

# THE AZERBAIJANI OFFICIAL State DISCOURSE ON THE ARMENIAN-AZERBAIJANI CONFLICT: BLOCKAGES TO PEACE

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## Abstract

*The intractable conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the first in a series of inter-ethnic wars to arise in the final years of the Soviet Union, has lasted for three decades and has gone through several violent episodes inflicting widespread death and destruction. Against the background of a long period of tried-and-failed resolution attempts, the conflict has led to the fostering of grievances, prejudice, long-lasting societal trauma and victimhood. Starting from these considerations, this paper seeks to emphasize the way in which, in the official state discourse, the Azerbaijani leaders concentrate mainly on their own traumas and victim status. This type of discourse sets off a unilateral solution to the conflict, considered the only right option, thus preventing any dialogue with the Armenian side, and implicitly any resolution of the conflict. From a methodological perspective, I have selected several official speeches belonging to the Azerbaijani leaders between 1994-2016 and held at various national and international forums. The content analysis of the Azerbaijani official speeches will be complemented by the data collected through semi-structured interviews with Azerbaijani experts in the field of International Relations during a field research to Azerbaijan. The paper concludes that trauma and victimhood as reflected in the official Azerbaijani state discourse function as blockages to peace and hinder any changes in the way Azerbaijani leaders represent the conflict and its resolution.*

**Keywords:** *the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, intractability, trauma, victimhood, peace.*

## 1. Introduction

The Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) is an intractable conflict that has been lasting for three decades despite the various peace-making attempts undertaken by the international community for its resolution. Amidst occasional and violent flare-ups, this conflict represents a constant threat to the security of the state actors involved, of the encompassing regions and of the international system.

The specialized literature on the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict abounds in political and legal explanations for its intractability as distinct from the psycho-social ones which have been less an object of scrutiny. Notwithstanding, this conflict contains a great share of psycho-social motivations<sup>1</sup> among which collective trauma and victimhood considered by scholars as having the potential to revive ancient animosities and to make the emotional issues in a conflict become as important as the real issues at stake.<sup>2</sup> Within the framework of an intractable conflict both sides seek to demonstrate that they are the only legitimate victim and suffered more. Thus a sense of collective trauma and victimhood is an inseparable part

of the official discourse of the conflicting parties.<sup>3</sup> This paper seeks on the one hand to emphasize the way in which, in the official state discourse, the Azerbaijani leaders concentrate mainly on their own traumas and victim status, and on the other to point out the implications of such a discourse on the peace attempts. For this purpose I have selected the following 17 official speeches belonging to the Azerbaijani leaders between 1994-2016 and held at various national and international forums: President Heydar Aliyev's speeches at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) 22/10/1995 and at the Millennium summit 7/09/2000; Heydar Aliyev's appeal to the Azerbaijani nation on the occasion of the third anniversary of the Khojaly "genocide", 25/02/1995, and the speeches held at the commemoration ceremonies dedicated to the victims of Khojaly, 26/02/1995 and 26/02/2002; President Ilham Aliyev's inaugural speeches from 2003, 2008 and 2013; President Ilham Aliyev's speeches at the official opening of Crans Montana Forum 23/06/2011, at the opening of the Guba genocide memorial established with the support of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation 18/09/2013, at the opening of a new settlement for 632 displaced families in Agdam 6/08/2014, at the opening ceremony of the 3rd Global Baku Forum 28/04/2015, and at the opening

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<sup>1</sup> Rauf Garagozov, Rena Kadyrova, "Memory, Emotions, and Behavior of the Masses in an Ethnopolitical conflict: Nagorno-Karabakh," *The Caucasus & Globalization* 5, issue 3-4 (2011): 77.

<sup>2</sup> Vamik Volkan, "Transgenerational Transmissions and Chosen Traumas: An Aspect of Large-Group Identity," *Group Analysis* 34, no.1 (2001); Masi Noor, Nait Shnabel, Samer Halabi, and Arie Nadler, "When Suffering Begets Suffering. The Psychology of Competitive Victimhood Between Adversarial Groups in Violent Conflicts," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 16, issue 4 (2012).

