

CIVIC (TRACK 2) DIPLOMACY  
BETWEEN ARMENIA AND AZERBAIJAN:  
A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW  
AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

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# INTRODUCTION

The study was carried out through interviews, review of open source materials, and a summarization and analysis of the information collected by Yerevan Press Club experts.

The study aimed to document the experience of Armenian-Azerbaijani interaction within the framework of Track 2 diplomacy, identify prospects for this interaction in the new environment, and develop recommendations both for current and potential participants in dialogue initiatives, as well as for national and international decision-making entities responsible for supporting such initiatives. The following questions were developed for interviews with Armenian civil society representatives and individuals engaged in dialogue with Azerbaijani counterparts (the interviews also included supplementary points for clarification):

**1. In what Armenian-Azerbaijani dialogue programmes have you taken part?**

- Who did you cooperate with (please specify the donor, the Armenian, Azerbaijani, or third-party partners, if any)?
- Please describe your role in the implementation of the programme(s).
- What actions were taken within the framework of the programme(s)?
- What results did you achieve?

**2. If you have implemented or taken part in more than one Armenian-Azerbaijani dialogue programme, please name the one you feel was the most successful.**

- Why was this programme the most successful?
- Why were the other(s) less successful?

**3. Do you have experience cooperating with civil society organizations from third countries in implementing Armenian-Azerbaijani programmes (not as a donor, but as a participant)?**

- If yes, from which countries (Georgia, Turkiye, etc.)?
- How would you describe your experience?

**4. Which period of the negotiation process on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was, in your view, the most promising in terms of the possibility of reaching an agreement? Why?**

**5. How would you evaluate Russia's role in the conflict from 1988 to the present?**

**6. Did civic diplomacy influence the settlement process?**

**7. What political (geopolitical) factors, and during which periods influenced the intensity and effectiveness of dialogue (interaction) among civil society representatives in the two countries?**

**8. What areas of civil society interaction were the most effective?**

- humanitarian (prisoners of war, hostages, refugees, etc.)
- peacemaking (rapprochement, communication, etc.)
- discussion of settlement models
- exchange of experience in protecting rights and interests, promoting reforms in various areas of life, etc.
- joint studies
- countering information warfare and the creation of an enemy image
- other

**9. What is the added value of interaction between Armenian and Azerbaijani civil societies? What is the level of demand for it at the official level?**

**10. What is the media's role in covering the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and Armenian-Azerbaijani relations, and what should it be?**

**11. To what extent do the conditions for NGOs in Armenia and Azerbaijan allow for effective dialogue at the level of civil society, expert community, and journalists? Have you ever proposed cooperating with Azerbaijani side and been denied due to restrictions in their country?**

**12. Is it acceptable for representatives of civil society and media to collaborate with their countries' intelligence services on issues concerning Armenia-Azerbaijan relations? What forms of such collaboration are permissible?**

**13. What changes are necessary to enable civil society and media representatives to make a greater contribution to conflict resolution?**

**14. Can the Armenian diaspora contribute to civic initiatives aimed at conflict resolution? What could its contribution be?**

**15. What is your assessment of the contribution of international (foreign) donor organizations to conflict resolution?**

**16. How can international and foreign non-governmental organizations and think tanks contribute to Armenian-Azerbaijani dialogue and conflict resolution? How effectively are they carrying out their mission?**

**17. Is there a necessity for a periodic, comprehensive analysis of achievements and mistakes at the level of civil society, experts, and media to determine priorities for future efforts? Is there a need for this type of analysis from the conflicting parties and international structures, and how could it be used in practice under current conditions?**

## CONTEXT OF PEACEBUILDING

Interviews for this study were conducted with twenty representatives of the Armenian NGO sector, the expert community, and media that have certain experience in interacting with Azerbaijani colleagues and partners. To analyze the data, it was essential to understand the respondents' overall attitudes toward the conflict and the prospects for its resolution (questions 4 and 5 of the questionnaire).

Opinions among the study participants regarding the most favorable period for conflict resolution vary significantly. Approximately a quarter of respondents believed that the best opportunity for a settlement came right after the end of the 1992-1994 Karabakh War, when, in the view of some, Armenia's leadership was an "independent geopolitical entity." Furthermore, Armenia was the winning side, capable of firmly defending its national interests while abandoning maximalist approaches. At the same time, those favoring this perspective argued that Azerbaijan would, in any case, not have agreed to any status for Nagorno-Karabakh outside its own sovereignty.

It was a fairly common position to link the prospects for a settlement to Heydar Aliyev's persona, who, in the opinion of some respondents, was more inclined to compromise than his son and successor. Specifically, the final years of Heydar Aliyev's presidency were highlighted as a promising period in terms of a settlement. Moreover, one respondent noted that at that time "Azerbaijan had not yet raised a generation that hated everything Armenian. Historical distortions had not yet taken on a total character, and the propaganda machine did not reach such a large audience." Another viewpoint put forward was that a relatively favorable period lasted until 2013, with mediators showing genuine interest in discussing various compromise options, intensive negotiations taking place, and numerous programmes ensuring contacts among professionals, ordinary people, and youth. Relative freedoms were still preserved in Azerbaijan, while in Armenia the attitude toward the "liberated territories" as areas to be eventually returned had not yet changed.

In terms of how frequently they were cited as promising periods for negotiations, the third and fourth places were "shared" between two phases: the first years following the outbreak of the conflict (1988-1991) and the timeframe spanning from the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and the mass exodus of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh. The supporters of the first version use as an argument the fact that the hostility between the two societies had not yet grown so severe, and human ties were still fresh: it was precisely then, as one respondent put it, "that a full stop, rather than an ellipsis was needed." In one response, the timeframe and settlement model were specified in even greater detail: the self-determination of Karabakh Armenians, in a form acceptable to Azerbaijan, could have been achieved during the period when Arkady Volsky was in charge of the Special Administrative Committee in Nagorno-Karabakh. However, the local Armenian elite boycotted Volsky's proposals, with Robert Kocharyan, the second RA President, playing a decisive role in that opposition. Had Volsky's plan been implemented after the collapse of the USSR, Armenians and Azerbaijanis could have parted ways peacefully.

The second option (2022-2023 period) was seen by its supporters as a promising period, since Russia was fully focused on the war in Ukraine and was unable, as before, to negatively influence the settlement process. They argued that the agreement ultimately initiated in August 2025 by Baku and Yerevan should already have been acceptable to the parties and could have made it possible to avoid the tragic developments of September 2023.

Among the respondents, there were also people who believed that the most favorable opportunities for normalizing Armenian-Azerbaijani relations opened up right after the 2018 “velvet” revolution in Armenia. In their view, for the first time since 1991, Armenian authorities enjoyed a high level of public trust, benefitted from the West’s goodwill, were for some time perceived without explicit negativity by official Moscow, and were even viewed for a period in Azerbaijan as a reputable and promising partner for negotiations.

Another viewpoint voiced was that a settlement of the conflict through negotiations was, in essence, unrealistic. Firstly, for a number of reasons, the Minsk Group was in no way capable of resolving this issue. Its activities had long rested on the false belief that all conflicts in the South Caucasus should be resolved according to a single logic. This created the impression that the Minsk Group mediators had never seriously engaged in seeking settlement solutions. Secondly, at different stages of the process, the conflicting parties sought less to reach an agreement than to buy time until circumstances became most favorable exclusively for themselves. This was evident given the steadily increasing level of hostile domestic propaganda, which suggested that Baku and Yerevan were not so much preparing their societies for peace as fueling the conflict. From this perspective, it was only after the many losses and immense trauma of 2020 and 2023 that the foundation was laid for pragmatic negotiating approaches. Therefore, despite Azerbaijan’s bravado and threats that recur from time to time, the likelihood of a resumption of war at the new stage has substantially decreased, although it has not entirely disappeared.

The question of whether the conflict and its final tragic episodes - the 44-Day War and the de-Armenization of Nagorno-Karabakh - could have been avoided is a legitimate one. However, from the perspective outlined in the previous paragraph, the answer appears negative, as the independence gained by Armenia and Azerbaijan following the collapse of the USSR was built on a logic of conflict, making it perhaps impossible to avoid the developments that had been unfolding over the past thirty-plus years. At the same time, it would make sense to reflect on alternative topics: how should the Soviet state and national communities have acted, say, in the 1960s and 1970s, to avoid conflict in the late 1980s. In the 1930s, the Soviet authorities attempted to eradicate nationalism, but during and right after World War II, they encouraged its certain manifestations among Armenian and other national communities in their own interest - protecting one's own identity was viewed as a resource for defense against the USSR's external enemies. The appropriateness of such a policy withered in the 1960s, yet stopping the process proved impossible or beyond the capacity of the aging communist partocracy. Meanwhile, “dormant” interethnic conflicts were likely seen as something to be used if necessary, in line with the “divide and rule” principle. Either way, the period of some 6 decades ago deserves a separate study. This is all the more relevant, given that the concept of the “fourth republic,” which underpinned the ideological agenda of Armenia's ruling “Civil

Contract” party, includes the postulate that the Soviet leadership artificially reactivated contradictions between the Armenian and neighboring Turkic peoples during the 1940s-1970s.

