Identity and Antagonism in the Nagorno-Karabagh Conflict

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Abstract

In over 20 years of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, there has been no significant progress towards peace. It has been argued that there is now no incentive for leaders to agree to a compromise because citizens are unwilling to accept one. In this context, the way in which citizens conceive of themselves and the 'enemy' has real implications on the outcome of the conflict. This paper examines the assumptions and qualities attached to Azerbaijan and the future of Nagorno Karabakh in the newspaper *Respublika Armenia* during four crucial periods for the conflict in the last decade. *Respublika Armenia* represents a moderate, state-sanctioned discourse within Armenian media. The findings show an entrenching of distrust towards Azerbaijan and consistently rigid notions about the future of Nagorno-Karabakh in publicly accepted Armenian discourse. In fact, there is some indication that not only the discourse but the realities of the conflict are worse now than they were ten years ago. This leads into a wider discussion about anti-Azeri sentiment as a part of modern Armenian identity.

Keywords: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh, conflict resolution, discourse analysis

BACKGROUND

For the last two decades, neighboring Armenia and Azerbaijan have been at odds and totally isolated from each other, following a period of ethnically motivated violence and a war over the would-be autonomous enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh.[1] No serious or lasting steps towards resolution have been made since the Russian-brokered cease-fire in 1994, in spite of the OSCE Minsk group's mediations, other attempts at mediation by foreign officials, and the fact that the status quo negatively impacts both Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Nearly 600,000 internally displaced Azerbaijanis (IDPs) are still living in isolated communities that were (are) intended to be temporary (Huseynov, 2005), while lingering animosity coupled with Turkish and Azerbaijani blockades stunt Armenia's potential growth by limiting trade and excluding Armenia from lucrative regional projects.[2] The line of contact, which roughly follows the official border between the two countries in the north, and then juts into Azerbaijan such that almost all of Nagorno-Karabakh and some of the surrounding area is de facto in Armenia, is now occasionally breached only by bullets.

Although the peoples of Armenia and Azerbaijan have many centuries of shared history, the current conflict between the two countries (simply termed the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict) is very much of the 20th century. There are a number of factors that contributed to the growing enmity between the two peoples in the late 80s, which, after having erupted into violent conflict in 1988, has continued until today.

The first violent conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis took place in 1905 in Baku, then part of the Russian Empire, when a period of internal unrest had weakened imperial central authority, allowing tensions between ethnically-identified social classes to boil over (Armenians were favored by imperial authorities and generally wealthier). The events of 1905 contributed to the growth of both Armenian and Azeri nationalism. Nagorno-Karabakh held an important place for both of these movements – to the Armenians it was seen as a stronghold of autonomy, and to the Azeris it linked their contemporary identity with their ancient roots (Croissant, 1998: pp.9-12). The Ottoman genocide of Armenians during World War I would loom large over Armenia's relationship with Azerbaijan. Despite their not having been involved in the Genocide, Azerbaijan's linguistic and ethnic proximity to Turkey ties them into a powerful narrative of suffering and persecution, which played a role in another eruption of violence in Baku in 1918 and has serious implications for the modern-day conflict.

Armenia and Azerbaijan fought over the three disputed regions[3] on their southern borders as short-lived independent states in 1918-1919, and it was the Soviets who would ultimately decide on the matter after their takeover in 1920. Having initially decided to award all three territories to Armenia for their conversion to Bolshevism, failure to immediately enact this change along with complaints from the Azerbaijani SSR and an anti-Bolshevik uprising in

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1 This work uses 'Nagorno-Karabakh' to describe the territory in question as it is the most commonly used English transliteration, although some sources use 'Nagorny Karabakh' which is the correct transliteration of 'Нагорный Карабах,' the Russian name of the region. The term 'Nagorno-Karabakh' is in fact derived from the adjective 'Нагорно-Карабахская ' which is often used to modify 'republic' or 'oblast.'

2 The Baku-Ceyhan pipeline transits through Tbilisi in part (or perhaps entirely) because it cannot possibly cross Armenia, and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway under construction is a response to the closure of the Baku-Gyumri-Kars railroad, which was the previous rail route for goods and people crossing between Eastern Turkey and Azerbaijan. For further reading on the regional impacts of these projects, see Samuel Lussac's "The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railroad and Its Geopolitical Implications for the South Caucasus" in Caucasian Review of International Affairs, Volume 2(4)-August 2008.

