

## PERCEPTIONS OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN ARMENIA AND AZERBAIJAN IN THE CONTEXT OF THE NAGORNO—KARABAKH CONFLICT

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### Introduction and methodology

■ Armenia and Azerbaijan, two states with a different historical and cultural-identity heritage, have developed hostile neighborly relations. Geographically and geopolitically, Armenia and Azerbaijan are located in the South Caucasus region or the Transcaucasia region, as it is often called. Transcaucasia is a geopolitical region located on the border between Eastern Europe and Southwest Asia, (Mulvey, 2000) in the southern part of the Caucasus Mountains, stretching from the southern border of Russia to Türkiye, including the territories of Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia.

This paper *aims* to be a contextual, conceptual and factual analysis of the complicated relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan and what are the main perceptions of civil society in these countries in the context of the conflict in Nagorno—Karabakh.

One of our *research hypotheses* is represented by the fact that the civil society in both countries is not developed enough to have a decisive role in the context of the complicated conflict in Nagorno—Karabakh. A second hypothesis that we want to test starts from the idea that underdeveloped civil society is still closely linked to political actors and responds to political impulses.

The main *research questions* raised are: Q1. Is there a developed civil society in Armenia and Azerbaijan to influence the conflict resolution? Q2. Is there a developed civil society in Armenia and Azerbaijan to influence the geopolitical direc-

tions of these countries? Q3. What is the perceptions of civil society from Armenia and Azerbaijan?

The *levels of analysis* we propose from a methodological perspective include: a. the conceptualization of civil society in Armenia and Azerbaijan; b. geopolitical contextualization; c. analysis of the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict and the complicated bilateral relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan; d. analysis of perceptions about civil society in Armenia and Azerbaijan from the perspective of the EaP Index.

The importance of the paper resides in the fact that civil society is one of the most important indicators of a democratic society (Popescu et al. 2022). To go even further, we could say that without a civil society, we do not have a democracy (Popovenciu 2022: 26). From this point of view, we will analyse the civil societies from Armenia and Azerbaijan for the period of 2011–2022 with a special emphasis on the year of 2020 when the Nagorno–Karabakh war erupted and the period of 2021–2022 in order to analyse how the civil society reacted to the events, which were the perceptions of the general public and how the CSOs got involved in the conflict resolution.

In order to make a comprehensive analysis we started from 2011 the first year when the European Commission released the European Integration Index for the Eastern Partnership states. We will pay a closer attention on the Management dimension, Participation of civil society category for each state having the purpose of developing a longitudinal analysis regarding the development and implication of the CSOs from each state. After 2015, when the Index was changed into the Eastern Partnership Index, the civil society became an inter-sectorial category. Hence we will analyse the periods of 2015–2016, 2017 and 2020–2021 by taking into consideration six sub-categories under the Approximation domain: Democratic rights and elections, State accountability, Independent media, Freedom of opinion and expression, Freedom of assembly and association, Equal opportunities and non-discrimination and Public administration. There was no available data for the 2018–2019 period of time, but, since the topic of the paper is concentrating on the September–November 2020 and afterwards, this limitation should not affect to a large extend our findings.

Beyond the EaP Index, we will analyse the Freedom House’s Freedom of the World 2021 and 2022 Reports, the USAID 2020, 2021 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Indexes and other qualitative researches in order to have a comprehensive view over the impact that the war had over the development of civil societies.

## Conceptual analysis. Literature review

### Definitions and concepts

When we talk about building a democratic society, we must call for the time that this civic building requires. We can even say that this is a continuous process of searching for social and civil balance between the interests of different actors in public life. But what is certain is that the first step in establishing a functioning democracy is strengthening democratic institutions and mechanisms. Perhaps the most important regulatory mechanism for democratic societies is represented by civil society (Zakota–Németh: 2022).

Civil society at large refers to all forms of social action undertaken by individuals or groups of individuals that are not connected to or managed by state authorities. A civil society organization is an organizational structure that has members that serve the general interest through a democratic process and that has a role as a mediator (sometimes as an amender of policies and or actions) between public authorities and citizens.

The fundamental documents of the European Union appeal to civil society in the articles of the Treaties: Article 15 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union recognizes the role of civil society in the good governance of the European Union (EU), and Article 11 of the Treaty on European Union emphasizes the need for the EU to maintain an open, transparent and constant dialogue with civil society organisations, for example when preparing proposals for EU legislation. Examples of such organizations include: social partners (trade unions and employers' groups); non-governmental organizations (e.g. for environmental and consumer protection); local organizations (e.g. youth and family groups). The European Economic and Social Committee represents workers' and employers' organizations at EU level and has a vital role in the EU's legislative process. The sectoral social dialogue committees are established to further involve the social partners in the decision-making process (EUR–Lex 2022).

