

WEAPONIZING RELIGION AND POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES FOR EUROPEAN DEMOCRATIC SECURITY

DRAFT REPORT



Photo: The dome of Shushi's Ghazanchetsots Cathedral hit by Azerbaijani rocket attack, Oct 8, 2020.
Credit: Zhinuzh Media, 2020.

About the authors

Armen Gevorgyan

Committee Chair, Standing Committee on Regional and Eurasian Integration of the National Assembly of Armenia;

Member, Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

Dr. Hovhannes Nikoghosyan

Adjunct Lecturer, American University of Armenia

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Introduction: the issue at stake

The Council of Europe and its main pillars, including the Parliamentary Assembly and the European Court of Human Rights, since their inception have done a great deal of effort to contribute to peace and cooperation among Member States and democratic security within national borders.

However, at times of war and ethnic conflicts too often we have witnessed deliberate destruction of heritage sites with the aim of eradicating the aboriginal culture, identity and the existence of the 'other'.¹ One important aspect that has rarely been brought to the attention of the Assembly - is the attempts by certain Member State Governments *to propagate religious dimension in ethnic conflicts, and often times abuse religion as a tool for political intervention in non-conflict environments of multi-ethnic states in Europe*, in order to indoctrinate people and kindle inter-faith antagonism. Such a contradistinction between Christian and Muslim identities, incited by certain Governments, and concerted efforts to propagate united action against 'the other' on religious grounds, may have a far-reaching consequences for democratic security and rule of law in wider Europe, by abrogating the social fabric in Member States by ways of weaponizing religion and stirring division in multiethnic societies.

The present report seeks to furnish the Assembly with supporting evidence and overview of the established *state practice* by the Governments of Azerbaijan and Turkey of such policies aimed at racially and religiously inspired human rights violations against Armenians in the course of the 44-day war in Nagorno Karabakh in Fall 2020 and its aftermath, as well as *attempts of mobilising Muslim societies against Armenia, Armenians and in European countries in general. Such state policies have begun to amount to efforts, particularly by Turkey, of establishing new forms of solidarity in Europe.*

In our view, the above is a clear incitement to disturb the peace in Europe by encouraging violence and discrimination against adherents of a particular religion and race. While such policies are most vividly manifested against Armenia, Artsakh (Nagorno Karabakh) and Armenians in Europe and beyond, they have a far wider implications onto other nations and communities as well.

This draft report is an initial attempt to map the existing problem and invite other Members of the Assembly to join efforts in elaborating further and distilling policy recommendations to ensure democratic peace and security in Europe.

¹ Cultural heritage in crisis and post-crisis situations, Report by Ismeta DERVOZ, 18 April 2015. Doc. 13758

The scope of the report

The present report will dwell on historical evidence since early 1990's as successive rulers of Azerbaijan have embarked on propagating racial superiority against Armenians and, in the course of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, had in numerous ways attempted to attach religious layers to its own antagonism with Armenians living in Republic of Artsakh (hereinafter referred to in internationalised term as Nagorno Karabakh), Armenia and multi-million Armenian Diaspora. Oftentimes such rhetoric trespassed into actual crimes - both in the battlefield and well beyond - in Europe.² Most recently, Azerbaijan had recruited mercenaries from Turkish-occupied areas of Syria (and probably Libya) to fight in the 44-day war in Fall 2020 by promising not only paychecks, but also by using language of religious fundamentalism. This has been in line with long-standing policy of Azerbaijan to ensure support by other Muslim states and communities in order to transform the ethno-political conflict about the status of Nagorno Karabakh into a religious confrontation between Christians and Muslims. The desecration of ancient Armenian churches and other historical monuments in the newly conquered territories since Fall 2020 - elevated to the status of state policy of the incumbent Government of Azerbaijan, in full support of Turkey - is a manifestation of ongoing cultural expansionism inconsistent with the values and ideals of the Council of Europe.

Azerbaijan's ally Turkey has used similar playbook to govern by Islamic populism³ at home and by weaving alliances with Turkic and other predominantly Muslim states in its immediate neighborhood and Muslim communities across Europe.

These vivid attempts of weaponizing religion and creating chambers for propagating religious controversies not only in Nagorno Karabakh, but also in other regions in Europe, are manifest violations of the Charter of the Council of Europe and, in particular, the pursuit of building "closer unity between all like-minded countries of Europe".

We believe the Assembly must step up its efforts to prevent such a future.

² Note: One of the ways Turkey attempted to upset democratic peace in Europe has been well described in the ECHR case of *Perinçek v. Switzerland* (2015).

³ Kirdiş, E. (2021). Islamic Populism in Turkey. *Religions*, 12(9), 752. MDPI AG. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/rel12090752>

Summary of previous work by the Council of Europe

The Council of Europe has a long history of addressing a wide range of issues pertaining to the safety and security of peoples engaged in ethnic conflicts and their aftermath, as well as making policy prescriptions to the national Governments to combat derivatives of that evil, namely racism, anti-semitism, xenophobia and intolerance. In particular, the Parliamentary Assembly has exhibited tireless efforts in the past in order to ensure the protection of human rights and individual freedoms, rule of law and democratic security in its Member States with a special emphasis to those suffering conflicts and civil strife. Wherever relevant, the Assembly has chosen to call upon the conflicting governments to seek exclusively peaceful resolution of their disputes with a special emphasis on the protection of human rights and cultural heritage sites, as well as engaging in confidence-building measures to avoid long-term enmity. A report, presented to the Assembly back in 1995, in the midst of the horrible war in former Yugoslavia at the time, alarmed the Member States of “invisible borders of intolerance and hatred [being] re-erected and fortified in the minds of its people”.⁴

The work of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance deserves a special mention, as the Council’s facility of developing confidence building programmes and guidelines for action against racism, intolerance and ethnic hatred.⁵

The Assembly has continuously been underlining the importance of respect for and understanding of cultural and religious diversity in Europe and throughout the world, stressing the need for ongoing dialogue. It has also adopted a series of resolutions and reports to condemn weaponization of religion in any context in modern European states. For example, Resolution 1928 (2013)⁶ condemned “any instances of negative stereotyping of persons based on religion, as well as the advocacy of religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence”. A great deal of discussion on the subject-matter was presented in the report associated with the resolution.⁷

Beyond the treaties signed within the frameworks of the Council of Europe, and reports and resolutions adopted in its Assembly, the European Court of Human Rights (hereinafter: Strasbourg Court, or ECHR) has also served a vital role in this regard. The Strasbourg Court, acting under the European Convention of Human Rights, has chosen to deal with ethnic conflicts on accounts of continuing violations of Article 2 (right to life), Article 3 (prohibition

⁴ REPORT on the fight against racism, xenophobia, anti-semitism and intolerance (Doc. 7318), 8 June 1995. <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/15309>

⁵ Confidence-building measures in the field of minorities, Council of Europe, May 1993. <https://rm.coe.int/09000016809deb7e>

⁶ Safeguarding human rights in relation to religion and belief, and protecting religious communities from violence; Resolution 1928 (2013). <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/19695/html>

⁷ Violence against religious communities, Report, Doc. 13157, 04 April 2013 <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/19544/html>

of inhuman or degrading treatment) and continuing violations of Article 5 (right to liberty and security) in cases concerning the Turkey-Cyprus issue and the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Palić v. Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2011); as well as continuing violations of Article 1 (protection of property) in cases concerning the Nagorno Karabakh conflict.

As a major source of ethnic conflict, the ECHR dealt with cases of racial and other forms of discrimination and, “in view of its perilous consequences”, requested national authorities to “use all available means to combat racism, thereby reinforcing democracy’s vision of a society in which diversity is not perceived as a threat but as a source of enrichment”.⁸ At various occasions, the Council has called upon States to maintain “neutrality” towards religions in order to preserve “pluralism and the proper functioning of democracy” (Metropolitan Church of Bessarabia and Others v. Moldova, no. 45701/99, 2001).

The above is only an outline of the richness of various efforts by main bodies of the Council of Europe aimed at urging Member States to prevent and prosecute for illegal expressions of hate speech, discrimination and denial of cultural identity.

Brief summary of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict and attempts to introduce religious dimension therein

A selection of notable authors like Broers (2019),⁹ Hakobyan (2010)¹⁰ and de Waal (2013)¹¹ have published extensively on the conflict’s history and modern peace process. For the purposes of the present report and for the sake of completeness, we will only provide the following short passage below.

The historiography of the political conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis about the status of Nagorno Karabakh dates back at least a century - to the 1921 decision by the Communist party (Bolsheviks) Caucasus Bureau to attach the region to the newly created Soviet Azerbaijan. The almost seven decades of Soviet rule in the region have not produced much reconciliation among the two communities in the region (by 1989 Soviet Census, of the roughly 190.000 population in the region 77% were Armenians, and 23% Azeris),¹² and the *Glasnost and Perestroika* policies proclaimed by last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev gave

⁸ Case of Makuchyan and Minasyan v. Azerbaijan and Hungary; (Application no. 17247/13), Judgment; 26 May 2020. <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-202524>

⁹ Broers, Laurence. *Armenia and Azerbaijan: Anatomy of a Rivalry*. Edinburgh University Press, 2019.

¹⁰ Hakobyan, T’at’ul. *Karabakh Diary: Green and Black : Neither War Nor Peace*. Tatul Hakobyan, 2010.

¹¹ Waal, Thomas de. *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War*. NYU Press, 2013.

