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In the Karabakh Conflict's Shadow: Ethnic Divides and the Challenges of Social Cohesion in Georgia (Report from the Project)

W cieniu wojny o Karabach. Wyzwania spójności społecznej
i etniczne podziały w Gruzji (raport z projektu)

Summary: This report from the project *Azerbaijanis and Armenians in Georgia: Uneasy Peace and Conflict Mobility in the Context of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War* presents the findings of field research conducted particularly in the rural areas of Kvemo Kartli, Samtskhe-Javakheti, and cities of Tbilisi, Marneuli, and Akhalkalaki, and media research carried out between 2020 and 2022. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has affected not only Armenia and Azerbaijan but also Georgia, home to sizable Armenian and Azerbaijani minorities. Although relations between these groups were largely stable before the war, the hostilities reignited tensions, manifested through grassroots (pro-war) activism, propaganda, and ethnic divisions fueled by social media. The impact of war varied by region – mixed villages maintained fragile coexistence, while homogeneous communities saw intensified animosity. External influences from Armenia and Azerbaijan shaped conflicting narratives, deepening polarization. Despite a slight post-war improvement, the continuing difficult political situation deepened distrust, fueled by propaganda and limited interethnic interactions. Georgia's lack of



a comprehensive minority policy has led to the marginalization of both communities, posing challenges to social cohesion and national integration.

Keywords: the 2020 Karabakh war, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, interethnic relations, Georgia

Streszczenie: Niniejszy raport z projektu „Azerbejdżanie i Ormianie w Gruzji: Trudny pokój i mobilność konfliktu w kontekście wojny o Górski Karabach w 2020 roku” przedstawia analizę mediów oraz wyniki badań terenowych, przeprowadzonych w latach 2020–2022 w Gruzji, wśród Ormian i Azerbejdżan na obszarach wiejskich w Kvemo Kartli i Samtskhe-Javakheti oraz Tbilisi, Marneuli i Akhalkalaki. Konflikt w Górskim Karabachu ma wpływ nie tylko na Armenię i Azerbejdżan, ale także na Gruzję, gdzie Ormianie i Azerbejdżanie stanowią dwie największe mniejszości. Choć stosunki między obiema grupami były w dużej mierze stabilne przed wojną w 2020 r., działania wojenne spowodowały wzrost napięć, które manifestowały się poprzez oddolny (prowojenny) aktywizm, propagandę oraz podziały napędzane przez media społecznościowe. Wpływ wojny różnił się w zależności od regionu – w wioskach mieszanych utrzymymano kruchy balans, podczas gdy w społecznościach homogenicznych wrogość była bardziej widoczna. Wpływy zewnętrzne z Armenii i Azerbejdżanu kształtowały sprzeczne narracje, pogłębiając polaryzację. Pomimo pewnej poprawy stosunków po wojnie, dalsza trudna sytuacja polityczna przyczyniła się do pogłębienia braku zaufania, napędzanego przez propagandę oraz ograniczoną interakcję między obiema grupami. Dodatkowo, brak spójnej polityki rządu gruzińskiego dotyczącej mniejszości prowadzi do marginalizacji obu grup, stanowiąc wyzwanie dla spójności społecznej i integracji narodowej Gruzji.

Słowa kluczowe: wojna w Karabachu w 2020 roku, Ormianie, Azerbejdżanie, stosunki międzyetniczne, Gruzja

Field research report: introduction

This report examines how the 2020 Karabakh war¹ and the ongoing political climate affect Armenian-Azerbaijani relations in Georgia. It focuses on everyday interactions, perceptions, and the subtle dynamics of coexistence.² Drawing on

¹ In this report, we use the terms “Nagorno-Karabakh” and “Karabakh” to refer to the region. The term “Artsakh,” which is the Armenian designation for the area and the official name used by the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh (the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic), is only used when required in a specific contextual or historical reference. This approach ensures neutrality and aligns with commonly accepted international terminology.

² Research project: “Azerbaijanis and Armenians in Georgia: Uncertain Peace and Conflict Mobility in the Context of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War” was funded by NAWA (Narodowa Agencja Wymiany Akademickiej – Polish National Agency for Academic

ethnographic fieldwork and media analysis, this report analyzes how conflict resonates through local communities, influencing interethnic relations, modes of communication, and narratives of belonging. It is divided into two parts: the first presents an ethnographic account based on field research, while the second part presents the findings from media monitoring. The report covers the period from 2020 to 2022, with some updates on the current situation.

According to the results of the 2014 Census, Azerbaijanis comprise 6,3% (233,000 people) and Armenians 4,5% (168,000 people) of the Georgian population. Armenians constitute the majority population in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region (54,6%); others also reside in the Kvemo Kartli region. Most Azerbaijanis populate Kvemo Kartli (42%), Kakheti (10%), Mtskheta-Mtianeti (2,5%), and Shida Kartli (2%).³ There are also historical Armenian and Azerbaijani communities in Tbilisi. Traditionally, Armenians have settled in the Avlabari district, while Azerbaijanis have occupied the area of Ortachala, as well as some parts of the area near the Lisi Lake. Azerbaijanis have also lived compactly in the Ponichala settlement, located in the suburbs of the capital. There are newcomers from both nations in Tbilisi, including professionals, students, and social activists. Both Armenians and Azerbaijanis inhabit other Georgian regions in small numbers.

When Azerbaijan launched military operations on September 27, 2020, to regain Karabakh and surrounding territories, both communities in Georgia mobilized, organizing rallies, providing humanitarian aid, and participating in war propaganda. The conflict fueled tensions, especially through social media, where misinformation and hostility spread rapidly. Although mixed villages in Kvemo Kartli maintained a fragile coexistence by avoiding war discussions, segregated communities experienced heightened animosity.

The war's outcome shifted regional power dynamics, increasing Azerbaijan's influence and complicating Georgia's neutral stance due to economic ties with Azerbaijan and Turkey. Despite recent efforts, Georgia lacks a comprehensive minority integration strategy, with issues such as limited Georgian language proficiency, employment discrimination, and political underrepresentation deepening alienation among Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Minority rights activists highlight barriers to integration, including nepotism in employment and restricted opportunities for minorities despite educational initiatives like the 1+4 program.⁴

Exchange) within the NAWA Urgency Grants programme, 2021. The project was affiliated with the Institute of Slavic Studies, the Polish Academy of Sciences.

³ Geostat, *National Statistics Office of Georgia*, Tbilisi 2014. Available on-line: <https://www.geostat.ge> [accessed on January 22, 2022].

⁴ Launched in 2010, the 1+4 program helps minority students learn Georgian for university entry, fostering integration and positive social impact. However, activists note that

Religious and ethnic tensions further complicate relations. As for Armenians, despite their shared Christian identity with Georgians, the relationship between the two has always been marked by mutual reluctance. Some activists even discuss Armenophobia in Georgia. Regarding Azerbaijanis, as Muslims, they are often viewed with distrust by many Georgians. Zaza Mikeladze, a former representative of Muslims of Georgia in the Georgian Parliament and an activist of the Solidarity Community NGO, expressed the opinion that Georgian policies towards Islam are marked by discrimination, and Muslims, regardless of their ethnic group, are not treated as full-fledged citizens.⁵

Ultimately, Armenian-Azerbaijani relations in Georgia remain vulnerable to political shifts in Armenia and Azerbaijan. While some individuals maintain friendships by avoiding politics, distrust prevails where interactions are minimal. The absence of state-led interethnic dialogue leaves both groups reliant on external narratives, reinforcing biases.

