Discussion Paper

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'Preparing populations for peace': Implications for Armenian-Azerbaijani peacebuilding

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Participants at a discussion at the Stepanakert Press Club, Nagorny Karabakh © Gegham Bagdasaryan

Introduction

In January 2019, after a meeting of Azerbaijani and Armenian Foreign Ministers Elmar Mammadyarov and Zohrab Mnatsakanyan in Paris, the co-Chairs of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's (OSCE) Minsk Group announced that the foreign ministers had agreed on the necessity of 'preparing their populations for peace'. The statement followed measures that had defused the considerable tensions of recent years along the Line of Contact in the Nagorny Karabakh conflict zone, as well as the Armenian-Azerbaijani international border. These included a sustained reduction in the number of ceasefire violations since 2017, and the establishment of 'operative channels' between the armed forces deployed along the Line of Contact and the executive structures of Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Combined with the instalment of a new government in Armenia following the 2018 power transition, these developments appeared to suggest a new political conjuncture more conducive to peace. At their first formal meeting in March, President Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan affirmed commitments to strengthening the ceasefire and expanding humanitarian cooperation.

In May 2019, Conciliation Resources convened a meeting of the Karabakh Contact Group (KCG) to discuss the implications of 'preparing populations for peace' for peacebuilding across the conflict today. Supported by the European Union (EU), the KCG is a platform engaging in open-ended dialogue and joint analysis on key policy issues. This meeting brought together civil society activists from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorny Karabakh, and international experts. This short brief summarizes the discussions. It identifies a number of salient obstacles confronting the reinforcement of peacebuilding efforts today and also a menu of policy options for addressing them.

What does 'preparing populations for peace' mean?

KCG participants highlighted that 'preparing populations for peace' is understood differently across the conflict.

In Azerbaijan it is understood as preparing people for a peace deal, against the backdrop of 'bringing Armenia back to the negotiating table' after nearly a decade of impasse in the negotiations with Serzh Sargsyan, Armenia's former president. This reflects Baku's greater impatience to move towards

substantive negotiations that would yield significant gains early in the process. According to one Azerbaijani participant, there is an implicit 'window' of around two years, within which Baku is hoping to see change.

Azerbaijani impatience, however, meets a gradualist Armenian approach. Rather than rapid steps towards a peace agreement, 'preparing populations for peace' is understood in Yerevan more in terms of reducing enmity and opening up channels. There is wariness of moving too rapidly before the core security concerns that have dominated Armenian agendas in recent years have been meaningfully addressed. Yet in the wake of the country's 'Velvet Revolution', according to one KCG participant, there is also a feeling that 'nothing is off the table now'.

For Armenians in Nagorny Karabakh, the prospect of 'preparing populations for peace' evokes long-standing dissatisfaction with being absent from the negotiations. According to one Karabakh Armenian participant, the idea is based on a 'false, patronising premise' that obscures the hierarchies institutionalized by the peace process. The participants agreed that the language of 'preparing populations for peace' unhelpfully portrays populations as the passive object of top-down policy-making. This runs counter to an effective logic of peacebuilding, with reciprocal flows of information and influence between elites and societies. For other participants, however, the reference to 'populations' carries an implicit affirmation of inclusivity that can be activated to challenge power hierarchies.

> **"The language of 'preparing populations for peace' unhelpfully portrays populations as the passive object of policy-making."**

Articulating a strategic vision

There was consensus in the KCG that much of the ambiguity around 'preparing populations for peace' owes to the fact that there is no strategic vision among elites as to what that peace might look like. Even if political will were present, there is 'no clarity in endgames' even within each party, let alone across the conflict. Political elites are preoccupied with domestic agendas that are both internally incoherent, and dissonant with each other.

In Armenia, there is an agenda for revolutionary change after the power transition in 2018, focused primarily on domestic liberalization. Nikol

Pashinyan has sought to extend the 'velvet brand' to the negotiations with Baku by highlighting the need to include Nagorny Karabakh in the talks. Yet the last year has revealed profound differences between a post-revolutionary Yerevan and elements within the de facto authorities in Stepanakert still loyal to patrons in the former Republican party regime. The Yerevan-Stepanakert relationship is in a critical period, pending simultaneous de facto presidential and parliamentary elections in Nagorny Karabakh in 2020.

