be like to be one. Funny, but sad, and then days turned into weeks, and weeks into months. I saw him everywhere: in classes, at the cafeteria, and in many other places. And it turned out he was a normal, kind, silent man with a gentle smile and excellent speaking manners. Can you imagine the frustration for an Azerbaijani girl to meet such an enemy?!?!

Then I received an e-mail from my professor informing me that an Armenian-Azerbaijan symposium was to be held in Boston, and naturally I wanted to be there. I had to meet more Armenians and learn about them, not because it was interesting, but because I wanted to overcome my frustration. I wanted to finally meet one bad Armenian matching the image I had of them for so many years. At the symposium, when I entered the room, I again had chills. I saw an Armenian girl who I recognized from Facebook. What a great smile, and she even looked Azerbaijani. I decided to approach her, introducing myself in English, and again, I was surprised.

What a great girl! But, of course, she had to be an exception. Just like the others.

And then, in an Intercultural Communication class, I was reviewing blog posts about Azerbaijan on Global Voices and noticed that the author's surname sounded Armenian — Krikorian. Immediately I became angry, and wondered why on earth was this Armenian guy writing about Azerbaijan? Is he crazy or up to something? So, I found the email address of the Managing Editor and wrote a complaint detailing my concerns. Later she responded with his email address, suggesting that I raise the issue direct with him. After settling myself, I wrote him an e-mail that wasn't aggressive, but it was sarcastic and ironic.

When he responded, it turned out this guy was very smart, very much informed, and also believed in building bridges. After exchanging some e-mails, as well as adding each other on Facebook, it was clear. I confirmed again that Onnik was another exception. Great person!

Now, after meeting many more Armenians, including socially in cafes, restaurants and bars, again frustration. Nice personalities, great minds, all exceptions (ironically), and so close to me that it

hurts like being mad at a friend. My anger, hatred, and whatever else I had, started to fade away, leaving just emptiness and the need to meet more and more of my "enemies." It is then that I understood my hatred had expired. People, my hatred had expired!!! And that, perhaps, is my message. The ingredients of the hatred to be found among both Armenians and Azerbaijanis have an expiry date even if many of us initially "buy" into it.

ONNIK KRIKORIAN

Social Media in Armenia-Azerbaijan Peacebuilding

When Adnan Hajizade and Emin Milli, two youth activists in Azerbaijan, were detained on politically motivated charges in July 2009, supporters naturally used social networking sites such as Facebook to campaign for their release. Spreading networks wide in order to disseminate information and updates, there were obviously risks involved, especially as activists could be monitored if privacy was compromised.

For them, however, that didn't matter. The important thing was that Facebook was crucial in the campaign to release the two men. And, as international awareness of their plight increased before their unexpected conditional release in November last year, they were probably right. Despite the inherent risks, there is no doubt that connecting people is something that Facebook excels at.

Indeed, significant progress had already been registered in another area, that of online communication and dialogue between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, months before the activists' arrest. Moreover, it was again Facebook, rather than blogs or other traditional means, which was pivotal in this respect. As a result, the online environment which exists today was unimaginable two and a half years ago.

Armenia and Azerbaijan fought a war over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh in the early 1990s. Over 25,000 were killed and a million forced to flee their homes until a 1994 cease-fire agreement put the conflict on hold. Even so, frontline skirmishes claim the lives of dozens of conscripts each year. Traditional forms of contact have also been cut off, and it is impossible for citizens from either country to visit the other.

True, meetings between civil society activists take place in third countries, but both societies generally frown upon such events, and potential participants are sometimes reluctant to take part. A recent survey by the Caucasus Resource Research Centers (CRRC), for example, found that 70 percent of Armenians opposed friendship with Azerbaijanis, while 97 percent of Azerbaijanis felt the same way about Armenians.

Therefore, such meetings are often shrouded in secrecy, even if this limits their effectiveness in wider society. Meanwhile, even when contacts are made outside of the conflict zone, people lose touch when they return home. But, in a brave new world of Facebook and Twitter, such a situation can now be addressed, or at least to a certain extent.

However, even if civil society organizations should have been the first to introduce the use of such tools into their own peacebuilding activities, it was instead left up to individuals. Through my own personal project and work as Caucasus regional editor for Global Voices, a citizen media site established at the Berkman Center for Internet & Society, adding contacts in

Azerbaijan allowed them to look into the lives of some Armenians and vice versa.

And while propaganda on both sides sought to convince respective populations that the other thinks only of revenge, the reality was quite different. For example, it probably comes as no surprise that many Armenians found online are not too dissimilar from their counterparts in Azerbaijan, with most rarely posting about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, preferring to instead share links and commentary about music and films.