Research methodology

The first phase of this ethnographic study was conducted during and after the 2020 Karabakh war (Sep–Nov 2020), involving observations of community events and ten interviews in Tbilisi, Kvemo Kartli, and Samtskhe-Javakheti. The second phase (Dec 2021 – Sep 2022) included fieldwork in Kvemo Kartli (Gardabani, Marneuli) and the villages of Tsopi, Shulaveri, Vakhtangisi, and Jandar, as well as in Samtskhe-Javakheti (Akhalkalaki, Akhaltsikhe, Ninotsminda) and the villages of Sulda, Adana, and others. Additional data was also collected in Tbilisi. Around 100 interviews, conversations, and five focus groups were conducted, alongside participation in social and political events. Anna Cieślewska was the project's principal investigator, conducting field research in the Gardabani District, Samtskhe-Javakheti, Tbilisi, and Marneuli. She also collected some data in Yerevan (Armenia). She organised and conducted focus groups with the contribution of Ketevan Khutsishvili, Aitan Mekhtieva, and Rima Marangozyan. Klaudia Kosicińska, a researcher within the project, contributed by collecting ethnographic materials in mixed Armenian-Azerbaijani villages and some other locations. In addition, Aitan Mekhtieva and Rima Marangozyan monitored media (Dec 2021–Sep 2022) under Ketevan Khutsishvili's supervision, analyzing Facebook pages, activists' accounts, and Armenian and Azerbaijani media. Due to the topic's sensitivity, anonymity was ensured for most interlocutors, except public

nepotism and discrimination still limit job opportunities for Armenians and Azerbaijanis. R. Amirejibi, K. Gabunia, *Georgia's minorities breaking down barriers to integration*, Tbilisi 2021; K. Mammadli et al., *The Implications of the Second Karabakh War on Georgia's Non-Dominant Ethnic Groups*, Tbilisi 2022.

⁵ Anna Cieślewska's interview with Zaza Mikeladze, January 1, 2023, Tbilisi.

figures. The report presents a selection of the collected ethnographic data, with additional findings featured in subsequent scientific articles and media coverage.⁶

Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Georgia

Armenians have lived on the present-day territory of Georgia since the 4th century, with many settling in cities such as Tbilisi, where they played a significant role in the country's economic and cultural development. Some assimilated into Georgian society and adopted Georgian surnames, while others retained their distinct identity. Migration waves continued in the 19th and early 20th centuries due to Ottoman policies that targeted minorities.⁷ Armenians from the region of Javakheti refer to themselves as *Javakhetis*, while the Armenian term *virahay* (Georgian Armenians) describes Armenians from Georgia (Armenian: *Vrastan*, Georgia). In Georgian, they are called *Somkhebi*.

Azerbaijanis have historical ties to Iran, Turkey, Russia, and the Caucasus. They migrated to the territory of modern Georgia between the 9th and early 20th centuries.⁸ Before the Soviet era, they were referred to as "Tatars," "Turks," or simply "Muslims." The 1926 Soviet census categorized them as *Turks*, but after 1936–38, the term *Azerbaijanis* was officially adopted.⁹ Common markers include *Georgian Azeri*, *Azerbaijani Turk*, and *Borchali Turk*, alongside regional or historical terms like *Qara-Yazi*, *Karapapakh*, and *Terekeme*. The term *Muslim* is frequently used, often to signify cultural rather than strictly religious identity.¹⁰

6 A. Cieślewska, "Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Georgia: The Role of Religion and Religious Leaders in the Second Karabakh War," *Caucasus Analytical Digest* 2023, vol. 134, pp. 12–16; A. Cieślewska, K. Kosicińska, "Navigating Turbulence: Azerbaijani-Armenian Relations in Georgia Post-2020 Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict," in: *Fiction, Memory, and Ethnic Politics in the South Caucasus*, eds. M. Mamedov et al., London–New York: 2026; K. Kosicińska, "«Maybe He is Thinking Something on the Inside but Is Not Showing It to Us»: The Dynamics of Neighborhood Relations Between Azerbaijani and Armenian Communities in a Multiethnic Region in Georgia After the Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020," *Sprawy Narodowościowe: Seria Nowa* 2023, vol. 55, article 3208, pp. 2–18.

7 S. Cornell, *Autonomy and Conflict. Ethnoterritoriality and Separatism in the South Caucasus – Cases in Georgia*, Uppsala 2002, p. 30; M. Lordkipanidze, *Istoriia Gruzii XI-nachalo XIII veka*, Tbilisi 1974.

8 S. Cornell, op. cit.; S. Yolaçan, "Azeri Networks through Thick and Thin: West Asian Politics from a Diasporic Eye," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 2019, vol. 10(1), pp. 36–47.

9 S. Cornell, op. cit.; S. Yolaçan, op. cit.; T. Świętochowski, "National Consciousness and Political Orientations in Azerbaijan, 1905–1920," [in:] *Transcaucasia: Nationalism and Social Change: Essays in the History of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia*, ed. R.G. Suny, Ann Arbor 1996, pp. 191–210.

10 K.-J.T. Storm, "A People In-Between: Examining Indicators of Collective Identity among Georgian Azeri-Turks," *Ethnopolitics* 2020, vol. 19(5), pp. 501–523.

Amirejibi and Gabunia note that, despite strong ties to Armenia and Azerbaijan, and limited participation in Georgian social and political life, most Armenians and Azerbaijanis consider Georgia their homeland. Their identity is shaped by factors such as their place of residence, age, education, economic opportunities, political engagement, and proficiency in the Georgian language. Many also see no contradiction in identifying with Georgia and their ethnic homeland.¹¹

The 2020 war in the Georgian context

The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war sparked strong reactions among Georgia's Armenian and Azerbaijani communities, who actively supported the respective sides. Due to the pandemic, discussions shifted to social media, where both sides engaged in propaganda and spread misinformation, influenced by Armenian and Azerbaijani media. Despite the Covid-19-related restrictions, both sides organized rallies, with Azerbaijanis demonstrating in Marneuli, Tbilisi, and Gardabani, while Armenians gathered in Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda (Samtskhe-Javakheti). The Azerbaijani embassy and local organizations supported events in Marneuli and Tbilisi. Azerbaijanis linked the Karabakh conflict to Georgia's territorial disputes, such as those in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, expecting reciprocal support from the Georgian government.¹²

Both communities organised humanitarian aid. Armenians collected funds and supplies through churches and the Javakhk NGO, which was established at the beginning of the 2020 war, raising 500 tons of aid and \$370,000. Azerbaijanis contributed food and livestock, and one of the villages sent 605 goats for the Azerbaijani army. However, aid collected by Armenians was more significant and organized. Around 250–300 Armenians from Georgia reportedly fought in Karabakh, mostly from Samtskhe-Javakheti, while about 22 Azerbaijani volunteer fighters from Georgia were killed.¹³ Volunteers from Georgia were generally not allowed to join the fight, leading to protests among some Azerbaijani groups – those who participated held Armenian or Azerbaijani passports at the time of the warfare.

The war had a significant impact on interethnic relations in Georgia, including in education. Previously friendly Armenian and Azerbaijani students became divided, leading to the creation of separate online learning groups to reduce tensions

¹¹ R. Amirejibi, K. Gabunia, op. cit.

¹² A. Cieślewska, K. Kosicińska, op. cit., pp. 182–200.

