

KARABAKH SETTLEMENT DISCOURSE: ENEMY AND PARTNER IMAGES

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It is commonly believed that the conflicts in the Caucasus are preventing it from developing into an integral geopolitical unit and a link between the East and the West, and the North and the South of Eurasia. It is tempting to ask who needs this geopolitical integrity: the local states, international organizations, or the main geopolitical forces present in the Caucasus? Can it be achieved at all? These questions surface in the Caucasian states from time to time: they seem to be too politicized or even deliberately invented. The processes underway in the Caucasus testify that there is a trend toward bilateral relations contrary to what a third side might wish. If we distance ourselves somewhat from the present state of regional relationships, the above questions can be unequivocally answered as follows: it is the South Caucasian states that primarily need cooperation and integration to achieve dynamic economic development and long-term domestic stability.

There is an opinion shared by many that the Karabakh conflict is the main stumbling block on the road to the unity all the local states need, and that neither the Abkhazian, nor the South Osset, nor the Chechen confrontations contain as prominent a geopolitical component as that present in the Karabakh conflict. This can be heard from foreign and even from Armenian and Azeri experts. The recent processes have demonstrated, however, that this is not the only truth, and that the still unsettled Armenian-Turkish and Georgian-Russian relations

are curbing regional cooperation even more. Indeed, the geopolitical component in the relations between Georgia and Russia has not diminished over time—it has become even more prominent. This trend is further promoted by the fact that Russia does not need a Georgian-Abkhazian settlement. The prospect of EU membership for Turkey enhanced the geopolitical component of Armenian-Turkish relations. In the past, this component came to the fore not so much in Turkey's sealing off its Armenian border because of the Karabakh conflict, as in its response to the recognition by other countries of the 1915 Armenian genocide.

The Karabakh conflict can be singled out among other factors because it is gradually developing into a protracted conflict with the adverse effects typical of such situations. At the same time, as distinct from other regional conflicts, the sides have been adhering to cease-fire conditions for over 10 years now without international peacekeeping interference; in fact, international peacekeepers never had any role to play in the conflict. This is seen as the only positive result of the negotiation process.

We all have to admit that the sides involved have absolutely different ideas about the settlement problem: they disagree about the subjects and objects and about the definition of the sides in the conflict; there is an inadequate interpretation of its political nature and, therefore, of the main aim of its settlement.

(a) Disagreements over the subjects and objects, and the sides in the conflict

At different times, responsibility for future settlement was placed either on the sides' leaders, or on their political elites, or, recently, on the nations and societies of the countries involved. The sides

and the intermediaries have not yet reached a mutually acceptable definition of the role of Nagorny Karabakh in the settlement process. Baku is convinced that contacts with the Karabakh leaders may be interpreted as de facto recognition of its independence. This explains why Azerbaijan frowns at trips by international intermediaries to Karabakh through the Lachin corridor connecting Armenia and Karabakh rather than from Azerbaijan across the mined buffer zone and the front line.

***(b) An inadequate interpretation of
the conflict's political nature and,
therefore, of the main aim of settlement***

Azerbaijan insists on calling the Karabakh conflict a territorial conflict, which means, according to numerous relevant statements, that the country should preserve its territorial integrity. Baku refuses to discuss any other aspects (confidence-building measures, safety guarantees to the people of Karabakh under Azerbaijan's jurisdiction, and the status of Nagorny Karabakh) on which long-term settlement depends. In Erevan and Stepanakert, this is a legal problem of self-determination.

The above has led to prolonged discussions about settlement. An analysis has revealed that the conflict is steadily developing into an ethnic one with corresponding repercussions in the form of widespread phobias and propaganda of an enemy image represented by the opposing side. We all know that once established these phobias demonstrate amazing tenacity.

At the “Neither War nor Peace” Crossroads

The classical variant of conflict settlement involves negotiations and political methods of meeting the sides' demands. Such negotiations should normally start immediately after the cease-fire and involve international intermediaries. A compromise is the only way to reach a settlement, which means that the concessions (either made or offered) should be equal and mutually acceptable if we are aiming at long-term settlement once the relevant agreements are signed. This is the only way to transform the formula of mistrust, “everything they like is bad for us” (typical of confrontation), into a formula of cooperation, “if it is bad, it is bad for all.” This is a theory that can hardly be applied to the Karabakh settlement because of the still lingering and interconnected domestic and foreign political psychological and social circumstances that time makes deeper. This theory can be translated into reality if the sides are simultaneously confronted with unconnected dangers. Naturally enough neither Baku nor Erevan wants this: they will have to be satisfied with a variant neither of them wants, while a long-term settlement will be ruled out.

