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“Prepare to be marginalised”: interview with Azerbaijani anti-war activist

Tuesday 13 October 2020, by [ROWLEY Thomas](#), [SAMADOV Bahruz](#) (Date first published: 8 October 2020).

As war continues over Nagorno Karabakh, the number of Azerbaijanis calling for peace is minimal. We speak to one of them.

In Azerbaijan, voices calling for peace are few and far between. Since hostilities over Nagorno Karabakh began on 27 September, observers have noted significant initial support from Azerbaijani society for war with Armenia.

Losses on both sides have been heavy, though figures for civilian and military dead are hard to verify. UNICEF has [drawn](#) attention to the numbers of children wounded and killed in the war, saying that an “immediate cessation of hostilities is in the best interest of every child”.

On 30 September, 17 Azerbaijani left-wing activists [released](#) an anti-war statement, calling for an end to the war and restoration of dialogue. “We strongly condemn every move taken to prolong the conflict and deepen hatred between the two peoples. We want to look back and take the steps necessary to rebuild the trust between our societies and the youth. We reject every nationalist and state-of-war narratives that exclude any possibility of us living together again on this soil,” they wrote.

Activist and researcher Bahruz Samadov was one of the signatories to the statement. “A fractious and divided society has suddenly been consolidated through the power of military action,” [wrote](#) Samadov in a recent column for OC Media. “The government, the opposition, and the de-politicised majority now espouse the same dominant narrative of a national duty to take back the country’s lost lands.” An activist with NIDA civic movement, he currently researches authoritarian stability and depoliticisation in Azerbaijan at Charles University, Prague.

openDemocracy spoke to Samadov about anti-war sentiment in the country, how Karabakh is the main field of politicisation in Azerbaijan and the role of the Azerbaijani left.

Three days after the war began, Azerbaijani leftists [released](#) an anti-war statement. It said Azerbaijan’s real enemy are the “people in power in the country”, “who have been impoverishing and exploiting ordinary people as well as our country’s resources for their benefit for more than two decades.” What has been the reaction to this statement - whether in Azerbaijan, Armenia or outside the country?

This was the first anti-war statement after the war started. It was published on [LeftEast](#). Two days after the war started, we had a conversation with leftist activists who live both in Azerbaijan and abroad, and we immediately came to the conclusion that we have to speak up against the war, raise awareness about what’s happening there - and not just for the internal audience, the inter-Caucasian audience, but also for everyone interested in the region.

For me it was unexpected that we had so many reactions - from Armenia, Azerbaijan and abroad.

Perhaps because it was the first time. After this, we had another two statements - not by leftists, but a [peace initiative](#).

When it comes to our ideas, we showed we are a real opposition. I would say even a radical opposition in positive terms. This is a time when Azerbaijani society is consolidating - both the opposition and the government share the same narratives, and the opposition supports, and expresses its admiration, for the president. In this statement, we showed who the real enemy is: people in power and the elites who have exploited the same narrative for decades, depoliticising people in the process.

Could you give an example of a reaction to the anti-war statement?

It was translated both into Turkish and Armenian. For me this was a little bit unexpected - the Turkish left also commented on it, despite the fact that there are different opinions there. But the most interesting? On Twitter a couple of days ago I saw a statement that said: "Look, as always, the leftists are treacherous and don't represent our people".

Have there been any expressions of support from people inside Azerbaijan?

I had a lot of messages from my friends who expressed their support, that they would also like to join the statement, add their signatures. But at the same time these people are from the same circle, they share progressive values - but they are few, and I know them personally. But I can't say we received messages of support from ordinary people. As you know, people share - especially now - nationalistic sentiments, and that's why we didn't expect support inside the country.

You mentioned other statements - most notably, the [Peace Statement](#) published on Caucasus Talks. You reported yourself that several people who signed that statement in Azerbaijan had received threats on Facebook following the publication.

Unfortunately, we did receive threats on Facebook. Someone published our names, saying that "we should find them and judge them". It's not state sponsored. I wouldn't say the state is interested in persecuting us now. But of course, in Azerbaijan, extreme nationalism is the dominant narrative - though I wouldn't say that people are ideologically extremists. They simply don't have access to alternatives.

At this stage I would not say that this is something dangerous, but we don't know what will happen in two or three days.