> **"There's space to be creative now, not go back to what is unpopular."**

In Azerbaijan, the primary agenda is for stability and the avoidance of change, insofar as this might threaten domestic and external security dynamics. Articulating a positive vision of peace has been particularly challenging. The issue of two policy papers (by Hikmet Hajiyev, Head of the Foreign Policy Analysis Department of the Presidential Administration, and Ramiz Mehdiyev, Head of the Presidential Administration) since 2018 indicates some effort to address this gap. This suggests that Baku is watching closely the change in Armenian leadership style and learning from it. Yet no clear overarching concept or roadmap defines the Azerbaijani position.

KCG perspectives differed on the utility of advocacy focused on the current peace proposal, the Basic ('Madrid') Principles. Participants agreed that even if the term 'Madrid Principles' has attracted unpopularity, actual public understanding of the content of the Principles is largely non-existent outside of expert circles. The current conjuncture was also seen by some KCG participants as an opportunity to open up the menu of possible approaches beyond those contained in the Principles: 'There's space to be creative now, not go back to what is unpopular.'

Where participants agreed was on the need for increased public awareness of the history of negotiations. According to an Azerbaijani participant: 'We should go beyond the Basic Principles and give a space for new ideas. But understanding the Principles is part of preparing people for peace. They need to be aware of existing discourses.' And in the words of an Armenian participant: 'Why is it important to show to the public the history of the peace plans in 1997, 1998 and 2001, and the Basic Principles? To demonstrate that in the past, the sides have at different times accepted very significant compromises.'

Asymmetries in civil societies across the conflict

A second moment of consensus in the KCG was on the asymmetries in civil society capacities, goals and horizons across the conflict.

Civil society mobilization played a significant role in Armenia's power transition in 2018, and several significant peacebuilding actors subsequently moved into political office. There are several individuals now in office with extensive experience of Track-II settings and who understand the theory and practice of peacebuilding. The Armenian government is more open and approachable than it has been for many years, and upwards influence into the Track-I process appears a real and attainable goal for civil society in Armenia.

This context drives an Armenian perspective that the present moment is an opportunity to broaden the circles engaged in peacebuilding, rather than to deepen those that already exist. KCG participants from Armenia see the current moment as an opportunity to think beyond Track-I/II schemas to include other kinds of social actors. According to one: 'commerce finds a way; there may be elements of informality, but it encourages communication'.

In Azerbaijan, civil society agendas are focused more on simply normalising grassroots activity that has been restricted for the last five years. Over this period, the pool of NGOs and individual experts working on the conflict has further contracted. KCG participants from Azerbaijan highlighted both the 'colonization' of civic space by other, 'uncivil' groups, and a stark centre/periphery divide in which there is no civic space, or tradition of civic engagement, in many regions of Azerbaijan.

As a result, Azerbaijani civil society faces a triple bottleneck: it is becoming deskilled in knowledge about the conflict, lacks the experience of interaction with Armenian counterparts, and cannot offer upwards influence into Track-I. KCG discussions revealed perspectives more focused on basic capacity-building to preserve a residual civil society, deepening the limited capacities that exist rather than broadening.

In Nagorny Karabakh, civil society development has for many years been constrained by the fact that the limited support coming from international donors has focused almost exclusively on peacebuilding objectives, rather than also supporting processes of democratization or capacity building. Neither has civil society been a beneficiary of support from the diaspora, which was channelled through institutions friendly to the pre-revolutionary regime in Yerevan and focused on infrastructure and development.

Independent civil society remains extremely limited in capacity and number; media and spaces for independent journalism are a particular gap.

Communicating 'peace'

Since late 2018 the overarching rhetorical climate surrounding the conflict has shifted toward more constructive messaging, although this has been inconsistent. KCG discussions revealed deep concerns among participants regarding the risks of 'preparing populations for peace' unravelling due to an inconsistent and tactical approach to communications. Even the best peacebuilding initiatives can fail early if framed insensitively, and one-off initiatives are unlikely to yield any benefit: 'if you just show a snapshot it will only provide a very negative snapshot'.

