

cultural diversity մշակութային

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კულტურული მრავალფეროვნება

ONNIK KRIKORIAN

ZAMIRA ABBASOVA

MARINE EJURYAN

AYGUN JANMAMMADOVA

SASUN KHACHATRIAN

SCARY AZERI

YELENA OSIPOVA

LIANA AGHAJANIAN

KEVORK OSKANIAN

ARPINE PORSUGHYAN

# CONFLICT VOICES

VOLUME 1, DECEMBER 2010

CAUCASUS

## ABOUT CAUCASUS CONFLICT VOICES

THIS PROJECT WAS CREATED BY ONNIK KRIKORIAN, A JOURNALIST, PHOTOJOURNALIST AND BLOGGER 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,

HE IS ALSO THE CAUCASUS REGIONAL EDITOR FOR GLOBAL VOICES ONLINE AND FIRST VISITED THE DISPUTED TERRITORY OF NAGORNO KARABAKH AS A REPORTER IN 1994 AND *ASSISTED THOMAS DE WAAL IN THE RESEARCH FOR BLACK GARDEN: ARMENIA AND AZERBAIJAN THROUGH PEACE AND WAR.*

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# CONFLICT VOICES

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ETHNIC AZERI WEDDING, KARAJALA, GEORGIA © ONNIK KRIKORIAN 2009



ONNIK KRIKORIAN

# Overcoming negative stereotypes in the South Caucasus

In the 16 years since a 1994 ceasefire agreement put the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed mainly-Armenian populated territory of Nagorno Karabakh on hold, peace remains as elusive as ever. The war fought in the early 1990s left over 25,000 dead and forced a million to flee their homes, leaving ethnic Armenian forces, backed by Armenia proper, in control of over 16 percent of what the international community considers sovereign Azerbaijani territory.

The situation, perhaps, is typical for many frozen conflicts, but what makes this dispute even more complicated is the almost constant rhetoric of hatred from both sides. Nearly two decades after the troubles broke out, new generations of Armenians and Azerbaijanis are unable to remember the time when both lived side by side together in peace. Armenia's last president, Robert Kocharian, for example, declared that the two were 'ethnically

incompatible' while his Azerbaijani counterpart, still incumbent Ilham Aliyev, regularly threatens a new war.

Regional analysts fear that such threats are not merely empty words. Fueled by massive oil revenue, the Azerbaijani military is rapidly re-arming itself and the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia over South Ossetia was enough of a wake-up call for the international community to once again direct attention towards unresolved conflicts in the South Caucasus.

In such a situation, perhaps, the possibility for reconciliation looks bleak, especially when the local media on both sides regularly perpetuates negative stereotypes of the other, often publishing little more than propaganda and in some cases even misinformation. "Without more accurate and unbiased information [...] free of negative rhetoric and stereotypes,

Armenians and Azerbaijanis will continue to see themselves as enemies without any common ground,” read a recent report on the local media from the Caucasus Resource Research Centers.

Yet, in the past 18 months, unprecedented development in cross-border communication can be found on the popular social networking site, Facebook, where a new breed of young activists in both Armenia and Azerbaijan are now able to virtually cross the ceasefire line.

Although not intended at the time, the first tentative steps towards this happened through Global Voices, a citizen media site co-founded by Harvard University researcher Ethan Zuckerman and former CNN Tokyo and Beijing Bureau Chief Rebecca MacKinnon. As Caucasus editor for the site, my own initial physical contact with Azerbaijani bloggers soon led to meeting many more online. Through a combination of email, chat programs, social networks and blogs, relationships were built online, setting the scene for future cooperation.

But the real breakthrough happened in July 2009 when two video blogging youth activists, Adnan Hajizade and Emin Mili, were detained and later imprisoned in Azerbaijan. Global Voices

became the main online resource to continuously follow the case, and as some Armenians began to take notice, they also began to make contact with their counterparts on the other side. Indeed, if it was once unthinkable for such open communication to occur, it soon became something almost routine.

It was also then that I also began my own voluntary personal project, Overcoming Negative Stereotypes in the South Caucasus, in cooperation with bloggers and journalists from Georgia and Azerbaijan—and the idea was simple. Although the notion that Armenians and Azerbaijanis are unable to live together is commonplace, that is very far from the truth outside the conflict zone. In neighboring Georgia, for example, ethnic Armenians and Azeris coexist in the same villages and towns. They speak each other's language and sometimes inter-marry.

Yet, the media in Armenia and Azerbaijan never reports on such stories, preferring to emphasize differences rather than similarities, and this is where blogs and social networking sites have stepped in. With Internet penetration still low throughout the region, the audience might still remain small, but they have started to fill a gap long left vacant. Indeed, even the very idea of a

collaborative story on an ethnic Azeri village wedding in Georgia with an Armenian and Azerbaijani name side by side working together was once unthinkable.

By this time civil society organizations had also started to notice this work, with some desperate for contacts of young people on both sides to include in their own programs. Having largely failed to identify suitable participants through traditional means, especially in a climate usually more against cooperation than for, NGOs were now eager to involve those already communicating online. Since then, their numbers have significantly increased and Facebook has become a crucial medium for participants to remain in contact once they return home.

That's not to say that such tools are without their risks or faults either, of course. At a recent conference, *Blogs and Bullets: Evaluating the Impact of New Media on Conflict*, at the U.S. Institute of Peace, there was perhaps more criticism of how Facebook sometimes polarizes connections on national, social and political grounds. Even so, in the context of Armenia-Azerbaijan relations it has become an incredibly valuable resource—for now, at least. While once the Internet was used to perpetuate conflict, it

is now also being used to promote peace.

As a result, and building on its coverage of citizen media during the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, Global Voices has since established its own special coverage page, *Caucasus Conflict Voices*, summarizing some of the new conversations taking place between Armenian and Azerbaijani bloggers. True, they might still be a minority, with the use of such tools still in its infancy, but until recently such communication never existed at all. It now remains to be seen whether these developments continue or if those opposed to peace also utilize them to drown out such voices.

ONNIK KRIKORIAN IS A FREELANCE JOURNALIST AND PHOTOGRAPHER FROM THE UNITED KINGDOM BASED IN YEREVAN, ARMENIA, AND THE INITIATOR OF THIS PROJECT.

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ARPINEH PORSUGHYAN

# The Media in Armenia and Azerbaijan: Effective or Affective?

Many academics argue that the influence of the media is especially strong in environments where citizens depend on a limited number of news sources. In contrast, when citizens have alternative sources of information they are less subject to the potential effects of media. Following this argument, how affective is the media in Armenia and Azerbaijan in establishing an image of the “other” in an environment where over 90 percent of the populations choose television as their primary source of information on current events with over 40 percent choosing family, friends, neighbors and colleagues as their second main source?<sup>1</sup>

Well, according to the annual nationwide Caucasus Barometer conducted by the Caucasus Resource Research Centers (CRRC), a rather large percentage of people in both countries appear to agree that the media determines what people think. The figure

was 39 percent in Armenia and 59 percent in Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, statistics highlighting the number of people who approve of friendship between Armenians and Azerbaijanis illustrate that quite well. Only 28 percent of Armenian respondents approve of friendship with Azerbaijanis while just 1 percent of Azerbaijanis approve of friendship with Armenians.