In your view, how has Azerbaijani civil society reacted to the war?

Two points. First of all, I really can't say that you can observe any anti-war sentiment among Azerbaijani civil society - especially those who are former political prisoners. At the same time, there are less hostile people who tolerate our side and our statement, I've seen support only from them. Some of them have written publicly that they know there are people who are anti-war and that their point of view should be respected.

But the people who are anti-war now, I predict that these people will be in charge in five or ten years. They are very active and visible. There were more than 10 signatories from Azerbaijan to the Caucasus Talks statement. So we can say there is still hope for change in civil society because of these people - who radically oppose the war, who can speak up and who have enough motivation to stay in Baku after this.

The anti-war statement said that the signatories do not support further mobilisation, and that its primary goal is to restore dialogue. Clearly, the fighting continues. Civilians and, indeed, soldiers are still dying. In your recent [article](#) for OC Media, you wrote that previous calls for peace in 2014 and 2019 “accomplished little and such impotence should surprise no one”. You went on to criticise the fact that peace initiatives have never reached a wide audience in Azerbaijan, and that they are ineffective because they tend to attract people with certain privileges, but also have to operate in an authoritarian environment. Given this background, what do you see as the first realistic steps to restoring dialogue?

Previous peace statements did not really reach society. But unlike the statements from before, these two recent statements - despite the hostility and negative comments - really made their point. Now everyone, at least people on social media, are aware that some people are standing against the war, who change their profile pictures and have signed the statement. Despite all the hostility, I think the main goal should be to reach people in a way which makes it clear that there is at least some other point of view.

How to restore the peace process? Of course the problem, as mentioned in the anti-war statement, is the state-centred approach. The state has monopolised the dialogue process and the process of interpreting the conflict. The last time I remember any dialogue happening was in 1999-2000, when there was a brief period of democratisation in Azerbaijan - that was a time of real dialogue. After that we can observe a real peace process, and then both states monopolised the process. As you know, civil society in Azerbaijan has always been under pressure, suffering from repressions. It's the lack of democratic culture in Azerbaijan that prevented the broader process of peace negotiation between the two countries over Nagorno Karabakh.

The problem is state monopolisation and the lack of initiatives in civil society, and of course the very fact that even civil society members share the authoritarian values of demonising the enemy, but not dialogue. If we want to restore the dialogue process, first of all we need democratisation, and second the process should not be state-sponsored. But I don't think that Azerbaijan's authoritarian regime will allow this.

Regarding your point about democratisation, obviously we do not know how this war will end. If Aliyev does not deliver victory, to an extent perhaps there will be a window of opportunity for democratisation. Equally, Aliyev may well deliver some kind of victory, in which case the chances for democratisation are fairly limited. How do you see this?

I believe there will be some kind of so-called “small” victory, as it happened in April 2016 - not taking Nagorno Karabakh by force, but a limited victory followed by peace negotiations. Now it's really difficult to predict, but at least we know that if peace negotiations will really start, they will go fast. At the same time, I don't think these peace negotiations will include progressives in Azerbaijan, and I don't believe that we will somehow impact or participate in these processes. What's worrying for me is the fact that Aliyev's ratings are really high now. If elections are held soon, it's 100% he will win without having to falsify the results.

“We should state that society has always been marked by depoliticisation. And we can't say that the opposition has succeeded in mobilising people around certain demands”

This is, of course, worrying for progressive people. This should also worry the nationalistic opposition, but unfortunately their nationalistic subjectivities prevail over their opposition position - they've always been a target for repressions. It's a paradox, but this is the logic of war - when your political subjectivity is neutralised by your national identity and nationalistic mood, this is the problem here. When we ask the question “Why is there no democratic mobilisation in Azerbaijan”,

the answer lies in national identity, which is built around the [loss of Nagorno Karabakh](#).

You've talked a lot about the place that the loss of Karabakh holds for politics and politicisation in Azerbaijan. Could you take us through your thinking on this?