KCG participants agreed that communication needs to be 'continuous and serious', while tactical, momentarily high-profile events should be avoided. Cross-conflict media initiatives, such as journalists' visits, should be structured strategically as multi-event processes that are cumulative, encompassing non-conflict themes and building up to more sensitive subject matter. These events should be designed with a view to building networks for 'a coalition of reasonable media' across the conflict, rather than generating one-off 'media spectacles'.

In a recommendation to international donors supporting media platforms, KCG participants underlined the greater utility of investing in existing outlets that have a rapport with mainstream audiences, rather than creating new ones that tend to look outwards to a donor audience.

The toning down of rhetoric also needs to be reciprocal. Communications on peace process developments need to be carefully calibrated with multiple audiences in mind – domestic and cross-conflict; backchannels and opportunities to check messaging are crucial. Increased communication on conflict-related issues also needs to be embedded within a broader framework of policy change. This is necessary to avoid new forms of communication being dismissed as gesture politics, or, as one KCG participant put it, a modern rehashing of empty Soviet rhetoric on the 'friendship of peoples.'

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Addressing policy coherence

Another problem is fractured policy-making environments. According to one KCG participant, 'from the policy-maker's outlook, there are simply too many inputs: from the adversary, international actors, donors, aid agencies, and other policy centres.' Meanwhile, looking at policy-making from outside in, there is a chronic absence of outputs, and even basic information about the content of policy.

Policy incoherence inhibits the capacity of Armenian and Azerbaijani governments to meet the needs of an accelerated or widened peace process. Clashing messages emerge from different policy centres (and individuals within them), and there is a lack of 'white papers' that can be reliably taken to represent national policy. There is ambiguity over decision-making chains, and institutional memory remains locked up in specific individuals rather than a transferable knowledge set.

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KCG discussions covered new possible configurations to improve policy coherence across the conflict:

○ In the context of Armenia, discussion focused on the idea of a deputy-level coordination mechanism located at the National Security Council, and comprising representatives of the Prime Minister's Office, National Assembly, Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence, the de facto authorities in Nagorny Karabakh, and, on some issues, civil society. If this is considered too ambitious, a department or sub-department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs officially responsible for policies, projects and coordination on conflict-related issues would still be valuable in broadening the circles of policy-makers engaged in conflict-related issues.

○ In the context of Azerbaijan, the idea of a 'Ministry of Reconciliation and Civic Equality' analogous to the Georgian ministry with this title was discussed. In this scenario, one part of the ministry would cover the conflict resolution remit, the other wider issues of ethnic diversity and inclusion in Azerbaijan.

KCG participants recognized the reluctance of authorities across the conflict to create new institutions. There is a risk that new institutions,

absent a clear and forward-moving policy, may also become new veto points. Without them, however, no such policy is likely to make progress. An alternative approach is to focus on informal envoys, which may be appropriate at a given stage but does not offer a wider institutionalization of experience and skills.

A further issue in policy incoherence is the absence of mechanisms channelling ideas upwards into Track-I. Two possible approaches to Track-II processes that could enable this were discussed:

○ A thematic track tackling specific challenges (such as security, status, right of return) issue by issue. This would be led by a set of core participants joined each time by new participants with expertise on a given question, also enabling newcomers to gain experience of dialogue. This format would meet regularly and in sufficiently flexible format to be able to respond quickly to new developments and changes in the political environment;

○ A fixed participation track engaging a smaller and constant group of former policy-makers/ negotiators with the experience and contacts for back-channel influence. This allows greater trust and confidentiality in order to be able to discuss politically sensitive subject matter.

Broadening the peace process

The advent of a new government in Armenia has resulted in a new focus on the meaning of inclusion. Prime Minister Pashinyan has emphasized the need for the population of Nagorny Karabakh to participate in the negotiations. Baku has rejected this as undermining the basis of the talks, for which it sees only Armenia's and Azerbaijan's participation as relevant.