Moreover, as the same theory on media effect also argues, those with little or no interest in politics are more prone to influence from the media. In Armenia, 37 percent of people are not at all interested or hardly interested in foreign policy. In Azerbaijan, that figure is 64 percent, but what about those who are interested in politics and access alternative sources of information? Academics have something to say about them as well.

Some argue that those with a strong interest in politics and access to various sources of information are subject to “biased processing,” the argument being that those that have a strong interest in politics tend to filter information based on their already existing views. Focus groups conducted by CRRC as part of the Eurasia Partnership Foundation *Unbiased Media Coverage of Armenia-Azerbaijan Relations* seem to support this argument. Focus groups participants, as well as active media consumers in the Armenian and Azerbaijani capitals, showed general dissatisfaction with the current state of the media in their respective countries and demanded unbiased media.

Yet, those same participants held very similar positions on the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, it being the one opined by the State.

Is there hope? Well, as CRRC's report suggests, “while the media can amplify existing tensions and reinforce differences, it also has the potential to build confidence across existing fracture lines by covering a wider spectrum of issues, diversifying sources, representing more voices than just the elite, and consciously eliminating bias from coverage.”

Social media and projects like this one, as well as Global Voices Online and the Social Innovation Camp Caucasus have been a great kick start to providing a platform for discussing issues beyond the conflict. After all, we have so much in common to discuss and we share similar concerns. In both countries the biggest concern in 2009 was the need to reduce daily spending in basic expenditures, both are worried about western influence, both perceive poverty as the biggest threat to the world, and in both countries, while generally uncertain, a significant percentage hopes that their children will be better off than they are.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Caucasus Resource Research Centers Caucasus Barometer 2009*

ARPINE PORSUGHYAN IS FREELANCE RESEARCHER, FORMERLY A REGIONAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATE AT CAUCASUS RESEARCH RESOURCE CENTERS (CRRC), AND THE CO-AUTHOR OF *ARMENIAN AND AZERBAIJANI INTERNATIONAL NEWS COVERAGE – EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT*.









16.7km SOUTH OF LACHIN, ARMENIAN-CONTROLLED AZERBAIJAN © ONNIK KRIKORIAN 2006



KEVORK OSKANIAN

# Armenia and Azerbaijan: In Search of Statesmanship

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is one of those intractable confrontations left over from the dying days of the Soviet Union. Since 1994, the calm brought about by an uneasy cease-fire has 'frozen' the frontline between the belligerents into place. Save for occasional, localised breaches of the truce, the jittery peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan has been maintained. Fundamentally, however, the peace talks themselves – presided over by the three co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group – have produced few results. Squaring the circle between Armenia's insistence on self-determination and Azerbaijan's equally adamant adherence to territorial integrity has proved well nigh impossible.

This conflict's intractability has consequences (and causes) that potentially go far beyond the confines of the Southern Caucasus proper. In the early 1990s, Nagorno-Karabakh was the scene of the former Soviet Union's bloodiest war, with 30,000 deaths and a

million refugees and IDPs. Even by conservative estimates, renewed warfare – with both sides armed to the teeth through years of extravagant military build-ups – would be a far messier affair if left unchecked.

And while open warfare still appears an uncertain, highly costly and therefore irrational choice for both sides, calls to solve the conflict by military means are being heard ever more loudly in Baku. The question must be posed as to whether Azerbaijan's multi-billion dollar military budgets might, at some point, cause Azeri policymakers to actually believe a war has become winnable. In any case, the sabre-rattling from the shores of the Caspian has little effect on the Armenian highlands. Yerevan continues to insist on Karabakh's de-facto (if not de-jure) independence, and any suggestion of returning the occupied (or, in nationalist lingo, 'liberated') territories to Azerbaijan are received with hysteria,

bordering alarm, especially, but not exclusively, in opposition circles.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is a good example of what social scientists would call a structure-agency problem. There is no doubt that most people in both Armenia and Azerbaijan desire peace. The difficulty in coming to an agreement is due to the limitations in any human's ability to shape his or her social environment as they please. This ability (agency) is limited as it collides with the values that govern appropriate behaviour within a given society, or as it contradicts powerful interests in the status-quo (structure). Some citizens and politicians might want to change the situation, but soon enough, however, they would be counter-acted by the nationalist norms that still govern their societies, or Russia's probable disinterest in a fundamental resolution (absent a major Russian role as a guarantor or a – forceful - restoration of Russian regional hegemony).

Whatever the peace, the nationalist gods must be satisfied, and mother Russia must remain content. And this is a serious limitation, to say the least.

The dark ghosts of nationalism continue to pervade and hold hostage both Armenian and Azeri societies, through selective narratives of exclusive suffering that underlie fear and hatred. When it is socially acceptable for Armenia's ruling party to source its ideological inspiration from an overt Nazi collaborator, or when it is deemed appropriate for Azerbaijan's armed forces to flatten a vast historic Armenian cemetery, calls for reason will more often than not fall on deaf ears on both sides of the divide. Armenia's former president talked of the 'ethnic incompatibility' of Armenians and Azeris while his Azeri counterpart then and now happily lays claim to Armenia's capital, Yerevan, and both can count on a considerable measure of social approval for doing so. Politicians on both sides have no problem in either advocating the retention of the fruits of ethnic cleansing, or threatening ethnic cleansing in revenge, in the name of righting 'historical wrongs'.

Any civil-society initiatives in favour of peace would have to battle and overcome these dark ghosts before becoming relevant in any way.

Moscow's disinterest in a fundamental resolution is also one of those structural factors impeding peace between Armenia and





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Azerbaijan. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, in many ways, lies at the centre of the many fissures that run through the region and is the one major factor impeding the independent emergence of over-arching co-operation in the Southern Caucasus. While much is indeed down to the (immature) domestic politics of both actors, the Russian Federation would clearly not be interested in an open, integrated and independent Southern Caucasus outside its own terms; Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan are and must remain within its sphere of 'privileged interest'.

And if Armenia and Azerbaijan reconcile, it will have to be on Moscow's terms. Failing that, Russia will have to deftly balance one side against each other without either being able to achieve 'closure', or, in fact, either side moving towards open warfare (which would also not be in Russia's interest in view of its wider regional ramifications). For all their open declarations of concern for a final resolution, officials in Moscow prefer keeping things in suspense, building on a long tradition of 'divide and rule', honed during two centuries of imperial domination – one more obstacle on the road to peace.