¹³ *Gürcüstan əsilli Birinci və İkinci Qarabağ müharibəsi şəhidləri haqqında sənədlər*. Available on-line: <https://24news.ge> [accessed on: December 31, 2022]; A. Cieślewska, *Between Georgia and Armenia: Javakhetian Armenians at the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War*. Available on-line: <https://stories.eastory.org/> [accessed on: December 31, 2022].

during Georgian language classes within the 1+4 program.¹⁴ Social pressure to take sides was strong, stigmatizing those who remained neutral. Some peace initiatives emerged, such as interfaith prayers at the Peace Cathedral, Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia in Tbilisi, which attracted participants from Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. According to Malkhaz Songulashvili, the head of the church and bishop, several people from the Azerbaijani and Armenian communities, along with their religious leaders, attended the first prayer. Due to the pandemic, the following prayers were organized online and offline. Azerbaijanis and Armenians living in Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and other countries, as well as representatives of other nations, joined online prayers.¹⁵ While isolated clashes occurred in Kvemo Kartli, local leaders mostly resolved them. Police intervened minimally but increased their presence in mixed areas after the war ended to prevent major conflicts. Georgian Azerbaijanis widely celebrated Azerbaijan's victory, while Armenians mourned the loss, further deepening divisions.

Kvemo Kartli: regional overview

The Kvemo Kartli region (*Lower Kartli*) is located in eastern Georgia and comprises the municipalities of Bolnisi, Dmanisi, Tetrtskaro, Tsalka, Marneuli, and Gardabani, as well as the city of Rustavi. Georgia's key economic and transportation hub, the province is home to Azerbaijanis, Armenians, Greeks, Russians, Georgians, and eco-migrants.¹⁶ The region features mixed Armenian-Azerbaijani villages, Tsopi, Khajorni, Mirzoevka (Norgiughi), and Shulaveri. Armenians also live in Marneuli and several other places.¹⁷ This part of the report examines Armenian-Azerbaijani relations in Marneuli and Gardabani, where Azerbaijanis form the majority (83,8% in Marneuli, 43,53% in Gardabani) and Armenians a minority (7% and 0,7%, respectively).¹⁸ This part of the study also covers the Lilo Market in Tbilisi and the focus groups with students and Azerbaijani residents.

¹⁴ A. Cieślewska, K. Kosicińska, op. cit.

¹⁵ Anna Cieślewska's interview with Professor Malkhaz Songulashvili, head of the Peace Cathedral, Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia, January 1, 2023, Tbilisi.

¹⁶ International Crisis Group, *Europe Report N°178 – 22 November 2006: Georgia's Armenian and Azeri minorities*, 2006. Available on-line: <https://www.refworld.org/reference/countryrep/icg/2006/en/18653> [accessed on: December 31, 2022]; C. Berglund, "Accepting Alien Rule? State-Building Nationalism in Georgia's Azeri Borderland," *Europe-Asia Studies* 2020, vol. 72, no. 2, pp. 263–285.

¹⁷ V. Romashov, *Living Together with Difference: Narratives and Practices of Co-existence in Armenian-Azerbaijani Rural Communities in Georgia*, Tampere 2022.

¹⁸ Geostat, op. cit.

The Marneuli town, the center of Azerbaijanis in Georgia, hosts cultural institutions and Azerbaijani media. The primary sources of income for Azerbaijanis in the Marneuli municipality include agriculture, cattle breeding, commerce, and transportation. As for the Gardabani district, apart from agriculture and husbandry, Azerbaijanis are also engaged in trade at the Lilo market in Tbilisi, the Istanbul Bazaar (Rustavi), and the car market in Rustavi. In addition, many families are supported by remittances sent by migrants from Russia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Poland, and other countries. There is an increasing level of grassroots activism by individuals and NGOs addressing the political and social challenges faced by Azerbaijanis in Georgia and advocating for the promotion of their culture. These include Salam, the Solidarity Museum, and others.¹⁹

Kvemo Kartli was established as a territorial-administrative unit (mkhare) – during the early 1990s reforms, following Georgia's independence. The name Borchalo, which partly covered the territories of the Marneuli, Bolnisi, and Dmanisi municipalities, derives from the Borchali Turkic tribe, who settled there in the 17th century when the territory was under the rule of the Safavid dynasty from Persia. Following the Russian colonization of the South Caucasus, the region was renamed the Borchali uyezd (district) of the Tiflis gubernia (governorate) in the Russian Empire. During the Soviet era, Borchalo was divided into the Bolnisi, Gardabani, Dmanisi, and Marneuli regions of the Georgian SSR, with most residents being Azerbaijanis. In the period of Tsarist Russia, today's Gardabani was a part of the Tiflis uyezd of the Tiflis Governorate. It was divided into two administrative units: the Qarayazskiy district (the southern part) and the Sartichalskiy district (the northern part). The Soviets renamed the Qarayazskiy district to the Gardabani district in 1947. In 1948, the industrial city of Rustavi was established, contributing to the region's development.²⁰

Ethnic tensions first emerged in Kvemo Kartli in 1989 when Azerbaijanis demanded autonomy for Borchalo. Although short-lived due to strong Georgian-Azerbaijani relations and the relatively good living standards of Azerbaijanis, tensions resurfaced in the early 1990s with the rise of nationalist movements. On the other hand, paramilitary units, composed of former military servicemen and street teenagers, spread fear in Kvemo Kartli and other parts of Georgia, with the notorious

19 A. Kvakhadze, *Unknown Suburbs: Azerbaijani Settlements of the Gardabani Municipality*. Available on-line: <https://gfsis.org.ge/files/library/pdf/English-2772.pdf> [accessed on: December 31, 2022]; A. Kvakhadze, *Georgia's Fertile Crescent: Marneuli Municipality*. Available on-line: <https://gfsis.org.ge/files/library/pdf/English-2921.pdf> [accessed on December 31, 2022].

20 A. Kvakhadze, *Unknown Suburbs...*, op. cit.

Mkhedrioni (*horsemen/knights*) particularly active in the region. These groups targeted ethnic minorities and even ethnic Georgians, forcing some communities into self-defense. In mixed Armenian-Azerbaijani villages, both groups united to protect their homes.²¹

During this period, the *Geyrat* movement was established in Marneuli to defend Azerbaijani rights in Georgia and mediate between Georgian and Azerbaijani authorities. Despite the ongoing war in Karabakh, Azerbaijanis and Armenians maintained cooperation, particularly through trade at the Sadakhlo market located on the border of Georgia and Armenia in the village of Sadakhlo. Nevertheless, during the first Nagorno-Karabakh war in 1991–1994, many Azerbaijanis from Georgia fought for Azerbaijan, while local communities provided humanitarian aid.²²

Azerbaijanis from Gardabani and Rustavi are generally considered more integrated into Georgian society, demonstrating higher proficiency in the state language and engaging more frequently in daily interactions with Georgians. In contrast, many Azerbaijanis in the Marneuli district remain culturally and politically detached from the Georgian society. However, our research shows that the Azerbaijani villages near the Georgian-Azerbaijani border in Gardabani are just as isolated as those in Marneuli. Limited contact with Georgians and strong transnational ties to Russia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey significantly shape their identities, just as much as their Georgian citizenship.

Narratives about the Karabakh conflict in Kvemo Kartli and Tbilisi

The first anniversary of the 2020 war was marked with a large celebration in Tbilisi, supported by the Azerbaijani Embassy and SOCAR (The State Oil Company of the Azerbaijan Republic). The second anniversary was more modest, likely due to increased tensions and ongoing negotiations. Azerbaijanis, influenced by Aliyev's "Strategy of Victory," gained confidence, believing that coexistence is possible only if Armenians accept Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan. Despite some reconciliation efforts, prejudice has remained a dominant force.²³

21 W. Górecki, "Rejon Marneuli – główny węzeł komunikacyjny Zakaukazia," [in:] *Nowe szlaki transportowe na Południu WNP. Azja Centralna i Zakaukazie*, Warszawa 1998, pp. 143–147.