3 From West to East, Nakhchivan, Zangezur (now Syunik), and Nagorno-Karabakh

Armenia caused the initial agreements to be reconsidered. The decisions to give Nakhchivan to Azerbaijan and Zangezur to Armenia were largely *faits accomplis*, and Joseph Stalin of the Caucasian Bureau decided to place Nagorno-Karabakh inside Azerbaijan as an autonomous oblast (NKAO), whose borders gave it a majority Armenian population (de Waal, 2003: pp.127-130). During the Soviet period, the people of Nagorno-Karabakh were content living within the Azerbaijani SSR, although they never lost their sense of connection to Armenia, using their limited autonomous power to safeguard Armenian culture, and petitioning to join the Armenian SSR in 1945, 1965, and 1977 (de Waal, 2010: p.105).

The rise of nationalism in Armenia and Azerbaijan in the late Soviet period, as in many other Soviet republics, was the result of a web of Soviet institutional factors and local cultural ones. Although changes in Soviet structure and rules made room for some amount of nationalist action starting in the 1960s (e.g., the Genocide Memorial in Armenia, or institutionalizing 'republican languages'), *glasnost* and *perestroika* were what made it possible for nationalist movements to organize in earnest (de Waal, 2005). Gellner has stated that nationalist movements are particularly suited to situations like the thaw of the Soviet Union, because in cases where there is no strong tradition of local political organization, movements based in cultural and social structures can build much faster than civic ones (Gellner, 1992: pp.249-250).

The increased interest in national revival tapped into a wealth of documents in both Armenia and Azerbaijan that had been accumulating, as part of a decades-long 'historical arms race' of sorts, portraying conflicting historical evidence that depicts each side as the longest-standing nation in the region, and most importantly, as the custodians of Nagorno-Karabakh (Shnirelman, 2001: pp.154-184). Thus, as nationalist sentiment grew on both sides of the border, ideas about the nature of Nagorno-Karabakh became more and more opposed. There were also concerns that as nationalism in Azerbaijan increased, it would put pressure on the Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as concerns that Karabakh Azeris were not being appropriately accommodated by the largely Armenian Karabakh leadership. According to Posen's definition, Armenia and Azerbaijan at the time fit a number of criteria for a security dilemma (Posen, 1993: p.37), which may, along with the opposing and increasingly antagonistic narratives on either side of the conflict, have contributed the ethnic violence that began to take place in the region.

By the time the NKAO held a resolution to join the Armenian SSR in 1988, there had already been accounts of ethnic violence between the two ethnic groups. Violence continued to escalate in spite of (or, some have argued, partially as the result of) the central administration's attempts to ease tensions between the two republics, and as the Soviet Union fell apart there were already full-scale military offensives taking place in Nagorno-Karabakh (Cornell, 1999: pp. 22-27). When Armenia and Azerbaijan began their existence as sovereign countries, they were already in a state of war. After three years of fighting, during which Azerbaijan had suffered several internal political crises and Armenia had managed to gain control of most of the former NKAO and seven of the districts surrounding it, Armenia and Azerbaijan signed a Russian-brokered cease-fire in Bishkek. To the Armenians, the result of the war was to correct the historical injustice by which Nagorno-Karabakh was assigned to Azerbaijan in the 1920s, while to the Azerbaijani side it represented Armenian aspirations on Azerbaijani territory.

The two main parties to the conflict have conceived of the legitimacy of the secession/occupation in opposing ways, so that to Armenia it was an entirely legal secession and Nagorno-Karabakh can never accept Azerbaijani rule, while to Azerbaijan it is an illegal occupation and justice dictates that Azerbaijan's official borders be restored, with Nagorno-Karabakh inside them (Oskanian 2005; Mammadyarov 2005). Armenia and Azerbaijan have each identified with one of two opposing principles of international sovereignty: self-determination or territorial integrity, respectively.

The two populations on either side of the conflict, in part due to the decades of isolation, still express high levels of antagonism towards each other (CRRC, 2009). As a result, and perhaps most troublingly, there does not appear to be any political incentive at this point for the president of either country to come to a compromise. The elites have been exploiting the existing nationalist sentiment and antagonism inside their own countries for political gain, and in so doing have nurtured a political environment in which it is prohibitively risky to suggest making concessions of any kind. Indeed there has already been an instance, in Armenia in 1998, when political elites were able to capitalize on the Armenian president's attempt at reconciliation to force him out of office[4] (Astourian, 2000). The ethnic animosity that motivated violence before the war has persisted, and is compounded by the continued separation of the two populations and the rhetoric of elites.