¹² Всесоюзная перепись населения 1989 года, Распределение городского и сельского населения областей республик СССР по полу и национальности: Нагорный Карабах: http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/resp_nac_89.php?reg=71

rise to political demands of the majority Armenian population to reunite with Soviet Armenia beginning February 1988. This pursuit was suppressed by the Kremlin, as well as Azerbaijan itself, and a series of ethnic cleansings in Sumgayit (1988), Baku (1990) and other places led to all-out war between newly independent Armenia, Nagorno Karabakh and Azerbaijan which was concluded by a trilateral ceasefire in May 1994, mediated by Russia. The 1992-1994 war left Nagorno Karabakh and seven adjacent regions under the jurisdiction of independent Republic of Artsakh and gave start to peace process under the auspices of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group and its co-chairmanship (since 1997) comprised of Russia, United States and France. The talks did not produce a lasting settlement to date, while two major violations of the ceasefire regime resulted in the Four Day War of April 2016, and the 44-Day war of 2020, and a new status quo as of Spring 2022.

In the course of the three wars (1992-1994, 2016 and 2020) the successive regimes in Azerbaijan (in particular, Heydar Aliyev in 1993-2003 and his son Ilham Aliyev since 2004) have not only engaged in anti-Armenian hate speech and levelled that up to a state policy, but also attempted to attach religious dimension to the conflict and antagonism with Armenians. Moreover, still under the Soviet rule, according to a diplomatic cable dispatched from Moscow, the U.S. diplomats cited the predominant moods in Baku that “[this conflict] *is a struggle between two different religions* [Muslim and Christian], worldviews and national identities”.¹³ In the same 1989 the founder of Azerbaijani modern historiography Ziya Bunyatov said in an interview: “...what is needed is a well-thought-out program of *propagandising the Moslem religion as a culture*, its history and ideological essence... in the final analysis, this should instill in young people thoughts about the great spirituality of their nation (Tonoyan, p. 74).¹⁴ Since independence the new authorities, especially Heydar Aliyev since 1993, began building up a religious dimension of the conflict which attracted religiously motivated mercenaries from Russia’s North Caucasus (predominantly Chechnya) and Afghanistan.¹⁵

Two countries - Iran and Russia - opposed this narrative due to their own geopolitical considerations. Neighbouring Iran has always been alert of ‘Islamisation’ of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict.¹⁶ Armenia has maintained cordial relations with the neighboring Islamic Republic, which showcased, among other things, the lack of religious dimension to the

¹³ U.S. Department of State Case No. F-2008-02192 Doc No. C17572156; cited in Sargsyan, Suren. *Armenia and Bush himself (in Arm)*. Newmag, 2022, p. 90.

¹⁴ Tonoyan, Artyom H., editor. *Black Garden Aflame: The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict in the Soviet and Russian Press*. East View Information Services, Incorporated, 2021.

¹⁵ Исламизация карабахского конфликта неизбежна, *Ноев Ковчег*, № 09 (156) Сентябрь 2010. <https://noev-kovcheg.ru/mag/2010-09/2178.html>

¹⁶ Vali Kaleji, Nagorno-Karabakh: Transformation From an Ethnic-Territorial to Ethnic-Religious Conflict, Russian Council on International Affairs, October 21, 2020 <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/columns/military-and-security/nagorno-karabakh-transformation-from-an-ethnic-territorial-to-ethnic-religious-conflict/>

conflict and this received appreciation in Tehran - both with the Government and the religious leadership (After the 2020 war Armenia also attempted rapprochement with Saudi Arabia¹⁷). In addition, in 1993 - when Afghan mujahideen and Chechen terrorists made their way to Nagorno Karabakh, increasing the chances of religious confrontation - Russian authorities, through the Russian Orthodox Church, initiated a trilateral format with Armenian and Azerbaijani spiritual leaders to prevent such a prospect (Tonoyan, p. 225). Such a meeting between Armenian Catholicos Vazgen I and the leader of the Office of the Muslims of the Caucasus Sheikh ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade was also convened in May 1988 under the pressure of the Kremlin, but failed to achieve anything.

The Azerbaijani clergy or Government never called the war in Nagorno Karabakh a *jihad*, but “[Azerbaijani] nationalism has primarily been anti-Armenian in content and Islamic in context.¹⁸ Political use of religious identity had been vividly manifested since joining the Organisation of Islamic Conference in 1992, when the Azerbaijani Government started lobbying for OIC’s taking pro-Azeri position in the conflict largely based on Islamic solidarity.¹⁹ In 2006 Azeri spiritual leader approached the closest to declaring *jihad*: “*I am ready to proclaim jihad for the liberation of the occupied territories of Azerbaijan. And I am ready to do so when the right time arrives.*”²⁰ After the Four Day War in 2016 he reiterated this stance by stating “...[t]he defense of the Motherland is part of our faith”.²¹ Neither of the two statements led to more formal declarations, yet President Aliyev echoed this narrative by citing “religious factor” as something impeding the conflict resolution: “The religious factor plays a role here. We are Muslims, so we are treated with double standards. Especially now, when Islamophobia is at a peak in Europe” (Tonoyan, p. 268).

¹⁷ Exclusive: Armenian president hails ‘new page’ in ties with Saudi Arabia, thanks Arab world for providing refuge after genocide; Arab News, 28 December 2021. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1991456/world>

¹⁸ Tchilingirian, Hratch (1998) "Religious Discourse on the Conflict in Nagorno Karabakh," Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe: Vol. 18 : Iss. 4 , Article 1. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol18/iss4/1>

¹⁹ Note: For a more elaborate discussion of the religious aspects during the 1988-2016 period, see: Tonoyan, Artyom, *Armenia-Azerbaijan: Rethinking the Role of Religion in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*, in *Religion, Conflict, and Stability in the Former Soviet Union*. Ed by Migacheva & Frederick, RAND Corporation, 2018. Accessed 5 March 2022.

²⁰ Sokhbet Mamedov, “Armenia Threatened with Jihad” [“Armenii Prigrozili Dzhikhodom”], *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, Moscow, August 29, 2006

²¹ “Sheikh: The Defense of the Motherland Is Part of the Faith” [“Sheykh: Zashchita Rodiny yavlyayetsya chast’yu very”], *Oxu.az*, May 26, 2016.

The Council of Europe and Nagorno Karabakh conflict

Prior to their accession to the Council of Europe, Armenia and Azerbaijan committed to seek exclusively peaceful resolution to the conflict (see Parliamentary Assembly Opinions 221 (2000) and 222 (2000) and Committee of Ministers Resolutions Res(2000)13 and Res(2000)14).²² This pledge was reiterated by both Governments at their accession to the organisation in January 2001.

The Assembly adopted a few resolutions and recommendations on the conflict. Most notable²³ among those are Recommendation 1251 (1994), Resolution 1416 (2005) and its associated Recommendation 1690 (2005), and Resolution 2391 (2021), the latter adopted in the aftermath of the 44-day war.

Given the limited scope of the present report, below we will focus on only the relevant aspects of the aforementioned documents, adopted by the Assembly.

The Recommendation 1251 (1994) was the early reaction of the Assembly to take note of the aftermath of the war, but was limited in scope. A decade later, in 2005, the Resolution 1416 in paragraphs 11-12 urged the parties the following [emphasis added]:

11. The Assembly condemns any expression of hatred portrayed in the media of Armenia and Azerbaijan. *The Assembly calls on Armenia and Azerbaijan to foster reconciliation and to restore confidence and mutual understanding among their peoples through schools, universities and the media. Without such reconciliation, hatred and mistrust will prevent stability in the region and may lead to new violence. Any sustainable settlement must be preceded by and embedded in such a reconciliation process.*

12. *The Assembly calls on the Secretary General of the Council of Europe to draw up an action plan for support to Armenia and Azerbaijan targeted at mutual reconciliation*

²² Cited in: Case of Sargsyan v. Azerbaijan, Application no. [40167/06](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre?i=001-155662), Grand Chamber Judgment, 16 June 2015. <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre?i=001-155662>

²³ Note: Two other draft resolutions were voted in January 2016, both of which were strongly favoured by the Government of Azerbaijan and objected by the Armenian delegation to PACE with claims of lacking neutrality and objectivity. First one was eventually struck down in the vote (drafted by [Mr Robert WALTER](#), United Kingdom, EC) - which Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev explained by reference to 'Islamophobia' at the Assembly: <https://www.lragir.am/ru/2016/01/30/46640/>

Another one was adopted as Resolution 2085 (2016), drafted by Ms Milica Marković from Bosnia and Herzegovina. The latter was placed under investigation in her home country over suspicions of corruption in connection with reports she authored on Armenia and Azerbaijan for the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), for which reasons the aforementioned Resolution 2085 (2016) will not be discussed in this report.

<https://www.rferl.org/a/bosnian-markovic-investigation-bribery-council-europe/28994507.html>

processes, and to take this resolution into account in deciding on action concerning Armenia and Azerbaijan.

In the following years, unfortunately, the implementation of the Resolution 1416 (2005) was unsuccessful, despite initially positive attitude by both national delegations of Armenia and Azerbaijan, albeit for different reasons. While the Azerbaijani delegation would stress on the Resolution's reaffirmation of the principle of territorial integrity, the Armenian party referred to the continuous bellicose rhetoric and hate speech that prevented the confidence-building measures endorsed in the Resolution 1416. Eventually this made the work of the PACE sub-commission impossible.²⁴

The associated Recommendation 1690 (2005) took the aspects of confidence-building measures further. In particular, it called upon the Committee of Ministers to, inter alia [emphasis added]:

- *Allocate resources for an action plan of specific confidence-building measures for Armenia and Azerbaijan;*
- Allocate resources for specific training programmes for teachers and journalists from both countries aimed at better mutual understanding, tolerance and reconciliation;
- *Allocate resources for specific action by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance concerning both countries, in particular with regard to educational institutions and the public media;*

In response,²⁵ the Committee of Ministers largely deferred to the ongoing peace process under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairmanship, in addition listing some initiatives funded by the Council in support of people-to-people contact among the parties involved.

The Assembly adopted Resolution 1553 in 2007 to remind of the obligations of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia on missing persons in the course of relevant conflicts. The resolution mostly had humanitarian agenda and is not of material importance for this report.