Does this leave the region without hope? Is it possible to go against these structures and change these societies and their calcified narratives in a certain direction, against the wishes of the Russian bear? Acknowledging the existence of 'structure' should not imply surrender to determinism or fatalism; neither does it deprive local and foreign actors of their moral responsibility to at least attempt to lead their societies away from the obscurantist idolatries of ethnic nationalism. From the West – institutions like the EU and CoE, and influential actors in politics and the academe – one should expect a more forceful challenge against the region's retrograde superstitions, instead of its usual acquiescence or indifference in the name of 'local sensitivities', energy supplies and domestic electorates.

For all the impediments, ordinary citizens within the regions have it in their power as well to form peace groups that help fashion an alternative narrative that emphasises the (many) commonalities within the different ethnic groups of that once culturally unified region. 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.

KEVORK OSKANIAN IS A DOCTORAL CANDIDATE AT THE DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OF THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND A FORMER EDITOR OF THE MILLENNIUM JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES.

HE BLOGS ON SECURITY ISSUES IN THE CAUCASUS AT [HTTP://KOVKAZ.BLOGSPOT.COM](http://kovkaz.blogspot.com).





AZERBAIJANI CEMETARY, NAGORNO KARABAKH © ONNIK KRIKORIAN 2009

ZAMIRA ABBASOVA

# Personal reflections on conflict and displacement

I was born in Vardenis in 1984, but four years later my entire family, including all my relatives, had to leave Armenia. I was only four when I left Armenia, fleeing to Azerbaijan due to the mass displacements. In retrospect, I don't know whether that's fortunate or not as I am unable to remember everything I left behind. However, I do remember our house, our garden, the playground, my friends, my apple tree, and the rooster which I loved so much.

After arriving in Azerbaijan I used to dream about our house and walking in the ruins of our village. At some point, however, everything just faded away. Even so, my family never lost belief in one day returning. We believe that two neighbors who have lived together for centuries will come together again even if evil has never left them alone and has always whispered hatred.

In Azerbaijan, we kept ourselves apart from the local culture for many years and couldn't adjust back to our ethnic roots. Being treated as a stranger made it even more difficult. Azerbaijanis from Armenia segregated themselves from the rest of society as a result, finding unity only among themselves. Discrimination towards us was everywhere. It was in the kindergarten I went to, in the primary school, and even in our social life.

Local Azerbaijanis made us think that we were different even though we have the same blood and the same ethnic roots. I grew up hearing people telling me that I was from Armenia and I therefore always identified myself as an Armenian-Azerbaijani, which, from their perspective, was considered a level below in local society.

After a while I have found myself reading more about this conflict, analyzing it, and asking everyone for their perspective so that I could try to figure out the bigger picture. In 2009 I left for the US as an Edmund Muskie Fellow to continue my education in the field of Conflict Transformation. Meanwhile, I also began to participate in different activities related to this conflict including simulations and symposiums.

Meeting Armenians for the first time shook my feelings and emotions up and down. 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.

This war made me a Peacemaker although I am very new in this area. My struggle is more complicated, however, because on the one hand I have to help those who are in conflict, and on the other help myself.

ZAMIRA ABBASOVA IS AN ETHNIC AZERI REFUGEE FROM ARMENIA NOW BASED IN BAKU, AZERBAIJAN. SHE RECENTLY COMPLETED HER STUDIES IN THE UNITED STATES FOCUSING ON CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND TRANSFORMATION AND HAS ALSO WORKED FOR INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN AZERBAIJAN.





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AYGUN JANMAMADOVA

# Letter from Baku: Them

## Allergy

"I have an allergy towards Them. I have never talked to Them, and I never will!" once exclaimed a friend. Someone working as a human rights activist in a NGO.

## Hypocrite

"I would gladly risk my own life trying to save a human life. But I will never bat an eyelid if I see Them in pain," once proclaimed a doctor treating me. Someone who promised to serve humanity after taking the Hippocratic Oath.

## Zombie

"We should remember what was done to us by Them. Otherwise, we would be zombies. The ones without history. We will be

mankurts. A nation without memory is destined to die," once yelled a history professor. Someone I always admired, before. After he retired, however, now gone from the list of my role models.

## Label

"Your character is developing into something like Them. Work on yourself," once claimed my course mate after I forgot to return his CD.

## Risk factor

"Your close communication with Them may put us at risk and make us a target," said one of my parents. And I left.



MARKET, STEPANAKERT,  
NAGORNO KARABAKH  
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## Bundle of nerves

“I do not know how I will control my anger if I am sitting around the same table with Them,” once typed a friend while chatting to me on Facebook. Someone who was going to participate in a regional youth meeting in Georgia. And someone who changed my opinion of him later.

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While my friend had an allergy, my professor hunted zombies, my doctor saved lives, my course mate put labels on others, a parent assessed risks, and a Facebook friend learned to manage his stress, they were probably too immersed in their own thoughts to take the time to analyze and assess themselves.

For as long as I remember, people around me always uttered these words. The words my ears hated to hear. The words my mind refused to accept. Words that fortunately did not affect me.

The words about Them. Armenians.



But with all this negativity there was going to be something wonderful.

My personal journey with some of Them started online, through Facebook. Surprisingly, we never touched upon issues such as politics and conflict. There simply wasn't a reason to. There were too many other common things connecting rather than dividing us. Such a short time to spend on matters imposed on others by politicians.

Then some of these "online statuses" turned into meetings in person in the beautiful country of Georgia. Something unbelievable. And I felt I was not the only one in the crowd to meet with Them like this.

As I communicated with Them more, I discovered simple truths that:

Nationalism has nothing to do with the love for your country.  
It is more and only about hate for other nations.

and

There are many similarities between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. So many that you can often confuse who is who.

One of those similarities was particularly advantageous for me. I was walking on the streets of Tbilisi with an Armenian friend I met at a conference when my eyes suddenly caught a Georgian souvenir – a horn for drinking wine. The seller of the souvenirs was Armenian and, thinking I was too, sold the horn at half the price.

I often wonder now how many tickets people from Armenia and Azerbaijan buy each day to get to Georgia. How many liters of wine are drunk over the table with toasts to peace. How many friendships are made, and how many relationships are formed.

And now as I reflect on all of this and realize what I see now around me – people from both countries in friendship with each other, meeting with each other, and sharing with each other — I just feel inspired to say...

You do not have to wait for the heads of countries to reach a compromise. You do not need a Peace Treaty to ratify the friendships you want or already have with Them. It is people like

us who make and bring peace. Do not wait “until the next time”. Do it today.

Now.

