

# MYTHS AND CONFLICT IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

## VOLUME 2

Instrumentalisation of Conflict  
in Political Discourse

elites interests media nations  
**caucasus** occupation  
manipulation aspirations rhetoric  
elections image **conflicts**  
identity independence threat state  
**myths** propaganda  
trauma ideology enemy populism  
opposition **stereotypes**  
ethnic power territory democracy



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# Myths and Conflict in the South Caucasus

VOLUME 2

## Instrumentalisation of Conflict in Political Discourse

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## Acronyms

<b>AGTRK</b>	Abkhaz State Television and Radio Company
<b>CoE</b>	Council of Europe
<b>CIS</b>	Commonwealth of Independent States
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental Organisation
<b>OSCE</b>	Organization for Co-operation and Security in Europe
<b>PACE</b>	Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
<b>PEA</b>	New Azerbaijan Party [ <i>Yeni Azerbaijan</i> ]
<b>PNFA</b>	Azerbaijan National Front Party
<b>SSR</b>	Soviet Socialist Republic
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund

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The “Myths and Conflict” series came to fruition thanks to the help and insights of a great many individuals to whom we are enormously grateful. The original idea for this research was the result of deep reflection and creative collaboration with International Alert’s partners in the “mediation” initiative: Jana (Darejan) Javakhishvili (Global Initiative on Psychiatry, Tbilisi), who became the “myths” strand coordinator and methodological supervisor; and Batal Kobakhia (Centre for Humanitarian Programmes, Abkhazia), to whom we would like to express our deep appreciation. Secondly, we would like to thank the researchers themselves, who are listed in full on pages 6-7, for undertaking such a momentous task. The themes researched within this series are quite taboo within the societies from which the researchers come. Therefore, entering into a cross-conflict, multi-component process required significant courage on behalf of the researchers. We would also like to extend our appreciation to the methodological advisers, who played a crucial role in encouraging and coordinating the respective research teams, providing tailored support where necessary: Oksana Karpenko (Centre for Independent Social Research, St. Petersburg) for her supervision of the textbooks research; Philip Gamaghelyan (George Mason University) for the blogosphere strand; and Tina Tsomaia (Georgian Institute of Public Affairs) for the journalist strand. Special thanks also to long-time partners and colleagues Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan (Eurasia Partnership Foundation), Liana Kvarchelia and Arda Inal-Ipa (Centre for Humanitarian Programmes, Abkhazia) for their overall expert advice on and support in moving the process along – whether through their vision and strategic overview, methodological support, facilitation and editing skills, or simply moral support.

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<sup>1</sup> Available at <http://www.international-alert.org/es/node/4529>.

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## Myths and Conflicts in the South Caucasus

### PREFACE

*‘A myth is a special system of communication, a meta-language (super-language, language about language) which conveys a message which is a set of significations that create a covert ideological discourse; on the one hand, the Myth attempts to change reality so that it conforms with the values of the myth-maker’s consciousness; on the other hand, it attempts to conceal its ideological nature and is perceived by the perceiver as going without saying, the natural order of things.*

*Myth is not a survival of an archaic consciousness but an enormous component of modern culture which is realised through advertising, the mass media, the cinema and other narratives.’ – Roland Barthes<sup>1</sup>*

This publication presents the results of research that attempts to shed some light on the ways in which myths and dominant narratives associated with the conflicts in the South Caucasus are constructed and transmitted in the region. A particular focus of interest was how myths associated with the conflicts are subject to domestic political manipulation, how “enemy images” are created, and how this in turn serves to strengthen the resilience of those conflicts to resolution. The image of the “enemy” is one of the most pernicious cancers gnawing away at societies in conflict. This image is utilised by the various political groups who construct images of “internal enemy” as a means of social control. Such measures restrict the space available for reflection and critical thinking about socio-political processes, as well as hindering the free exchange of opinions and pragmatic decision making.

This research attempted to raise questions regarding taboo topics on which there has been historical public consensus, thus preventing such topics from being studied or reinterpreted. The initiative therefore required a certain amount of civic courage from the researchers. We would therefore like to express our gratitude to all of the South Caucasian researchers and partners who were involved in the process and to praise them for their commitment and courage.

### Research objectives and challenges

The research project set itself two relatively ambitious aims. Primarily, we set about creating a process whereby representatives of civil society from all sides of the conflicts in the South Caucasus were brought together and encouraged to engage in a joint

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<sup>1</sup> R. Barthes (1994). ‘Myth Today’, i.e. Collected works: Semiotics. Poetics. Progress Universe: Moscow. pp. 72-130.

methodological reflection on the impact of taboo topics on their respective societies. In doing so, we wanted to shift the focus often found in such “cross-conflict” initiatives from a critical evaluation of “the other side” to a critical interpretation of the opinions, societal images and associated attitudes that prevail within the researchers’ own societies. Despite the extremely delicate and sensitive nature of the task, to some extent the process was “conflict-sensitised” by including researchers from all conflict regions without exception. This created the opportunity for them to reflect synchronously. It ensured the necessary balance for the research: rather than interpreting their referent society unilaterally, representatives from each side were involved in a coordinated process. Researchers from Abkhazia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Nagorny Karabakh and South Ossetia (predominantly young sociologists, political scientists and journalists) worked together. Researchers from Russia (as an interested party in the South Caucasus region) were also involved. Thus, the project created a common platform for simultaneous critical rethinking of the role played by myths associated with the conflicts in the participants’ respective societies. This in turn provided an opportunity for the exchange of information, ideas and comparative analysis. More importantly, it helped to identify universal processes at play in each of the South Caucasian societies which often mirror one another across the conflict divides.

A secondary objective of the research project was to produce a high-quality product in the form of research papers that would provide food for thought for the respective societies.

The process turned out to be far more complex in reality than could have been expected at the design stage. In particular, we faced two challenges:

- The need to identify young researchers from the South Caucasus, despite the lack of any established research traditions, particularly in terms of conducting qualitative research. In practice, our response to this challenge was to add a capacity building component for less experienced colleagues, who received support from more experienced researchers;
- The need to find the correct tone when presenting the research results, in order to encourage readers to stop and think, reflect, distance themselves from the myths prevalent in their society and develop their own informed position. The risk was that the wrong tone could potentially have the opposite effect, causing irritation, negative emotions and resistance. This would merely have reinforced deep-rooted clichés and stereotypes.

We hope that we managed to find the right response to these challenges.

## Research content

The research project examined three means or mechanisms through which myths are created and disseminated: through history textbooks; through political discourse; and through the media, including the blogosphere.

In this volume, we present the research on political discourse. This block looks at how “enemy images” are utilised in the domestic politics of the South Caucasus as they enter their third decade of protracted conflict. The studies in this block do not follow a common methodology but were proposed by the authors themselves: some are more sociological research pieces, using the method of discourse analysis; others are based on a political analysis. Whatever the approach or methodology employed, all articles without exception show clearly and unambiguously how the societal myths of post-conflict societies – such as “enemy images”, “victimhood” and the search for a “saviour” – are used to manipulate public opinion. Interestingly, the researchers are equally critical of pro-governmental and oppositional political discourses which both utilise enemy images to advance their political agendas, frequently inventing new myths about “internal enemies” when external threats no longer serve their purpose. In doing so, these myths contribute to the stagnation of domestic politics and hold back democratic processes.

In another volume, we present the research on history textbooks. This research is a comparative analysis of how the process of “sovietisation” of the Caucasus (the period from the October 1917 revolution up to the approval of the new USSR Constitution in 1936) is portrayed in textbooks from the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Here, the authors worked to a standard rubric and methodology based on a discourse analysis of the textbooks in use in their respective societies. In addition to the research pieces on the representation of “sovietisation”, we also include a joint piece by two authors on the reinterpretation of narratives related to the Nagorny Karabakh conflict in Armenian and Azerbaijani history textbooks.

The results show that the new (post-Soviet) textbooks are based on the same ideological paradigm as the Soviet textbooks. They use the same language and nationalist discriminatory discourse, ruling out any understanding of history as a narrative. They provide what are in fact Soviet essentialist patterns of understanding historical and contemporary realities. “Friendship of the peoples” has given way to revised national histories hostile to the “other”. These are offered as “truths” to be memorised by children, embedding the enemy images deep into the psyche of the nation. The gulf that exists between the essentialist discourse dominant in the region and contemporary post-modern thinking suggests that the new generation is being brought up infected by the very myths that, as the political module in our research shows, often lead to stagnation of our societies, leaving them stuck in a valueless dead-end.

The third research block – on the media – combined a study of mainstream journalist ethics with the prevalence of enemy images in the burgeoning blogosphere. The study of journalist ethics highlighted how the line between objectivity and patriotism is often hard to draw in times of conflict. The importance of developing a “home-grown” code of ethics was highlighted, in order to enable journalists to navigate their ethical dilemmas and avoid being manipulated by politically manufactured disinformation. The study of the blogosphere, which is mainly dominated by the younger generation, revealed the worrying extent to which the narratives and negative stereotypes propagated through mainstream politics, education and the media are absorbed and further disseminated by the younger generation. It was felt that while the previous generations had the “experience of the other” before the conflicts of the early 1990s, a whole generation has grown up now without this experience.

Despite the pessimistic picture suggested by our conclusions, we believe that this publication still provides some grounds for optimism. Firstly, if our societies are to recover, we must first make the right “diagnosis” and identify the real (as opposed to mythologised) problems. We can confidently state that this task has been fulfilled in this round of research. We see it as an achievement that this research has broached such taboo topics. A further achievement, in our view, is that these topics have been published and will be presented for consideration by a wider circle of readers. It is our hope that this book will provide readers with food for thought and encourage them to reinterpret outmoded clichés and stereotypes. We also hope that the knowledge contained in this collection will help future generations of the Caucasus region to overcome essentialism. This would in turn help Caucasian societies to identify alternative ways of interpreting socio-political processes in such a way as to make more positive interaction in the region possible.

We would like to thank all participants and project managers without exception for their sincere and dedicated collaboration, and we hope that readers will enjoy reading the research results.

The editors

## **INTRODUCTION**

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# The Instrumentalisation of Conflict in Political Discourse

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Liana Kvarchelia

The period of transition which followed the disintegration of the USSR was a difficult and, in many ways, painful process for the majority of “administrative units” located on the former Soviet territory. The transformation of the political system and economic relations revealed serious internal contradictions and opposing tendencies in these post-Soviet societies. Many retained the old authoritarian style of government alongside some measure of social and economic liberalisation. On the other hand, there was a growing desire within the societies themselves for serious institutional changes which would open up the path for wider civic participation. This led to a clash between a *diktat*-based system of administration and demands for political modernisation, often present at the wider public level but articulated through political parties, non-governmental organisations and the media. There was also a clash of ethno-nationalist ideologies and civic values in the fledgling states, whether these were multi-ethnic societies where ethnic communities were represented relatively equally across the population or societies where, according to the old Soviet terminology, the “titular nation” constituted the overwhelming majority.

However, the most serious challenge to stability in the South Caucasus following the demise of the USSR was posed by ethnic conflicts between the former Soviet territorial units (Union Republics, Autonomous Republics, etc.), where the identity of the various peoples and their right to self-determination were contested and territorial claims advanced. Indeed, conflicts continue to be an important factor affecting the nature and dynamics of domestic political processes within the communities of the South Caucasus.

In any situation of ethnic conflict it is unsurprising that external threats act as catalysts of public solidarity. However, where conflicts occur in combination with weak democratic institutions and low levels of political culture, their presence can pave the way for political elites to manipulate public opinion. This manipulation is part of the elite’s efforts to ensure their unchallenged leadership. Claiming a monopoly on the status of embodiments of the “national idea”, these elites tend to crush dissent and impress the idea on the public that political pluralism is supposedly a danger, given external threats, and that any criticism of the authorities is a challenge to state interests and the national idea itself.

Ethnic conflicts are almost always protracted in nature, but they cannot stem the rise of political pluralism forever. A public which is dissatisfied with the state of affairs inside the country will become increasingly indifferent to politicians citing the danger of societal collapse posed by an external threat; this tactic will eventually no longer be enough to prevent competing political programmes from gaining hold. However, this does not mean that “conflict” and accompanying images of the “enemy”, “traitor”, “hero”, “anti-hero”, etc., will disappear from the domestic political agenda, particularly where conflicts remain unresolved.

In this collection of research papers, the researchers provide examples of political processes in Abkhazia (Liana Kvarchelia), Azerbaijan (Ilham Abbasov), Armenia (Mikayel Hovhannisyán), Georgia (Ketevan Khapava), Nagorny Karabakh (Gegham Baghdasaryan) and South Ossetia (Eduard Kabulov) to attempt to analyse how the topics of ethnic conflict and its accompanying images are internalised in domestic political discourse. The authors study the mechanisms, messages and practices used to rally the public through the use of the topic of conflict and societal trauma. Particular attention is paid to crisis periods, particularly around election campaigns or emotionally-charged dates of anniversaries or commemorations of historical events. The articles analyse the role of the most significant images – “the external enemy”, “the friend”, “the internal enemy” and “the hero” – in creating new political myths, which have a significant impact on the trajectory of socio-political development in the countries of the South Caucasus.

Although each individual context has its own unique features, there are clearly parallels at an instrumental level, as well as in terms of the social and political consequences of utilising the topic of conflict in the domestic political life of the countries of the South Caucasus. The authors come to the shared conclusion that it is difficult to avoid criticism of current political practices when talking about sustainable democratic processes and social maturity in post-Soviet societies or about creating the conditions necessary for the transformation of protracted conflicts in the South Caucasus.



## CHAPTER 1

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# Use of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict as a Theme in Abkhazia's Election Process

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Liana Kvarchelia

## Introduction

Negative campaigning practices which use the theme of conflict and accompanying images, in particular the image of the “enemy”, is a relatively widespread phenomenon in post-totalitarian states. While the motives, principles and mechanisms behind these practices generally tend to be similar, the scale and character of their impact on society are often a reflection of specific cultural and historical development, as well as the current societal context, which tests the ability of a society to respond to modern challenges.

This article attempts to analyse the nature of domestic political campaigning practices used in Abkhazia by the main political players to gain power and political influence, and also to identify the role and place occupied by the images, related to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, in domestic political discourse, using the Abkhaz election process as a case study. The article does not aim to provide an in-depth study of the reasons, mechanisms and patterns through which the image of the “external enemy” is formed. It instead focuses on how the “external enemy” image is used to construct the image of the “internal enemy” and attempts to analyse the social consequences of such practices of community mobilisation for Abkhaz society.

We therefore attempted to view the problem of how the theme of conflict is used from several perspectives. Firstly, it was important to consider the context in which campaigning techniques are used. This context primarily comprises the fears associated with the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, but also the challenges accompanying the emergence of a partially recognised independent state in the process of democratic transition. Such a context forms key problems/threats which are implicated in the construction of the images of “the enemy” and “the friend”.

Secondly, we attempted to discover how the categories of “the enemy” and “the friend” are used in Abkhaz political mobilisation and to identify the advisory and support groups for and through which various political messages are voiced.

Thirdly, we attempted to analyse the mechanism through which the image of “the internal enemy” is constructed and its underlying motives.

Fourthly and finally, we attempted to identify the extent to which the Abkhaz public is resistant to the impact of negative mobilisation techniques based on the utilisation of the theme of the conflict.

## The use of the “image of the enemy” as a political tool

The practice of manipulating public opinion by various political groups to recruit supporters and legitimise political claims is relatively widespread in post-Soviet countries.

This is most evident in electoral processes. Elections are an effective political instrument regardless of whether they are sham, as in a “managed democracy”, or are genuinely contested. In either case they require political elites to develop an effective campaigning strategy with respect to the electorate.

Since situations of unresolved ethnic conflict involve real external threats which can be invoked quite rationally, the manipulation of public opinion often involves the “image of the enemy”. Invoking the image of “the enemy” enables the authorities to justify their own failures in foreign and domestic policy to their citizens. Various political groups also use this image in attempts to discredit their political opponents. Manipulation of the “image of the enemy” is an instrument of social control which helps various political groups to ensure voting behaviour they deem favourable, whilst ensuring that the subjects of the manipulation remain under the illusion that they have a free choice.<sup>1</sup> The practice is designed to suppress critical thinking among the public and promote “an unthinking attitude” that substitutes public awareness of what is going on with emotional responses.<sup>2</sup>

These manipulative techniques are not falling on stony ground. In fact, post-Soviet societies have inherited the totalitarian regime's attitudes and phobias, and represent fertile ground where mass stereotypes lead to societal demands which follow entirely predictable lines. These societal demands combine with ideologically-based manipulation to create conditions in which the “enemy image” features regularly in domestic public discourse. In closed societies, the use of the “ideologeme of the enemy” as a political practice produces ‘a deliberate rejection of institutional “complexities”, a blocking of modernisation and development, a vulgar over-simplification or flattening of the socio-cultural organisation of society’.<sup>3</sup>

In transitional societies the changing external environment and internal impetus for change inherent in the societal renaissance raise serious questions over which precise paradigm societies will follow as they develop. In this sense there is a risk of this issue being drowned out by populist rhetoric from those political groups which are sometimes referred to as ‘the losers from modernisation’.<sup>4</sup> Unwilling and often incapable of assuming responsibility for serious institutional reforms, the overriding objective for these political groups is to gain or hold on to power. This is unsurprising when we consider that their

1 *Tekhnika konstruirovania politicheskogo imidzha I ego vozdeistvia na SMI* [The technique of constructing a political image and its impact on the media], ADV Energy Advertising Company. Available in Russian at <http://www.adv-energy.com.ua/infos/v/293>.

2 K. Kalandarov (1998). *Upravlenie obshchestvennym soznaniem. Rol' kommunikativnykh protsessov* [Managing public opinion. The role of communicative processes]. Moscow: Gumanitarnyi Tsentri ‘Monolit’.

3 L. Gudkov (2004). *Negativnaya identichnost. Stat'i 1997-2002. Avtorskii sbornik* [Negative identity. Articles from 1997-2002. Author's collection]. Moscow: Novoye literaturnoye obozrenie.

4 N. Baranov. *Populizm v stranakh tsentralnoi i vostochnoi evropy*. Lektsia 9 po kursu ‘Politicheskie transformatsii postkommunisticheskikh stran tsentralnoi i vostochnoi evropy’ [Populism in Central and East European states. Lecture 9 of the course in ‘Political transformation of post-communist Central and East European states’].

only rallying call is the “image of the enemy”, against which society is called on to support them as “true patriots” who alone understand the sacred meaning of statehood. This pseudo-patriotic rhetoric, which intensifies during election periods and is packed full of phrases relating to “enemies”, “traitors” and other terms discrediting political rivals, starts to act as a constraint and control on public attitudes and public discourse, subtly turning their “oracles” into arbiters with a monopoly on patriotism. Society is ushered into a quasi-reality where, in the “best” populist traditions, wishful thinking operates and rational debates are presented as a “suspect phenomenon” not for public consumption. Society then becomes hostage to mythologised notions of reality which last for years.

## Key threats forming the “image of the enemy”

The campaigning practices underlying the construction of these public images in Abkhaz society can only be understood in detail by taking into account the political context within which Abkhazia developed both before and after the collapse of the USSR. Therefore, we have attempted to identify the main factors which have influenced Abkhazia’s political development over the course of several decades.

The dominant factor which for many years has determined the nature of Abkhazia’s socio-political development is the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, which arose largely out of the demographic changes resulting from the Caucasian War in the 19th century, the Stalinist policy of assimilation and the “Georgianisation” of Abkhazia. The open phase of the conflict relates to the Georgian-Abkhaz war of 1992-1993. An interesting pattern was noted by Volkan, who emphasised that ‘as the nation’s self-identity increasingly crystallises around the presence of the enemy, this chronic conflict is increasingly encrusted with this identity’.<sup>5</sup>

The central negative image in Abkhaz public consciousness today is the “image of the enemy” – the Georgians. It is clear that any “image of the enemy” is formed out of the fears and threats associated with an opponent. In the case of Abkhazia, the threats voiced in the initial stages concerned politics, demography and culture. **The demographic threat** was associated primarily with the forced resettlement of a significant proportion of the Abkhaz population outside Abkhazia as a result of the Caucasian War in the second half of the 19th century. This was also the period in which Armenian refugees from Turkey and settlers from various parts of the Russian empire (a significant proportion of whom were Georgian) began to settle in Abkhazia. However, the biggest mass settlement of Abkhazia by migrants is associated with the resettlement of the Georgian population in the Stalinist period.

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5 V.D. Volkan (1988). *The Need to Have Enemies and Allies*. Northvale, p.5.

It was during that period that the **threat to the continuing existence of the culture and language** came to the fore. In the 1940s, the written Abkhaz language was changed from the Latin to the Georgian alphabet. The Abkhaz language was banned in schools shortly afterwards and was replaced by Georgian as the main language of instruction. At the same time, the Abkhaz-language teacher-training faculty in Abkhazia's only institute of higher education, the Pedagogical Institute, was closed. Many Abkhaz toponyms were also then replaced with Georgian geographical names.

In terms of the **political threat** – the destruction of Abkhaz statehood – this is also associated with the era of Joseph Stalin in recent history. It was during his rule (in 1931) and on his initiative that Abkhazia's status as a “Union Republic” incorporated by treaty into the USSR was reduced to that of autonomy incorporated into the Georgian SSR.

Experts in Georgian-Abkhaz relations often wonder why Georgia is the public “enemy” in Abkhazia and not the Soviet machine as a whole, which destroyed the lives of individuals and entire peoples. To answer this we must not simply point to the fact that Joseph Stalin was a Georgian by nationality, but to the policy of the forced Georgianisation of Abkhazia he instigated, which created a raft of problems in relations between the two peoples, many of which only emerged later to explosive effect. It is also worth pointing out that the majority of Abkhaz society is more critical of the Stalinist period for its violation of the collective rights of ethnic Abkhaz than the totalitarian regime's violation of individual rights during this period.

The term “enemy” often implies the existence of a “friend” as the other element of the dichotomy. While attempts to assimilate/Georgianise the Abkhaz were behind the formation of the “image of the enemy” represented by Georgia, with the departure of Stalin, Abkhaz society increasingly began to see Moscow – the centre – as a “friend” and “older brother” to whom appeals could be made over Georgian encroachments. The role of the centre was particularly significant as nationalist movements in Georgia and Abkhazia spread during the *perestroika* period. The image of Russia as a “friend” reached a new height following Moscow's recognition of Abkhaz independence in 2008.

The collapse of the USSR had engendered a new, even more destructive threat – the **threat to the physical security** of the Abkhaz people, which emanated from the new state of Georgia. This threat is associated with the 1992-1993 war. The fact that Georgian military units entered Abkhaz territory, the military action and its consequences, the casualties and the threat articulated by the commander of the Georgian troops regarding the physical annihilation of the entire Abkhaz ethnicity afforded emotional and psychological vigour to an already fully-formed image of the “enemy”. The deliberate burning of the buildings of the Abkhaz State Archives and the Institute of Abkhaz History, Language and Literature by Georgian soldiers in the presence of witnesses was, for the Abkhaz, a **symbolic act of the annihilation of Abkhaz identity**. In the period following

the end of the Georgian-Abkhaz war, the Georgian **policy of isolating and marginalising** Abkhazia to this day, accompanied not only by militaristic but also derogatory and even racist rhetoric ('pygmies inciting people against humanity', 'Lilliputians (Abkhaz) tying Gulliver's legs (Georgia)', 'Moscow's puppets', 'barbarians' with "Mongoloid ideology", etc.<sup>6</sup>), is seen as an evil which one can only expect from one's principal enemy. Even Georgia's denial in recent years that any Georgian-Abkhaz conflict exists and refusal to deal with Abkhazia as a party in negotiations, as well as Georgia's new exclusive emphasis on its conflict with Russia, are interpreted as insulting and dismissive of Abkhazia's role as an actor.

All these threats have combined to perceive Georgia with an enduring "image of the enemy" in the public consciousness. They have raised an awareness of a collective need to defend oneself against Georgia, and this has increasingly taken precedence over other arguments in favour of the independence of the Abkhaz state in Abkhaz political discourse. However, Georgia, the enemy, was not the only hostile personage in Abkhaz public perception. If Russia is a friend which has become a shield between Georgia and Abkhazia, thus meeting Abkhaz society's need for protection against Georgia and the threats emanating from it, then the West (principally the US), through its unilateral support for Georgia's "territorial integrity", is increasingly perceived in Abkhazia as an inimical force. This is a simplified picture of the political background against which political parties differentiate and domestic political competition develops in Abkhazia and which defines the main parameters of political mobilisation practices.

## **The theme of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict as the main instrument for campaigning during the 2004 Presidential elections in Abkhazia<sup>7</sup>**

As in many other post-socialist countries in the initial stages of democratic transition, populism has been an influential force in relations between the political elites (opposition and government) and the public in Abkhazia.<sup>8</sup> Populist discourse is framed by the

6 E. Shevardnadze. 'Speech at the UN General Assembly', New York, 25th September 1992; 'Saakashvili: Prevailing Enemy with Resorts', *Civil.ge*, 23rd April 2011. Available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23858>.

7 There are regular elections taking place in Abkhazia at all levels, including presidential, parliamentary and local. In 1994, several months later after the end of the war, the Parliament elected Vladislav Ardzinba President of the Republic of Abkhazia. Prior to that, since 1990, Vladislav Ardzinba had been Chairman of the Supreme Council of Abkhazia. Since 1994 the Supreme Council according to the new Abkhaz Constitution was transformed into the People's Assembly - Parliament of the Republic of Abkhazia. The second presidential elections took place in 1999 and Ardzinba was the only candidate running for the post. The third presidential elections in 2004 became the first contested presidential elections in the history of independent Abkhazia. The candidate, supported personally by the First President Ardzinba, lost the election and Sergei Bagapsh became the second President of Abkhazia.

8 See N. Baranov, *Op. Cit.*

following factors: 1) populism tends to present a dichotomous view of the world;<sup>9</sup> 2) during unresolved ethnic conflict the nature and direction of the “us” and “them” dichotomy is predetermined; 3) crisis situations create the most fertile soil for populism and these are to be found in transition societies during elections, including pre-election and post-election situations.<sup>10</sup>

The first contested Presidential elections in Abkhazia were the elections of 2004, ten years after Abkhazia gained independence. The decade preceding these elections was hard from an economic, political and psychological perspective. At Georgia's insistence, and in accordance with a resolution passed at the 1996 CIS Summit, Abkhazia had long been subject to international sanctions. During the negotiation process the Abkhaz leadership had faced pressure from virtually all international mediators, which demanded unilateral political concessions from the Abkhaz authorities. These and other factors led to the formation of a “siege mentality” among the Abkhaz public, which helped to cement the “image of the enemy” and to rally society in opposition to the hostile external environment. However, although the “image of the enemy” in public perceptions has not changed to any significant extent over time and the general public has maintained its solidarity over the opponent represented by this image, on domestic issues (clientelism; the character of resource distribution against a difficult economic situation; high levels of crime, etc.) public opinion has started to fragment. The emergence of opposition parties, free media and civil society organisations has been an important signal that, despite Abkhazia's external isolation (lack of recognition) and its formal alienation from international institutions and processes, and, indeed, active political and trade sanctions, the foundations of an open society are, nevertheless, being laid.

It was against the background of this ‘fantastical symbiosis of authoritarian and democratic elements’<sup>11</sup> that the second parliamentary elections were held (in 2002), in which opposition forces were already actively engaged.<sup>12</sup> Although the main opposition movement at the time – *Aitaira* – was forced to call on its supporters to boycott the election process, political life in Abkhazia had unequivocally moved towards pluralism and political competition. However, the political discourse remained tainted for many years by the practice of using the ideologue of the enemy and its associated negative designators.

In 2002 not only opposition forces but also non-governmental organisations (NGOs) came under fire from the authorities. Although not members of the opposition movement, the NGOs were critical of the authorities over certain aspects of the country's internal development and they stood for a consistent democratisation process in Abkhazia. The

9 U. Al'termatt (2000). *Etnonatsionalizm v Evrope [Ethnic nationalism in Europe]*. Moscow: Russian State University for Humanities.

10 N. Baranov, *Op. Cit.*

11 N. Baranov, *Op. Cit.*

12 The first post-war contested parliamentary election took place as early as 1996. However, at that time the oppositional parties and movements had not emerged yet and the competition was between personalities rather than political groups.

authorities and their supporters, mainly traditionalist thinkers, were irritated by the political activism of civil society organisations and their espousal of democratic values. Civic values, in the over-simplified views of these ethnocentrically-minded politicians and experts, were perceived as a threat to traditional culture and consequently to the Abkhaz state as a whole.<sup>13</sup> The focus of NGO representatives on searching for adequate responses to challenges to the development of Abkhaz statehood, which would combine serious measures to strengthen and develop Abkhaz culture and the Abkhaz language as a state language, with civic values and the principle of inclusivity (given the multi-ethnic nature of Abkhaz society),<sup>14</sup> was perceived by the NGOs' opponents as an expression of an "over-literal" interpretation of the Constitution of Abkhazia.<sup>15</sup>

They were initially, however, reluctant to criticise NGOs directly for their adherence to democratic principles and so looked for another, more "tractable" reason for turning the public against the representatives of the non-governmental sector. They "found" this in the dialogue between the representatives of Abkhaz and Georgian civil society (under the auspices of international organisations) on the conflict and NGOs' cooperation with international organisations. The government's supporters, ignoring the political and diplomatic dividends to potentially be gained from civil society dialogue between members of countries in a state of conflict, as well as the importance of contacts with the Western expert and diplomatic communities for an internationally isolated country hoping to gain international recognition, mounted a campaign to vilify NGOs, aimed exclusively at depriving liberal-minded civil society organisations of public legitimacy. These attempts to discredit NGOs were part of a broader strategy of stemming the growth of opposition sentiment in the country.

The most aggressively manipulative techniques were those employed during the 2004 presidential elections, where political campaigning reached new levels of incandescence and public demand for change. Demands, such as calling for the replacement of the political elite, were clearly articulated as never before by a number of political movements, including the war veterans' organisation. The year 2004 was a watershed for Abkhazia in terms of the formation of a democratic culture of constitutional change of government, although the accession of the opposition to power was not without tensions which resulted in the creation of a sham coalition government.

The year 2004 was also a watershed in terms of the large-scale use of the "image of the enemy" as the main technique for mobilising public opinion. The authorities tried to utilise the public's solidarity against an "external enemy" to mobilise the electorate

13 A. Inal-Ipa (2011). 'De-isolation in Abkhaz public discourse', in International Alert (2011a), *The De-isolation of Abkhazia*. London. Available at <http://www.international-alert.org/resources/publications/de-isolation-abkhazia-0>.

14 Although the Abkhaz language has the status of a state language, in practice the working language in Abkhazia is Russian.

15 The constitution of the Republic of Abkhazia is based on the democratic principles of the separation of power and contains references to fundamental international documents including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.



against internal political rivals. Since the results of the elections meant a change in the administration, which had for many years been headed by the undisputed leader of the Abkhaz national liberation movement Vladislav Ardzinba until his illness, supporters of the government deliberately tried to misrepresent the intentions of the opposition. They equated **opposition to the governing elite with opposition to the national liberation movement, the national idea itself and the Abkhaz state as a whole**. Opposition figures and their supporters were denounced as “pro-Georgian” forces expressing enemy interests. The fact that some of the oppositional candidates had worked in the Soviet era as party functionaries within the Georgian SSR was used to present these candidates to the electorate as politically unreliable politicians. The aim was to engender high levels of public distrust in the opposition and, if necessary, to spur the population to protest.

Against this complex social and political background, Abkhaz NGOs organised public monitoring of the elections and announced the results of their monitoring at the court where the election results were disputed.<sup>16</sup> The view of the League of Voters, which confirmed that the opposition candidate had won, was interpreted by the losers as direct support for the opposition.