The other body of the Council, namely the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), mentioned in the Recommendation 1690 (2005) cited above, has regularly published monitoring reports on Azerbaijan (as well as Armenia). Suffices to refer to one of those reports, released in 2016, which said, in particular:

²⁴ Armenpress: [Armenian parliamentary speaker meets with CoE Secretary General Terry Davis], in Armenian. 5 Nov, 2007. <https://armenpress.am/arm/news/69834/>

²⁵ The conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh region dealt with by the OSCE Minsk Conference; Recommendation 1690 (2005), Reply from the Committee of Ministers, Doc. 10685, 26 September 2005. <https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/X2H-Xref-ViewHTML.asp?FileID=11024&lang=EN>

“...political leaders, educational institutions and media [of Azerbaijan] have continued using hate speech against Armenians; *an entire generation of Azerbaijanis has now grown-up listening to this hateful rhetoric*” [emphasis added].²⁶

Same narrative was incorporated by the U.S. State Department in their annual reports.²⁷ However, the extent of understanding by the international community of the general environment of racial and other forms of discrimination has been limited for over a decade, as since 2011 Azerbaijan terminated reporting on these issues to the OSCE. The same ECRI (2016) report stated, that:

“The Advisory Committee of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (ACFC) for example noted “a persistent public narrative surrounding the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh identifying [in]variably Armenia or Armenians as ‘the enemy’ and openly promulgating hate messages”. According to other sources, there is a conflict-ridden domestic political discourse and *Azerbaijan’s leadership, education system and media are very prolific in their denigration of Armenians*” [emphasis added].

A number of other entities have drawn similar conclusions on the situation in Azerbaijan.²⁸ But while such reports - adopted by ECRI or other organisations and Governments, continued limited, but at least some screening of Azerbaijan’s human rights record, there had been little or no political cost incurred for the regime in Baku.

The Resolution 2391 (2021) - was adopted by the Assembly after the 44-day war of 2020. Apart from evaluations of the post-war humanitarian situation in general, the Assembly made two relevant observations on tackling hate speech and preserving the cultural heritage. In particular, the Resolution 2391 (2021) noted:

18. The long running conflict has had a catastrophic impact on the cultural heritage and property of the region, for which both Armenia and Azerbaijan have a responsibility. In light of this, the Assembly:

18.1 condemns the damage and destruction for which Armenia is responsible in the former conflict areas returned to Azerbaijan....

²⁶ ECRI, Report on Azerbaijan (fifth monitoring cycle), June 2016, <https://rm.coe.int/fourth-report-on-azerbaijan/16808b5581>

²⁷ US Department of State, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Azerbaijan, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/AZERBAIJAN-2019-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf>

²⁸ Council of Europe Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, Fourth Opinion on Azerbaijan, adopted on 8 November 2017, <https://rm.coe.int/4th-acfc-opinion-on-azerbaijan-english-language-version/1680923201>; US Department of State, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Azerbaijan, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/AZERBAIJAN-2019-HUMANRIGHTS-REPORT.pdf>

18.2 condemns the deliberate shelling of the ... Ghazanchetsots Cathedral in Shushi as well as the destruction or damage of other churches and cemeteries during and after the conflict;

18.3 remains concerned, in the light of past destruction, about the future of the many Armenian churches, monasteries, including the monastery in Khutavank/Dadivank, cross-stones and other forms of cultural heritage which have returned under Azerbaijan control;

18.4 expresses concern about a developing narrative in Azerbaijan promoting a “Caucasian Albanian” heritage to replace what is seen as an “Armenian” cultural heritage;

19. Hate speech has been a long-standing problem in both countries, as noted by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) in its reports, in particular in relation to Azerbaijan, which has also been criticised by the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

The Strasbourg Court thus far issued two landmark judgments, namely *Chiragov and others v. Armenia* (Application no. [13216/05](#)) and *Sargsyan v. Azerbaijan* (Application no. [40167/06](#)), both rendered by the Grand Chamber on June 16, 2015 (predominantly about property issues of the applicants).

In all of the adopted documents, cited above, the Assembly has wilfully avoided underlining the religious differences of conflicting parties, not to bring it in as a source of conflict. While this may be argued to have been a political choice by the Assembly and other organisations, it nevertheless did not deter the Government of Azerbaijan from speculating on that narrative. The above documents testify to the fact that racial discrimination and hate speech have generally been accounted for as vivid problems in Azerbaijan, perpetrated by the authorities. The types of crimes, committed by Azerbaijani military in the recent war in 2020 (or before), as well as statements by the President of Azerbaijan up until now, signal to the existing policy of portraying the conflict and especially its aftermath as a notable victory not only for Azerbaijan, but also for the entire Muslim world.

Efforts by Armenia to denounce religious character of the conflict

Unlike Azerbaijan, Armenian parties - i.e. both Republic of Armenia and Republic of Artsakh - have always been committed to denouncing religious dimension in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. One of the important directions of Armenian foreign policy since 1991 has been strengthening relations with neighbouring Iran and the Arab world.²⁹

Probably the most sound effort by Armenia has been the active engagement, through the good services and mediation of the Russian Orthodox Church and successive Patriarchs of Moscow and All Russia, with the Office of the Muslims of the Caucasus, i.e. the religious leader of Azerbaijan, dating back to May 1988.

In February 1993, already in the course of the active war, Catholicos Vazgen I of All Armenians met with Sheikh ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade in Montreux, Switzerland. This meeting concluded by adopting a joint statement to denounce any religious basis for the ongoing war. Such statements were adopted at later stages of the conflict too - e.g. in Fall 1993, Summer 1995 in Moscow, etc. At later stages, e.g. in November 2000, the religious leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia began adopting joint communiques to call upon the political leaders to find peaceful resolution of the conflict. This lasted till 2017. Yet despite the spirit of the joint statements, the Azerbaijani religious leader often made remarks upon return that were neither consistent with the environment of those meetings, nor with the purpose of those. For example, in 2008 the Sheikh ul-Islam said: *"...we don't see the results of these meetings because the lie and treachery sit in the blood of Armenians"*.³⁰ But even after such statements, the meetings and communication between religious leaders continued, with proactive engagement of the Russian Patriarch.³¹

Political and religious authorities in Armenia have continuously reiterated that the conflict is void of any religious meaning, including in the course of the 44-day war,³² and encouraged investments to Armenia from Iran and the Arab world.³³ This continued after the 44-day war, too.³⁴

²⁹ Note: Since 2004 Armenia has become an observer state in the Arab league.

³⁰ Spiritual leader of the Muslims of the Caucasus: "Lie and betrayal is in the blood of Armenians". Day.az. 22.08.2008. /in Russian/ <http://news.day.az/society/125166.html>

³¹ Глава РПЦ призвал Армению и Азербайджан к диалогу [in Russian], News.am, 24.07.2020. <https://news.am/rus/news/593219.html>

³² Catholicos of All Armenians slams attempts to give religious nature to NK conflict, Armenpress, 7 October, 2020. <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1030761.html>

³³ RA President: Baku's attempts at imparting religious character to Karabakh issue are unacceptable, Panarmenian.net, June 11, 2010. <https://www.panarmenian.net/m/eng/news/49907>

³⁴ We still need to learn how to use the power of the Diaspora – President Sarkissian's interview with Asia Times, Armenpress, 22 December, 2021. <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1071438/>

Efforts by Azerbaijan to flare up religious dimension to the conflict before the 44-day war

As noted above, since the late 1980s Azerbaijani leadership has tried to add religious dimension to the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, with a view of both attracting allies among Muslim countries as well as consolidating its own society.

Much of the racial discrimination and hate speech, voiced by the Azerbaijani authorities over the years, has been in the form of denigrating Armenians on the grounds of religious identity. *This state policy has been manifested in two ways: first, by denying any of the historical (cultural and religious) heritage in Nagorno Karabakh and some parts of Armenia-proper (including capital Yerevan) as belonging to Armenians (for which reasons the fake-historical concept about Caucasian Albania had been nurtured); and second by blaming Armenians for Islamophobia to validate the victory in the 44-day war was one to be cherished by all Muslims.*³⁵

Denying Armenians of cultural heritage

For decades the Azerbaijani leadership at various levels had been engaged in accusing Armenians of ‘erasing’ Azerbaijani cultural and religious heritage in Nagorno Karabakh. Yet no independent scholar, foreign Government, nor any reputable international organisation (NGO or otherwise) or the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairmen had ever testified to any such facts. Quite the contrary, an Armenian charitable foundation funded a renovation of a Shia mosque in Shushi and in 2019 it was inaugurated as Armenian-Iranian Cultural Center.³⁶

In contrast, the Azerbaijani leadership has engaged in racial discrimination campaign against Armenians - duly testified by ECRI and other organisations cited above - by both denying any Armenian heritage and destroying the existing material culture. These reports are vocal testimony of the propagandistic nature of the often repeated narrative by the Azerbaijani Government, Government-controlled NGO’s and others about ‘tolerance and multiculturalism’ in the country. One of the often reiterated claims is about the preservation of the Armenian Church in Baku,³⁷ which however functions as a branch of “Presidential library” with no public access, rather than a religious entity. Moreover, high-level Government officials, including President Aliyev, often pinpoint at this Church building in Baku to reinvigorate anti-Armenian rhetoric and justify the state policy.³⁸

³⁵ [Глава государства: Все международное сообщество уже согласилось с нашей Победой, приняло ее] (in Russian). 27 Sept 2021.