22 Wojciech Górecki's interview with Rafik Gadziyev and Dawid Akhmedov, February 5, 1998; Anna Cieślewska's interview with a former vice director of the Sadakhlo market, August 3, 2022.

23 A. Cieślewska, K. Kosicińska, op. cit.

Lilo Market, Tbilisi

Layla, an Azerbaijani vendor at the Lilo market in Tbilisi, articulated perceived cultural and social differences between Azerbaijanis from Azerbaijan and those residing in Georgia. “Azerbaijanis from Azerbaijan eat vipers,” she remarked, using this expression to underline what she saw as a distinction in customs and attitudes. She further reflected on interethnic relations, noting that while tensions between Armenians from Armenia and Azerbaijanis from Azerbaijan are pronounced, such antagonisms are less evident in the Georgian context. Residing in Rustavi, Layla recounted a personal experience: during a visit from her husband’s relatives from Azerbaijan, they were visibly unsettled by the presence of her Armenian neighbor, fearing that she might poison them, suspicions Layla herself considered irrational. The neighbor, sensing discomfort, eventually ceased her visits until the relatives had left. According to Layla’s words, local Armenians should not be held responsible for the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh: “They know Armenia is to blame, but what can they do?” This comment reflects her political view, while also suggesting a degree of empathy toward local Armenians and an attempt to maintain social balance.²⁴

Ali and Sevinj, traders originally from villages near Gardabani but currently residing in Tbilisi, observed that most Azerbaijanis in Lilo tend to express uncritical support for President Aliyev’s policies regarding Nagorno-Karabakh. While commercial activities facilitated relatively peaceful interactions during the conflict, latent ethnic tensions continued to underline social relations. Ali remarked, “There is no friendship,” capturing a pervasive sense of mistrust. In contrast, Sevinj noted, “People have anger inside but do not show it,” highlighting the hidden nature of interethnic grievances. Both interlocutors criticized the rise of nationalism but acknowledged the enduring strength of ethnic loyalties. Despite these ongoing tensions, everyday life persists; for example, their son and his Armenian girlfriend, briefly separated due to the war, were able to reunite in the aftermath, illustrating the complex interplay between conflict, identity, and personal relationships.²⁵

Gevorg, an Armenian vendor at the Lilo market, deliberately refrains from discussing the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to preserve commercial relationships with Azerbaijani customers. He reflected that “it is always perceptible – one’s feelings toward others,” emphasizing the subtle yet persistent emotional undercurrents shaping everyday interactions. Gevorg characterized the conflict as largely meaningless and attributed its persistence to Russian geopolitical interests, suggesting external manipulation as a key factor in sustaining tensions. Furthermore, he expressed the

²⁴ Anna Cieslewska’s conversation with Leyla, June 6, 2022, Lilo market, Tbilisi.

²⁵ Anna Cieslewska’s various conversations with Ali and Sevinj, May–July, 2022.

view that Armenians and Azerbaijanis share more cultural and social similarities than either group does with Georgians, highlighting the complex layers of identity and affinity that transcend national borders within the region.²⁶

As a multiethnic urban center, Tbilisi functions as a site of sustained social interactions between Azerbaijani and Armenian communities across domains such as commerce, education, and everyday life. The city operates as a shared social space where intersecting identities, historical narratives, and collective memories form the dynamics of intergroup relations. Within this context, Tbilisi simultaneously facilitates cooperation and negotiation as well as the reproduction of tensions and prejudices, reflecting the complex nature of coexistence in multiethnic settings.

Students' perspectives on the 2020 conflict

A focus group organised at the premises of the Tbilisi State University included seven students (3 Armenians – 2 females, 1 male; 4 Azerbaijanis – 3 females, 1 male).²⁷ The students came from various regions of Georgia, including Samtskhe-Javakheti, Kvemo-Kartli, and Tbilisi. While acknowledging the emotional toll of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, the interlocutors reflected on the conflict in a measured and ambivalent manner. Their narratives revealed a simultaneous awareness of the war's divisive consequences and an effort to maintain social equilibrium in the Georgian context. Some described their families' direct or symbolic involvement through providing humanitarian aid or having relatives fighting at the front line, indicating that transnational kinship ties continue to shape local understanding of the conflict.

During the escalation of hostilities, tensions surfaced within student communities. One widely recounted incident involved a dispute over the question of "to whom Karabakh belongs," which erupted among students during the height of the 2020 conflict. Despite these moments of confrontation, post-war interactions often reflected a complex coexistence: while certain familial, professional, or academic relationships endured across ethnic lines, others were strained or interrupted by the war. Several students emphasized that, although they shared the same educational institutions, Armenian and Azerbaijani students at Georgian universities tended to remain socially segregated. Interethnic engagement was described as limited and largely confined to formal or institutional settings. However, student narratives revealed a range of positions, often oscillating between identification with kin-state politics and a desire to transcend them. As one Azerbaijani student reflected: "At first, I was neutral. A citizen of Georgia should be neutral because both Armenians and Azerbaijanis live here.

²⁶ Anna Cieślowska's conversation with Gevorg, June 6, 2022, Tbilisi.

²⁷ The focus group with the students, May 4, 2022, Tbilisi.

But I have relatives in Azerbaijan. I love them, and I thought: 'Maybe they are being killed?' It was difficult for both sides." An Armenian student similarly emphasized civic identity over ethnic division: "The war is the worst thing that could happen. It should not affect our relationships because we are citizens of Georgia." Other students articulated a shared sense of loss and disillusionment: "There is no winner in this war," "Both sides have losses," "The soldiers fighting did not want this either. It is all politics, and everyone is a victim," "They send 20-year-olds to die. We do not know why. It is a political game."

Most participants expressed a desire to form friendships with people from the opposing group and believed that the conflict should be resolved peacefully. However, the opinions expressed by the students differed from those of ethnically homogeneous focus groups composed of only Armenians or Azerbaijanis. Participants in these groups declared their willingness to cooperate with another party, but they distrusted its representatives and spread false information.

Gardabani municipality: perspectives on the 2020 war

Vakhtangisi, a village located near the Azerbaijan border crossing (closed since 2020), is primarily inhabited by Azerbaijanis, with a small number of Georgian and Armenian families also residing there. During Soviet times, the settlement was part of an ethnically diverse *kolkhoz*, populated by Georgians, Armenians, Germans, Russians, and Ukrainians. A focus group of seven participants (4 men, 3 women) included retirees and young adults (mostly students).²⁸ Although participants aimed to remain neutral, strong emotions about Karabakh were evident. Nationalist sentiments occasionally emerged, particularly regarding perceived historical injustices and distrust toward Armenians. However, these feelings were tempered by everyday practices of coexistence and participation in shared civic spaces.

Several male interlocutors referenced historical grievances, framing Armenia's very existence as "a product of Russian imperial strategy" that, in their view, disrupted Turkic unity. Others reflected on the ruptures in personal relationships during the 2020 war, recalling how previously cordial connections with Armenian acquaintances were severed, particularly through social media or the cessation of communication altogether. These micro-level dynamics mirrored the macro-level polarization occurring across the region.