These positions reflect the fact that inclusion is typically seen as tantamount to recognition of any included party's claims and narrative. For some KCG participants for whom status is the fundamental issue at stake, inclusion should occur only on the basis of the desired status. For others, however, if inclusion is defined and framed according to each side's conflict narrative about status, it can be destructive. In this view, inclusion needs instead to be delinked from status and articulated to interests, needs and responsibilities.

Inclusion is not, by this argument, the exact inverse of exclusion, but implies a variable presence or other forms of participation by issue and interest. That in turn implies a richer and more diverse infrastructure of negotiation formats: it is not surprising that inclusion is politicised when there is only a single and very narrow high table to gain entry to. Here, KCG discussions highlighted that

Discussing 'preparing populations for peace' in Baku, Azerbaijan © Avaz Hasanov

the potential for regional frameworks to serve as vehicles of inclusion on some issues remains under-explored.

Overall, KCG discussions pointed to the need for a new debate on the meaning of inclusion. There are diverse groups and constituencies whose non-participation in the peace process takes different forms. These range from broad social categories such as women and young people, to different population groups and spaces, such as Nagorny Karabakh, border and displaced communities and diasporas, to specific political actors, such as de facto authorities. Inclusion in each case will mean something different.

In other peace processes across the world, such as that in Colombia, inclusion has been addressed through the establishment of mechanisms such as working groups and civic forums to address specific issues and feed ideas 'upwards' to the formal negotiations. The formation of pilot networks and working groups, possibly under the wing of regional organizations, could establish relationships and reserves of expertise and mutual understanding on specific issues. These would then be available for activation in the event of real movement in the formal negotiations. Until then, such groups could generate ideas that feed in to relevant policy agencies at deputy ministerial level.

With specific reference to what is perhaps the single most contentious inclusion issue, the participation of Nagorny Karabakh, KCG discussions highlighted that the emerging policy distance between Yerevan and Stepanakert has made this a more urgent issue. KCG discussions underlined how exclusion has had ambiguous consequences, lessening both the visibility of the de facto authorities in the peace process but also their responsibility for its outcomes. For one Karabakh Armenian participant, exclusion from the Minsk Group has provided de facto authorities with a long-standing comfort zone, which the Velvet Revolution – and Nikol Pashinyan's advocacy of responsibility – is challenging. However, the real cost of exclusion, as noted above, has been borne by civil society in Nagorny Karabakh.

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Perhaps the least visible constituency in the conflict system has been the displaced community of Karabakh Azerbaijanis. The socio-economic needs of the wider displaced population have been a focus of both international and then domestic

programming over the last 25 years. Yet the inclusion of Karabakh Azerbaijanis in peacebuilding initiatives has been marginal. In 2018 they received a new leadership, in the form of career diplomat Tural Ganjaliyev. This has resulted in additional visibility, yet capacities for wider participation remain unclear.

Risks in 'preparing populations for peace'

The prospect of 'preparing populations for peace' also carries risks. There is, firstly, serious concern over raised expectations of change. On the Azerbaijani side, expectations relate directly to the peace process and envision concessions from the new leadership of Armenia.

In Armenia, change in the domestic socio-economic and political situation has been keenly anticipated since 2018's Velvet Revolution. In Nagorny Karabakh, simultaneous de facto presidential and parliamentary elections in 2020 are expected to be a crucial moment influencing future trajectories of domestic politics in both Nagorny Karabakh and Armenia.

These sets of expectations are in tension with one another, as captured by this KCG participant: 'Azerbaijan is convinced that concessions are coming, but I do not see any coming from Yerevan. At the end of the year, will Baku say 'we tried diplomacy and it didn't work', and revert to military pressure?'

Pitching Track-II interventions in the current context is fraught with political risk. Clear messages from Track-I on the course of the peace process are unlikely, for reasons discussed above. According to one KCG participant, Track-II has to work around 'paranoia in Track-I about public knowledge on what is being discussed'. Some KCG participants argued that if peacebuilding initiatives do not push Track-I sufficiently, they may be seen as simply consolidating the status quo. They saw opportunities for Track-II to press ahead in processes that the formal negotiations would eventually tap into. In this way, Track-II could lead the way in setting the agenda for peace. Yet, if peacebuilding initiatives run too far ahead of the formal negotiations they may face backlash.