Civil society institutions are needed not only in countries where democracy is being built, but also in those with a strong democratic tradition. These are necessary in the long term. Often, the interests of political and economic actors, such as party and business interests, intertwine and act against the public interest, so civil society remains important. In such situations, in order to correct the malfunctions, other institutions are needed, which are not part of the social-political subsystem, nor of the economic subsystem. Civil society's reactions to administrative, economic, social and other policies that contradict its interests are varied: demonstrations, press campaigns, protests, etc. Since such actions are difficult to organize and often have only a short-term impact, it is necessary to create some kind of structures parallel to those of the state. They must work with the structures involved in the management of society to find the right solutions and to continuously improve the quality of social life. Civil society must be involved in a

wide range of issues such as central and local governance, international relations, economic development, social and public health issues or environmental protection (Zakota–Németh: 2022) and why not as and in the present case in managing a conflict.

Because there has been a strong correlation between the origin of this conflict and the peace process, there is a concerted effort to increase conflict-sensitive research in the fields of sociology, anthropology, social psychology, political science, and history, as well as the applied fields of international development and journalism, can produce a breadth of knowledge and more experts that are able to contribute to the transformation.

Conflict is of many kinds, but beyond the great global military conflicts, history has shown us that after diplomatic conflicts or even next to them, there are ethnic conflicts. Ethnic conflicts are loaded with so much subjectivity that even neutral moderators cannot handle the situation very well. Ethnic conflict is a form of conflict in which the objectives of at least one party are defined in eminently ethnic terms. In this situation, the conflict and its antecedents and even possible solutions are perceived only in ethnic ways. Paradoxically, or perhaps not, ethnic conflict itself is usually not related to ethnic differences but to perceptions of ethnicity's perspective on political, economic, social, cultural and often territorial issues (Britanica).

### Literature review

Perhaps we are talking about one of the most critical disputes in the long-standing post-Soviet space when we talk about the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. While this issue has long been seen as more of a territorial dispute – to a large extent, it can also be argued to be a conflict of ethnic identity. However, the negotiations carried out by the Minsk Group on the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict, which were initiated within the OSCE, did not yield any results. In this context, the process of solving the problem through negotiations has failed. This opened the way for extraordinary measures to be taken to reach a solution. The final military confrontation experienced in 2020 was also specifically triggered by this approach (Kurt–Tüysüzoğlu: 2022).

The scientific literature on the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict, has been written mostly in the last decades by scholars, journalists (<https://romania.europalibera>: 2020), and policymakers who are usually of Armenian or Azerbaijani origin. All the mainstream from Armenian and Azerbaijani media, both in the region and diaspora, also represent this trend. What unites this Bibliography is the fact that it focuses on legitimizing the position of one side and disregards even the most basic needs and interests of the other side.

Both Armenian and Azerbaijani authors have very similar approaches to the conflict: every positive feature is attributed to their side and every negative feature

to the other. The conflict is seen from an adversarial point of view. The Armenian side (Papazian, 2008) usually blames Azerbaijani and the Azerbaijani side (Shamkhal et al. 2016) blames Armenian for the failure of the peace process. They are united in their critique of the international community's inability to deliver a just solution, the Armenian version of which, obviously, is the opposite of the Azerbaijani one.

Another trend in the literature includes authors who tend to take a neutral or objective stance, and also look at the conflict from a zero-sum point of view (Chitadze, 2016; German, 2012; Gamaghelyan et al. 2021; Cheterian, 2018; Diyarbakirlioğlu, 2020). What unites these authors, however, and what differentiates them from others, is that they focus on the development of a long-term peace process that could transform the relations between the societies and make sustainable coexistence of Azerbaijanis and the Armenians possible. Many mention that accepting the other's grievances with as legitimate is an important first step in looking for a solution and that lasting peace requires reconciliation between the societies, not only among politicians and elites. Some emphasize the central role of identity in the perpetuation of the conflict. All of them stress the necessity of involving civil societies in the peace process (Kopecek et al. 2016; Caspersen, 2012).

In the happy event that Armenian and Azeri negotiators ever reach an agreement on the future status of Nagorno–Karabakh, it is worth noting that this would not necessarily resolve the conflict as any peace treaty would require the agreement of the Karabakh Armenians, whose political representatives are currently excluded from the peace negotiations. It is almost impossible to conceive of Karabakh Armenians agreeing to such a treaty without a change in their perception of Azeris. According to the theory of conflict transformation and subsequent peacebuilding, civil society in Nagorno–Karabakh should be an integral part of this change (Kopecek et al. 2016).

However, the discussion of identity, and identity-based conflict resolution, has been virtually nonexistent until recently.

It should be noted that the conflict remained latent for more than 20 years, and the political systems of the countries involved in the conflict have always adapted to the situation. Conflict is often used by political leaders to legitimize their power, consolidate their support, and marginalize their opponents and thus neutralize democratization pressures. Under these conditions, conflict transformation approaches are considered a necessary means to deal with conflict. Given that political elites have little motivation to implement such a transformation, civil society actors are increasingly coming to the fore. Thus, only through multiple initiatives supported by civil society actors, the practices of transforming conflicts towards peace can advance and, subsequently, bring good coexistence in the region (Ayunts et al. 2016).