True, this isn't always the case, with nationalists from both sides also online. However, as Facebook is primarily "social," spreading hateful propaganda can result in users having their accounts suspended. Nevertheless, if one of the key attributes of Facebook is that it is a social networking site, some critics argue that rather than extend connections, it simply replicates those to be found in the real world. Such concerns are valid, of course, but they overlook the fact that Facebook is a tool with strengths and weaknesses determined by how it is used. It should also be evaluated in the context of fairly ethnically homogenous countries such as Armenia and Azerbaijan with no other means to

communicate. Even "liking" a personal photograph or openly wishing someone a happy birthday can be revolutionary in this context.

Simply put, after a period of virtual trust building and overcoming stereotypes, a space for dialogue can finally be created. Even on a small scale, such interactions directly challenge the very basis on which isolation from each other is justified. Skype can also be considered invaluable here too, and sooner or later, networking not only spreads, but also becomes "acceptable."

Even so, such connections can eventually begin to taper off, and herein lies the problem. Although Facebook has broken down barriers between some Armenians and Azerbaijanis, those involved tend to be incredibly similar. They are perhaps already libertarian and cosmopolitan, and simply needed the tools to circumvent restrictions in place. Of course, this is still a huge success, but such people remain a minority. So, while some users on both sides now have access to information and opinions they never had before, we need to constantly monitor, assess and evolve the use of new tools in order to spread the net wider. At the time of writing, for example, there are 111,480 Facebook users in

Armenia and 304,380 in Azerbaijan, while mutual connections number only a few hundred at best.

This isn't to negate the importance of Facebook, of course, as it has proven itself an indispensable tool which has achieved more open communication between Armenians and Azerbaijanis than any other medium to date. However, there is also the need to strategize its use, especially as others will eventually attempt to obstruct progress in this area. Privacy issues will therefore become key.

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ONNIK KRIKORIAN

Clearing Mines and Saving Lives in Nagorno Karabakh

AMARAS, Karabakh — In an almost perfectly idyllic setting, with a monastery dating back to the 4th century and a nearby mulberry orchard, there's hardly a soul around. Even the church in the complex is empty, save for a small boy waiting to sell candles to anyone who does visit. The roads are devoid of traffic and therefore silent, while the only sound that breaks up the tranquil atmosphere is that of bird song. Mesrop Mashtots, the inventor of the Armenian alphabet, is reputed to have established a pioneering school to use his unique script here at the beginning of the 5th century, but the first time I visited Amaras was by military helicopter in 1994 for another reason entirely.

On assignment for the U.K's The Independent, it was to cover the immediate aftermath of the cease-fire agreement which put the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed territory of Nagorno Karabakh on hold. This time, however, more

than 15 years later, it was with civilian sappers from the British HALO Trust demining charity to cover another war-related story. Despite a tentative peace and relative calm, while it is common knowledge that soldiers still die on the front line each year, what isn't is that civilians often fall victim to other dangers. Marks on the grass, indicating that a large vehicle had recently stopped nearby, highlighted that only too well. It's unlikely that the driver knew that he had actually parked in a minefield.

Fortunately, there had been no loss of life or injury but, given a policy of reclaiming agricultural land as well as promoting tourism, it's an accident waiting to happen. Indeed, it's not hard to imagine that the vehicle could well have been a coach loaded with tourists from the diaspora.

During the war, militias from both sides indiscriminately laid mines which are unable to identify or distinguish between their victims. In such a situation, and lacking any maps, the task of clearing such areas is made incredibly difficult. However, even when minefields laid by regular army units are marked, many people simply ignore them. “Unfortunately, there are still accidents happening,” says Yura Sharamanyan, operations manager for the HALO Trust, the only mine and UXO clearance organization operating in the self-declared but unrecognized republic. “One was in an area where there were signs warning about the mines. People just ignored them and a tractor blew up on an anti-tank mine.”

One such victim is Kolya Kocharyan, caretaker of the Amaras monastery. His tractor hit an anti-tank mine 10 years ago and he still walks with a limp and can’t straighten his left arm. In the mulberry orchard opposite, the HALO Trust has already begun work to clear any other landmines which might remain. Unlike the task of clearing anti-personnel mines, which can be triggered by a person’s weight, the deminers wear no protective clothing as they use a metal loop detector to scour the land. Sharamanyan says that

in the unlikely event of a person detonating an anti-tank mine, no amount of protection would be enough anyway.

Roly Clark, HALO’s Program Manager in Karabakh and a veteran of mine clearance operations in Cambodia, Angola and Afghanistan, says that 26 hectares [54.24 acres] were cleared in total. “We found two anti-tank mines and nine items of unexploded ordnance,” he says. “The reason for the low number of mines was probably because it was just nuisance mine laying during the war to stop tanks driving through the orchard.”

