

Syuzanna Barseghyan

The Armenian Institute of International and Security Affairs

Neither War nor Peace: The Soft Power of Discourse

“Humans never engage in war without the mediating force of discourse”¹

Adam Hodges

The discourses of peace and war are relevant for the Armenian society, which has lived for more than two decades in the conditions of "neither war, nor peace". Due to the unsettled Karabakh conflict, Armenia's relations with the neighboring countries and the regional realities, the discourse of war is perceived to be very “natural’ for the public, and the discourse of peace is becoming increasingly "abstract."

Discourses of peace and war have a significant impact on realpolitik, and on the decision-making process. On political and public platforms, in the media and social networks, the essence of this discourse shapes the notions of peace and war, defines the objectives of national security and the corresponding behavioral patterns for its provision. As Adam Hodges mentions, war is not wired into human brains, but rather exists as a culturally contingent phenomenon, expressed in language as well as action.²

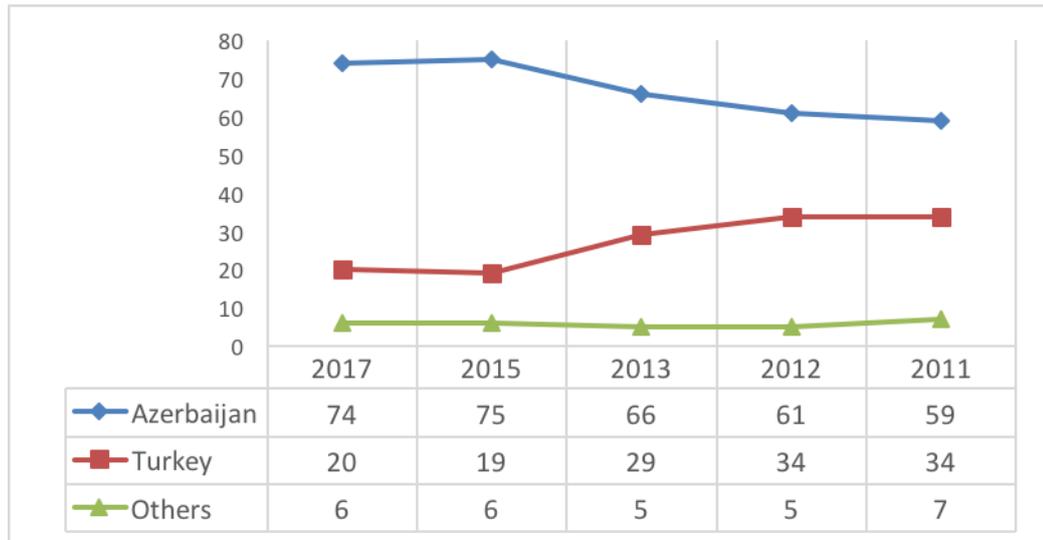
Hostile Environment

The correlation of peace and war discourses, conditioned by the peace-loving or bellicose nature of verbal activity on public platforms (mainly in political rhetoric and in the media space) forms public perceptions of security in which the definition of a "friend vs. an enemy" occupies a special place. According to public opinion polls, the overwhelming majority of the Armenian public have a hostile perception of the neighbors, in the person of Azerbaijan and Turkey (see Diagram 1). However, even though the other two neighbors – Georgia and Iran – are not considered enemies, only a small part of the respondents recognizes them as friends.

¹ Discourses of War and Peace, Adam Hodges (ed.), Reviewed by Vesa Koskela, Sociolinguistic Studies, Vol. 9.4, 2015, p. 519.

² See also there.

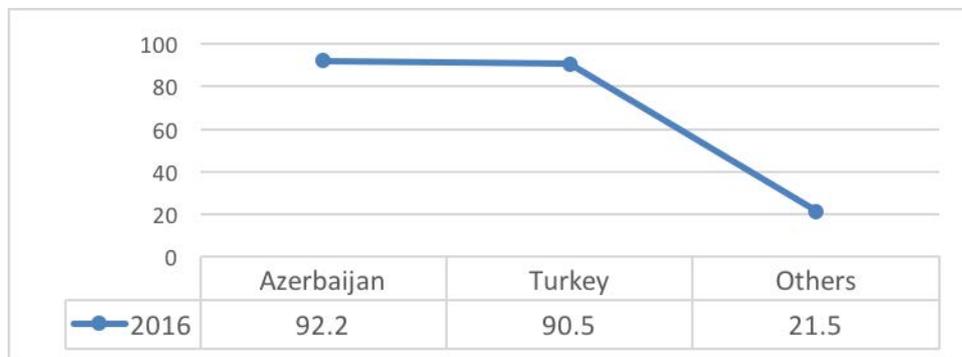
Diagram 1. The enemies of Armenia, according to public opinion,%³



Moreover, the data show that over the past 7 years there has been a dynamic growth in the perception of Azerbaijan as an enemy.