In assessing Russia's role, survey participants showed considerable unanimity. The differences lay mainly in how radical their views were. Some argued that the Soviet center and the successor of its policy, the Russian Federation, were the very architects of the conflict, did everything to keep it unresolved, and that today Moscow is trying to keep it alive. A fairly common opinion was that “Aliyev would never have launched the 2020 war and carried out the ethnic cleansing of 2023 if he had not received a “go-ahead” from the Kremlin.” Russian support in Armenia goes to political forces that hinder agreements between Baku and Yerevan. As one respondent pointed out, “Russia is a classic empire that sought to maintain its dominance during the Soviet era, and in recent years, has been interested in maximizing its presence and influence in the region. One could argue that it has been the main beneficiary of the conflict.”

At the same time, it was expressed that Russia's role varied depending on specific periods. Some respondents pointed out that changes in its interests led to its support for Armenia at times and Azerbaijan at others. Other respondents credited its mediation efforts, which were crucial for achieving the May 1994 ceasefire, and in subsequent years, played a constructive role in the negotiation process due to Russia's interest in cooperating with the West. In the first decade of the new millennium, the geopolitical component in Moscow's mediation began to prevail, which entered into contradiction with the prospects for a settlement, especially given that the international community gradually delegated the entire process to Moscow. Russia's engagement in the war against Ukraine, along with the preceding deterioration of its relations with the West - including with other Minsk Group co-chairs - on the one hand, weakened its influence in the South Caucasus, and on the other, increased its dependence on relations with Türkiye and Azerbaijan, resulting in unfavorable developments for Armenia and Karabakh Armenians. While Russia managed to stop the war in April 2016, it failed to do so in 2020. Following the 44-Day War, even with peacekeeping troops deployed, it failed to fulfill its mission and prevent the mass exodus of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh.

In summarizing Russia's role in Armenian-Azerbaijani relations, it would be appropriate to cite the confidence expressed by some survey participants that the role of this power - whether positive or negative - will depend, first and foremost, on how much Armenia and Azerbaijan will let third parties manipulate their contradictions instead of overcoming or smoothing them over through dialogue.



## STAGES OF “PREPARING SOCIETIES FOR PEACE”

In the modern history of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations, four episodes stand out where both the parties and the mediators, to varying extents and at least at the declarative level, embraced the idea of “preparing societies for peace.” This topic first gained relevance after the May 1994 ceasefire. Baku and Yerevan engaged in negotiations on conflict resolution under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group, and even though they did not make an official statement on the importance of “civic diplomacy,” the efforts of international organizations to establish dialogue under the Track 2 format enjoyed some support from the authorities of both countries. The idea of “preparing societies for peace” was first recognized as an element of the official agenda of Armenia and Azerbaijan following the talks between Heydar Aliyev and Robert Kocharyan in Key West in March 2001.

Following the “Velvet Revolution,” similar to earlier leadership changes in Yerevan or Baku, a situation different from before emerged, stimulating certain expectations of new trends regarding the Karabakh conflict. The year 2018 opened the possibility of resuming bilateral contacts that had been cut off after the April 2016 war, and mediators assumed a more active role. There were interactions between Ilham Aliyev and Nikol Pashinyan, and negotiations between the foreign ministers intensified. On January 16, 2019, the Azerbaijani and Armenian foreign ministers, Elmar Mammadyarov and Zohrab Mnatsakanyan, issued an official statement, in which the most notable element was the reference to the need for preparing the peoples for peace. It was implied that one of the ways of achieving this goal would be to contribute to dialogue not only at the official level but also with the engagement of society at large. Following the meeting between Ilham Aliyev and Nikol Pashinyan on March 29, 2019, the possibility of implementing joint humanitarian projects was discussed. However, the fact that events unfolded in an entirely different manner was, in a sense, the result of what was probably the lowest intensity of public dialogue since the very beginning of the conflict.

The experience shows that, on the one hand, abstract peacemaking at the civil level is sooner or later doomed to failure, when there is no progress in the settlement process involving the decision-making parties. On the other hand, however, the freezing of Track 2 and complete alienation of societies from each other cannot but have a negative impact on the effectiveness of formal negotiations. Such conclusions are also made based on the previous studies on the prospects of dialogue carried out by different organizations in Azerbaijan and Armenia, particularly by the International Center for Human Development and Yerevan Press Club. Unfortunately, in both of the previous episodes, when the official parties emphasized the need to prepare societies for peace, events evolved in the opposite way. Therefore, it is critical that similar statements made by Baku and Yerevan in recent months - which can be considered the fourth such episode - do not contradict their true intentions and actions. Equally vital is that interest in supporting civic initiatives does not come solely from international organizations.

According to the YPC [study](#) conducted in 2018-2019, which also involved experts, journalists and representatives of civil society from Azerbaijan, the history of initiatives within the framework of Track 2 designed to help resolve the conflict can be divided into the following periods: 1. Initiatives of the Soviet period (1988-1991); 2. Contacts during the “hot phase” of the conflict (1992-1994); 3. Establishment of dialogue after reaching agreements on the ceasefire (1995-1997); 4. The period of the most intensive interaction and involvement of a large number of public representatives in joint projects (1998-2001); 5. “The fading inertia of regional interaction” (2001-2010); 6. The “ice age” in civic diplomacy (from 2011 up until the time the abovementioned study was conducted).

Naturally, the conventionality of the proposed chronology implied blurred boundaries between periods and the presence of different trends in each of them. Nevertheless, it contributes to the understanding of the changeable specifics at different stages when the representatives of civil society and media were involved in the formation of the context of the Karabakh conflict.

During the 6 years following the aforementioned study (2019-2025), dialogue initiatives fit into two more periods: 7. Maximum confrontation not only in military and political arenas, but also in relationships at societal and personal levels, including media, the expert community, the NGO sector, and active users of social networks (2019-2023); 8. Modest attempts to build dialogue under qualitatively new conditions, different from those of earlier eras: the Soviet period, the first Karabakh war, the relative status quo maintained after the 1994 ceasefire, and successive escalations of varying intensity spanning from the April 2016 hostilities and the accord on the text of the Agreement on Establishment of Peace and Inter-State Relations in early 2024. Accordingly, this period, which remains in progress as of the current study, can be considered to have started around the end of 2023 and the beginning of 2024 (the period of “prevailing constructivism”). Outlined below is a characterization of each of the eight highlighted periods, relying both on the [study](#) from six years ago and an analysis of the most recent data.

In the period of intensified national movements in Soviet Azerbaijan and Soviet Armenia in the late 1980s - primarily triggered by the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, accompanied by outbreaks of ethnic violence - the contacts among different circles of Azerbaijani and Armenian public were fairly intense. These contacts involved not only the Soviet nomenclature formats in which “the positive experience of coexistence in the USSR” was preached, but also the opponents of the authorities of that time. For the latter, unifying ideas included the pursuit of independence and liberation from the Communist empire. In particular, the dialogue between the representatives of the Armenian National Movement and the Azerbaijani Popular Front, which were coming to power, with the mediation of the democratic forces of other Soviet republics, primarily the Baltic ones, was quite intensive. Although the belief in the feasibility of compromises after the establishment of post-communist rule in Azerbaijan and Armenia was more inherent in the mediators than in the parties of the conflict, it largely determined the agenda of contacts and their attractiveness for the participants.

Even in the early 1990s, when Baku and Yerevan were just gaining international subjectivity and the conflict became “internationalized”, with their confrontation

moving into the hottest phase, representatives of Azerbaijan and Armenia maintained contacts in a variety of formats. In addition to the glimmering hopes for the possibility of resolving the conflict, there was also an interest in solving specific problems, exchange of information, and understanding how the neighbors comprehend the processes. For example, in the editorial office of the “Hayastani Hanrapetutyun” (“The Republic of Armenia”) daily, established in 1990 by the post-communist Armenian Parliament, regular telephone interviews of journalists with prominent Azerbaijani figures of the new wave were usual, when important events for coverage took place in the neighboring republic. Representatives of official Yerevan showed the same openness towards Azerbaijani journalists. With the final collapse of the Soviet Union, the mutual interest, however, began to quickly give way to the hostility of the new authorities to each other.

During the 1992-1994 war, the contacts of human rights defenders on issues of prisoners of war, hostages, search of missing persons and return of bodies of those killed became particularly relevant. During this period, a number of Armenian and Azerbaijani public organizations were actively working with the International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, other foreign humanitarian missions, as well as with the relevant state structures of the parties.

Naturally, the activities of the officials were rarely sincere and constructive, but the forced interaction with the international organizations and civic activists played an important role in the fate of many people. In particular, this work was carried out by Larisa Alaverdyan’s Armenian Foundation Against Violation of Law and Eldar Zeynalov’s Human Rights Center of Azerbaijan. After the establishment of the ceasefire, the International Working Group on the search of prisoners and hostages was established, which included human rights defenders from Azerbaijan, Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as from Russia and Georgia. However, this group could not avoid political manipulation from the outside. As a result, its activities were periodically frozen and resumed, before being completely terminated.