A recurring theme was the tension between ethnic identification and national belonging. As one male participant remarked, Azerbaijanis in Georgia are not citizens of Azerbaijan—Armenian counterparts often overlooked an important distinction that

²⁸ The focus group with the villagers, June 4, 2022, Vakhtangisi.

he felt. He emphasized that both communities' alignment with their respective kin states risked destabilizing the Georgian context, adding, however, that while Azerbaijani narratives were grounded in "truth," Armenians in the majority were disseminating "misinformation".

Participants also spoke of the emotional complexity surrounding the war's outcome. One woman recounted the widespread celebrations among local Azerbaijanis following Azerbaijan's military victory, but also acknowledged that for families who had lost loved ones, the question of "who won" was not that important. It presents the emotional differences within communities themselves.

Despite such tensions, many participants underscored the pragmatic and often deeply personal nature of interethnic relations in Georgia. Everyday life continued to provide opportunities for contact and cooperation: attending each other's weddings, funerals, and neighbourhood events remained common. As one older man noted, although nationalist discourse was gaining visibility in diasporic contexts, such as Russia, where his son had both Azerbaijani nationalist acquaintances and Armenian friends, these developments had not significantly affected interpersonal relations within Georgia. "We live in Georgia, so we remain quiet," he explained, articulating a localised ethic of restraint aimed at maintaining social harmony.

An Armenian family residing in the village of Vakhtangisi described a general sense of social integration within their local context, though they also noted the presence of subtle, underlying mistrust. During the 2020 war, relatives from Armenia expressed concern for the family's safety, reflecting fears projected from across the border. The family tried to reassure them by saying that things were calm around them. Reflecting on the broader conflict, the son from this family expressed frustration with its historical continuity, rhetorically questioning the basis of the dispute and referring to it as "a hundred-year war." His comment captured a sense of fatigue and detachment from the dominant nationalist narratives. Following Azerbaijan's military victory, public celebrations erupted in the village, which the family found unsettling. However, they also observed that not all members of the Azerbaijani community endorsed these displays of triumph; some neighbors expressed disapproval of what they perceived as excessive celebrations.²⁹ In contrast, Irakli, an ethnic Georgian from a nearby village, observed that many young Azerbaijanis are nationalists and support Azerbaijan's policies. He thinks they live in isolation from Georgia's main currents due to economic, social, and political circumstances. As a result, they are neither in Georgia nor Azerbaijan, and they are susceptible to Azerbaijani propaganda.³⁰

²⁹ Anna Cieslewska's conversation with the Armenian family, October 29, 2022, Vakhtangisi.

³⁰ Anna Cieslewska's conversation with Irakli, October 29, 2022, Vakhtangisi.

The case of Vakhtangisi, located on Georgia's borderland, illustrates how the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict continues to hold significance in local communities far from the frontline. Azerbaijani residents generally identify as Georgian citizens and maintain peaceful relations with Armenian neighbors, in everyday interactions. However, moments of heightened tension, such as during the 2020 war, reveal the underlying mistrust and emotional complexity that lie beneath the surface of coexistence. Social isolation of the village reinforces nationalist narratives shaped by Azerbaijani and Turkish media, local leaders, and kinship networks. Consequently, for many people, Karabakh remains a powerful symbol of historical injustice and ethnic loyalty, even among those with no direct connection to its territory.

Marneuli municipality: perspectives on the 2020 war

Marneuli, home to a large Azerbaijani population in Georgia, saw visible war propaganda during the 2020 conflict. Many locals have families in Azerbaijan or live between the two countries, which shapes their views on the Karabakh conflict. In contrast to the more segregated border villages of Gardabani, the mixed neighborhoods of Marneuli offer greater opportunities for everyday interaction between Azerbaijanis and Armenians. Yet the 2020 war brought latent tensions to the surface, exposing underlying divisions.

Seven people (4 females and 3 males) of different ages from the town and surrounding villages attended the focus group in Marneuli.³¹ Participants reported that the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war had no direct impact on their day-to-day relationships with Armenians in Marneuli. However, as one male interlocutor cautiously noted, "You never really know what someone thinks; each side supported their own." Such comments suggest that, while overt conflict was avoided, mutual perceptions remained shaped by ethnic affiliations and unspoken tensions. Several participants acknowledged that isolated incidents had occurred during the war period and attributed a deterioration in intergroup sentiment, in part, to inflammatory discourse circulated via social media platforms.

Despite physical proximity and frequent contact in Marneuli's multiethnic environment, none of the Azerbaijani participants said they had initiated dialogue with their Armenian neighbors about the conflict or the political status of Nagorno-Karabakh. The prevailing view was that such conversations were best avoided to preserve social harmony: "It's better not to talk about it – not to damage the relationships," several participants explained, pointing to a tacit ethic of silence.

³¹ The focus group with people from Marneuli district, October 5, 2022, Marneuli.

Notably, expressions of interethnic friendship were often accompanied by narratives that recalled the First Karabakh War, invoked as historical evidence of Armenian untrustworthiness. These memories, selectively mobilized, coexisted with genuine concerns about family members or friends – citizens of Azerbaijan – who had been mobilized during the 2020 conflict. Such anxieties contributed to an emotional distancing from local Armenians, even in the absence of open hostility.

Within the Marneuli municipality, where Azerbaijanis constitute the majority, public discourse surrounding Karabakh is heavily formed by official Azerbaijani state narratives. These perspectives, often echoed by community members, reinforce ethnonational frameworks of belonging and collective memory. Yet, despite these pressures, a form of silent consensus exists to maintain a delicate balance by avoiding confrontation regarding the conflict.

Samtskhe-Javakheti: regional overview

Formed in 1995, Samtskhe-Javakheti comprises the historical provinces of Meskheti (Samtskhe), Javakheti, and Tori (the Borjomi gorge area), bordering Armenia and Turkey. The merger was controversial among Javakheti Armenians, who viewed it as a strategy to alter Javakheti's ethnic composition, where Armenians made up 90,6% of the population. Today, Armenians constitute 54,6%, with Georgians at 43,35%, and smaller groups, including Russians, Meskhetian Turks, and Greeks. The region's capital is Akhaltsikhe, but Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda remain the Armenian cultural and demographic centers. Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda are situated on a high plateau, often referred to as "Georgian Siberia" due to its harsh winters, which make life difficult for the people living there. Until the 2000s, poor infrastructure and a Soviet era border zone policy isolated the area from the rest of Georgia.³²

The mass Armenian settlement in South Georgia dates to the 19th century, following the Russian-Turkish war (1828–1829); other groups began to arrive towards the end of the 19th century due to the Tsarist policies, and the increasing pressure on Armenians in Turkey, before and after the 1915 genocide. Many Armenians in Samtskhe-Javakheti refer to eastern Turkey as "Western Armenia" but identify regionally as *Javakhhahayer*, distinct from other Armenian groups.³³

32 W. Górecki, "Teraz Dżawachetia? – ormiański separatyzm w południowej Gruzji," [in:] *Nowe szlaki transportowe na Południu WNP. Azja Centralna i Zakaukazie*, Warszawa 1998, pp. 126–142; S. Veloy-Mateu, *The Armenian Minority in the Samtskhe-Javakheti Region of Georgia: Civic Integration and its Barriers*. Available on-line: <https://grass.org.ge/en/publikaciebi/policy-papers/33-the-armenian-minority-in-the-samtskhe-javakheti-region-of-georgia-civic-integration-and-its-barriers> [accessed on December 31, 2022].