It is noteworthy that there is a more acute perception of the hostile neighborhood in Artsakh, and there is practically no difference in the perception of Azerbaijan and Turkey (see Diagram 2).

Diagram 2. The enemies of NKR, according to public opinion (multiple answer,%)⁴



The discourse of war is rarely associated with Turkey, regardless of the unfriendly relations, the closed border, and historical intransigence.

The attitude towards Russia is not unambiguous. In the public consciousness, Russia has retained the image of the only friend for a long time already. On the one hand, in the public consciousness there is the image of Russia as the guarantor of Armenia's security and the main actor in the settlement of the Karabakh conflict; on the other

³ Caucasus Barometer, Public Perceptions on Political, Social, and Economic Issues in the South Caucasus Countries, Yerevan, 2017 (http://www.crrc.am/hosting/file/_static_content/barometer/2017/CB2017_ENG_presentation_final_.pdf).

⁴ Opinion Polls in Nagorno-Karabakh: Comparative Results from 2015 and 2016, IPSC – Institute for Political and Sociological Consulting, Armenia, 2016 (<http://eufoa.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Comparative-opinion-polls-2015-2016-17.11.2016-Website-Eng-2.pdf>).

hand, Russia is a security threat for Armenia and Artsakh, because it sells offensive weapons to Azerbaijan.

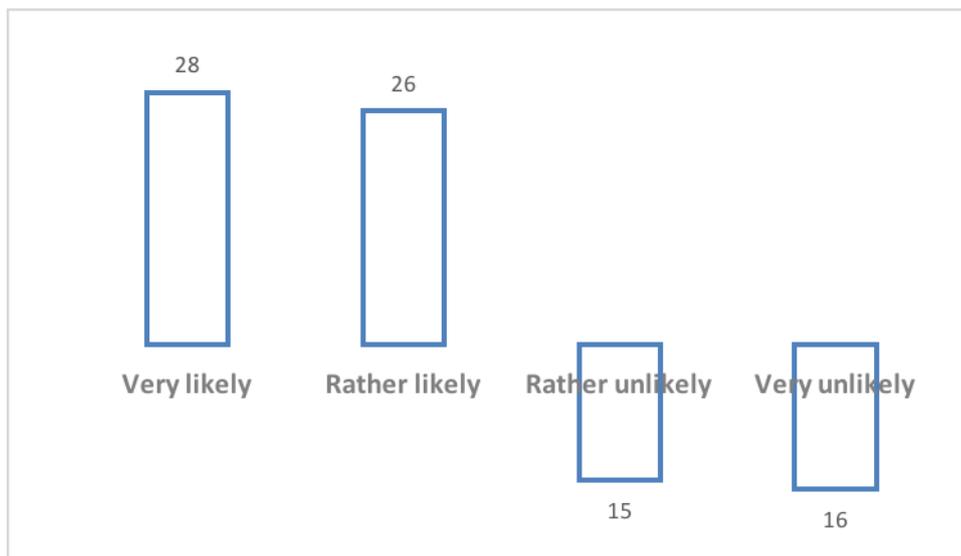
Such a hostile, unfriendly environment provokes an acute perception of security in the Armenian society, which, in turn, contributes to the development of the discourse of war, the militarization of the society and the legitimization of war in general.

And in this generally hostile environment, the discourse of war is mainly focused on the Karabakh conflict.

The Karabakh Conflict is a Key Factor in the Discourses of War and Peace

According to public opinion, the socio-economic problems that are a priority for the population are followed by the significant issues of unresolved conflict and the lack of peace (10-11% of respondents).⁵ However, the peaceful settlement of the conflict is not very realistic in the foreseeable future (see Diagram 3). 15% of the respondents even find it difficult to make any predictions regarding this matter.

Diagram 3. How likely is it to find a solution by peaceful negotiation in the next five years? (%), 2013⁶



A public opinion after the April war in 2016 showed that, despite the threat of war, the majority of the Armenian population sees the resolution of the Karabakh conflict only through negotiations (see Diagram 4).