<https://media.az/politics/1067831811/glava-gosudarstva-vse-mezhdunarodnoe-soobschestvo-uzhe-soglasilos-s-nashey-pobedoy-prinyalo-ee/>

³⁶ Gohar Agha Upper Mosque restored, inaugurated as Armenian-Iranian Cultural Center in Artsakh, Armenpress, 14 October, 2019. <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/991623.html>

³⁷ [Армянская церковь в Баку], (in Russian), 20 Oct 2020. <https://vesti.az/armiya/armyanskaya-cerkov-v-baku-khranyashhikhsya-zdes-knig-net-dazhe-v-armenii-video-419719>

³⁸ [Президент Ильхам Алиев Маргарите Симоньян...] (in Russian), Trend.az, 24 Feb 2022,

One of the internationally-sound episodes of the destruction of Armenian cultural and religious heritage in the territory of Azerbaijan dates back to late 2005, when a video footage was released of Azerbaijani military methodically demolishing with sledgehammers all the cross-stones, or khachkars, remained in Djulfa Cemetery in Nakhijevan (officially: Naxçıvan Autonomous Republic), dating back to XIII century. Five years earlier UNESCO demanded to protect the heritage site, to no avail.³⁹ The soldiers were recorded loading the debris on to trucks and dumping it into the Araxes.⁴⁰ Azerbaijan denied the facts. In 2019 evidence was published in the art journal Hyperallergic showing that the monuments were covertly and systematically demolished as part of an Azerbaijani campaign to erase traces of indigenous Armenian culture in the region.⁴¹

Over the past few decades the Azerbaijani historians have developed and solidified a narrative about “Caucasian Albania” to deny Armenians their cultural heritage and appropriate Armenian lands, culture and history.⁴² Both on the level of the President,⁴³ and other officials and religious leaders, this narrative of “Caucasian Albania” has seen wide use in anti-Armenian contexts. In this regard pseudo-historical works have been funded by Heydar Aliyev Foundation in the past two decades.⁴⁴

Among other domains, this xenophobic policy had been manifested at the highest levels by claims over historical belonging of other Armenian cities and towns, including capital

<https://www.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3560053.html>

³⁹ Armenian cross-stones art. Symbolism and craftsmanship of Khachkars, unesco.org.

<https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/armenian-cross-stones-art-symbolism-and-craftsmanship-of-khachkars-00434>

⁴⁰ Monumental loss: Azerbaijan and 'the worst cultural genocide of the 21st century', The Guardian, 1 Mar 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/mar/01/monumental-loss-azerbaijan-cultural-genocide-khachkars>

⁴¹ High-Resolution Satellite Imagery and the Destruction of Cultural Artifacts in Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan; American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), December 5, 2010.

<https://www.aaas.org/resources/high-resolution-satellite-imagery-and-destruction-cultural-artifacts-nakhchivan-azerbaijan>

Simon Maghakyan and Sarah Pickman, A Regime Conceals Its Erasure of Indigenous Armenian Culture, hyperallergic, February 18, 2019. <https://hyperallergic.com/482353/a-regime-conceals-its-erasure-of-indigenous-armenian-culture/>

Amos Chapple, When The World Looked Away: The Destruction Of Julfa Cemetery, RFE/RL, December 10, 2020 <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-azerbaijan-julfa-cemetery-destruction-unesco-cultural-heritage/30986581.html>

⁴² Nora Dudwick, The Case of the Caucasian Albanians: Ethnohistory and Ethnic Politics, Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique, Vol. 31, No. 2/3, Regards sur l'anthropologie soviétique (Apr. - Sep., 1990), pp. 377-383. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20170734>

⁴³ [Президент Азербайджана Ильхам Алиев обратился к народу] (in Russian), trend.az 25 Nov, 2020.

<https://www.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3339819.html>

⁴⁴ [«Война против Азербайджана: под прицелом культурное наследие»], (in Russian), azertag.az, 04.10.2007.

<https://azertag.az/ru/xeber/VOINA PROTIV AZERBAIDZHANA POD PRICELOM KULTURNOE NASLEDIE-672804>

Yerevan, repeated regularly.⁴⁵ Armenians were proclaimed to be ‘a worthless nation’,⁴⁶ and “country of no value”.⁴⁷ These narratives have intensified following the 2020 war, again on highest levels.⁴⁸

This xenophobic narrative of racial discrimination triggered a torrent of war crimes in the course of the 2016 war,⁴⁹ and more isolated incidents against Armenians captured on the Line of Contact at other times.⁵⁰ The Four Day War has seen beheading,⁵¹ torture, and mutilation of combatants’ and civilians’ dead bodies by Azerbaijani military.⁵² The most infamous case of glorifying murderers of Armenians is the repatriation from Hungary and decoration with state awards of R.S. in 2012 - a case that eventually reached the ECHR.⁵³ Elmira Suleymanova, the Ombudsperson of Azerbaijan at the time of commission of this crime in Hungary, stated: “R.S. must become an example of patriotism for the Azerbaijani youth”.⁵⁴

This denial of Armenian historical heritage made in Azerbaijan at the highest levels before 2020 were, in fact, meant to serve as justification of desecration of Armenian cultural and religious sites in the re-captured territories of Nagorno Karabakh.⁵⁵ Aliyev reiterated this narrative of “Armenian vandals”, of “Armenian Islamophobia” and “Caucasian Albania” continuously in every interview in the course and the aftermath of the 2020 war.⁵⁶ **We**

⁴⁵ [«Иреван – наша историческая земля, мы должны вернуться на эти земли»], (in Russian), aniarc.am, February 8, 2018. <https://www.aniarc.am/2018/02/08/ilham-aliyev-speech-8-february-2018/>

⁴⁶ Ziyafat Asgarov, First Vice-Speaker of the Parliament: “It is hard to purge the ‘Armenian’ pest. The longer it remains without cure, the harsher its consequences are”.

[Зияфет Аскеров: «Армения входит в список бесперспективных государств»] (in Russian), APA.az, 16.04.2013 <http://ru.apa.az/news/245450> s

⁴⁷ Ilham Aliyev on Twitter, November 20, 2012,

<https://twitter.com/presidentaz/status/270827003521929216>;

Hurriyet Daily News, Azerbaijan Leader Unleashes Anti-Armenia Twitter Tirade, November 20, 2012,

<https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/azerbaijan-leader-unleashes-anti-armenia-twitter-tirade-35078>

⁴⁸[Президент Азербайджана: Зангезур, Гёйча, Иреван – наши исторические земли] (in Russian), APA.az, 10 Dec 2020. <https://apa.az/ru/xeber/vnutrennyaya-politika/Prezident-Azerbajdzhana-Zangezur-Gyojcha-Ireван-nashi-istoricheskie-zemli-431529>

⁴⁹ For more evidence see: Interim public report on atrocities committed by Azerbaijani military forces against the civilian population of the Nagorno Karabakh Republic and servicemen of the Nagorno Karabakh Defence Army on 2-5 April 2016 - Office of the Ombudsman of Nagorno Karabakh. <https://artsakhombuds.am/ru/document/560>

⁵⁰ Mamikon Khojayan, captive in Azerbaijan, was injected with drugs and oil, Aysor.am, 26/06/2014. <https://www.aysor.am/en/news/2014/06/26/mamikon-khojayan-police/811905>

⁵¹ Azerbaijani soldiers behead Armenian Yazidi Kurd: Karabakh conflict, ekurd.net, April 4, 2016.

<https://ekurd.net/azerbaijani-behead-yazidi-kurd-2016-04-04>

⁵² Azerbaijani Soldiers Execute Elderly Armenian Couple in Artsakh; Then Cut Off Their Ears; hetq.am; 3 Apr 2016. <https://hetq.am/en/article/66976>

⁵³ Case of Makuchyan and Minasyan v. Azerbaijan and Hungary (Application no. [17247/13](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng/?i=001-202524)), 2020. <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng/?i=001-202524>

⁵⁴ “Zerkalo” newspaper [Azerbaijan, in Russian], 28 February, 2004

⁵⁵ [Президент Ильхам Алиев выступил с обращением к азербайджанскому народу] (in Russian), Trend.az, 4 Oct 2020, <https://www.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3310628.html>

⁵⁶ [Президент Ильхам Алиев дал интервью турецкому телеканалу NTV] (in Russian), Trend.az, Oct 15, 2020. <https://www.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3317283.html>

believe all this had been done to transform the self-determination issue of the people of Nagorno Karabakh - a cornerstone of the political conflict since 1988 - into a religious conflict between Armenians, on one hand, and Azerbaijanis as an outpost of the Islamic world - on the other. Over the past three decades, no foreign Government (other than Turkey) has endorsed this narrative in any ways.

The Armenian Human Rights Defender over years has issued numerous alerts and evidence-based reports to showcase the true reach of the government-administered vilification of Armenians, including on religious grounds, and called to take immediate action towards counteracting state-perpetuated hatred.

Allegations of Armenian and European Islamophobia

A week before launching the war against Nagorno Karabakh Ilham Aliyev accused Armenians for adherence to “state policy of Islamophobia”. He added: “Azerbaijan has always been active in terms of Islamic solidarity... by supporting Islamic states in international organisations”.⁵⁷

Apart from repeated statements over the years by the Azerbaijani President and other lower-level officials, the Azerbaijani Government has consolidated this policy in the international dimension through the Organisation of Islamic Conference since its full-fledged membership in 1992 and through its humanitarian arm - the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (ICESCO) - where Ilham Aliyev’s wife and Vice President of Azerbaijan Mehriban Aliyeva had been decorated with honours of Goodwill Ambassador since 2006.⁵⁸ This organisation has annually adopted resolutions to support and validate Azerbaijani position in the conflict, while Ilham Aliyev and other government officials used the forum to broadcast messages of Islamic solidarity against Armenians.