A third category of risk is peacebuilding incoherence. This is not a new problem, but it carries new weight in the context of an activated peace process. A consistent problem emphasized by KCG participants across the spectrum is coordination. Even within the European Partnership for the Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (EPNK) consortium, 'it was only through personal contacts that we could find out information about other activities'. Calls for

coordination between Tracks I and II were seen by some KCG participants as premature, pending improved coordination *within* Track-II.

Here again, cross-conflict asymmetries are significant. With a new leadership and participatory dynamic in Armenia, peacebuilding actors can be visible, facilitating coordination among them. In Azerbaijan, the more dispersed, de-institutionalized environment in which peacebuilders operate makes coordination considerably more challenging. In Azerbaijan, one participant noted that no green light was given for NGO-level participation in the third phase of EPNK – participation was possible only at the level of the single individual.

KCG discussions revealed realism and scepticism among Armenian and Azerbaijani peacebuilding practitioners, reflecting a history of 'windows of opportunity' that have not brought about change. At the same time, there was a considerable degree of consensus on the shortcomings of existing conflict resolution dynamics and the kinds of measures that could start to address them. There was a shared sense of urgency to pursue these measures and capitalise on the potential for positive change.

Defining areas for peacebuilding interventions

The KCG discussions identified five areas or baskets for peacebuilding interventions that could supply content to the 'preparing populations for peace' framework, beyond the confidence-building measures aimed at strengthening the ceasefire currently under discussion in the OSCE Minsk Group.

1. Strategic communications for peace

The rhetoric of 'preparing populations for peace' was seemingly adopted by the parties in January 2019 (it first appeared in December 2018 as a Minsk Group recommendation to the parties after an OSCE Ministerial Council meeting in Milan). Yet since then clashing messages have issued from different policy centres within Armenia and Azerbaijan. To address this, KCG discussions converged on the need for a more strategic approach to communications across the conflict, to include:

○ Coordination of leader-to-leader public communications and key messages on peace process issues; as noted above, clear messages from Track-I are unlikely, yet public signals indicating that cross-border initiatives are acceptable, and even encouraged – would create greater space for Track-II;

○ Exploration of leader-to-society communications, including the adoption of mutually acceptable messaging around cultural and symbolic calendars (i.e. such as religious holidays);

- A feasibility study for the resumption of TV-bridge debates featuring public figures and policy-makers;
- Scheduling of regular journalist exchanges, development of a 'code of conduct' for participants, and media professionals' network-building on thematic issues relevant across the conflict;
- Working with social media influencers to positively influence conflict-related discourse;
- Exploration of public visits by senior policy-makers across the conflict that would bring the peace process 'home', rather than scheduling meetings in distant capitals often associated with distracting geopolitical agendas.

2. Dialogue on policy

Unlike in many conflicts, there is a draft framework for the resolution of the Nagorny Karabakh conflict in the form of the Basic Principles. These form the basis for the negotiations, although in practice they have not been developed in any detail and remain a bare framework. Recent and previous KCG discussions have repeatedly emphasized that there is little public confidence in the Basic Principles, as a set of ideas that is more than a decade old and not subject to public debate. The resulting absence of a strategic vision leaves a gap that is filled by cynicism and hardline positions.

The KCG stressed an urgent need for multiple dialogue processes alongside the formal talks. These would serve distinct functions, from regular problem-solving within flexible formats capable of rapid reaction, to strategic envisioning of long-term approaches, to more technically-oriented processes that demonstrate the benefits of dialogue through the delivery of practical outcomes. Within a framework of multitrack dialogues, inclusion at different levels may serve multiple and different goals: fulfilling normative expectations, building capacity, and securing legitimacy.