With the aim of discrediting the NGOs the supporters of the losing side announced that the NGOs public monitoring was tainted with “Georgian fingerprints”. Parallels were drawn between the Abkhaz “League of voters for fair elections” and the Georgian movement *Kmara*, an active participant in the “Rose revolution” in Georgia. There was a clear implication that the League’s statements of support for a democratic election process were in fact a cover for “enemy forces”, whose aim was to bring power to political groups loyal to Georgia. By presenting events in Georgia and in other post-Soviet countries as “exporting revolution”, “orchestrated” by the West, the losing side was thus attempting to present the opposition’s victory in Abkhazia as promoting Georgian interests with the support of the West. The mythologising of Georgia’s “role” in Abkhazia’s pluralistic development was a clear attempt to reconstruct the “image of the enemy” and construct the images of “traitors” and “accomplices” derived from it.

Despite the mass propaganda campaign, a significant proportion of voters did not take seriously this ideological labelling or indeed the populist discourse conducted by the supporters of the previous administration. Firstly, the accusations levelled against opposition politicians were based on politicians’ alleged ties with Georgia arising from their work for the Soviet authorities in Tbilisi. The public response to these accusations was muted since they related to the widespread Soviet practice of training up party functionaries: in Abkhaz (unlike Georgian) discourse, there was no wholesale demonisation of the Soviet past, apart from attempts at Georgianisation.

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<sup>16</sup> The League of voters “for fair elections” was created in the run-up to the 2004 presidential elections and was comprised of both NGO representatives and ordinary citizens.

Secondly, in a society as small as Abkhazia, in which every person is publicly visible and where not just a politician's life story but also his family tree are often a matter of public knowledge, it is difficult to ascribe mistakes or crimes to someone which they have not committed.

Thirdly, by 2004 public demand for serious change in all spheres of life in Abkhazia had reached surprising heights; therefore, votes in favour of the opposition were, in many cases, protest votes. Voters were not even swayed by the recruitment of Russian politicians and cultural figures to the campaign backing the government candidate (an instance of the exploitation of the "image of the friend"). Although a large proportion of the electorate voted for the opposition, the depressing result of the use of the aforementioned political campaigning techniques was a deep split in society, which led to unprecedented levels of internal antagonism which remain today.

## Use of the "image of the friend" in political campaigns

The topic of "the enemy" again came to the fore on more than one occasion in the election periods (2009 and 2011). Since the emergence of the opposition in Abkhazia in the late 1990s, the main political forces in Abkhazia could be roughly classified into "traditionalists" and "pragmatists". The latter won in the 2004 elections.<sup>17</sup> Until recently the topic of "the enemy" was voiced mainly by political groups from the traditionalist wing of Abkhaz politics. The "traditionalists" were characterised by a peculiar combination of ethnocentrism and Soviet mentality. Initially they positioned themselves as the legitimate political force by default: in statements they said they opposed "the enemy" and "Georgia's accomplices", by whom they meant any political group that opposed the then government. Apart from that, the traditionalists opposed themselves to those who were 'against the values of Soviet society'.<sup>18</sup> By contrast, the "pragmatists", who came to power in 2004 and who had considerable experience under their belt from the Soviet era working with the *nomenklatura*, positioned themselves from the start as managers, whose priority was the wellbeing of the ordinary citizen. However, despite the depressing and unsuccessful experience of utilising the "enemy image" by traditionalists during the 2004 elections, it was the pragmatists who took the initiative and attempted to extract political dividends from the dichotomy of the images of "the enemy" and "the friend".

Following the Russian Federation's recognition of Abkhaz independence in 2008, relations between the two states started to intensify. Over a brief period a series of important

17 This is an arbitrary division. There are clear "pragmatists" among the "traditionalists"; while the "pragmatists" have their own "traditionalists". The more idealist wing of traditionalists genuinely believes in their ethno-populist slogans but there are also situational traditionalists who make opportunistic use of traditionalist rhetoric.

18 A. Fateyev (1999). *Obraz vruga v sovetskoj propagande. 1945-1954* [The image of the enemy in Soviet propaganda. 1945-1954]. Available in Russian at <http://psyfactor.org/lib/fateev9.htm>.

documents was signed, including a framework treaty on friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance, as well as agreements on joint efforts to guard Abkhazia's state border, military collaboration and a combined Russian military base on Abkhaz soil.<sup>19</sup> Russia became Abkhazia's main strategic partner, donor country and guarantor of security against threats emanating from its principal enemy, Georgia. Unlike the perception of "the enemy" in Abkhaz society, which is more or less monolithic, attitudes to its principal "friend", however, are more nuanced. Some clauses in the Abkhaz-Russian agreements led to public concern over a possible decrease of Abkhaz sovereignty and its increasing military, political and economic dependence on Russia.<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that the current opposition (the "traditionalists"), as well as the government (the "pragmatists"), see Russia as Abkhazia's principal strategic partner. However, the opposition politicians' view is that the Abkhaz-Russian partnership should not be asymmetrical. According to the opposition, the Abkhaz authorities themselves are responsible for the increasing dependence on Moscow due to their failure to stand up consistently for the interests of their state.

Since the opposition had already occupied the niche of "true patriots" vis-à-vis Georgia, it would have been difficult to make public accusations stick regarding its "betrayal" of state interests by collaborating with the enemy; therefore, on the eve of the 2009 presidential elections, the "pragmatists" accused the opposition of acting against Abkhazia's principal friend and defender against the Georgian threat. The authorities were in all likelihood counting on the fact that the public, which after the events of 2008 was particularly appreciative of Russia's role as the main factor restraining Georgia, would share their criticism of the opposition. It also needed to marginalise the opposition in the eyes of the Russian establishment, in case Russia decided to back one of the presidential candidates.

The opposition's failure to win the 2009 elections cannot of course be explained solely in terms of the successful manipulation of public opinion by the "pragmatists". Public demand for stability turned out to be stronger than the demand for reforms and the majority of voters at that time did not associate either demand with the opposition. The opposition itself was divided and weak. Despite this it attempted to defend itself in the eyes of Abkhaz society and the Russian establishment by adopting an active anti-Western position.<sup>21</sup> The anti-Western attitude of the traditionalists is an ideologically-based rejection of civil society values as well as a way of softening accusations of being anti-Russian and at the same time a protest against the double standards of the West, which recognised Kosovar independence but continues to refuse to recognise Abkhazia.

19 M. Gurgulia (2011). 'Partial recognition of Abkhazia as an independent state: opportunities and challenges', in International Alert, *The Politics of Non-recognition in the Context of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict*. London; S. Gezerdava (2011). 'Abkhaz sovereignty and relations with Russia', in International Alert, *Op. Cit.* Available at <http://www.international-alert.org/resources/publications/politics-non-recognition-context-georgian-abkhaz-conflict>.

20 *Ibid.*

21 A. Inal-Ipa (2011). *Op. Cit.* I. Khintba (2011). 'De-isolation via the West: opportunities and restrictions', in International Alert (2011a), *The De-isolation of Abkhazia*. Available at <http://www.international-alert.org/resources/publications/de-isolation-abkhazia-0>.

The upshot of the manipulative techniques employed by all political players (both government and opposition) in their campaigns meant that the Abkhaz political community now found itself awkwardly located between its “enemy” and “friend”. The opposition demonstrates wishful thinking, exaggerating Russian interests in strengthening Abkhaz sovereignty and naïvely insisting on overcoming the asymmetry in relations with Moscow whilst at the same time criticising the authorities for their “multi-vector” foreign policy.<sup>22</sup> For their part, the authorities are left feeling defensive over their “multi-vector” policy, insisting to Moscow and its own society that an independent Abkhaz state can be entirely satisfied with partial recognition. Neither has so far shown any willingness to look for a consensus over issues of strategic importance, although this would be a rational response given the partial character of recognition of Abkhaz independence.

In their attempts to defend themselves against criticism, particularly of corruption, “the pragmatists” have increasingly started to resort to organised “public outcries” on particular issues. For example, following the publication of the conclusions of a joint Russian-Abkhaz evaluation of the effectiveness of Russian aid, which uncovered serious faults in the implementation of economic projects financed by the Russian Federation in Abkhazia, the leader of one of the opposition parties made a statement in which he severely criticised the Abkhaz authorities. He also used insulting language towards the senior Russian official who was attempting to justify the shortfalls in expenditure. In response the Abkhaz police detained the politician for three days, and then released him under pressure from the opposition and civil society. To counter the protests from opposition parties, independent media and NGOs, the government’s supporters organised a “public condemnation” of the opposition figure in an attempt to divert attention away from the embezzlement of finances towards the insults against the Russian bureaucrat. These statements were portrayed as an “attack” on the friendship between Abkhazia and the Russian Federation, which was playing into the hands of Abkhazia’s enemies. However, the attempt to play on the images of “the enemy” and “the friend” did not lead to any significant results for the organisers of the campaign. It achieved little resonance with the wider public, instead leading to a series of protests from various political and public groups. The probable reasons for its failure were, firstly, that the detention of a well-known politician was seen as a serious challenge to fundamental freedoms, as until then there had never been any political detainees in the history of independent Abkhazia; secondly, the public interpreted the actions of the authorities as an attempt to divert attention away from the activities of corrupt bureaucrats.

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22 Although the term “multi-vector” has now become part of the general political lexicon in Abkhazia, its specific meaning was the expansion of international contacts whilst maintaining and strengthening the strategic partnership with Russia.

## Political marginalisation and construction of the image of the “internal enemy”

The border district of Abkhazia, Gal, which is populated by an ethnic Georgian group (Mingrelians), has on various occasions provided a “convenient” opportunity for the manipulation of the “image of the enemy”. During elections, the residents of this district have been repeatedly the focus of negative rhetoric. Before the 2004 presidential elections, the population of Gal had participated in all elections, including the referendum on Abkhazia's sovereignty in 1999. This allowed the then administration in Abkhazia to declare the results of the referendum legitimate, as well as the election (unopposed) of the president of the republic, Ardzinba, for a second term in 1999. However, in 2004 following their defeat in the presidential elections, the “traditionalists” contested the results of the election, using the claim that there had been massive voting irregularities in Gal district as their main argument, the residents of which they did not consider could be called Abkhaz citizens. Since the votes of ethnic Abkhaz were split between pro-government and opposition candidates, and the majority of Gal residents voted for the opposition (the “pragmatists”), the choice of the residents of Gal district was decisive. In their statement, supporters of the losing candidate said unequivocally that “patriots” cannot allow the fate of Abkhazia to be determined by Georgians, i.e. the enemy.

The population of Gal district “migrate” between being classed as “direct enemies” and “fifth columnists” depending on the level of tension at a given point in time. For example, shortly before the 2009 presidential elections the authorities (the “pragmatists”), who also viewed the Gal district as an important electoral resource, decided to expedite the issuing of Abkhaz passports for the district's residents by lobbying for amendments to the Law on Citizenship of the Republic of Abkhazia. This would mean that all residents of the district (former refugees) who had returned to their former place of residence before 2005 would be automatically declared citizens of Abkhazia. The tabling of this amendment to the Law on Citizenship led to vehement protests from the traditionalist opposition and precipitated a political crisis in the country. Parliament was forced to withdraw the amendment and restore the original version of the law. In a tempestuous debate on the issue, during which some opposition members referred to the entire Mingrelian population of Abkhazia as a “fifth column”, the general thrust was that most of the district's population should be prevented from voting. This pressure led to the issuing of passports in Gal district being suspended for the period of the elections. These emotional discussions about the “explosive” role of the district's Georgian population in Abkhazia's political life did not appear to be backed by any strategy for resolving the real problems in Gal district itself or those related to the district. Clearly, such kind of discourse is bound to have an impact on this population's loyalty to the Abkhaz state and society.

Almost at the beginning of Sergei Bagapsh's second presidential term, political forces within the ruling elite had already started competing for the next presidency.

The divisions within the ruling elite emerged in the summer of 2010 when the topic of “the enemy” was revived, this time in connection with the broadcast of a documentary film by the Georgian director, Mamuka Kuparadze, on Abkhaz state television (AGTRK), entitled *Absence of Will*. The tone of the film is overtly anti-war and is the first Georgian film in which the author attempts a critical rethinking of Georgian policy on Abkhazia, calling on the viewer to look for the causes of the 1992-1993 war within Georgia itself rather than outside its borders. As well as the documentary, AGTRK also screened a discussion of the picture by a panel of representatives of the Abkhaz public which was attended by the director himself. Although the film contests the official Georgian version of events preceding the Georgian-Abkhaz war, its showing on television was used by certain political forces to organise a “public condemnation” of the NGO organising it and, above all, the officials who issued the permit for Kuparadze to enter Abkhazia. The nature of the attacks, the arguments employed, the fact that the criticism was directed at specific officials from the administration and specific people in the NGO community, and the political affiliation of the public groups, through which vehement accusations of “selling out to the West” and “betraying the national interest” were channelled, all suggested that the campaign to discredit those organising the screening of the film was initiated by rival forces within the government elite. Without stopping to consider what political forces might have been behind the campaign, the opposition forces reacted viscerally, issuing a series of outraged statements in response to the screening of the Georgian film on AGTRK.

The accusations levelled by the supporters of the “pragmatists” and “traditionalists” were based on the following factors: outrage about the fact that a Georgian journalist had come to Abkhazia, that a Georgian film had been screened on Abkhaz state television, and that there had been constructive discussion of the film, which had taken place in a relatively amicable atmosphere. Regarding the content of the film, it was clear from the contradictory comments that most of those who expressed their outrage had either not seen the film at all or had interpreted it very freely.

Despite the mass campaign of criticism run on state media, in which some of the opposition participated, many citizens welcomed the screening and were surprised by the film which actually unmaskes Georgian policy. They appreciated that the accusations levelled against the representatives of the NGOs were absurd, as was the fact that the Abkhaz Parliament set aside important matters and met on two separate occasions to debate the situation and even considered it necessary to issue a statement criticising the organisers of the screening of the film. However, citizens refrained from publicly expressing their opinion on this “uncomfortable” topic for fear of being dubbed “unpatriotic”, since it was not simply a matter of one specific film, but of interaction with the Georgian side (the director coming to Abkhazia) after two wars (1992-1993

and 2008).<sup>23</sup> Thus, despite the failure of the campaign to discredit civil society activists and individual officials, public opinion was significantly paralysed.

The peculiarity of the situation is that there is regular public contact between individual citizens of Abkhazia and Georgia which are unpublicised but nevertheless well known to the public, for example in the sphere of trade. Many goods on the Sukhum market have in fact been imported from Georgia. Abkhaz citizens with serious illnesses (HIV/AIDS, drug dependency, cardiovascular disorders) who cannot receive appropriate treatment in Abkhazia and who do not have the funds to travel to Russia for treatment have as an emergency measure to travel to Georgia and be treated there. There are frequent voices heard in society calling for the banning of any such contacts. However, the criticism is political in nature and is aimed mostly at the authorities, who fail to prevent the Abkhaz citizens from being drawn into Georgia's realm, while ordinary citizens, who choose to visit Georgia, receive little public attention and are not subjected to attacks presumably because they are not generally engaged in public or political activities.

In this regard it is interesting also to note the tactic of Georgian officials. According to the Georgian administration, Russia and the Abkhaz "puppet regime" are the main "obstacles" to people to people contacts and in general to a Georgian-Abkhaz settlement, whereas Georgia allegedly has "no problem" with Abkhaz society. The Georgian authorities under President Saakashvili's leadership were widely publicising their efforts to "restore" relations with the Abkhaz. They were attempting to demonstrate to the international community that they treated ordinary people in Abkhazia as their own citizens. The main focus of attention here was on ethnic Abkhaz. For example, in Georgia free healthcare until recently has been only available to ethnic Abkhaz, while residents of Abkhazia of other ethnic origin have been denied a such right. Recently, however, more often the Abkhaz could benefit from free health services only in return for signing a document confirming their Georgian citizenship.<sup>24</sup>

Although there is little interest in Abkhaz society as a whole in socio-political processes within Georgia, the manoeuvring of the Georgian authorities in connection with the "Abkhaz issue" does not go unnoticed and is merely seen as confirmation of Tbilisi's cunning plot. As a result, even humanitarian campaigns by international organisations operating through Georgia can find surprising interpretations. When in 2010 the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) carried out a polio immunisation programme in Abkhazia, a campaign was launched in some of the oppositional media against the

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23 The only person to speak out openly against "witch hunts" over the showing of the Georgian film was the former parliamentary deputy, the public activist Ts. Gumba. She initiated the publication of an open letter in local media defending the British academic, George Hewitt, who was also subjected to attacks after speaking out positively about the film. The letter was only signed by a few public figures. See *Apsnypress* news article of 27th July 2010, available in Russian at <http://apsnypress.info/news/1246.html>.

24 Anonymous interview with patients undergoing treatment in Georgia, Sukhum, May 2011.

programme. Along with doubts with regard to the necessity of immunisation as such, concerns were articulated in society on the grounds that the vaccines had been imported by UNICEF workers through Georgian territory where, according to staunch sceptics, these drugs might have been deliberately contaminated with poisonous substances. It is difficult to be sure how much the protest against the vaccinations was dictated by a real concern over the lives of children or whether it was part of an anti-government campaign.

Another important aspect is that political discussions using the conflict theme are often bolstered by the attendance of representatives of significant social groups, such as war veterans or mothers of the fallen, who enjoy particular public respect. Among such groups are also representatives of the national intelligentsia: artistic unions, academic institutions, etc. This section of society were in the past the most active members of the Abkhaz national liberation movement. Once the aim of the national liberation struggle – the gaining of independence by Abkhazia – was achieved, and following its recognition by the Russian Federation, the priorities for society have now become state-building, democratisation, etc. As a result, some representatives of national intelligentsia, with their experience of the struggle for national self-determination and their knowledge of Soviet practices of public participation, are no longer in demand. For them the conflict theme marks a return to the era of the national liberation struggle and provides the intelligentsia with the platform it needs.

It is important to note also that in post-war societies there are individuals whose feelings of vulnerability encourage them to side with the most radical sections of the political community. Their vulnerability may stem from their presence on occupied territories during military action (which might lead to accusations of political unreliability), or from the fact that they have relatives who are ethnically related to the enemy. Other potentially vulnerable people might be those who do not speak the indigenous language, did not take part in military action, did not “take up weapons to defend the motherland”, etc. The solidarity these groups exhibit with the more radical sections of society merely generates the illusion of a secure environment, when in fact it deepens divisions among the public.

Interestingly, a myth has recently taken hold in Abkhazia that the conflict between Abkhazia and Georgia is over following the August 2008 events. Meanwhile, Georgia continues to be perceived as the enemy by the overwhelming majority of citizens. The fact that ordinary people can hold a combination of two opposing notions (“there is no conflict but there is an enemy”) suggests that society has adapted to a situation of protracted conflict. Thanks to all the existing guarantees of security and the opportunities that cooperation with Russia has opened up, the public does not see any practical point in looking for ways to settle the conflict with Georgia, at least in the short and medium term, and does not have to be concerned about the price of an unresolved conflict in the



existing geopolitical situation. For the political and expert communities, the fact that some members are articulating mutually exclusive statements (“there is no conflict but there is an enemy”) may be interpreted as a populist way of avoiding problems while instrumentalising the “image of the enemy”.

## Shift in public priorities as an indicator of societal transformation

Generally, and despite periodic excesses over the use of the topic of the conflict, there do seem to be some signs that the conflict theme is gradually waning in importance as an instrument for mobilising the public in relation to domestic politics. The most recent example relates to the 2011 presidential elections.<sup>25</sup> Despite previous experience which demonstrated that using the “image of the enemy” during elections does not achieve its direct aim of publicly discrediting opponents, an interview with the former Georgian Defence Minister, Tengiz Kitovani,<sup>26</sup> was publicised, in which the former minister spoke of alleged collaboration between one of the presidential candidates and Georgian special forces during the Georgian-Abkhaz war. The public at large, however, dismissed the interview as a fabrication and condemned the use of the interview as a mobilisation technique.

The 2011 elections were therefore of particular interest, not least because this was the first time that manipulation of the “Georgian issue” led to almost unanimous public rejection. This is likely to have been for the following reasons: the Russian Federation’s recognition of Abkhaz independence and the security guarantees it provided were undeniably crucial factors which reduced the significance of the conflict theme for the Abkhaz public. However, no less important was the fact that democratic processes in Abkhazia are gathering strength and, whereas public political participation in Abkhazia has traditionally been related mostly to defence and promoting collective rights, under these new conditions the focus has now started to shift to issues of domestic state-building and governance. A more sober view of politics is forming in society and the main priorities for most citizens are now increasingly the strengthening of the rule of law, combating corruption and increasing the wellbeing of the population.<sup>27</sup> This is also reflected in the dominant political discourse, where generalisations over “the enemy” are to a certain extent losing ground.

25 Due to the untimely death of the second President of Abkhazia, Sergei Bagapsh, extraordinary presidential elections were held in 2011. Alexander Ankvab won the election and became the third President of Abkhazia.

26 Tengiz Kitovani was Georgian Defence Minister during the 1992-1993 Georgian-Abkhaz war.

27 I. Khintba (2011). ‘Presidential elections in Abkhazia: A changing society in a fixed context’, *Caucasus Dialogues – Perspectives from the Regions*, International Alert. Available at <http://www.international-alert.org/our-work/caucasus-dialogues-perspectives-region/presidential-elections-abkhazia-changing-society-fixed-context>.

## Findings

To conclude our analysis of community mobilisation practices in Abkhazia, we here identify certain trends associated with the utilisation of the theme of conflict:

1. In small societies political techniques, including those that use the “image of the enemy”, often fail to achieve their direct goal of discrediting and ostracising political opponents. This is because political and public actors are not virtual figures in small societies – they are accessible, their activity is largely visible and transparent. Nevertheless, this should not be taken to mean that manipulation of “the image of the enemy” has no side effects.
2. Invoking the “image of the enemy” as a way of political assassination of opponents stands some chance of success where vestiges of a totalitarian mentality remain, since this relies largely on the same techniques. In a small society, wide use of the ideologue of the enemy can be used, if not to “dispose of” rivals, then at least to neutralise them to some extent by depriving them of public support, since public opinion can easily be paralysed by populist slogans. In a situation where the principal hallmark of “true” patriots is their expression of hatred of the enemy (which certain groups routinely voice on any public issue, even ones not directly related to the conflict), some topics become a taboo in society, and self-censorship develops. Apart from anything else, this in fact holds back the development of a culture of intellectual debate.
3. Whilst the “image of the enemy” is widely used in political discourse, there are experts and politicians especially from among those who are most actively manipulating the “enemy image”, who consider the conflict as resolved and who claim that there is no need for the resolution anymore. “Conflict resolution” as well as “conflict transformation” are arbitrarily interpreted as an “abandonment” of the idea of independence and as such presented to the public. Ridding themselves of the necessity to seek resolution of the complex problems in a specific geopolitical environment, these groups blackmail society with accusations of “collaborationism”.
4. In transition societies which have undergone a long struggle for national self-determination, the leadership of the national liberation movement often tends to be identified with the state and the national idea itself. In this situation any public or political forces (opposition movements, independent media, civil society organisations) which criticise the leadership can easily be portrayed as acting against the state and classed as “enemies” and “traitors”.
5. In any conflict there are external parties which hold unilateral positions on resolving the conflict. Interaction with such external actors on any issues may be used by populists as a reason to “expose” their opponents. For example, given the West’s support for Georgia’s “territorial integrity” and the anti-Western feeling this engenders in Abkhazia, interaction between members of Abkhaz civil society and

(“hostile”) Western organisations is criticised, even if the aim of this interaction is to overcome deep-rooted Western stereotypes about Abkhazia and change its attitude towards the question of Abkhaz independence. Those who express anti-Western sentiments demand an end to all contacts until the West recognises all Abkhaz lawful claims. The West’s double standards over nations’ rights to self-determination are often identified with the values of democratic society as such. Likewise, in Georgia under Saakashvili’s leadership, where Russia’s role was heavily demonised, any attempts by the opposition to initiate pragmatic dialogue with Moscow were bound to run aground on accusations of betraying the national interest.

6. The “image of the enemy” is almost always accompanied by the “image of the friend”. Populist messages range from accusations of collaborationism with “the enemy” to accusations of “attacks” on good relations with “the friend”. Different messages are used by the same political forces depending on whether they are in power or in opposition. In the Abkhaz context the word “friend” is associated in the public consciousness with Russia. Following the recognition of Abkhaz independence the “image of the friend” has resurfaced in political discourse. Whereas the image of the “external enemy” is more comprehensive and simplified, and there is public consensus with regard to it, the image of “the friend” is more discreet and nuanced. Manipulating the images of “the enemy” and “the friend” to accommodate the interests of certain political groups drastically reduces room for manoeuvre when it is necessary to take rational decisions that would actually be in the best interests of the whole of society.
7. Issues relating to ethnic minorities on one’s own territory in a situation of an ethno-political conflict, when these minorities ethnically are related to the opposing side, such as the Mingrelians in Abkhazia’s border district of Gal, are often instrumentalised in domestic discourse and used to radicalise public attitudes towards these minorities. However, rather than the intended result (depriving one’s enemy of a social base in one’s territory), radical groups have merely bolstered the Mingrelian population’s image of the Abkhaz as “the enemy”, whilst failing in any way to resolve the real problems associated with the border district.
8. Issues relating to the rights of such ethnic minorities are often taboo, even for the independent press, as it wants to avoid becoming a target for accusations of a “lack of patriotism” and retain the “moral” right to criticise political players on other issues without hindrance.
9. One regrettable result of the manipulation of the conflict theme is a deep societal split that will take many years to heal. In a society as small as Abkhazia, political division affects interpersonal and even family relations, which from one perspective is evidence that kinship plays little role in determining political preferences. However, the high levels of antagonism caused by this split are a significant obstacle to creating a favourable environment for the free and rational exchange of views.

10. Forces which articulate populist ideas, sincere or simply to serve their vested interests, attempt to “monopolise” patriotism and accuse the more liberal section of society (for example, NGOs) of being futilely distracted by universal human rights. The perception of NGOs fostered by these forces is that they are guilty of “elitist snobbery”, moralistic tendencies, dogmatism and generally being out of touch with “local realities”, which partly explains the lack of potential for mobilisation (as an institution). At the same time, the experience in Abkhazia shows that although the civil society movement has not become a political movement (in the form of a political party), representatives of civil society organisations, despite attacks and defamation, are perceived by many as healthy forces in society and, as a result, they are from time to time elected to Parliament and local government.
11. Despite the wide use of the ideologeme of the enemy in political campaigning and the negative consequences listed above, Abkhaz society is becoming less susceptible to manipulation. The presence of important democratic institutions, such as competing political forces, free media and an active civil society creates a relatively stable space for the public demand for change to be freely articulated.

## Conclusion

The use of negative domestic political campaigning techniques may turn out to have serious consequences for post-Soviet societies. In a situation of unresolved ethnic conflict, where a democratic political culture remains undeveloped and democratic institutions are not entirely stable, and where the public is keenly aware of its own demographic and cultural linguistic vulnerability, utilising the “image of the enemy” and constructing the image of “internal enemies” help to bolster the dominant influence in society of ethno-populism, to revive xenophobia, as well as to actively spread conspiracy theories, to inhibit free analytical thought and ultimately curtail the space available for taking rational decisions on issues that are important for both society and state. However, attempts to separate real threats from imagined ones are often portrayed as “eroding the image of the enemy” which serves the enemy’s interests. Nevertheless, unless the manipulation of the theme of conflict as an instrument of political blackmail by forces intent on obtaining political dividends in the struggle for power and influence is exposed, society will remain “on the sidelines” of modernisation processes for a long time.

In the Abkhaz context the “image of the enemy” has not faded from the internal political agenda with time. Despite the clear failure of attempts to radicalise public opinion using “the enemy” during the elections in 2011, populist gambits and manipulative techniques using the conflict theme are not yet a thing of the past. Any step within the negotiation framework, or any decisions taken by the Russian-Abkhaz partnership, might act as an impetus for the reproduction of “the enemy” by competing political groups. At the same time, the sober and rational response of the majority of the population to the excesses

of the 2011 election campaign is evidence that 'Abkhaz society has entered a phase in which it is driven more by pragmatism than emotion',<sup>28</sup> with "the enemy image" (and populist rhetoric linked with conflict in general) gradually losing its ability to bring about mass political mobilisation around internal issues.

The 2011 election campaign also showed that political elites do not always keep step with the development of society or even undervalue it, while society itself becomes less susceptible to manipulation as openness increases. However, society has yet to make the transition from passive non-acceptance of manipulative techniques to the open and rational discussion of all issues concerning public and governmental life. Such a shift will be evidence of progress in the development of a democratic political culture in Abkhazia.

## CHAPTER 2

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# “Patriot Games”: Marginalising Political Opponents in Modern Azerbaijan

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Ilham Abbasov

## Introduction

Azerbaijan held parliamentary elections ‘in the autumn of 2010 (7th November), an event which always evokes a degree of excitement in domestic politics, especially as campaigning had started much earlier, in the spring. More importantly, however, these elections were a significant milestone in Azerbaijan’s post-Soviet history. Firstly, not a single representative of the leading opposition parties gained a seat in the country’s Parliament (*Milli Majlis*).<sup>1</sup> This was not due to any boycott of the elections by the opposition. Indeed, the government’s official version is that the opposition simply lost its last remaining vestiges of popularity. According to the opposition, these elections were crudely rigged to ensure that opposition candidates were deprived of the few seats in Parliament they had held since the previous elections.<sup>2</sup>

These elections demonstrated another interesting and finally accepted feature of the country’s political in-fighting. This was not that the weakness of the opposition was particularly evident, but rather that, according to my observations, deputies from both the opposition and the ruling party sought to use the debate on how to resolve the Nagorny Karabakh conflict as a source for attracting votes. This was particularly evident in the run-up to the election, where both sides of the political divide (the opposition and the ruling party) accused each other of being incapable of resolving the conflict.<sup>3</sup>

During the Parliamentary elections the ruling party insisted that it alone was capable of resolving the Nagorny Karabakh conflict, whilst the opposition retorted that the ruling party “lacked the patriotism” to achieve a “just” resolution of the conflict. The ruling party, seeking to undermine the already weak position of the opposition, then weighed in with claims that the opposition was playing into the hands of those “hostile” to or indeed the “enemies” of Azerbaijan, calling the opposition a “fifth column”. Therefore, both sides attempted to exploit the conflict by using the “enemy of the people” discourse to discredit their political rivals.

Put slightly differently, each side, to varying degrees, used its right to speak on behalf of the Azerbaijani nation to construct a discursive image of “the enemy”: the ruling party assigned the role of the “enemy” to the opposition, and vice versa. The media (television, newspapers, electronic news websites) played an important part in the

1 ‘The new make-up of the Milli Majlis: a long forgotten reminder of Soviet time’, TURAN Information Agency, 8th November 2010. Available in Russian at <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/blogs/651/posts/5971>.

2 The last Parliament in 2005 included five deputies from opposition parties. The total number of deputies is 115.

3 Since the topic of the analysis presented in this article is domestic politics in Azerbaijan, I will not go into detail about the specific features of the Nagorny Karabakh conflict. However, to make my position clear, I refer to the descriptions of the conflict provided by Thomas de Waal and Svante Cornell. There are of course criticisms that can be made of each of these publications. However, they are, in my view, among the most interesting and illuminating works on this conflict. For more information, please see: T. de Waal (2005). *The Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War*. Moscow: Tekst; E. S. Cornell (2001). *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*. Richmond: RoutledgeCurzon, pp.61-141.

process of marginalising political opponents. Both the ruling party and the opposition are active political actors with access (albeit at differing levels) to the media, the largest space available for public representation of their programmes and ideologies.

The practice of marginalising political opponents is becoming ever more common and widespread, with the latest “blame game” taking place in March-April 2011, when the opposition launched public demonstrations inspired by the Arab Spring. Activists on both sides (the ruling party and the opposition) are constructing a discursive image of the “enemy” in domestic politics, which is presented to the public mainly through the various branches of the media. This article analyses the specific features of these representations.