In the wider European context, for example, in the course of the 2014-15 migration crisis, President Aliyev blamed Europe for ‘Islamophobia’, too.⁵⁹ In fact, Ilham Aliyev has used the religious factor for assaulting his opponents quite often. The next year, following the unsuccessful vote of the Azerbaijani-sponsored resolution at the Parliamentary Assembly in January 2016, Aliyev blamed the PACE for ‘Islamophobia’.⁶⁰ After the April war he used the

⁵⁷ [Президент Ильхам Алиев: Армения – это страна, где исламофобия является государственной политикой] (in Russian), Trend.az, 20 Sept 2020. <https://www.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3302008.html>

⁵⁸ A ceremony devoted to rewarding Mehriban Aliyeva with the title of Goodwill Ambassador of ISESCO was held – Official website of Mehriban Aliyeva, 23.11.2006. <https://mehriban-aliyeva.az/en/news/node/840585>

⁵⁹ [Ильхам Алиев обвинил Запад в исламофобии из-за мигрантского кризиса] (in Russian), Interfax.ru, 17 Sept 2015. <https://www.interfax.ru/world/467548>

⁶⁰ [Ильхам Алиев: «Армению поддерживают потому, что азербайджанцы – мусульмане»] (in Russian), Iragir.am, 30.01.2016. <https://www.iragir.am/ru/2016/01/30/46640/>

OIC Summit to broadcast similar narratives.⁶¹ The next year, 2017, was declared one of “Islamic solidarity” in Azerbaijan, and proclaimed the alliance with Turkey “a bright example of Islamic solidarity”.⁶²

In the following chapters we will show how the issue of Islamic solidarity was abused in the course of the 44-day war and its aftermath.

⁶¹ [Ильхам Алиев: Мусульманские страны больше всего страдают от террора] (in Russian), Moskva-Baku.ru, 14 Apr 2016.

https://moscow-baku.ru/news/politics/ilkham_aliev_musulmanskie_strany_bolshe_vsego_stradayut_ot_terrora/

⁶² [Ильхам Алиев назвал главную несправедливость к мусульманам] (in Russian), Vesti.az, 25 Sept 2017. <https://vesti.az/news/342384>

Azerbaijan's policy of igniting religious conflict during and in the aftermath of the 44-day war

The Azerbaijani state policy to attach a religious dimension to the conflict was largely manifested during the 44-day war. In the aftermath of the war, which ended with Azerbaijani victory, these efforts accelerated with the aim of showcasing the significance of that victory for the Muslim world as a whole, **as Azerbaijani leadership attempted to build up a narrative of Armenians destroying or desecrating the Muslim heritage on the territories under their control.** This has been manifested in a few ways, namely: (a) continuing efforts to maintain Muslim unity against Armenia, (b) importing religiously motivated terrorist groups to the battlefield to fight Armenians, (c) deliberately destroying Christian Churches and heritage sites, (d) denying Armenian heritage in the re-captured lands.

Continuing efforts to maintain Muslim unity against Armenia

Warmongering by the Azerbaijani President has become a new-normal for over a decade.⁶³ A flawed consensus had emerged in the international community till 2020 that the bellicose rhetoric was needed for the domestic purposes alone, despite the fact that it was resulting in physical violence against Armenians - caught on the Line of Contact, or elsewhere in Europe, United States and Russia. For example, the ECHR has produced a number of judgments accusing Azerbaijan of causing death to at least three civilians in captivity in, respectively, 2010 and 2014.⁶⁴ The two judgments, rendered in 2020⁶⁵ and 2021,⁶⁶ confirmed those as crimes motivated by racial discrimination.⁶⁷

⁶³ European Friends of Armenia, Collection of War Threat Statements by the President Ilham Aliyev and Other Azerbaijani Officials, 2018,

https://eufoa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/AliyevWarThreats_update_31.07.2018.pdf

⁶⁴ Azerbaijan Found Guilty In 2014 Deaths Of Armenian Captives, RFE/RL Armenian Service, Nov 4, 2021.

<https://www.azatutyun.am/a/31546265.html>

⁶⁵ Case of Saribekyan and Balyan v. Azerbaijan, Application no. [35746/11](https://www.echr.am/resources/echr/judgments/8bf062b89bad2d6409695591343b4f4c.pdf), Judgment, 30 January 2020.

<https://www.echr.am/resources/echr/judgments/8bf062b89bad2d6409695591343b4f4c.pdf>

⁶⁶ Case of Khojuyan and Vardazaryan v. Azerbaijan, Application no. [62161/14](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre?i=001-212964), Judgment, 4 November 2021.

<https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre?i=001-212964>

⁶⁷ Note: In the aftermath of the July 2020 clashes on the border, inter-ethnic violence and conflict was sparked in foreign communities with both Armenian and Azerbaijani nationals. For example, the famous KZV Armenian School and its adjacent Armenian Community Center in San Francisco were vandalised with racist anti-Armenian graffiti. "Apricot wars" were sparked in Moscow bazaars and between community members, yielding to numerous people being detained or expelled from Russia. In France, a memorial center dedicated to the victims of the Armenian Genocide was defaced with pro-Turkish slogans; and around 250 people marched through the city centre waving Turkish flags, yelling violent threats like: "We are going to kill the Armenians."

Tim Hume, Turkish Ultranationalist Group Linked to "Hunt For Armenians" in France, Vice.com, October 29, 2020. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/epddna/turkey-france-armenia-grey-wolves-lyon>

Elizaveta Kirpanova, [Воспаление косточек] (in Russian), Novaya Gazeta, № 78, 24 July 2020

<https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2020/07/22/86368-vospalenie-kostocek>

In the pre-2020 period this warmongering was mostly carried out by dehumanising Armenians and *presenting this nation as a legitimate target* - for its own people and generally for the Muslim nations. Throughout the 44-day war and its aftermath President Aliyev gave numerous interviews to local and international press to dehumanise Armenians, accuse them for 'Islamophobia' and call for Muslim unity in the fight against them. At one occasion in January 2021, he said: "I have numerous times stated in international fora, addressing leaders in Muslim nations... Armenia cannot be a friend to Muslim states."⁶⁸ On another occasion he accused Armenia of 'Islamophobia' which "is an insult... to the whole Islamic world".⁶⁹

In January 2021 Azerbaijani President received Salim M. AlMalik, the Director-General of OIC's Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO), which was used as an opportunity to feed the narrative of alleged Armenian 'Islamophobia' and showcase the victory in the war as meaningful for the entire Muslim world.⁷⁰ "We celebrated the victory, because that is our victory. Your victory is a victory for ISESCO", OIC's official stated.⁷¹

Thus, one of the ways of providing for 'Muslim unity' for President Aliyev - something the Turkish President has long aspired to lead (as discussed in the following chapters) - has become **the propaganda narrative of Armenians destroying Islamic places of worship in Nagorno Karabakh**. During and after the war President Aliyev continued making groundless accusations of "Islamophobia" and "fascism" to Armenia and Armenians - not evidenced in any way or shape, other than in propaganda pieces, alleging that Armenians had destroyed or desecrated Muslim heritage in the territories under the control of Nagorno Karabakh in 1994-2020. These accusations against Armenia were being aired to solidify Muslim unity behind Azerbaijan and justify the destruction or desecration of Armenian heritage sites and Churches in the re-captured territories in Nagorno Karabakh.

Religiously motivated terrorist groups in Nagorno Karabakh

Weeks before the 44-day war, Azerbaijan, with the help of its ally Turkey, has transported hundreds, if not possibly thousands⁷² of religiously-motivated terrorists from Turkey-

Smith, Christie (24 July 2020). "Armenian School and Community Center in San Francisco Vandalized". NBC News. <https://www.nbcbayarea.com/news/local/armenian-school-in-san-francisco-vandalized/2332248/>

⁶⁸ [Президент Ильхам Алиев подарил мечети Саатлы в городе Шуша Коран] (in Russian), Trend.az, January 2021. <https://www.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3365023.html>

⁶⁹ [Президент Ильхам Алиев провел пресс-конференцию для представителей местных и зарубежных СМИ] (in Russian), Trend.az, 26 Feb 2021. <https://www.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3386936.html>

⁷⁰ [Мехрибан Алиева сделала публикацию в связи с 31-й годовщиной трагедии "Черного Января"] (in Russian), oxu.az, 20 January 2021. <https://ru.oxu.az/politics/459327>

⁷¹ [Президент Ильхам Алиев принял делегацию ИСЕСКО] (in Russian), Trend.az, 13 January 2021 <https://www.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3363634.html>

⁷² Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, October 28, 2021, <https://www.syriahr.com/en/190066/>

controlled areas of Syria (and possibly Libya) and stationed in close proximity to the future battlefield.⁷³ These mercenaries were not only promised remuneration,⁷⁴ but also bonus payments for beheading a “*kaffir*” (unfaithful, or non-Muslim).⁷⁵ One captured mercenary confirmed that they were promised an extra payment for each “beheaded infidel”.⁷⁶ These fighters were mostly ‘used’ in the Southern flank of the Azeri advance - as reported by BBC,⁷⁷ Wall Street Journal⁷⁸ and other sources (while Aliyev denied⁷⁹) - where the fatality rate was especially high. Some of them were left stranded in the battlefield too.⁸⁰ After the conclusion of the ceasefire on November 10, the relevant UN Working Group on the use of mercenaries called to ‘withdraw’ the mercenaries from the region.⁸¹

Deliberately destroying Christian Churches, heritage sites and other crimes

There is a large body of evidence - carefully collected by the Armenian Human Rights Defender and the Ombudsperson of Nagorno Karabakh, reported by the international media outlets, as well as available in open-access social networks - that the Azerbaijani army was acting under direct orders to destroy Churches, heritage sites and commit other crimes based on religious hatred.

Probably the most well-known war crime (among many others⁸²) during the 44-day war is the double-attack on the Holy Savior Ghazanchetsots Cathedral in Shushi on October 8, 2020.⁸³ The Human Rights Watch later called this a ‘possible war crime’.⁸⁴ Azerbaijan not only deliberately targeted this Cathedral with high-precision weaponry - *twice during the*

⁷³ Lindsey Snell’s new website to reveal more about Turkish invasions, Mediamax.am, April 26, 2021.