This elite rhetoric is the primary focus of this work. Discourse plays a particularly important role in ethnic conflicts, because so much of the nature of the conflict lies in the opposing parties' perceptions of each other. Given that the intractable attitudes in Armenian (and Azerbaijani) society are a major driving factor in the continued stalemate, understanding the way in which attitudes towards the 'other' are formed is particularly relevant to the outlook of the peace process.

This work intends to examine the world according to state-sanctioned discourse in Armenia, and to examine what elements of the discourse on Azerbaijan remain constant across time and across changing political situations. More particularly, it intends to isolate what 'Azerbaijan' means in the world depicted by reports from *Respublika Armenia*, the official government newspaper (in Russian). The analysis will thoroughly survey the news output around different key events in recent Armenian history, to describe what 'Azerbaijan' meant at those times and to

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4   This event was by no means entirely caused Ter-Petrosyan's resignation; discontent with the economy and some of his positions had already eroded his support, and in the lead up to the announcement of the proposed agreement his own party was fracturing. However, the suggestion of a conciliatory agreement on Karabakh created a focal point for public discontent that the opposition used to speed the dissolution of Ter-Petrosyan's government.

identify commonalities across the different times and events.

METHODOLOGY

Critical discourse analysis can refer to a wide range of methodologies with diverse theoretical underpinnings. The specific focus of this work is inspired by the work of Dorothy Holland dealing with 'figured worlds.' Holland defines the 'figured world' as a "socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others" (Holland, 1998: 48). The 'figured world' essentially represents a framework in which the set of assumptions about the nature of the world, of other people, of the self, and of relationships can be examined. A figured world is populated by the "figures, characters, and types who carry out its tasks and who also have styles of interacting within, distinguishable perspectives on, and orientations toward it" (Holland, 1998: 51); the way these characters are represented in a given discourse is indicative of their relationship to and how they are perceived by the makers of that discourse.

This work was conceived with the following methodological concerns in mind:

- Source selection: The official Russian-language newspaper, *Respublika Armenia,* was chosen for both academic and logistical reasons. A newspaper (with government affiliations) will not have the same need to tend toward diplomatic speech that official government statements do, and will be created by a larger circle of people. While it reports official goverment business and sometimes features politicians as contributors, it does not consist only of official statements, and as such can represent a wider range of viewpoints than official business alone – or give a broader view of what discourse that is considered viable in association with government sources. In addition, *Respublika Armenia* has a more complete archive available online than many other regional newspapers, many of which have no articles dating from before 2008, at the earliest. The longer time-span allows for a more interesting evaluation of the existence of long-standing trends in sanctioned discourse.

- Time period selection: The times chosen for evaluation do not represent the basis for a strict comparative survey, because of the difficulty in isolating all factors that may affect the content and distribution of news articles over a given period of time. They are intended to provide a 'snapshot': a small-scale but detailed description of the image of Azerbaijan at the   time in question. In addition, different political situations were used to identify which lines of discourse persist across different political climates. The dates chosen are the following

    o   25 May 2001 – 25 June 2001, the breakdown of the Key West talks

    o   20 January 2006 – 20 February 2006, the Rambouillet talks

    o   10 February 2008 – 10 March, 2008, the presidential election and subsequent protests

    o   15 May 2012 – 15 June 2012, cease-fire breaches

After having isolated all the articles referencing Azerbaijan in a given time period, the next step was to evaluate the positioning of Azerbaijan or Azerbaijani actors in reference to the subject matter and the author, as well as to determine what the text assumed about Azerbaijan and Azerbaijanis. In addition, note was made of any words frequently tied to Azerbaijan and its actors, based loosely on Fairclough's concept of "collocation," which describes words that are more likely to appear together than other combinations (Fairclough, 2003). While there are many different factors influencing the resolution of the conflict whose discursive representations may be relevant to settlement prospects (attitudes towards the resolution process, attitudes towards the OSCE Minsk group and other international actors, ideas about the legitimacy of Nagorno-Karabakh's secession), they were not included in this analysis for the sake of clarity and space, and because they do not immediately speak to the image of Azerbaijan in Armenian society.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

By and large, the broad themes of discourse about Azerbaijan observed in *Respublika Armenia* have been consistent. A number of narratives remained constant across time, while some themes remained constant but changed in intensity or character, and a few appear only at certain times. One of the pitfalls of this type of research is that the presence and predominance of different narratives will naturally somewhat reflect the state of the news at that time: during times of increased violence there will of course be more indication of narratives involving violence, while during a period of negotiations there are likely to be more depictions of the resolution process and the future of Nagorno-Karabakh. Thus, it is important when comparing the discourses across time not to draw conclusions based solely on the predominance of a given line of discourse, rather taking into account the way in which that discourse is presented and its relevance given the context of the time.