In the first half of the 1990s, in parallel with the practical humanitarian work under the auspices of international organizations, the dialogue on peace between the Azerbaijani and Armenian human rights defenders was developing. The most significant event in this process was the presentation of the Olof Palme Prize (in 1992) to the representatives of the Azerbaijani and Armenian branches of the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly (HCA) Arzu Abdullayeva and Anahit Bayandur.

The “Scandinavian accent” in the activities of the HCA was not limited to the prize of the Prime Minister of Sweden, killed in 1986. This was also manifested in the familiarization (after the conclusion of ceasefire) of representatives of the civil societies of the conflicting parties with the model of the Swedish Aland autonomy within Finland. In the post-war period, this model was considered acceptable for Nagorno-Karabakh by peacebuilders. By the initiative of the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly offices, officials were also involved in the “Aland process”, but this provoked an episode that raised a big question with regard to the opportunity to apply the Scandinavian experience in the South Caucasus. During one of the meetings in 1995, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic Arkady Ghukasyan remarked that the model was wonderful, yet the Azerbaijanis are not Finns. To this, Tofiq Zulfugarov, who at that time held the post of

Deputy Foreign Minister of Azerbaijan, retorted: "... but you are not Swedes either, comrades Armenians!"

The agreements on the ceasefire regime signed in May 1994 by representatives of the leadership of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh, opened a window of opportunities for the implementation of various projects (in the logic of Track 2) by international structures, donors and non-governmental western organizations. Both intergovernmental (OSCE) and non-governmental organizations (Vertic, Links, Institute of War and Peace Reporting, Conciliation Resources, International Alert and others) took the initiative. The dialogue platforms proposed by these organizations' partners in the South Caucasus later paved the way for local initiatives too. At first, the events were perceived by the participants of the region as a continuation of war by other methods. They sought to prove the opponents their rightness and other's responsibility for the conflict, expecting full and unconditional surrender as a result of verbal battles.

The first pragmatic forms of interaction were found by the journalistic organizations of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Realizing that the interest in what was happening in the neighboring country was high despite the hostile relations of the societies to each other, they used personal contacts to establish professional cooperation between the media. Internews organized a series of thematic TV bridges, which, although held in the mode of "ideological wrestling" allowed Azerbaijani and Armenian audiences to learn about the lives of neighbors from "living people". Yerevan Press Club and its partners in Azerbaijan took advantage of the desire of their countries to integrate actively into the international community, fulfilling certain obligations to move towards membership in the Council of Europe. In this sense, the exchange of experience in defending freedom of speech and information was of mutual interest. The second half of the 1990s was the period when Armenian and Azerbaijani media environments became closer than ever. In Armenia, the rights of journalists and the pluralism of broadcasters were better protected, but in Azerbaijan, especially after the abolition of military censorship in 1998 and due to the economic growth, a real media business began to develop. Discussing purely journalistic topics not only contributed to a better understanding of the problems, but also taught the participants to respect the opinion of the opponents. Later, this facilitated better understanding when addressing issues related directly to the conflict.

The same can be said about the projects in other areas that contributed to the professional and personal contacts, bypassing the "minefields" of numerous contradictions. Common concerns about social problems, environmental challenges, the progress of reforms in the field of education, and so on helped to realize what brought together and united the Armenian and Azerbaijani public. The increased interest of the international community in the South Caucasus as a single region exposed in the mid-to-late 1990s, contributed greatly to the strengthening of ties in the thematic areas. This interest was conditioned by the joining of the US, the European countries, as well as major companies to infrastructure - primarily energy - projects.

Civil society organizations interested in regional formats readily took advantage of the situation. Trilateral projects (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia) were most widely used due to the programme "Synergy in the South Caucasus" launched by the

American “Eurasia” foundation in 1997. Thanks to it, dozens of non-governmental organizations gained experience working together with their partners from neighboring countries. Such a mass phenomenon in itself contributed to the erosion of the “enemy image” at least among those directly involved in project activities.

Communication in the regional format made it possible also to compare different approaches to the conflicts and their potential resolutions in cases of unrecognized Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh. One of the most successful project ideas involved research on the prospects for the development of the region as a whole, provided the conflicts did not hinder cooperation. At the same time, while the Armenian side at the official level was ready to consider the relevant opportunities prior to the settlement of the Karabakh conflict, Azerbaijan insisted on the recognition of its territorial integrity as a precondition for cooperation. Mutually exclusive approaches gradually reduced the relevance of regional initiatives involving all the countries of the South Caucasus in both economic and other spheres. This naturally affected Track 2, in which the topic of the conflict once again began to prevail over the idea of cooperation.

In this regard, initiatives not limited to the Caucasus as a single region proved useful in the following years, aiming to familiarize Azerbaijani and Armenian audiences with interethnic conflicts in other regions of the world. Joint film screenings and comparative expert analysis of confrontations and attempts to overcome them in the Balkans, Cyprus, Palestine, South Tyrol, Northern Ireland and other parts of the world - both successful and unsuccessful - helped to search for and discuss models that would work in the future in Nagorno-Karabakh. Both the proposals of the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs of the second half of the 2000s and the expert products reflected the extensive peacemaking experience filtered through the specific context of the Karabakh conflict. The most dynamic phase of dialogue took place during the three-year period between 1998 and 2001, when Azerbaijani participants visited Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, while Armenians traveled to Azerbaijan. They had the opportunity to communicate with politicians, ordinary citizens and form their own perceptions of how the conflict was transforming. Among the pioneers here, along with some of the organizations mentioned above, were the German Friedrich Ebert and Friedrich Naumann foundations, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. They carried out long-term projects entailing Armenian-Azerbaijani activities not only on “neutral territory”. Moreover, the participants of several parallel projects of the late 1990s had a chance to meet with the presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia, Heydar Aliyev and Robert Kocharyan, respectively, as well as with other high-level officials from both sides.

Frequent trips came to an end in the autumn of 2001, when an incident first occurred in Baku with a group of media and civil society representatives from Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia. In particular, aggression was directed at Karen Ohanjanyan, the chairman of the “Helsinki Initiative-92”, in front of television cameras. The fact that the incident was not a random episode found its confirmation a month later: the visit of another group of Armenian journalists to Azerbaijan was very tense and accompanied by unfriendly media coverage. It became clear that hard times were coming for direct bilateral contacts.

The participants of the dialogue projects, which reached the peak of success, had to give up the illusion that civic diplomacy in the Karabakh conflict could play a significant role in the settlement process, regardless of the interests of the authorities. A lack of prospects in the dialogue on the official level led to the relative marginalization of Track 2.

It is not excluded that there existed a direct link between the limitation of contacts among journalists and civil society representatives and the above-mentioned talks of the two presidents - Robert Kocharyan and Heydar Aliyev - in Key West, USA. The negotiations lasted for an entire week, but did not result in the signing of documents. Aliyev and Kocharyan, as mentioned, departed, after receiving parting words from the mediators to prepare their societies for reconciliation, but the opposite process followed. About 600 Azerbaijani organizations and public figures signed a National Charter on the principles of the settlement of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, which excluded any agreement between the parties before "the liberation of Azerbaijani lands" and return of refugees. The signatories of the Charter envisaged the status of "cultural autonomy" for the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh. In their turn, all factions of the Armenian Parliament made a joint statement, ruling out the signing of any document that would imply vertical subordination of Nagorno-Karabakh to Baku.

The plan of American politician Paul Goble (1996) on territorial exchange between Baku and Yerevan and the Dartmouth Conference (2001-2007) stood out among other initiatives to resolve the conflict before and after the failure in Key West. Within the framework of the latter, the co-chairs of the working group, American and Russian diplomats Harold Sanders and Vitaly Naumkin, moderated discussions at 11 meetings of representatives of the public from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh, trying to use the experience of the Camp David Agreements on the Middle East settlement. Both of these initiatives, however, can only be considered as part of Track 2 in a relative sense, since by definition they did not rely on more or less broad public support but rather functioned in an advisory capacity for the official negotiation process. Later, similar but less ambitious steps were taken, conditionally referred to as "Track 1.5".

The establishment of rigid national frameworks for the settlement, along with the adoption of measures to restrict the freedom of media and civil society in Azerbaijan, led to the gradual winding down of bilateral and regional contacts. Such structures as the Caucasus Forum of Non-Governmental Organizations and "South Caucasus" Association of Journalists, which had emerged at the peak of cooperation, failed to realize their ambitious integration plans. Naturally, the joint projects of Azerbaijani and Armenian non-governmental organizations continued to a reduced extent and without mutual visits. The work aimed at maintaining the existing contacts and countering the growing tendency to create an "enemy image" characterized the interaction between Yerevan and Baku Press Clubs and "Yeni Nesil" ("New Generation") Journalists Union of Azerbaijan. In addition to the 1990s traditional format involving partners from the three South Caucasus countries, these organizations found it interesting to look at bilateral relations in a broader context, by engaging partners and participants, alongside Georgia, from the unrecognized entities of the South Caucasus, and from Türkiye. In particular, Stepanakert Press Club was an active partner in these projects.