## The socio-political context

Both the topic and methodology employed (discourse analysis) require us to begin with a description of the social context and/or “institutional positioning”, in which the representatives of the ruling party and the opposition are located. Before starting the analysis we need to describe the (political) context and circumstances within the country where the election campaign took place. A multi-party system and conditions to compete for political power have emerged in Azerbaijan in the post-Soviet period. At the official level (in the discourse of the ruling party) it is constantly emphasised that Azerbaijan currently enjoys democratic governance. For example, in one of his most recent interviews (11th October 2011) for Al-Jazeera, Ilham Aliyev, the President of Azerbaijan, said that:

‘Today we have democratic institutions, freedom of the press, free access to the internet. Free access to the internet is certainly not available in all countries, as is well known. In Azerbaijan over 50 percent of the population uses the internet. We are members of several international organisations. For example, we have been a member of the Council of Europe for ten years, the main agenda of which is human rights and democracy. Azerbaijan has also voluntarily joined the European Union’s “Eastern Partnership” programme.’

The president did not deny that there were some difficulties; in his words, democracy in Azerbaijan is still “young”. However, he generally gave an upbeat assessment of the situation in terms of the development of democratic freedoms and human rights.<sup>4</sup>

According to the main opposition parties (“Musavat”, the Azerbaijan National Front Party (PNFA), etc.), however, the political regime in the country should be viewed

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<sup>4</sup> Ilham Aliyev was interviewed by a correspondent of Al Jazeera TV channel. Site of the President of Azerbaijan – Ilham Aliyev (11/10/11). Available at <http://en.president.az/articles/3273>.



as authoritarian.<sup>5</sup> During debates held at “Musavat” party headquarters in Baku on 22nd November 2011, the reasons for the Azerbaijani authorities’ slow progress over European integration were discussed. In the opposition parties’ view, these included, among other reasons, a lack of will to develop democratic institutions and support human rights.<sup>6</sup> The dismissal in early November 2011 of university professor Rafik Aliyev of the Oil Academy was roundly condemned by members of the “Forum of Azerbaijani Intellectuals”.<sup>7</sup> A few days before his dismissal, the academic had called publicly for the development of democratic institutions in Azerbaijan. On 27th May 2011 the “Forum of Azerbaijani Intellectuals” presented a Charter for *Seven Steps to Democracy*. The Charter contained a ‘strongly worded criticism of the party in power, calling it a corrupt authoritarian regime which was flouting the political, social, economic rights and freedoms of its citizens’.<sup>8</sup>

This is a further demonstration of the wide gulf between the views of the ruling party and the opposition, even over such matters as the style of political governance in place in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. This gulf is widened further by domestic political point scoring and attempts to marginalise political opponents. The ruling party’s discourse assigns the role of the “enemy” to the opposition and vice versa. In the ruling party’s

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- 5 Opinion is divided within the expert and academic community over the profile of the political authorities in Azerbaijan. André Altstadt describes the process of democratisation in Azerbaijan in 1988-1993 in the context of decolonialisation and talks of the inevitability of change [A. Altstadt (1994). ‘Decolonization in Azerbaijan and the Struggle to Democratize’, in D. V. Schwartz and R. Panossian R (eds), *Nationalism and History: The Politics of Nation Building in Post-Soviet Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia*. Toronto: Center for Russian and East European Studies, pp.95-126]. The author of a very extensive book on the events in Azerbaijan in the 1990s, the journalist Thomas Goltz, in his assessment of the government style of President Heydar Aliyev (1993-2003) talks of a “cult of personality” [T. Goltz (1999). *Azerbaijan Diary: A Rogue Reporter’s Adventures in an Oil-Rich, War-Torn, Post-Soviet Republic*. New York & London: M. E. Sharpe, p.65]. Marina Ottaway thinks that a hybrid style of government has emerged in Azerbaijan, combining features of democracy and authoritarianism. She proposes designating this type of political system “semi-authoritarian” [M. Ottaway (2003). *Democracy Challenged: the Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism*, Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, pp.51-70]. Many local independent observers and experts for their part designate the style of government that emerged in Azerbaijan in the post-Soviet period as authoritarian, or point out serious failings and miscalculations in the development of democratic institutions within the country [A. Yunusov (2007). *Azerbajdzhan v nachale XXI veka: Potencial’nye konflikty i ugrozy [Azerbaijan at the start of the 21st century: Potential conflicts and threats]*. Baku: Adil’ogly, pp.165-174; O. Abdulayev (2011). ‘Azerbajdzhan – 2009: Osnovnye tendencii obshchestvenno-politicheskogo i social’no-ekonomicheskogo razvitiya [Azerbaijan – 2009: Basic trends in socio-political and socio-economic development]’, in A. Iskandaryan (ed). *Kavkaz – 2009: Ezhegodnik instituta Kavkaza [The Caucasus – 2009. Caucasus Institute Annual Report]*. Yerevan: Institut Kavkaza, pp.9-28; Z. Guliyev (2011). *Azerbajdzhan posle Gejdara Alieva [Azerbaijan after Heydar Aliyev]*, Moscow: Regnum, pp. 83-90]. A harsher criticism of the current political system might for example be that ‘towards the start of the 21st century an eastern variant of a transformed Soviet political system emerged. A *de facto* Central Committee of the Communist Party remains in place, now renamed as the Presidential Administration. All power in the provinces is concentrated in the hands of executive officials appointed by the president. The cabinet of ministers and parliament do not play an important role in the life of the country’. Sh. Abbasov (2011). *Achievements and Missed Opportunities – The South Caucasus: 20 Years of Independence*. Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, p.108.
- 6 *Baku is not interested in European integration* [22/11/11]. Available in Russian at [http://www.azeri.ru/papers/contact\\_az/92494/](http://www.azeri.ru/papers/contact_az/92494/).
- 7 The official version is that the academic was dismissed for ‘failing to carry out his professional duties’. However, it is widely believed that Aliyev was fired for criticising the authorities. Sh. Chobanoglu. ‘«Kollegi» Rafika Alieva [Colleagues of Rafik Aliyev]’, Radio Azadlyg, 18th November 2011. Available in Russian at <http://www.radioazadlyg.ru/content/blog/24395239.html>; ‘Deputati: Uvol’nenie vsemirno izvestnogo uchenogo Rafika Alieva ne delaet chesti vlastjam Azerbajdzhana [Deputies: The dismissal of the world-renowned academic Rafik Aliyev does not honour to the authorities of Azerbaijan]’, panorama.am. Available in Russian at <http://www.panorama.am/ru/society/2011/11/15/rafik-aliev/>.
- 8 *Opposition: The authorities and the intelligentsia* [7/11/11]. Available in Russian at [http://azeri.ru/papers/contact\\_az/91872/](http://azeri.ru/papers/contact_az/91872/).

discourse the opposition is a kind of “fifth column” which supports “external enemies” or those “inimical” to Azerbaijan. Opposition party leaders are increasingly accusing the government of acting “against the interests of the people”. This radicalisation of domestic politics is preventing the development of political institutions and dooming any dialogue between the ruling party and the opposition to failure. The post-Soviet generation of the country’s citizens, as it observes these “discussions” between the ruling party and the opposition, is acquiring misconceptions of how politics function in democratic countries.

This article analyses the political discourses employed by the ruling party and the opposition in which politics boils down to marginalising one’s opponent. The author has adopted this approach since it provides a way for this marginalisation of political opponents to be subjected to reasoned criticism and exposes the potential pitfalls inherent in manipulating the “image of the enemy” in domestic political discussions.

The article also attempts to assess specific examples of the manipulation of the “image of the enemy” in domestic politics, which allows us to consider whether there are potential overlaps between the interests and political priorities of the different political actors (the ruling party and the opposition).

## Methods

Our analysis relates mainly to the discourses currently employed by the ruling party and the opposition, often during parliamentary election campaigns in relation to the events of the first decade of the 21st century. The analysis is based on texts, mostly in the form of electronic media, which span a variety of positions (both pro-government and pro-opposition). These discourses are illustrated by extracts from texts that, in the author’s view, portray them at their most typical.

My main focus when employing the critical discourse analysis method was on identifying the dominant discourses in domestic political discussions (political campaigns) in Azerbaijan. As part of this analysis of dominant discourses I have attempted to define the role, the basic elements (or set of discourses) and level of popularity of the discourse of “the enemy” in the context of domestic political campaigns.

Interviews and statements given in the news by prominent individuals from the political establishment were of particular interest, as it is precisely these public figures who have the recognition and authority to promote (or block) these discursive gambits. It is also these prominent politicians who, in the author’s view, have a particular interest in appropriating the conflict for their own ends.

Generally the author has tried to concentrate on the most interesting texts, those published between the summer of 2010 and the autumn of 2011, when the events around which the analysis is concentrated occurred. For the purposes of the analysis a total of 72 texts were selected, which reflected the different points of view (the ruling party and the opposition) and were representative of the manipulation of the “image of the enemy” as practised in the country’s domestic political life.

As a result I believe that discourse analysis is the most appropriate method to use here since it reflects the specific features of this study (an analysis of media materials regarding the marginalisation of political opponents practised using the “image of the enemy”). We should say here that the term “discourse analysis” is used to cover a number of different approaches to the analysis of texts, speeches, etc. The method applied in this article is based mainly on Norman Fairclough’s method of critical discourse analysis. However, the author has also included in the analysis some premises from the “founding father” of this approach, Michel Foucault. Therefore, the approach used is, to some extent, a combined one which adopts a “social construct” perspective to explain the use of images of “the enemy” and “the friend” for the accumulation of political capital. Or, as Fairclough himself remarks, ‘it is a commonplace in non-positivist social science that social phenomena are socially constructed’.<sup>9</sup>

The definition provided by Marianna Jørgensen and Louise Phillips in their survey of the literature appears to me to be entirely acceptable: ‘in many cases, underlying the word “discourse” is the general idea that language is structured according to different patterns that people’s utterances follow when they take part in different domains of social life, familiar examples being “medical discourse” and “political discourse”. Discourse analysis is the analysis of these patterns’.<sup>10</sup> This definition should be supplemented by reference to the constitutive role of discourse, i.e. based on Foucault’s approach, I also see my task as ‘examining them (discourses) as practices that systematically form the objects about which they speak’.<sup>11</sup> In the context of the topic of this study – discourse analysis – this constitutes a methodological approach which enables us to study and describe the gambits systematically used to form the images of “the enemy” and “the friend” in political discourse with an aim to shape ideas about why one person is worthy of being elected to parliament and another should be rejected. Or, to put it another way, how one actor is accorded the right to hold power in the political process to the exclusion of another.

Slightly adapting Foucault’s ideas, I would say that two “eternal questions” are crucial here. The first ‘presents an analysis of the language connected with a certain fact of discourse:

9 N. Fairclough (ed) (2007). *Discourse and Contemporary Social Change*. Bern: Peter Lang, p.10.

10 M. Jørgensen and L. Phillips (2004). *Discourse analysis: as theory and method* (Russian Translation). Kharkov: Gumanitarnyi Tsentri, p.14.

11 M. Foucault M. (2004). *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Russian Translation). St. Petersburg: Gumanitarnaya Akademiia, p.112.

what were the rules for forming such a statement'; the second 'presents a description of the events of discourse: why this statement and not another?'<sup>12</sup> Or why do utterances (constructs) about "enemies" and "friends" appear in pre-election rhetoric at all?

Foucault again formulates the two key aspects or questions as follows: 'First question: who is speaking? Who, among the totality of speaking individuals, is accorded the right to use this sort of language?' The second question rehearses the need 'to also describe the institutional sites [from which the] person accorded this right...makes his discourse and from which it derives its legitimate source and point of application (its specific objects and instruments of verification)'.<sup>13</sup>

In this particular study the speakers (those accorded the right to speak) are political actors (incumbent deputies standing for re-election to Parliament, representatives of mass media, officials at various levels of seniority, members of the opposition, experts, political scientists, etc.). The scene in which the discourse is carried out is the media, rather than the chamber of the *Milli Majlis*. The overwhelming majority of Azerbaijani citizens have never visited the *Milli Majlis* and have no personal experience of following its debates. They obtain all their information from the media. Moreover, all prominent party members and the government are constantly giving interviews to various branches of the media in which they set out their positions. These interviews are intended for the widest possible audience.

One final reason for employing a critical discourse analysis approach is that 'critical discourse analysis is "critical" in the sense that it attempts to show the role of discursive practice in maintaining the social establishment, including social relations with an unequal distribution of power. The aim of critical discourse analysis is to facilitate social change and a more even distribution of power in the processes of communication in society as a whole'.<sup>14</sup>

## Opposition as "serving enemy interests"

As we embark on the analysis of political discourses, it may initially be helpful to recall that on 1st March 2010 a statement was issued on an ".az" domain internet website by the chairman of one of the parties represented in *Milli Majlis* (which is often designated by the media as pro-government), stating that a number of opposition parties in Azerbaijan were "funded from centres" located outside the country. The deputy believed that these funds originated from countries "hostile" to Azerbaijan. The statement claimed in particular that:

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12 *Ibid.*, p.73.

13 *Ibid.*, pp.112-114.

14 M. Jørgensen and L. Phillips [2004]. *Op. Cit.*, p.104.

‘There are certain forces in various countries that fund certain Azerbaijani opposition parties. [These forces] are hostile towards Azerbaijan and attempt to weaken our state by various means, supporting the Armenian government’s occupationist policy and providing donor funding to Yerevan.’

Despite the severity of his tone, the deputy still attempted to shroud the statement in secrecy, perhaps simply to attract as much attention to himself as possible and to use his statement to generate the greatest possible amount of speculation. The deputy did not specify the names of the people or parties involved, merely indicating that he would reveal them when the time was right. In his opinion they were the “radical opposition”. In his statement he merely added that:

‘I do not want to name specific people as yet but I can confidently say that a number of opposition political parties of Azerbaijan are funded from sources with close ties to Armenia’.<sup>15</sup>

The deputy also stated that he had been speaking publicly on this subject for over a year. He thought that money was not only being transferred directly to party officials but that NGOs were also being used for funding purposes. These statements and accusations that the opposition was unpatriotic soon went further when, in early April, a deputy of the opposition party *Musavat* referred to one of the March plenary sessions of the *Milli Majlis* regarding the reasons given for the ban imposed by the capital’s mayor on mass demonstrations by the opposition. Using parliamentary conventions, he claimed that this was an infringement of the right to freedom of assembly. In response to this, a deputy from the ruling party *Yeni Azerbaijan* [New Azerbaijan] (PEA) stated (in unparliamentary language) that the capital’s authorities were right not to permit the demonstrations to go ahead. This deputy from the ruling party believed that:

‘Your objective is not to hold a rally, but to demonstrate your activities to the forces that fund you. We do not know yet which terrorist organisation it is that you are working for’.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the fact that this statement did not cause too much of a stir, it is nevertheless possible to see that a “dirty” parliamentary election campaign began in the spring of 2010. Of course, all these statements may simply have been a direct result of the election campaign. However, the tone of the accusations and the underlying arguments also tell

15 R. Babaev. ‘Predsedatel’ partii «Ana Vjetjen» ne isključaet finansirovanija azerbajdzhanskoj oppozicii iz proarmjanski nastroennyh istochnikov [Chairman of the Party “Ana Vetən” does not preclude the funding of Azerbaijani opposition from the pro-Armenian sources], *1aznews.az*, 3rd March 2010. Available in Russian at <http://www.1news.az/politics/20100301040015141.html>.

16 ‘Sijavush Novruzov oppozicii: eshhe neizvestno, kakim imenno terroristicheskim organizacijam vy sluzhite [Sijavush Novruzov of the Opposition: No one knows exactly how you serve terrorist organisations]’, *mediaforum.az*, 2nd April 2010. Available in Russian at [http://www.mediaforum.az/articles.php?article\\_id=20100402035311709&lang=rus&page=00](http://www.mediaforum.az/articles.php?article_id=20100402035311709&lang=rus&page=00).

us a great deal about the general style of politics in modern-day Azerbaijan. The elections for Parliament can be seen as symbolically important. Of course, accusations of a lack of patriotism have long been routine and widely used in political life in Azerbaijan. The Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict is becoming the most convenient basis for such mutual recriminations. Indeed, these are now increasingly levelled by the political parties themselves.

It is hard to imagine that any party or any political analysts/experts might ever have accepted such funding. In fact, the Nagorny Karabakh conflict is one of the only issues which can unite practically all of Azerbaijan's politicians. Virtually without exception, all representatives of the government or the opposition parties adhere to the same version, albeit with certain variations. This version is well known: Armenia is the aggressor and the occupied territories should be returned. Nevertheless, they constantly hurl accusations at each other of collaborating with the Armenians and lacking patriotism. This is an extreme form of public ideological pressure.

Domestic problems are mounting in Azerbaijan, and voicing criticism of any of them is equated with protesting against the state. For example, criticism of the current government, or the actions of the late president, Heydar Aliyev, is increasingly equated in official discourse with opposition to the country's independence. "Speaking out against the state" is also interpreted as "acting against the interests of the people or the nation". The country is thus increasingly becoming personified and represented by specific political actors, criticism of whom is increasingly seen as problematic, rather than by the idea of constructing national statehood based on equal rights and obligations.

## **Dominant discourses of power**

We should note that a number of representatives of the ruling party are using the media under their control to discredit the opposition publicly by assigning it the "image of the enemy" in its discourse. This should not be dismissed as just a clever ruse dreamed up by political advisers employed by the ruling party during the last elections in response to counter attempts to hold public demonstrations in the spring of 2011 inspired by events in Arab countries. The tradition of discrediting political opponents by publicly accusing the most respected parties of "working for the enemy" goes back to the first decade of this century. The examples given above should instead be seen merely as more extreme manifestations of this practice or, more accurately, as the ruling party ratcheting up pressure on political opposition and civil society. This pressure is increasing year on year and accusations are becoming increasingly shrill. One result of this increased pressure, as noted earlier, has been the failure of a single representative from the most prominent and respected opposition parties to gain a seat in the last Parliament.

Statements that the opposition is serving those “hostile” or “inimical” to the country are not the only way to demonstrate the opposition’s lack of patriotism. Even when its actions are not represented as funded by “pro-Armenian” forces or even directly by Armenian forces, the opposition is still presented as an enemy of democracy and of Azerbaijan’s peaceful development. This started during the last parliamentary elections (in November 2010), when the most prominent and respected opposition parties (PNFA, *Musavat*, etc.) began to be labelled as organisations which were “enemies of the Azerbaijani people” and “[enemies of] Azerbaijan’s statehood”. This discourse then became ingrained in political life, receiving a new lease of life in the run-up to the elections. The ruling party’s dominant discourses may be summarised as follows:

1. The opposition are assigned the image of inveterate “radicals”, a term clearly redolent with associations with or directly borrowed from the discourse on “radical Islamists”. In fact, some of the opposition is indeed composed of representatives from Islamist parties. There are clearly some terms appropriated from Soviet discourses of “the enemy”, in which the “enemy” is anyone who collaborates with “the West”. This is the externally-funded internal “enemy” (those who have sold out to external forces), who criticises the ruling party and aims to stop “us” (the country, people) from successfully developing.
2. The image assigned to the opposition is that of a small, marginal group, which is nevertheless connected directly by its funding interests to “the historical enemy” – the Armenians – and its most important transnational institution – the Armenian lobby. In this discourse, the opposition does not represent a real force advocated by the people. However, the fact that the opposition accepts “sponsorship funding” from the evil enemy and thus plays the role of a “fifth column” can only cause consternation among “true patriots”.
3. Even if the opposition is not actually funded by the “Armenian lobby”, etc., it exists on funds provided by foreign countries. This is interpreted as sufficient grounds for suspicion that the opposition is disloyal to the entire “Azerbaijani people”. The “fact” that the opposition is using “foreign funds” to finance its activities is also interpreted in the context of constructing a discourse of “our own path” to democracy. In this context it is assumed that a number of different international foundations and organisations are working to bring the opposition to power in order to disrupt the country’s stable development. These international “agents of influence” do not like the fact that “we” are successfully pursuing our own special path of constructing a democratic state (which differs from the “Western” path).

This discourse, in which the opposition is presented as the collective “enemy” of the Azerbaijani people, was formed long before the last elections. It had already emerged in 2005 during political campaigning in the run-up to Azerbaijan’s parliamentary elections. In 2005, i.e. during the country’s third Parliamentary elections, calls and demands were made to carry out an investigation into the source of opposition parties’ funding. One

of the most notorious statements at the time was made by a parliamentary deputy, who was also the deputy executive secretary of the country's ruling party *Yeni Azerbaijan*.

'For a long time now we have been repeatedly saying that a number of opposition parties are systematically receiving financial assistance from various foreign sources,' the parliamentarian stated. This, he says, is a flagrant violation of our country's laws, which state that no one may receive any form of funding for political activity from abroad. All the facts ascertained by them, the deputy stated, would be submitted to the law-enforcement agencies of Azerbaijan. Additional information would also be sent to the Electoral Commission. [The deputy said that] at many events organised by the opposition they [foreign sources] were providing training in all sorts of things that 'have no relation to the electoral process. We know that they are being trained in acts of provocation... These donors [...] are various foundations, non-governmental bodies, which in fact have direct funding from the governments of various countries'.

Five years ago the very same deputy and chairman of the pro-government party *Ana Vetən* was involved in shaping a collective image of the internal "enemy", i.e. that the opposition is living off foreign money and hence implementing the objectives and supporting the interests of foreign donors. The opposition camp sees this "pro-government" party (and, incidentally, virtually all the others) as a sham political association (organisation) created merely in order to shore up the fiction that a multi-party system and political pluralism operate in Azerbaijan. As early as 2005 a deputy from *Ana Vetən* stated that:

'...in Azerbaijan there is a nexus of interests of a number of different international organisations and associations which is attempting to influence our country. And it is clear that such circles [...] are becoming donors, awarding funds under the cover of non-governmental organisations to the main radical opposition parties with the aim of bringing them to power and then implementing their plans... "The country's law-enforcement agencies should deal with these parties and reveal to the public what is really going on." In the deputy's view the Minister of National Security should take the lead on this.'<sup>17</sup>

The discourse of the ruling party described above either labels these foreign donors as pro-Armenian or says nothing specific about them. However, the clear implication from the statements by representatives of the ruling party was that they were talking about "Western" foundations. It is particularly European and American (US) foundations

17 'Parlamentskie vybory v Azerbajdzhane, novosti, kommentarii, analiz [Parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan, news, commentary, analysis]'. *AzTOP Forum*, 23rd July 2005. Available in Russian at <http://forum.aztop.com/index.php?&act=ST&f=12&t=13264&showall=1>.



which are offering support to the opposition.<sup>18</sup> According to the version propounded by the regime’s supporters, this support is directed towards destabilising the situation in the country. For example, this is how the attempted mass public demonstrations in Baku on 2nd April 2011 can be interpreted. In the view of Rabiyyat Aslanova, chair of the Committee of Human Rights of the *Milli Majlis* and member of the PEA party:

‘The government has tried so hard to refurbish Fountain Square [the square in the city centre]. The president himself attended the opening ceremony. This square was reconstructed with love. Why should the authorities break and destroy it? These statements are unjustifiable. They are very unreasonable assertions. The authorities only construct and build up, whilst the opposition destroys. But the world only remembers those who build...’<sup>19</sup>

Thus the key elements of the ruling party’s discourse, as is clear from the arguments set out above and below, are binary opposites such as “stability/destabilisation”, “creation/destructiveness”, “radical/constructive” and, ultimately, “us” and “them”. This discourse is a dangerous threat to the existence of an independent, sovereign state. The country’s

18 In March 2010 a campaign was launched against the activities of Radio Free Europe and, in particular against its Baku office. The official explanation for the abrupt increase in criticism was that Radio Free Europe was not presenting Azerbaijan’s interests in the Nagorny Karabakh conflict. According to the radio station’s own staff, the real reason was an article in the *Washington Post* on properties in Dubai owned by the President’s family, a translation of which had been put on the radio’s website. However, the radio station was also criticised for supporting the opposition, i.e. the “radical” and “destructive” part of the political establishment. One of the deputies from the ruling party said that ‘the impression is being formed that the USA’s policy is to engineer Nagorny Karabakh’s secession from Azerbaijan by any means possible’. ‘Fazil’ Mustafa: «Radio «Azadlyg» vpolnjaet ukazaniya svoih hozjaev, pojetomu ono i ne rabotaet v interesah Azerbajdzhana [Fazil’ Mustafa: Radio Liberty performs the instructions of its masters; therefore, it does not work in the interests of Azerbaijan]’, *1news.az*, 17th March 2010. Available in Russian at <http://1news.az/politics/20100317043201269.html>.

In the words of another deputy from the ruling party: ‘Unfortunately Radio *Azaldiq* [Radio Free Europe] is increasingly revealing signs of cosmopolitanism. Instead of providing an objective assessment of events in the country the editors have essentially become a mouthpiece for the opposition. [...] If we take a close look at the activities of the Armenian and Azerbaijani editors of Radio Free Europe we see a huge difference in their work. The Armenian editors consistently defend Armenian interests whilst ours only denigrate what is happening in Azerbaijan. Money does not decide everything; anyone in any job, whether journalist or politician should not forget his country’s interests. Nagorny Karabakh is our bleeding wound and every Azerbaijani citizen should always remember that.’ Deputat: «Radio Azadlyg» tol’ko «ochernjaet» vse, chto proishodit v Azerbajdzhane [Deputy: Radio *Azaldiq* only ‘denigrates’ everything that happens in Azerbaijan]’, *1news.az*, 17th March 2010. Available in Russian at <http://1news.az/politics/20100317123034550.html>. The deputy in charge of the Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights also joined in the criticism: ‘The Azerbaijani editors of Radio *Azaldiq* hardly report on events in the country and, where it does, it sees everything in a poor light. ... it must unfortunately be stated that this radio station is not complying with its task of reporting events in the country objectively [...]. It is of course understood that this radio station is funded by another state, but the journalists working for it should have some patriotic feeling. Recently I have only heard lies and biased information on events in our country from this radio station. There are so many factories and businesses opening in our country but the editors have not once bothered to tell their listeners about that. And when did we last hear anything from this radio station about Nagorny Karabakh or the Khojali genocide? Love for one’s native country cannot be sold at any price. Even in difficult conditions a patriot will always find a way to promote his native country. We have not seen the journalists on the editorial board of Radio *Azaldiq* doing this. They should not cast a shadow on everything that is happening in the country.’ ‘Rabijjat Aslanova: «U rabotajushhij na radio «Azadlyg» zhurnalistov hotja by dolzhno byt’ chuvstvo patriotizm» [Journalists working at Radio *Azaldiq* should have some patriotic feeling]’, *1news.az*, 18th March 2010. Available in Russian at <http://1news.az/politics/20100318100144167.html>.

19 I. Rasul. ‘Rabijjat Aslanova: «Vlasti sozidajut, a oppozicija razrushaet [Rabiyat Aslanova: The authorities build, but the opposition destroys]’, *radioazadlyg.org*, 12th April 2010. Available in Russian at <http://www.radioazadlyg.org/content/article/3554636.html>.

ruling authorities, as this discourse runs, is the sole guarantor of independence, and hence the sole guarantor of development and increased prosperity. The ruling party's discourse also exploits anti-colonial discourse. Any influence from outside the country is represented in this context as an attempt to deprive "us" of the freedom "to attain our destiny on our own". "Their" attack on "our" independence becomes an important argument in designating the opposition collectively as the "enemy" of the peace and prosperity which has arrived after many years of Russia's anarchy, arbitrary rule and colonial power.

The ruling party's discourse also assigns a special meaning to the collective image of the "Azerbaijani people". In the ruling party's discourse this imagined collective actor invariably supports it and is grateful for all the efforts that the ruling party have made to develop the country. The results of the elections are seen as a demonstration of the "people's love" for it. I remind readers once again that not a single representative from any of the most prominent opposition parties in the country have a seat in Parliament.

## **Agents of power, or who is constructing official discourse**

As the above arguments and quotations clearly demonstrate, official discourse is constructed by parliamentary deputies and party officials from the country's ruling party, the PEA. These representatives of the political regime have undoubtedly been given explicit instructions to construct a discourse which will discredit the opposition. However, it is difficult to make any definite statement about the extent to which the content of the discourse itself is dictated "from the top" or how much space the deputies are permitted to construct the discourse themselves. The country's president occupies the moral high ground, well "above" such matters as explanation on his attitude towards the opposition. The position he occupies is too high up and remote to condescend to explaining relations with political opponents inside the country. The president contents himself by stating that the opposition is a marginal element in society with too few resources to make it a realistic political contender for power.

During the elections the president even refused to participate in television debates. Some of the president's statements, however, contained important indicators of the ruling party's message to its supporters: that the public must be persuaded that the ruling regime is democratic. In a notorious interview given to the television channel Euronews (in February 2010), a journalist asked President Ilham Aliyev outright about the style of governance in the country – how did he answer criticism that "he is governing the country as a post-Soviet dictatorship"? The president, clearly disconcerted by the question, gave an answer that clearly implied and reflected domestic criticism of the opposition:

‘Such expressions are insulting. We are sometimes the target of entirely unjustified, extremely biased criticism, whether in the international media or in the so-called

international human rights groups. All these attempts to portray Azerbaijan as an undemocratic country are absolutely unacceptable. We understand that, as Azerbaijan’s importance grows, attempts will also multiply to influence Azerbaijan from all parts of the world. [...] The country’s internal problems, its traditions, its history, political system, its attitude to the nation’s leader must be left to the people of the country to decide. [...] If anyone wants to use the criteria of democracy to achieve their aims, we will not allow this!’

As for the opposition:

‘...here the people must decide...It is not our fault if the opposition in Azerbaijan is weak. I can even tell you why the opposition in our country is in such a ... disastrous state: it is because the Azerbaijani people’s lives are getting better and better. In the crisis year of 2009 our economy grew by 9.3 percent, industry by 8.6 percent, inflation was just 1.5 percent and foreign currency reserves rose to 20.4 billion dollars. What can the opposition offer in such circumstances? Just criticism? Well, they do indeed provide this day after day and we do not object.’<sup>20</sup>

The deputies of the *Milli Majlis* reproduce the same rhetoric, but in the form of more direct accusations. Their targets, the leaders and activists of the opposition parties, take any opportunity which presents itself to claim that the regime ruling the country is undemocratic. They thus permit themselves to make public statements that are *unacceptable* to the current authorities. However, the president does not permit himself to make any specific statements about the nature of the funding of opposition parties or to call the most prominent of them *radical*. Populist statements of this kind are left to *Milli Majlis* deputies and functionaries of the PEA. This, perhaps unintentionally, emphasises the low status the opposition has in the eyes of the ruling party. In his speeches the president does not deign to pay too much attention to “such marginal groups”. Deputies and functionaries from the ruling party have thus become the public agents who also represent the discourse described.

So far, we have quoted a number of statements from deputies. It therefore makes sense to turn now to PEA party officials. Here, the most prominent public figures are the executive secretary of the ruling party and his deputy. In fact it is largely public statements by PEA’s executive secretary which have contributed to the radicalisation of the image of the opposition:

‘The radical opposition sees enemies in everyone: officials working in government bodies, deputies of the *Milli Majlis*, anyone who is [state] funded. All this forms a hostile ideology directed against the national interests of the Azerbaijani people’. [...]

20 ‘Il’ham Aliyev: “u nashego terpenija est’ predely” [Ilham Aliyev: “Our patience has limits”], *euronews*, 2nd February 2010. Available in Russian at <http://ru.euronews.net/2010/02/02/interview-with-ilham-aliyev-president-of-azerbaijan/>.

He also accused the opposition media of a propaganda programme of hate and hostility against Azerbaijan. His deputy also said that attempts by the radical opposition to organise demonstrations in Baku were against the people's interests: 'Attempts by the radical opposition to disrupt public order and stability in the republic are directed against the national interests of Azerbaijan. The opposition has always acted against the national interest of the Azerbaijani people. The radical opposition is a tool in the hands of deputies in foreign parliaments who serve the Armenians' interests.' In the words [of the deputy secretary of the ruling party] the Azerbaijan public opposed the attempts by the radical opposition to disrupt stability in the country: 'Everyone is only too well aware of the human casualties caused by the disorder in Libya. Our people do not want to see it repeated in Azerbaijan. Radicalism will fail.'<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, all the main elements of the ruling party's discourse are represented in public speeches given mainly in Parliament, but also in numerous interviews and statements to the media by deputies and senior PEA party officials. These two institutions are increasingly actively engaged in the process of constructing a collective image of the opposition as "the nation's enemy". Under this discourse the opposition is radicalised and turned into an enemy "of all that is holy": the people/the nation, stability, development, independence, etc. The aim of the ruling party's discourse is to appropriate a simple and accessible image of itself as "a true patriot" in the political process and to deny this to the opposition.