And never feel discouraged to take a step closer to Them. Do not let any “risk factors, labels and allergies” get in your way. Because there is nothing more enjoyable than breaking stereotypes and walls.

Ah, and I forgot to tell you what happened to the guy with the bundle of nerves chatting to me on Facebook.

A week later he posted photos from the regional meeting he attended. Every other photo of him was of hugs, kisses and hanging out with two young people with atypical names for Azerbaijanis – Tigran and Anush. Them. Armenians.

Do you know what I want most of all now?

I want a visa.

I want a direct flight.

I want a budget train route.

I want to send a greeting card by post.

I want to make a telephone call.

There. From here.

To Yerevan. From Baku

Maybe, sometime in the near future? With people wanting Peace and doing something for it like you do everything is possible. But for now I am sending a letter. To Yerevan from Baku. By email until next time...

AYGUN JANMAMMADOVA IS A LAWYER FROM AZERBAIJAN. HER ACADEMIC BACKGROUND IS IN INTERNATIONAL LAW AND PEACEFUL RESOLUTION OF INTERNATIONAL DISPUTES AND HAS BEEN AN ACTION PARTNER IN PEACE AND CONFLICT AS A PART OF A PROJECT RUN BY OXFAM AUSTRALIA.



AYGUN JANMAMADOVA

# Letter from Tbilisi: Eat, Love, Pray...

*"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."*

*"I miss Baku more than anything else, and I still remember the delicious smell of freshly baked bread in our yard in Ganja, Azerbaijan."*

— said Albert.

*"It's like when you fight with your brother or sister over a toy. They are your own flesh and bone, but still you hit them just for nothing. This is how it is with our nations too."*

*"My Armenian friend is worth a thousand other friends."*

— added Ramiz.

## **Tbilisi, Morning. Teahouse**

The old part of town. Nicely tired after walking around. The weather is chilly. A cup of tea would be so good now. We spot a teahouse on one street and decide to walk in. As I sit down I can hear a couple of men nearby speaking in my mother language – Azerbaijani.

It turns out this teahouse belongs to an ethnic Azerbaijani. Now and then, though, the language of conversation over the table smoothly flows into another language. It is not Russian, or Georgian...

Seeing my puzzled face, one of the men greets me in Azerbaijani, and as it always feels somehow warm to run into your fellow compatriots in a foreign country I move my chair closer to his table without hesitation.

He has been living in Tbilisi for over 10 years and just two minutes later takes me on a journey I rarely get to travel. The South Caucasus, a region more defined on the map with its funny abrupt borders, appears to be sitting at the little square table.

In fact, he is not my fellow compatriot, even though his Azerbaijani is better than my own. His name is Albert and he is an ethnic Armenian.

He also sings folk songs in Azerbaijani by the legendary Armenian troubadour Sayat Nova, and quotes poems from the great Azerbaijani poet Samad Vurgun. Albert also has a large family with his wife, an Azerbaijani, and a dream – to cross the Azerbaijani border.

He introduces me to his best friend sitting next to him at the table.

His name is Ramiz, a 74-year old ethnic Azeri singer who sings Armenian songs. I ask him to sing a little for me, but he politely refuses, saying that there has been a loss in the family. His beloved wife recently passed away. She was Armenian.

The musical friends wax lyrically about each other's beautiful cultures, fascinating us with the similarities connecting them, and ponder the futility of the game that is the conflict between the two countries.

A few minutes later the owner of tea house, an ethnic Azeri, also joins in. He asks his waitress to bring some more tea. He speaks in Armenian to her, but she responds in Azerbaijani. She is an ethnic Armenian.

This is the melting pot that is Tbilisi, and this is my little Caucasus without borders and passports. This is an Azeri tea house visited as much by ethnic Armenians as it is by ethnic Azeris.

### **Afternoon. Armenian church**

I've never been to an Armenian church, for obvious reasons, but in Tbilisi I can visit whenever I like. There is one in the center of Baku, of course, but even if it is intact, its doors are now always closed.

This one, a stone's throw from a mosque, was built in the 7th century and Sayat Nova is buried here. A pleasant woman is

standing by a table in the back selling candles. When she learns that I'm from Azerbaijan a kind smile lights up her face.

She says that ethnic Azeris also visit this church and some even pray. She has many Azerbaijani friends, many of them with Armenian spouses. Karine is ethnic Armenian and dreams of visiting her friends in Baku.

### **Midday. Baku restaurant**

Upon entering, we can already guess the cultural mix to follow. The restaurant manager, an ethnic Azeri, says that Armenians love Azerbaijani cuisine as well. It's no surprise given how similar the two cuisines are.

Sometimes, she says, more Armenians wine and dine here than Azerbaijanis.

### **Evening. Tbilisi Airport**

With wonderful memories, it is with some sadness that I get ready to depart from Tbilisi, a city connecting people and bridging divides. It is the only place in the region where Armenians and Azerbaijanis can love, trust and become friends with each other.

At the airport, I look at the departures schedule to check my flight back home. If only I could catch a flight to Yerevan one day.

Perhaps unintentionally symbolic, the check-ins for the Baku and Yerevan flights are called at the same time.

Armenians mistakenly come to our counter before being politely told that theirs is the next one along. Meanwhile, flights from Baku and Yerevan are scheduled to arrive at the very same time.

If only the entire Caucasus could be like this, harmonic and synchronic. And why not? With overlaps in cuisine, culture, mentality and human emotions connecting us, is it so wrong to seek to coexist peacefully together?

Upon landing in Baku I receive a SMS from a friend in Armenia, but with telecommunications blocked the other way, I can't text her back.

One day I hope I can...





ARMENIAN CHURCH, TBILISI, GEORGIA © ONNIK KRIKORIAN 2009

MARINE EJURYAN

# Letter from Yerevan: Thoughts on the ultimate peace

For those of you that know me, but didn't when I was still a freshman or sophomore, you'll probably be surprised to hear that just four years ago I was one of those to be found among young Armenians shouting anti-Turkish and anti-Azerbaijani slogans during commemoration events. I was also the same person writing articles for my university newspaper with titles such as "The big hoax, Azerbaijan."

In retrospect, when I look back at those perhaps 'dark' years, I know that it was simply the time when I was at the peak of a process searching for myself, determining my own ideology and finding my own path in life. I can also assume that there are many other young people and teenagers in our countries who have also been through this before finally ending up where they are today.

And now, having just graduated with a MA in International Relations, I have also turned into someone who has dozens of Turkish and Azerbaijani friends. Among them, I have to say, some are very close indeed. I'm also someone who listens to Turkish and Azerbaijani music, reads books by authors from both of those countries, and finally a person who supports every genuine initiative that will lead to peace and a resolution of the conflict which keeps others apart.

Some might say that all those regional youth trainings, peace conferences or other related events are simply a waste of time as they change nothing in the current stalemate, while others consider them simply a source of money for organizations or groups involved in those activities. However, from my own experience, I can say that they were instead a turning point which have shaped my current views and opinions.