The “neither war nor peace” conditions formulated in 1994 by the Bishkek agreement on a cease-fire along the frontline offered the chance of compromise. It seemed that by that time the sides had already left all conflict stages behind, while everyone was fed up with the fighting. This was true of the winners, the losers, and the geopolitical actors present in the region. However, the bitter information struggle, meant to keep the fighting spirit alive in both countries, shows that the sides preferred to ignore the chance offered by the cease-fire. A mere agreement is not enough to reach a long-term settlement: it also needs an adequate propaganda. In other words, the sides should accept the idea of mutual concessions.

In fact the logic of the “neither war nor peace” conditions is a crossroads leading either to war or to peace, therefore it requires dual propaganda. If war is preferable, society should prepare for it by

planting an enemy image in people's minds. If the sides opt for peace, society should not only be prepared to accept it, but be ready to preserve it. This can be achieved by promoting the idea of mutual and, more important, equal concessions. The statements offered by the sides' spokesmen on a possible settlement in the first years reflected this ambiguous situation. (To satisfy the international community, the sides loudly stated their willingness and determination to use diplomatic methods to reach a settlement. At home, they spoke about their willingness to fight if need be.) Azerbaijan wanted to change the postwar situation immediately, while Armenia wanted to consolidate it at the international and diplomatic level.

In fact, Baku is prepared to return Karabakh by force if peaceful means (not only a mutually acceptable agreement, but also all other diplomatic means, "peace-enforcement" included) fail. The use of force conditions the sides' dual behavior. What head of the Popular Front of Azerbaijan Ali Kerimli said in an interview explains why the use of force alternative was revived in Azerbaijan in 1999 (under President Heydar Aliiev). While talking to us, Ali Kerimli said the following: "In Azerbaijan the war and peace issue cannot be discussed. The Popular Front of Azerbaijan is following a course for liberating our lands. There are several options; the range is wide. So far, we still welcome the efforts of the co-chairmen of the Minsk OSCE group to reach an agreement by diplomatic means. We should keep in mind that new generations have appeared on both sides of the front. There is a new Armenian generation in Karabakh that knows nothing of Azerbaijan's jurisdiction. In ten-years' time, the word "Karabakh" will mean nothing in the rest of the country. This must be prevented if we want to avoid a strategic defeat. For our children a war will be meaningless. We know what we are fighting for. I should say that a peaceful settlement looks much more natural: the sides should meet at the negotiation table to discuss their own interests and priorities and those of their strategic allies. In short, everything depends on the Armenian politicians' goodwill. If they continue speculating on the officer's death (we should first investigate the crime in detail), the process will be protracted. First the shooting in the parliament, then the death of an officer at his Azeri colleague's hands. The tension has reached its peak; if procrastination continues, our party will be categorically against it. We will demand resolute steps, and society will support us."¹

Compare this with what Georgi Khaindrava, state minister of Georgia for conflict settlement, said in his interview about Tbilisi's official position on settlement. Let me remind you that the Abkhazian and South Osset settlements are an issue of territorial integrity (in the same way as the Karabakh settlement is for Baku). It is very important that in Georgia the Abkhazian conflict is seen as an ethnic conflict. Said the minister: "The old rulers used force and this was their big mistake. We want a constructive and, most importantly, peaceful dialog. Force can return the territories, but it cannot settle the conflict. We are working hard to remove the mistrust and rejection now evident between the Georgians and Abkhazians. I think everyone should openly recognize his mistakes. We should start the ball rolling. As the majority of Georgia's population, we should shoulder this responsibility."²

We and Our Enemies

The *Region* Research Center, along with the Institute of Peace and Democracy of Azerbaijan and with the support of the Erevan office of the European Commission in Georgia and Armenia, started investigating the discussions around the Karabakh settlement in June 2004. We are working in two

¹ Interview with A. Kerimli, 20 February, 2004 [www.caucasusjournalists.net].