An important element and one which deserves close attention is the use of blurred, collective terms to refer to the foundations, organisations and countries which are attempting to prevent "us" from developing by using the Azerbaijani opposition as their "fifth column". However, in some instances, these hostile forces are named in more specific detail:

'You do not have to look very far to see what this support from outside leads to – Iraq, Afghanistan and other countries are glaring examples', said [the secretary of the PEA], who thought that forces existed 'that are pushing the radical wing of the opposition into destabilising the socio-political situation in the country'.<sup>22</sup>

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- 21 R. Babaev. 'Pravjashhaja partija obvinila radikal'nuju opoziciju v sluzhenii antiazerbajdzhanskim interesam [Ruling party accuses radical opposition of serving anti-Azerbaijan interests]', *1news.az*, 15th April 2011. Available in Russian at <http://www.1news.az/politics/20110415010912160.html>; 'Zampred pravjashhej partii: 'Radikal'naja opozicija obrechena'' [Deputy Chair of ruling party: 'Radical opposition doomed'], *radioazadlyg.org*, 15th April 2011. Available in Russian at <http://www.radioazadlyg.org/content/article/9503230.html>; T. Gadzhiev, 'Massovyj vyhod iz radikal'nyh opozitsionnyh partij ih chlenov javljaetsja rezul'tatom destruktivnoj dejatel'nosti jelih partij [Mass desertion by members of radical opposition parties is a result of the parties' destructive activities]', *trend.az*, 23rd April 2011. Available in Russian at <http://ru.trend.az/news/politics/1866038.html>; I. Dzhafarov, 'Grazhdane strany osuzhdajut usilija opozicii narushit' stabil'nost' v Azerbajdzhane [The country's citizens criticise the opposition's efforts to disrupt stability in Azerbaijan]', *AZE.az*, 25th April 2011. Available in Russian at [http://www.aze.az/news\\_ali\\_axmedov\\_qrajdane\\_56561.html](http://www.aze.az/news_ali_axmedov_qrajdane_56561.html); 'Vlasti Azerbajdzhana obvinili opoziciju v "sluzhbe interesam Armenii" [Azerbaijani authorities accuse opposition of 'serving Armenian interests']', *regnum.ru*, 15th April 2011. Available in Russian at <http://www.regnum.ru/news/1395305.html#ixzz1STubwQXy>.
- 22 S. Mamedov. 'Opaseniya Azerbajdzhana: Baku obvinjaet vneshnie sily v namerenii destabilizirovat' situaciju v strane [Azerbaijan's fears: Baku accuses external forces of intending to destabilise the situation within the country]', *nezavisimaia*, 17th June 2011. Available in Russian at [http://www.ng.ru/cis/2011-06-17/6\\_azerbajdzhana.html](http://www.ng.ru/cis/2011-06-17/6_azerbajdzhana.html).

This gives rise to a somewhat contradictory situation. On the one hand, the EU and the US are partners. However, they are also the forces which are trying to dislodge “us” from the path of prosperity and stability. Moreover, this contradiction is explained by the fact that the Azerbaijani authorities need the EU and the US as partners (particularly economically) but intends to build relations with them on the principle that “they” do not intervene in our “internal” affairs, and “we” sell “them” oil and gas, and also support military operations.

The secretary of the ruling party criticises countries taking part in the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, but conveniently forgets that the present authorities in Azerbaijan also supported these military actions and even sent military units, albeit symbolic ones. This is precisely the paradox: the political authorities are supporting and participating directly in military operations aimed at establishing democracy through external pressure, whilst roundly criticising a similar policy on the domestic political stage.

## Opposition discourse

Opposition discourse will not be described in detail here, for the simple reason that the opposition levels essentially the same charges outlined above against the ruling party. Virtually every prominent member of the opposition has issued statements in this vein. We will instead try to give a flavour of this discourse using statements made by the former secretary (*bashkan*) of *Musavat*. During the 2005 elections, this *bashkan* fought accusations that the opposition was engaged in activities against the interests of the people, stating that:

‘Everybody knows that the democratic forces won the last elections, as well as the parliamentary and the presidential elections in Azerbaijan. It was only by force that this regime was able to remain in power. It is not us – the democratic forces – but rather the current regime which rigs ballots in elections and uses force against their very own citizens which must leave the political arena.’<sup>23</sup>

Where the opposition’s discourse does differ from that of the ruling party is that members of these parties publicly confirm their alignment with “Western democracies”. They also publicly (and openly) ask EU and US politicians to support democratic reforms in the country. The ruling party’s discourse does not and indeed cannot include public appeals of this kind, as it portrays itself as an equal partner to the “Western democracies” and as a liberal and democratic force.

23 Z. Rasuldzade. ‘Isa Gambar: “Mezhdunarodnoe soobshhestvo podderzhivaet demokraticheskie processy v Azerbajdzhane, chego ne bylo na prezidentskih vyborah 2003” [Isa Gambar: The international community supports democratic processes in Azerbaijan which did not exist in the 2003 presidential election]’, *Day.az*, 2nd September 2005. Available in Russian at <http://news.day.az/politics/30623.html>.

Judging from the accusations permeating their public statements, however, the discourses of the opposition and the ruling party are otherwise virtually indistinguishable. The same former *bashkan* of *Musavat*, in an address to the people on the country's "Independence Day" in 2008, accused the ruling party of "discrediting the very idea of independence". He stated that:

'They [the ruling party] have not only erased Independence Day from the calendar, but have also discredited the very idea of independence through their incompetent and failed policies. As a result of the Aliyevs' unpatriotic policies, not only has the nation been unable to enjoy the fruits of independence: it has become poorer and lost even more rights over the period in which this regime has been in power.'<sup>24</sup>

The opposition's discourse contains the same populist clichés: the ruling party is lacking in patriotism, acting "against national interests", etc. Scores of such clichés litter many articles by opposition journalists. These articles are often full of the same sensationalist rhetoric as the discourse of the ruling party. For example, here is a similar comment on the 2005 parliamentary elections:

'I report regularly on events in Azerbaijan for our newspaper and I have previously written that the ruling party has, on the eve of the elections, finally been exposed and unmasked in the eyes of the public and the entire world. In other words, they can be seen as they really are: a neo-Soviet, totalitarian, police state which is anti-Western, anti-democratic and whose current policies are acting against the people's interests. There is no doubt that the ruling party is running scared and sees the only way out of the mess it itself has created in strengthening the forces of reaction by attempting to go down the path of Belarus and Uzbekistan and by implementing dangerous plans for repressive counter-revolutionary measures against its public.'<sup>25</sup>

Whilst the ruling party accuses the opposition of attempting to import democracy from the West and sees the opposition as a "fifth column" which assists Azerbaijan's enemies and depends for its existence on their funds, the opposition also periodically issues similar accusations. For example, a recent article (in November 2011), written by a renowned opposition journalist, states that:

'...the Kremlin's "fifth column" has never lost its firm grip on the state apparatus. The servants of the Cheka have always been on the alert. This "fifth column" played a crucial role in bringing the current president to power. [...] In 2003 Russia reached a consensus with Washington over the future government of Azerbaijan. Unlike the

24 'İsa Gambar: vlasti Azerbajdzhana diskreditirovali ideju nezavisimosti [İsa Gambar: The Azerbaijani authorities have discredited the idea of independence]', *Kavkazskii Uzel*, 18th October 2008. Available in Russian at <http://azerbajjan.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/143022/>.

25 R. İunusov (2005). 'Teatr absurda po-azerbajdzhanski [The theatre of the absurd à la Azerbaijan]'. Available in Russian at <http://ramisyunusov.50webs.com/theater.html>.

experts in the US State Department, the Russians had no choice. The Azerbaijani opposition was traditionally orientated towards the West and rejected the path of collaboration with the “Northern Bear” and the “Southern Fox”[Iran]. [...] This geopolitical choice made by the opponents of the Aliyevs can be easily explained since all of the opposition leaders came from the National Front, which preached the values of national independence and future reunification with “Iranian” Azerbaijan. Their interests did not overlap with those of the Kremlin, which was pursuing a single goal – returning Azerbaijan to its sphere of influence at any price.<sup>26</sup>

This is another example of how the opposition’s discourse presents the ruling party in terms of the same cliché: the “fifth column”. Only in the opposition’s discourse does the ruling party become a “fifth column” of Russia, which is seen by the author of the above extract as a country of persisting totalitarianism, a symbol of evil. For that author, the interests of the ruling party overlap with the regime in Russia since the ruling party also rejects the values of independence. As a result, whilst the ruling party’s discourse states that the opposition can only continue its existence if it has support from outside, the opposition’s discourse also states that the ruling party only retains its position as a result of external support. The two discourses form a mirror image of each other in which modern Azerbaijani society is assigned the role of a puppet. The strings which move or support this puppet society are being pulled from outside the country. An “outside hand” is to blame for all “our” problems and woes.

This discourse, then, renders any dialogue impossible. How can a dialogue be developed with rulers who are acting “against the people”? Alternatively, how can debates be held with an opposition which supports “our external enemies” and acts as an opponent of “our achievements and independence”? Indeed, any accusations of radicalisation should be directed at both sides in the political arena: both sides are becoming radicalised and these populist slanging matches are preventing any talk on possible democratisation.

## **“The friend” or the foreign policy preferences of the ruling party and the opposition**

In this situation there is simply no space left in the domestic political scene for a “friend”. As a result, the ruling party and the opposition both locate “friends” outside the country. After the collapse of the USSR, the country’s neighbour Turkey could claim to be its only genuine “brother”. Throughout the whole post-Soviet period there has only been one serious spat in relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey, when their alliance and “fraternal” relations were placed in doubt when the “Turkish-Armenian protocols” were

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26 ‘How shame overcomes fear’ [2012]. Available in Russian at <http://www.radioazadlyg.org/content/blog/24389223.html>.

signed in October 2009.<sup>27</sup> Immediately after these documents were signed, Azerbaijan's Interior Ministry issued a statement saying that normalising relations between Turkey and Armenia before the Nagorny Karabakh conflict had been resolved was against Azerbaijan's interests and "the spirit of fraternal relations" between the two republics. Relations remained tense for some time afterwards, culminating in the events the media dubbed the "Wars of the flags".<sup>28</sup> However, as the ratification of the protocols was delayed and gradually became less and less likely, relations between the states revived.<sup>29</sup>

Disagreements between the two countries have thus been limited to symbolic *démarches*, public statements and a few demonstrations by radicals in Baku. Although political analysts have on more than one occasion talked of a cooling of relations at the highest levels, this has done nothing to stop support from the ruling party and the opposition for the ideology of "fraternalism" from spreading. Throughout the entire post-Soviet period Turkey has unwaveringly supported Azerbaijan over the Nagorny Karabakh conflict, despite receiving nothing in return, not even official support for the recognition of the Turkish Republic of Cyprus. In place of this recognition, which could lead to difficulties over Azerbaijan's relations with the EU, Turkey has become an important partner in the transit of Azerbaijani oil and, perhaps in the not too distant future, natural gas.<sup>30</sup>

In addition, the Turkish authorities also have constant and widespread public support in Azerbaijan in their dispute with Armenia and the Armenian Diaspora over whether the events in 1915 in Anatolia should be referred to as genocide. Opposition to this policy is a rare example of unanimity and consensus in the Azerbaijani political establishment, intellectual circles and the general public. On this question Azerbaijani politicians are not only strikingly united but are also in complete agreement with the Turkish authorities and, seemingly, the majority of the Turkish public. In fact, the Armenians are the "common enemy" for both communities.<sup>31</sup>

27 I am referring here to the "Protocol establishing diplomatic relations" and the "Protocol on developing bilateral relations" signed on 10th October 2009 in Zurich by the foreign ministers of Turkey and Armenia, Akhmet Davutoglu and Eduard Nalbandyan.

28 The events began with a football match between Turkey and Armenia on 14th October in the city of Burs, attended by Abdulla Gül and Serzh Sarkisyan, where Azerbaijani flags were banned. A few days later an official protest was lodged with the Turkish authorities regarding the disrespect shown to the Azerbaijani flag. However, Baku went further and Turkish flags set up in the Martyrs' Avenue (Shekhidlyar Khiyabany) in the centre of Baku at the memorial in honour of Turkish servicemen who had died in the city in 1918 were taken down. This occurred precisely during the period of events which I had singled out for further analysis. The official version is that the flags were removed since they violated the law on rules for the use of flags by foreign states and international organisations in the Azerbaijani Republic. This version did not fool anyone, particularly since the flags were later returned to the avenue despite the law. S. Rumiantsev. (2010). "'Vojna Flagov' i Konkurencija za Status 'Universal'noj Zhertyvy" [The "war of the flags" and competition for the status of "universal victim"], *Kavkazskii Aktsent*, No. 4, 2010, pp 25-29.

29 O. Abdulaev (2011). *Op. Cit.*, pp.19-23.

30 On 26th December 2011 Turkey and Azerbaijan signed a Memorandum of Understanding in Ankara on the creation of a consortium for the construction of a gas pipeline to supply natural gas from the Azerbaijan *Shakh Deniz* deposits to Europe. 'Azerbaijan and Turkey sign memorandum of understanding on Trans Anadolu gas pipeline' (2011). Available in Russian at [http://www.azeri.ru/papers/contact\\_az/94392/](http://www.azeri.ru/papers/contact_az/94392/).

31 For intellectuals and politicians (and indeed for ordinary people) from Armenia, the conflict with Azerbaijan is itself an integral part of a wider conflict with the Turks whom, in Ronald Suny's view, can be designated 'the traditional enemy' [R. Suny (1997). 'Soviet Armenia', in R. Hovannisian (ed). *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*. New York: St. Martin's Press, p.376]. This conflation of the Azeri and Turkish people into one nation or people by the Armenians is further support for a concept proposed by the previous president of Azerbaijan: 'One nation – two states'.



In this context, relations with Turkey are also becoming an important factor in domestic policy. For example, the authorities have tacitly allowed demonstrations organised by a number of different parties to go ahead. The most recent mass demonstrations were over a law passed in France making it a criminal offence to deny the [Armenian] genocide. By late 2011, two demonstrations had already been held at the French embassy in Baku. The first demonstration was organised by representatives of the International Centre of the Diaspora and Veterans of the Patriotic War on 22nd December 2011. The second demonstration was held on 26th December and was organised by activists from the Party of National Independence. The police did not intervene and this was a clear indication that the demonstrations were held in compliance with the ruling party since they would otherwise have been forcibly dispersed.<sup>32</sup> In fact the authorities themselves, as represented by Azerbaijan’s foreign minister and Sheikh-ul-Islam, Allahshukyur Pashazadeh (the official chairman of the Caucasian Muslims Office), have publicly criticised the resolution by the French parliament.<sup>33</sup>

This protest undoubtedly had widespread public support in Azerbaijan. In this sense, such “unofficial” demonstrations and official *démarches* are designed not just to demonstrate the unwavering “friendship” and alliance with Turkey, but also for domestic consumption, enabling the ruling party to show its commitment to the fight against the “common enemy” and increasing its own domestic political authority.

Occasionally, however, events in the political life of the countries have led to situations in which the “fraternal peoples” attack each other. Some such situations have emerged since the “War of the flags” and, although they have been less public in nature, they have perhaps been no less serious. For example, documents disclosed on the WikiLeaks website which have been widely discussed in the newspapers and websites of the Azerbaijani opposition suggest that President Ilham Aliyev has had some very uncomplimentary things to say about the current administration of the Turkish Republic. These comments were occasioned by the rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia, i.e. “the old story” which had led to the outbreak of the “War of the flags” in 2009 was revived.<sup>34</sup>

A number of analysts subsequently suggested that Turkey might turn to Azerbaijani politicians for support in its conflict with Israel. However, this did not happen and

32 *Akcija protesta pered posol'stvom Francii [Demonstration outside the French embassy]* [22/12/11]. Available in Russian at [http://www.azeri.ru/papers/contact\\_az/94243/](http://www.azeri.ru/papers/contact_az/94243/); *Ocherednaja Akcija protesta pered posol'stvom Francii [Another demonstration outside the French embassy]* [26/12/11]. Available in Russian at [http://www.azeri.ru/papers/contact\\_az/94394/](http://www.azeri.ru/papers/contact_az/94394/).

33 *Elmar Mamed'yarov: reshenie Naciona'oi Assamblei Francii eshhe dolzhno byt' utverzhdeno [Elmar Mamed'yarov: resolution by France's National Assembly has still to be ratified]* [23/12/11]. Available in Russian at [http://www.azeri.ru/papers/contact\\_az/94319/](http://www.azeri.ru/papers/contact_az/94319/); *MID Azerbajdzhana: reshenie parlamenta Francii nesovmestimo so svobodoj slova i vyrazhenij [Ministry of the Interior of Azerbaijan: resolution by French parliament incompatible with freedom of speech]* [23/12/11]. Available in Russian at [http://www.azeri.ru/papers/contact\\_az/94255/](http://www.azeri.ru/papers/contact_az/94255/); *Sheikh pristydil Sarkozi [Shaikh condemns Sarkozy]* [27/12/11]. Available in Russian at [http://www.azeri.ru/papers/contact\\_az/94478/](http://www.azeri.ru/papers/contact_az/94478/).

34 *The phantom of 'WikiLeaks'* [16/9/11]. Available in Russian at [http://www.azeri.ru/papers/contact\\_az/89266/](http://www.azeri.ru/papers/contact_az/89266/).

Azerbaijan remains an ally of that Middle Eastern country despite the abrupt cooling of Turkish-Israeli relations.

Generally, the image of “the friend” – Turkey – is used by the opposition more often than the ruling party in domestic politics. A significant proportion of the leading opposition parties support Turkish nationalism and pan-Turkism (*Musavat*, the National Front Party of Azerbaijan, the Party of National Independence of Azerbaijan, and others). Therefore, any cooling in relations between the Azerbaijani and Turkish authorities is perceived as striking a blow against the “unity of the two fraternal peoples”. Opposition officials often include references in their criticisms to a lack of close ties with Turkey, reluctance on the part of the present authorities to collaborate more closely with its “brotherland”. Additionally, it is much harder for the ruling party itself to blame the opposition for these shortcomings. Nevertheless, the prospect of relations being established between Turkey and Armenia has met with a sharply negative response from both the Azerbaijani authorities and the opposition: here the ruling party and the opposition have demonstrated some unanimity.

Despite some difficulties in the relations between the Turkish and Azerbaijani administrations, they remain close allies. In fact, some of these difficulties have demonstrated the lack of any foreseeable alternative to “fraternal relations” in the near future. It is also likely that, in the near future, the leading opposition political parties will continue to insist on the need for closer integration with Turkey, whilst criticising the ruling party for not paying sufficient attention to this problem. The ruling party, for their part, will continue to emphasise that relations are “amicable” and “fraternal” even if frictions arise in future, i.e. close relations with Turkey will remain an important factor in domestic politics.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The primary conclusion is that the practice of marginalising domestic political opponents has to stop. It can be stated unequivocally that there are no serious grounds for accusations such as unpatriotic behaviour, “consorting with the enemy” or those hostile to Azerbaijan, “a political regime which works against the people’s interests” or accusing the opposition of acting “against the interests of the people”. Both sets of accusations are pure speculation or examples of populist rhetoric. If indeed these accusations had any foundation in fact, it is certain that the deputies or representatives of the opposition parties or the ruling party would long since have been caught establishing links of this kind. However, this has not happened and for several years now matters have not gone beyond mutual accusations and speculation verging on insults.

Demands to reject radical discourse should be directed at both sides in the political arena. The above analysis clearly demonstrates that politics has long since been supplanted by

political conflict. Even the image of “the friend” (Turkey) is used in this internal political battle to manipulate public opinion. Even in relation to this “friend” there are no signs that either the authorities or the opposition are making the slightest attempts to unite, despite Turkey being seen by both sides as a “brotherland”. This atmosphere of conflict is poisoning the country’s political life. Finally, we should remember that all participants in the political process are citizens of Azerbaijan: mutual, populist accusations which are completely unfounded discredit both sides engaged in such recriminations.

By themselves, exhortations are of course unlikely to have much effect. My own view is that it is time for the most serious politicians from the two opposing camps to try to identify topics or areas on which they can collaborate and gradually change the situation in the country. For example, the environmental situation in Azerbaijan is potentially of concern to all citizens and mass public demonstrations could unite the conflicting sides.

At the present time the only question on which the conflicting sides can agree is that of “the external enemy”. The ruling party and the opposition are united only in their condemnation of the actions of the Armenian side in the Nagorny Karabakh conflict.<sup>35</sup> However, even this “meeting of minds” has led to a rivalry that produces a conflict-ridden domestic political discourse rather than attempting to collaborate to resolve the conflict. Each side is straining to outdo the other in its militant rhetoric. Each side again and again uses the conflict to attempt to discredit its political opponents. On the question of Nagorny Karabakh, the ruling party and the opposition, as collective or individual political actors, each attempt to be “holier than the Pope”. Meanwhile, we would make the point that, if all political actors in Azerbaijan were to see the conflict as an issue of prime importance, the sensible response would be to launch a combined effort to resolve it.

Arguments over the conflict (or more precisely how to resolve it) are in my view not a very promising basis for establishing dialogue between the ruling party and the opposition. In order to stand a chance of success, dialogue would need to start on an issue which can be completely depoliticised. Returning, for example, to an environmental movement, this could perhaps be launched through volunteer campaigns to clear waste from the country’s capital, or indeed a series of measures directed at the environmental education of children and young people, etc. Joint participation in such measures would provide an opportunity to mobilise all citizens of the country to resolve these important issues and leave those problems which clearly cannot be resolved for the moment to the future. Changing the country for the better needs to start today and the best way to begin is by taking the simplest and smallest steps. However, this depends first and foremost on the parties first calling a halt to their populist and radical accusations.

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<sup>35</sup> And also, as emphasised above, in their recognition of Turkey’s status as the main and in fact only “brotherland”.

## CHAPTER 3

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The Use of Images of the External  
Friend and Enemy in Armenian Domestic  
Political Discourse:

An Analysis of Speeches given by the First  
President Levon Ter-Petrosyan  
(September 2007 - May 2011)

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Mikayel Hovhannisyan

## Introduction

Political discourse within a country is formed as opposing political camps exchange information about their policies and views on socially and politically significant issues. The need generated by this exchange to rethink or reflect on their own stance and that of the opposition shifts the subsequent cycle of exchange up to a new meta-level generated by the reflective process. The combined effect of this is to form a mythological picture which constitutes how a specific system of relations is viewed in a specific period of time. A mythological system is required as a coded or shorthand version of common or agreed conceptions prevailing within the society governed by this system.

Over time, however, reality, as described by this system of political mythology, and the system itself diverge. This divergence arises because reality is far more dynamic than the system of political mythology used to describe it. When this divergence reaches a certain critical limit, the need arises to re-describe the changed reality, leading to a change in the system of political mythology. This study aims to identify political myths and how images of the external friend and enemy within Armenian domestic political discourse are used by analysing public speeches given by Levon Ter-Petrosyan and the responses of the authorities' responses.

Given the context of the Nagorny Karabakh conflict, Armenian-Turkish relations, Armenian-Russian relations and Armenian-West relations (comprising Armenian-USA, Armenian-European and also Armenian-“Western” relations), any reference to the image of an external friend/enemy is of particular interest, as it simultaneously presupposes a number of different target audiences: political opponents and the general public inside the country, as well as external forces engaged in (or capable of influencing) political processes inside Armenia and around it. In this sense it permits a large number of different connotations, thereby affecting many components which make up modern Armenia's system of political mythology.

Before embarking on an analysis of those myths regarding the use of the image of friend and enemy in Armenian domestic political discourse, we should first define our understanding of the concept “political myth” and explain why this concept is appropriate for this study.

Interpretations of this concept vary according to how the concept “myth” is defined in modern discourse. For example, some sources define political myth as ‘political consciousness which constitutes a misinterpretation of the actual political system’.<sup>1</sup> This clearly delineates “myth” as a fabrication, as fiction, an invention underlying “inadequate interpretation”.

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1 Mir Slovari (2012). 'Мифы Политические [Political myths]'. Available in Russian at [http://mirslovari.com/content\\_pol/mify-politicheskie-1215.html](http://mirslovari.com/content_pol/mify-politicheskie-1215.html).

Another view of political myths is when “myths” are viewed as partly or completely constituting the *Zeitgeist* by using composite or coded images to represent the conventions prevailing at that historical period, with regard to certain processes, phenomena, behavioural norms or modes of relations within that context. These components either evolve in the public consciousness to form stereotypes which are either adopted to simplify public perceptions of events, phenomena, relations etc., or they do not take hold and fall into disuse.

An analysis of political discourse as a process which forms the system of political myths is thus of particular interest. Images used in political discourse, particularly in public speeches, depending on their relevance to the public consciousness, are either adapted to the overall conceptual framework, continuously re-interpreted and transformed into mythologemes or myths, or rejected and consigned to oblivion.

The creation of public and political myths is a collective process with no specific author. The process inevitably involves some “breaking in” of concepts by opponents and society as a whole.

It is this perspective which informs this study. Its aim is to provide an analysis not only of the main features of Armenia’s domestic political discourse, but also the mythopoeic process and the role of different societal components in this process.

## **Main contexts in which the images of the external friend and enemy are used and the rhetorical devices employed in speeches**

### **Myths concerning Ter-Petrosyan and his return**

The return of the first president of Armenia, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, to active politics, announced in his public speech on 21st September 2007 – his first in ten years of retirement – sent political shockwaves through the country.

The reaction to his return was not only a result of the sudden possibility that an active contender for power had emerged, but also of the fact that Levon Ter-Petrosyan, as a political actor and the first president of Armenia, is somewhat mythologised in the public view of both his detractors and supporters.

The mythologising of the first president has been aided by many components of his biography: a scion of the diaspora who has lived all his conscious life in Armenia, an academic who knows several foreign languages, married to a woman from St. Petersburg of

European origin, etc. The image of the “founding father” or, as some of his supporters call him, “the founding president” is another mythologeme which nurtures the myth of return.

The very fact of Ter-Petrosyan’s return is another mythologised phenomenon. His self-imposed 10 years of silence and isolation played an important role, as well as a statement apparently made by Ter-Petrosyan which was periodically circulated in Armenian socio-political folklore: ‘I shall not return until the people ask me to.’ Another important element of this myth is the article entitled *War or Peace*,<sup>2</sup> written by Ter-Petrosyan on 1st October 1997, just over two months before his resignation, in which he presented an analysis of Armenian domestic and foreign policy, and the Nagorny Karabakh conflict in particular. In the context of this study, the article is remarkable in drawing a sharp distinction between the so-called “war party” and “peace party”. Public response to it was extremely varied: some called it “prophetic”, others “a betrayal”.

The myth of “Levon’s return” bears comparison with the much older myth of Mher the Lesser, the Armenian epic hero who was the last and most complex heroes of Sassoun. According to legend, Mher voluntarily withdrew to a cave, saying: ‘There is much evil in the world, the earth cannot bear my weight. I shall not leave my confinement until the grain of wheat grows to the size of the rosehip.’<sup>3</sup> Generally the image of the “unjustly rejected hero” is typical of Armenian mythopoeia: a characteristically Armenian popular saying is *gna meri ari sirem* which can be translated as ‘I will not love you until you are dead’.

Another mythological element associated with Ter-Petrosyan’s return is the fact that Adam Sargsyan, former prime minister and leader of the “Republic” party and the brother of prime minister Vasgen Sargsyan (killed by terrorists on 27th October 1999) and Stepan Demichryan, son of the murdered speaker of Parliament Karen Demirchyan, the leader of the Armenian Democratic Party and the main opposition candidate in the 2003 presidential elections, joined forces with Ter-Petrosyan. In this context the mythologeme of “the heirs” combined with the myth of “the return” became a powerful argument in favour of the need to “restore justice”.

Finally, one more important addition to the myth of “return” is the mythologeme “recognition of past mistakes and redemption”. Out of power for ten years, yet observing processes from the sidelines and analysing the path the country has taken, Ter-Petrosyan has returned to politics with the aim of “restoring his good name in the eyes of succeeding generations and destroying the system of power which started to take shape in the last years of his presidency”. Many of his supporters justify their support in

2 L. Ter-Petrosyan. ‘War or Peace’. Available in Armenian at [http://www.anm.am/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=133:warorpeace&catid=50:artsakh&Itemid=87](http://www.anm.am/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=133:warorpeace&catid=50:artsakh&Itemid=87).

3 Armenian national epos “The Daredevils of Sasoun”. Available in Russian at <http://www.gisher.ru/vetv-4-mgermladshiy-uxod-mgera-v-skalu-t13879.html>.

these terms, noting at the same time that ‘Ter-Petrosyan does not need to gain power as a means of enrichment’. Ter-Petrosyan himself presented this aim in a speech on Freedom Square on 16th November 2007. The first president asked forgiveness for bringing Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan to Armenia and foisting them on the people. ‘Of all the mistakes I may have made in office, I recognise that this was the biggest’, he said. ‘In fact it was not a mistake but a disaster that I brought on the people. But if that is so, allow me and help me to free you from this disaster.’<sup>4</sup>

## General analysis of rhetorical devices and contexts of public speeches

It is important to note at the outset that Ter-Petrosyan’s public speeches share one fairly obvious characteristic: his knowledge of literary language and the frequent use of unusual phraseology, archaisms and the academic style of his speeches lend them a certain *gravitas*. Sometimes, presumably for the purpose of contrast, Ter-Petrosyan uses colloquial, slang terms, and Russian loan words that are more usually to be found in Yerevan vernacular. Ter-Petrosyan’s speeches tend to be coherently argued, filled with academic citations and definitions. As a result, some of his speeches are rather lengthy and turn into protracted lectures.

In relation to the functions of images of the external friend and enemy, we first need to contextualise them. Two main contexts can be distinguished in Ter-Petrosyan’s speeches: domestic and foreign policy policy. Each of these can be subdivided into topics which provide concrete examples of the functions of the images:

The following topics come under domestic policy:

1. Systemic problems of governance and the election campaign;
2. The need for radical change in the system of power in the post-election situation;
3. The events of 1st March (2008) and the domestic political crisis caused by those events.

Foreign policy covers two main topics:

1. Armenian-Turkish relations;
2. The Nagorny Karabakh conflict.

Interestingly, both topics in the foreign policy context are fundamental issues which have had a huge impact on how Armenia perceives its identity as a nation and a state, and have been discussed at all levels of public discourse throughout the whole period of Armenian independence.

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<sup>4</sup> L. Ter-Petrosyan. Speech at political rally on Freedom Square, Yerevan, 16th November 2007. Available at <http://olddest.hetq.am/eng/politics/7321/>.



There is also a clear link between Armenian-Turkish relations and the Nagorny Karabakh conflict: Armenia's two major external problems which are often linked and presented as a single common threat.

## The domestic political context

As previously mentioned, Ter-Petrosyan's presidential nomination in 2007 was an event in itself and attracted universal attention. In this context, the content of speeches used to launch the electoral campaign is naturally significant.

Seven speeches given by the president during this period are of interest: the first speech, which was referred to earlier and heralded his return; three speeches at national rallies in Yerevan with very large audiences; two speeches at caucuses supporting Ter-Petrosyan's candidacy in the presidential elections; a meeting with young people where participants were given the opportunity to ask questions on a range of topics.