The situation, however, is a lot different in other locations. On a visit to Surarassy in 2006, a village situated less than an hour’s drive outside of Lachin, a mangled lorry lay in a ditch on one side of the road — a tell-tale sign that mines were present. Another seven were believed to remain, but villagers continued to herd their cattle along the route in the mistaken belief that it was safe. Ironically, just a few meters away, forest and grazing land were laden with at least 900 anti-personnel mines. During the war, conscripts from Karabakh had saturated the area to prevent Azerbaijani Special Forces from infiltrating past the line of contact under the cover of night.

The minefield was discovered well over a decade later when a local hunter stepped on a mine. His friend hit a second while attempting a rescue.

More recently, on December 14 last year, Artur Khudatyan, a 13-year-old resident of the village of Hin Taghlar in the Hadrut region of Karabakh, found a metal object nearby. Although the teenager had received Mine Risk Education at school, his adolescent curiosity got the better of him when he attempted to open with an axe what was actually a cluster bomb left over from the war in his backyard. It exploded but, fortunately for Khudatyan, its full load of lethal bomblets failed to detonate. If it had, he might well have been killed. The situation is even more dangerous for younger children with some cluster munitions resembling metal balls.

Around 328 civilians have been killed or injured by landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO) in Karabakh since the 1994 ceasefire, with at least six accidents, such as the one involving Khudatyan, occurring in 2010. The situation is improving, with over 80 percent of 5,093 hectares [12,584 acres] contaminated by landmines and 70 percent of over 30,000 hectares [74,100 acres] affected by cluster bombs now cleared by the HALO Trust, but

there is still much work left to do. For now, though, over 10,000 landmines and 50,000 items of UXO have been neutralized since the charity started operations in 2000. Work is not just confined to Karabakh either; the HALO Trust is also working in the surrounding military buffer zone.

Nevertheless, even if the remainder could be cleared in the near future, that is now looking less likely, given cuts in HALO Trust's funding for 2011. According to Clarke, a 2007 agreement with the British government came to an end last year and \$400,000 will be cut from the charity's budget otherwise made up from over \$1 million from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and a smaller amount from the Julia Burke Foundation. It will, however, mean that at least dozens of deminers will be made redundant.

"Funding from the British government has been cut because it changed their mine action strategy," says Clark. "They came up with a list of countries that will receive funding and Nagorno Karabakh wasn't one of them. The loss of 60 deminers will therefore mean a reduction in the area cleared of mines and cluster munitions in Karabakh in 2011. This also unfortunately





means the date to which communities in Karabakh can look forward to being free from the threat of landmines and UXO will be extended by several years. HALO has tried to raise funding from other governments, but Nagorno Karabakh's political status and the politics surrounding the region have made it impossible to do so."

Nevertheless, despite the cut in funding from the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), the British Embassy in Yerevan did host an event for the HALO Trust last December. Ironically, albeit coincidentally, the meeting was held on the same day that Artur Khudatyan was injured by the cluster bomb. Marking 10 years of its work in Karabakh, the HALO Trust invited the local media in the hope of attracting more attention to the problem and perhaps even interest from potential donors. One possible source of additional support, for example, could be the large Armenian diaspora. However, Clarke says that this is not proving as simple as it first might sound.

"We tried very hard to raise money from the diaspora in America in 2007, but without any success," he explains. "HALO has two offices in Washington and San Francisco and all the major

Armenian organizations were approached last year. An appeal signed by Bako Sahakyan, the current President of Nagorno Karabakh, as well as Arkhady Ghukasyan, his predecessor, was sent out to a diaspora mailing list provided by his representative in Washington; the media was contacted, but very little money was raised. Also, the Hayastan All-Armenian Fund was approached in 2007, but that too failed."

In that letter, both the current and former presidents outlined the urgency of the HALO Trust continuing its work in Karabakh. "Over the last ten years Nagorno Karabakh has suffered a disproportionate level of casualties from mines and UXO, with 294 known victims. On a per capita basis, that is three times as many landmine and UXO victims as in Afghanistan, a country widely acknowledged to be one of the most mined in the world," it read. "The HALO Trust is the only organization conducting this critical, life-saving work in Nagorno Karabakh ...Clearing Nagorno Karabakh of landmines and UXO will save Armenian lives and foster a return to normality more than a decade after the war."

"With political issues preventing many donor governments from funding HALO in Nagorno Karabakh, we really have to now look to



the diaspora for support,” concludes Clarke. “By supporting HALO, the diaspora would be directly helping some of the poorest people of Nagorno Karabakh. Agricultural land cleared of mines would enable rural farmers to cultivate them for the first time since the war and cluster bombs removed from villages would literally save people’s lives.”

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