² "Pravo na avtonomiu," *Krasnaia zvezda*, 23 April, 2004.

directions: we are analyzing the images of enemy and partner promoted by the Armenian and Azeri media, as well as the stereotypes accepted by the Armenian and Azeri public.

It is not our aim to prove with facts and theories what is obvious and what the intermediaries have been recently talking about. Everyone knows that there is enmity and even hatred between the sides. The settlement is stalling and the process keeps coming back to the starting point. This means there are mutually exclusive ideological and psychological parameters and fewer things in common. Those that have still survived are rooted not in the sides' approaches—they are created by circumstances beyond their control. What is more, the frequent talk heard in Baku about war as the only way out of the protracted conflict leaves no doubt about who is seen as the enemy in the two capitals.

Reality proved to be more complicated than we expected it to be at the project's start. We are not limiting ourselves to simple interest in how the opposite side assesses its opponent. It is very important to understand why these conclusions are made, how convincing they are, how each of the sides looks at itself, etc. Comparing adequate approaches and arguments, assessing the level of motivation of negative and positive attitudes toward enemies, partners, themselves, etc. is just as important for studying the stereotypes of enemy and partner.

We have analyzed the press (six newspapers in each of the countries) in order to study the stereotypes of enemy and partner promoted in Armenia and Azerbaijan. We selected the press because even though the electronic media have a wider audience than the press they, as a rule, do not reflect the entire range of opinions current in the political discussions in Erevan and Baku. In other words, the press makes it possible to trace the changing opinions of all kinds of political forces.

We used the following methodology:

- Identification of the dynamics of negative and positive stereotypes (their stability);
- Degree of their motivation (which of the images are explained, which of them are taken as an axiom, etc.);
- Thematic gradation of stereotypes (which domestic or foreign forces and international organizations act as partners for achieving the goal);
- Identification of stereotypical types (whether any given negative stereotype is specific: a definite or abstract enemy or opponent) and their correlation (comparison of positive, negative, or neutral descriptions of the opposite side and the forces involved in the settlement);
- Identification of the main sources of stereotypes, that is, identification of political biases of the "architects/co-architects" of these stereotypes (the power structures, opposition parties, and public figures in one's country and abroad, etc.).

I would like to describe a circumstance that suddenly appeared at the project's first stage and which demonstrated the project's immense practical importance: the members of the monitoring group themselves were under the spell of certain stereotypes. This became obvious when we started formulating the key parameters of the stereotypes. Ours and similar projects designed to simultaneously monitor the media in two countries to compare the obtained results naturally require maximally formalized content assessments and consistently observed research parameters (something that we achieved). Still, at the early stage of our joint work (during the project's first two weeks), we ran across such formulas as: "One should not come to an agreement with an aggressor (Armenians.—*L.B.*)," "Azerbaijan will never cede its position to the enemy," "Turkey will never re-open the border (with Armenia.—*L.B.*) until Azerbaijan's demands are satisfied." The monitoring group in Baku marked these opinions with a + sign. The monitoring group in Erevan marked the following statements of the Armenian press in the same way: "Turkey has no chance of joining the EU," "Merzliakov (Russia's representative in the Minsk OSCE group.—*L.B.*) said that the Azeri media

attributed to him statements he never made,” “Russia is not ceding its position in the region,” etc. Later, such cases became rare.

To avoid boring quantitative descriptions of our findings, let us look at the main trends typical of the Armenian and Azeri stereotypes. On the whole, the media in both countries proceed from negative assessments when talking about the conflict and its settlement. This is true of the so-called “descriptions of relationships inside the country” (domestic policies, the relations within society and among individuals) and the opinions held by the sides about the intermediaries. Positive assessments could be found only in declarations about the sides’ willingness to cooperate and in all sorts of politically biased promotion information. For example, members of international organizations invariably gave a positive description of their role in achieving cooperation among the region’s countries. The same fully applies to the representatives of power and the opposition who tend to approve of what power (opposition) has done to resolve the conflicts, domestic problems, or foreign policy contradictions.

Journalists naturally lead when it comes to the number of positive and negative attitudes promoted by the sides’ press. Reports which are expected to be neutral lead in terms of the number of positive and negative assessments among all other genres expected to be biased (interviews and analysis). No wonder, the results showed that the journalists were the most active promoters of an enemy image as represented by an Armenian in the Azeri media and by a Turk in the Armenian media.