After 2001, the research component began to play an increasingly significant role in regional cooperation, allowing for collaboration at a distance. This is reflected in the titles of various publications, including “Quality Media Reporting of Developments in the Countries of South Caucasus as a Factor of Overcoming Regional Problems”, “Karabakh Conflict in the Mirror of Media and Public Opinion in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh”. During this period, significant support to Yerevan and Baku Press Clubs and “Yeni Nesil” was provided by the Network Media Program of the Open Society Institute.

The topic of propaganda, which became particularly relevant in 2014, prompted a group of media experts from Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia to conduct a [study](#) (with the assistance of Deutsche Welle Akademie) on the methods of information wars in the South Caucasus. Azerbaijani and Armenian partners also participated in similar projects in the format of the six Eastern Partnership countries. Earlier, from 2008 to 2013, within the framework of a more extensive bilateral project of the Eurasia Partnership Foundation, Yerevan Press Club and “Yeni Nesil” worked on the so-called [“Glossary of Hate Speech”](#), which contained not only a set of negative stereotypes used in the media of Azerbaijan and Armenia, but also recommendations on how to avoid phrases that irritate the audience on the other side of the “frontline” without loss for the meaning of what was said. Although some journalistic circles in both countries were interested in applying the results of the research in practice, the general trend towards tougher information confrontation turned out to be far stronger.

Beginning in 2005, the cooperation between Armenian “Region” Research Center and Azerbaijani Institute for Peace and Democracy - headed respectively by Laura Baghdasaryan and well-known human rights defenders and experts Leyla and Arif Yunusovs - was active as much as the growing difficulties allowed. In 2012, they created a joint website dedicated to the research of various aspects of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. After the arrest and emigration of the Yunusovs in 2016, the partners’ joint activities were temporarily suspended. However, two years later, online discussions titled “The Karabakh Conflict in the Context of the Political Processes in Armenia and Azerbaijan” moderated by these partners were resumed and continued for one year.

The risk factor accompanying bilateral cooperation, the criminal prosecution of Azerbaijani politicians, experts and journalists, as well as the difficulties created since the early 2000s for Armenians and Azerbaijanis to visit each other affected their representation in various regional forums. For example, Azerbaijani journalist Rauf Mirkadirov was a regular participant in the annual conferences on the regional problems held since 2000 in Armenia at the initiative of Armenian politician David Shahnazaryan and the German Friedrich Ebert Foundation. However, his arrest and conviction in 2014, followed by emigration, became one of the reasons for the absence of representatives of Azerbaijan from these events for several subsequent years. Nevertheless, in 2019, Azerbaijani expert Rauf Rajabov was able to participate in another such conference, which at that time was considered as a positive sign for these initiatives.

In particular, it was expected that new opportunities might open up for the Caucasus Institute headed by Alexander Iskandaryan. For many years, this organization held meetings with the participation of Azerbaijani scholars, prepared publications devoted

to the political and socio-economic situation in the South Caucasus countries, and to the prospects for resolving the Karabakh conflict. Scholars from the United States, Russia, Europe, and Georgia contributed to the annual printed collections of articles. However, during the period when Armenian-Azerbaijani contacts were restricted, these yearbooks were forced to be published without articles by Azerbaijani analysts, while the escalation of the conflict in 2020 blocked their return to the yearbook's pages.

The "ice age" in Track 2 relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia resulted in special attention to youth initiatives. The impossibility of effective interaction under the prevailing circumstances forced actors to rely on the new generation, preparing it for dialogue and for seeking ways to the settlement in the future, when, perhaps, more favorable conditions might emerge. In particular, such an approach formed the basis of the initiatives of the Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation, which started in 2007 by offering to Armenian and Azerbaijani activists a platform for dialogue. "Armenian Progressive Youth" NGO and their Azerbaijani partner Nazim Ibadov focused on developing skills for resisting aggressive nationalist propaganda. Another example is Eurasia Partnership Foundation, which organized more or less regular meetings for the youth of the two countries, and at the same time tried to create a peacemaking platform for the participants of these meetings in the new media. The Foundation also initiated activities of conflict transformation schools in Baku and Yerevan in 2017-2018. The project targeted young Azerbaijanis and Armenians, who were expected to gain critical thinking skills that would help to develop new approaches for the conflict resolution.

The obstacles to directly addressing the issue of conflict resolution prompted the initiators of dialogue projects to turn to the language of arts - literature and fiction, films and documentaries. In 2003, the Caucasus Forum of Non-Governmental Organizations published under one cover stories of writers from the South Caucasus, including Azerbaijani and Armenian ones. The collection titled "Time to Live" became a kind of common dialogue space for writers of the region. The translations of contemporary works of modern writers of the two countries into Russian, English and their national languages, and their presentation on the joint website "Litlab" (2006-2007) within the framework of a project by Baku and Yerevan Press Clubs, were designed to promote a better understanding of each other's societies in the condition of mutual isolation.

Quite popular was the book "Reporters in Karabakh War", published in 2002 with the support of the Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations, which featured the memories of journalists who had visited the frontline. These were not only vivid, but also highly instructive stories - from the standpoint of professional conduct - for journalists covering wars.

Short films ("Dialogue Through Film") told the human side of the Karabakh conflict, the experiences of prisoners of war and refugees, the fate of mixed marriages, the "war games" on the Internet... Between 2007 and 2013, Internews staff from Azerbaijan and Armenia, together with the British organization Conciliation Resources, produced around 30 films in this series, intended for public viewing.



As stated by the initiators of the event in Armenia titled “Azerbaijani Film Festival” in 2010, their goal was to create a space for direct communication and resist the propaganda gaining momentum through “degeneration of humanistic ideas and denial of reason.” However, the reaction of the Armenian society and media in this regard was mainly negative, including the opinion that the festival of the Azerbaijani films could become an event aimed to restore trust between the citizens of the two countries only if a similar initiative were held in Azerbaijan. The screenings were denied venues at three different locations in Yerevan, and the planned showings in Gyumri and Vanadzor, caused a scandal and were eventually cancelled.

This precedent raised a serious question about the effectiveness of “shock” peacemaking techniques in situations where a large portion of societies in the countries involved in an acute conflict are reluctant to take the first step towards reconciliation. In any case, it was during the “ice age” when the “shock” of unilateral initiatives in Armenia - where there were significantly fewer restrictions on the activities of non-governmental organizations than in the neighboring country - led to the loss of interest by many NGOs in dialogue with partners in Azerbaijan. Overall, however, it can be concluded that this change of sentiments was caused less by specific problematic events, than by the widespread conviction of the futility of seeking peaceful solutions in the face of escalating confrontation between Baku and Yerevan.

The failure of “the football diplomacy” between Armenia and Turkiye (2008-2009) also had a certain impact on the development of this trend. For the Armenian public, it became an argument in favor of the impossibility to overcome historical contradictions with neighboring Turkic states, while for Azerbaijani public, it became evidence of the risks inherent in any steps toward reconciliation with Armenia. This episode once again confirmed the intertwined nature of Armenian-Turkish and Armenian-Azerbaijani contradictions: in particular, Azerbaijan is far more aggressive in its rejection of the Armenian Genocide than Turkiye itself, while Ankara, since the closure of its border with Armenia in 1993, has conditioned the normalization of relations with Yerevan on Armenia’s unilateral concessions in the Karabakh issue. The hardening of positions by all sides not only diminished the attractiveness of the trilateral dialogue - in which Baku and Yerevan Press Clubs had shown particular interest since 2000 - but also increased the caution of the two societies towards each other, a trend that persisted until late 2023.

Ideas that could have gained public approval in the late 1990s became unacceptable to most people 10-15 years later. Georgy Vanyan, the director of the Caucasus Center for Peace-Making Initiatives and organizer of the above-mentioned failed film festival, together with Azerbaijani political scientist Zardusht Alizadeh, also launched the civic initiative “Tekali Process” (2012-2015), named after an Azerbaijani-populated village in Georgia. The project included “hearings” on various problems of the South Caucasus, with the participation of well-known politicians and public figures from the region. Their audience included residents of the border areas of the three South Caucasus countries. However, the reaction to the “Tekali Process” was mixed not only in Azerbaijan and Armenia, but also in Georgia.

In September 2018, Vanyan and Alizadeh appealed to the Azerbaijani and Armenian public, urging them to spend huge funds on the arms race, but rather to direct them

to the search for peace, restoration of mutual respect and understanding. This was not the first such appeal. In 2010, within the framework of the initiative called “Independent Civil Minsk Process on the Resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict”, Eldar Namazov, the former head of the Secretariat of the President of Azerbaijan, and David Shahnazaryan, the former Ambassador of the President of Armenia on Special Missions, issued a statement on the occasion of the signing of a Declaration which, in particular, called on the leadership of the two states “to refrain from the war-like rhetoric, and political and information action aimed at conflict escalation, to take urgent steps on securing the ceasefire and preventing armed clashes, and to ensure the immediate withdrawal of snipers from the frontline”. However, it should be acknowledged that these initiatives did not have a significant impact on the settlement process, as they contradicted the trends prevailing in the negotiations at the official level.