<sup>3</sup> Noa Schori-Eyal, Eran Halperin, and Daniel Bar-Tal, "Three layers of collective victimhood: effects of multileveled victimhood on intergroup conflicts in the Israeli-Arab context," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 44 (2014): 778; Daniel Bar-Tal, *Intractable conflicts: Socio-psychological foundations and dynamics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

ceremonies of the Baku International Humanitarian Forum 4/10/2012 and 29/09/2016; President Ilham Aliyev's speeches at the official receptions on the occasion of the Republic Day 27/05/2015 and 27/05/2016, at the reception of the heads of diplomatic missions and international organizations of Muslim countries in Azerbaijan on the occasion of the holy month of Ramadan 8/06/2016 and at the meeting of the Security Council under the President of Azerbaijan, 2/04/2016. The content analysis of the selected official speeches will be complemented by the data collected through semi-structured interviews with Azerbaijani experts.

### 1.1. Brief overview of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over NK

NK region - lying within Azerbaijan's borders, and mainly inhabited by ethnic Armenians - received the status of an autonomous oblast (NKAO) within Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) in 1923. On February 20, 1988, the governing body of NKAO voted in favor of the region's unification with the Armenian SSR. This attempt at secession was rejected by Azerbaijan and further led to a war that had devastating material and human consequences. More than 20.000-30.000 lost their lives and hundreds of thousands of others became refugees and internally displaced persons. Furthermore, during the conflict, grave human rights violations and destructions occurred, which left the societies traumatized. The full-scale war between Armenians and Azerbaijanis ended in 1994 with the signing of a ceasefire agreement in Bishkek when Armenia had full control not only over the NK region, but also over seven adjacent regions such as Agdham, Qubadli, Jabrayl, Zangilan, Kalbajar, Lachin and Fizuli. At present, there are no diplomatic relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, while the NK, together with the seven adjacent regions are under Armenian control.

Since the signing of the ceasefire agreement, the two countries have embarked on a long peace process for finding a solution to the conflict, but without any positive results. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Minsk Group (OSCE MG), co-chaired by France, the Russian Federation and the United States, has been mediating the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan since its creation in 1994. However, all their proposals have been rejected one by one by the parties.

The most significant achievement of the peace process are the so-called Madrid principles introduced by the OSCE MG at the 2007 OSCE Madrid summit. They contain: (a) the return of the territories surrounding NK to Azerbaijani control; (b) an interim status for NK providing guarantees for security and self-governance; (c) a corridor linking Armenia to NK; (d) future determination of the final legal status of NK through a legally binding referendum; (e) the right of all internally displaced persons and refugees to return to their former places of residence and (f) international security guarantees, including a peacekeeping operation.<sup>4</sup> Although under discussion since 2007, Armenia and Azerbaijan have not yet signed them.

Against a backdrop of more than two decades of tried-and-failed attempts at resolution, the violations of the ceasefire agreement gradually intensified, and the conflict embarked on an escalation phase. Although there have always been ceasefire violations, these started to be more prominently reported as from 2014. For instance, in early August 2014, deadly clashes took place along the Line of Contact (LOC) described at the time as being the bloodiest episode since the signing of the ceasefire in 1994<sup>5</sup>. The situation escalated again in November 2014, when an Armenian Mi-24 military helicopter was shot down by Azerbaijani armed forces<sup>6</sup>, a novelty for the way in which skirmishes used to take place along the LOC. The ceasefire violations continued in 2015 as well, starting with January. These resulted in 12 victims and 18 injured and were catalogued by the OSCE MG as recording "the highest number of confirmed victims in the first month of a year from the 1994 ceasefire agreement."<sup>7</sup> In the context of increased violent incidents, the co-chairs of the OSCE MG emitted several declarations throughout the first months of 2015, soliciting the parties to respect the terms of the 1994 ceasefire agreement and restart the official peace talks for solving the conflict. They also recognized the deterioration of the military situation on the LOC and the violent trend that continued simultaneous with the 2014 deadly clashes. Nevertheless, April 2016 marked the most serious escalation of the conflict, which "brought Azerbaijan and Armenia the closest they have been to all-out war in NK since the 1994 truce<sup>8</sup>." Although this episode might be included in the cycle of occasional flare-ups characterizing the conflict, it was unprecedented in its intensity, the type of armament used and the human loss<sup>9</sup>. The OSCE MG strongly condemned the outbreak

<sup>4</sup> Kamer Kasim, "The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: Regional implications and the peace process", *Caucasus International* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 106.