It is no surprise, therefore, that identity matters as well as all other nonpolitical components of the conflict have not been addressed in the negotiations to date. Research on identity and its influence on the Armenian Azerbaijani conflict, the role of civil society, on collective memory and transmitted trauma and other

factors is growing – our study can be included in this category. Various experts increasingly approach the resolution of the conflict less as an outcome and more as a process. This process requires a long-term vision and commitment and a comprehensive understanding of all the underlying needs and factors, not only the political ones. It must involve continuous assessment and reassessment of the ever-changing context, political and economic factors and identity needs.

In all this context, the risk of escalation of the conflict remains an open one, and the need for external mediation remains a pressing need. Under these conditions, such a conflict would destabilize the South Caucasus region, affecting oil and gas exports from Azerbaijan – which produces approximately eight hundred thousand barrels of oil per day – to Central Asia and Europe. We note that Russia has pledged by treaty to defend Armenia in case of military escalation, but at the same time Türkiye has pledged to support Azerbaijan. So the vocal support of the United States for Armenia in recent years, along with Russia's current involvement in the war in Ukraine, could produce realistic premises for the resumption of the conflict and could further complicate efforts to ensure peace in the region. Given the reduced capacity of the United States and Russia to serve as honest brokers, the European Union, led by European Council President Charles Michel, assumed a more active mediation role in 2022 (Global Conflict Tracker).

### The geopolitical context

The relationships in the Causational space were complicated throughout the 20th century. The Ottoman legacy highlighted the complex relationships between the peoples and religious communities of this region. The Soviet Union not only did not solve these but aggravated the mistrust between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the independence of these states led to even more violent conflicts in the Nagorno–Karabakh region, which proclaimed itself a republic on 28 December 1991.

Armenia's geographical position (hard border with Azerbaijan and Türkiye) has contributed to the fact that the country has a concept of complementarity in foreign policy. This concept is an attempt to balance specific interests, and on the other hand the lack of a concrete position in the direction of foreign policy. Armenia, with its interest and desire to cooperate with the EU in the Eastern Partnership (EaP), has also maintained its openness to Russia (Brie–Goreainov 2021: 249). When Armenia began negotiations on an Association Agreement with the EU in 2010–2012, Russia suddenly raised the price of Russian gas exports to Armenia and signed a contract with the Baku authorities for the supply of Russian weapons. Armenia was thus put under pressure to make another geopolitical option (Brie–Goreainov 2021: 249).

Armenia joined the Eurasian Customs Union, and later the Eurasian Union, but at the same time it showed interest in the PaE. In this way, Armenia used the con-

cept of diversification in the economic field and in foreign policy. Thus, due to its geographical position, Armenia is forced to have a policy based on the principle of complementarity and balance between Moscow's ambitions and EU interests.

On the other hand, Azerbaijan, having valuable oil resources, was more independent in managing its foreign policy. Majority Muslim, this country has developed special relations with the Islamic world. At the same time, he tried to break away from the model of Islamic states and to give the state a strong secular character under the influence of Western culture. „*Its position at the intersection of West and East has allowed Azerbaijan to develop a symbiosis of the values of both cultures*” (Gerasymchuk–Matyichyk–Nantoi–Platon 2013: 29).

The harsh geopolitical realities of the Caucasus, where Azerbaijan has strained relations with Armenia and cordial relations with Georgia, have led to a westward orientation of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan has an interest in working with the EU within the EaP and in finding a way out of its problematic relationship with its neighbours. Its interest is therefore linked to cooperation with the EU, without any additional ambition of an integrative nature. This reality was increasingly understood over the period of 13 years of the EaP by the EU, which offered the possibility to deepen relations in the bilateral field depending on the specific level of ambition. The level of ambition in the EU relationship was even more complicated in the context of the Russian aggression in Ukraine after February 2022. As a result of the European sanctions imposed on Russian oil and the need to diversify gas sources, the EU has shown itself to be more and more friendly and open to collaborate economic and political with the state of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan took advantage by signing new energy export agreements on the European market.

Given the geographical position, the blockade and the policy of isolation from Türkiye and Azerbaijan, the development of relations with neighbours such as Georgia and Iran is of particular importance to Armenia. Economic cooperation between Georgia and Armenia largely includes the transit of goods from Russia to Armenia and vice versa, passing through the territory of Georgia. However, Georgia is not a strategic partner for Armenia. Armenia is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union, the Collective Security Treaty Organization and a strategic partner of Russia, and Georgia in its turn aims to get closer to the EU, NATO and has a strategic partnership with Türkiye and Azerbaijan (CRS Report for Congress, 2010; Goreainov–Brie 2021: 233–234). In this sense, the political visions of these two countries are different.