It was during such events that I first met young people from Azerbaijan and Turkey, talking to them about various issues from history to politics and ending up finding similarities in our culture, traditions and mentality. This dialogue also helped me to look at the same things from a different points of view, breaking stereotypes that I had which led to a change in my thinking on many different issues.

Another way I became acquainted with young Azerbaijanis was via Facebook, which has now become not only a place for us to remain in touch, but to also discuss politics, culture, and mentality. These virtual friendships have also later become real life meetings which, I have to admit, were really exciting for me. Don't ask me why because I probably won't be able to explain it, but I feel an inexplicable closeness to these people and everything related to them.

During one of the meetings with friends from Azerbaijan in Tbilisi, where I went for vacation in winter, we decided not to go back home with "empty" hands and held a flash mob, walking peacefully to the Georgian Parliament with a message of peace in the South Caucasus written on large posters in six different

languages (Armenian, Azerbaijani, English, French, Georgian and German).

Actually, an interesting incident happened during the flashmob when the police stopped us to ask what we were demonstrating for. When we told them that we were simply young people from Armenia and Azerbaijan calling for peace in the region their answer, as I'm sure my friends will agree, was inspiring. "Well done, guys!" they said. "You have no problem. Continue!"

And that wasn't the only refreshing incident. When hanging out in a Georgian restaurant the waiter serving us asked if we were from Azerbaijan, probably after hearing Azerbaijani being spoken at the table. "Yes, we are," a friend answered. "Except her. She's from Armenia" (yeah, I was the only Armenian that day). "That's already huge progress," the waiter responded looking serious.

There are many other such stories too, but what crosses my mind is the following. What is the point in just investing all our efforts into trying to prove to the whole world that we are right and the other side is wrong and must be blamed. What?

Nothing.



Nothing, but waste of time and effort, while unresolved conflict continues to incur greater economic, political and social losses and while the general population, which is the direct victim of the conflict rather than politicians, suffers from its myriad negative consequences. So, let's put aside for a while all those sensitive issues and conflicting interpretations of the past and try to talk about other common things. I'm more than convinced that these are many.

Dialogue.

This is the only path before us, just as it was in my case when talking with Azerbaijanis changed my view on many things. Talking and moving on. Cooperating and moving on. Only with this approach can many other sensitive issues find their ultimate solution as well. Instead, I always keep in mind this sentence, which I read in a book some years ago and want to share with you now.

"The opinion that neither side of the conflict can get "everything" is right. But this rightfulness is, so to speak, political. From a humanitarian aspect, both sides can get everything, as this "everything" is the ultimate peace."

MARINE EJURYAN HOLDS A MA IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS FROM YEREVAN STATE UNIVERSITY AND CURRENTLY STUDIES EU INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND DIPLOMACY AT THE COLLEGE OF EUROPE IN BELGIUM. SHE IS AN ACTIVIST WITH EXTENSIVE EXPERIENCE OF CROSS-BORDER PEACEBUILDING AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION PROJECTS.

HER RESEARCH INTERESTS INCLUDE PEACE STUDIES, REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS, WITH A FOCUS ON TURKISH-ARMENIAN AND ARMENIAN-AZERBAIJANI RELATIONS.





KHRMORT, NAGORNO KARABAKH © ONNIK KRIKORIAN 2009



MARINE EJURYAN

# Armenia-Azerbaijan: Time to live together peacefully again

“How can you learn Turkish?” my five-year-old cousin asked when he saw my Turkish text-book and asked what the book was for.

“They are our enemies, he went on to exclaim. “Turks and Azerbaijanis are bad people... and I hate them!”

Of course, I’m used to hearing these kind of reactions from people when they find out that I study Turkish. More often than not their reaction is “how can you learn ‘their’ language?” It’s either that or questions such as “isn’t it ugly?” (!)

And this is only because, I suppose, ‘their’ language is that of the ‘enemy...’

But what upset me most was my little cousin’s reaction. Even at such a young age he already had that ugly feeling of hatred. Probably it shouldn’t be much of a surprise when they hear stories

about “cruel enemies” on TV, radio, in kindergartens, and at school.

Even in families the word “Turk” is used as curse, and it usually implies both Turks and Azerbaijanis. On the other hand, the expressions “Ermeni” (Armenian) or “Ermeni dölü” (Armenian descendant) are used as insults by Turkish and Azerbaijani people.

Whenever there is need to defame someone, finding any connection or relationship between that person and Armenians is the simplest way. This simply proves once again that state propaganda functions perfectly in our countries.



Governments, mass media and some other institutions and individuals are so obsessed with maintaining an image of the “enemy” among their people towards the other side, that they use every possible opportunity to slander this “enemy.”

As a result, we witness propaganda everywhere and sometimes in the most ridiculous of forms. “I hate TV, I don’t watch it,” I remember one of my Azerbaijani friends telling me. “There is anti-Armenian propaganda everywhere, even in soap-operas!”

Yet, propaganda only prevents the peaceful resolution of the conflict. Both anti-Armenian and anti-Azerbaijani propaganda only increases the feeling of hatred towards the “enemy” in our societies and undermines any possible trust between the two nations.

And the fact is that there will not be the ultimate peace if the parties don’t trust each other and maintain an image of the “cruel enemy” in their minds. This is even the case if the two governments sign a peace agreement tomorrow.

A fierce struggle continues to be waged especially by historians from both countries even though their accounts of history strongly

contradict each other. What is more important for them is to merely represent the other side as the historical enemy.

And what we see in history books is only a collection of events when the two nations were in conflict with each other. There is not a single mention of when we were cooperating, fighting a common enemy, or were partners in trade and handicraft.

But if we can’t find such accounts in the history books, we can read examples of those close ties in some works of literature and poetry. Usually, however, for obvious reasons, they are generally ignored or not spoken about.

Yet recently I was told about a short novel by the outstanding Armenian poet and writer Avetik Isahakyan (1875-1957) called “Bayram Ali.” In it the author speaks about Armenians and Azerbaijanis living together and fighting against “the common enemy who took their territories and water”.

And in another novel by Aksel Bakunts (1899-1937), “Nut-trees of brotherhood,” the story is told of a strong friendship between an Armenian and an Azerbaijani during the clashes at the beginning of 20th century.

Only a few people have probably read these works even though both of the mentioned authors are very famous in the Armenian literature. Even so, I am not surprised that these stories aren't very popular and certainly not included in the school curriculum.

The same is true for other Armenian icons such as Sayat Nova, the 18th century troubadour, and Sergei Parajanov, the internationally renowned filmmaker. While the first wrote most of his songs in Azerbaijani, the second used an Azeri folk story for his last film, *Ashik Kerib*.