<sup>5</sup> Joshua Kucera, "At Least Ten Killed In Karabakh's Worst Fighting In 20 Years", *Eurasianet*, August 1, 2014, <https://eurasianet.org/node/69321>.

<sup>6</sup> "Armenian military helicopter shot down by Azerbaijani forces, killing three", *The Guardian*, November 12, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/12/azerbaijani-forces-shoot-down-armenian-military-helicopter>

<sup>7</sup> "Statement by OSCE Chairperson-in-Office and Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group on latest developments in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process", OSCE, February 7, 2015, <https://www.osce.org/cio/139411>

<sup>8</sup> Zaur Shiriyev, "The 'Four-Day War': Changing Paradigms In The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict", in *Trapped Between War and Peace: The Case of Nagorno-Karabakh*, ed. Gulshan Pashayeva and Fuad Chiragov (Baku: Center for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2018), 121.

<sup>9</sup> "Nagorno-Karabakh's war. A frozen conflict explodes", *The Economist*, April 9, 2016, <https://www.economist.com/news/europe/21696563-after-facing-decades-armenia-and-azerbaijan-start-shooting-frozen-conflict-explodes>

of this unprecedented violence and called Armenia and Azerbaijan to resume negotiations for peacefully settling the conflict<sup>10</sup>. Currently the peace process is stalled and there are no new changes in the way the two countries got used to handle the conflict or their adversarial relationship.

## 2. The Azerbaijani official state discourse

The Azerbaijani leaders represent the conflict with Armenia in terms of “invasion”, “aggression”, “occupation of Azerbaijani territories” and of the number of “internally displaced persons/refugees” resulted from the “ethnic cleansing” perpetrated by Armenia:

*“For more than seven years now the **aggression** of the Republic of Armenia against Azerbaijan has been going on, with the aim of annexing the Nagorno Karabakh region of our country. Armed formations belonging to Armenia have occupied more than 20 per cent of the territory of Azerbaijan. More than 1 million citizens of our country, who are now **refugees**, have been evicted from the **occupied territories** and are now living in tent camps in the most difficult circumstances”* (Heydar Aliyev, UNGA, 50th session, 22/10/1995);

*“Armenia’s **aggression** against Azerbaijan, the **aggression** which brought countless calamities to millions of people is the main destabilizing factor in the Southern Caucasus. During this **aggression**, the Armenian armed forces have occupied 20 percent of the territories of Azerbaijan, conducted **ethnic cleansing** and forced one million Azerbaijanis to leave their native homes”* (Heydar Aliyev, Millennium summit, 7/09/2000);

*“Armenia continues its **aggressive** policy against Azerbaijan. As a result of this policy and the policy of **ethnic purge**, 20 percent of our lands are still under occupation. One million Azerbaijanis suffering from the policy of **ethnic cleansing** cannot yet return to their lands”* (Ilham Aliyev, inaugural speech, 24/10/2008).

Moreover, in the official Azerbaijani state discourse, the conflict with Armenia is put forward as being “the most painful problem” and “a severe blow” that ever happened to Azerbaijan in its history. In his inaugural speech from 2003, President Aliyev stated that “*The conflict with Armenia is the most painful problem of our country*” whereas in his speech at the official opening of Crans Montana Forum in Brussels on 29 June 2012, he emphasized that:

*“One of the main problems after the restoration of independence was the occupation of our lands by Armenia. This dealt a severe blow to us. This dealt a severe blow to the security and cooperation in the entire region. Nagorno-Karabakh is internationally recognized historical territory of Azerbaijan which*

*Armenia has occupied. Armenia has conducted a policy of ethnic cleansing on these Azerbaijani lands. In general, 20 per cent of our land is currently under Armenian occupation.”*