33 W. Górecki, *Teraz...*, op. cit.

The Karabakh conflict has long resonated in Javakheti. The *Javakhhk Committee* (later *Javakhhk Movement*) was founded in 1988 to support the Nagorno-Karabakh. It became a key political force, mobilizing fighters and self-defense groups to counter potential attacks by Georgian nationalist groups. As a result, in the 1990s, many people in Javakheti possessed weapons purchased from the Soviet military base (the 147th Motor Rifle Division) established in Akhalkalaki in the 1990s. During this period, economic collapse hit Samtskhe-Javakheti harder than other Georgian regions. De facto self-governed by Armenians, some separatist ideas emerged but never gained mass support. At that time, the state borders were not clearly defined, nor were the interests and influence of the new states and particular ethnic groups. Yet, Armenia avoided backing separatism to maintain good relations with Georgia, access to Russian trade routes, and exit the Black Sea. One of the destabilizing factors was the Soviet military base. It was a major employer for Armenians connected to the region's formal and informal authorities. Despite local opposition, the base was closed in 2007.³⁴

Migration to Russia has been a primary economic driver, though new opportunities in Poland and elsewhere may shift this trend. Many residents, especially those from the older and middle generations, rely on Russian and Armenian media due to their limited proficiency in Georgian, which shapes their political outlook. However, younger generations with better Georgian language skills tend to integrate more fully into broader society. Higher education traditionally led Javakheti Armenians to Yerevan, though Georgia's 1+4 program has encouraged more to study in Tbilisi. Many hold dual or triple citizenship (Georgian, Russian, Armenian), maintaining ties across all three countries.

The *Javakhhk Movement* advocated for autonomy until 2012, organizing protests in the mid-2000s for linguistic and political rights. While autonomy demands have faded, isolation from Georgian society persists. The local administration has high Armenian representation, with authorities in a pragmatic power-sharing arrangement with Tbilisi, balancing local interests with national loyalty. According to various interlocutors, local authorities are loyal to Tbilisi, regardless of who is in power, while successive governments, in exchange, allow them to pursue their interests and turn a blind eye to the non-transparent practices of local officials. Power sharing in governance is distributed between formal authorities and local "strongmen," who influence local elections, investments, and the economic system in local towns and villages.

A significant regional investment is the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, which has a station in Akhalkalaki. Consequently, the number of Turkish workers and tourists has increased, and trade with Turkey has become vital for many locals. Besides migration,

³⁴ Ibidem; V. Ter-Matevosyan, B. Currie, "A Conflict that Did Not Happen: Revisiting the Javakhhk Affair in Georgia," *Nations and Nationalism* 2018, vol. 25, no 1, pp. 1–21.

agriculture, small businesses, and employment in state institutions, NGOs, and media are the sources of income. Yet, economic ties with Russia and Armenia remain strong, placing Samtskhe-Javakheti in a complex geopolitical position.

Narratives about the Karabakh conflict in Samtskhe-Javakheti

The 2020 war highlighted the strong political mobilization of Armenians from Samtskhe-Javakheti. A Georgian NGO worker from Akhaltsikhe noted that the idea of a united Armenia, including Karabakh, remains popular among local Armenians. People believe Karabakh was the only territory of historical Armenia they managed to “regain” in the early 1990s. Thus, the loss in 2020 was especially painful as many had contributed significant resources to the war effort.³⁵

Commemorating the war is crucial. Annual memorial services for fallen soldiers are held at Surb Khach Church in Akhalkalaki. Activists erected a khachkar at the church’s premises to commemorate the dead. Following the first war (1988–1994) and the second Karabakh war (2020), local activists also established two steles near Ninotsminda, dedicated to two Armenian heroes: Gevorg Chavush and Monte Melkonian.³⁶

Armenians from Samtskhe–Javakheti feel betrayed by Armenian politicians and media, having believed in victory until the end. Many say, “Helping Karabakh was our duty. Where Armenians die – Armenians help.” In 2022–2023, concerns persisted over instability in Karabakh, the Lachin corridor blockade, and fears of another genocide, as the memory of 1915 remains vivid. The annexation of the unrecognized Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijan in September 2023 and an exodus of over 100,000 people from there seemed to confirm this opinion. Turkey was viewed as the main threat, and its role in the 2020 war was widely discussed during our research. While in 2022, Azerbaijanis saw Armenia as controlled by Russia, Armenians often believed Azerbaijan was subordinate to Turkey.

Expressions of distrust toward Nikol Pashinyan’s government were widespread among interlocutors, many of whom accused the Armenian leadership of having “sold” Karabakh. While some acknowledged the constraints Pashinyan faced, the dominant sentiment reflected feelings of betrayal and abandonment. Karen Papikyan, a local activist and co-founder of the Javakhk NGO (*Fond Dzhavakhk ryadom s Armyanami*),

35 Anna Cieślewska’s interview with an NGO employee, April 22, 2022, Akhaltsikhe.

36 Monte Melkonian is a contemporary Armenian hero, a member of the legendary Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA). This militant organization operated between 1975 and the 1990s; it is delegatized in many countries, including Turkey and the US. Monte died during the first Karabakh War. His tomb is in Yerablur – a Military Pantheon in Yerevan, the burial place of Armenian soldiers who died in all Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts.

articulated a widely held view: “The Armenian authorities should have announced a general mobilization for Armenians from all over the world, then we would have won.” His comment reflects a diasporic imaginary of transnational solidarity and collective responsibility. Deeply affected by the 2020 war, Papikyan described how, when the conflict erupted in September, he abandoned his everyday commitments to coordinate aid efforts, driven by a personal and moral imperative to defend Artsakh (Karabakh). But in 2022, he remarked that people had become disheartened and were no longer willing to contribute financially or provide other forms of help.³⁷ A female journalist from Akhalkalaki noted that the conflict has still been simmering beneath the surface. In her view, Azerbaijan’s authoritarian regime suppresses independent voices. However, the situation in Armenia is also difficult, and many Armenians are leaving the country, disillusioned with the political and economic conditions.³⁸

Despite lingering resentment, some people recalled a peaceful coexistence with Azerbaijanis before 1988. For example, an elderly man who had served in Azerbaijan in 1985 remembered having friendly relations at the time and attributed the later conflict to political interference rather than personal animosity.³⁹ Yet, others insist, “A Turk is a Turk”, and “We will never reach an agreement with them.”

Nevertheless, Azerbaijanis visit Akhalkalaki and the surrounding area, work on railway construction, and trade in bazaars. They also go door-to-door, selling clothes and other items from their cars in villages. There was a break in trade during the 2020 war, as Azerbaijanis were afraid of coming to Akhalkalaki. A few months after the ceasefire had been signed, contacts resumed. However, not everyone is happy about trading with Azerbaijanis. Despite relative normalization in 2022, mutual dislike prevailed, as some believed Azerbaijanis cheat Armenians. Others acknowledged that despite all the difficulties, trade with Azerbaijanis should continue.

We organized a focus group in Sulda village, attended by six middle-aged and retirement-aged males.⁴⁰ One participant expressed a positive view of Azerbaijanis from Georgia, highlighting their differences from those in Azerbaijan and noting that many he knew blamed the Azerbaijani government for initiating the war. As a trader, he described having longstanding friendly ties with Azerbaijani sellers, who were once warmly welcomed into homes. However, since September 2020, their interactions have become more distant, now limited to brief social encounters rather than the close relationships they previously shared. Other participants were less optimistic, expressing grievances related to Azerbaijanis, Azerbaijan, and Turkey.