When it comes to trends in Track 2, some stand out in particular. While before the early 2000s there was an increase in direct interaction of local organizations, after their operational opportunities were restricted, the key role returned to the external moderators of contacts. From 2003 to 2009, the leading role in Track 2 on the Karabakh settlement was effectively assumed by the international Consortium Initiative composed of international non-governmental organizations and supported by the British government. From 2010, the European Partnership for the Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (EPNK), which united several organizations and was supported by the European Union, took the lead. Both initiatives were aimed at creating a favorable atmosphere in the societies of the conflicting parties, and it was within their framework that local Armenian and Azerbaijani organizations implemented some of the mentioned projects. It is worth noting in advance that this trend has solidified over the past few years: in particular, several phases of the EU4Peace programme have played a leading role in peacemaking in the South Caucasus.

There were also major efforts to describe and understand the Karabakh conflict. Among the most well-known are the books “Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War” (2003) by Thomas de Waal, Europe and Eurasia programme researcher at Carnegie Foundation, and “Karabakh Diary, Green and Black: Neither War nor Peace” (2008) by the then “Civilitas” Foundation expert Tatul Hakobyan. A contribution to deeper understanding of the problem (distinctive in its genre) was made by the joint [publication](#) of political scientists Rasim Musabekov and Stepan Grigoryan, journalists Arif Aliyev and Boris Navasardian, titled “The Karabakh Conflict: To Understand Each Other”, the brochure “Variants for a Solution of the Karabakh Conflict: Concepts and Reality” authored by Ali Abbasov and Harutyun Khachatryan, the analytical works of Mehman Aliyev, the director of “Turan” information agency, Richard Giragosian, the director of the Regional Studies Center, Laurence Broers, the Caucasus programme director at the “Conciliation Resources”, and a number of other experts.

It was precisely during the “ice age” in Azerbaijani and Armenian societies that voices criticizing their own governments for their “unconstructive policies” in the conflict became extremely rare. Far more widespread was criticism for their failure to defend national interests consistently enough. This was caused not so much by the restrictions imposed from above as by the public sentiments, which were less

susceptible to the ideas of peacemaking. Mostly, the public in both countries showed no sympathy for their fellow citizens, including well-known figures, who tried to examine the roots of the conflict in their own society, leadership, rather than in the other. The most striking example in this sense is the sharply negative attitude in Azerbaijan to writer Akram Aylisli, author of “Stone Dreams” (2012), a novel dedicated to the events of the late 1988-early 1989 in Baku. In Armenia, the criticism of the authorities’ position on the Karabakh conflict, voiced by the above-mentioned Georgy Vanyan and by Mikayel Danielyan, the chairman of the Helsinki Association, was met with strong disapproval. At the same time, in some cases, alternative viewpoints on the problem were perceived as a result of dependence on foreign donors. In particular, such sentiments were spread by pro-government media.

Given the extreme shortage of independent initiatives aimed at genuine dialogue, the space was from time to time occupied by purely performative projects with a propagandistic focus. In 2007 and 2009, at the initiative of former Minister of Culture of Russia Mikhail Shvydkoi, ambassadors of Azerbaijan and Armenia to the Russian Federation, composers Polad Bulbuloglu and Armen Smbatyan, prominent representatives of Azerbaijani and Armenian intelligentsia participated in joint trips and high-level meetings in Baku, Yerevan and Stepanakert. In 2016, the Baku Platform for Peace emerged, which, after being discredited by the participants allegedly representing the Armenian side, was replaced in 2017 by the Armenia-Azerbaijan Civil Peace Platform, registered in Tbilisi. Contrary to their declared peacemaking intentions, these initiatives only aggravated relations between the parties to conflict, as evidenced by numerous publications in the media. While the initiative backed by Moscow clearly followed a formalistic approach with no idea of what the results might be, the Baku and Tbilisi platforms pursued a concrete goal of substituting and simulating a genuine peacemaking process.

Another trend characteristic of the “ice age” in the Track 2 settlement process was the involvement of religious figures. In April 2010, Catholicos of All Armenians Karekin II visited for the first time Baku and participated in the World Summit of Religious Leaders. In November 2011, the Chairman of the Caucasian Muslims Office Allahshukur Pashazadeh arrived in Yerevan to participate in the meeting of the CIS Inter-Religious Council.

From the very beginning of the Armenian-Azerbaijani peacemaking process, dialogue at the level of women's organizations became an important component, and it was also among the key elements within the European Partnership for the Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. This dialogue format could have been elevated to a new level following the “Velvet Revolution” in Armenia, if the spouses of Ilham Aliyev and Nikol Pashinyan had joined it. Both had expressed their interest, yet up until the end of the 44-Day their actions were mutually exclusive. On April 3, 2019, at the meeting with Azerbaijani servicemen, Mehriban Aliyeva said: “The Azerbaijani flag will be raised in every village and city of Karabakh,” which naturally provoked sharp reactions in Armenia. Within the framework of the “Women for Peace” initiative, Anna Hakobyan organized a trip to Nagorno-Karabakh for Russian female public figures, which, in turn, caused extreme discontent in Azerbaijan. At the same time, the possibility of more coordinated actions by these two women, who take active public positions, had considerable potential for reducing the risk of escalation.

When the irreparable happened on September 27, 2020 - a war that took the lives of nearly ten thousand soldiers and civilians - Anna Hakobyan formed a detachment of 13 women known as “Erato” to participate in military actions. It was only after the conclusion of the Washington Agreement on August 8, 2025, that the spouses of the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders made their first joint attempt at peacemaking, by staging a photo shoot at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit and World War II victory celebrations in China.

## POST-44-DAY WAR DYNAMICS

The periods that followed the “ice age” are best examined together, as the trends that surfaced during this period are logically interconnected. Notably, this interconnection could already be observed in 2016, marked by the four-day April War. While the freezing of Track 2 until 2016 was primarily due to restrictions imposed on media and NGO activities in Azerbaijan, after the April War, the participants in “civic diplomacy” themselves - with only a few exceptions - began to see their role as being needed more for informational and rhetorical confrontation. Neither experts nor journalists managed to reach an agreement on an in-depth investigation into the circumstances of the two outbreaks of hostilities in April 2016 and July 2020, which ultimately made a large-scale confrontation inevitable. A brief “respite”, manifested in the renewal of Armenian-Azerbaijani foreign ministerial talks following the “Velvet Revolution” and declarations from both sides affirming their commitment to a peaceful settlement on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ceasefire in mid-May 2019 ended on August 5 of that year, when Nikol Pashinyan declared at the opening of the Pan-Armenian Games in Nagorno-Karabakh: “Artsakh is Armenia – period!” Even the exchange of journalists facilitated by the OSCE in December 2019, after a long pause, failed to prevent the situation from sliding into sharper confrontation at all levels, including Track 2. It was confrontation and rivalry over who would “best” condemn the other side for violations of international law, a reliance on violent approaches to resolve the issue, and the cultivation of hatred and enmity that characterized the activities of representatives of the expert community, NGOs, and media from mid-2019 through the end of 2023. Such an atmosphere naturally left no space for civic diplomacy to play any role in preventing not only the 44-Day War but also the escalations along the border in 2021-2022, and the blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh, which culminated in Azerbaijan's military operation and the mass exodus of virtually the entire Armenian population from the region.

The worsening of circumstances that took shape during the “ice age” led a number of Armenian organizations to withdraw from the dialogue process, despite their continuing interest in peacebuilding. Some found their Azerbaijani partners in difficult situations, in certain cases forced to leave the country. Others - primarily human rights defenders - came to the conclusion that no actors remained in the neighboring country with the courage to stand up for human rights. Nevertheless, the experience of interaction accumulated over the past 20 years allows these organizations to be regarded as a “golden reserve” should the conditions for dialogue initiatives change. The period of “maximum confrontation” (2019-2023), which included not only military clashes of different scales but also the pandemic, was marked by the introduction of

new working methods by organizations involved in peacebuilding. In certain cases, many shifted from the joint component to parallel activities, particularly during the 44-Day War. For instance, Media Initiatives Center and its partners - each contributing from their own side - worked on creating a video archive of the war and an online training platform for conflict reporting. Considerable efforts were made to ensure the safety of war correspondents, including the provision of bulletproof vests and helmets.

From the end of 2020 onward, a number of organizations, including Armavir Development Center, Martuni Women's Community Council, Goris Press Club, and others, were forced to reorient their activities toward assisting refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh and facilitating their integration into Armenia's socio-economic and cultural environment. "Stepanakert" Media Club (previously known as Stepanakert Press Club) released the book "Artsakh: Blockade and Forced Displacement in Human Stories," which portrayed the tragedy of Karabakh Armenians through human stories. Following the September 2023 mass exodus of Karabakh Armenians, Media Initiatives Center, Public Journalism Club, and Yerevan Press Club implemented a range of projects aimed at professionally integrating, training, and employing journalists from Nagorno-Karabakh.