The enemy image is a very specific one: there are fewer vague descriptions of the “foreign forces that try to destabilize the situation in the country,” “the powers that be are pursuing their personal interests when talking about a settlement” type (they belong to the category of “an abstract enemy,” etc.) than much more specific negative descriptions: “the Armenian aggressors,” “the enemy will never tread the land of Azerbaijan,”³ and “Azeris and Turks are the same,” “Turks are always Turks,”⁴ etc. When applied to domestic forces, descriptions become vague: there are forces that “are pushing the country toward a precipice,” “occupied the country as an enemy force,” “create an atmosphere of fear and impunity,” “simulate struggle against corruption,” “are concerned with personal wealth and prosperity,” etc. (this is a collective image of the enemy at home represented by the powers that be). The same applied to the press reports about the structures (or prominent figures) who “obediently follow instructions,” “disgrace the country and the image of the state and the nation,” “play into the enemy’s hands,” “paralyze the country for the sake of their narrow political interests, while the threat to the state’s continued existence has become obvious,” etc. This is a collective image of the enemy at home represented by the opposition. Here are more examples: “These people (the judges who passed judgment in the case of the activists of the Azeri Liberation of Karabakh Organization who tried to burst into the premises of the Armenian participants in the NATO training exercises in Baku.—*L.B.*) are Armenians.”⁵ “In Azerbaijan there are traitors who are worse than Armenians,”⁶ “We (the Armenian delegation in the PACE.—*L.B.*) are the only ones, after the Albanians, whose opposition members discredit our country in the eyes of the Assembly,”⁷ “Our (Armenian.—*L.B.*) nation is profoundly uncultured and ignorant. We are appalled to realize at times that we are living exactly as the Azeris. Who knows, if 100 years ago we were similar to what we are now, the Turks would have never annihilated us.”⁸

³ The most frequent descriptions found in the Azeri press studied during the NATO training exercises in Baku in the summer of 2004.

⁴ In several successive issues, the Armenian *Ayots ashkhar* used these titles to describe the picketing of the hotel where the Armenian officers who arrived in Baku to take part in the NATO training exercises in July 2004 lived.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3 September, 2004.

⁶ *Eni Musavat* (Baku), 23 June, 2004.

⁷ *Novoe vremia* (Erevan), 28 September, 2004.

⁸ *Ayots ashkhar*, 2 September, 2004.

Both the Armenian and Azeri press speak about their enemies with passion and never fail to explain to readers who are they: the Azeri readers should know that Armenians and everything Armenian are absolutely hostile, even if they are present inside the country. Any Azerbaijanian citizen with Armenian roots is a potential enemy ready to betray the country. (“Those in power should know that the children they conceived by *akhchis* (a vernacular name for a woman in Armenian.—*L.B.*) have already surrendered the lands of Azerbaijan.”⁹ The readers in Armenia, on the other hand, should know that the Azeris are enemies like the Turks, that they are doing everything to resume the fighting, that the Turks will never recognize the Armenian genocide. They are a perfidious nation that will never become a civilized one even after they become part of Europe. (“Have the Turks changed their nature? No, they have not, in the same way as nothing has changed in the ‘Greater Turan’ program.”¹⁰ “The European and Armenian officials who believe that, after joining the EU, Turkey will become a more democratic state should be asked to explain why the Turkish authorities permit arrests of those of Turkish citizens who dare to talk about the Armenian genocide issue.”¹¹

To sum up. The Armenian press intensifies its negative treatment of the Azeris when certain events take place (such as statements of prominent Azeris, rallies and pickets triggered by Armenian participation in the NATO military exercises in Baku, etc.). The assessments are both negative (and accompanied by explanations) and categorical. During the lulls, the Armenian press resumes neutrality both when writing about Azerbaijan (with the exception of the Karabakh-related issues) and reporting about categorical statements coming from Baku or even ultimatums addressed to Erevan.