<https://mediamax.am/en/news/society/42910/>

⁷⁴ [Захваченные сирийские боевики рассказали об участии и потерях банд в войне в Карабахе] (in Russian), Telegram Channel @RVvoenkor, Oct 27, 2020. <https://t.me/RVvoenkor/385>

⁷⁵ Hetq, Artsakh Army Captures Another Syrian Mercenary (video), November 1, 2020.

<https://hetq.am/en/article/123824>

⁷⁶ Armenia Slams Turkey, Azerbaijan As Syrian Fighters Captured In Karabakh, RFE/RL Armenian Service, Nov 2, 2020. <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/30925158.html>

⁷⁷ Ed Butler, The Syrian mercenaries used as 'cannon fodder' in Nagorno-Karabakh, BBC News, 10 December 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-55238803>

⁷⁸ The Wall Street Journal, Turkish-Backed Syrian Fighters Join Armenian-Azeri Conflict, October 14, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/turkish-backed-syrian-fighters-join-armenian-azeri-conflict-11602625885>

⁷⁹ Aliyev’s false statements in an interview with France24 - FIP.am, 15 Oct, 2020. <https://fip.am/en/13375>

⁸⁰ MediaLab, We Are Here in Mataghis, There Is No Food, No Water, Take us out from This Swamp: Voice Message of a Syrian Mercenary (Video), October 21, 2020, <https://medialab.am/104601/>

⁸¹ The UN Working Group on the Use of Mercenaries, Mercenaries in and around the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Zone Must be Withdrawn – UN Experts, November 11, 2020.

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26494&LangID=E>

⁸² “War Crimes Under International Law Committed By Azerbaijani Forces In The Course Of Their Military Operation Against Artsakh (Nagorno Karabakh) And Armenia” – Report by Ani Harutyunyan et al, peacedialogue.am, November 07, 2020. https://peacedialogue.am/en/2020/11/07/war_crimes_en/

⁸³ Nagorno-Karabakh: Armenia accuses Azerbaijan of targeting cathedral, BBC News, 8 October 2020

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54465172>

⁸⁴ Azerbaijan: Attack on Church Possible War Crime – Human Rights Watch, December 16, 2020.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/16/azerbaijan-attack-church-possible-war-crime>

same day - which excludes unintended nature of the hit, but also later denied any wrongdoing.⁸⁵

Other churches, for example the one in the Mekhakavan community, was completely erased from earth - as evidenced by a BBC video report.⁸⁶ Evidence in social media - captured by Armenian Ombudsman⁸⁷ - showed another church (St. Yeghishe in Mataghis region, built in the 19th century) being cynically dishonoured and vandalised by the Azeri military. The Armenian Human Rights Defender has released a number of reports to showcase how the Azerbaijani servicemen are acting out of anti-Armenian religious fanaticism in the course of the 44-day war⁸⁸ and its aftermath. Moreover, as documented by the Ombudsperson, one of the Armenian POWs who had been returned in 2021 had attested how he was being tortured and humiliated on religious grounds.

A major breakaway with the silence of European institutions has been the adoption by the European Parliament on March 10, 2022, of a resolution which ‘strongly condemn[ed] Azerbaijan’s continued policy of erasing and denying the Armenian cultural heritage in and around Nagorno-Karabakh’.⁸⁹ The document cited 1,456 mainly Armenian monuments that came under Azerbaijani control as a result of the 2020 war, with their physical existence now being endangered.

Historical revisionism

On December 7, 2021 the International Court of Justice issued order on provisional measures in *Armenia v Azerbaijan* case,⁹⁰ which in particular said:

“92. The Court considers that... Azerbaijan must, in accordance with its obligations under CERD.... take all necessary measures to prevent the incitement and promotion

⁸⁵ [Хикмет Гаджиев: Азербайджанская армия не обстреливает церкви и другие объекты гражданского назначения], (in Russian), Trend.az, 9 Oct 2020.

<https://www.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3313608.html>

⁸⁶ Jonah Fisher & Abdjalil Abdurasulov, Nagorno-Karabakh: The mystery of the missing church, BBC News, 25 March 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-56517835>

⁸⁷ The Azerbaijani military servicemen are vandalizing the Armenian church of St. Yeghishe in the Mataghis region of Artsakh -- Video evidence by Armenian Human Rights Defender, 29.03.2021

https://www.ombuds.am/en_us/site/VideoGalleryView/520

⁸⁸ Human Rights Defender of Armenia and Human Rights Ombudsman of Artsakh: Ad Hoc Public Report on Organized Hate Speech and Animosity Towards Ethnic Armenians In Azerbaijan As Root Causes of Ethnically-based Torture and Inhuman Treatment by Azerbaijani Armed Forces (September-November 2020), December 7, 2020, <https://artsakhombuds.am/en/document/780>

⁸⁹ European Parliament resolution of 10 March 2022 on the destruction of cultural heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh (2022/2582(RSP)), adopted 10 March 2022 in Strasbourg.

https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0080_EN.html

⁹⁰ APPLICATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION ON THE ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION (ARMENIA v. AZERBAIJAN). Order on provisional measures. <https://www.icj-cij.org/public/files/case-related/180/180-20211207-ORD-01-00-EN.pdf> (07 December 2021)

of racial hatred and discrimination, including by its officials and public institutions, targeted at persons of Armenian national or ethnic origin; *and take all necessary measures to prevent and punish acts of vandalism and desecration affecting Armenian cultural heritage, including but not limited to churches and other places of worship, monuments, landmarks, cemeteries and artefacts*".

The Government of Azerbaijan has not treated the above ICJ order with respect, did not roll back its anti-Armenian policies and in fact re-energised its policy of denying Armenian history, historical origins of cultural and especially religious sites and engaged in historical revisionism. This was carried out by a continuous flow of hate speech, including high-ranking officials and public figures - to further proof the existence of such state policy.⁹¹

The most vivid attempt was carried with regards to the Dadivank Monastery, built in the 9-13th centuries. Despite the initial arrangement through the Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch to preserve the Monastery under the jurisdiction of the Armenian Apostolic Church and maintain monastic life in the premises, soon after the ceasefire the passage of pilgrims and clergy to the Monastery was made difficult and then prohibited.⁹² Before that, in December 2020, an attempt of cultural and religious usurpation of the monastic complex was made by sending representatives of Udi community to claim co-ownership,⁹³ reviving the claims about 'Caucasian Albanian' heritage.⁹⁴

In the larger context, Azerbaijani Government openly declared in February 2022 about the intention to create a special commission to erase, in their view, "Armenian forgery" from churches, "putting into practice a pseudoscientific theory that denies the churches' Armenian origin".⁹⁵ Following criticism, the Government toned back on this soon, but the past practice suggests Azerbaijan will proceed on this in some other ways and forms - for example by practising the attribution of the Armenian cultural and religious heritage to the 'Caucasian Albania'.

⁹¹ For further discussion, see: *The Azerbaijani policy of hatred and animosity towards Armenians as root causes of ethnically motivated violations of human rights: evidence-based analysis of the post-war developments* -- Ad-hoc public report by Human Rights Defender of Armenia, February 2022.

<https://ombuds.am/images/files/3101f60c869b0f378dbc737b002e5054.pdf>

⁹² Baku hinders entry of Armenian clergy and pilgrims to Dadivank, Armenian Public TV, 27 Jul, 2021.

<https://www.1lurer.am/en/2021/07/27/Baku-hinders-entry-of-Armenian-clergy-and-pilgrims-to-Dadivank/524478>

⁹³ Azerbaijanis Send Priest to Dadivank as Part of Broader Cultural Usurpation Attempt, The Armenian Mirror-Spectator, December 6, 2020. <https://mirrorspectator.com/2020/12/06/azerbaijanis-appoint-priest-to-dadivank-as-part-of-broader-cultural-usurpation-attempt/>

⁹⁴ Azerbaijan Claims that Dadivank Monastery Belongs to Udi Cultural Heritage, monumentwatch.org, May 15, 2021. <https://monumentwatch.org/alerts/azerbaijan-claims-that-dadivank-monastery-belongs-to-udi-cultural-heritage/>

⁹⁵ Heydar Isayev, Azerbaijan announces plans to erase Armenian traces from churches, Eurasianet, Feb 4, 2022. <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-announces-plans-to-erase-armenian-traces-from-churches>

Through this state policies of denying Armenians of history, degrading their dignity and portraying them as enemies of all Muslim people - the **Azerbaijani President had been attempting to transform the issue of national self-determination of the people of Nagorno Karabakh - duly recognised by the working documents under OSCE Minsk Group co-chairmanship in 2007-2020 - into a religious clash between two religions. This policy acquired such a vast proportion that the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs issued a statement in April 2021 calling for “the preservation and protection of religious and cultural heritage [sites]”.**⁹⁶

By denying the Armenians of their history and claiming historical ownership of the re-conquered and now occupied lands with their cultural and religious monuments, Azerbaijani leadership began a new phase of ethnic cleansing of those Armenians that still remained in Nagorno Karabakh. In the face of the peacekeeping forces stationed in Nagorno Karabakh, at least in two instances the Azerbaijani Government used loud-speakers to broadcast Azan,⁹⁷ as well as messages to the Armenians “to leave the Azerbaijani land” or face consequences.⁹⁸ **This is a new form of pursuing a state policy of ethnic cleansings of Armenians, once implemented in the pre-war period in Nagorno Karabakh and cities of Azerbaijan-proper, such as Sumgayit, Baku, Kirovabad etc.**

If no international effort to stop the anti-Armenian racist and xenophobic campaign by Azerbaijan against Nagorno Karabakh is carried out, this Armenian region will repeat the faith of Nakhijevan, where Armenians comprised around 40 percent of the population in 1910s,⁹⁹ and virtually no Armenian remaining by early XXI century.