Those themes that appear throughout are meaningful because they are evidence of a line of thinking that is so pervasive to the idea of 'Azerbaijan' that it will appear in a wide range of contexts. Azerbaijani elites and their behavior are characterized negatively in all cases, although the specific negative characteristics with which they are associated varies slightly. Dishonesty (along with being dishonest for political gain) is a theme that pervades all time

periods, associated with the conflict specifically and in a range of other contexts. Azerbaijani elites are often outright condemned for this fact, though there is also a certain tendency to simply dismiss Azerbaijani elites as ridiculous or emotional through the use of mockery, particularly in the later articles – one article from 2008, titled "Joke of the day," is just one long quote from former Azerbaijani Minister of Education Firuddin Jalivov about the origin of Armenians. Azerbaijan's poor human rights record is also a common theme, featuring prominently in the articles from 2001, 2006, and 2012, either in reference to specific events (e.g., Council of Europe recommendations, the Eurovision song contest) or in more general terms. Based on the findings here, the idea that Azerbaijani elites and the government of Azerbaijan are dishonest (often maliciously) is an essential part of modern Armenian discourse on Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan is associated with aggressive tendencies across all time periods, although in 2001 it is related to only one specific incident in the past (the destruction of Martakert[5]), while the articles from 2006, 2008, and 2012 feature numerous references to aggressions in the present and past. This topic pervades the discourse in 2012, where more than half (15/27) of the articles analyzed reference Azerbaijani agression, using terms like 'saboteur', 'criminal', 'provocative', and 'barbaric' (this is partly to be expected, given the context of the cease-fire violations occurring at the time). References to Azerbaijan's threats of future aggression are distributed similarly: they appear across all time periods, but are only mildly prevalent in 2001 and rise in prevalence until 2012. In 2006, 2008, and 2012 this discourse is accompanied by the theme of Azerbaijan's military expansion, with the implication that Azerbaijan is preparing for renewed war conditions. Based on the findings here there appears to be a steady increase in the prevalence of Azerbaijan's aggressive tendencies in discourse through the years (not only that this theme is most prevalent in 2012, but that it is represented steadily more in each snapshot).

Articles from 2012 also contain a number of discourses that are not observed or barely observed in the other time periods under investigation. Apart from one mention of the strength of the NKR military in 2001 and a vague mention of Azerbaijani military incompetence in 2008, the narratives of Azerbaijani military weakness and Nagorno-Karabakh's readiness to defend itself (along with Armenian military forces) are unique to 2012. The one article reporting a youth group's calls for vengeance cannot be considered a discourse on its own, but it adds to the sense that in 2012 Armenian discourse is much more reactionary than previously observed. Much of the emphasis on the militaristic possibilities for the conflict is likely spurred by the events of the time, however it is important to note that the period of time investigated in 2008 also saw unprecedented violence on the line of contact but did not see the same militaristic lines of discourse.

The question of neutral mentions of Azerbaijan is interesting, because it in some sense serves as a marker for the delineation between 'Azerbaijan the enemy' and just Azerbaijan – more neutral mentions in the media detracts from the idea of Azerbaijan as enemy above all else, while fewer neutral mentions will support this idea. Over the time periods discussed, Feb-March 2006 saw the highest proportion of neutral mentions, with a third (11/33) of the articles mentioning Azerbaijan neutrally, while May-June 2012 saw the least, with less than a sixth (5/27) of articles mentioning Azerbaijan only neutrally. The snapshots from 2001 and 2008 each saw close to a third of articles mentioning Azerbaijan only neutrally (5/17 and 8/25, respectively). The discrepancy in neutral mentions leads to some interesting observations about the contexts in which these mentions appear. There are some common topics for articles in which Azerbaijan is described neutrally that reoccur across the years. Short write-ups of political events, including the president's weekly schedule, peace talks, and diplomatic visits, which tend towards more diplomatic language, are examples of this. Sports stories and stories about local or regional economic trends are an important group because they demonstrate that it is not unusual to refrain from making negative comments on Azerbaijan or Azerbaijanis outside of a political context[6]. In general, Azerbaijan was more broadly painted in a negative light in the 2012 snapshot than in previous years, and for the most part sports and economic interests were fields in which Azerbaijan was often referenced neutrally.