Geopolitically, Azerbaijan has built a foreign policy based on the logic of a diplomatic oscillation between Russia and the EU, but also between Iran, the USA and Türkiye.

Azerbaijan pays special attention to bilateral relations with foreign states, including neighbouring states. In this sense, Azerbaijan's relations with Türkiye, which is also a strategic partner, are special and very important. Türkiye was the first country to recognize the independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan and has so far provided support in various fields. It is very important for Azerbaijan that the

Turkish side has always supported its position in the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict. Between these two countries there are close relations of economic and energy cooperation (Goreainov–Brie 2021: 235).

Given the earlier conflict with Armenia over the Nagorno–Karabakh region, Azerbaijan was forced to move even closer to Türkiye, to which it felt close in terms of the mutual sympathies inherited from the common Islamic culture and religion. The two states signed the Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Support in 2010. Türkiye, by this treaty, undertakes to support the Azerbaijanis by any means, including the military (Goreainov–Brie 2021: 235).

The proximity to Türkiye also facilitated some openness to the United States. Russia’s military cooperation and geopolitical common position with Iran have led Azerbaijan to further strengthen relations with Türkiye as a strategic ally (Gerasymchuk–Matiychyk–Nantoi–Platon 2013: 29; Goreainov–Brie 2021: 235).

Türkiye, together with Italy and the Russian Federation, are Azerbaijan’s main trading partners (CRS Report for Congress, 2010). Important pipelines pass through the territory of Türkiye, through which Azerbaijan gas and oil are delivered to Europe. Cooperation with Türkiye is also very close in the military. To this end, Türkiye is providing financial assistance to Azerbaijan in the sphere of defence (Goreainov–Brie 2021: 235).

An important direction of Azerbaijan’s foreign policy represents bilateral relations with Iran. Contemporary bilateral relations between Azerbaijan and Iran are not simple, but they are developing quite intensively, even if there are several problems. It should be mentioned that in Iran there is the large Azerbaijani diaspora, about 16 million Azerbaijanis (Souleimanov–Kraus, 2017: 11). Thus, almost 16% of Iran’s population constitutes of ethnic Azerbaijanis. Although Iran has close cooperation with Armenia, the country officially supports the Azerbaijani side in the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict (Goreainov–Brie 2021: 235).

### **Nagorno–Karabakh conflict and Armenia’s bilateral relations with Azerbaijan**

Armenia and Azerbaijan do not have any kind of official diplomatic relations (Bilateral Relations). Armenian-Azerbaijani relations are the main problematic direction in the foreign policy of both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Legally, diplomatic relations are missing, the two neighboring states are neither at peace nor at war, they have no commercial and economic relations.

The Nagorno–Karabakh region is an enclave within Azerbaijan. In 1989, the population of the region was about 189,000, of which 76.9% were Armenians and 21.5% Azerbaijanis, and the rest were Russians, Ukrainians and others (Băhnăreanu, 2016: 10). Armenia considers Nagorno–Karabakh to be a part of historical Armenia (Avakian, 2015: 8). In 1988, ethnic Armenians living in Nagorno–Karabakh demanded the transfer of what was then the Nagorno–Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) from Soviet Azerbaijan to Armenia (The Nagorno–Karabakh conflict, 2023).

On December 28, 1991, Nagorno–Karabakh proclaimed itself a republic, and in the subsequent period it fought for independence with the new state of Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani side did not accept the declaration, unlike Armenia, and imposed direct presidential control over the enclave. As a result, heavy fighting broke out between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces. The conflict has allowed Karabakh–Armenian forces to regain control of Nagorno–Karabakh, leaving Azerbaijan with about 15% less territory (Goreainov–Brie 2021: 236). Thus, by Geographically and geopolitically, Armenia and Azerbaijan are located, according to some data, more than 30,000 people had been killed and more than one million displaced. In May 1994, Russia mediated the conflict and the two states agreed to sign an armistice accepted by the Nagorno–Karabakh army commander (the agreement was officially signed on July 27, 1994). (CRS Report for Congress, 2010).

The conflict between the two countries escalated in July 2020. Armenia and Azerbaijan have made mutual allegations of ceasefire violations. On September 27, 2020, military actions between the Armenian and Azerbaijani forces were resumed, which continued until November 10, 2020, and several thousand people were killed on both sides. Armenia was the first to declare a state of war, followed by Azerbaijan, but in the latter it was done so only in certain parts of the country. The two states blame each other for this serious deterioration of the situation (Goreainov–Brie 2021: 237)

The Nagorno–Karabakh conflict is of particular importance to the Russian Federation and Türkiye. Armenia’s traditional ally in this conflict is Russia. Moscow and Yerevan are very close. Both peoples are closely connected, including through the Orthodox Christian faith. In fact, Armenia is one of the former Soviet republics that are loyal to Russia. Both are part of the Eurasian Economic Union. The two countries are also military partners. Russia has a base in Gyumri, Armenia, and Armenia is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a post-Soviet military alliance. However, in the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict, Moscow does not position itself as an ally of Armenia, but as a mediator within the OSCE (Goreainov–Brie 2021: 236).