The content of the speeches in this period is interesting, since they represent an attempt by Ter-Petrosyan after a decade of silence to present a fuller picture of the regime of Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan, characterising it as a kleptocracy and presenting its structure, resources and methods of governance. The second component of the speeches can be characterised in terms of an explanation and justification of actions taken during his presidency. This part had an important function: to destroy the stereotypes of the "hot and cold years", the period when blockades and war led to an energy and economic crisis in Armenia.

In the context of this study, the most noteworthy and interesting of Ter-Petrosyan's speeches was his address to a rally on 8th December 2007, entitled *History, ideology, typology*.<sup>5</sup> This speech is important because it represents the most conceptualised and systematised presentation of the fundamental factors of Armenia's domestic and foreign policy. This speech also deserves attention since in it Ter-Petrosyan answered accusations made against him by Kocharyan and Sargsyan, as well as the pro-government press.

The need to voice these issues was a result of both public demand and the reaction of the authorities, in particular Robert Kocharyan who, when asked to comment on Ter-Petrosyan's return to active politics, answered that he asked citizens to remember how many streets were lit in Yerevan during Ter-Petrosyan's period of office and how many there were in his own period of office. Another reaction, this time from Serzh Sargsyan in response to Ter-Petrosyan's statement that, if all the opposition forces rallied around him he would retire after three years and guarantee that honest, democratic elections would

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5 L. Ter-Petrosyan. 'History, ideology and typology'. Available at <http://archive.168.am/en/articles/5366>.

be held, was the statement: ‘Three years will certainly be enough for him to surrender Nagorny Karabakh.’<sup>6</sup>

Naturally the topics of the Nagorny Karabakh conflict and Armenian-Turkish relations were periodically used both by the authorities and the opposition, particularly since Ter-Petrosyan’s resignation was in fact brought about by the Nagorny Karabakh conflict. The authorities accused Ter-Petrosyan of “weakness” and a willingness to enter into “anti-Armenian concessions”, whilst Ter-Petrosyan accused the authorities of not only failing to make any progress in negotiations for ten years but also of giving ground, particularly by allowing Nagorny Karabakh to be removed from the negotiation process.

Although neither the authorities nor the opposition used openly hostile statements against Azerbaijan during the election campaign, indirect and implicit references to the image of the enemy – normally taken to be Azerbaijan – were repeatedly made. Since this discourse was entirely conducted in terms of domestic politics, however, the connotation underpinning the image of the enemy was that of an internal enemy or traitor rather than the external enemy. The image of Azerbaijan as the enemy was played down, becoming the “opponent”, a less emotional and personified concept.

Serzh Sargsyan’s accusations of “surrender” and articles in the pro-government press on Ter-Petrosyan’s “pro-Turkish” leanings were followed by the speech at a rally on 8th December 2007, in which the first president presented his position on Armenian-Turkish relations and the Nagorny Karabakh conflict in detail. He said in particular: ‘I cannot help noting that the people who accuse me of being pro-Turkish are the same people who obsequiously served the Turks for extended periods of their lives.’ This statement sounds rather ambiguous given that Ter-Petrosyan usually sticks in his speeches to very precise, detailed formulations. Ter-Petrosyan is using the term “Turk” here to refer to Azerbaijan and, in this context, “Turks” are a collective image, synonymous in Armenian consciousness with the “enemy”. Classifying Azerbaijanis as “Turks” automatically classifies them as part of the collective “enemy”. It is interesting that Ter-Petrosyan then followed this sentence not with the Nagorny Karabakh conflict but Armenian-Turkish relations. In particular, having touched on the topic of the genocide, he commented: ‘Like most of the participants at this rally, I am a descendant of genocide survivors...’ He then spoke about how his grandfather took part in the Battle of Musaler, how his father at seven years of age carried food and water to the front line, and how his mother was born in a cave during the fighting: ‘If the French Navy had not been sailing by the shores of Musaler, I would not be alive now and, much to the delight of Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan, I would not be speaking from this podium today.’<sup>7</sup>

6 Available in Armenian at <http://www.armtown.com/news/am/lra/20071120/46429/>.

7 L. Ter-Petrosyan. ‘History, ideology and typology’. Available at <http://archive.168.am/en/articles/5366>.

The speech on 8th December 2007 is reminiscent in structure and content of an academic lecture justifying the need for a change of regime in Armenia. In this speech Ter-Petrosyan in particular provided a detailed analysis of the current system of power, comparing it to the methods of governance used by the Tartar Mongols. Although Ter-Petrosyan insisted that the analogy was not intended to be ethnic in nature, in the public perception this comparison nevertheless implied the connotation of “immigrants”, identifying Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan with their place of origin – the Nagorny Karabakh Autonomous Oblast of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic. For most of the opposition-leaning public, the “Tartar Mongol” comparison, along with the definition of “kleptocracy” became firmly associated with the Kocharyan-Sargsyan system of power. These two definitions became a sort of “code”, implying a more detailed definition of the system of power in Armenia as presented by Ter-Petrosyan in the pre-election period. This “code” covered the main qualities ascribed to the authorities by the opposition: “[ethnic] origin”, “clan”, “predatory methods of governance”, “cultural and intellectual inadequacy”, “lack of commitment to Armenian values”, etc. Therefore, in the view of a significant portion of opposition supporters in the Armenian public, Ter-Petrosyan provided a complete profile of the authorities and provided a very detailed picture, describing its structure, methods and resources. Unsurprisingly, the descriptive images of “kleptocracy” and “Tartar Mongols” were used not only during but also after the pre-election period.

In terms of analysing the use of images of the friend/enemy in domestic political discourse, appeals to or invocation of Russia, Europe and the US are of particular interest. For example, when criticising the policy of “equity for debt”, under which Armenia transferred a large number of strategically important assets to Russia in exchange for extinguishing Armenia’s external debt, Ter-Petrosyan lists all the assets transferred to Russia, saying: ‘Russia is not to blame for this deal and there are no grounds for the accusations made against it. As Russian President Vladimir Putin has stated, the initiative for this deal came from Armenia’s authorities. They were driven by the desire to rid themselves of concerns about interest payments on Russian debt and to make their job easier, while at the same time they did not take into account the serious damage that this unwise and irresponsible course of action would cause to friendly Armenian-Russian relations.’<sup>8</sup>

This statement can clearly be understood in two ways. On the one hand, Ter-Petrosyan “absolves” Russia from responsibility for this deal; on the other he notes that damage has still been caused to Armenian-Russian friendship for which the current authorities are to blame. The statement thus contains an affirmation of friendship by stating that Armenian-Russian friendship exists, whilst simultaneously alerting the Russian

authorities to a tendency for relations to worsen at a more profound level, thereby indicating that the current authorities are not reliable partners.

Another important external actor in the context of domestic politics is Europe. Before we turn to an analysis of the use of the image of Europe, we should note that, for much of the Armenian population, the various European institutions are conflated into a general and undifferentiated whole (i.e. no distinction is made between institutions such as the Council of Europe (CoE) and the European Union. Nor is there sufficient public awareness that Armenia is a member of the CoE). For example, a survey carried out in Yerevan in November 2008 revealed that just 14.3 percent of respondents have a good understanding of the format of Armenian-European relations.<sup>9</sup> From this point of view it is curious that when Ter-Petrosyan addresses the CoE, he identifies it not as an “alien” institution, but as an institution of which Armenia is a member, which entitles it to make demands of it, i.e. “its own” organisation with which Armenian society can have grievances. This is the subject of the following statement he made during his speech at the same meeting on 8th December 2007:

‘Recently, several media outlets have discovered another act of treason with which to accuse me, alleging that I have been appealing to foreigners, urging them to interfere in our country’s domestic affairs. This is an excusable misunderstanding, since those who hold this view, most likely due to their lack of education, do not realise that the Council of Europe, its General Assembly [*sic*] and the OSCE are not alien structures but our own organisations. They do not realise that Armenia, as a full member of these institutions, has assumed certain obligations. Consequently, we are merely demanding that our own institutions monitor the implementation of these obligations. This demand stems from the obvious fact that if our state has taken on commitments to this organisation, then this organisation too has assumed commitment to our people. All of this means that, if we are to view these structures as alien, then Armenia cannot be a member of any international organisation.’<sup>10</sup>

This statement has a number of different audiences and pursues a number of aims:

1. To explain to the public the structure of the responsibilities and commitments of Armenia and the CoE;
2. To precisely identify a “European” target audience in the form of the CoE;
3. To announce publicly the responsibilities of the CoE and justify the need for sufficient and consistent monitoring of Armenian domestic political processes by the CoE;
4. To demonstrate to European structures that he was committed to European values;

9 Centre of European Law and Integration [2008]. ‘Attitude of Yerevan citizens toward the process of European Integration [Analysis of the sociological survey results]’. Available at [http://ces.am/images/stories/CESPDF/soc\\_en.pdf](http://ces.am/images/stories/CESPDF/soc_en.pdf).

10 L. Ter-Petrosyan. ‘History, ideology and typology’. Available at <http://archive.168.am/en/articles/5366>.

5. To proclaim once more that the current authorities were “not playing by the rules”: neither the internal rules established by the country’s constitution, nor the external rules established by virtue of Armenia’s CoE membership.

Therefore, Ter-Petrosyan consistently argues that external support for the current regime is unreliable and unproductive for any serious external forces interested in one way or another in domestic political processes in Armenia.

The presidential elections which took place in Armenia on 19th February 2008, and the results published by the Central Electoral Commission giving Serzh Sargsyan 52.82 percent of the vote, leaving Ter-Petrosyan in second place with 21.5 percent, spilled over into mass demonstrations which turned into 24-hour rallies on Freedom Square, where supporters of Ter-Petrosyan set up a “tent city”.

At this point Ter-Petrosyan’s speeches underwent some changes. Firstly, significant space began to be given to questions of an administrative nature as well as tactical issues linked to plans for the immediate future. Ter-Petrosyan also adopted a much harsher tone in his criticism of the authorities and called on opposition forces and society as a whole to unite. It was in this period that the slogan, “who is not with us is against us”, was voiced, which was perceived by the population in very different ways.

Statements on foreign policy contained within speeches from this period clearly show a tendency of referring to Europeans, Russia and, to a lesser degree, the US as “friends”.

This was the result of the specific processes occurring during the brief period of time (nine days) between the elections and the events of 1st March. There were many events during this highly tense period when emotions were at fever pitch: opposition rallies attended by many thousands of people, deputy general prosecutor Dzhangiryan coming out in support of the opposition, a letter of support from several members of the Armenian Interior Ministry, vote recounts in several electoral constituencies, arrests of Ter-Petrosyan supporters, etc.

Given these conditions, it was only natural that Ter-Petrosyan’s “addresses” to these target audiences became increasingly frequent, leading to a clear and perceptible change in tone for the domestic and external target audiences. The primary domestic audience included potential supporters of the opposition who, it was hoped, would be enticed to join the demonstrations on Freedom Square, as well as various political and state actors, and thereby weaken the authorities’ position.

In terms of the external players referred to at the beginning of the study, speeches at this period were made to those classed as “friends” – Europeans, Russia and the US. It

should be noted that as the rallies continued, these speeches became increasingly shrill and specific. For example, on 28th February, Ter-Petrosyan expressed his disapproval of the election observers, particularly the representatives of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE):

‘Elections are not just about the day of the election but an ongoing process of at least four months which also includes the current arrests, searches...Some countries, particularly CIS countries, have serious complaints about the OSCE. Unfortunately, Armenia has now also joined the ranks of dissatisfied. The authorities are unhappy with the OSCE and have even raised the issue of its reform. However, the OSCE and its monitoring missions should be concerned not about the government’s dissatisfaction, but about the dissatisfaction of the people. Our dissatisfaction, which could grow, may harm these missions’ authority even further. The monitoring missions and the West must not adopt a formalistic attitude to what is happening in Armenia.’<sup>11</sup>

Ter-Petrosyan then presented what amounted to an ultimatum in the following terms:

‘Within ten days all the forces, countries, organisations which I have mentioned could have either a country like Lithuania – lawful, civilised, democratic, with a free market economy, or a country similar to the countries of Central Asia... This is the alternative. To obtain [the first], the West needs only to respect our people. Thus the West, the countries of the EU, the US, international organisations should today make their choice: either they are with the people of Armenia or with Armenia’s Mongol Tartar regime.’<sup>12</sup>

Appeals to Russia took a different form. At the same rally, Ter-Petrosyan stated:

‘Russia continues to occupy a serious position among the superpowers and the position of this country has great weight. I know that Russia today is facing a dilemma – by supporting the current authorities, it will forfeit the trust and love of Armenian society. By supporting the people, Russia will have in Armenia a strong, serious and worthy partner. Russia has had recent experience in Ukraine and Georgia; therefore, I am sure that Russia will take the right decision on the situation in Armenia.’<sup>13</sup>

As we can see, these two appeals are quite distinct from one another. The style and structure of this text show that expectations of the West are more tied to support for democratic processes, whilst the address to Russia calls for it to review the priorities

11 ‘Ter-Petrosyan gave 10 days to West’, *a1plus.am*, 28th February 2008. English translation available at <http://www.a1plus.am/en/politics/2008/02/28/6963>.

12 *Ibid.*

13 ‘Россия примет верное решение [Russia to take the right decision]’, *a1plus.am*, 28th February 2008. Available in Russian at <http://www.a1plus.am/ru/politics/2008/02/28/6848>.

of the partnership. While, in the case of the West, the tone of the appeal is one of “dissatisfaction and demands”, in the case of Russia, the tone is one of “persuasion and friendly request”.

Analysing the appeal to Russia, we can distinguish three components:

1. ‘To this day Russia occupies a serious position among the superpowers and the position of this country has great weight.’ This recognition by the Armenian opposition of Russia’s status as a superpower with great weight may also be seen as a declaration that it is prepared to retain partner relations with Russia.
2. ‘... Russia today faces a dilemma – by supporting the current authorities, it will lose the trust and love of Armenian society. By supporting the people, Russia will have in Armenia a strong, serious and worthy partner.’ This section can be viewed as a statement that Russia’s current policy in Armenia has little prospect of success and that it runs the risk of losing the trust of the people if it supports the current authorities.
3. ‘Russia has had recent experience in Ukraine and Georgia, therefore, I am sure that Russia will take the right decision on the situation in Armenia.’ This is a reference to the possibility of a repeat of the Georgian and Ukrainian scenarios in Armenia, which could ultimately lead to Russia losing ground in the South Caucasus.

It is difficult to say whether the Armenian opposition might have obtained the support of any of these target audiences as, two days later, the authorities dispersed the opposition rally on Freedom Square, after which the tragic events of 1st March occurred,<sup>14</sup> which sparked a domestic political crisis without precedent in the history of independent Armenia. The events of 1st March also had a significant impact on public consciousness in Armenia, a topic which requires additional study.

As previously discussed, the later period covered by this study (March 2008-May 2011) constitutes the longest segment in the period of confrontation. We have divided this segment into two components (i.e. the internal political crisis and foreign policy context that includes Armenian-Turkish relations and the Nagorny Karabakh conflict) to allow for a more detailed and sound analysis.

## The internal political context

The crisis which arose following the events of 1st March in fact covers the whole of the later period covered by this study (March 2008-May 2011). This is primarily due to the fact that the criminal investigation into the events of 1st March is still open, with no one

<sup>14</sup> Human Rights Watch (2008). ‘Armenia: Police beat peaceful protestors in Yerevan’. Available at <http://www.hrw.org/news/2008/02/29/armenia-police-beat-peaceful-protesters-yerevan>.

having faced charges or sentenced for the ten deaths; law-enforcement agencies have not officially uncovered the full picture of events, etc. We use the somewhat arbitrary term “the post-March crisis” here, because, at certain points, the events of 1st March form the main topic of a “distancing” discourse between the opposition and the authorities. With the appearance of the Armenian-Turkish protocols (October 2009), domestic policy issues were relegated to second place, although they did not disappear entirely and were periodically revived by the opposition.

The first opposition rally after the events of 1st March took place on 20th June 2008. The four-month gap was due to the fact that, throughout this entire period, the authorities had refused permission for a rally and, according to the testimony of representatives of the opposition, the Yerevan Mayor’s office had refused 45 applications for rallies to be held. It should be noted that the rally on 20th June was also not sanctioned by the authorities. In Ter-Petrosyan’s words, the opposition decided to hold this rally in the run-up to the session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), where a resolution on the internal situation in Armenia was to be discussed, since this acted to some extent as a guarantee for the opposition that the authorities would exercise restraint.

As Ter-Petrosyan noted in his speech at that rally, the PACE resolution passed on the situation in Armenia included three basic points: creation of an independent commission of inquiry into the events of 1st March; withdrawal of amendments to the law on holding mass demonstrations; the release of “persons detained for political reasons”. The third point constituted the opposition’s main demand, since Ter-Petrosyan did not believe that the first or second demands would be met.

It is essential to note that, apart from domestic target audiences, the main and possibly only external target audience at this point was the West in general, particularly the Council of Europe. The reason for this was specific to the situation: Ter-Petrosyan’s aim was to secure the release of his supporters and he thus appealed to the external target audience which possessed the means of exerting pressure required for this specific case – PACE resolutions. Markedly, the target audience – in this case the Council of Europe – is not presented as external in structure: Ter-Petrosyan continues to use the argument that Armenia is a full member of the CoE and, as a result, is fully entitled to demand adequate action from it. Therefore, at the very beginning of his speech at the rally on 20th June, Ter-Petrosyan stated: ‘Our purpose in holding this rally is to show the bureaucrats of the CoE and the OSCE that they must stop viewing Armenia from the racist perspectives of their lofty platforms, that they must stop ignoring our people and treating them as people from a third world country.’<sup>15</sup>

15 Levon Ter-Petrosyan for President [2009]. ‘Լեւոն Տեր-Պետրոսյանի ԵԼՈՒՅԹԸ 2008 Թ. ՀՈՒՆԻՍԻ 20-Ի ՀԱՆՐԱՀԱՎԱՔՈՒՄ’ [Levon Ter-Petrosyan, 2008, Yerevan. JUNE 20 – RALLY]. Available in Armenian at <http://www.levonpresident.am/?catID=20&contID=333>.



Despite this, the CoE seems to be viewed as an external force which wishes to change the situation but needs to be convinced of this or given the right information. This is evidenced by the following utterance by Ter-Petrosyan in the same speech: ‘And if the Council of Europe or the international community thinks that the law can restrain our authorities, they are deeply mistaken.’<sup>16</sup>

As mentioned above, in the post-March period the topics covered in the speeches varied, reflecting changes in the external and domestic policy contexts. Three main and complementary topics can be distinguished here as being used by the opposition: the domestic political situation, the Nagorny Karabakh conflict and Armenian-Turkish relations. How frequently these topics came to the fore depended on the target audiences and the situation. Therefore, speeches were concentrated on political detainees and inquiries into the killings of 1st March on the eve of the PACE sessions, visits by senior European or American officials, and the municipal elections in Yerevan; Armenian-Turkish relations naturally came to the fore with the start of “football diplomacy” and the signing of the protocols; the Nagorny Karabakh issue was the main topic before the Sargsyan-Aliyev meetings or in response to statements by leaders of the countries chairing and co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group. For these reasons the division of these periods into specific time segments was complex and ultimately arbitrary.

Dialogue with the authorities developed throughout the post-March period. Individual precedents where the opposition took part in official election processes, in particular the Yerevan mayoral elections, along with some external pressure, gradually steered the opposition and the authorities towards dialogue which, as later events showed, had lamentable results. In this context the statements by Ter-Petrosyan addressed to external actors gradually became more severe in tone. In particular, after the municipal elections, Ter-Petrosyan sharply criticised the monitoring missions of Western organisations. At a rally on 1st June 2009 he accused the CoE and the OSCE of ‘double standards’, ‘unprincipled behaviour’ and ‘outrageous treatment of the people’.<sup>17</sup> At a rally on 12th June, Ter-Petrosyan expressed himself in even harsher terms, stating: ‘But now we turn to Serzh Sargsyan’s powerful backer or “mafiosi protector” – our beloved West.’<sup>18</sup>

In the same speech Ter-Petrosyan explains the reason for his frequent criticism of the West: ‘For more than a year, my aim when talking about the West has not been to criticise or lecture it, but something quite different:

1. To rid the Armenian people of empty illusions about Western “justice”;
2. To stop the West from treating the Armenian people as an inferior race and taking us for fools and to make it realise that we are quite aware of what is happening;

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Levon Ter Petrosyan’s speech at June 1 2009 rally in Yerevan.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

3. To prevent scepticism about the West spreading to Western or universal human values, to which the Armenian people has, on more than one occasion, demonstrated its commitment.<sup>19</sup>

By criticising the West and stating that this criticism has “internal” aims relating to self-reliance, Ter-Petrosyan is simultaneously appealing to internal target audiences (the authorities, his supporters) and external audiences (Russia, the West), allowing each audience to interpret his “address” at a number of different levels. This kind of “meta-linguistic” address, with its multiple and diverse target audiences and sections aimed at individual audiences, achieves the remarkable feat of avoiding positioning any one of these target audiences as an enemy or friend at any level.

The topic of *Realpolitik* and double standards are also a consistent feature of Ter-Petrosyan’s later speeches. He uses them, for example, at a rally on 1st March 2010 to explain the global community’s concentration on external policy linked to Armenian-Turkish relations and the Nagorny Karabakh conflict whilst totally ignoring the country’s domestic problems.<sup>20</sup>

Ter-Petrosyan’s rhetoric undergoes certain changes as Western agencies’ attitudes to the issue of political detainees change. At a rally on 6th April 2010 Ter-Petrosyan noted that changes in the external political situation and Sargsyan’s attempts at manoeuvre in the Armenian-Turkish and Armenian-Azerbaijani talks had led to the West focusing attention on Armenia’s domestic problems in order to exert pressure on Sargsyan.<sup>21</sup>

The lack of success of external policy initiatives, which became clear in the autumn of 2010, meant that domestic topics again came to the fore. It should be noted that in the period from March 2008 to the autumn of 2010, the authorities released a certain number of political detainees and stopped refusing permission for the opposition to hold rallies. The only ban remaining in place related to Freedom Square, access to which was closed.

In November 2010 the ‘Armenia-EU Dialogue’ conference was held in Yerevan, which served as a further opportunity to demand that European structures consistently monitored the implementation of PACE resolutions.

Nevertheless, the speeches of this period were mainly aimed at the domestic audience; their aim was to prevent a drop in numbers of active opposition supporters. This determined the contents of the speeches at rallies in late 2010 and early 2011, which focused on

19 ANC (2009). ‘Լևոն Տեր-Պետրոսյանի ելույթը 2009 թ. հունիսի 12-ի հանրահավաքում [Levon Ter-Petrosyan in 2009. June 12 rally]’. Available in Armenian at <http://www.anc.am/am/addresses/63/360/>.

20 ANC (2010). ‘Լևոն Տեր-Պետրոսյանի ելույթը 2010 թ. մարտի 1-ի հանրահավաքում [Levon Ter-Petrosyan in 2010. March 1 rally]’. Available in Armenian at <http://www.anc.am/am/addresses/62/363/>.

21 ANC (2010). ‘Լևոն Տեր-Պետրոսյանի ելույթը 2010 թ. ապրիլի 6-ի հանրահավաքում [Levon Ter-Petrosyan in 2010. April 6 rally]’. Available in Armenian at <http://www.anc.am/am/addresses/62/382/>.

corruption and the economy. Criticism of the West, accusations of inconsistency and lack of principles continued, but in softer terms than before.

The situation changed in March 2011 when Ter-Petrosyan presented his ultimatum, demanding the release of political detainees. Throughout the spring of 2011 and up to the rally on 31st May, Ter-Petrosyan's speeches can be characterised as a series of ultimatums submitted to the authorities. Interestingly, he presented his ultimatums against the backdrop of the so-called "Arab Spring" and the demands set out in them gradually developed into preconditions for potential dialogue with the authorities.

The last time segment of this study concentrated exclusively on domestic issues, where the main external target audience was again the West, although the speeches had been toned down considerably. One example is Ter-Petrosyan's speech of 28th April 2011, when speaking of the ending of funding under the "Millennium Challenge" programme, he explained this in terms of the problems with democratic processes in the country, again linking the terms "the West" and "democracy".

Such changes in Ter-Petrosyan's rhetoric are above all explained by the role of mediator played by senior Western officials in setting up dialogue between the opposition and the authorities, as well as successes in the process of releasing political detainees.

## The external political context

In August 2008 the so-called "football diplomacy" began, heralded by the visit of the President of Turkey, Abdullah Gül, to Armenia at the invitation of Serzh Sargsyan and the proposal that they both attend a football match between Armenia and Turkey. This event, along with the subsequent signing of the Armenian-Turkish protocols, Serzh Sargsyan's return visit and the entire process of the "rise and fall" of football diplomacy inevitably had an impact on domestic politics.

However, it should be noted that Ter-Petrosyan's overall position on the Armenian-Turkish protocols was distinct from Serzh Sargsyan's position in one respect: the joint committee of historians. This is how Ter-Petrosyan expressed his stance on this issue at the rally on 15th September 2008: 'Without wanting to sound wise after the event, I don't know who advised [Serzh Sargsyan] when he stated that Armenia was ready for or accepted Turkey's proposal, which is essentially to set up a joint committee of historians to determine once and for all whether it was genocide or not.'<sup>22</sup> Ter-Petrosyan went on to say that this meant 'Turkey is being given a chance to feel the weakness of Armenians' current authorities, which are even prepared to agree to a committee of this kind being set up. The damage has been done!

22 'Levon Ter-Petrosyan's speech at September 15 2008 rally'. Available in Armenian at <http://www.a1plus.am/am/politics/2008/09/16/26207>.

Naturally, neither Armenian society nor the diaspora will let Serzh Sargsyan or any other president agree to such a committee being set up...but as I have already said, the damage has been done. Serzh Sargsyan has shown the weakness of his authorities...'.<sup>23</sup>

Interestingly, during the speech at the same rally, Ter-Petrosyan recalled attempts to combine the two problems into one: 'When I went to Ozal's funeral, Demirel proposed organising a trilateral meeting with me and El'chibey. I refused. He then offered to organise my meeting with El'chibey, which the Turkish Foreign Minister would also attend. But this meeting was also essentially trilateral and I again refused. I said that I would have a separate meeting with El'chibey and we would discuss everything needed. The purpose of this trilateral meeting in fact was to emphasise Turkey's involvement as a mediator, but what would Turkey's mediation mean for us? In the end a 2-1 format was arranged, since Turkey and Azerbaijan are in complete agreement on the Nagorny Karabakh conflict.'<sup>24</sup>

Ter-Petrosyan also indicated another extreme position: 'Jacques Chirac, the French President, proposed holding a meeting between me, himself and Aliyev. I refused, saying that Armenia cannot participate in a trilateral meeting unless the president of Nagorny Karabakh attends it. Moreover, a similar proposal was also made to me by Boris Yeltsin – our friend, Armenia's best friend and a personal friend of mine.'<sup>25</sup>

If these statements are analysed, this leads to a number of curious conclusions:

1. When two extremes are indicated and one of them is expressed as a "friend", the second will automatically be classed as the "enemy";
2. Statements that Turkey is being given an opportunity because of the weakness of the Armenian authorities have a negative connotation.
3. Applying a 2-1 formula to the format of the Armenia-Turkey-Azerbaijan meeting transforms a three-component system into a binary opposition, again with a negative connotation.
4. Emphasis on the link between the authorities' weakness and an external threat, combined with the fact that, in this context, the authorities are portrayed in a negative light, means that two negative connotations are being combined, i.e. an "external enemy-internal enemy" link is identified.

These conclusions are also supported by other statements in later speeches given by Ter-Petrosyan on foreign policy issues. These include, for example, his statement at a rally on 15th May 2009 that Sargsyan's lack of legitimacy was placing him under serious external pressure on the Nagorny Karabakh question and Armenian-Turkish relations and that there were two possible ways out of the situation that had been created, [both of which

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

would] unite the people: the release of all political detainees, or his retirement.<sup>26</sup> In this statement Ter-Petrosyan is again attempting to demonstrate a link between external and domestic political problems and hence an “external enemy-internal enemy” link.

In the context of Armenian-Turkish relations and the Nagorny Karabakh conflict, the role of the superpowers – the USA, the EU and Russia – is also discussed. Of interest in this regard is the following statement by Ter-Petrosyan on how a nation’s right to self-determination and territorial integrity are prioritised: ‘In these matters unfortunately the international community – and when I say the international community I have primarily in mind the superpowers – are not guided by clear or shared principles. These matters are usually resolved on the basis of one of two principles: territorial integrity or a nation’s right to self-determination. However, these are not applied in a standardised way. Expediency also plays a role here. If it is to the advantage of one or more superpowers to resolve a problem based on the principle of territorial integrity they resolve it based on this principle, but if it is to their advantage to resolve it based on the principle of self-determination, they resolve it based on that principle. This means that the question is determined on the basis of the advantage and interest of one of the superpowers arising from one specific principle...’<sup>27</sup>

Through the statement where superpowers are presented as unprincipled and inconsistent and acting only to their own advantage and interests, Ter-Petrosyan forms an image of “neither friend nor enemy”, stating that any of the superpowers can be a friend or indeed an enemy depending on the situation.

As previously discussed, the period of the most active appeals to external political issues lasted up until the autumn of 2011; however, even after this, these issues periodically re-surface in Ter-Petrosyan’s speeches. In particular, statements about the potential dangers in the Nagorny Karabakh negotiation process have continued right up until March 2011.

## Conclusion

If we are to attempt to summarise the conclusions of this study, we might conclude as follows:

One of the weightiest arguments used in domestic politics in Armenia is the accusation directed by political opponents at each other of [dis]loyalty over questions of conflict resolution. This is generally done by identifying links between an external enemy and an

26 ANC (2012). ‘Արտահերթ նստաշրջանի նախաձեռնություն [The extraordinary session of initiative]’. Available in Armenian at <http://www.anc.am/am/addresses/63/86/>.

27 ‘Levon Ter-Petrosyan’s speech at September 15 2008 rally’. Available in Armenian at <http://www.a1plus.am/am/politics/2008/09/16/26207>.

internal political opponent. Identifying this link automatically forms an image of the internal enemy with close links to the external enemy.

In terms of the use of the images of external friends, the tendency is for the friendship to be personalised in order to demonstrate that a real friendship between the individual leaders of two countries can help to bring about the assistance and support of the friendly country in resolving internal and external problems. On the other hand the use of “personal friendship” confirms the “traditional” nature and the “real basis” of the partnership. At the same time the contexts of the right course for domestic audiences and for public support and mutual advantage for external audiences are also achieved via using images of external friends in external and domestic political contexts.

By way of a conclusion we can say that the processes described in this article have led to Armenian society undergoing significant changes which can, to some extent, be characterised as the emergence of “civic” society. This is clear from the emergence of a large number of informal civic initiatives which use civic solidarity as an instrument to defend public interests in a number of areas, particularly the environment, social issues and criminal behaviour in the Armenian army.

In the widest sense we can say that Armenian society has become more open and the state more closed, which is leading to a situation where the conflict between society and the authorities becomes more principled and uncompromised. The discourse developed throughout the entire period described has, to some extent, identified a number of key issues which need to be reviewed and re-evaluated by Armenian society:

- The need for Armenian society to decide which of its aims should take priority and assess the resources available to it (i.e. what is really important for it and how it can achieve this). In this regard the topic of “Democracy” vs “Conflict” is the most relevant. As a result of the changes described in the public discourse, the traditional dispute within Armenian society over the priority given to – and consequently sequencing of addressing – issues regarding the democratisation of the country and the resolution of the Nagorny Karabakh conflict has not only been revived but has also become more principled in nature, i.e. it is no longer just a problem of maintaining or handing over power;
- Society’s awareness of the importance of its function within the system of government as an important step towards a correct appreciation of the concept of “civil society”;
- The change in attitude towards the concepts of external and internal threats/support and awareness of how these terms are manipulated in politics.