37 Anna Cieslewska’s interview with Karen Papikyan, April 20, 2022, Akhalkalaki.

38 Anna Cieslewska’s conversation with a female journalist, April 19, 2022, Akhalkalaki.

39 A male participant of a focus group, June 9, 2022, Akhalkalaki.

40 The focus group, June 10, 2022, the village of Sulda.

A middle-aged female entrepreneur from Akhalkalaki has established a trusting trade relationship with Azerbaijanis at the Lilo market in Tbilisi, often receiving goods on credit and paying later. A female participant in the focus group organised in Akhalkalaki and attended by six people (3 males and 3 females) had a similar experience.⁴¹ She observed that her neighbors trading at the Lilo market maintained cordial relations with Azerbaijanis. However, another participant offered a contrasting perspective, noting that Azerbaijani sellers have begun to distance themselves from Armenians socially, perceiving interactions through the lens of recent conflict dynamics and asserting their dominance – “They want to show that we are the winners and you are the losers” – she said.

This sentiment echoes a broader pattern of skepticism and wariness toward Azerbaijani communities, underscoring the enduring interethnic mistrust in the region. One participant recounted how she warned her daughter against forming close friendships with Azerbaijanis. As she said, not out of xenophobia, but due to uncertainty about their intentions. Despite her initial reluctance, her daughter eventually realized “the challenges of maintaining genuine friendships with Azerbaijanis” and now keeps her interactions polite but distant. Similarly, a priest from Ninocminda described Azerbaijanis as becoming increasingly aggressive after their victory, including both youth and older generations. He expressed the belief that good relations with “Turks” were unattainable, given the numerous casualties whose deaths remain deeply personal tragedies for local Armenians.⁴²

The 2020 Karabakh war deepened political mobilisation among Armenians in Samtskhe-Javakheti, reinforcing historical narratives and mistrust toward Azerbaijanis. During our 2022 research, it became evident that while some recalled past coexistence and continued trade relationships, the conflict had significantly strained interactions, deepening distance and resentment. Many felt betrayed by the Armenian leadership and feared further instability, with Azerbaijan and Turkey seen as the primary threats. Despite moments of economic cooperation, mutual suspicion prevailed, shaped by the lingering trauma of conflict and loss.

Media analysis

Regional media (Georgian, Armenian, Azerbaijani) extensively covered the 2020 Karabakh war. Armenians and Azerbaijanis, emotionally invested due to family and social ties, reacted according to conflict developments. From December 2021 to September 2022, our monitoring categorised data into political events, conflict assessments, violations, and reactions to war anniversaries.

⁴¹ The focus group, June 9, 2022, Akhalkalaki.

⁴² Anna Cieslewska's interview with a priest, April 20, 2022, Ninotsminda.

Armenian and Azerbaijani media presented opposing views, but similarly used reports of casualties and violations to shape public opinion emotionally. Social media played a key role, with comments and reactions reflecting widespread sentiments; however, it was unclear whether the commenters were actual citizens of Georgia.

Comments on official statements

All media shared official information regarding various political, social, and economic events. Neutral wording often drew criticism. Armenians insisted on using “Artsakh” instead of “Karabakh” and criticised Prime Minister Pashinyan, expressing frustration about the future. Some comments used “Turk” pejoratively for Azerbaijanis, and Russia was blamed for escalating the conflict. Azerbaijani commenters supported their government and military, focusing discussions on state actions.

Border incidents

Border clashes were widely reported, with Armenian and Azerbaijani media citing differing casualty numbers. Azerbaijani sources claimed responses to Armenian provocations, reiterating their goal of “complete de-occupation.” Armenians in Georgia, like those in Armenia, did not accept the outcome of the 2020 war. August – September 2022 saw heightened coverage of shelling incidents and worsening tensions.

Memorialisation and anniversaries

Memorials for war casualties were a major focus of media attention. Videos and photos evoked strong reactions, with opposing sides sometimes responding in an insensitive manner.

The Khojaly massacre was widely discussed in Azerbaijani media.⁴³ On its 30th anniversary (February 2022), campaigns took place in Tbilisi with the support of the Azerbaijani embassy. The Azerbaijani Museum of Culture in Tbilisi hosted the “Khojaly Genocide-30” conference on February 12. Some social media posts referred to “Turks” as victims. As for Armenians, on 24 April, they commemorated the 1915 genocide. From March to April 2022, the Armenian community in Georgia hosted

43 The Khojaly massacre refers to the killing of hundreds of Azerbaijani civilians by Armenian forces in the town of Khojaly, Nagorno-Karabakh, in February 1992 during the First Karabakh War.

several genocide-themed exhibitions in Tbilisi.⁴⁴ On 23 April, after a two-year COVID break, a torchlight procession walked to the Armenian Apostolic Church in Tbilisi. Akhalkalaki saw a large march ending at Surb Khach Church, accompanied by war songs. Armenian, Turkish, and Georgian media extensively covered these events.

Azerbaijanis commemorated the Azerbaijani massacre (March 1918), committed by Armenian Dashnaks and Bolsheviks. Azerbaijan's government has recognized 31st March as a National Day of Mourning since 1919. May also saw additional commemorations. On 9th May, Armenians marked WWII Victory Day, the 30th anniversary of Shushi's capture, and the Artsakh Defense Army's founding. A football tournament in Akhalkalaki honored local Armenians killed in Karabakh. On 3rd April, Youth Center students laid flowers near the khachkar at Surb Khach Church for Armenian soldiers who died in the 2016 four-day war. Patriotic songs and poems were performed.⁴⁵

Azerbaijani celebrations included Novruz, during which President Aliyev and his wife lit a flame in Suqovushan, highlighting Karabakh's return to Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani and Georgian media reported on this. Georgia also observed the 99th anniversary of Heydar Aliyev's birth. Azerbaijani officials, business representatives, and embassy personnel visited his monuments in Tbilisi and Rustavi.⁴⁶

The Armenian-Azerbaijani negotiations

Official peace talks began with an EU-mediated trilateral meeting in Brussels on 22nd May 2022, attended by Azerbaijani President Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan. The talks, led by then-European Council President Charles Michel, focused on a peace plan for Nagorno-Karabakh. Pashinyan faced criticism after agreeing to a draft peace treaty and establishing a border demarcation commission. He stated that Azerbaijan's five-point proposal for normalizing relations was acceptable to Yerevan. The Armenian opposition accused him of recognizing Azerbaijani sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh and launched mass protests.⁴⁷

44 Armenpress, *Exhibitions dedicated to Armenian Genocide to be held in Tbilisi until April 24*. Available on-line: <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1078550> [accessed on: March 22, 2022].

45 A. Minasyan, *Armyane mira otmechayut troynoy prazdnik*. Available on-line: <https://jnews.ge> [accessed on: May 9, 2022].

46 Kh. Azizov, *Azerbaijani national leader Heydar Aliyev's birth anniversary marked in Georgia*. Available on-line: https://azertag.az/en/xeber/azerbaijani_national_leader_heydar_aliyevs_birth_anniversary_marked_in_georgia-2127674 [accessed on May 5, 2022].

47 RFE/RL, *Armenia-Azerbaijan Joint Commission To Meet At Border 'Soon,' EU Says*. Available on-line: <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-azerbaijan-talks-brussels-peace-plan-pashinian-aliyev/31862535.html> [accessed March 23, 2022].