As resulted from the above-mentioned excerpts, Azerbaijani leaders have built a victim-type discourse centred mainly on the Armenian “aggression” and “occupation” of Azerbaijani territories and the human consequences it caused among a significant category of Azerbaijani people labelled as refugees and internally displaced persons. Thus, Azerbaijani leaders’ representations of the conflict are made through the victim status perspective they claim directly. Azerbaijanis consider themselves victims of both a policy of occupation and ethnic cleansing committed by Armenia. Furthermore, Azerbaijani leaders attribute the causes of their people suffering exclusively to the *Armenian enemy*. This essentialist view encountered in the official Azerbaijani discourse assign all the blame on Armenia and excludes any situational factors.<sup>11</sup> Thus the Armenian side becomes the main guilty and solely responsible for the situation Azerbaijan is confronted with. This type of discourse serves as the basis for building a common reality in which the victim status is attributed solely to the Azerbaijani side which considers itself as having suffered the most. The same way of representing the conflict with Armenia centred on the victim status of Azerbaijan was also noted in the semi-structured interviews I applied to several Azerbaijani experts. The interviewees constantly resorted to formulations such as “we are the victims”, “Armenians have occupied our territories” or “we still suffer because of the occupation.”

The victimhood experiences of Azerbaijanis are connected to the traumas they suffered during the conflict and which are always inserted in the official discourse. Among these, Azerbaijani leaders refer mainly to one particular episode which took place in Khojaly on the night between 25-26 February 1992. This is described by Thomas de Wall in his book *Black Garden. Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War* as being the most violent and bloodiest during the active phase of the conflict causing a great number of civilian deaths.<sup>12</sup> The Khojaly episode is represented by the Azerbaijani leaders as being a “genocide”, “a crime against humanity”, and “a massacre.” For highlighting the gravity of this traumatic experience, the pain and injustice it entails among Azerbaijanis, but also the evil nature of the *Armenian enemy*, Azerbaijani leaders use superlatives among which “the bloodiest page of our history”, “the most horrible act of savagery”, “one of the most brutal terror acts” and detail the “Armenian atrocities”:

*“Three years have passed since the genocide in Khojaly which is the bloodiest page of our history. This genocide is the most horrible act of savagery and a*

<sup>10</sup> “Statement by Representatives of the OSCE Minsk Group countries”, OSCE, April 5, 2016, <https://www.osce.org/mg/231386>

<sup>11</sup> Maria Hadjipavlou, “The Cyprus Conflict: Root Causes and Implications for Peacebuilding,” *Journal of Peace Research* 44, no. 3 (2007): 350.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas de Wall, *Black Garden. Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War* (New York: University Press, 2003), 170-172.

*crime not only against the Azerbaijani nation, but also against the whole humanity”* (Heydar Aliyev to the Azerbaijani nation on the occasion of the third anniversary of the Khojaly “genocide”, 25/2/1995);

*“The Khojali massacre is a tragic page of our history as well as one of the most brutal terror acts in the history of mankind ... The Khojali tragedy is a bloody page of the Armenian policy of ethnic cleansing and genocide against the Azerbaijani people ... The Azerbaijani government, citizens and diaspora abroad take a lot of measures for informing the world community about the massacre: books are being written, research is being made, the massacre is being discussed in the parliaments of different countries and international organizations ...”* (Heydar Aliyev, ceremony dedicated to the third anniversary of the Khojali victims, 26/02/2002);

*“I would like our guests to know that our country and people have also been faced with a major humanitarian catastrophe. In the early 1990s, as a result of Armenia's military aggression against Azerbaijan, 20 per cent of our land was under occupation. As a result of this occupation and the policy of ethnic cleansing, more than one million Azerbaijanis became refugees and IDPs in their own land ... Innocent people were killed. A war crime was committed against our people – the Khojaly genocide. As a result of genocide in the town of Khojaly, 613 civilians were killed, including 106 women and 63 children. All these Armenian atrocities have been documented”* (Ilham Aliyev, opening of the Fifth Baku International Humanitarian Forum, 29/09/2016).