## CHAPTER 4

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# Remembrance Day: Contemporary Discourse on the Georgian- Abkhaz Conflict in the Georgian Media

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## Introduction

The media's influence on the development of conflict is a relatively little-studied topic.<sup>1</sup> However, as media researchers have shown,<sup>2</sup> notions generated by the media are a factor in the emergence, escalation and resolution of conflict. The routes through which the media reproduce specific discourses around conflict are particularly interesting. Such discourses not only influence perceptions of the past but also implicitly shape future policy. A change in discourse frequently indicates a shift in policy by groups or institutions (such as the state), with their own particular version of how the conflict should be settled. The resulting new discourse is designed to change public attitudes towards the conflict in order to legitimise the new policy.

In Georgia's recent history there have been instances of the state changing its discourse on the restoration of territorial integrity.<sup>3</sup> The discourse formed in the 1990s during the rule of Eduard Shevardnadze<sup>4</sup> was constructed on a classic security paradigm, which was centred on the international balance of power (in this case between Georgia, Russia and the US). This discourse was discredited once it became clear that it was incapable of leading to any real change, *inter alia*, the problem of Abkhazia. The need facing subsequent administrations in Georgia<sup>5</sup> was to build an effective strategy for re-incorporating the breakaway territories within Georgia whilst simultaneously combining this policy with one of building a new, democratic civil nation which would unite the members of its various ethnic groups.

August 2008 was a turning point in relations between Russia, Georgia and Abkhazia. The war established a new balance of power,<sup>6</sup> which required a new strategy. In 2008-2010 two documents were drawn up setting out the priorities for state policy on this issue: the 2008 Law on Occupied Territories,<sup>7</sup> and the 2010 State Strategy on Occupied Territories.<sup>8</sup>

This article will show how the pro-government<sup>9</sup> media (at the time of this study between 2009 and 2011) legitimised state policy on Abkhazia.

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1 E. Gilboa [2009]. 'Media and Conflict Resolution: Framework for Analysis', *Marquette Law Review*, Vol. 93, Issue 1.

2 *Ibid.*

3 A.Y. Sir [2010]. 'The Emergence and Evolution of Georgian Security Discourse: Failures and Implications'. Available at [http://www.academia.edu/351107/The\\_Emergence\\_and\\_Evolution\\_of\\_Georgian\\_National\\_Security\\_Discourse](http://www.academia.edu/351107/The_Emergence_and_Evolution_of_Georgian_National_Security_Discourse).

4 President of Georgia 1995-2003; Head of State 1992-95.

5 Following the Rose Revolution of 2003, the National Movement Party of President Saakashvili.

6 F. Coene [2009]. *The Caucasus: Introduction*. London: Taylor & Francis.

7 Government of the Republic of Georgia [2008]. *The Law on Occupied Territories*. Tbilisi. Available in Georgian at <http://www.smr.gov.ge/docs/doc215.pdf>.

8 Government of the Republic of Georgia [2010]. *State Strategy on Occupied Territories*. Tbilisi. Available at <http://www.smr.gov.ge/docs/doc204.pdf>.

9 Here and after, when referring to the "current government", this paper refers to the Presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili and the rule of the "United National Movement" during the period of this study.



The authors of this article analysed official discourse on Georgian-Abkhaz relations based on materials from the news broadcasts of the three largest pro-government channels: Rustavi 2, Imedi and the Public Broadcaster. These broadcasts exemplify the discourse intended for a Georgian audience, which aims to explain and legitimise existing policy. We analysed news items relating to 27th September 2009 and the same day in 2011. 27th September marks (on a semi-official level) the anniversary of the fall of Sukhumi.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, this day in particular provides plenty of items relating to the topic of this article.

The material gathered enabled us to analyse the historical narrative, the way in which the media presents contemporary policy on relations with Abkhazia, and potential for conflict resolution or the development of Georgian-Abkhaz relations. Particular attention was focused on the moral assessments of the conflict parties, ways in which blame is apportioned, and the rhetorical techniques used in this regard.

The main conclusions of our analysis can be briefly summarised as follows: materials from pro-government media at that time release Abkhaz society from responsibility for the conflict and its consequences; the main “culprits” are considered “Russian imperialism” and “separatist leaders” responsible for misleading Abkhaz society, which now, given the deplorable results of the Russian occupation, is starting to realise this “mistake”. Reconciliation between the two fraternal peoples (the Georgians and Abkhaz) is inevitable, although how and when this will happen is not specified. The ground would thus appear to be prepared for a variety of peace initiatives. However, Russia has the final word in this process and Abkhaz society’s possibilities in this regard are extremely limited. Thus, on the one hand, a positive image is constructed of the Abkhaz as a fraternal people, whilst, on the other hand, the role of Abkhaz society is reduced to that of a secondary party to the conflict. In the authors’ view, this notion of Abkhaz society as a “younger brother” presents a significant barrier to the development of bilateral relations. It is not only an obstacle to a fully-fledged dialogue between the parties; it also prevents an accurate assessment of the potential role of Abkhaz society in resolving the conflict.

This discourse appears to have been constructed based on three needs of Georgia’s political leaders during the period of this study: 1) the need to create/sustain an image of being “national” leaders; 2) the need to distance themselves from the failures and crimes of the previous Georgian authorities; 3) the need to justify their passive role in establishing Georgian-Abkhaz relations.

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<sup>10</sup> Although 27th September is not officially celebrated, the principal organisers behind events held on this day are government agencies.

## Analytical methodology

The researchers based their analysis on an ethnomethodological approach in sociology/social psychology.<sup>11</sup> In particular, the Membership Categorisation Analysis method proposed by Harvey Sacks was used (with some modifications and simplifications).

We analysed the categories used in television broadcasts to determine the Georgian, Russian and Abkhaz sides (for example, “gangs of separatists”), the collectives to which these categories belong (“gangs of separatists” belong to the collective of “those engaged in military action”), and the actions routinely ascribed to that category (“gangs”, apart from engaging in military action, also engage in violent looting). Categorisations were tested against two rules of application proposed by Harvey Sacks: the consistency rule (where two or more categories are assigned to the same collective) and the economy rule (where each individual is assigned to a single category).<sup>12</sup>

## The conflict context

The roots of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict go back to the 19th century. From the late 1980s onwards the conflict moved into an active phase, culminating in the start of open hostilities on 14th August 1992, when units of the Georgian National Guard entered the district of Gali. The official reason given for this was to protect the railway line from the attack by the supporters of ousted president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia.<sup>13</sup> The National Guard encountered resistance from Abkhaz units, and this day marked the start of military action in Abkhazia. The armed conflict lasted just over a year and ended with the defeat of the supporters of the central authorities of Georgia and the establishment of control by the secessionists over most of the territory of the former Abkhaz SSR.

The capture of Sukhumi by separatist forces on 27th September 1993 determined the subsequent course of the war. In the following week Georgian units vacated the entire territory of Abkhazia apart from the Kodori gorge. For the Georgian public, the fall of Sukhumi came to symbolise their defeat in the war. This event is also associated with traumatic memories of atrocities committed by secessionist militants, as well as the subsequent mass exile of the Georgian population from Abkhazia. Newsreels showing the difficult journey made by internally displaced people (IDPs) across the snow-covered mountain gorge are repeated regularly on Georgian television channels on Remembrance Day.

11 As a guide to this, Silverman’s approach was used [D. Silverman (1993). *Interpreting Qualitative Data*. London: Sage Publications].

12 Silverman (1993), *Op. Cit.*

13 The first president of independent Georgia in 1991-92.

One of the issues around which the conflict developed was the shift in the proportions of the Abkhaz and Georgian populations on the territory during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Soviet state policy aimed to shift the political balance back and forth between the different communities at various periods.<sup>14</sup>

Each of the conflicting sides interprets the historical background to the conflict differently. Abkhazia's past is the subject of embittered disputes, in which members of the intellectual and the political elites on both sides are embroiled.<sup>15</sup>

## Analysis of materials

### “Remember Abkhazia”<sup>16</sup>

The principal message behind the programmes studied is the need for the peaceful reunification of Abkhazia with Georgia, which is widely demonstrated by an impressively diverse range of groups among the population, including ex-combatants and war victims.

#### Closer relations through common tragedy

Particular significance is assigned to supporting a peaceful alternative by mothers of fallen combatants. News items show them, despite an implied “right to vengeance”, calling for reconciliation and mutual forgiveness. They regularly figure in news items devoted to the Day of the Fall of Sukhumi. The memorial to fallen combatants on Heroes Square in Tbilisi is a place mothers can go to mourn the loss of their sons and daughters. In brief interviews they give their interpretations (mostly from a patriotic perspective) of the tragedy experienced by their families: ‘Two of my sons perished in that war. They were defending their country, their home.’ A sense of shared maternal tragedy provokes sympathy and solidarity with the mothers of the fallen combatants on the opposing side: ‘I express sympathy to all mothers of whatever nationality, Abkhaz, Russian or Armenian.’ These mothers construct a new image of another party to the conflict – the composite “Image of the Mother”.

#### Abkhaz society – readiness for reunification

The media studied largely reproduces a discourse of civic nationalism which corresponds to Georgia's state policy; this involves constructing a “civic community”, consisting

14 G. Derlugyan (2000). *The Forgotten Abkhazia: Anatomy of Post-Socialist Ethnic War*. Evanston: Northwestern University. Available at [http://www.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/ponars/pm\\_0163.pdf](http://www.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/ponars/pm_0163.pdf).

15 See, for example, V. A. Shnirel'man (2003). *Voiny pamiati. mify, identichnost' i politika na Zakavkaze* [Memory wars. Myths, identity and politics in the Transcaucasus]. Moscow: Akademkniga.

16 A slogan widely used in the discourses of the Georgian authorities.

of the entire population residing on Georgian territory (including Abkhazia).<sup>17</sup> The ideology of civic nationalism is reproduced by identifying Georgian society with the Georgian authorities, and also by presenting the majority of the residents of Abkhazia as supporting the idea of reunification. Presenting the residents of Abkhazia as loyal citizens of Georgia, allows the policy of peaceful restoration to be legitimised as the only way to prevent the conflict in Abkhazia from turning into a “fratricidal” conflict.

Some news items overtly identify the authorities with the country: ‘Our country is doing everything it can for the de-occupation of its territories’ (referring to diplomatic actions).

### **Georgian society: consensus on conflict**

The Day of the Fall of Sukhumi is used as an opportunity to present Georgian society as united in its vision of the problems, tasks and challenges it faces. Politicians’ speeches presented in news items regularly use the pronoun “we”, which glosses over political differences between individual members of society.

Members of the opposition are often seen on screen attending events to commemorate the fall of Sukhumi. Their attendance and utterances at these events are intended to symbolise the unity of the nation in the face of an external threat.

Attendance by representatives of other groups of Georgian society at these events is also meant to symbolise consensus. Society is represented by veterans, young people and the mothers of fallen soldiers. Particular emphasis is placed on continuity between generations; young people and youth organisations regularly attend these events.

The goal of Georgian society (both the older and younger generations) is declared to be the restoration of the country’s territorial integrity. ‘Our duty...is to finish the job for which these people fought, to achieve the goal...a united Georgia’, said a representative of the Georgian government.

These news items entertain only one possible option for resolving the problem: Abkhazia’s re-unification with Georgia. It is emphasised that this must inevitably be the final outcome and that the “Abkhaz nation” must be “saved”.

### **Traitor politicians and hero warriors**

Events of 18 years ago continue to pose questions which demand answers from the media. The responsibility of the country’s leaders for starting the war and the defeat is a particularly topical subject due to the continuing conflict between supporters

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<sup>17</sup> Civic nationalism became state ideology following the “Rose Revolution”. An analysis of the development of Georgian nationalism is provided in: S. Khinchagashvili (2008). *Post-Soviet Georgian Nationalism in the Context of Social Memory and Collective Trauma Theories*. MA thesis submitted to University of Edinburgh. Available at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/95671817/33700000-Post-Soviet-Georgian-Nationalism-Social-Memory-Cultural-Trauma#download>.

and opponents of the deposed president Zviad Gamsakhurdia. By recognising this responsibility, the media at the same time absolve ordinary combatants from responsibility, presenting their motives as far removed from the vested interests of the politicians. At the same time, the heroic image of the Georgian ex-combatant serves as a distraction from the looting and violence in which the Georgian side was also involved.

Many of the news items outline a clear distinction between the Georgian leaders and ordinary combatants. The fratricidal conflict is blamed on the leaders at that time (along with Russia and the separatists). Ordinary combatants, on the other hand, are exonerated and presented as victims of the perfidy of Abkhaz, Russian and Georgian politicians: ‘...*These people fought for their country, not for the leaders.*’

The authorities are attempting to distance themselves from the Georgia of that period and the politics of its leaders. Both Shevardnadze’s supporters and the supporters of the deposed president Gamsakhurdia have been assigned equal legitimacy: ‘The leaders [Gamsakhurdia and Shevardnadze] sentenced each other [to death], which led to suffering for our country and thousands of its sons.’

There is a tendency towards portraying ordinary members on the Georgian side of the conflict as victims, with the armed forces and the civilian population alike presented as victims of a far superior opposing force. Narratives of the fall of Sukhumi play an important role in this. According to the Georgian version of events, when the decisive attack was launched on Sukhumi, the Georgians had no heavy weaponry – it had been withdrawn under the Sochi Treaty of 27th July 1993,<sup>18</sup> following the truce mediated by Russia between the two sides.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, in the Georgian narrative, the Russian and Abkhaz military units were opposed by only partially armed Georgian combatants. This view releases them from responsibility for the defeat and attempts to evoke heroism. Both ordinary combatants and certain leaders are presented as heroes. It is interesting how the news items refer to the Georgian armed forces. The term normally used is the “armed forces” – the most convenient term, given the diverse nature of the groups involved in military action (the National Guard, the police, the *Mkhedrioni*,<sup>20</sup> and other semi-official groups). This term also makes it easy to gloss over the fact that the reputation of some of the groups involved in military action (including the *Mkhedrioni*) was tarnished considerably during the armed conflicts at the time, as well as later during the armed struggle for power. These relatively neutral terms (not revealing negative associations) are used to cover up the suppression of war crimes.<sup>21</sup>

18 N. Gvazava (2006). *Negotiations with the Russian Federation*. Tbilisi. Available at <http://georgiaupdate.gov.ge/ka/tagliavini/7536cf05239fc063b22334239603eb8e/3bb284154c27cd76e8dbac26517addbd/48d6b2cc6e8177364899fe5d1e6c0826>.

19 V. Guruli & M. Vachnadze (eds) (2003). *The History of Georgia – XX Century*. Tbilisi: Tbilisi State University Press.

20 The *Mkhedrioni* was a paramilitary group and political organisation in Georgia. It was outlawed in 1995 but has been subsequently reconstituted as the “Union of Patriots” political party.

21 For a detailed discussion of the war crimes committed by both sides in the conflict see Human Rights Watch (HRW) (1995). *Georgia/Abkhazia: Violations of the Laws of War and Russia’s Role in the Conflict*. New York. Available at <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1995/Georgia2.htm>.

The heroes – ordinary Georgian participants in the conflict – are presented using the image of veterans. Veterans are people whose authority can be used to support various versions of the history of the conflict. The narrative which presents the fall of Sukhumi and the loss of Abkhazia as a result of betrayal is interesting here. This narrative is encountered in some accounts given by direct participants in the events: *‘The war was sold out. They sold us, the soldiers, like sheep, they left us to rot.’* The analogy with sheep is used to emphasise the helplessness of the ordinary fighters. On the whole, the account of betrayal opens up an interesting perspective on the events of 1993 – there is open reference to traitors but it is not clearly specified who these were (the leaders of the country, the supporters of President Gamsakhurdia, or someone else).

The hero image is complemented by a morally negative image of the opposing side, the anti-heroes (Russia/the separatists). One item on the death of the leaders of the pro-Georgian government of Abkhazia – Zhiuli Shartava and other members of the government – reflects this view and is perhaps best demonstrated by the following quotation: *‘Shartava had the chance to escape but he refused. In revenge for his heroism the separatists shot him and other members of the government on the square in front of the Council of Ministers building.’*

## The Abkhaz are “more than brothers”

Attitudes towards the Abkhaz in the context of armed conflict are ambiguous. The media presents the Abkhaz not as a fully-fledged party to the conflict, but rather as a pawn in the conflict between Georgia and Russia, duped and exploited by Russia in order to harm Georgia. This attitude generates an image of the Abkhaz as Georgia’s friend. Restoring Georgian jurisdiction over Abkhazia is presented as a solution to the conflict favourable for both sides. A peaceful approach to conflict resolution is emphasised. However, no specific definition of how this might be achieved is provided.

### Survival of the Abkhaz nation through “inevitable return”

As the media frequently emphasise, the inevitable restoration of Georgian jurisdiction over Abkhazia will not only restore “historical justice”; it is also the only chance for saving and preserving the Abkhaz nation. In the version promulgated by the media, the Georgian perception of Abkhazia is identical across all social and political levels – Abkhazia is a territorial unit seen as an inalienable, lawful, historical part of an indivisible Georgia: *‘...Occupied Abkhazia is our historical land.’*

Rhetoric on Abkhazia smacks of benevolent patronage, with Abkhazia on the brink of annihilation: *‘...Every day there are violations of fundamental human rights, there are no security guarantees, there are no development processes.’*

Georgia wants to and is indeed obliged to “save” Abkhazia from the destruction of its culture and from total occupation. The main message behind the appeal addressed by Gia Baramia (Chairman of the Government of the Abkhaz Autonomous Republic in exile) to the Abkhaz is the fear that ‘eventually there will be no Abkhaz left in Abkhazia’. In his words, ‘the Abkhaz are currently facing redoubled oppression...’. The only chance for Abkhazia is therefore the restoration of Georgian jurisdiction; the only possible outcome is, then, the reunification of Abkhazia with Georgia.

Restoration of historical justice and irrevocable reunification are processes which are voluntary rather than coercive in nature. Some news items try to prove that Abkhaz youth (Abkhazia’s future) is aware of Russia’s policy of occupation and is looking to Georgia to save it: ‘They [Abkhaz youth] request asylum from the Georgian government and [request the] revelation of truth about the Russian regime of occupation.’ The return of Abkhazia is inevitable: no other scenarios are entertained. By presenting Georgia as Abkhazia’s saviour, the media emphasise the attractiveness of Georgia as a flourishing democratic and liberal state.

#### **Abkhaz government and Abkhaz society are different**

The Georgian media’s depiction of the Abkhaz differentiates between a number of social and political groups, depending on the context. It consists of separatist combatants and the illegitimate *de facto* government; and civilian Abkhaz society. Nevertheless, a logical pattern can be traced behind this understanding and portrayal of the Abkhaz. The Abkhaz combatants who were involved in military action in 1992-93 are described as separatists: informal armed units acting unlawfully and fighting in alliance with the official army of a foreign/other state. Their aggressive military action led to casualties not just among their Georgian enemies but also among the Abkhaz civilian population. As a result the citizens of Sukhumi (*Sukhumchane*)<sup>22</sup> suffered, regardless of their ethnic background.

The launch of military action is blamed firmly on the Abkhaz Guard: ‘The Abkhaz side rebelled against the National Guard of Georgia in Ochamchira and Gulripsh districts and in the city of Sukhumi, which led to the start of military action in Abkhazia.’ This creates an unambiguously negative image of Abkhaz combatants engaged in the armed conflict. However, this image is distinct from the general image of the Abkhaz, as these combatants harmed civilians on both sides, both Georgians and Abkhaz.

In parallel with this historical negative image of the Abkhaz combatant, the media have produced a new image of ex-combatants who regret what they have done and realise the importance of restoring Georgia’s jurisdiction over Abkhazia. Considerable airtime is devoted to a news item on a meeting between two veterans (a Georgian and an Abkhaz)

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22 A term covering both Georgian and Abkhaz residents of Sukhum/i.

who are now living on different sides of the de facto border: ‘Two sides of the same war: a meeting between Abkhaz and Georgian combatants who stood on opposite sides of the barricades 18 years ago...’ (states the trailer for the news item). The main message of this news item is the Abkhaz veteran’s revised view of the conflict: ‘I regret it, I did not realise then what I was doing, I very much regret that we made this mistake then.’

A clear distinction is made between the Abkhaz public on the one hand and the Abkhaz political leaders on the other. The Georgian government’s appeals through the media for peace, brotherhood and a shared bright future are not directed at the authorities, but the population of Abkhazia. The discrepancy between the policy of the Abkhaz authorities, which is clearly not aimed at reincorporating Abkhazia into Georgia, and the positive presentation of the Abkhaz people is explained in terms of the illegitimate nature of the current authorities. The current Abkhaz authorities are portrayed as mere “puppets” of the Russian occupying regime. They are manipulated by external forces and serve their interests rather than the interests of the Abkhaz people.

The message promoted by the media can therefore be interpreted as follows: the Abkhaz authorities do not represent the interests of Abkhaz society and are not part of it. Although Abkhaz combatants bear responsibility for starting the armed conflict and for acting against the interests of the Georgian government, today they regret this; if even this most radical section of the Abkhaz side is ready for peaceful co-existence with Georgians, the Abkhaz must be seen not as enemies but as friends.

### **Georgia – older brother; Abkhazia – younger brother**

Contemporary Abkhaz and Georgian societies are seen in the same context: they have a common history, a common tragedy, common interests, a common enemy and a common goal – to save Abkhazia (from Russian occupation).

There are also signs of an attempt to create a common civic identity through statements that the Abkhaz and Georgians share one land – not just Abkhazia but the rest of Georgia too. This Georgian-Abkhaz identity is subsumed in the epithet “*Sukhumchane*” (residents of Sukhumi). Emphasis on shared citizenship not only creates a common basis for unification but also localises the conflict and rules out any possible justification for intervention by external forces.

The policy of peaceful reunification resonates with the image of fraternal relations between the Abkhaz and Georgian nations, which is given significant coverage in a television broadcast entitled “Even More [than Brothers]”. This metaphor is used to present the two nations as linked by kinship and again emphasises the “domestic” nature of the conflict: ‘This day has provided us with a hard lesson in what opposition between brothers can lead to’ (stated by a representative of the Georgian opposition party).



Nevertheless, “fraternal relations” in combination with the “saviour” position creates the clichéd “older brother-younger brother” image, which reflects discriminatory discourse inherited from the Soviet era – a mirror image of the Soviet cliché of “Russia as the older brother to the other Socialist peoples”.<sup>23</sup> The forgiveness of mistakes, accepting responsibility for the fate of the younger brother, the start of a new life and spiritual kinship are all features of one news item devoted to ‘the baptism of Abkhaz adolescents by representatives of the legitimate government [the government in exile] of Abkhazia’. The news item shows members of the pro-Georgian government of Abkhazia [in exile] acting as godparents to Abkhaz adolescents.

This image of a prodigal “younger brother” who now needs help from its “older brother” (Georgia) absolves the Abkhaz side from much of the responsibility for the course of events, making it not a party to the conflict but merely a participant.

### Russia – the real enemy

The Georgian media studied cultivate an unambiguously negative attitude towards Russia, creating an enemy image in relation to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.

Russia is described solely in terms of “the occupier”, “Russian occupiers” and “Russian occupation”. “Occupation” is the official lexical form used to define Russia’s actions in relation to Georgia and is used at all levels, from politicians’ speeches to journalists’ narratives.<sup>24</sup> Since an occupier cannot logically be an indirect participant of conflict, Russia is then an actively involved party which Georgia is/has been forced to resist.

The Georgia/Russia dichotomy can have a number of meanings: conflict with “little Abkhazia” is replaced by the unequal struggle against “huge Russia”, an internal conflict redefined as an international conflict, in which the only logical outcome of the conflict was defeat. As this is a painful issue for the defeated side, the evasion of responsibility is a defence mechanism to justify the loss/defeat and to allow Georgia to maintain a positive image of itself (as a just and self-sufficient state). Shifting the blame onto Russia exonerates Abkhazia, expunging the “guilt” of Abkhaz society (the defence mechanism) and preparing the ground for later development of Georgian-Abkhaz relations.

The media provide many details on the history of the conflict to affirm Russia’s “guilt” in the fall of Sukhumi. Details such as the citing of specific military units increase levels of confidence in the information provided and serve as verification of Russia’s undisputed involvement in the conflict. For example: ‘On 27th September 1993 a decisive battle occurred involving ground forces and, even more importantly, the units of the 345th Air

23 To read further about the nationalism policy of Russia and the Soviet Union, see R. G. Suny (1993). *Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

24 In 2010 the Georgian parliament passed a law “On the Occupied Territories” intended to define the status of the territories occupied following military aggression by the Russian Federation. For more information, see <http://www.smr.gov.ge/docs/doc216.pdf>.

Assault Division deployed in Gudauta district,<sup>25</sup> which carried out an attack on disarmed Georgian positions, leading to the fall of Sukhumi.’ The alleged amoral and inhumane actions of Russian troops are backed up by direct accusations that they caused the deaths of Georgian citizens:<sup>26</sup> ‘For 13 months and 13 days the separatist units, together with the Russian army, fought to take Sukhumi. On 27th September thousands of Sukhumi residents were subjected to torture.’<sup>27</sup> There were over 5,000 civilian casualties from the bombing and concentrated fire.<sup>28</sup> This quotation makes it clear that Russia’s involvement is not restricted to the decisive battle for Sukhumi. Russia is seen as being actively involved throughout the military engagement and the reference to “the Russian army” emphasises its political and official status.

The media also present items claiming that the rights of Georgian citizens are violated by Russian border guards during their everyday activities. For example, news programmes actively report instances in which civilian residents in Gali district (ethnic Georgians) are detained: ‘Despite the bilateral talks, our people are once again being taken hostage in Gali. We have discovered that a bus was stopped in the village of Ganakhleba in Gali district and Georgian residents, children and older people taken hostage by the Russian occupiers.’ The situation is thus portrayed as the continuation of the long-standing conflict.

The media’s citing of atrocities and violations of international legal standards by Russia corresponds with the official position of the Georgian government, which classifies Russia’s actions as ethnic cleansing.

The media frequently claim that the Georgian government has evidence of ethnic cleansing: ‘On the occasion of the 18th anniversary of the fall of the city of Sukhumi the Temporary Commission on the Restoration of Georgia’s Territorial Integrity will re-examine the question of the Russian occupation. The members of the Commission will continue to work on documents regarding ethnic cleansing in Tskhinvali and Abkhazia’. Referring to the Tskhinvali conflict and ethnic cleansing in one breath helps to conflate the two conflicts and stress that Russia is pursuing a consistent policy of aggression in relation to Georgia as a whole: its aggression is not restricted solely to one region of Georgia (Abkhazia) but, as the 2008 Georgia-Russia war shows, it can flare up at any time.

Representatives of official Georgian agencies speaking on news programmes (such as Shota Malashkhia, Chair of the Temporary Committee on the Restoration of Georgia’s Territorial Integrity) dismiss Russia’s policy as “fascism” and the legacy of its communist past.

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25 This refers to Russian combat units.

26 According to Human Rights Watch, the Russian side is responsible for mass violations of human rights, as well as the Georgian and Abkhaz sides (HRW (1995). *Op. Cit.*).

27 The Human Rights Watch 1995 report confirmed instances of torture of civilians (*Ibid.*).

28 Those who perished are not distinguished by ethnic background – they are designated generally as *Sukhumchane* (Sukhumi residents). According to data from the Abkhaz government in exile, 4,994 civilian residents died and 423 residents went missing. Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia (2010). ‘Dead and Missing Data’. Available in Georgian at <http://scara.gov.ge/ka/2010-03-17-12-49-14/2010-03-17-13-54-43/81-2010-07-29-10-58-11.html>.

According to the Georgian media, a negative image of Russia is slowly building up in Abkhazia, with its role being transformed from that of an ally to that of a conqueror; there is a growing feeling of oppression which will favour re-unification of Georgian and Abkhaz society.

Citing Murman Chkhotua, the Public Defender (Ombudsman) of the Abkhaz government in exile, one news item states: ‘The Abkhaz opposition parties are secretly gathering signatures for the withdrawal of Russian troops from Abkhaz territory; the Abkhaz have already realised that Russia only wants Abkhaz territory.’ In Chkhotua’s words, Russia has conquered Abkhazia and its behaviour on this territory is not subject to any control’.

In terms of the rhetoric of Georgian television broadcasts, the media do appear to be trying to cultivate expectations that a more optimistic scenario will develop in relation to the Abkhaz side (which is ‘changing its mind, coming to its senses’); with regard to Russia it makes no such forecasts and the outlook on relations between Georgia and Russia remains unwaveringly bleak.

## The conflict in Abkhazia as a social trauma – the media’s perspective

Our examination of television programmes allowed us to not only track official state rhetoric on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, but also to identify the stage Georgian society has reached in dealing with the problem and its needs during the period studied. Following its defeat and territorial losses, Georgian society is suffering the effects of severe societal trauma,<sup>29</sup> the results of which are manifested in the attitudes and behaviour of the entire society. One feature of unresolved societal trauma (in this case a frozen conflict) is the tendency to become stuck at the grieving stage, preventing transition to the next stage of dealing with the trauma. Some of the most frequently used words in news items are ‘we grieve for...’, ‘we mourn’, etc., the aim of which is to show that pain remains despite the passing of 18 years (‘Abkhazia is our pain’). Year in, year out, television channels repeat almost identical news items showing shootings and the harrowing escape through the Kodori pass, preventing people from forgetting past events and “reviving” the trauma of defeat.<sup>30</sup> The marking of 27th September, the “Day of the Fall of Sukhumi”, with its already established rituals (visits to the memorial to the fallen and mothers in mourning), also serves to memorialise this traumatic experience.

A further feature of societal trauma is the transmission of the traumatic experience from generation to generation; the news items also show evidence of this. One of the most

29 V. D. Volkan (2007). *After Wars: Psychoanalytic Observations On Societal Traumas*. Melbourne. Available at [http://www.freudconference.com/online\\_papers/After\\_Wars.pdf](http://www.freudconference.com/online_papers/After_Wars.pdf).

30 Interestingly, the main slogan on the billboards was “Remember Abkhazia!”

common news subjects on television is of young people, emphasising that they are the successors to the “adult generation”, acknowledging their responsibility for the course of the conflict and their duty to resolve it. The declared approach for conflict resolution is peaceful, which holds out hope that these young people, who will be responsible for future decisions, will develop corresponding policies. However, the new generation continues to be influenced by trans-generational trauma and is likely to remain biased in its judgements.

In the context of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, a traumatised society, in this case Georgia, identifies Russia as the main culprit. In accordance with the theory of societal trauma, the opponent is de-humanised:<sup>31</sup> Russia is presented using the classic enemy image. The worsening of Georgian-Russian relations has also revived historical trauma associated with the annexation of the Georgian kingdom by the Russian empire in the 18th century. The phenomenon of “chosen trauma”<sup>32</sup> helps to extend historical negativism to new events, whereby Russia’s actions can be explained by “Russia’s inherent imperialist ambitions”. Such a perception of Russia rules out any possibility of negotiations and leads to stalemate, whilst at the same time, it creates a platform for rapprochement with the Abkhaz, based on the assumption that, although Abkhazia may not yet be aware, it will soon realise the true intentions of “Russia the occupier” and unite with Georgia to fight against Russia for self-preservation.

Russia’s looming presence as a “mighty” enemy helps to remove any guilt attached to the “small Abkhaz nation” and now, 20 years after the traumatising events of the war, allows Abkhazia to be perceived through the ties of kinship. Its small size is also reflected in the view of Abkhazia as a “younger brother” led astray (by Russia); it is portrayed not as a fully-fledged party to the conflict, but merely as a bystander in the real conflict between Russia and Georgia.

This study proposes that Georgian society continues to focus on the reliving of traumatic experiences, which prevents it from developing specific courses of action (for example, news items regularly take the view that “we must resolve the conflict” without providing any specific details). Possibly, news items which revive traumatic memories help to keep this issue relevant.

Although the articulation of an unambiguously peaceful approach is important, future developments will depend on how quickly society can make the transition to the next level of responding to trauma.