Social media discussions in Georgia revealed mixed reactions. In March, Armenia applied to the OSCE Minsk Group to negotiate a peace deal, with Pashinyan reaffirming his commitment to regional peace and normalization with Turkey. Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov confirmed that Baku had submitted a five-paragraph proposal.⁴⁸

Border delimitation commissions met in Moscow on 16th–17th May. Ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Georgia followed the discussions, and online hostility declined, though skepticism remained.⁴⁹ Since Armenia's 2020 defeat, opinions circulated that Aliyev's military actions were possible due to Russian President Putin's tacit approval and Turkish support. However, since August 2022, Baku's activities have been perceived as independent. Between July and October, the media focused on peace negotiations, ceasefire violations, and the second anniversary of the Karabakh war. Ethnic Armenians remained distrustful of the process.

Activism

Arsen Karapetyan, an Armenian member of the European Georgia party, condemned fellow party member Ahmed Imamkuli for displaying the Gray Wolves sign,⁵⁰ after Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu responded to Armenian protesters in Uruguay with a controversial gesture. The Armenian Community NGO protested outside the party headquarters. Vrezh Harutyunov from the Youth Union NGO demanded disciplinary action against Imamkuli, accusing him of promoting "Great Turan" in Georgia.⁵¹

Giorgi Tumasyan, head of the Armenian Ardzagank platform, urged human rights organizations to respond. He reported the incident to the Georgian government, the European Georgia, and the Council of Ethnic Minorities, warning that it could inflame Armenian-Azerbaijani tensions in Georgia.

48 JAMnews, *Op-ed: Role of mediators decreases as Yerevan, Baku enter direct dialogue*. Available on-line: <https://jam-news.net/op-ed-role-of-mediators-decreases-as-yerevan-baku-enter-direct-dialogue/> [accessed on: April 16, 2022].

49 Armeniatoday, *Izvestna data vstrechi trekhstoronney komissii po delimitatsii armyano-azerbaydzhanskoy granitsy*. Available on-line: <https://armeniatoday.news> [accessed on: May 12, 2022].

50 The Grey Wolves is a Turkish far-right paramilitary organization and political movement associated with the Nationalist Movement Party. They are considered ultra-nationalist and neo-fascist.

51 Panarmenian.net, *Georgian-Azerbaijani Politician under Fire for Ultranationalist Gesture*. Available on-line: <https://panarmenian.net/eng/news/300163> [accessed on: May 7, 2022].

Russian peacekeepers

The 2020 war concluded with a ceasefire brokered by Russia and enforced by the deployment of 2,000 Russian troops. The introduction of Russian peacekeepers sparked widespread skepticism, visible on social media platforms like Facebook, where many voiced doubts about their neutrality and long-term intentions. Among Armenian citizens in Georgia, reactions ranged from sarcasm to outright frustration.

One user openly criticized the continuous wave of grievances, arguing that it was time to move forward and focus on living in peace rather than dwelling on past conflicts. While such a statement might have typically sparked heated debates, it instead received unexpected support from others in the discussion. Another user even described this shift in attitude as “a sign of change,” suggesting a growing openness to reconciliation and a desire to move beyond entrenched narratives of victimhood and resentment.

Georgia's official actions

Georgia has sought to strengthen regional ties and act as a bridge between Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Armenia. Nikoloz Samkharadze, a member of Georgia's ruling Georgian Dream party, stated, “We have made a firm decision to start working on the establishment of the Parliamentary Assembly of Georgia, Turkey, and Azerbaijan,” emphasising Georgia's commitment to regional cooperation. He highlighted Georgia's strong relations with Armenia and its strategic alliances with Turkey and Azerbaijan, which he described as “exemplary.” He also noted the potential for new transit corridors to reduce the EU's dependence on Russian energy.⁵²

ATV Media reported intense shootings on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border in January 2022. In February, a scandal erupted over Matsoni/Matsun packaging on Georgian Imedi TV. The package displayed Armenian text stating, “Karabakh is Azerbaijan” and “Dolma is also Azerbaijani,” sparking Armenian protests. Imedi TV quickly removed the material and apologized for the “technical error,” but did not explain the situation. Armenian media widely covered the controversy.⁵³

The Russo-Ukrainian war reignited social media debates. Some ethnic Armenian citizens of Georgia accused Georgians of double standards—supporting Ukraine but

52 Report News Agency, *Azerbaijan-Turkiye-Georgia Parliamentary Assembly created*. Available on-line: <https://report.az/en/foreign-politics/azerbaijan-turkey-georgia-parliamentary-assembly-created/> [accessed on: May 24, 2022].

53 News.am, *Georgian TV Channel Apologizes for Anti-Armenian Captions on Photos*. Available on-line: <https://en.armradio.am/2022/02/10/georgian-imeri-tv-apologizes-for-anti-armenian-captions-of-photos/> [accessed on: February 10, 2022].

not being active during the Karabakh war. Young Armenians expressed anti-Azerbaijani sentiments, while Georgians attempted to explain their differing responses to both conflicts.

Georgia officially supports dialogue for a peaceful settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict under international law. However, ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani citizens of Georgia do not always accept this stance. Ethnic Armenians criticize Georgia's neutrality, arguing that it ignores religious ties and that it is nothing short of abandoning Armenia.⁵⁴

Conclusion

Armenian-Azerbaijani relations in Georgia have remained complex and multifaceted in the aftermath of the 2020 war. While initial tensions escalated due to strong support for respective kin-states and heated debates on social media, intergroup relations largely depend on daily interactions. In mixed communities and shared economic spaces like the Lilo marketplace, pragmatic coexistence is prioritized, with both groups avoiding discussions about the conflict to maintain stability. However, distrust is more pronounced in areas with minimal contact, reinforced by divisive media narratives and communal events that shape group identities.

The Georgian state's failure to foster a sense of shared national identity among ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis has further deepened divisions. Many members of both communities lack proficiency in the Georgian language, relying instead on external media sources in Armenian, Azerbaijani, Russian, and Turkish. This dependence exposes them to nationalistic narratives that fuel grievances, reinforced by the perception of their marginalisation within Georgian society. As a result, Armenia and Azerbaijan leverage these vulnerabilities to exert influence over their respective groups in Georgia, further complicating interethnic dynamics.

Media coverage plays a crucial role in shaping these relationships. Reports from Armenian and Azerbaijani news outlets often present the same events from conflicting perspectives, contributing to parallel narratives. Armenian media tend to emphasise victimhood, while Azerbaijani media project confidence and triumph. During the 2020 war, social media battles and the spread of fake news intensified hostilities. However, such rhetoric has gradually diminished since 2022, partially due to a shift in focus toward the war in Ukraine. Nonetheless, misinformation continues to shape public perceptions, making it challenging to determine whether online discourse accurately reflects the sentiments of Georgian citizens or is influenced by external actors.

54 A. Cieślewska, *Armenians and Azerbaijanis...*, op. cit.

While Georgian experts generally endorse the country's neutrality, considering it essential for regional stability, public opinion is divided. Azerbaijani citizens of Georgia tend to support the common interest of Azerbaijan and Georgia in regaining "occupied territories." Armenians of Georgia often align with official Armenian narratives, while Azerbaijanis tend to support Azerbaijan's stance. The war's aftermath has strengthened these emotional ties, with Armenians perceiving themselves as victims and Azerbaijanis as victors, temporarily straining interethnic relations within Georgia.

Despite these challenges, the decrease in aggressive rhetoric and the growing emphasis on diplomatic dialogue suggest potential for improved relations. The direction in which Armenian-Azerbaijani relations in Georgia evolve will depend on state policies promoting integration, responsible media reporting, and individuals' willingness to engage in critical discussions beyond nationalistic narratives. The delicate balance of coexistence remains contingent on economic interdependence, social interaction, and a broader commitment to regional stability.

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