All the above testifies to the fact that Azerbaijan has transformed into a state which has secular Constitution, but is propagating racial discrimination and hatred against Armenia, inter alia, on religious grounds – in the hope of mobilising its own society against this country and winning allies in the Muslim world. There is no other explanation of why the Azerbaijani leadership has continuously engaged in false, unsubstantiated accusations against Armenians for allegedly destroying or desecrating Muslim heritage in Nagorno Karabakh in 1994-2020 – a cover for doing exactly the same against Armenian Christian heritage. Opposing Muslim and Christian religions and their followers to each other in Europe is not only about Armenia, but can yield to many

⁹⁶ Statement by the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group - 13 April 2021
<https://www.osce.org/minsk-group/483416>

⁹⁷ Hasmik Harutyunyan, Azerbaijan’s Ongoing Policy of Ethnic Cleansing in Nagorno-Karabakh, EVN Report, Mar 27, 2022. <https://evnreport.com/spotlight-karabakh/azerbajians-ongoing-policy-of-ethnic-cleansing-in-nagorno-karabakh/>

Video report by Twitter Account @TheScarmind, Feb 26, 2022

<https://twitter.com/thescarmind/status/1497535916616863745?s=21>

⁹⁸ [Azerbaijani military using loudspeakers in Nor Shen village, Nagorno Karabakh] (in Armenian), Aparaj.am, 04.03.2022. <https://aparaj.am/adrbejancineri-sadrankhnerih-teghaphoxvel-en-nor-shen/>

⁹⁹ For more details, see: Donald Earl Miller, Lorna Touryan Miller (2003). Armenia: portraits of survival and hope. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press. ISBN 9780520234925.

side effects and conflicts in wider Europe, given also Turkey's political activity in European states, discussed in the following chapter.

Turkish efforts of establishing new forms of solidarity in Europe

Turkey has almost immediately since independence in 1991 been a fraternal ally of Azerbaijan and has consistently shown support – political, military and diplomatic – to Baku in its aspirations against Armenia. The efforts of introducing religious dimension to the ethnic conflict with Armenians is not the only case when Turkish Governments, in particular those under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, have attempted to weaponise religion.

Turkey's state policy of reinvigorating the role of religion in both domestic and foreign affairs has seen a steady increase under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, particularly since 2010 – with the Gaza Flotilla incident - in foreign affairs, and Constitutional Referendum - in domestic politics. In the European context one of the manifestations of this leadership aspiration was seen in 2017, when President Erdogan posed as a leading critic of European politics after the European Court of Justice adopted a decision to allow European companies to ban employees from wearing religious symbols including the Islamic headscarf.

In domestic politics, there has been a firm state policy to build up 'social' and 'political' Islam in Turkey by ways of consolidating Government oversight over religious foundations and educational institutions.¹⁰⁰ In parallel the ruling Justice and Development Party's role (which has religious roots itself) with religious organisations were re-framed and eventually social Islam was embedded with state institutions, through the Turkish Religious Affairs Directorate, or *Diyanet*.¹⁰¹ State policy of nurturing a religious generation ("raise pious generations", in the words of President Erdogan)¹⁰² has been underway for several years. The decision to convert Hagia Sofia into a mosque in mid-2020 (which had been a museum since 1934) was a manifestation of the growing brinkmanship in relations with Europe.¹⁰³

In the foreign policy domain, Turkey has been very assertive in building religious, but also economic, social connections with small European parties, as well as NGOs and religious movements led or influenced by Imams supported by the Turkish government's religious

¹⁰⁰ Salim Çevik, Erdoğan's Comprehensive Religious Policy..., SWP Comment 2019, 05.03.2019, doi:10.18449/2019C12. <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2019C12/>

¹⁰¹ Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, A Paradoxical Tale: Reading the Transformation of Erdoğan's Turkey Through the Lens of Religion, Oasis Center, 17/01/2022. <https://www.oasiscenter.eu/en/a-paradoxical-tale-reading-the-transformation-of-erdogan-s-turkey-through-the-lens-of-religion>

¹⁰² Carlotta Gall, Erdogan's Plan to Raise a 'Pious Generation' Divides Parents in Turkey, New York Times, June 18, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/18/world/europe/erdogan-turkey-election-religious-schools.html>

¹⁰³ Turkey's president is playing religious politics, The Economist, Jul 11 2020.

<https://www.economist.com/europe/2020/07/11/turkeys-president-is-playing-religious-politics>

affairs office. In some cases Turkey encouraged the Muslim communities in Europe to become an official homogeneous minority, which is in stark breach of European policy of separating religion from politics. Sweden is just one example.¹⁰⁴ Interference in 2017 Bulgarian elections through campaigning among Bulgarian nationals living in Istanbul is another one.¹⁰⁵ The ideological foundation of this state policy is the adherence to a certain form of “Neo-Ottomanism” - justifying the outreach to the regions where Turkish Ottoman Empire had control in its heydays. In January 2019 President Erdogan declared that the borders of Turkey span “from Vienna to the shores of the Adriatic Sea, from East Turkistan [China’s autonomous region of Xinjiang] to the Black Sea.”¹⁰⁶ In the European context, the local religious units have been the tools of this policy.¹⁰⁷ The other tool has been working with the Turkish diaspora - and more broadly, European Muslim communities – in European states through religious foundations registered in various places.¹⁰⁸ Some European states, such as France, Germany, Netherlands¹⁰⁹ and Austria, have limited this outreach, but this pushback has not been evenly done in other European states.

*Thus, while the European institutions have traditionally declared the people of Muslim religious identity as “part and parcel of Europe’s diversity”¹¹⁰ and decried discriminations of any sort as contrary to the law, Turkey has employed these liberal laws and policies as ‘loopholes’ to create controversies in Europe by invigorating its religious and other organisations functioning in European states. **The efforts of Turkey to proactively use its NGOs and Diasporic structures in Europe for the purposes of establishing new forms of solidarity means nothing else by attempts of weaponising religion in multicultural European societies, which shall be a matter of concern for European security.***

In the post-Soviet space the driver of creating religious alliances has been the Organisation of Turkic States (formerly Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States), consisting of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey and Uzbekistan, established in 2009. An EU and

¹⁰⁴ Magnus Norell, Erdogan’s Influence in Europe: A Swedish Case Study, Washington Institute For Near East Policy, Jun 4, 2020.

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/erdogans-influence-europe-swedish-case-study>

¹⁰⁵ Mariya Cheresheva, Turkey’s Hand in Bulgarian Election Angers Sofia, *Balkan Insight*, March 20, 2017.

<https://balkaninsight.com/2017/03/20/turkey-s-hand-in-bulgarian-election-angers-sofia-03-19-2017/>

¹⁰⁶ Lorenzo Vidino, Erdogan’s Long Arm in Europe, *Foreign Policy*, May 7, 2019.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/07/erdogans-long-arm-in-europe-germany-netherlands-milli-gorus-muslim-brotherhood-turkey-akp/>

¹⁰⁷ Ahmad Nazeef, Erdogan’s tentacles: How Turkish socio-religious networks influence Europe’s political landscape? – TRENDS Research and Advisory, 7 Jan 2021.

<https://trendsresearch.org/insight/erdogans-tentacles-how-turkish-socio-religious-networks-influence-europes-political-landscape/>

¹⁰⁸ Pinar Tremblay, How clipping Turkey’s religious reach has boosted Erdogan in Europe, *Al Monitor*, May 12, 2020. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/05/turkey-western-moves-boost-support-to-erdogan-among-diaspora.html>

¹⁰⁹ Erdogan accuses EU of ‘crusade’ against Islam, *DW.de*, 17.03.2017. <https://p.dw.com/p/2ZM6Y>

¹¹⁰ The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) issues a new General Policy Recommendation to Council of Europe member states, Press Release – 1 March 2022. <https://hudoc.ecri.coe.int/eng?i=REC-05rev-PR-2022-360-ENG>

Council of Europe member-state Hungary's inclusion in the Turkic Council (as observer state) since 2018 has been another realm of Turkey's advance against the West. Prime Minister Victor Orbán also emphasised religious aspects of the Turkish integration policy, by saying Hungarians are "Christian people living in the West, standing on foundations of Hun-Turkic origins".¹¹¹ Three years later, in November 2021, Prime Minister Orbán offered to become a bridge between Turkic Council and the Visegrád country group.¹¹² This policy "to redefine Hungary's identity"¹¹³ is a challenge for the unity of Europe (and its liberal order) and will present an opportunity for Turkey to have a bigger say in European politics, if continued.

Another two cases in post-Soviet space when the Turkish authorities have long tried to meddle by using religious factor – are Crimea and Moldova's Gagauzia region. While in the latter case the interference and attempts to stir anti-Government sentiments have predominantly been in financial (trade, investment) terms, in Crimea the religious factor was attempted to use more strategically following the 2014 war in Ukraine. The Crimean Tatars – a Muslim religious minority in the peninsula – became a tool at the hands of Turkish authorities in their security competition with Russia.

By forging political unity among Muslims, be that through the Organisation of Turkic States or in other formats, Turkey is trying to assemble a community of states, most of them non-democratic, based on religious factor. In contrast to the OIC, this is led by one state - Turkey - and is meant to serve its purposes of power projection in Central Asia in particular. The same tactic of religious mobilisation is used in the occupied territories of Syria. The same has been employed for the war in Nagorno Karabakh in 2020 by bringing in religiously-minded mercenaries and launching a propaganda campaign to dehumanise Armenians on religious grounds.

We will not discuss the Turkish policies in oil-rich Central Asia, but will only dwell on the case of Azerbaijan, given the scope of the present report.

Following a brief period of ambiguity in relations with Azerbaijan in 1991-93, Turkey has established strategic relations with Azerbaijan, best characterised by the words of late Heydar Aliyev as "one nation, two states". Turkey (as well as Pakistan) has unconditionally supported Azerbaijan in the course of all major escalations on the frontline in Nagorno

¹¹¹ Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's speech at the 6th Summit of the Cooperation Council of Turkic-speaking States – Official Website of Hungary's Prime Minister, 3 September 2018.