The difficulties in interaction between journalists from Armenia and Azerbaijan gave renewed relevance to JAMnews, a regional South Caucasus outlet, founded in Tbilisi in 2015. The outlet pursues two parallel objectives: first, it presents the official positions of the countries in the region on the entire spectrum of political issues; second, it introduces them to one another, using human stories to illustrate how similar the peoples of the South Caucasus are in their customs, emotions, and tragic experiences. At the same time, the restrictions that Georgia has introduced on local organizations receiving funding from foreign donors create significant difficulties for JAMnews's future work.

Changes also affected the interaction between Armenian and Azerbaijani environmental organizations. Following the 44-Day War, several of these organizations - particularly Ecolur - due to deep-rooted contradictions and the use of environmental issues for confrontational purposes, switched to Armenia-Georgia and Azerbaijan-Georgia bilateral formats. Even when partnerships do emerge, they prefer not to publicize it. Nevertheless, the current changes in the political context allow one to rely on the recognition of the fact that tackling environmental issues requires, at the very least, a regional scope, and that nature itself dictates the need not to be confined within state boundaries. Khazer, an Armenian organization, has managed to establish cooperation with its Azerbaijani partner in the "Vulnerability" subgroup formed within the framework of the EU4Dialogue programme.

Amid evident challenges facing peacemaking civic activism, there is a growing demand for contacts among representatives of the expert community and for political analysis. The Finnish organization Crisis Management Initiative (Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation) and Links Europe have been particularly active in this field. As part of their programmes, expert meetings have been organized. Specifically, in April 2022, Links Europe released the report "The South Caucasus from war to peace: 30 measures between now and 2030 Armenia and Azerbaijan, Armenians and Azerbaijanis, need to build the future based on mutual trust and confidence." At the

same time, the goal of achieving tangible results was not set in every case, yet in terms of intangible results, an additional channel of communication was established among government officials, political actors, political scientists, and conflictologists. With the support from international partners, the Caucasus Institute continues to hold online and in-person meetings in a closed format. The Institute collaborated with the Azerbaijani Center for International Relations Analysis in organizing these meetings. The Research Center on Security Policy, led by Areg Kochinyan, is becoming increasingly influential. The Center's representatives organize and actively participate in dialogues on practical matters, debates, and discussions of theoretical issues, including through media channels. At Track 1.5 and Track 2 levels, experts are mastering various methodological tools for peacebuilding. In recent years, the Women & Global Security Architecture think tank, led by Armineh Margaryan, has also actively joined dialogue initiatives. In 2024-2025, WGSA hosted international conferences on comprehensive security and resilience, giving a significant place on the agenda to the negotiation process between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

A number of organizations, with the Civil Society Institute among them, carried out awareness-raising work in the pre-war period, aimed at studying the nature of the conflict, restoring trust among people living in border regions, creating a “network of dialogue facilitators” and promoting the “safe region” agenda. Through collaboration with German non-profit mediation company Inmedio and partners in Azerbaijan - whose names for well-known reasons remain undisclosed - the Civil Society Institute organized courses on mediation and dialogue for non-governmental sector representatives from Armenia and Azerbaijan in Yerevan, Baku, Berlin, and Tbilisi. However, these efforts were extremely limited in scale and were unable to significantly influence the political context shaping the course of the conflict. The same can be said about contacts among creative professionals - filmmakers, musicians, and others. The Eurasia Partnership Foundation considers 2020 as the peak of its programmes in this direction, when just two days before the outbreak of war, an event was held to present Armenian translations of Azerbaijani poetry prepared by its grantees. At the same time, much like the representatives of the expert-analytical community, these “enlighteners” were thus accumulating peacebuilding potential that could be used in a more favorable environment, which developed in parallel with the official peace process of 2024-2025.

In implementing its Armenian-Azerbaijani projects, Peace Dialogue NGO partnered with organizations from Georgia, the United Kingdom, and Germany. Within these initiatives, numerous studies were carried out, and publications, handbooks, and methodologies were produced. In terms of non-material results, the work with young people and various groups contributed to the development of critical thinking, the formation of empathy, and dissemination of a culture of peace.

In light of the issue of missing persons, prisoners of war, and other detainees, the experience accumulated in the 1990s by the Armenian Foundation Against Legal Arbitrariness, the Human Rights Center of Azerbaijan, the Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Georgian branches of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly, the HCA Georgian National Committee, and the Nagorno-Karabakh Committee of “Helsinki Initiative-92” - whose traditions were carried on by the HCA Vanadzor Office, which collaborated with the HCA Ganja Committee from 2005 to 2010 - could have become particularly relevant in the recent years. These organizations also worked to protect the rights of

families whose members had become victims of the conflict. However, much of their experience was lost in the following fifteen years due to restrictions on human rights activities, primarily imposed by Azerbaijani authorities. On the one hand, the recent months' emerging cooperation between the national security agencies of Armenia and Azerbaijan in this area opens up new prospects. On the other hand, however, the International Committee of the Red Cross - whose support was essential to the effectiveness of local organizations - has ceased its operations in Azerbaijan.

As noted above, the momentum for peacebuilding efforts stemmed from the accord and, in particular, the initialing of the text of the Agreement on Establishment of Peace and Inter-State Relations in 2025, together with the developments that preceded it since late 2023. Accordingly, the beginning of this period of "prevailing constructivism," still ongoing at the time of this study, can be dated from late 2023 to early 2024. In a situation where the sides have started to address practical issues, the approach of the organization "Imagine," which has implemented numerous programmes to promote Armenian-Azerbaijani dialogue involving youth, journalists, and experts, primarily in Georgia, has gained particular relevance. According to "Imagine" representatives, the key characteristic of their approach was that participants in the dialogue were told that they were not there to play games but to work and solve problems. In particular, they received the assignment to outline ten facts that had led to the outbreak and development of the Karabakh conflict. All responses were subsequently brought into discussion, with the aim of identifying parallels with the opposing side's viewpoints, perceptions, and the narratives presented in textbooks. At the same time, participants in the dialogue were required to follow the principle that "understanding does not imply acceptance."

A significant breakthrough in this framework was the "Line of Contact" initiative launched by Yerevan and Baku Press Clubs in late 2023. By mid-2025, over 100 dialogue-oriented television programmes had been aired on partner television channels in the two countries. Those taking part in these programmes followed the general approach underpinning the initiative: interlocutors are free to use any facts and their own interpretations of them, yet the conversation is meant to be centered on a joint search for solutions, rather than on proving their own correctness or the other side's guilt.

At the same time, it should be noted that even with nearly 30 years of cooperation between YPC and BPC, their initiative could not have been possible without the support of the British organization International Alert, which led the media consortium during the second and third phases of the EU4Peace programme. In general, for at least the past 20 years, international organizations have tended to solidify their leading role in Armenian-Azerbaijani dialogue projects. Many of the projects described above, as well as other similar initiatives were carried out within the framework of the EU4Peace programme by consortia led, alongside International Alert, by Conciliation Resources and Links Europe, or through EU4Dialogue, another major programme coordinated again by European partners.

Alongside the European Union, the main donors and supporting partners included the OSCE, the Council of Europe, the British Government, German political foundations, the European Endowment for Democracy, SIDA (Sweden), Black Sea Trust, UN Women, IKV Pax Christi (Netherlands), HEKS (Switzerland), Media

Diversity Institute, Article 19 and others. The discontinuation of funding for the majority of projects by the US Government had an extremely negative effect, leaving a number of promising peacebuilding initiatives unable to reach their logical conclusion or suspended at the outset.

An overview of the history of civic diplomacy in the context of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict shows that a wide variety of methods was used in every possible area. Yet, this inevitably leads to the question: what impact did these efforts actually have on the resolution process? None of the respondents interviewed for this study gave an unequivocally positive answer to this question. A pessimistic view was voiced, according to which, civic diplomacy is unable to have a tangible impact on Armenian-Azerbaijani relations, as key decisions are made at other levels, where public opinion is largely not taken into account. While the efforts of civic activists and journalistic publications may influence how people think and feel, even majority opinion fails to play a decisive role in authoritarian countries like Azerbaijan. It was also pointed out that civic diplomacy would have had a greater impact on the settlement had its role not been directly restricted by the Azerbaijani authorities, and, at specific periods, by the Armenian authorities too.

At the same time, respondents highlighted that dialogue always remains the preferable option, as communication offers a chance to listen to the opposing side and discuss each other's arguments, although it was acknowledged that, at different stages, those sincerely engaged in such dialogue programmes constituted a marginal minority. According to several respondents, civic diplomacy is able to produce results when official sides have the political will to work toward a settlement. One participant pointed out that such will existed between 1997 and 2001, while another suggested that civic diplomacy was more or less "functional" until the well-known developments of 2020-2023.

Among the difficulties faced by Track 2, respondents also highlighted the fact that the relatively independent segment of civil society in Azerbaijan lacks any influence, while a significant part of Armenian civil society is driven by revanchist sentiments. One respondent provided a specific example of what he considered a destructive involvement of civil society in conflict resolution and transformation, where the voice of a certain segment of peacebuilding participants ceases to serve as an alternative perspective and merges into the chorus advancing a populist-patriotic discourse. An issue under discussion in Armenia is whether the state, for the sake of peace, could withdraw international lawsuits concerning human rights, if this is stipulated by the agreement reached with Azerbaijan. On the one hand, human rights defenders insist that it is essential to first deal with the crimes and eliminate their consequences, and then proceed to handshakes. Meanwhile, those who support conflict transformation believe that, for the sake of peace, a handshake is the necessary first step.