The official discourse surrounding the Khojaly trauma is characterized by an emotional style that includes feelings of pain, injustice, sorrow linked with Azerbaijani collective memory of past trauma and negative representations of Armenians. This specific trauma is evoked not only at the national anniversaries commemorating this event, but also in every official speech of the Azerbaijani leaders on the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict and its resolution where it is presented as the most important traumatic event in the history of Azerbaijan's history, beyond any comparison with any other violent event, and which has created immeasurable suffering still with an impact on the lives of today's Azerbaijanis. The memory of this past trauma and the experience of loss triggers strong emotions and its successive reply in the official Azerbaijani discourse reactivates and reinforces the pain associated with it. The following speech of President Heydar Aliyev encompasses these elements:

*“Throughout its history the Azerbaijani people faced a lot of tragedies. One of them is the Armenian aggression lasting for six years, which caused a lot of losses, including victims and occupation of our territories. But the Khojaly massacre is the most tragic of all. The Khojaly genocide committed by the Armenian aggressors is one of the most brutal events ... one of the most cruel tragedies in the history of the mankind ... We suffered a lot. However, the murder of*

*the innocent people, including women, children, the old and the sick was the most tragic event of the six-year war. The Khojaly tragedy demonstrated the real ambitions of the Armenian aggressors. The Azerbaijani people was stabbed in the heart in that horrific night. It still hurts us ... The Khojaly tragedy is a source of sorrow for us”* (Heydar Aliyev, ceremony dedicated to the third anniversary of the Khojaly “massacre” 26/02/1995).

From the above-mentioned excerpt, it can be seen how the Khojaly trauma is transformed in a symbol of national pain. Furthermore, to stress the national pain associated with this traumatic experience, the Azerbaijani leaders always insert in their speeches the sudden and unexpected uprooting of those who have become displaced and who are called “refugees on their own lands.” Thus, the plight of Azerbaijani displaced people represents for Azerbaijani leaders a living proof of the suffering of their nation:

*“Speaking about humanitarian issues, I want to say a few words about our most disturbing problem of course. Azerbaijan has been faced with a humanitarian catastrophe for 20 years. For 20 years, the internationally recognized ancestral lands of Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding seven districts have been under Armenian occupation. This occupation continues. Azerbaijanis have been subjected to a policy of ethnic cleansing. All the Azerbaijanis have been driven out of Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding districts. Currently, the world's biggest number of refugees per capita is registered in Azerbaijan. We have over a million refugees and IDPs who can't return to their homes because of the ongoing Armenian aggression”* (Ilham Aliyev, opening of the Second Baku International Humanitarian Forum, 4/10/2012);

*“We suffered from occupation as almost 20 percent of our territories is still under occupation and more than one million Azerbaijanis became refugees and internally displaced on their own lands. We suffered from ethnic cleansing, from Khojaly genocide, which is recognized already by more than 10 countries, and this process continues”* (Ilham Aliyev, opening ceremony of the 3rd Global Baku Forum, 28/04/201);

*„We have been subjected to an injustice. About 20 per cent of our land is under occupation. More than a million refugees and displaced persons are suffering from this conflict. Armenia has conducted a policy of ethnic cleansing against us and committed the Khojaly genocide”* (Ilham Aliyev, reception of the heads of diplomatic missions and international organizations of Muslim countries in Azerbaijan on the occasion of the holy month of Ramadan, 8/06/2016).

The plight of the Azerbaijani displaced persons was also highlighted by the Azerbaijani experts I interviewed. The majority shared that the most disappointing aspect of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict was the situation of the displaced who have

been banished from NK and the surrounding regions and who can't return there thirty years later. One example of latent solidarity sensed among the interviewees is the following:

*"I have never been in Nagorno-Karabakh, but I know people from there and I have this connection with them. If they are suffering, I am suffering too. They are my compatriots. They suffer ... how could I be happy with this?"* (R.G., November 2012, Baku).

The Khojaly trauma has been reproduced through discursive and commemorative practices throughout generations and transformed into a central collective trauma with repercussions on the daily lives of Azerbaijani people. This past trauma falls into the category of "chosen" traumas, a term originally coined by Vamik Volkan to refer to the shared mental representations of past traumatic events that have caused a large group to face serious assault, suffer loss and experience helplessness, shame and humiliation at the hands of a group. According to the author, the term "chosen" reflects "a large group's unconscious choice to add a past generations' mental representations of an event to its own identity."<sup>13</sup> Also, the "chosen" trauma is encoded in the collective memory of the victimized group who remains with psychological wounds that they transmit over generations as it is the case of Azerbaijanis and the Khojaly trauma. Furthermore, as evidenced by the above-mentioned excerpts of speeches, the Azerbaijani leaders choose to remember and emphasize only their own trauma, with little regard towards Armenians' own suffering, thus reproducing the "egoism of victimization."<sup>14</sup> This tendency has further led to competitive victimhood claims, that it is the assertion of a group that it has been subjected to greater suffering than the adversarial group.<sup>15</sup> Bearing on the severity of their respective sufferings, Azerbaijanis claim that they have endured more harm and injustice than Armenians as well as minimize and even question Armenians' past traumas:

*"The Khojaly tragedy occurred in front of the whole world. In other words, we are seeing it not as some sort of a myth, such as the totally unfounded myth of the "Armenian genocide", but on the basis of real facts. Videos, photos and testimonies of eye-witnesses – this is the truth and reality. But for some reason certain people don't want to see this, while others try to portray Armenians as victims"* (Ilham Aliyev, the opening of the Guba genocide memorial established with the support of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, 18/09/2013).

This conflict-supporting discourse centred on trauma and victimhood shape at its turn the way in

which Azerbaijani leaders envision the resolution of the conflict. They endorse a solution of the conflict that takes into account the "unjust" situation the Azerbaijani state is confronted with due to the "occupation" of its territories and the displacement of a large category of its population. According to President Ilham Aliyev:

*"From the perspective of international law, Nagorno-Karabakh is an integral part of Azerbaijan ... we want our lands back. We want the lands of our ancestors back. We are right in our wish. Justice and international law support our position. Therefore, the situation of neither peace nor war cannot last any longer"* (Speech at the opening of a new settlement for 632 IDP families in Agdam, 6/08/2014);

*"I have repeatedly expressed my thoughts on this matter. There is no change in our position, and the people support and endorse this position. This conflict must be resolved within the framework of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. There is no other way ... We want the issue to be resolved so that our lands could be freed from occupation and Azerbaijani displaced persons could return to their ancestral lands"* (Speech at the official reception on the occasion of the Republic Day, 27/05/2016).

Thus, the Azerbaijani leaders support "only" a solution based on the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan while other options are out of the question. From an Azerbaijani perspective, the resolution of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict "must" start from the following considerations: the illegal occupation of Azerbaijani territories and the necessity of respecting the rules of international law. The official discourse on this topic sets off a unilateral solution to the conflict, considered the only right option, thus revealing inflexibility and lack of compromise as shown by the way the Azerbaijani leaders formulate their arguments:

*"Nagorno-Karabakh is native Azerbaijani land, an integral part of Azerbaijan. The whole world recognizes Nagorno-Karabakh as an integral part of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan's position is unambiguous, based on justice and historical truth. Our historical land of Nagorno-Karabakh is an integral part of Azerbaijan from both political and legal points of view. Any concessions on the issue of territorial integrity are out of the question ... Azerbaijan's territorial integrity is not in any doubt and the conflict must be resolved only within the framework of territorial integrity ... the truth, justice and international law are on our side"* (Ilham Aliyev, inaugural speech, 19/10/2013);

*"For a peaceful solution to the issue Armenia must vacate the occupied lands. There is no other option ... Our territorial integrity is not, never has been*

<sup>13</sup> Vamik Volkan, "Transgenerational Transmissions and Chosen Traumas: An Aspect to Large-Group Identity," *Group Analysis* 34, no.1 (2001): 88.

<sup>14</sup> According to John Mack, "the egoism of victimization" refers to the tendency of an ethno-national group, as a direct result of its own historical trauma, to exclusively concentrate on its own sufferings and to not show any empathy towards the sufferings of another group. For further details see John Mack, "The Enemy System" in *The Psychodynamics of International Relationships. Vol. I: Concepts and Theories*, ed. Vamik D. Volkan, Julius A. Demetrios and Joseph V. Montville (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1990), 83-95.

<sup>15</sup> Masl Noor, Rupert Brown, Roberto Gonzalez, Jorge Manzi, Christopher Alan Lewis, "On Positive Psychological Outcomes: What Helps Groups With a History of Conflict to Forgive and Reconcile With Each Other", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 34, no. 6 (2008 June): 821.

and never will be the subject of negotiations. This conflict must be resolved within the territorial integrity of our country. There is no other option” (Ilham Aliyev at the meeting of the Security Council under the President of Azerbaijan, 2/04/2016).

