

Perceptions of Prerequisites for Long-term Peace in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh

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Background

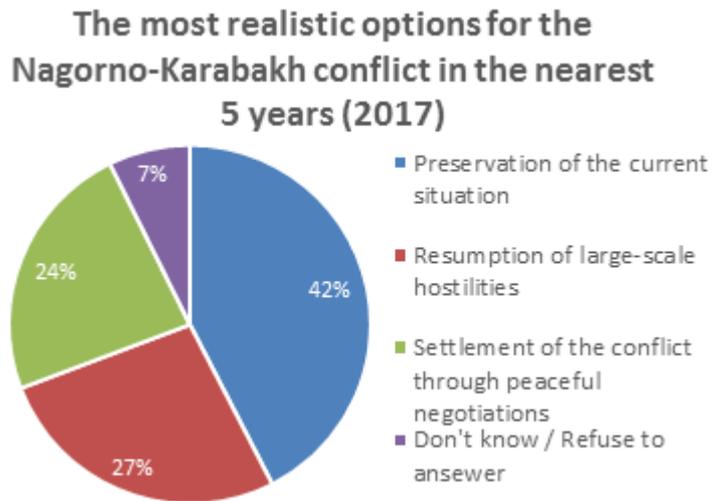
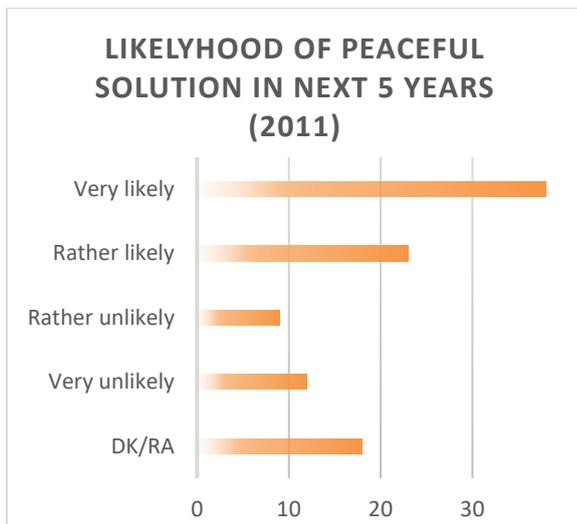
In the lack of a breakthrough in peace negotiations, tensions in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh have been growing since the early 2000s, reaching their peak in April 2016. Media discourses and political campaigning in Armenia and Azerbaijan reflect ongoing deterioration of interethnic relations. A study conducted in 2017 by the Caucasus Institute with support from the UK Government's Conflict, Stability and Security Fund aimed to collect and consolidate data on attitudes, perceptions and visions of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and its resolution prospects among the civil society, expert community and general population of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

Residents of border regions believe that the war still goes on

The April 2016 escalation influenced perceptions of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Residents of the regions of Armenia and Karabakh located near the line of contact believe that the war is ongoing and expect new escalations any time. And even though people in Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia generally do not qualify the current state of affairs as war, ever since the April 2016 escalation they have felt more at risk of war.

People in Armenia have less faith in a peaceful solution every year

Although we cannot exactly measure the influence of the April 2016 escalation on public opinion, we know that the number of Armenians who consider resumption of large-scale armed hostilities as the most realistic option for the mid-term has increased from 21% in 2011 up to almost 29% in 2017. Overall, the societies of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh have become accustomed to the status-quo and take it for granted: almost half of all respondents' view preservation of the status-quo as the most realistic scenario for the next five years.



Every eleventh resident of Armenia supports military solution to the conflict

Even though people living in Armenia previously supported peaceful settlement of the conflict and the majority of them – 86% – still do, the number of people who favour a military solution of the conflict is growing. In 2017, it attained 9% of Armenia’s population. The April 2016 escalation has contributed to the radicalization of public attitudes, in particular, in the border regions. The phrase “*either we die or they do*” sounded in many interviews and focus groups, which was not the case in previous years.

War causes emigration and moral dilemmas

The post-April 2016 situation in the conflict, whether or not viewed as a war, has caused a surge in emigration, especially from Nagorno-Karabakh itself. While in time of peace, emigration is viewed from the perspective of freedom of movement and the wish to improve living standards, in times of war or military escalation the decision to emigrate can lead to a moral dilemma. In the light of the perceived risks following the April 2016 escalation, people living in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, especially in regions located near the frontline, have had to make the choice between staying in their homeland and doing their patriotic duty at a risk to themselves and their families, or fleeing to safety and letting their country and fellow citizens down.

Some Armenians believe in peaceful coexistence with Azerbaijanis but mistrust prevails

The absence of a peaceful settlement, worsening of official relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and frequent incidents on the line of contact have all contributed to the deterioration of interethnic relations. Field data showed that mistrust and fear of Azerbaijanis are common in Armenian society.

Some of respondents in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh cannot imagine open borders and peaceful coexistence with Azerbaijanis even though many people aged 40 and older remember normal daily contacts and even close friendships in the pre-war past. However, the April 2016 escalation has affected memories, highlighting episodes of interethnic hostility that provide new justification for the mistrust and ethnic prejudice. The most optimistic respondents believe relations can improve decades later through the efforts of new generations that had not experienced the war.

The main conclusion from the study is that the societies of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh are unprepared for the peaceful settlement of the conflict, and that trust-building efforts will be required before peace can be real.