A variety of approaches to dialogue are needed, including:

- A *problem-solving track* addressing approaches to political issues such as security, status and the right of return, with a flexible format capable of engaging new experts and reacting quickly to changes in the surrounding environment;
- A *strategic vision track* engaging a smaller and fixed participation group of former policy-makers/negotiators tasked with drafting a detailed peace plan that can be shared with those engaged in the Track-I process and stakeholders in wider society;
- A *technical track* focused on issues of common concern, bringing together technical experts who are professionals in their field, and focused on joint analysis, problem solving and the potential for practical change (in areas such as disaster management, environmental protection, water resource management, health); technical dialogue may, under some circumstances, allow for status to be less salient in framing dialogue;
- A *regional track* engaging Armenian, Azerbaijani, Georgian and other participants, both to facilitate dialogue on wider regional issues of concern and to provide a flexible framework facilitating inclusion where bilateral formats are problematic. A prominent thread in the KCG discussion was the role that bottom-up networked ties could play in the South Caucasus as an alternative to top-down geopolitical fracture.

3. Policy-level coherence and capacity-building

The policy-making infrastructure in each state lacks capacity to effectively meet the challenges of either an accelerated or widened peace process. This can be met through initiatives to:

- Conduct a review of the functionality of current policy architecture addressing conflict in each party and exploring alternatives, such as the potential for new or upgraded policy infrastructure, envoys, backchannels and coordination centres, to be shared with the parties;
- Provide mediation support to the parties in the form of training for current and future diplomats on best practice in conflict transformation and peace processes.

4. Strategic inclusion and civil society capacity-building

Working with local partners, international peacebuilding interventions can support a new debate on the meaning of inclusion by supporting initiatives to facilitate the participation of a wide range of currently excluded actors. These could include, but are not limited to:

- Support for conflict transformation training for women, youth and border communities;
- Support for local civil society and independent media platforms in Nagorny Karabakh;
- A baseline study of capacities and needs of the Karabakh Azerbaijani community;
- Within some populations and constituencies, a round of 'peace polling' (opinion surveys explicitly

Young people at a peacebuilding event in Spitak, Armenia © Media Initiatives Center

addressing conflict themes and reconciliation) could precede and strengthen the case for intervention.

5. Conflict literacy and public education

Societies across the conflict have for many years been exposed to unilateral and reductive narratives. Substantial work is required to provide public access to a wider range of information, challenging audiences to think differently about conflict and peace. This applies in the first instance to awareness of what is being negotiated in the formal talks. Possible ideas here include:

○ A peace process 'primer', identifying the central problems and how different peace plans, including the Basic Principles, have addressed them;

○ Video infographics visualising the Basic Principles and the problems they address, for a younger audience in online spaces;

○ Creative papers that aim to envision approaches and policy issues 'beyond' current proposals, and to engage new audiences who are currently disengaged and unreceptive to a conversation framed in terms of the Basic Principles.

Beyond this, KCG discussions converged on the ongoing necessity of building out cultural memory and perceptions of 'the other' in ways conducive to a meaningful peace process. From across the conflict, there is a strong sense of monopolies being held over the discourse around conflict and peace: 'Histories [of the conflict] are told in black and white: yes, there have been explicit periods of violence, but they are also accompanied by cooperation.' These reflections speak to the necessity of broad-ranging work to fragment identities defined by conflict, recover local histories, and deal with the past.

In January 2019, following a meeting of Azerbaijani and Armenian Foreign Ministers Elmar Mammadyarov and Zohrab Mnatsakanyan in Paris, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe announced that the ministers had agreed on the necessity of 'preparing their populations for peace'.

The announcement followed a sustained reduction in Line of Contact violence and the instalment of a new government in Armenia after the 2018 power transition, widely referred to as the 'Velvet Revolution'. These developments have driven speculation that the Armenian-Azerbaijani peace process may be shifting towards a new political conjuncture more conducive to peace.

Yet there is little agreement across the conflict on what 'preparing population for peace' means in practice. Azerbaijan seeks to move quickly to what it terms substantive talks yielding the return of territories at an early stage. Armenia is more concerned with reducing enmity and reviewing the format of the talks. These opposed positions are not new, and reflect the absence of a strategic vision of peace at the level of political elites.

In May 2019, Conciliation Resources convened a meeting of the Karabakh Contact Group (KCG), an Armenian-Azerbaijani dialogue platform, to discuss risks and opportunities facing the peace process. This paper summarizes those discussions. It identifies a number of salient obstacles to peacebuilding efforts today, and presents a menu of policy areas where focused work is needed to help meet these challenges.

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