Both were men of the Caucasus and embraced all of its culture, but why do we need to know that we used to live in peace with our "enemy"? Really, why?

There are also similar examples in Azerbaijani literature too.

Two famous Azerbaijani poets, Nizami (1141-1209) and Khagani (1120-1199), speak with praise about Armenians in their works. "Some time ago when I came to Armenia I was lonely and desperate. But now I go back being highly honored," wrote Khagani<sup>1</sup>.

These are only a few examples, but I'm sure there are probably even more, telling of a time when there was friendship and cooperation between our nations. Even today they still live side by side with each other elsewhere in the world.

Tragically, however, many years of war, enmity, and negative propaganda have resulted in the current perceptions of the 'other' in each of our societies. Without a doubt it is now time to break the stereotypes Armenians and Azerbaijanis have of each other.

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 we can also do so here – in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh. What we need to do first, however, is to end the propaganda wars on both sides.

We also need time.

Time for both societies to learn to live together peacefully again.

<sup>1</sup> *Хагани. Избранные произведения. Баку, 1965; Литературный Азербайджан, октябрь 1960. С. 4*





HALO TRUST DEMINING, SUARASSY, ARMENIAN-  
CONTROLLED AZERBAIJAN © ONNIK KRIKORIAN 2006



SASUN KHACHATRYAN

# Beyond the Boundaries of Impossibility

When you are born into an Armenian family with terrible stories about a war waged nearly two decades ago passed down by relatives, it usually doesn't occur to you to think about dialogue, peace or reconciliation. This is especially true when that conflict effectively continues today and when you have grown up with images of atrocities haunting you from time to time. It is also the case when still have fresh personal memories from the bombing of your native village by Azerbaijani artillery deployed near Sadarak, Nakhichevan, in the early 1990s.

And how can you think of any possible engagement with a citizen from the other side when you are standing in a hilltop trench observing the frontline between Armenia and Azerbaijan during your military service in the army? Oblivious of yourself and bereft of your senses, you open fire on Azerbaijani soldiers in search of something badly needed having crossed the non-barbed border

demarcated in our imagination. You fire and it is an inexplicable force that makes you do so.

Your Azerbaijani counterpart might simply be loading a mule with the remnants of a bombarded and deserted house, probably to use as construction materials, but it seems like the right thing to do. And as soon as you do pull the trigger of your AK47 you start then filling in the blanks with your own story, seemingly persuasive, to sooth yourself and to ease your conscience. But as the dust settles it proves ineffective and you eventually realize that you failed in cheating yourself as common sense prevails.

Later, with a couple of years of experience in reporting and translation as well an emerging knowledge of conflict and peace-building, you find yourself hoist with your own petard, aware that

in all probability you are unable to answer to the simplest of questions:

Why?

Maybe it's just a simple expression of heroism, the demonstration of courage, or even just idle boasting to show the rank and file that you just prevented the enemy from using resource that you didn't use either. Maybe it's the duty of a soldier. Maybe it's reward-driven ambition conditioned by the possibility of earning just a little praise from your commander. Maybe you can call it by whatever name you like, but whatever you do, don't call it patriotism. Perhaps it is unmitigated temerity, callousness, immaturity or indoctrination and prejudice.

Maybe these are also some of the most undesirable remnants of war.

Why shoot at each other while serving at the front line unless there is no other choice, especially when in the silence of the night you could instead negotiate with the enemy to reach an unwritten, albeit and judicially non-binding, agreement that would see no single shot fired from either side except in circumstances which

leave you with no other choice. And that is what you could do, and fortunately, on frequent occasions, it is.

Now, more than ten years after my military service, I find myself with a few Azerbaijani friends. Not only do we write to each other from our two countries following occasional meetings in third countries, but when we are together for cross-border projects we dine and drink together, offering mutual toasts or finding ourselves out clubbing in Tbilisi, Georgia, the closest neutral venue for coming together. Unfortunately, what also comes to the fore is some kind of discomfort, confusion, shame and regret for what was done in the past.

The first time I came into direct contact with citizens of Azerbaijan was in September last year. Three journalists each from Armenia and Azerbaijan made up a small group on the way to Abkhazia with a Dutch coordinator. Before then I could never have imagined that I'd be sitting next to Azerbaijanis in the same mini-bus on our way to Sukhumi to report on the situation there more than a year after the August 2008 war.

It even made us sometimes forget our own conflict over Nagorno Karabakh when we instead engaged in heated discussions over the Russian-Georgian one as well as its consequences.

I have a photo and in it the guy is me and the girl in front asleep is an Azerbaijani journalist and almost a stranger to me at the time. I remember only her name – Nigar. Packed in the mini-bus like sardines, it was comfortable to put my hands over the front seat. Exhausted after some five or six hours on the road, Nigar must have fallen asleep as her head slipped off the headrest and fell somewhere between the headrest and on part of my hands.

I did not move them, but had to wait until her head was resting on something else. Our Dutch coordinator noticed what was happening in the back, took out his camera and shot the moment.

But the question I still ask myself is what has changed in me and perhaps what helped me rid myself of some deep-rooted prejudices and stereotypes to think in quite another way. More reasonable, balanced, and most importantly, cautious, I am unwilling to fan the flames of the conflict over Nagorno Karabakh at this level. For better or worse, I instead consider that

engagement is the only path to walk down when it comes to the resolution of conflicts.

It is always possible to right past wrongs, and dialogue on an individual level, as well as by civil society, should be brought to life – and the sooner the better. After contact with Azerbaijanis my conclusion is that nothing is impossible, even if it might seem unrealistic to others at first sight.

SASUN KHACHATRYAN IS A JOURNALIST BASED IN  
YEREVAN, ARMENIA.





AZERI WEDDING, KARAJALA, GEORGIA © ONNIK KRIKORIAN 2009

LIANA AGHAJANIAN

# A view from the Diaspora: There is only humanity

When the Nagorno-Karabakh war was taking place in the early 1990s, I had already settled with my family as a toddler from Iran into the strange and enchanting world of America like many other members of the Armenian Diaspora. Even though my parents had escaped to the U.S. as refugees after nights spent with a newborn in a basement during the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution proved too much to handle, our lives were as deeply engulfed by Iranian culture as they were by Armenian tradition.

With grandparents that hailed from Tabriz, I heard stories of Azeri and Armenian families co-existing peacefully, almost as if they were one in the same. But that was before I entered the Armenian Diaspora private school system that spans from Los Angeles to Boston. Everything turned from grey to black and white. There was no “Armenian and Turkish” or “Armenian and Azeri.” There was just “right” and “wrong.”

Two rich populations of people with enough culture between the both of them were reduced to a piece of land.