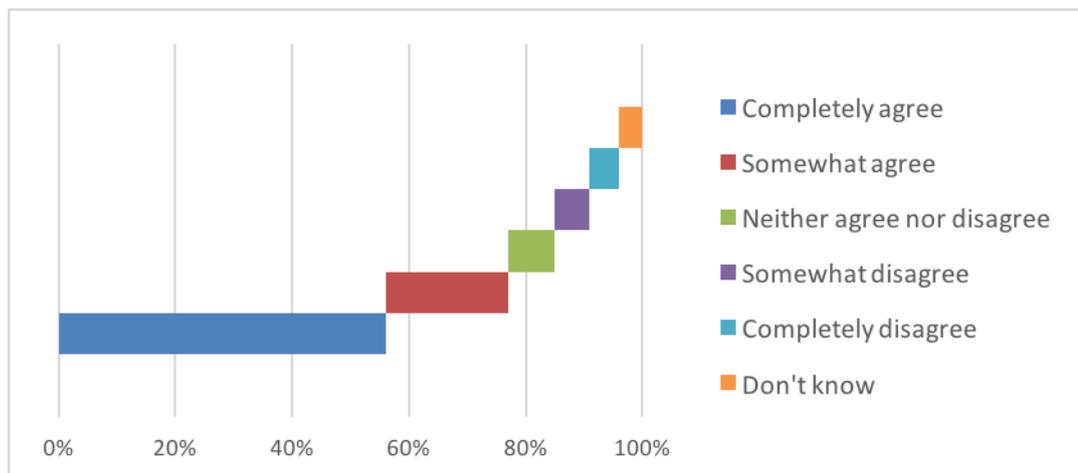
⁵ Caucasus Barometer, Public Perceptions on Political, Social, and Economic Issues in the South Caucasus Countries, Yerevan, 2017

(http://www.crrc.am/hosting/file/ static content/barometer/2017/CB2017_ENG_presentation_final .pdf).

⁶ Caucasus Barometer, Public Perceptions on Political, Social, and Economic Issues in the South Caucasus Countries, Yerevan, 2013

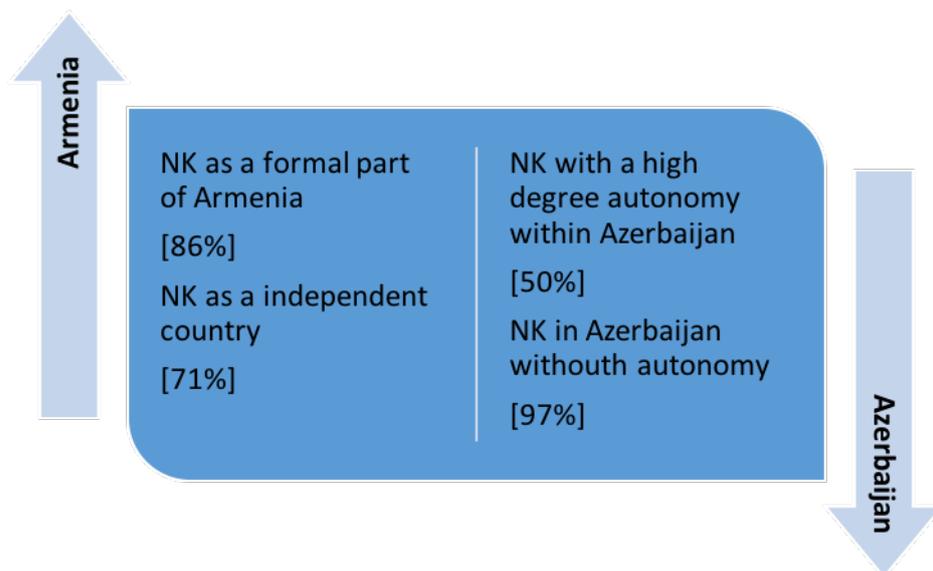
(http://www.crrc.am/hosting/file/ static content/barometer/2013/CB2013_public%20presentation_English.pdf)

Diagram 4. “April war showed that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict should be resolved through negotiations and not through force”: Public opinion, 2017⁷



In fact, in the same way the Armenian society reaffirms its approach to a peaceful settlement. However, existing polar approaches render the prospect of the latter as unrealistic (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Approaches to the status of Nagorno-Karabakh, 2013⁸



The societies of the two countries are in solidarity in their attitude to only one option they both consider unacceptable (88-90%): it is about the status of NKR as a special administrative region governed jointly by Azerbaijan and Armenia.

⁷ Caucasus Barometer, Public Perceptions on Political, Social, and Economic Issues in the South Caucasus Countries, Yerevan, 2017 (http://www.crcr.am/hosting/file/_static_content/barometer/2017/CB2017_ENG_presentation_final_.pdf).