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31 V. D. Volkan (2007). *Op. Cit.*

32 A “chosen trauma” refers to ‘the shared mental representation of the historical traumatic event...[which] becomes a significant marker for the large-group identity’ (V. D. Volkan (2004). *Chosen Trauma. The Political Ideology Of Entitlement And Violence*. Berlin. Available at <http://www.vamikvolkan.com/Chosen-Trauma,-the-Political-Ideology-of-Entitlement-and-Violence.php>).

## Conclusion

The Georgian (pro-government) media analysed underline the unanimity of Georgian society in its support for the restoration of Georgian jurisdiction over Abkhazia, which they see as the only possible option.

The basis for returning Abkhazia is provided in terms of civic nationalism, the official ideology of the Georgian government since the “Rose Revolution” in 2004: the emphasis is on the same civic values for both Georgian and Abkhaz societies.

The Abkhaz side is viewed in terms of a friend, more precisely a younger brother, hoodwinked (by Russia) and not a fully-fledged, equal party to the conflict; instead it is shown as a bystander drawn into the real conflict between Russia and Georgia. This attitude removes responsibility from Abkhaz society both for past events and also for further conflict resolution. Responsibility is instead shifted to Russia, the “aggressor” and “occupier” which is portrayed as waging a struggle against Georgia. Russia is assigned the role of a common enemy to both the Georgians and Abkhaz.

The reference to a strong enemy allows the Georgian government (during the period of this study) to evade responsibility for resolving the conflict. The discourse presented is in line with the objectives of the Georgian authorities of that period: to create an image of political leaders as the guardians of the country’s “national interests”, primarily its territorial integrity.

In general, the pro-governmental media transmitted a desire for a peaceful settlement of the conflict, yet without proposing any specific way to achieve this. Our analysis suggests that the position is in fact one of stalemate, since, in the situation put forward by Georgian media, dialogue is impossible between both parties to the conflict: Russia is the aggressor and so cannot be negotiated with and Abkhazia lacks the authority for decision making. Assigning the image of a younger brother to the Abkhaz side could be considered a discriminatory discourse inherited from its Soviet past, incompatible with the concept of civic nationalism. Therefore, Georgia’s approach to transforming the conflict through civic nationalism is inconsistent.

## CHAPTER 5

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“Working the Enemy’s Mill” – Putting  
the Brake on Internal Development in  
Nagorny Karabakh:  
A Media Study of the Image of the “Enemy”

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Gegham Baghdasaryan

*‘Without radical changes in public opinion, any peacebuilding process actively initiated by third parties is bound, sooner or later, to falter and go the way of the Palestinian peace process...The key to real peace for Armenians is the opinion of the Azerbaijani public, not its ruling elite; conversely, the key for Azerbaijanis is Armenian public opinion ... Success of the peace talks can only be achieved through the moral and spiritual healing of these societies.’*

– Murad Petrosyan, Editor-in-chief of the Nagorny Karabakh newspaper *Chto delat*

## Introduction

Accusations of “bringing grist to the enemy’s mill” are fairly common in Nagorny Karabakh. This notion has become a rallying cry to unite public opinion. In reality, however, rather than rally the people, it puts a serious brake on internal development and precludes competition and diversity. The fact that such accusations persist is a result of the ongoing heightened levels of insecurity felt by the residents of Nagorny Karabakh.

Such levels of insecurity render the populace prone to pathological scare-mongering about the perils of “democratic transformation”. One symptom of this is the philosophical debate between two newspapers in Nagorny Karabakh – one a state newspaper and the other an opposition paper. One issue of the state newspaper ran the following front page headline: ‘If they tell me that democracy is on one side of the scales and the country’s security on the other, I would choose the latter. And no one has the right to criticise me for that!’ In response, the opposition paper reprinted the headline, but juxtaposed it with Benjamin Franklin’s famous dictum: ‘Those who would exchange their liberty for security deserve neither liberty nor security.’ The differing positions thus highlight the two views, philosophies and psychologies that persist in Nagorny Karabakh.

But this dilemma is not restricted to Nagorny Karabakh. Speaking at the 20th anniversary of Armenian independence, Hrant Margaryan, one of the leaders of the Armenian political party “Dashnaktsutyun”, summed up what had been achieved in that time:

‘Weigh up what you think the positives and negatives are. One positive achievement is the restoration of our independent statehood. Add the liberation of Artsakh and the Armenian army on the same side. On the other side, put whatever you like – the democratic deficit, social problems, inequities in social relations, economic restrictions, arbitrary rule by the government, anything you like. Now try to balance them.’<sup>1</sup>

Essentially, Margaryan is saying that achievements in domestic policy are relinquished

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1 See article in Armenian at <http://www.lragir.am/armsrc/country-lrahos53738.html>.

for the sake of (apparent) achievements in foreign policy, while achievements at the national level are indeed contrary to the interests of civil society.

This dilemma is bolstered by militaristic statements emanating from Azerbaijan. The authorities in Nagorny Karabakh in turn exploit the “democracy versus security” situation and the Azerbaijani administration’s military rhetoric to bolster the authoritarian regime and block any fundamental democratic transformation.

The Armenian (and other) media claim that Baku is not only issuing militaristic statements, but is sowing hatred of Armenia and Nagorny Karabakh and of anything remotely connected with the Armenians and their affairs. This is being taken to absurd extremes. For example, at the 2011 World Boxing Championships held in Baku, Misha Aloyan, world champion member of the Russian team, said he was forced to leave the arena under guard because infuriated Azerbaijani fans were waiting for him at the exit.<sup>2</sup> The situation descends into farce when one realises that the target of their hatred did not even represent Armenia: although Misha was born in Armenia, he is in fact an ethnic Yezidi Kurd.

Naturally, such propaganda creates fertile ground for the “democracy or security” dilemma to take hold in Nagorny Karabakh and Armenia. The propagation of “enemy images” by Azerbaijan is the theme of a separate study within this volume. It is only through collaborative studies that we can answer questions such as whether the Azerbaijanis’ alleged hatred of everything Armenian is really equal to that portrayed in the Armenian as well as Azerbaijani and Russian media. This paper analyses the situation in the media of Nagorny Karabakh without attempting to determine whether, or to what extent, this is merely a response to the situation in Azerbaijan.

One thing seems to be beyond dispute: if the propaganda war continues, there will be no progress on resolving the conflict, since the propaganda war itself is to some extent the reason for the “democracy or security” dilemma. Indeed, the current situation is really a propaganda war being waged by the conflicting sides. This is why any serious attempt to resolve the Nagorny Karabakh conflict must start with the cessation of the propaganda war, as it not only undermines confidence in the peace talks but also creates problems for Nagorny Karabakh internally.

## Methodology

This study consists of analysis of a number of media reports from Nagorny Karabakh, Armenia, Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation. A desk review was also conducted of the author’s personal archives and publications as well as articles by colleagues. The

2 “World Boxing Champion Misha Aloyan: “I left the Baku palace under guard!””, *Regnum*, 10th October 2010. Available in Russian at [www.regnum.ru/news/fd-abroad/armenia/1454325.html](http://www.regnum.ru/news/fd-abroad/armenia/1454325.html).



author studied relevant academic articles, particularly those relating to nationalism and its various forms.

Due to the lack of specialist research aimed at identifying the clichés and stereotypes used in the Nagorny Karabakh media, the author has drawn on studies conducted in Armenia and Azerbaijan to categorise the stereotypes and clichés that are used in the Armenian media to characterise Azerbaijan as a country and state. The term “cliché” is understood here as fixed words or phrases with a negative subtext or content; “stereotypes” are defined as concepts, characteristics, etc. that are frequently repeated but in different words, with the same negative subtext or content.

The materials studied were divided into three sub-topics: the “enemy image” in domestic political life, in foreign policy, and as an obstacle to peacebuilding.

Materials from Nagorny Karabakh’s “new media” were also used. Internet news resources are scarce in Nagorny Karabakh and so most materials came from just three websites: *Artsakh News*, *Artsakh Today* and *Karabakh News*. Since politics in Nagorny Karabakh are reported in detail and on a daily basis by the Regnum news agency in Russia, this resource was also used ([www.Regnum.ru](http://www.Regnum.ru)). Items were collected during the study that identified and refined the enemy image.

## Findings of the study

### Symbiosis of enemy images

The principal enemy image as portrayed in Nagorny Karabakh is a peculiar symbiosis of Turk and Azerbaijani – a kind of “two-headed monster”. However, there is also a linguistic reason for this synthesis. Although the literary Armenian language does contain the ethnonym “Turk”, in the Nagorny Karabakh-Armenian dialect “Turk” is substituted by the composite ethnonym “Tork”, which refers to this symbiosis of “Turk” and “Azerbaijani”. As the editor of a Nagorny Karabakh publication, I have on several occasions been required to check with the author of an article who precisely he had in mind when he used this word, as it was far from clear whether he was referring to the Azerbaijanis or the Turks.

An article entitled ‘Azerbaijanis are the same old Turks...’ in the electronic edition of *Artsakh Today* gives a flavour of this “linguistic peculiarity” as well as attitudes to the Azerbaijanis.

“Our experience tells us that they [Azerbaijanis] are a variety of the Turks, who only recognise force...”, states the military psychologist David Dzhamalyan. However, Dzhamalyan is simply confirming what the inhabitants of Artsakh have always said. It is no accident that there is no such term as “Azerbaijani” in the Artsakh dialect, but only the word “Tork”, which derives from the word “Turk”. So today’s Azerbaijanis were popularly identified with the Turks and no distinction was made between them. As for Dzhamalyan’s statement that today’s Azerbaijanis only recognise force, this is a simple “truth” that children in Artsakh imbibe along with their mother’s milk. Decades of “co-habitation” in fraternal Azerbaijan had little impact on people’s psychology. To this day, when people want children to quieten down in Artsakh, they scare them by saying “the Tork will get you”. This phrase has always worked without fail on Artsakh infants.’

Then again, it is generally thought that there is some justification for this linguistic peculiarity, since the ethnonyms “Turk”, “Azerbaijani Turk” and “Caucasian Tatars” were used in the Soviet Union to refer to the modern Azerbaijanis up to 1936. An interesting piece of historical information from Armenian sources asserts that, in 1936, Stalin decreed that the Turkish language of Azerbaijan be renamed “Azerbaijani” and that the Turks of Azerbaijan be renamed “Azerbaijanis”.<sup>3</sup>

In this context, the Armenian media often refers to the results of the 1921 agricultural census of Azerbaijan. According to this census, 94.4% of the population living on the territories which were later (1923) incorporated into the newly formed Autonomous Oblast of Nagorny Karabakh (AONK) were Armenian and only 5.6% Azerbaijani “Tyurks” and other nationalities.<sup>4</sup>

However, this symbiosis of enemy images is not confined to Nagorny Karabakh. Recently, a group of young academics conducted an interesting study – entitled ‘National discourse in Armenia’ – with the support of the Heinrich Böll Foundation in the South Caucasus. The study found that Turkey and Azerbaijan are both demonised in Armenian public opinion and portrayed as hostile. In the Armenian media, the image of Turkey is closely associated with the image of Azerbaijan, with Azerbaijan almost always being mentioned in the context of a potential threat. There is no image of Azerbaijan as an autonomous, integral entity or notion of it as such in Armenian news publications. The researchers’ view was that a narrative of denial in relation to Azerbaijan was widespread in Armenian nationalist discourse. As the study indicates:

3 See F. Alekperli, ‘K istoriya etnonima TYURK v Azerbaidzhane’ [Towards a history of the ethnonym TYURK in Azerbaijan], available in Russian at <http://www.proza.ru/2011/01/17/351>.

4 Cited from the Azerbaijan agricultural census, published by the Central Statistical Office, Baku, 1924.

'The presence of Azerbaijan itself is acknowledged, but it is presented as a bankrupt state. When speaking of this, many authors draw attention to the undemocratic nature of the ruling regime in Azerbaijan, to the fact that power has been handed over in dynastic fashion from Heydar Aliyev to his son Ilham and also to the fact that the Azerbaijan economy is ineffective and almost entirely reliant on commodity exports. Azerbaijan is commonly referred to in the Armenian media as an oil monarchy, a sultanate or a feudal state.'<sup>5</sup>

An analysis of news items suggests that the threat of slaughter or ethnic cleansing by Azerbaijan and Turkey remains a common topic. Even officials expressed the view that 'if Nagorny Karabakh comes under Azerbaijani control, not a single Armenian will be left'.<sup>6</sup> However, in the researchers' view, 'whereas fear and deep-rooted phobia apply in the case of Turkey, in Azerbaijan's case it is seen as a much smaller potential threat'.<sup>7</sup> They believe that the main reason why challenges from the official administration in Baku are viewed as less dangerous is that 'in nationalist circles, there is an expectation that Azerbaijan would face a crushing defeat if a new war were to break out'.<sup>8</sup>

The Turkish side itself fuels this symbiosis by identifying itself with the Azerbaijan side, using slogans such as: 'Azerbaijan's pain is our pain', 'Turkey will fight side by side with Azerbaijan for Nagorny Karabakh', 'we are one nation, two states' and so on.<sup>9</sup> Turkey is generally thought to have the same attitude towards the Armenians, although this cannot be stated categorically, if only because a public debate has been launched in recent years in Turkey on the role of the Armenians; this debate occasionally includes some pro-Armenian statements, something that would be unheard of in Azerbaijan today. It is also worth mentioning that the slogan 'we are one nation, two states' is used for political purposes by the administration in Azerbaijan and Turkey, rather than reflecting public perception.

Quite absurd stories can also be encountered in Turkey. Consider, for example, this news item published on the Regnum news agency's website:

'In Turkey, three citizens were charged with "Armenian propaganda" for wearing "Emporio Armani" clothes. This amusing but depressing incident was covered by the Turkish newspaper *Taraf* under the headline "Armani is Armenian". The author of the article, the journalist Roni Margulis, does not specify names or dates but assures readers that the story has not been made up.

5 'Natsionalisticheskii diskurs v Armenii: Obrazy Turtsii i Azerbaidzhana odinakovo vrazhdebni i demonizirovani' [The national discourse in Armenia: The image of Turkey and Azerbaijan are equally hostile and demonised], *Regnum*, 7th June 2011. Available in Russian at <http://www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1413303.html>.

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*

9 'Erdogan: Turtsiya plechom k plechu s Azerbaydhanom budet borot'sya za Karabakh' [Erdogan: Turkey stands shoulder to shoulder with Azerbaijan in the struggle for Karabakh], *News.am*, 25th October 2011. Available in Russian at <http://news.am/rus/news/79300.html>.

“It never entered my head that I was spreading propaganda by doing this. I respect my country, I am not guilty”, one of the suspects stated in court. “I had no ulterior motive or any intentions at all. On the other hand, Emporio Armani is a well-known Italian brand. I reject the charges levelled against me”, the second accused said. The third said: “Yes, I acknowledge that the shirt belongs to me. But I have not done anything wrong.”<sup>10</sup>

However, not everything is as clear-cut in Azerbaijani-Turkish relations, as revealed by WikiLeaks and reported in *First Armenian News and Analyses*:

“We never thought Turkey would sell us off so cheaply”, said Ilham Aliyev, the President of Azerbaijan, in the presence of the US ambassador. A crisis in Azerbaijani-Turkish relations prompted a “highly disturbing” phone call from the Turkish ambassador in Baku, Hulusi Kilich, to his US colleague Anne Derse on Sunday 5th April 2009. The Turkish ambassador asked the US to convince the administration in Baku that Armenia would continue talks on a Nagorny Karabakh settlement after the opening of the Armenian-Turkish border.<sup>11</sup>

## Conditioning young people’s attitudes towards the “enemy”

An unpublished study carried out in 2005 by the “Young Political Scientists Club” of Nagorny Karabakh clearly shows the attitude of Nagorny Karabakh’s younger generation to the Azerbaijanis. While conducted several years ago, it is still relevant in the absence of alternative data, because youth are rarely included in such studies. The study showed that young people in Nagorny Karabakh at the time had virtually no personal Azerbaijani acquaintances. They had never met or seen any Azerbaijanis and knew them only from their parents’ stories – anecdotes of military battles and enmity. As a result, they were wary of Azerbaijanis, whom they perceived as a threat. Against this background, young people are susceptible to propaganda that aims to develop and inflate enemy images.

The study by the Young Political Scientists Club was essentially a series of mini-questionnaires on the topic of the Nagorny Karabakh conflict. These were aimed at identifying how ready young people in Nagorny Karabakh are for contact, integration and peaceful co-existence with the Azerbaijani side. The study sought to examine the extent to which the young people perceive Azerbaijanis as the enemy and what their

10 ‘Armyane vedut propagandu v Turtsii pri pomoshchi “Emporio Armani” – SMI’ [Armenian propaganda in Turkey employs ‘Emporio Armani’], *Regnum*, 17th October 2011. Available in Russian at [www.regnum.ru/news/fd-abroad/armenia/1456436.html](http://www.regnum.ru/news/fd-abroad/armenia/1456436.html).

11 ‘WikiLeaks: “My nikogda ne dumali, chto Turtsiya nas tak deshevo prodast”’ [Wikileaks: ‘We never thought Turkey would sell us off so cheaply’], *First Armenian News and Analyses*, 15th September 2011. Available in Russian at [http://www.1in.am/rus/scaucasus\\_sazerbaijan\\_9560.html](http://www.1in.am/rus/scaucasus_sazerbaijan_9560.html).

vision is for a future integrated region. Focus groups were conducted with a total of 80 respondents aged 16 to 30 years. The vast majority of respondents (over 80 percent) had never travelled outside of Nagorny Karabakh and had never met Azerbaijanis. However, it also emerged during the interviews that some have internet contact with Azerbaijanis in the cities where there is an internet connection.

The results of the study also show that older schoolchildren, who had never met any Azerbaijanis and had only seen the after-effects of the war but not the war itself, view the peaceful co-existence of the two peoples in terms of good neighbourly relations, but not within the same state. One respondent commented: ‘Adults told us that relations with the Armenians were poor back then, I think if we go back to living together they will be just as poor.’ Slightly older respondents tended to be much more mistrustful.

## Clichés and stereotypes

No specialised studies have been conducted to identify clichés and stereotypes in the media of Nagorny Karabakh. However, the media tends to use stock terminology and there is a tradition of reprinting items covering the whole of Armenia; moreover, the overall atmosphere in the Armenian and Nagorny Karabakh media is identical. Against this background, the results of a joint study conducted from 1st to 30th June 2010 by the Union of Journalists (*Yeni Nesil*) in Azerbaijan and the Yerevan Press Club in Armenia is likely to be useful. The study was conducted as part of the Eurasia Partnership Foundation project “Armenia-Azerbaijan eMedia Bias Baseline Assessment”, supported by the UK Foreign Office.<sup>12</sup> A selection of results from the study is given below, shedding light on the stereotypes and clichés used in the Armenian media when referring to the Azerbaijani side. The results include analysis of the Armenian media by Azerbaijani researchers. A corresponding study was also conducted into the Azerbaijani media’s attitudes to the Armenian side.

As outlined, this study defines “clichés” as recurrent, fixed words or phrases with a negative subtext or content; “stereotypes” are defined as concepts and characteristics that are frequently repeated but in different words, with the same negative subtext or content.

## Clichés

Current clichés in the Armenian media include references to Azerbaijan is an ‘aggressor country’ or claims that it is conducting an ‘aggressive, outrageous, boorish policy’ (also

12 “Cross Monitoring”: Inaccurate Information, Clichés and Stereotypes in Online Media of Azerbaijan and Armenia’, summary of research by the Yerevan Press Club in Armenia and the “Yeni Nesil” Journalists’ Union of Azerbaijan, administered on 1st–30th June 2010 under the Eurasia Partnership Foundation project, “Armenia-Azerbaijan eMedia Bias Baseline Assessment”. Available in Russian at [http://www.ypc.am/upload/ArmAzInternet\\_2010\\_rus.pdf](http://www.ypc.am/upload/ArmAzInternet_2010_rus.pdf).

referring here to the propaganda war). The Azerbaijanis themselves are characterised as ‘cavemen capable of all kinds of beastliness and vandalism’. References to “genocide” in relation to Armenians are also used in this context – in Azerbaijan, Baku, Ganja, Sumgait, Marag (an Armenian village in the Mardakert district of Nagorny Karabakh) and Nagorny Karabakh, etc.

## Stereotypes

Current stereotypes in the Armenian media include claims that ‘Armenia supports the peaceful resolution of the conflict, but Azerbaijan wants to resolve it militarily’ and that ‘the Azerbaijanis are unilaterally violating the truce and breaching international standards’. Particularly interesting is the conviction that ‘Azerbaijan’s continuation of its destructive policy will only speed up international recognition of the Nagorny Karabakh Republic’. Stereotypes presented as a logical response and counter to this include statements that: ‘the Armenian side must not make any concessions to Azerbaijan; any concessions will only feed its appetite, and anyway the Azerbaijani army is currently demoralised, incapable of fighting and weak; but the Armenian army is much stronger and braver than the Azerbaijani, so even re-opening military action would inevitably end in victory.’

The profile that is built up in the Armenian press of Azerbaijan covers not just the country, the state and its institutions, but also individual representatives of the nation and state. The study concludes that this profile suggests that “Armenophobia” is now an official state policy in Azerbaijan: ‘national minorities in Azerbaijan are persecuted and subjected to religious oppression, ethnic cleansing and assimilation’;<sup>13</sup> ‘there is no tolerance even within the Muslim faith; the Azerbaijanis are anti-Semitic.’<sup>14</sup> This explains why the leaders of Azerbaijan, who are concerned not about the fate of their country, but only about how to bolster their own clan’s position, are incapable of showing any concern for the Armenians of Nagorny Karabakh.

Azerbaijan is also characterised in a regional context. The country is portrayed as playing a ‘destabilising role in the South Caucasus and is a threat to the region’.<sup>15</sup> Another claim is that ‘Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijanis ... are encroaching on others’ cultural values’.<sup>16</sup>

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13 *Ibid.*, p.19.

14 *Ibid.*, p.19.

15 ‘Glossariy yazyka vrazhdy: ispol’zovaniye stereotipov v SMI Azerbaydzhana i Armenii’ [Glossary of hate speech: the use of stereotypes in the media of Azerbaijan and Armenia], p. 32. Available in Russian at [http://mediafairplay.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/stereotypes\\_finalsep2012.pdf](http://mediafairplay.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/stereotypes_finalsep2012.pdf).

16 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

## How the conflict is presented in the Nagorny Karabakh media

### News services in Nagorny Karabakh

News services in Nagorny Karabakh are at an early stage of their development. There is some diversity in the print media: alongside the state newspapers, there are also party political print publications (some parties have their own print agencies), along with one private newspaper (the Armenian-language *Nor edzh*), one self-published newspaper (the Russian-language *Chto delat*) and an independent monthly periodical *Analitikon* (published with the support of Conciliation Resources as part of the European Partnership for the Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorny Karabakh). However, there is no such diversity in the electronic media. The only television station is the Artsakh Public Television and Radio Company, the former state television channel. There are very few internet news resources in Karabakh, although there is some progress in this area. The republican newspaper *Azat Artsakh* is not only the main official mouthpiece, but also the only respectable newspaper with regular circulation. Since 2007, there has been no political opposition in Nagorny Karabakh, so there are no opposition media.

Items related to the “Azerbaijani theme” do appear in the Nagorny Karabakh media, but only occasionally. These news items are mainly ironic or sarcastic in tone, a genre which tended to figure more during the propaganda war at the beginning of the conflict’s escalation in the 1990s. One example is the article by David Dzhamalyan (quoted from [voskanapat.info](http://voskanapat.info)), entitled ‘Azerbaijani academic: Azerbaijanis descended from Cyclops’, which appeared on 13th March 2011 in an issue of the e-newspaper *Karabakh News*.

‘It turns out that the descendants of the one-eyed Cyclops ended up as our neighbours. No, this is not an insult. If I wanted to insult them, I would have written descendants of the brainless Cyclops. The first statement, by the way, is not mine either, but the conclusion arrived at following scrupulous research into the history of the Turkish tribes back in the 1940s by the Azerbaijan academic M. Rafili.’<sup>17</sup>

This was followed by a quotation from a leaflet by the well-known Armenian-Iranian scholars, Garnik Asatryan and Nikolay Gevorkian, entitled ‘Azerbaijan: the principle of attribution and the Iranian world’. This work was published as far back as 1990. The author of the aforementioned article, Dzhamalyan, goes on to reveal the conclusion of an Azerbaijani academic:

17 D. Dzhamalyan. ‘Potomki tsiklopov: Azerbaydzhantsy proiskhodyat ot tsiklopov’ [Descendants of the Cyclops: Azerbaijanis come from the Cyclops], *Voskanapat.info*, 13th March 2011. Available in Russian at [http://voskanapat.do.am/news/potomki\\_ciklopov/2011-03-13-1191](http://voskanapat.do.am/news/potomki_ciklopov/2011-03-13-1191).

‘So, in the opinion of the distinguished Azerbaijani academic M. Rafili, Azerbaijanis are descended from the Cyclops. He shared this discovery with readers in his article “The pre-Nizami culture of the Azerbaijani people”, published in 1947 in Baku in the collection *Nizami Gyandzhavi* (pages 26–45). Intriguingly, the Azerbaijani academic arrives at his undoubtedly sage and considered conclusion by drawing on ... Homer’s world famous work *The Odyssey*. We can only marvel that no one had noticed this before Rafili.’<sup>18</sup>

The article continues in the same vein. This item is interesting because no pieces of this type had appeared for a long time in the Nagorny Karabakh media. In the early years of the Nagorny Karabakh movement, the media had “entertained” itself with such pieces, when ironic and sarcastic responses to anti-Armenian articles in the Azerbaijani press were popular. However, we cannot say definitively that there has been a “renaissance” of this genre.

## The authorities and society

The Nagorny Karabakh authorities generally tend to avoid making harsh statements or criticisms of Azerbaijan. Instead, they restrict themselves to stating that without the participation of the Nagorny Karabakh side, the talks process cannot be effective and that Azerbaijan must resign itself to this reality – i.e. that Nagorny Karabakh will never give up its *de facto* independence and will never again be incorporated into Azerbaijan. This tone is also present in other statements on a wide range of international issues and pan-Armenian topics. The only exception might be the recent response of Nagorny Karabakh’s President Bako Saakyan to a journalist’s question on the prospect of Armenian-Turkish protocols [formal diplomatic relations]. The head of state expressed scepticism about the prospects of Armenian-Turkish dialogue, insinuating that this would necessitate Armenia having to deal with a dishonest partner that was little short of a fraudster.

The fact that the government generally makes every effort to appear constructive and civilised in the international arena could theoretically be used by international actors as a way to exert influence on the government.

The prevailing public mood in Nagorny Karabakh is quite another matter. Although statements are made that Nagorny Karabakh is prepared to take a seat at the negotiating table with Azerbaijan, an atmosphere of mistrust is being inculcated in relation to the people and organisations that collaborate with Azerbaijani colleagues on various international projects. They are secretly referred to as spies and foreign agents. One of the apologists of this attitude, a Minister of Culture, was heavily engaged a few years



back in an alleged “witch hunt”, which led one journalist from the newspaper *Demo* (still in print at that time) to call him ‘the Minister of Security Culture’.

The authorities in Nagorny Karabakh criticise journalists whom they see as being excessively soft or pacifist, in contrast to Azerbaijani journalists who are deemed aggressive and militaristic. As Aleksandr Grigoryan, former head of the information department in the presidential administration, wrote in his sensational article: ‘if you want to fight, then you should fight...’

This ambivalent attitude, both constructive and sceptical, has created a public discourse that now appears more radical than that of the authorities, with aggressive messages being circulated for internal consumption in sharp contrast to the less aggressive ones directed at the outside world. This is the reason why the “targets” respond in different ways.

Another reason why the administration is less radical than the public is that the official elite has full confidence in the Armenian administration, which represents the interests of Nagorny Karabakh in the peace talks along with its own. The Armenian administration has signed up to the “Madrid Principles”, which state that the conflict can be resolved through compromise. Such compromise would in this case involve Nagorny Karabakh renouncing its “liberated territories” or the “security cordon”, as these territories are often called. Therefore, the Nagorny Karabakh administration is on the one hand trying to avoid harsh patriotic statements out of fear of criticism from the Armenian administration; at the same time, however, it is secretly encouraging pessimism over the peace process and any reconciliation with Azerbaijan.

The image of an “internal enemy” has also been perpetuated over time, and it is here in particular that the “democracy or security” dilemma has taken root. The internal enemy is in essence anyone who disagrees with the authorities and criticises its actions.

However, this image is inconsistent, as the administration occasionally counts as its friends people who hold unpatriotic principles and world views, and vice versa. Sometimes, their opponents are those who favour the strengthening of the “second Armenian state”. Friends and enemies are identified based on loyalty to the authorities. For example, those whom the authorities call their friends include people from more pacifist circles but who approve the actions of those in power. In a word, the interests of the authorities take priority. Since personalities rather than institutions dominate, personal loyalties are paramount rather than an individual’s commitment to the interests of the state or nation. This naturally leads to stagnation, since its main effect is to prevent independent thinking.

In the war years, internal enemies were called “deserters”. In the post-war period, they are called “spies” or “foreign agents”. Recently, people have also begun to write of “the immigrant element”. This refers to people who have come to live in Nagorny Karabakh quite recently and who are dissatisfied with the authorities. Contented “immigrants”, on the other hand, are welcomed, indeed enjoying a number of written and unwritten benefits in accordance with propaganda about the “Armenian triad” – i.e. Nagorny Karabakh, Armenia and the Armenian diaspora.

Speculation of this kind arose in November 2011 in response to an article by Aik Khanumyan. An article entitled ‘What is Aik Khanumyan writing for?’ was written in one e-newspaper in response to Khanumyan’s article. The latter article, entitled ‘Bako Saakyan has created a police state in NKR’, was published in various Armenian media outlets and reprinted by *Vesti.az*.<sup>19</sup> However, it proved too much for the Nagorny Karabakh authorities. The response to the article argued that:

‘A cocksure attitude and extremism are the main methods employed by those attempting to engage in “non-governmental activism” in Artsakh... The title itself is openly libellous and provocative. We can see how far removed from reality these accusations are simply from the fact that Aik Khanumyan is here in Artsakh, and his constant attempts to denigrate everything that is currently taking place in Artsakh with impunity ... his accusations that the country is entirely corrupt can only be taken at face value by those unfamiliar with the current situation in our society and are certainly intended for an external audience. But then the question arises: who is Khanumyan working for when he denigrates everything that is currently happening in Artsakh, which *Vesti.az* is only too pleased to reprint?’<sup>20</sup>

Another e-newspaper employed insults in an article with the garish headline, ‘The fruits of a sick imagination’:

‘Where does a young man with his whole life in front of him get such bitterness from? It is difficult to understand how someone who came back to Artsakh just a couple of years ago is already allowing himself to teach its residents the whys and wherefores of democracy.’<sup>21</sup>

19 ‘Ayk Khanumyan: Bako Saakyan sozdal v “NKR” politseyskoye gosudarstvo’ [Bako Saakyan has created a police state in ‘NKR’], *Vesti.az*, 8th November 2011. Available in Russian at <http://bit.ly/Vr83o1>.

20 ‘Dlya chego pishet Ayk Khanumyan?’ [What is Aik Khanumyan writing for?], *Artsakh Today*, 14th November 2011. Available in Russian at <http://www.artsakhtoday.com/?p=9532&lang=ru>.

21 ‘Vladimir Grigoryan “Plody bol’nogo voobrazheniya”’ [Vladimir Grigoryan ‘The fruits of sick imagination’], *Artsakh Today*, 15th November 2011. Available in Russian at [http://artsakhtoday.com/?p=9542&fb\\_source=message](http://artsakhtoday.com/?p=9542&fb_source=message).

## The image of the enemy as a mechanism for legitimising power

The image of “the enemy” – both external and internal – is used as a mechanism to legitimise and hold onto power, regardless of the quality and their achievements. The authorities are so busy in this respect that the pursuit of the enemy gets in the way of the day-to-day management of society. The public is colluding in this too by choosing deliberately to defer dealing with its problems “until later on”, when times are better or safer.