Azerbaijan and Armenia signed an agreement under Russian auspices to end hostilities in the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict, which marks Azerbaijan’s military victories after six weeks of fighting. Following a 10 November 2020 tripartite agreement backed by Russia, Azerbaijan regained control over large parts of the self-proclaimed republic, successfully cutting its ties with Armenia. According to the terms of the ceasefire agreement, the so-called Lachin corridor remained the only road connecting Nagorno–Karabakh with Armenia, the security of which was to be provided by the Russian peacekeeping contingent (Amnesty International 2023).

Azerbaijan has also called on Armenian forces to hand over some areas it owns outside the Nagorno–Karabakh border, including the eastern district of Agdam and the western part of Kalbajar (Goreainov–Brie 2021: 237–238). Armenians will also lose the region of Lachin, where a crucial road connects Nagorno–Karabakh with Armenia, leaving more than 6,500 dead. The agreement stipulates that a 5-kilometer

-wide area in the so-called Lachin corridor will remain open and be protected by about 2,000 Russian peacekeepers (RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service 2022).

Azerbaijan's victory in the six-week war in Nagorno–Karabakh with Armenia, in which it enjoyed unconditional support from Türkiye, a faithful ally, further strengthened President Aliyev's position, despite the country's economic difficulties. Following the ceasefire agreement, Azerbaijan regained control of districts adjacent to the Nagorno–Karabakh region that it had not controlled for more than 26 years, as well as part of Nagorno–Karabakh (Goreainov–Brie 2021: 238; Amnesty International 2023).

The situation became much more complicated after the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Since February 2022, Azerbaijan has initiated three major escalations in Nagorno–Karabakh and on the Armenia–Azerbaijan state border (Grigoryan 2023).

*"The road, which connects Nagorno–Karabakh to Armenia, has been inaccessible to all civilian and commercial traffic since 12 December 2022 after being blockaded by dozens of Azerbaijani protesters, widely believed to be backed by the country's authorities. The situation has left some 120,000 ethnic Armenian residents in Nagorno–Karabakh without access to essential goods and services, including life-saving medication and health care"* (Amnesty International 2023). Nagorno–Karabakh has been under a total blockade by Azerbaijan for a month.

### Civil Society in Armenia and Azerbaijan: trends and the impact of war

In order to analyse which were the perceptions and the actions of the civil societies from Armenia and Azerbaijan regarding the 2020 conflict resolution, firstly, we need to identify the status-quo regarding their development and involvement in the public affairs of the two states. For that, we used the relevant information from the Eastern Partnership Index (launched in 2011). After analysing the score that each state has recorded in various domains over the years, we used the data available from the Freedom House's Freedom of the World 2021 and 2022 Reports, the USAID 2020, 2021 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Indexes and other qualitative researches in order to have a comprehensive view over the impact that the war had over the development of civil societies. These reports are of high importance, since we cannot have a democracy without having a robust, resilient and efficient civil society (Popovenciu 2022: 26). Thus, its development characterizes the entire political system. By making a longitudinal, comparative analysis, we could identify and analyse the main progress, but also the stagnation and even regression regarding the aforementioned topic. The analysis concentrated mostly on the years of 2020, 2021 for the purpose of seeing how each civil society was impacted by the war, how it reacted to it and which was its role regarding the conflict resolution that followed.

The EaP Index was launched two years after the launch of the EaP and includes aggregated statistical data on the level of integration of all six EaP member countries. It should be mentioned that from 2011 to 2014 the Index was officially called the European Integration Index for the Eastern Partnership states. The name was replaced in 2015 with the Eastern Partnership Index. The change was not accidental, given the meaning of integration and how it was perceived especially by Russia. Also, if in the case of the former, the emphasis was put on the integration process, thus starting from the premises that all six partner states wanted an in-depth relationship with the EU, if not even accession, in the case of the latter the tonality is more nuanced/adapted taking into account the different interests of the partner countries.

It should also be mentioned that in the period 2011–2014 the EaP Index had a special dedicated section for the category Participation of civil society within the Management dimension. Starting from 2015, this part was integrated as an intersectorial category, being included in all domains, especially in the Approximation one. Within it we have chosen to analyse the Democracy and good governance category, the following sub-categories: Democratic rights and elections, State accountability, Independent media, Freedom of opinion and expression, Freedom of assembly and association, Equal opportunities and non-discrimination and Public administration. Given the wartime situation, how the population reacted from both countries (mass protests in Armenia, anti-violence petitions in Azerbaijan and the governments' reactions; the humanitarian aid that was provided by the NGOs; the CSOs implication in the conflict resolution like the negotiation regarding the release of war prisoners) we consider the aforementioned sub-categories to be the most relevant. Unfortunately, regarding the EaP Index, there was no available data for the 2018–2019 period of time, but, since the topic of the paper is concentrating on the September–November 2020 when the war erupted and afterwards (period that was included in the Index), this limitation should not affect to a large extend our findings. Thus, in order to carry out a comprehensive comparative analysis, we have analysed the reports of the European Commission since 2011 until 2014 (Management domain, category Participation of civil society), and the ones from 2015 until 2021, all the aforementioned fields.