As a Diasporan, it’s hard to connect with anything more than a symbolic, theoretical idea of two countries thousands of miles away. So the land, the war, the army fatigue became the only concepts to adhere to. Changing these and decades of other cemented perceptions in the realm of Armenian culture and its association with Azeris, Turks and more became the roots out of which Ianyan magazine was born.

It was also these same perceptions that scared me into believing that I was alone in my fight for peace, reconciliation and understanding. I had frightening dreams of getting bombarded with hate mail and worse – no readers.

To my surprise, I began to make connections with people from more backgrounds than I ever imagined – all which would not have been possible without the encouragement and connections of individuals whose passion for change was contagious and one of the most effective democratic tools in use today: social media.

Through them, I cemented relationships with Armenians spanning everywhere from Montreal to Fresno – and an entire army of amazing people in Armenia who make me smile from ear to ear every time I think about them. Somewhere down the line, I even had a privilege to get to know a handful of non-Armenians who have had longstanding love affairs with all that spans beyond Mt. Ararat.

But the most significant and poignant links came in the form of all that we do not speak of, and if we must, speak ill of. A series of audio Skype interviews published on Global Voices Online between its Caucasus regional editor and myself as well as two prominent Azeri bloggers introduced and connected us all.

There was Arzu Geybullayeva, the regional analyst from Baku whose blog, *Flying Carpets and Broken Pipelines*, is an insightful mishmash of news and observations from Azerbaijan, and Scary

Azeri, the London transplant whose humorous outlook on life is well worth the read and relatable, no matter where you descend from. There is also Nigar Hacizade, a recent college grad from Istanbul who beautifully united Azeri and Armenian cultures through the struggles and stereotypes women from both cultures face.

I wrote about Norooz, a rich tradition celebrated by Azeris, Iranians and subsequently many Iranian-Armenians like me. In the course of a week, Armenians and Azeris had come together, leaving comments full of the celebration of love and life – there was no hate anywhere to be found. Even those unfamiliar with the custom joined in to wish everyone a Happy New Year.

Then we moved on to food – the world's best uniter - at least where two cultures who indulge in the pleasures of the palate more often than we'd like to admit are concerned anyway. Posts about Easter Bread produced some of the most smile-inducing comments I've ever read on the site – it was sheer proof that we had so much to celebrate together.

A post by Fulbright scholar and journalist Ashley Killough about a Peace Corps experience in Armenia wasn't immune to the



Armenian/Azeri connection either. “I wish the similarities between Armenians and Azeris were more widely recognized than there differences,” the comment read. “Hopefully there will be peace between these two great countries in the near future.”

Another post about Onnik Krikorian’s project highlighting unity in diversity via Tsopi, a Georgian village where Armenian and Azeri families live together in complete harmony became an agent of change – an Armenian linked and quoted the piece on a forum and wondered about all the hate spewed between the two cultures over the years after seeing the innocent faces of ethnic Armenian and Azeri children who shared their lives together in peace in Georgia.

Yes, we’ve been doing it wrong, he thought.

The more I wrote, the more it was evident that all of us – Armenians, Turks, Azeris – shared more than we were led to believe. In the simplest of terms, we became humans – a notion we had forgotten for way too long. The most rewarding element of this entire incredible experience was realizing that we had all become agents of change right in front of our eyes.

“There are no nations,” said Isaac Asimov. “There is only humanity. And if we don’t come to understand that soon there will be no nations because there will be no humanity.”

And while the change will come gradually and slowly and we will still be exposed to those who prefer to spread intolerance and misunderstanding, the tides are turning and the momentum is big. Taking a step to understand a fellow human being beyond the politics, territorial lines and propaganda isn’t hard at all – you just have to take the time to try.

LIANA AGHAJANIAN IS THE EDITOR OF THE  
INDEPENDENT ONLINE ARMENIAN JOURNAL IANYAN  
AT [HTTP://WWW.IANYANMAG.COM](http://www.ianyanmag.com).



ETHNIC AZERI GIRL, MOSQUE, TBILISI, GEORGIA © ONNIK KRIKORIAN 2009

YELENA OSIPOVA

# A view from the Diaspora: Thoughts on the ‘other’

It's difficult to be an Armenian. Not so much because of all the bloody history (in every sense), or the conflicts, or the never-ending migrations... The major issue for me lies in separating the fact from fiction, the real from the imaginary, the myths, the legends, and all the propaganda from the reality I live as an Armenian; especially, as an Armenian abroad.

Growing up in Yerevan during the early years of “transition”, we quite literally lived through the Karabakh war. I guess I'm fortunate not to have been affected in any more direct way, but living the consequences was, I believe, more than enough to instill hostility. Hostility towards an “other” whom I never really met, but always heard so much about.

The fact that I was born into a family of Diasporan repatriates made this perspective even more twisted, since there was another

“other” too, who tortured and mutilated my nation about a century ago, and who, somehow, came to blend into the current picture as well.

Then, there was the inherent and, perhaps, inevitable “otherness” that I felt myself, never being quite able to feel normal within a society which, I was told, is supposed to be mine, but which, for some reason, did not fully understand my ways, my food, or even some of my language (the confused faces of some classmates who heard me use Western Armenian words are still vivid in my mind).

Twisted, and yet very overpowering, as I wanted to be a “proper Armenian.” I had come to learn that to achieve that I would have to live up to certain expectations: dedicate my life to “The Cause” and to the struggle for an idea that was romantic and potentially



explosive at the same time. I was supposed to hate, and I was supposed to fight.

I'm glad I didn't. And I have only the "other" to thank for it.

As a freshman at college – in a country far, far away - I happened to attend an Azeri cultural evening. At a certain point, I should admit, I got confused since it was very difficult to stay aware of the fact that it was not an Armenian cultural evening: the only good reminder of that was the Azeri flag hanging on the wall.

Music? All too familiar. Traditional dress? Wait a minute, I thought that's Armenian! Folk dance? Those are Armenian moves! Food? Since when is dolma Azeri?

Another conversation with an Azeri classmate revealed that he had a member of his family killed in the Karabakh war, and that just like myself, he was supposed to despise "the other". But I, in all my adolescent naïveté, thought we were the only victims? It hadn't even crossed my mind that I could have been an "other" too, belonging to a group that could have inflicted destruction, pain, and suffering upon someone else...

Yes, thank you, dear schoolmates, for helping me: helping me realize that I did not know you; for helping me go beyond the restrictive map and look further; for helping me shake off the straight-jacket put on me by my proper "Armenianness"; for helping me live a life not full of hate.

I believe I owe thanks to that baklavaci in Istanbul's Grand Bazaar, too, who told me of his "amazing Armenian friends" back at his home village; just as I am grateful to the Turkish reporter who was all too eager to discuss the Genocide with me, sharing some ideas, and inviting me to her town.

I am not saying it's all roses and love out there. Quite the contrary: seems like the pressure and the war rhetoric just keep increasing by the day.