In the same vein, it is important to note that the majority of references to Azerbaijan involve elites (intellectuals, press, political and military decision-makers), rather than citizens. Apart from the one mention of "the Azerbaijani mentality" in an article from 2001, describing Azerbaijanis in general as gullible and ignorant, the only even implied negative mentions of regular Azerbaijani citizens come in reference to historical violence and especially the Sumgait[7] massacre, although even in that case the blame is in some places ascribed to Soviet Azerbaijani authorities. In reference to the human rights situation in Azerbaijan, its citizens are sometimes portrayed in a sympathetic light (particularly but not exclusively ethnic minorities). Whether or not this distinction is felt by readers,

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5   A primarily Armenian region of Nagorno-Karabagh damaged during the war – the article in question focused heavily on the damages to this region while ignoring other (previously predominantly Azeri) cities that were destroyed.

6   There is actually an interesting story (discursively speaking) that plays out in an article from 2006: it reports on Yerevan soccer team 'Pyunik' being penalized for pulling out of a tournament game against Baku 'Neftchi' in Moscow. In a separate paragraph it is explained that "Russia allegedly could not provide safety guarantees" and Pyunik were concerned because of "clashes between fans and players that took place at a game in last years tournament," without specifying any involvement on the part of Azerbaijan. Interestingly, the clashes during the previous year were in fact between Armenian and Azerbaijani fans, a point that other Armenian news sources linked to the decision to forfeit, as well as reporting on Azerbaijani fans making threats: http://www.armtown.com/news/en/a1p/20060119/35095/ (from A1+, reported by Armtown) [10 May 2013]

7   The Sumgait Massacre was a series of violent riots targeted at Armenians in the industrial town of Sumgait, near Baku, in February 1988. With ethnic tensions already high, the riots were apparently sparked by reports of violence against Azerbaijanis in southern Armenia. For more details, see (de Waal, 2003: p. 31-37)

it seems that in the times observed for this research, the writers of *Respublika Armenia* are deliberately painting Azerbaijani elites rather than regular citizens in a negative light.

The last thing that bears pointing out is the space of things that are not said in this sampling of Armenian media. Given the current political atmosphere, it is not possible to expect that these things might be said, but part of the point of looking at discourse is thinking about which actions and outcomes it values, and which ones it ignores. There is never any suggestion of Armenian (i.e. mutual) culpability in any of the events of the last 20 years. In this light, it is no surprise that reconciliation and more specifically compromise are not seriously considered. While there are abundant statements on the need for a peaceful resolution and the importance of the peace process, there are no mentions of compromise or of any outcome that does not satisfy all of the Armenian side's current expectations.[8] In the world reported by *Respublika Armenia*, Nagorno-Karabakh is independent from Azerbaijani control and on its way to recognition but (thanks largely to untrustworthy Azerbaijani elites) a peace agreement is not on the horizon.

CONCLUSION

Through a thorough study of the news coverage around specific events in recent history, it has been established that across different years and political climates, official Armenian news sources consistently present an image of Azerbaijan as dishonest and a hindrance to the peace process. There is a reason why OSCE Minsk Group negotiations moved away from presenting full settlement proposals years ago, opting rather for smaller agreements on 'guiding principles' for the process. At the current time, the requirements of each side are mutually exclusive to the point where there is no room for overlap, and as such a solution that would be acceptable to both sides does not exist. This state of total incompatibility is related to the rigid and opposing discourse on both sides. Understanding the nature of that discourse and what drives it will help to understand the difficulties in reaching an agreement, although it will not necessarily lead to ways to address the problem.

The point of this work is not that *Respublika Armenia* is specifically fabricating or manufacturing a negative image of Azerbaijan, because it's not – it is by and large reporting on actual events or statements. However, the point is that, through actions on the part of Azerbaijan *and the way they are subsequently interpreted and presented,* this is the image of Azerbaijan that exists, and that is presented to Armenia by official actors. A study on Azerbaijani elite discourse aimed at how they justify their position on the conflict also revealed serious impediments to peaceful resolution (Tokluoglu, 2011). In this conflict, the statements made by Azerbaijani and Armenian elites feed off each other, as a provocative statement from one side is met with a provocative reaction from the other, causing distrust to grow entrenched in both societies. This distrust poses problems not only from the point of view of coming to an agreement in the peace process, but also in the more general sense of future harmony in the region. It is likely that this growing distrust will have to be addressed before a real peace settlement can be signed, but it is certain that distrust has to be addressed before the two peoples can coexist peacefully.

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8 In fact, there were instances in the 2008 presidential elections where having agreed to a peace plan in the past was a serious political liability. The fact that Levon Ter-Petrosyan agreed to a step-by-step deal in negotiations was held against him (54), and there appears to have been a significant negative publicity campaign to spread news that he might have once privately agreed to a Meghri corridor exchange (54, 66).

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