This collusion is facilitated by the fact that certain aspects related to the use of “enemy images” can be quite useful for society. The use of enemy images helps to reinforce a defensive stance, maintain a high state of alert and concentrate resources in one area, making security issues easier to resolve. They are a justification for the authorities to assume responsibility for resolving more fundamental issues relating to the security of the country and its citizens; they are a means of rallying the people, bolstering their sense of identity and encouraging the conservation of scarce resources.

However, the biggest disadvantage of this approach is that society is abdicating responsibility for taking control of its own future, instead putting itself in a position of dependency on people who are actually the same as they are. In fact, people are voluntarily sacrificing their freedoms for the sake of universal security, without truly realising that it is these very freedoms that provide them with more resources for defending themselves and their country. In doing so, they are limiting their part in determining their own future.

It will clearly take time for people to realise that democracy, far from being a threat to security, is actually one of the guarantees of security: it is only by being free that people can live in safety, because they at least retain their right to participate in making decisions that will affect their future.

## The image of the friend in Nagorny Karabakh media

The principal friend of Nagorny Karabakh is, naturally, **Armenia** – or more precisely, Mother Armenia – since both are considered to be “one people and two states”. More specifically, the two states form a triad: Armenia, Nagorny Karabakh and the Armenian diaspora.

Nevertheless, discontent is being increasingly voiced in Nagorny Karabakh over the fact that it appears to have been sidelined in the peace talks. Many people believe that it is unacceptable that the Armenian administration has in practice monopolised the right to settle the Nagorny Karabakh problem itself. As matters progress, people are increasingly starting to think that Armenia’s mission should be limited to providing security guarantees for the people of Nagorny Karabakh. Relations between Armenia and Nagorny Karabakh are thus becoming a topic for discussion. There have recently been talks in both Armenia

and Nagorny Karabakh over the need to define more clearly the rights and responsibilities of the two states in relation to settling the Nagorny Karabakh problem. The policy of non-intervention,<sup>22</sup> conducted by the Nagorny Karabakh authorities, is becoming untenable as public opinion in Nagorny Karabakh hardens over the need to create a second Armenian political centre and for Nagorny Karabakh to be recognised as a separate regional military and political factor – a role jealously guarded by the Armenian authorities.

For the older generation, **Russia** is an unambiguous friend. In discussions with representatives of the older generation, there is no point in expressing any doubts regarding the disinterested nature of Russia's position, indicating that Soviet propaganda has also left its imprint on their minds. However, the younger generation is extremely sceptical about the role of the Russians in the fate of the Armenians and does not agree that Russia is their saviour.

Another regional power – **Iran** – is viewed unambiguously as friendly. The Armenian psyche may be seriously influenced by school lessons on literature about the Battle of Avarair (a crucial battle between the Armenians and Persians in the 5th century) and in particular the historical novel *Vardanank* by the Armenian classicist Derenik Demirchyan. However, “today” outweighs “yesterday”, partly due to the friendly policy of the Iranian authorities.

According to the Iranian Foreign Minister, **Ali Akbar Salekhi**, during a visit to Yerevan in November 2011: ‘The positions of Armenia and Iran overlap on a surprisingly large number of regional and international issues.’<sup>23</sup> At the same time, one of Iran's spiritual leaders, Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi, called on the Azerbaijani authorities to learn lessons from recent events in the region.<sup>24</sup> In addition, on 14th May 2011, the Iranian ambassador to Armenia made an unprecedented statement that in the event of a conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Iran would always adhere to the conviction that in order to establish lasting peace, the conflict would have to be resolved on the basis of dialogue, the non-use of force and respect for the right of self-determination.<sup>25</sup> This explicit reference to the principle of national self-determination led to protests in Baku.

The people of Nagorny Karabakh also count the **United States** as a country friendly to the Armenians. This is because it is the only country with a separate budget for humanitarian assistance for Nagorny Karabakh, which is regarded as *de facto* recognition.

22 As is well known, Nagorny Karabakh does not participate directly in the talks, although the co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group make periodic visits to its capital Stepanakert.

23 ‘Skhozhest’ pozitsiy pozvolit Armenii i Iranu sovместno reshit’ regional’nyye problemy – Salekhi’ [The similarity of the positions of Armenia and Iran mean we can work together to solve regional problems – Salekhi], *Regnum*, 8th November 2011. Available in Russian at <http://www.regnum.ru/news/fd-abroad/armenia/1464658.html>.

24 See article in Armenian at <http://tert.am/am/news/2011/11/08/iran-azerbaijan>, 8th November 2011.

25 ‘The Statement of Iran’s Embassy’, *Lragir.am*, 14th May 2011. Available in English at <http://www.lragir.am/index.php/eng/0/politics/view/21776>. A more in-depth analysis of this statement can also be read in the July 2011 edition of *Analyticon*, available in English at <http://theanalyticon.com/?p=567&lang=en>.

Moreover, it was the former US president Woodrow Wilson who drew up the borders of Armenia in the Treaty of Sevres in 1920; although they never came into force, these measures corresponded to the aspirations of Armenians the world over. We should also not discount the fact that the US has the most powerful Armenian lobby in the world.

The people of Nagorny Karabakh have also traditionally had good relations with France, although in some intellectual circles it is customary to talk of the French’s negative role in the fate of Kilik’s Armenian state. Nonetheless, former sympathies remain, something which the French authorities are “aware” of and which they occasionally emphasise. As the former French president Nicolas Sarkozy stated during his October 2011 visit to Yerevan: ‘No country can imagine what Nagorny Karabakh means for Armenia better than France.’<sup>26</sup>

## Prospects for dialogue

The Armenians and Azerbaijanis have different allies on whose unwavering support they can rely for the resolution of the Nagorny Karabakh conflict – a fact which they do not seem to realise is closing down opportunities for a direct Armenian-Azerbaijan dialogue. However, it does seem that, as time goes on, the sides will begin to realise that there is no alternative to such a dialogue.

The fact that they talk the language of enmity and hate is deplorable, but it is also worth bearing in mind that they use such language when speaking among themselves and that it is more for domestic consumption. As in the old days of the Soviet Union, the best front is reserved “for export”.

For example, consider this curious news item. Russia’s former president Dmitry Medvedev (now Prime Minister) in an October 2011 meeting with students from various Russian colleges and universities as well as representatives of youth organisations divulged some details of meetings between the heads of Azerbaijan and Armenia:

‘The entourages of both presidents – President Aliyev and President Sargsyan – get on surprisingly well with one another and switch easily from Azeri to Armenian and from Armenian to Azeri. This simply takes place before my eyes. This is of course a hidden factor. But I hope that Serzh Azatovich and Ilham Geydarovich will not be offended if I say that they get on well with each other too. When we sit together around the table, they communicate very well.’<sup>27</sup>

26 ‘Net bol’shey opasnosti, chem sokhraneniye status-kvo v zone karabakhskogo konflikta – Sarkozi’ [There is no greater risk than maintaining the status quo in the Karabakh conflict zone – Sarkozy], *Regnum*, 6th October 2011. Available in Russian at [www.regnum.ru/news/fd-abroad/karabax/1452995.html](http://www.regnum.ru/news/fd-abroad/karabax/1452995.html).

27 ‘Prezidenty Armenii i Azerbaydzhana neplokho ladyat drug s drugom – Medvedev’ [The presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan get along well with each other – Medvedev], *Regnum*, 21st October 2011. Available in Russian at [www.regnum.ru/news/fd-abroad/armenia/1458226.html](http://www.regnum.ru/news/fd-abroad/armenia/1458226.html).

There is also an old joke about the many meetings between Aliyev senior and Robert Kocharyan (Armenia's second president) which states that there was only one topic which the two presidents did not manage to discuss over all that time – the Nagorny Karabakh problem. They had too much else to talk about.

**In other words, the authorities have normal relations but leave enmity and hate to the public.** The public has always been ignored, both by the authorities themselves and by mediators as well as other international players. Moreover, recent visits by representatives of the Armenian and Azerbaijani intelligentsia to Baku, Yerevan and Stepanakert have been run like clandestine operations. The impression formed is that they want to reconcile the peoples secretly without anyone knowing, including the people themselves.

The main conclusion of this article is that **as we build bridges of trust between the societies of the conflicting sides, we should not just rely on cooperative action between governments. We need to find a solution ourselves too.**

## Conclusion

Without democratic changes, the public on all sides of the conflict cannot actively participate in or have their say on any settlement of the Nagorny Karabakh conflict. We first have to get our own houses in order, which is where the international community can help. Democratisation must not be dependent on geopolitical and strategic interests. Incentives must be introduced for democratic change in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorny Karabakh. Direct assistance is needed to facilitate the emergence of democratic institutions in Azerbaijan, Armenia and Nagorny Karabakh. Above all, this should involve the formation of an independent media, since they have an enormous role to play in the objective reporting of the Nagorny Karabakh problem and conflict resolution, in ending the “propaganda war” and in dismantling “enemy images”. Such measures would in turn enable the public to influence their governments in the future in terms of launching talks and progressing to mutually acceptable decisions.

## CHAPTER 6

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# The Exploitation of Ethnographic Myths (Hero/ Traitor) in Modern Military Conflicts and the Post-war Reconstruction of Ossetian Society

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Eduard Kabulov

## Soviet influence on traditional Ossetian way of life

Ever since the Soviet Union began to collapse there have been nationalist murmurings in South Ossetia. There are many reasons for this, one of which is the experience of Sovietisation, in all senses of the word. During the period in which South Ossetia was incorporated into the multinational empire of the USSR, which dealt with national identity in purely political terms, the Ossetians, like many other national minorities, expressed and lived out their ethnicity in their private lives, within a tightly circumscribed space where they felt it was safe to do so. There were few avenues for self-expression, since there was no native language instruction in schools, ethnicity was stigmatised in Soviet practice, and most of the population was urbanised, which led to the destruction of traditional lifestyles at the level of the individual, the family, and society as a whole.

The experience of sovietisation and forced urbanisation led to a rift between Ossetians and their traditions, in which the fundamental legislative body for micro-communities was the *Nykhas* (the people's council).

In particular, individuals expressed their ethnicity within the Soviet socio-political system by making special public declarations of their association with a particular group.

The lack of appropriate space for public self-expression and the acknowledgement of national identity during the Soviet period meant that people had to find alternative means. At the same time, people withdrew into their immediate and extended families where they continued to nurture the sense of belonging, their unique nationhood, becoming part of the national historical memory, assimilating themselves with their nation's historical memory, and feeling a part of it.

All nations' historical memories are perpetuated by narratives which are handed down from generation to generation. The Ossetians are no exception. Berzenov, the famous Russian traveller, wrote intriguingly in 1851:

‘The Ossetians listen avidly to fairy tales and stories like the fairy tales of the Russian mountain *Bogatys* [warriors], despite the view held by many people that mountain peoples only engage in war and looting for booty. However, glory and the desire for fame often drive the Ossetian to pick up his rifle and sword... To be a famous “brave horseman” in the village, the valley and in the whole highland area which constitutes his world is the pinnacle of his desires and labours... Tales of their raids and the adventures of a fighting and hunting life, and the encounters and misfortunes of the journey are highly engaging. The novelty of the subjects, the lively simplicity of the tales and finally the soundness of their judgements on mountain warfare, on the advantages of locality, when to attack enemies, and when to evade them will interest any veteran who has come under fire in battle. Generally they scorn



death and consider themselves to be excellent warriors. The Georgians, for example, whom they ridicule as *popkhikhor*, are the butt of many of their jokes. When little boys are learning how to shoot at a target they imitate a Georgian who, they say, turns away from his rifle when he fires...<sup>1</sup>

In Soviet times, Ossetians continued to engage in this kind of story-telling, supporting and perpetuating history in the evenings at the family table or at lavish community feasts where the traditional intersected with the new in the mixing of cultures. This can be seen as a traditional form of affirming one's ethnic self-consciousness, self-realisation and, to some extent, socialisation with new elements.

During the Soviet period, Ossetians started to make declarations on their distinctive ethnicity using the form of a toast at a feast – a modified version of the traditional prayer. Without claiming to have studied national traditional rituals in any detail, I can nevertheless say, based on the interviews I have held with the older generation in far-flung corners of South Ossetia, that prior to Sovietisation, traditional Ossetian feasts did not involve large amounts of alcohol or lavish tables straining under the weight of viands.

Sovietisation added, along with ideological and political changes in the Ossetian community, a mixture of different ingredients from various cultures: from the Georgians, the lavishness of the feast, and from the Russians, the value assigned to the consumption of vodka.

Before the Soviet revolution, the overriding characteristics of Ossetian society and ideology were ascetism in everyday life and moderation in all things. The traditional toast/prayer was correspondingly succinct: Ossetians prayed to their mythological gods and asked for their blessing for highly specific matters, addressing their prayers to specific gods depending on the occasion.<sup>2</sup>

If it had not been for the military conflict which flared up during and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Ossetians' need for self-identification would doubtless have been met and enacted through narratives related over the ritual of the long feast and added to their folklore.

The Georgian-Ossetian conflict sparked a new attitude in society in which the public overcame the national threat by rallying around a heroic leader. This was the public's reaction to the crisis created by the collapse of Soviet ideology, one of the fundamental

1 N. Berzenov (1852). 'Iz vospominanii ob Osetii' [From Memories of Ossetia], *Caucasus*, No. 5, p. 67.

2 See T. Kulaeva, 'Religia Osetin' [The Religion of Ossetians]. Available in Russian at <http://www.osetia.ru/~toma/Religija.html>; See also N. Emelianova, 'Traditsionnaia kul'tura i religia Osetin' [Traditional Ossetian Culture and Religion]. Available in Russian at <http://ossetians.com/rus/news.php?newsid=926>.

tenets of which was the indissoluble friendship between peoples and the state protection of each separate individual.

South Ossetia clung to its sovietised political and social mindset for a considerable time following the collapse of the USSR and also faced a multiplicity of problems, including the threat of physical annihilation by large numbers of “unofficial Georgian groups”, as they were referred to, which surrounded South Ossetia and regularly fired on it from all sides.

South Ossetia lacked the resources to cope with these new challenges, with the public determinedly clinging on to the remnants of the Soviet mentality that the Kremlin would punish Georgian aggression, despite the disappearance of the USSR. This paradoxical stance of retaining the trappings and ideology of the USSR, even after it had ceased to exist, led to many contradictions within society, including those of ideology.

The military conflict imposed its own conditions on the way society functioned. Decision-making procedures became spontaneous and chaotic, although still seen as close to the people’s wishes in comparison to previous Soviet methods. Unofficial groups formed around those leaders who took on the responsibility to manage society (or the Republic, as it proclaimed itself after Georgia abolished its status as the “South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast”).

## **The demand for heroes**

The ideals of heroism have developed over millennia of human history out of primitive, elemental archetypes through oral traditions (in particular heroic epics) to become the subject of literature and art, as well as specialist academic disciplines: ethics, aesthetics, sociology and psychology.

Heroism is seen as the performance of acts of outstanding significance for society in response to the exigencies of historical development and the interests of the masses of the people, and requires the performer to be prepared for self-sacrifice. The act of heroism is always associated with the maximum concentration of moral and physical force and requires the greatest personal bravery, endurance and resilience. The problem of heroism has multiple aspects, including those of ethics, psychology and aestheticism, among others. For philosophers, however, the sociological examination of the problem, based on a study of the essential nature of the historical process, is of greatest significance. This examination of heroism raises questions around the criterion of “the hero”, its historical antecedents and the role of the individual in history.

The Italian philosopher Vico attempted to provide a sociological analysis of the problem of the hero, using the term “heroism” to designate a particular period of human development, i.e. the heroic age or the “age of heroes”, which follows the “age of the gods” and precedes the “age of men”. For Vico, heroism is inextricably linked to the civic life of antiquity and impossible in the subsequent “rational” period of human development:

‘Today, heroism is, by the very nature of the citizen, impossible [...] we must therefore come to the conclusion that a hero in our sense of the word is that for which oppressed peoples yearn, philosophers study, poets portray; however, civic nature...does not know such blessings.’<sup>3</sup>

This concept is developed extensively by Hegel, who considered the distinguishing characteristic of heroism in antiquity to be its combination of individual activity, the personal motivation to carry out a public act which was important and dangerous for the individual himself, and the universal approval of this. The ancient hero, according to Hegel, saw no conflict between action and morals or sentiment and duty. Hegel classifies the “heroic age” as a period of development of the state and statehood in general:

‘There is no longer any place for heroes in the state: they are only encountered in the period of the uncivilised [...] condition of man. Their objective is lawful, essential and state-like, and they see it as their own personal matter to achieve it.’<sup>4</sup>

The ideologues of the Enlightenment and revolutionary romanticism created the concepts of the rebellious heroic individual fighting for national and political freedom, and the “natural” equality of human beings.

In reactionary romanticism, on the other hand, the hero is contrasted against the people, “the mob”, and has even been deified into the “hero cult”;<sup>5</sup> in Nietzsche’s image of the “superman” he acquired the moral right to violence.<sup>6</sup> These ideas were also developed in reactionary streams of bourgeois thought in the 20th century which emphasise the individual exclusivity of the hero, link heroism with militarism, and view militarism in a positive light.

In the Soviet period heroic public rhetoric was applied to the context of labour (terms were invented and introduced into public usage such as “hero of Socialist labour”) and the Second World War (“hero of the invisible front” and “war hero”). The experience of past generations of Ossetians, transmitted through narratives which imbued traditional habits of thought with a heroic conception of life and death, may have been

3 J. Vico [1940]. *Principles of New Science Surrounding the Common Nature of Nations*, Leningrad, p. 295.

4 G.W.F. Hegel (1934). *Philosophy of Nature, Essays*, Vol. 7, Leningrad, p. 112.

5 T. Carlyle [2008]. *On Heroes, Hero Worship and the Heroic in History*. Moscow: Penguin Books.

6 F. Nietzsche [1891]. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

an important factor in the way Ossetians distinguished themselves in the war against fascism, obtaining the highest number of awards of the title of “Hero of the USSR” per capita of the population.

The clearest evidence of the survival of all the conceptions and characteristics of the hero and heroism provided above can be seen in the social order of South Ossetia during the collapse of the USSR and at the beginning of the Georgian-Ossetian military conflict; however, it can also be noted in the brief truces between military actions in the ceasefire zone.

The heroic act holds special significance in the context of South Ossetia. The very birth of the idea of the independence of the republic is associated with a symbolic heroic act: on 23rd November 1989 a group of young men, most of them students, joined hands and blocked the road in front of an unofficial column of thousands of Georgian nationalists headed by leaders of nationalist parties and groups which they had followed from Tbilisi to Tskhinval on the pretext of holding a rally there. The subsequent escalation of the conflict developed at breakneck speed.

Physical isolation from the rest of the world, the news blackout, the military emergency, physical survival, problems arising from economic collapse, the loss of agricultural resources, and forced migration of the rural population from South Ossetian villages bordering Georgia, as well as Ossetians from within Georgia seeking asylum in South Ossetia, demanded urgent action.

The onslaught of war, the collapse of the Soviet government, inescapable hunger and the threat of physical annihilation in the 1990s led to a revival of a dormant need, kept alive in the national historical memory, for heroes as national saviours in the South Ossetian consciousness.

The impulse to go to war was strong and genuine. Young people with no military training went to war in their masses. A huge flood of students arrived from Moscow and larger cities of the USSR to fight, most of whom perished. The underlying and undisputed idealistic assumption was that going to war and meeting one’s end would save the nation and assure its free and happy future existence, for which young people gave their lives willingly.

Somewhat paradoxically, this military conflict to which the outside world was oblivious revived at the end of the twentieth century a medieval demand for heroes in what was a highly civilised and well-educated society. Two famous statistics from the State Statistics Committee of the USSR confirm the view that Ossetia was indeed thoroughly modern: firstly, Ossetia had the highest percentage of interethnic marriages in the USSR; secondly, the percentage of women with higher education was also the highest in the USSR.

However, in the context of total paralysis of day-to-day government and the presence of serious threats to life, conditions were created which enabled the heroic epic to be revived and transformed into everyday reality. The tense situation rallied the Ossetian public: heroes were in demand and revered by and helped to mobilise the public.

However, this euphoric rallying of South Ossetian society against a common enemy over time led to a complete transformation of society's world view.

It is interesting that, in all the years following the signing of the *Dagomys* [Sochi] Agreement<sup>7</sup> in June 1992, the public demand for heroes has not waned. This demand may have changed in form but has remained at the forefront of public consciousness and the power of its significance is evidenced in how it has served – and to this day still serves – as a tool through which to manage South Ossetian society.

In all the years following the signing of the Agreement and the withdrawal of military units from the conflict zone, the situation in the region of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict has remained difficult to interpret. The tension associated with nightly shootings, murder and robbery on the ceasefire line was constant. Society did not abandon its view that politicians needed to be strong leaders capable of robust responses to challenges as they arose.

The fact that heroes have been in demand over such a prolonged period arguably is an indicator of a *de facto* war situation, of the constant threat felt by society of a resumption of hostilities, of insuperable economic and political dependence on Russia and isolation from the rest of the world. All these, as well as other factors, account for why the public continues to demand a leader-saviour, who can be trusted implicitly, to whom all decision making and resource allocation is delegated without need for accountability.

From observing the development of the conflict in South Ossetia and how military rhetoric was employed in public, one can draw the conclusion that during the phase of violent conflict the demand for a heroic ruler has been skilfully used as a means of managing society for the purposes of survival; while, during the post-conflict period it has been used for the political manipulation of society.

An obvious conclusion is that by investing some effort into maintaining a no war-no peace situation, by blurring the boundary between the two, one can achieve suitable conditions for the manipulation of public opinion by both formal and consequently informal leaders alike.

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7 The 'Sochi agreement' (the 'Agreement on principles of peaceful settlement of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict') – was signed in Sochi (Russia), on 24th June 1992 between Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Eduard Shevardnadze, Chairman of the State Council, the Georgian leader. It is sometimes referred to as the *Dagomys* agreement(s).

The leaders of the nationalist movement who survived the military conflict and – if we believe their public rhetoric – were victorious, had mastered skills in waging battle which they continue to use in peacetime (or, more precisely, in the intervals between escalations of the conflict).

It is worth noting, however, that during relatively long periods of peace, the usefulness or moral defensibility of the behaviour of “heroic leaders” has been questioned. There has been covert and sometimes even public discussion of the leaders’ motives when making certain decisions or actions unrelated to war. The ranks of protest within society have grown stronger and, as it were, reached a critical mass in many periods of so-called “peace”.

This has alarmed leaders. They know that their hold on society is loosening, that their control over the levers of power is loosening and becoming unpredictable in the absence of an external threat. These alarming changes in society have spurred leaders to search for ways to maintain the status quo.

## The change in political rhetoric

In order to maintain its grip on power, the political elite needed to maintain the public and individual perception of being under threat, so that everything and everyone would revert to the accustomed militarised, heroic style of government. During peacetime, this meant that the image of the external enemy was projected onto the domestic community. Thus, one of the most enduring forms of threat was invented by the leaders themselves – the notion of the “internal traitor” or the “enemy within” – a threat originating from inside society itself. In the language of a civilised political culture, such people or groups would be called “opposition leaders” or “dissidents”. In this new political rhetoric, the South Ossetian authorities have used the word “traitor” to imply a person who is ready to surrender to the enemy the achievements gained through the sufferings of the people and the heroism of the few in exchange for material goods. These “achievements” have been interpreted in different ways and have been fluid terms that have never been succinctly formulated. However, they have usually been taken to mean stability, the absence of open armed conflict, or simply survival. None of the leaders could claim that there had been any visible improvement in the republic’s economic and social status, its links with the outside world, or indeed in any other areas.

Post-war reconstruction has turned out to be no easier than warfare. In this area, heroes have found that they have not been given as much respect and latitude as they had been during the war.

However, the heroes of the wartime resistance have persisted in their conviction that they must continue to rule in peacetime – a conviction, incidentally, which has been shared by society, which assumes that they had a moral right to govern, given that they have sacrificed their lives for the good of all.

This rhetoric was in fact only viable because people were prepared to exchange their freedoms and all of their rights “if we can only prevent war”.

From studying the press and analysing rhetoric, as well as the interviews with both those who witnessed and took part in the events of those times, one can purport that, in post-1990s South Ossetia, the leaders of the national movement became polarised around the notions of “hero” and “traitor”, and constructed the political system accordingly. The leaders themselves have fought hard to maintain their unlimited rights which, by an unwritten law, are every hero’s due; this battle for leadership has been mirrored in the rest of society. The public became obsessed with who had fought and where, what evidence of it existed, who had simply pursued the trophies of war, and who had benefited economically from the war and how.

Paradoxical as it may seem, those who died were in the best position: in the public perception they remained heroes and have never come under criticism, whatever the circumstances in which they perished.

In peacetime many “heroes” have continued to fight for unrestricted privileges, though without particular support of the masses they have had to rely on their friends and relatives, who had their own interests in this matter. This has led to the establishment of clans, which have divided power between themselves; while citizens, on the other hand, have split into various camps depending on which unofficial group they favoured or to which they belonged.

The results of this polarisation of society into non-heroes, heroes and traitors have impacted on the practical aspects of social relations in South Ossetia, in particular with regards to the reconstruction of the republic’s infrastructure and overall sustainability. The leaders have clearly been reluctant to get involved in “dirty work not worthy of heroes”, by which is implied the sectors of agriculture, construction, rehabilitation and service provision.

Those leaders who have remained active apply all the methods they have learned as “heroes” in peacetime, slowly and steadily setting about destroying their opponents (other “heroes”) through these “heroic” methods. By the start of the August 2008 war, there were virtually no strong clans or leaders left apart from the one in power.

## Manufacturing “heroes”

The authorities continued to employ the same methods of rule that they had used in wartime. The absence of war meant, however, that heroes were no longer being “produced”. They therefore had to be “manufactured”. The authorities have consistently used ancient, traditional ways of ruling society at historical moments of crisis. These include identifying heroes and using special symbols to honour them. Loyal servants have often been awarded the Order of *Uatsamonga*, a mythical goblet (‘requesting glory’),<sup>8</sup> the highest honour awarded by the ancient Ossetians to outstanding warriors. In the modern context awarding it provides a special opportunity for manufacturing “socially and politically useful heroes”.

Post-war politics in South Ossetia is also dominated by a quasi-ritualistic classification of its citizens as deserving and undeserving. One particular example was the priority given to restoring the homes of people who had remained in Tskhinval during the August 2008 war over those who had not, regardless of their individual financial difficulties, or level of vulnerability.

## An end to the demand for heroes

The provision of security guarantees by Russia ushered in a new era in modern history in South Ossetia marked by a change in public attitudes. The authorities realised that the wartime propaganda machine it operated so successfully for so long was no longer viable.

A wave of anti-government protest began, focusing particularly on the misallocation of funds for restoring property and infrastructure destroyed in the 2008 war. This time the public protests extended to fundamental issues such as the lack of civic freedoms and the usurping of power and resources by one group of people.

The November 2011 Presidential elections showed that the idea that “society be governed by a hero” was outmoded and no longer applied to South Ossetia.

However, the inertia of the government was such that it could not envisage any scenario involving change. Moreover, although the ruling elite was convinced that a man – one of their manufactured heroes – was bound to win the presidential elections, it blithely

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8 *Nartamonga* (in other versions – *Amonga*, *Uatsamonga*) – refers to a magic bowl used during the feasts of the Nart warrior heroes in Ossetian (Nart) mythology (“ukazatel'nitsa”). “They shall keep safe the Nartamonga and solemnly bring it to the banquet. It shall be used by them also for other purposes, and then the Alagata set the conditions. For example, during the feast, when competing with each other Soslan and Chelahsartag danced both on the floor and on the tables, and one of them, even on the raised point of the Nart sword, Alagata brought out the Uatsamonga, the 4-cornered Nart cup, filled to the brim and said “He who dances with a bowl on his head without spilling a drop, is the best dancer.”” G. Dumézil (1977). *Ossetian Epics and Mythology*. Moscow: Nauka. p.179.



allowed a woman to register as an opposition candidate, whilst male opposition leaders who presented just as serious competition were for one reason or another denied the opportunity to stand for election. And it just so happened that the majority rallied around the female anti-hero and in a shock victory, the elections were won by a woman for the first time in the post-Soviet space.

South Ossetia had reached a point where public opinion was beginning to develop and change so rapidly and dynamically that the authorities barely realised what was happening, let alone come to terms with it.

Interestingly, even Russian propaganda surrounding South Ossetian politics factored in this peculiarly Ossetian mentality of loyalty to the traditional institution of heroism, knowingly supporting one of the male candidates – a soldier and potential hero.

What Russia, like the local South Ossetian authorities, had failed to take into account was that appeals to heroism only work in an emergency situation, where a society's vital interests are at stake. The response of the ruling elite and the Russian authorities was clearly based on an already outmoded militarist tradition: i.e. the undertaking of a “heroic” special mission to overturn the choice of the South Ossetian people – the annulment of election results and persecution of the elected female leader.

Interestingly, now that society no longer faced a direct threat of annihilation, the popular protest against this arbitrary and unjust action was of a democratic nature, eschewing heroic or military methods.

## Conclusion

The birth of a “national idea” in post-Soviet South Ossetia – further nurtured during the phase of armed conflict – was closely associated in the public consciousness with individual leaders of the national resistance and their feats, within a context of total public confidence in them.

The public accepted it as a given that heroism is not a “profession” and cannot be taught, as implied by the belief that the national leaders of the resistance must possess certain special qualities. Although public attitudes tended to be stereotypical with excessive expectations of the “hero” in moments of crisis, this factor did help to consolidate society and give it the strength to cope with the difficulties facing it as a result of the conflict.

Society clearly needed a figurehead during the crisis period, as evidenced by South Ossetia's focus on national leaders in the early 1990s. Politically, however, it was quite medieval, with a strongly cohesive social structure and its own peculiar system of state security.

Society became frustrated with the wartime models that their heroes continued to apply in peacetime and there was a gradual but perceptible shift away from the idealistic ideas of the national movement, as private interests came into conflict with the common national idea.

Over this period the South Ossetian public came round to the view that heroism was only relevant during armed conflict.

The example of South Ossetia suggests that heroic individuals tend to undermine the integrity of the community with their narratives of superhuman acts, and this may have been an additional cause of frustration with these heroes. Contemporaries harping on about a hero who was “a man in the fullest sense of the word” must tend to question the place and role that lesser members of society with more modest capabilities can occupy.

In peacetime the opportunities for manipulating society appear to have been radically reduced, and the ruling elites were forced to be creative in manufacturing new forms of propaganda based on the underlying manipulation of ethnographic myths of heroes and heroism for political ends.

In the case of post-Soviet South Ossetian society, it is clear that now that the direct security threat has been dealt with, the values of the national movement are giving way to a more pragmatic approach to the present and future of South Ossetia, with the public currently weighing up the advantages of independence or incorporation within Russia – i.e. reunification with the North Ossetians.



This publication attempts to shed some light on the ways in which myths and dominant narratives associated with the conflicts in the South Caucasus are constructed, transmitted and used in the region. A region-wide research project examined three main modern mechanisms through which myths are created and disseminated: through history textbooks; through political discourse; and through the media, including the blogosphere. A particular focus of interest was how myths associated with the conflicts are subject to domestic political manipulation, how “enemy images” are created, and how these in turn serve to strengthen the resilience of those conflicts to resolution.

In this volume, we present the research on political discourse, examining how these enemy images are utilised in the domestic politics of the South Caucasus as they enter their third decade of protracted conflict. The papers show clearly and unambiguously how the societal myths of post-conflict societies – such as “victimhood” and the search for an avenging “saviour” on one side, and “victorious” posturing on the other – are used to manipulate public opinion for short-term political gains.

One of the conclusions is that the conflicts are irresolvable as long as the political and public discourse is dominated by such images. This closes down the space available for reflection and critical thinking and creates an atmosphere in which promoting internal societal or democratic change is of secondary importance, which in turn has a detrimental impact on prospects for conflict resolution. As long as oxygen is not given to alternative discourses, Caucasian societies will continue to face a future of perpetual conflict and rivalry.

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