The same idea of justice associated with the resolution of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict has been noticed during the interviews with Azerbaijani experts. The interviewees have constantly resorted to formulations such as: “the situation is unjust”, “the situation is unacceptable”, “we want justice” or “we will never accept our territories to remain in Armenia’s possession.” Furthermore, they underlined that “Azerbaijan is the victim country because its territories are occupied” and therefore, from this perspective, “Armenia must do the first step in the peace negotiations and show good will in solving the conflict by liberating the occupied territories.” The Azerbaijani experts also underscored that “Azerbaijan, even from the position of a victim country, was able to compromise and offer to NK the highest level of autonomy within the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan.” This would imply that “Azerbaijan reached its compromise limits and now it’s time for Armenia to show the same compromise capacity so as to achieve a symmetry in the mediation process.” In this sense, the interviewees proposed that “a good start would be the withdrawal of Armenian troops from two or three occupied territories, if not from the all seven.” This perspective appears also in the official Azerbaijani state discourse:

*“The Armenian armed forces must first withdraw from Nagorno-Karabakh and other occupied lands. The most acceptable option here is a phased settlement. We have repeatedly spoken about that. Only a gradual settlement can bring about a solution to the issue”* (Ilham Aliyev at the official reception on the occasion of the Republic Day, 27/05/2015).

The official Azerbaijani discourse directs the public towards a very specific set of emotions such as anger, pain, fear, bitterness, injustice which constitutes the dominant emotional style for representing the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict and its resolution. From an Azerbaijani perspective, it seems unfair for the country which sees itself as the unjustly harmed party to make any further concessions that would benefit Armenia. This is a typical reaction employed in cases of intractable conflicts where making concessions is viewed as unbearable on the one hand because of the ongoing sense of victimhood and on the other because the negotiation partner is perceived as responsible for the unjustified suffering and pain within the current conflict.<sup>16</sup> Hence, reaching a negotiated solution against the backdrop of such a reaction becomes difficult to conclude. Azerbaijan’s self-presentation as

the only legitimate victim, with focus on the unjust harm and atrocities perpetrated by the *Armenian enemy* seen as an illegitimate perpetrator, leads to the shaping of an official Azerbaijani discourse of victimhood which supports the deepening of division and mistrust between the conflicting parties, the fostering of negative intergroup attitudes and contributes to the continuation of the conflict. In turn such an official discourse trapped in a circle of collective past trauma and victimhood creates a barrier to the development of a constructive dialogue with the opponent and to the peaceful resolution of the conflict since it sustains the dynamic of confrontation and the promotion of escalation.

### 3. Conclusions

The Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over NK is an intractable conflict that has been lasting for three decades entailing long-lasting societal trauma, widespread death, destruction and victimhood. The Armenian “occupation” of NK and the seven surrounding regions, which make up some 20% of the country, together with the mass population displacement it has caused represent a traumatic experience for Azerbaijanis as reflected in the official Azerbaijani state discourse. The Azerbaijani leaders choose to concentrate in their speeches only on their own traumas and victimhood status, showing no regard towards what the *Armenian enemy* has suffered at its turn in the past. Among the traumas remembered, the 1992 Khojaly episode with its “open wounds” plays a central role. The constant reprisals of the traumatic experiences lived in the past at the hands of the *Armenian enemy* reinforces a deep sense of victimhood among Azerbaijanis. As shown by the official selected speeches and the semi-structured interviews, Azerbaijanis claim their own group as being the only legitimate victim of the conflict. This understanding serves as the basis for building a common reality where the attribution of the victim status exclusively to one sole party, to the one which considers itself as having suffered the most, is done by negating the losses the *Armenian enemy* has registered in the past and minimizing its suffering. This type of discourse sets off a unilateral solution to the conflict based on the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and considered as the only right option, thus showing reduced willingness for compromise. Hence, trauma and victimhood as reflected in the official Azerbaijani state discourse hinder any changes in the way Azerbaijani leaders represent the conflict and its resolution and serve as a blockage to peace, thus contributing to the protraction of the conflict.

<sup>16</sup> Noa Schori-Eyal, Eran Halperin, Daniel Bar-Tal, “Three layers of collective victimhood: effects of multileveled victimhood on intergroup conflicts in the Israeli–Arab context”, *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 44, (2014):782.

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