In terms of results, as it can be seen below, since the launch of the Index, clear differences in terms of national preferences emerged between the two states. Although it was not possible to talk about a desire regarding their possible integration into the EU, they had different reasons. Armenia perceived the program as an element of friction that could jeopardize their positive bilateral relationship with the Russian Federation, while Azerbaijan adopted a balancing strategy between the EU and Russia. Speaking concretely about the involvement of civil society, as can be seen below for the year of 2011, Azerbaijan recorded a score of 0, on a scale from 0 to 1, while Armenia, although less developed than the other 4 EaP remaining states, had a score of 0.5 highlighting a more developed and involved civil

society in the decision making process that Azerbaijan. Comparing longitudinally the 2011–2014 period of time, we can see the same difference, in the sense that the civil society from Armenia was more involved than the one from Azerbaijan. In terms of the front runners, for the period of 2011–2014 Georgia and Moldova scored the highest values. After being evaluated with the 0 score in 2011, Azerbaijan had a constant value 0.40–0.42, thus illustrating a state where the status-quo is maintained at a relatively low level of development. On the other hand, Armenia proved more active starting from a value of 0.40 and reaching 0.67, hence, not making revolutionary changes, but still being on a positive trend (<https://eap-csf.eu/>).

*Figure 1: Participation of civil society in Armenia and Azerbaijan- Management domain*

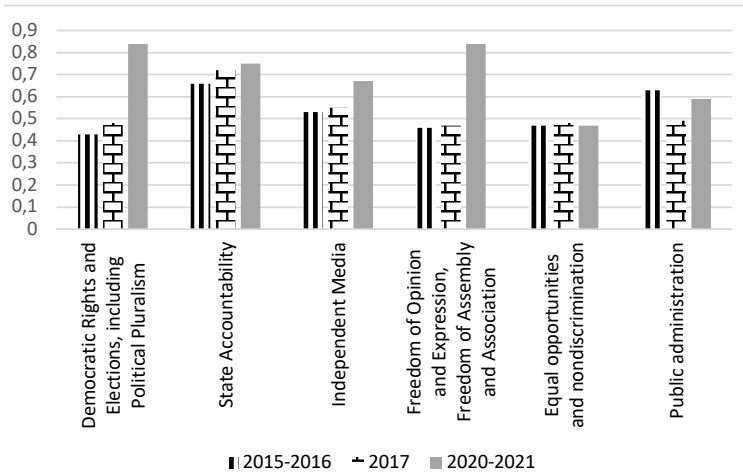


Source: Analysis developed by the authors based on the data collected from Eastern Integration Indexes for Eastern Partnership countries conducted by Open Society and International Renaissance Foundations available online <https://eap-csf.eu/>, accessed 4 December 2019

As previously mentioned, starting from 2015, the civil society category was integrated as an inter-sectorial item, included in several domains among which we have chosen 6 categories within the Approximation domain. Analysing the 2015–2021 period of time, we can observe that the trend already identified from the previous period continues with Armenia as a front runner from the two.

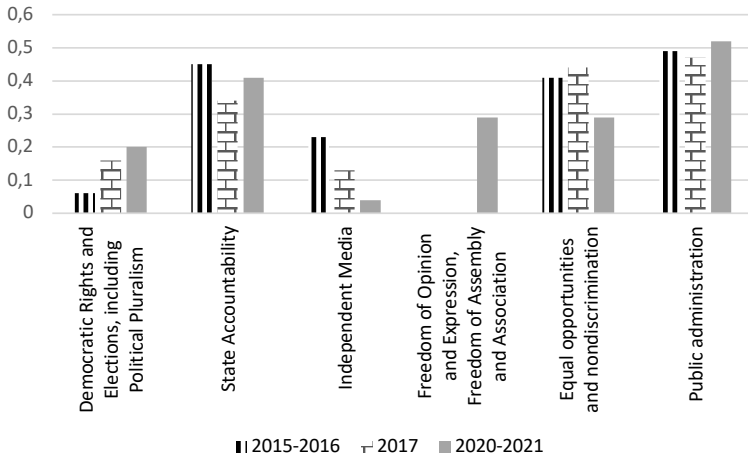
Given the topic of the paper, we will pay closer attention to the 2020–2021 period of time since the Nagorno Karabakh war took place in the autumn of 2020. Thus, looking at the values of 3 from the 6 categories that were analysed in 2020–2021, Armenia continued its progress, being the first among all six EaP countries, surpassing even the candidate countries Moldova and Ukraine regarding: Democratic rights and elections (reaching a score of 0.84), Independent Media (0.67) and Freedom of opinion, expression and freedom of assembly and association (0.84). On the other end of the scale, we can identify Azerbaijan which in the same period of 2020–2021 reached the lowest score from all six countries in two out of the six selected categories: State accountability (reaching a score of 0.41) and Independent Media having a score of 0.04, practically pinpointing towards the idea that there is almost no free media in this state. Regarding the category of Freedom of opinion, expression and freedom of assembly and association it registered a score of 0.29 occupying the fifth place being followed by Belarus. What is to be noted here is the fact that during 2015–2016 and 2017, Azerbaijan's score was zero, thus, although still low, the 0.29 score represents a positive trend (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum).