If we investigate politicisation/depolicitisation in Azerbaijan, first we should state that society has always been marked by depoliticisation. And we can't say that the opposition has succeeded in mobilising people around certain demands. For example, they always articulate demands for social and economic rights, but they never succeed. They also articulate demands around Nagorno Karabakh, claiming that the president isn't strong enough on this issue, but neither the demands on Karabakh nor the demands on social rights have had the power to mobilise people. This is a fact. The issue with depoliticisation is that the opposition has never presented something new, something that will break the old narratives, and I can't say that the mainstream opposition are really different ideologically from the ruling party. Many observers could say there is a lack of democracy even within these parties, as for decades the same political leadership has been in power, and they have always been weak.

But there have been successful mobilisations. In 2013, young people [organised](#) around demands that army service should be improved, after a series of soldiers died outside of combat. These demands were something powerful, but if we go deeper, we see that even these demands were nationalistic demands - "our army is weak, and we should improve it to defeat our external enemies". Every demand has a relationship to an external enemy.

Could you talk more about how you understand depoliticisation? How does it work in your view? Is it being forced from above or does it emerge as a result of different factors?

In Europe, the situation is completely different - there is a consensus around certain ideas, with centre-right and centre-left switching out from power. But in Azerbaijan, we have an authoritarian consensus whereby the Aliyev regime enjoys hegemony, and people passively agree to this reality. Society simply does not want to be engaged in political struggle.

This is the result of the presence of an external enemy, which has replaced inner antagonisms. The fact that every two or three years we see an escalation over Nagorno Karabakh, when several soldiers die every month, this keeps the trauma alive. People do not want to forget it.

There have been several examples of social mobilisations. The case of [Tofiq Yaqublu](#) or [Mehman Huseynov](#), political prisoners who went on hunger strike. People supported them, held rallies for them. But at the same time, these mobilisations weren't political enough. People supported Huseynov and Yaqublu because they "were one of us". These campaigns never questioned the roots of the regime. However, the positive side of these campaigns is that the Azerbaijani Left actively participated in both, showing solidarity even if ideologically neither Mehman nor Tofiq are on the left.

Tofiq Yaqublu is a war veteran with a clean reputation, and we [organised](#) a protest rally for him - despite our different ideological stances; it was the first such rally, organised explicitly by the Left. And, of course, feminists and other progressives supported our actions. Importantly, we expressed solidarity with the repressed oppositional figure, and if a struggle incorporates a progressive, democratic agenda, we are ready for a broad anti-authoritarian coalition.

You're suggesting here the connection is never made between the Aliyev regime and socio-economic issues. The anti-war statement says that the regime has been "diverting resources from essential sectors, such as education, healthcare, and social welfare, into the military, making profits for our

capitalist neighbors with imperialist aspirations – Russia and Turkey. Strangely enough, every single person is aware of this fact, but a sudden wave of amnesia hits everyone as soon as the first bullet gets shot on the contact line between Armenia and Azerbaijan.” What would be the leftist position on the trauma and traumatic narratives around the loss of Karabakh?

The leftist position should be that we accept that this trauma exists. We shouldn't blame people, the [displaced persons](#) who want to return to their land - they lived there for decades, and their ancestors before them. The problem lies in the fact that they are not fully integrated, and live with this desire to go back to Nagorno Karabakh, or usually the so-called “buffer zone”. For the left, the position should focus on completing demilitarisation of the region. And IDPs should have the right to return and live where they want. I wouldn't blame the state here. After two decades, displaced people live in more or less normal conditions, although some people are still suffering. Sometimes they face discrimination from those who believe that they enjoy some kind of benefits - such as not paying for electricity, or when their children enter university.

Regarding Nagorno Karabakh, society should focus on demilitarisation, not its status. It's not clear whether they want to be independent or part of Armenia. Pashinyan stated in the summer that [Karabakh is part of Armenia](#). This state-centrism on both sides prevents demilitarisation of the region, and the left should criticise both sides, and be objective about displaced persons and their rights.

I should mention that we are marginalised now, how should we cope with it? For my friends who live in Azerbaijan, what is happening now is psychologically damaging. They face pressure from both sides. Even in our families, it's not easy to cope with. Progressives need to support one another, prepare to be marginalised, and avoid despising people for their beliefs - we need to understand their trauma. We should stand against the war, but the left should not try and provoke people against us.

I believe that this marginalisation is not something long-lasting, and we should have patience. I already see that the anti-war position in the last couple of days faces less aggression than at the beginning

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