<https://miniszterelnok.hu/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-6th-summit-of-the-cooperation-council-of-turkic-speaking-states/>

¹¹² Hungary to initiate joint summit of Turkic Council and V4 - - Official Website of Hungary's Prime Minister, 12.11.2021. <https://miniszterelnok.hu/hungary-to-initiate-joint-summit-of-turkic-council-and-v4/>

¹¹³ Hamdi Firat Buyuk, Orbán Enlists Turkic States In Fight Against Liberal Democracy, balkaninsight.com, October 22, 2019.

<https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/22/orban-enlists-turkic-states-in-fight-against-liberal-democracy/>

Karabakh. Such support was crucial for Azerbaijan's victory in the 44-day war by ways of not only diplomatic assistance in UN, OSCE, Council of Europe, OIC and elsewhere, but also material support - military training, provision of combat UAVs and transfer of religiously-minded mercenaries from Turkish-occupied parts of Syria (and probably Libya).¹¹⁴ As evidenced on many occasions, Turkey's support was decisive in Azerbaijan's victory in Nagorno Karabakh, which meant much for feeding nationalist narrative both domestically in Turkey and for the Turkish leadership in its leadership aspirations in the Muslim world.¹¹⁵ *"The struggle carried out in the political and military areas [against Armenia] will continue from now on many other fronts"*, - Turkish President said in his first post-war visit to Azerbaijan.¹¹⁶ Speaking at the military parade in Baku on December 10, 2020 - where the notorious 'trophy park' was presented in April 2021 - President Erdogan glorified the masterminds of the Armenian Genocide (including killing of Armenians in Baku in 1918), by saying: "Today, may the souls of Nuri Pasha, Enver Pasha, and the brave soldiers of the Caucasus Islam Army, be happy".¹¹⁷ En route to the parade, he reiterated the challenge to Europe if they dared to sanction Turkey for any of its policies. Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu reiterated this narrative in February 2022, that the war was "a lesson" for Armenia.¹¹⁸

The military defeat of Armenian forces in the Nagorno Karabakh war was interpreted by many in Azerbaijan and Turkey as a fitting opportunity to build a closer union, a Turkic confederation - at least on a rhetorical level.¹¹⁹ Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu hailed the victory of Azerbaijan on November 10, 2020: "[Azerbaijan's victory] also demonstrated the power of the Turkic nation".¹²⁰ This narrative was apparently not emotional, but an expression of state policy, since it was reiterated also by President Erdogan a month later.¹²¹

¹¹⁴ Turkish President Erdogan's speech at the parliament – Official website of the TCCB, 01.10.2020.

<https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/122223/-we-primarily-opt-for-a-settlement-of-disputes-regarding-the-sharing-of-political-and-economic-potential-in-the-mediterranean-on-an-equitable-basis->

¹¹⁵ Did Erdogan approve Azerbaijan escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh? – Report by Al Monitor Staff, October 2, 2020. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/10/turkey-erdogan-approve-azerbaijan-escalation-armenia-nagorno.html>

¹¹⁶ 'One nation, two states' on display as Erdogan visits Azerbaijan for Karabakh victory parade – France24, 10/12/2020. <https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20201210-one-nation-two-states-on-display-as-erdogan-visits-azerbaijan-for-karabakh-victory-parade>

¹¹⁷ Yavuz Baydar, Is Erdogan moving closer to 'Making Turkey Big Again?', ahvalnews.com, Dec 15 2020 <https://ahvalnews.com/eu-turkey/erdogan-moving-closer-making-turkey-big-again>

¹¹⁸ [Власти Армении могут способствовать развитию региона, если не будет внутреннего и внешнего давления - Чавушоглу] (in Russian), RFE/RL Armenian Service, Feb 10, 2022. <https://rus.azatutyun.am/a/31697832.html>

¹¹⁹ [Турция строит новую Османскую империю] (in Russian), Lenta.ru, July 1, 2021. https://lenta.ru/articles/2021/07/01/tur_az/

¹²⁰ [Мевлют Чавушоглу: Азербайджанская армия под Вашим руководством показала силу тюркской нации] (in Russian), Trend.az, 10 Nov 2020. <https://www.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3332696.html>

¹²¹ [В Баку прошел Парад Победы с участием Президентом Ильхама Алиева и Реджепа Тайипа Эрдогана] (in Russian), Trend.az, 10 Dec 2020. <https://www.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3347674.html>

An important element for bridging the Turkic world, missing in the past, is the so-called “Zangezur corridor” in Azerbaijani-Turkish parlance, or a (likely – extraterritorial) land route through the Armenia’s Southern Syunik province to connect Azerbaijan through the newly re-captured territories of Nagorno Karabakh to Turkey through Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhijevan. Both by Azerbaijani and Turkish high-level officials the opening of regional communication lines, and especially the so-called “Zangezur corridor” has been labelled as bridging Turkey to the rest of Turkic republics in Central Asia and allowing more opportunities for power projection in these regions.¹²²

In order to formally increase the level of convergence between two countries - Presidents Aliyev and Erdogan signed a joint Declaration signed in Shushi on June 15, 2021 (later ratified by both legislatures). This document proclaimed the city of Shushi “a cradle of Azerbaijani culture and Turkic world in general” and pledged close cooperation in every field.¹²³ The document also formalised the solidarity of the Diasporic groups of two countries on foreign soil for joint endeavours “against common threats” - something that will echo all over Europe, given Turkish ambitions of penetration in European politics.

For many years Azerbaijan has already been providing full support to, for example, denialist policies of Turkey with regards to Armenian Genocide of 1915, whether in Washington or European capitals, and in this way has turned into an *alter ego* of Turkish foreign policy. The success in the 2020 war in Nagorno Karabakh will further encourage the Turkic alliance for more penetration in European politics. Outside of the European political context, the Foreign Minister of Turkey Mevlut Cavusoglu used a Turkish nationalist ‘Grey Wolves’ salute to the Armenian protesters in Uruguay on the eve of the Armenian Genocide commemoration day, April 24, 2022.¹²⁴

The European capitals and the European parliament in particular have continuously voiced concerns over “Turkish Government’s increasingly assertive foreign policy, which is repeatedly putting the country at odds with the EU as a whole”.¹²⁵ What is different after the 2020 war in Nagorno Karabakh - Turkey will be even more encouraged by its success in connecting to the Central Asia, through Nagorno Karabakh and Armenia, and aspire for more in Europe, inter alia by reinvigorating clashes on religious grounds incited by its own ‘agents of influence’ in Europe.

¹²² [Президент Ильхам Алиев принимает участие в проходящей в Университете АДА международной конференции...] (in Russian), AZERTAG official news agency, 13.04.2021.

<https://video.azertag.az/ru/site/video/115889>

¹²³ [Shushi Declaration signed by Presidents of Azerbaijan and Turkey] (in Russian) – non-official translation by kavkaz-uzel.eu, 16 June, 2021. <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/365007/>

¹²⁴ “Cavusoglu flashes Grey Wolves sign to Armenian protesters in Uruguay”, Armenian Public Radio, April 24, 2022. <https://en.armradio.am/2022/04/24/cavusoglu-flashes-grey-wolves-sign-to-armenian-protesters-in-uruguay/>

¹²⁵ REPORT on the implementation of the common foreign and security policy - annual report 2021 (2021/2182(INI)), by David McAllister, Committee on Foreign Affairs of the European Parliament, 20.12.2021. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2021-0354_EN.html

State-driven incitement to disturb democratic peace by resorting to violence and discrimination against adherents of a particular religion in Europe is a major problem. It is a direct threat to European societal security as it targets the fabric of multiculturalism by placing the religious identity of people over their adherence to values of pluralism and citizenship.

Conclusions and recommendations [DRAFT]

1. The Assembly is invited to contribute to the present draft report with the aim of putting more focus on the attempts of **weaponizing religion in Europe**. This is not only about the security of Armenia or Armenians, but the democratic security of all European nations, since security on the continent is indivisible.
2. Armenia and Armenians – both in Nagorno Karabakh and beyond, in Europe – have been subjected to racist and xenophobic state policies of Azerbaijan and Turkey for years. The latest manifestations of this state policy can be found in the course of the 44-day war in 2020, launched by Azerbaijan and supported by Turkey, by ways of subjecting Armenian POWs to torture on religious grounds, demolishing Armenian sites of worship and cultural heritage, denying rights to cultural identity, etc. While the security and political implications of this war and its aftermath are well studied by academics, the religious factors have long been neglected both by scholars and Governments.
3. The Council of Europe is encouraged to launch consistent political and other efforts to restrain its Member States from weaponization of religion for political or any other goals. Turning a blind eye or neglecting this challenge will most likely yield to further divisions and mistrust in multiethnic European states, and therefore – their democratic security.
4. The PACE and the Council of Europe in general shall not be made a platform where seeds of controversy are planted to stir conflicts on religious grounds among Christians and Muslims. Therefore the Assembly needs to adopt a more proactive legislative position in terms of calling upon states to avoid weaponizing religion in their domestic or foreign policies.
5. The state policies of Governments of Turkey and Azerbaijan, discussed in the draft report, shall be alarming not only for Armenians, but also other European nations. These two Members have to be put under spotlight of the Assembly (as well as other bodies of CoE) for periodic and professional reporting on eradicating religious and other forms of intolerance, as well as reinvigorating controversies among religious communities in Member States. It shall be pronounced contrary to the values and mission of this organisation and Europe as a whole that two Governments continuously abuse, inter alia, the democratic process to infiltrate and seed discord in multiethnic societies on religious grounds.

6. The Council of Europe shall aim to become the platform where the issue of weaponising religion for political goals by sovereign Governments, discussed in the draft report, is duly addressed and deliberated. This brazen challenge has to be handled at the earliest possible time, otherwise the democratic security of European states will be on the line.

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