In Azerbaijan the picture is different: the press is nearly always negative when writing about Armenians, Armenia, and everything Armenian. This is practically never explained, which means that the enemy image (Armenians) has taken shape at the propaganda level. The examples are numerous: an Armenian is a vehicle of numerous negative traits; he uses his skills to undermine Azerbaijan. Here is the most typical example: “Armenia shows us an example of how everything should be presented promptly and in a way that forces the Azeri side either to remain silent in the face of the Armenians’ skilful propaganda efforts or try to vindicate itself post factum.”¹² All positive features (“persistent and purposeful,” “know how to convince people,” “they are well organized abroad,” etc.) are mentioned when the press talks about the need to consolidate, or when it warns readers against the carriers of these traits.

The Armenian media writes less about the Turks’ positive traits (“the Turks are good diplomats,” they are “resourceful”, etc.) than about their negative features. Today, the number of negative publications about the Turks, who for many years have been refusing to recognize the fact of the Armenian genocide and who moved away from Erevan because of Karabakh, has decreased. Categorically negative statements about Turks are reserved for the Azeris. On the whole, however, there are more negative publications about Turkey (and Turks) than positive or neutral ones. They are invariably accompanied by explanations. Categorically negative and unexplained statements are also reserved for the Azeris described as enemies.

It should be said that the Azeri media are also fond of describing a relatively new enemy in old and familiar terms. Armenians, their nature, and separatism are denounced in articles that speak of countries with a more or less large Armenian diaspora (Georgia, Russia, the U.S., etc.).

The image of a potential adversary ready to help the enemy holds a special place in the press. Normally such descriptions are accompanied by a generalized motivation: “Our partner is an enemy of our enemy or the partner of our enemy is our enemy too.” This applies to articles about the international organizations involved in the decision-making or commenting on the present state of the Kara-

⁹ *Eni Musavat*, 26 July, 2004.

¹⁰ *Ayots ashkhar*, 9 September, 2004.

¹¹ *Azg* (Erevan), 7 October, 2004.

¹² *Ayna-Zerkalo* (Baku), 11 September, 2004.

bakh settlement; about the countries involved in the talks and about the neighbors wishing to enter into more active relations with one of the sides. On the whole, all negative descriptions of Turkey in the Armenian media are related to the need to normalize Armenian-Turkish relations in the context of the Karabakh issue. Some of the positive publications about Turkey in the Azeri media are also related to the same sphere. The same applies to positive or negative attitudes in the publications about Iran, Russia, America, France, etc.

Both countries differ in their approach to international organizations. In the Azeri press, the important information about international mediators and organizations is directly related to the Karabakh conflict. This includes discussion of statements (which can be described as pro-Azeri or pro-Armenian), for example, "Armenians are our sworn enemies—why does NATO invite them to our country?"¹³ "We have an enemy—Armenia, therefore, we cannot meet NATO's military standards,"¹⁴ "If it wants to cooperate with us, NATO should help us liberate our lands."¹⁵ In the Armenian media, positive or negative assessments depend on how international organizations treat the country's domestic problems, the level of democratic freedom, and the institutional development of democratic society in the country. The result of our study is predictable: during the periods of worsened relations between the ruling circles and the opposition in Armenia, the Karabakh issue (except in relation to the 1998 events) is normally pushed aside.

C o n c l u s i o n s

1. On the whole, the stereotypes offered by the Armenian and Azeri media are based on negative assessments. This indicates a certain aggressiveness of the public and political elites in both countries. This is true of bilateral relations and the domestic situation. The propagandist clichés (created for foreign and domestic use) show that the sides are still living in the "regime of coercion" typical of the periods of hostility.
2. The Karabakh conflict figures more prominently in the negative publications carried by the Azeri press than by the Armenian press. This shows that in Baku the still unresolved problems are connected with and explained by the still unsettled Karabakh conflict.
3. The Azeri press, which writes a lot about the need to rekindle the hostilities, is insistently promoting the image of a victim that should be prepared to revenge itself. But on the other hand, this might negatively affect the nation's belligerence in the future.
4. The Armenian media demonstrate the victor syndrome, which should no longer link the domestic problems to the still lingering Karabakh conflict, at least while the status quo is preserved.
5. Both countries are promoting the enemy image for domestic use. This demonstrates the dual standards the countries apply when talking about compromises on the Karabakh issue and about creating open civil societies.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ *Ekho* (Baku), 19 June, 2004.

¹⁵ *Eni musavat*, 1 July, 2004.