Figure 2: Armenia's civil society – Approximation domain



Source: Analysis developed by the authors based on the data collected from Eastern Partnership Indexes conducted by Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum available online <https://eap-csf.eu/>, accessed 4 January 2023

Figure 3: Azerbaijan's civil society – Approximation domain



Source: Analysis developed by the authors based on the data collected from Eastern Partnership Indexes conducted by Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum available online <https://eap-csf.eu/>, accessed 4 January 2023

These dynamics are supported by other international statistical data. For example, in 2022 the Freedom House considers Armenia to be partly free, reaching a score of 55 out of 100 having a civil society that is considered strong. Comparing the rate with the one from 2021 (55/100 as well) Armenia proves among others also stability in its reforms and no significant impact of the war upon the reforms (Freedom House, 2022).

Regarding the effects of the Nagorno Karabakh war upon the Armenian society, given the loss of war, the decision makers had to face huge criticism coming from the population regarding the conflict resolution, events culminating with mass protests that ended in seizing the Parliament's chambers for a limited period of time. Although under pressure, the President Nikol Pashinyan remained in power, but what is important to mention is that, although there were some police interventions and temporary detention of some protesters during the 2020–2021 protests, they were free to exercise their right to protest and at the macro level there were no important legislative changes, that could have negatively affect the rights of the civil society (Freedom House 2021). At the same time, in terms of perceptions of the general population, according to the Settlement of the Karabakh Conflict: Results of the August k place in Survey that too March 2021, the Armenians considers that the settlement of the conflict depended firstly on the Armenian government (35%), the Russian Federation (33%) and the global superpowers (China, USA, Russia and the EU) (32%) (Civilnet, 2021). Hence, the perception regarding dependence on external forces, mostly Moscow was still visible even after the war, especially since the government faced huge criticism as it was revealed above.

On the other hand, Azerbaijan reached a score of 9 out of 100, being, thus, labelled as a non-free country. In comparison with 2021 when it reached 10 points, we could argue that the state faces a slow regress. Regarding the development of civil society, due to the legislative changes that were made in the recent years, its liberties have been crippled, having very limited rights in terms of activism and freedom of expression (Freedom House, 2022), as the EaP Indexes have already shown. Also, comparing with the rights of Armenian citizens to protest, in Azerbaijan the ruling party, Yeni (New) Azerbaijan Party (YAP), remained in power after the elections held on February while the *“authorities arrested opposition leaders along with activists planning to hold a protest over the elections’ conduct later that month”* (Freedom House, 2021).

Regarding the freedom of media, in the case of Armenia, the media operates relatively freely and there are some small online media outlets that are independent. At the same time in the aftermath of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict resolution that was highly criticized, in July 2021 the Parliament passed a law according to which is illegal to bring serious insults towards officials and public figures. This decision was met with an antagonistic behaviour by NGOs and journalists taking into consideration that the bill could bring harm to the freedom of expression rights (Freedom House, 2022). In comparison, in Azerbaijan, the social media users or the citizens that voiced against the Nagorno Karabakh war and praised for a peaceful resolution *“were harassed and threatened online, prompting at least one activist to remove their signature”*(Freedom House, 2022). For example Giyas Ibrahimov, an Azeri civil society activist, was briefly detained in September. *“In October, he was questioned by prosecutors for signing a petition calling for a peaceful resolution along with activist Narmin Shahmarzade”*(Freedom House, 2022).

Analysing other international Indexes that highlight the development and the role of civil society in both Armenia and Azerbaijan during and after the war, the trends are constant with the previous findings. For example USAID 2020 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index, Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia highlights Armenia as reaching a 3.6 score, where 1 is the highest level of sustainability and 7 is the lowest, whereas in the case of Azerbaijan is 5.9 (USAID 2020). In 2021 the scores remained the same in the case of both countries (USAID 2021). As it can be seen below, the most concerning issue regarding Armenian civil society refers to the financial viability aspect, field where it scores the highest due to the dependency on foreign donors (USAID 2020) (Zamejc et al. 2021).