Consequently, human rights defenders present a united front in their uncompromising position, justifying their approach with the argument that justice needs to be ensured. Apparently, this represents a situation where the legitimacy of a position is verified through practice - namely, which specific solution ensures a lasting and stable peace between the conflicting sides.



Civic diplomacy produces results when it engages circles truly capable of generating constructive discourse within their communities - if not today, then at least in the near future. However, there is always a risk that this process could be influenced by “fashion trends,” and in periods when peacebuilding enjoys official endorsement, it may draw in random individuals, as well as those who, in the past, did the opposite. During the interviews conducted by the YPC study team, respondents also noted that Track 2 has a real impact when it reaches public platforms and conveys peacebuilding ideas to the broader public. Closed formats mainly benefit the participants themselves, enabling them to gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the issues and establish professional connections. These formats are unlikely to have any impact on the adoption of specific decisions. They can be useful for addressing practical issues, such as organizing hostage exchanges, collecting data on missing persons, etc. In such cases, publicity can sometimes even hinder the achievement of results.

Based on the views expressed by respondents involved in dialogue initiatives it follows that the effectiveness of civic diplomacy tends to grow in proportion to the level of democracy in society and the state. Within such an environment, peacebuilding activities shape political discourse, changing citizens' attitudes toward the settlement process, even though it is ultimately those who hold actual power that make all the decisions. Even in authoritarian systems, leaders take into account public sentiment, and effective civic diplomacy is capable of influencing through public opinion.

A key point to ensure is that civil society is not entirely isolated from dialogue at the official level. Without access to certain details of the negotiations, independent experts, journalists, and activists face difficulties in contributing to the settlement process and engaging the wider public.

It is precisely the factor of awareness and “deeper immersion” in the issue that shapes skepticism toward cooperation between Armenia and Azerbaijani civil societies, partly because, according to the widespread opinion in Armenia, civil society in the neighboring country is either nonexistent or marginalized. It is a different matter when it comes to contacts among experts (although in terms of legal status the expert community is often classified as part of civil society, it has specific characteristics), as they are currently having a positive impact on the resolution process.

One view stood out, asserting that the concept of “civic diplomacy” cannot be applied to civil society's peacebuilding efforts. According to this view, since “diplomacy is the art of deception,” the non-governmental sector cannot practice it as such. It may either support or decline to support a particular diplomatic initiative by the authorities, but its own engagement in the conflict resolution must adhere to the principle of “unbiased truthfulness.”

The study also aimed to identify what participants in Armenian-Azerbaijani dialogue programmes regarded as the “added value” of civic diplomacy. According to the respondents, these included direct communication between representatives of the two countries, information exchange, a better understanding of regional security challenges, and the discovery of promising interlocutors.

Another aspect of no small importance to the study was the identification of areas of cooperation between civil societies of Armenia and Azerbaijan that appear to be the most effective and promising. Respondents most often pointed to the peacemaking aspect, which included activities contributing to the rapprochement, establishment of contacts, and the dissemination of information about the nature of the conflict and the settlement process. With a considerable lag, the second and the third places were shared by the humanitarian aspect (in particular, dialogue on the prisoners of war, hostages, refugees, related human rights activities, etc.) and the discussion of settlement models across various informal platforms, including media. Next area in frequency of mention were joint studies.

With regard to studies, respondents specifically pointed out the appropriateness of regularly analyzing the achievements and mistakes of Track 2 and almost unanimously emphasized the need for such analysis. It was further emphasized that donors themselves should be interested in relevant research, which would allow them to enhance the effectiveness of their peacebuilding efforts. There is an obvious and broad demand for a tool generating constructive ideas and approaches. The benefits of such studies, carried out in the spirit of “looking back for the future,” could be greater if films on the history of peacebuilding were simultaneously produced and distributed. To avoid the repetition of mistakes, it is advisable to engage not only the direct participants of civic diplomacy, but also diverse groups - differing by profession, age, geographic location, etc. - in the exchanges of opinions on the effectiveness and prospects of Track 2. Some doubts about the appropriateness of examining peacebuilding experiences, raised by two respondents, were conditioned by the specific nature of the sides involved in the conflict: in Armenia, a critical assessment could prompt a revision of approaches for greater effectiveness, whereas the main issue lies in the state of civil society in Azerbaijan, over which only the country's authorities hold influence.

## HOW TO ENHANCE THE ROLE OF CIVIC DIPLOMACY?

From the range of ideas and suggestions identified during this study and aimed at enhancing the role of Track 2, the following can be highlighted:

- view the movement toward peace in conjunction with the promotion of democracy in Armenia and Azerbaijan;
- encourage innovative and creative approaches to peacebuilding;
- engage more reputable international experts in the dialogue between the two countries;
- enhance the educational level of civil society actors and journalists, especially those involved in bilateral initiatives, equipping them with skills to handle their emotions and feelings and practice self-reflection;
- avoid involving in the peacebuilding process actors who are politically biased and prone to manipulation and provocation;
- regularly hold brainstorming sessions and discussions on what can be done further within the framework of Track 2.

Civic diplomacy is not implemented in a vacuum and depends on numerous external factors, which were also examined within the frames of this study, with the course of the conflict being the primary one among them: in periods of escalation, constructive dialogue was rendered nearly impossible. The second major factor is the attitude toward Track 2 by the Azerbaijani authorities, which restrict civil society's opportunities to varying degrees of severity. Grant support from international and foreign donors, which has been substantially reduced since the beginning of 2025 due to the policies of the new US administration, is also significant.

Throughout different periods, the prospects for Armenian-Azerbaijani settlement were negatively affected by events such as the aforementioned April 2016 escalation in NK, the pandemic, the 44-Day War, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the mass exodus of Karabakh Armenians in September 2023, and the arrests and sentencing of civil society representatives and journalists in Azerbaijan.

Furthermore, it is also worth mentioning one-off Russian initiatives aimed at establishing contacts among experts, intellectuals, and journalists, which, as a rule, appeared to imitate peacebuilding.

Media played a key role in the conflict. However, aside from a small number of exceptions, their content was subordinated to the harshest political conjuncture. Journalists saw themselves as participants in the war, with the best also waging a war against fake news. At the same time, they acknowledge that, overall, honest reporting cannot prevent conflicts, whereas propaganda - shaping enemy images and spreading reciprocal hatred - has proven to be a highly influential instrument.

Up until at least 2020, many Armenian outlets - even quality and independent ones - adopted a "pro-state" stance when reporting on certain issues, such as border incidents, by reproducing the prevailing official position. Self-censorship and constraints hindered the audience's ability to objectively perceive real developments. This attitude was likely driven by the desire to avoid public condemnation. Moreover, when information surfaced that went beyond the official discourse (for instance, references to the persecution of Azerbaijanis in the late 1980s), the overwhelming majority of Armenian outlets ignored it. In the course of this study, there was also an opinion voiced that Armenian media tend to address the topic of peace more at the Track 1 level, while at the level of civil society, there is less inclination to do so.

At the current stage, with the prospect of a settlement emerging, adherence to professional ethics and the establishment of conditions for civilized discussions are becoming particularly relevant. In particular, accuracy, unbiased reporting, and the refusal to dehumanize the opposing side are bound to yield results in resolving the conflict. It is also important for information consumers to possess media literacy and the ability to critically analyze and perceive the content they receive.

The establishment and advancement of functional democracy, with the media being an integral part, could make a significant contribution to the peace process. Of course, while such an awareness would be desirable in both countries, respondents observed that Azerbaijan is moving in a different direction. Even so, quality media can help Armenia navigate out of the "trap" it finds itself in. Additionally, media fulfills

another crucial role: representing the country to foreign audiences, primarily in Russian and English, but also in Azerbaijani, Turkish, and other languages.

Civil society's operating conditions also constitute a factor influencing the effectiveness of the Armenian-Azerbaijani dialogue. According to YPC study participants, in Azerbaijan, the majority of NGOs simply operate under government control. Special state institutions and governance systems have been established for this purpose, and peacebuilders have long been subject to accusations of "espionage," "betrayal," etc. These circumstances have hindered and continue to hinder constructive interaction. On the Azerbaijani side, willingness to participate in dialogue initiatives is primarily demonstrated by those who have obtained authorization from "above." Some Armenian organizations, however, voluntarily decline interaction, viewing their potential partners from the neighboring country as sharing responsibility with their government for the war and the mass exodus of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh. This has long created unfavorable conditions for dialogue, yet the breakthrough achieved in the peace process in August 2025 may have a positive impact on the situation.

One specific aspect of Armenian-Azerbaijani dialogue initiatives is their being under the "observation" of intelligence services on both sides. Therefore, the issue of acceptable forms of interaction between peacebuilders and these agencies could not be ignored in this study. The respondents unanimously stressed that participants in civic diplomacy should act in full independence, including from intelligence services. At the same time, the majority noted that, to the credit of relevant Armenian bodies, they have not attempted to interfere in their activities. Meanwhile, according to respondents, in Azerbaijan, such cooperation is mandatory for a significant portion of civil society.