Yet, we should not forget that the "average person" would not choose to go to war if he had a basic livelihood and certain achievable aspirations in life; but it's difficult for states to ensure this basic livelihood and aspirations – especially if we are talking about young, unstable, and insecure states.

Instead, it is much easier to apply the “nation” label (i.e. straightjacket) and manipulate the minds: the lack of a better alternative and the diverted focus of attention might, after all, fuel sufficient “courage and dedication” for a conflict...

Why not realize that over centuries – before we were even aware of our “nationhood” as such (since the latter is, quite surprisingly, a very modern concept) – we have evolved as a region, sharing land and culture? Why not admit that we are not that different, after all, and that we truly can get over the endless and pointless political debate and continue the process that was so abruptly interrupted with the creation of the mostly artificial borders?

Why not focus all that energy and effort toward sharing, rather than dividing and alienating? Why not realize that we are human beings – first and foremost – before we are assigned a “national” label?

I feel like the naïveté is creeping back, again. But then, I see like-minded people from the region, not just abroad, but also online, and that gives me hope: hope that, perhaps, one day I can share “dolma” and “tan” (or, “ayran”) with Georgian, Azeri, and Turkish

friends in Yerevan, without being frowned upon by my own “compatriots.”

YELENA OSIPOVA BLOGS AT [HTTP://LENA-  
GLOBALCHAOS.BLOGSPOT.COM](http://lena-globalchaos.blogspot.com)



ALAGYAZ, REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA © ONNIK KRIKORIAN 2004



SCARY AZERI

# A view from the Diaspora: Sometime in my lifetime

The first time I saw an Armenian name in the comments of my blog I was confused. Who was this man, why would he be so friendly to someone who called her blog Scary Azeri? He turned out to be a journalist working in the region. Very shortly after his first comment, I noticed that he linked to my blog posting. Sure, I was grateful for the exposure.

However, it was a slightly controversial topic, about restoring virginity back home.

‘Why would he choose that particular piece?’ was my first reaction. ‘He might want to portray my home country in the worst possible light! What if he is using me to laugh at Azeris?’ Pretty soon I realized that all he was trying to do was bring the two nations closer, in whatever way he could, by getting people to communicate.

Since then, over a year ago, Scary Azeri is being read by quite a few Armenians. In fact, at some point, there were days when my blog would receive more hits from Armenia than from Azerbaijan. I was not sure if it was a good thing- I still wanted to be allowed to visit Baku without getting into any trouble!

If you think I am exaggerating, you simply don’t have any idea just how paranoid some Azeris are about any association with the “enemy”. A little while ago, when I mentioned my Armenian readers to my friend, she was sincerely concerned. She told me that she closed her Odnoklassniki account after a few of her Armenian ex-classmates from Baku added her to their friends.

She was worried what might happen if she keeps in touch with them. She was concerned someone might be watching her every move online.

I thought she was losing it, to be honest. But she blamed me in becoming too western. Too relaxed and unaware of the reality back home. Perhaps it is understandable she was so paranoid. I did hear of people in Azerbaijan being questioned by the authorities after voting for Armenia during the Eurovision. I mean, seriously?

But I wonder if things are changing too rapidly for anyone to control or stop them.

Yes, a lot of my Azeri friends, people I love and respect, still shock me with their reluctance to consider the possibility of a friendly future with Armenians ever again.

Yet, the more I look around, the more I realize that there are plenty of people, mostly the younger generation, who are more than happy to communicate. People who just want to talk to each other, without dwelling on the same issues and throwing them in each other's faces over and over again.

One Azeri friend said that, even though he understands the sentiments, he could never forget or forgive what happened. 'You

have not been personally touched by the war', he added. He was there, in Karabakh, loading the corpses into the truck.

Maybe. I was thinking about what he said, and wondering if that is why there are so many young people amongst those who are happy to be friends again. Maybe they are too young to remember.

But what about us? People who were there when everything happened?

Okay, I have not been personally touched by the conflict. I did not lose a lover or a relative; I did not even know anyone who died. Even so, we all suffered from being at war. The damage to our lives, to our countries left us crippled for years. But, besides remembering the time when it all changed so tragically, I am also old enough to remember what it was like before.

In my class at school, half of us were Azeris. The rest were other nationalities. I did not even register the fact that some of my classmates were Armenian until people started to leave. Did I suddenly start hating them just because they had an Armenian name? Of course not. Does my mother hate her university friend who had to flee from Baku, but then, years after, having found my

mum on Facebook, got in touch? I watched them talk on Skype, laughing, sharing their memories. Nothing had changed between them. Nothing ever could.

My blog is never political. Well, almost never. I talk about cultural stuff, funny or peculiar things we, Azeris do that seem bizarre to the rest of this world, and the other way round.

What has become apparent from the year of blogging and comments I get from the Armenian readers is that we are very similar in a lot of ways. I am not sure why we should be surprised about that. We were part of the same country for an awfully long time. It isn't just the war that we share but so much more. Our mentality, cultures and backgrounds are interlinked and the similarities come through in our music, food and customs. The internet opened the doors in the virtual world that have been shut by the war in the real life.

But, in the real life, how far does this conflict stretch across the borders? What happens abroad, far away from the conflict zone?

Well, I would argue that it fades away.

In Moscow, Bakuviens hang out together. And when I say Bakuviens, I don't mean only Azeris. Just like in Tbilisi, on the neutral territory, a lot of Azeris and Armenians happily co-exist. They share toasts, laughs and happy memories. They date, make friendships and forget the problems they left behind.

In the UK, I occasionally run into Armenians, too. Once at work, in London, I was introduced to a new temp. Her name was Natalia and there was something awkward in the way she looked at me when I said I was from Azerbaijan that made me realize she might be an Armenian. It was not a hostile look. It was the look of confusion, embarrassment and discomfort.

She turned out to be an Armenian whose parents immigrated before she was born. She did not know much about Azeris (or Armenians for that matter) and she did not know how I would react when she told me she was an Armenian. Once we established that neither of us was going to kill the other, we could relax and chat, laugh at the awkward moment we shared, and enjoy talking about the problems in the region, cultural aspects and things we both wished were different.



And that is what it feels like to someone living outside the conflict zone. Of course I remember what happened. But I also remember the good parts of the past. Every war eventually comes to an end. And I sincerely hope there is going to be peace in the region sometime soon.

Sometime in my lifetime.

SCARY AZERI BLOGS AT

[HTTP://SCARYAZERI.BLOGSPOT.COM](http://scaryazeri.blogspot.com).

# CONFLICT VOICES

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DESIGN, PHOTOGRAPHY, EDITING AND CONCEPT BY  
**ONNIK KRIKORIAN** / [HTTP://WWW.ONEWORLD.AM](http://www.oneworld.am)

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