As the Index is mentioning, Armenia proves to have a relatively stable and strong civil society that played a key role during the war, as it proved to be adaptable during crisis and provide the Armenian society the necessary services. At the same time, it must be mentioned, that its advocacy power in relation with the government decreased due to the ceasing of the formal and non-formal channels of communication (USAID 2020). In absolute terms, “according to statistics provided by the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), 5,136 public organizations (compared to 4,794 in 2019) and 1,335 foundations (compared to 1,212 in 2019) were included in the state register as of the end of 2020”(USAID 2020). Thus the number of CSOs increased, revealing a more active presence and involvement of the Armenian society.

Figure 4: Armenia's civil society sustainability



Source: USAID, 2020 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index, Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia, Armenia, 24th Edition, 2021, available at: <https://www.fhi360.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/csosi-europe-eurasia-2020-report.pdf> accessed on 5 January 2023, p.20

Regarding Azerbaijan, the war did not change the civil society sustainability. As the Index is mentioning, one single positive aspect can be highlighted, namely the public image of the civil society organizations improved as part of their support for marginalized groups. At the same time, the access to foreign donors remain an issue. Among the government’s actions against the freedom of speech and expression, the Index is emphasizing as the others above the internet restrictions against the ones that condemned the violence of what was called the Patriotic

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War (USAID, 2020). In absolute terms “according to official information, in 2020, the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) registered 71 local CSOs (compared to 109 in 2019 and 169 in 2018), bringing the total number of registered non-commercial entities to more than 4,500. There are also dozens of unregistered groups in the country. During the year, three CSOs voluntarily dissolved their legal status” (USAID, 2020). Thus, the war did have an important impact over the general trend of decreasing the number of CSOs.

Figure 5: Azerbaijan’s civil society sustainability



Source: USAID, 2020 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index, Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia, Armenia, 24th Edition, 2021, available at: <https://www.fhi360.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/csosi-europe-eurasia-2020-report.pdf> accessed on 5 January 2023: 29.

Comparing the above quantitative data with the available qualitative researches, we can reiterate that the civil society in Armenia played an important role during and after the war. For example, the CSOs adapted to the situation on the ground and provided assistance and access to services for the displaced people, engaged in capacity building actions together with monitoring of rights for the ones that fled the war region. Others offered psycho-social support for the war veterans (Komm 2021: 13).

Another important element in what concerns the role of civil society in conflict resolution is represented by the fact that they can be a tangible solution when the diplomatic communication is under pressure. This was also the solution in the case of the Nagorno–Karabakh war, as the CSOs from both Armenia and Azerbaijan were communicating at the online level (since the people-to-people contact ceased to exist) in order to solve the issue of war prisoners as part of the peace-building process (Komm, 2021: 17).

In conclusion, the civil societies from both countries have been engaged in the conflict resolution after the Nagorno–Karabakh war erupted in 2020 in various degrees. The CSOs from Armenia seemed to be more efficient in adapting to the changing landscape due to a relative stable environment existent prior to the conflict emergence. Although there are some limitations, the rights to assemble

or the freedom of speech are generally ensured in Armenia. Also, another important aspect is represented by the access to foreign funding, opportunity that is also allowed in this country. On the opposite side, the CSOs from Azerbaijan had a marginal effect and tended to have their rights limited over time. They tend to face censorship and the right to free media is practically non-existent. Also, activists risk imprisonment over anti-government protests. Unfortunately, the wartime situations are prone to generate the emergence of non-democratic regimes or a legitimacy gaining for the non-democratic decisions (Borza 2022: 14). Armenia seems to be under this threat, but for the analysed period, it did not fall under this category. The same cannot be said about Azerbaijan.

## Conclusions

Nagorno–Karabakh is a dispute over the province’s status as a major source of tension between the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan and the leadership of the self-proclaimed republic of Nagorno–Karabakh, in the mediation of which other international actors got involved, such as OSCE, the Minsk group consisting of France, the Russian Federation and the USA. In conclusion, it should be noted that the border of the Nagorno–Karabakh region, about 100 kilometers, is one of the most dangerous militarized areas in the neighborhood of Europe.

The Russian aggression in Ukraine moved the center of Russia’s interest from the Caucasus. In this context, the Azerbaijani state was encouraged to exert new pressure and escalate the situation in Nagorno–Karabakh. This new reality on the ground has been facilitated by the Kremlin’s decreasing capabilities and changing interests in the region. Russia’s preoccupation with the war in Ukraine has significantly limited its capabilities in other key regions of the post-Soviet space. In the South Caucasus, Moscow has been doing its best not to get involved in a direct confrontation with Türkiye and Azerbaijan and wants to preserve its role as a neutral arbiter in the Armenian–Azerbaijani context. Azerbaijan in its turn has been periodically testing Russia’s red lines, trying to change the status quo on the ground (Grigoryan, 2023).

Azerbaijan can afford a position of ‘armed neutrality’. On the one hand, it is close to the EU and the US, providing its natural resources to the European market. On the other hand, it assesses quite realistically the impact of the Russian Federation on European policies and avoids any confrontation with Moscow, although it does not express any desire to develop relations as close as Armenia.

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