At the same time, while engaging with intelligence services is, in principle, unacceptable, it proves inevitable in situations directly related to security threats. Furthermore, in specific areas of peacebuilding - such as issues concerning hostages and missing persons, where access to intelligence information is essential - the effectiveness of these efforts directly depends on contacts with them. It is absolutely unacceptable for participants in dialogue initiatives to be handed pre-prepared questionnaires or instructions to be used when communicating with Azerbaijanis. It was also expressed that attempts by intelligence services to request information about the activities of peacebuilders are purely imitative in nature, as they possess all means to acquire this information without directly engaging with civil society representatives or journalists.

The study participants also touched upon the role of Armenian diaspora in the peacebuilding process. Some argued that its role should be limited to financing dialogue initiatives. They suggested that substantive engagement would potentially complicate the process, given the considerable differences in the interests and perceptions between Armenian society and Armenian communities abroad. Even when diaspora representatives are well-educated and love their historical homeland, they rarely manage to understand the situation simply because they are not based in Armenia.

Another group of respondents views the diaspora as having the potential for meaningful engagement. They explained that this is conditioned by the diaspora's "invulnerability" to the authorities of some of the countries where they reside. As a result, representatives of these Armenian communities are free from political influence and, relying solely on universal human values, are able to create an environment for dialogue, including through the engagement of influential figures from other countries in their activities. Furthermore, the experiences of other inter-ethnic conflicts show that diaspora can play a pivotal role in peace initiatives. A notable example is the Northern Ireland conflict, where it was the Irish diaspora that made the decision to withdraw its investments from the war and instead redirect its resources into the peace process. When parties are constantly caught up in conflict, they risk losing touch with reality, and in this sense, there is often a need for a fresh perspective from the outside.

Throughout the study, it was emphasized that the diaspora is not a monolithic structure; it is quite diverse in its views and capabilities. Certain diaspora organizations are not interested in conflict resolution, as all of their activities and funding could be called into question. Others, on the contrary, are able to contribute through their knowledge, expertise, resources, and connections. Therefore, it is important to have a clear idea of which segments create obstacles to resolution and with which segments Armenian diplomacy (including civic diplomacy) needs to strengthen cooperation.

A concern was raised that a portion of the Armenian diaspora, regardless of their country of residence, has become "shamefully pro-Russian." Its representatives justify this stance by arguing that moving away from Russia, "Armenia will be swallowed by the Turks... Turkiye will come and wipe you out..." For this category of diaspora Armenians, a homeland with the status of a Russian province is viewed as an acceptable reality.

While most participants in the study expressed a degree of skepticism regarding the role of the diaspora, no one questioned the decisive contribution of international donor organizations to conflict resolution through civic diplomacy. Their support was described as unmatched and irreplaceable. Beyond merely providing resources, their engagement brought weight to Track 2. This, however, did not imply that the work of international donors was free of gaps and shortcomings. Some respondents tended to rate their work as little effective and their overall contribution as insufficient, largely because the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict and the role of the non-governmental sector were given little priority by them. The way the allocated funds were distributed did not always contribute to their targeted use and productive work on the ground. As one expert community representative remarked, the very fact that virtually all Azerbaijani participants in dialogue projects welcomed the 2020 war demonstrates the miscalculations by international partners and donors. In addition, representatives of environmental organizations, in particular, highlighted that international financial instruments, focused exclusively on economic gains, had an indirect negative impact on their environmental conservation efforts in the region.

This underscores the importance of periodically reviewing Track 2 activities, seeking ways to enhance their effectiveness, as well as identifying those initiatives and actors that make a tangible contribution to peacebuilding. This study specifically revealed a

lack of inclusiveness and diversity within the dialogue platforms created with the support of international donors. At the same time, the process should primarily engage participants who are truly and sincerely interested in peace. Meetings held within these platforms require greater intensity and consistency. A more detailed discussion of these matters - considering both the role of various components of the peacebuilding process and the specifics of the current situation, is provided in the “Conclusions and Recommendations” section.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The added value of civic diplomacy can be realized only if it stays ahead of the official negotiation agenda. When at the level of top officials from Armenia and Azerbaijan and on other interstate diplomatic tracks, the sides demonstrate greater constructiveness and willingness to move further than Track 2 participants permit themselves, the relevance of Track 2 could be called into question. A sign of such a situation emerged after August 8, 2025. This does not mean that the explanatory efforts by experts and journalists for a broader Armenian and Azerbaijani audience ceases to be required. However, it is only one of several areas of civic diplomacy and by no means exhausts its overall mission.

The fact that Track 2 lags behind Track 1 creates apparent advantages for dialogue programmes that maintain direct contact with decision-makers, which, in turn, cannot but affect their independence. While the conditional “Track 1.5” offers significant benefits, it cannot fully replace other forms of engagement in peacebuilding, especially those addressing issues not currently included on the official diplomacy agenda - for example, the environment, human rights and freedoms, cultural dialogue, and other humanitarian areas. Therefore, to fully unlock the potential of citizen diplomacy, it is important to create conditions, facilitating the engagement of actors who have previously demonstrated effectiveness but have found themselves sidelined due to the changed circumstances.

Along with efforts to prevent military escalation, the unblocking of communications, border delimitation and demarcation, resolving the issues of missing and detained persons and establishing contacts between residents of border villages can significantly contribute to building a regime of trust. Such initiatives require active civil society engagement and influence the perception of the peace process among Armenian and Azerbaijani families and individuals. Accordingly, comprehensive support for these initiatives from both international structures and the national authorities of both countries can significantly improve the climate in the peace process.

Developing critical thinking regarding the authorities’ actions could be an important step in drawing a significant part of civil society out of its isolation from the official peace process. This allows for distinguishing genuine intentions from imitation, creative approaches from artificial slowdowns of promising actions. Supporting critical thinking, particularly in relation to the conflict, is especially relevant in a context of

poor quality of education, the bias among large segments of the media, and a lack of intellectual discourse. Deep, bold, and professional analysis, along with a rejection of unconditional acceptance, creates the prerequisites for finding alternative solutions and stimulating more vigorous progress. Such contributions from the non-governmental sector take on a special meaning in the current situation, where the international and regional context has opened a window of opportunity for Baku and Yerevan, which could slam shut due to the parties' slowness and indecision.

An analysis of recent years' projects reveals that the most effective initiatives are those marked by publicity and the ability to engage the wider public in discussions on the topical aspects of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. Given the differences in the two countries' governance systems, closed-door discussions are unlikely to accelerate the settlement process. In contrast, discussions - such as those broadcast on television - indirectly engage their entire audience, thereby helping to overcome the estrangement of citizens of Armenia and Azerbaijan from both the bilateral agenda and from each other.

Track 2 participants should abandon aggression and mutual accusations that are one-sided in their categorical nature. At the same time, they should demonstrate openness and willingness to face controversial points. This combination of dialogue skills, both in media and alternative formats, implies not only a selection of interlocutors capable of constructive discussions but also effective moderation.

On the one hand, effective dialogue within the framework of civic diplomacy is fostered by inviting interested, sought-after and competent experts from other countries (the European Union and its individual member states, and the United States), who primarily enjoy a certain level of trust and contribute to the peace process. The potential participation in discussions of representatives from Russia, which retains levers of influence over the South Caucasus, generated persistent negative attitudes among participants in peacebuilding initiatives in both Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, if Moscow reconsiders the nature of its involvement in the region and demonstrates respect for the region's sovereignty - both at the official level and among the expert-analyst community - opportunities may emerge for Russian representatives as well. At the same time, integrating the topic of the Armenian-Azerbaijani peace process into wider regional and international context does not negate the primacy of direct Armenian-Azerbaijani dialogue.

The breakthrough achieved on August 8 in Washington elevates the bilateral format's status as central to the region's development prospects. This, of course, applies not only to the official level but also to citizen diplomacy. In this light, the sides should take advantage of the situation and organize events under dialogue projects directly in Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The prospects for creating favorable conditions for Track 2, alongside their positive aspects, carry certain risks. The "fashion" for peacebuilding is bound to draw opportunistic attention and interest both within Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as among external actors. Consequently, distinguishing between consistent, responsible participants in the process and its situational "companions" becomes particularly relevant.

Measures to counter disinformation, the propaganda promoting hatred and xenophobia, and hybrid methods designed to fuel or preserve the conflict should constitute a mandatory element of cooperation between representatives of the two countries' media and expert communities. The use of foreign propaganda against each other, which exacerbates mutual hostility via third-country information leaks, should be replaced by joint protective mechanisms. In particular, it is relevant to examine the instruments of destructive propaganda hindering agreements between Baku and Yerevan, develop an appropriate “antidote,” and align these efforts with positive joint actions in the information and analytical sphere.

As repeatedly highlighted in the responses of participants in this study, the experiences, achievements, and failures of Armenian-Azerbaijani civic diplomacy require regular examination and analysis. Updating one's knowledge of its dynamic history and current state serves as a resource for generating new ideas and launching practical initiatives.





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