⁸ Caucasus Barometer, Public Perceptions on Political, Social, and Economic Issues in the South Caucasus Countries, Yerevan, 2013 (http://www.crcr.am/hosting/file/_static_content/barometer/2013/CB2013_public%20presentation_English.pdf).

According to the surveys of 2015 and 2016⁹, the population of Artsakh, in its turn, sees two main options in determining the status of Nagorno-Karabakh: 1) being independent and 2) becoming part of Armenia. It should be noted that the four-day April war of 2016 made significant amendments to the perceptions of the Artsakh people, regarding the status of the NKR and the settlement of the conflict. The perceptions of the population of Artsakh regarding the above-mentioned status cover the 7 regions (Aghdam, Jabrayil, Fuzuli, Qubadli, Kalbajar, Lachin, and Zangilan), and they are seen as part of the NKR or RA.

From among the options for the conflict resolution, the maintenance of the status quo with the presence of the Armenian army(35%) and the recognition of NKR's independence by Armenia (preserving territories and peace) (33%) are considered a priority by the population of Karabakh, and only 1/10 of the respondents see military actions as a solution. At the same time they believe that if the regional and global powers impose handover of territories to Azerbaijan, they should resist with weapons(81%).

Thus, the Karabakh conflict is the main impetus for the discourses of war and peace in Armenia and Artsakh. The domination of the discourse of war over that of peace is a consequence of polar approaches, held by the conflicting parties who find it difficult to find mutually beneficial solutions. There are apprehensions that if the Armenian side is ready for a peaceful settlement, the opposing party may take a different position. Such a situation engenders rivalry, in which only one side can be the winner, therefore, in the media and on public platforms, the discourse of war becomes dominant. On the one hand, it contributes to the escalation of the war, on the other hand, it presents itself as the language of peace: the development of the country's military potential and the suppression of enemy's attempts of armed aggression are represented by actions, aimed at establishing peace.

The Main Power of Discourse

Unlike the practices of war and peace, the communicative and verbal nature of the discourses of war and peace makes it possible to deconstruct the accepted and war legitimizing discourse by changing language and narratives. However, the factors influencing these discourses and the stakeholders thereof are very diverse, namely the authorities and persons responsible for politics, the public of Armenia and Artsakh, the Armenian diaspora, the media, the opposing party of the conflict, the international community, intermediary organizations, and so on. Consequently, the entities stimulating these discourses are able to affirm the superiority of one of these discourses. In addition, the diversity of stakeholders contributes to the emergence of differences between social and political discourses, between reality and perception.

The authorities/politically responsible forces, the political parties and the civil society, think tanks and experts are particularly influential among the Armenian actors promoting

⁹ Opinion Polls in Nagorno-Karabakh: Comparative Results from 2015 and 2016, IPSC – Institute for Political and Sociological Consulting, Armenia, 2016 (<http://eufoa.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Comparative-opinion-polls-2015-2016-17.11.2016-Website-Eng-2.pdf>).

a discourse. After the ceasefire was established, these forces circulated various, often mutually exclusive approaches to resolving the conflict.

It can be noted that balanced and conservative approaches by politically responsible forces that the main political forces lie in the center of discussions, which come to rather present different negotiating formats, options for the solution, some compromises as well as uncompromising issues (often at the official level they avoid public talks about concession agreements). Whereas there are two radical approaches on the periphery. On the one hand, it is the so-called nationalist approach which considers the issue in the wider context of the Armenian Question (restoration of historical justice and the return of Armenian lands), within the framework of which it is unacceptable to talk about concessions and which presupposes forceful methods of solution. On the other hand, there is little unambiguous readiness to concede a very small number of civil society representatives in the name of peace.

It is difficult to judge in which direction the new authorities of Armenia will lead this discussion. So far, the new government and the new president have declared their readiness for a peaceful resolution of the conflict, underlined the pernicious consequences of the war for both countries and the region as a whole, and spoke of the intention to get NKR back to the negotiating table.

Manipulations with the War Discourse

Manipulations with the issue of security is another force stimulating the discourse of war, based on the special sensitivity of the society to this topic. Using the military position and the high degree of interest of the society in defense matters, the authorities apply patriotic propaganda to weaken the public demand for democratic processes, in many cases contrasting security with democratic and civil values. Noting the preservation of security as the most important task, the authorities give it an unquestionably important status, narrowing, at the same time, the perception of the concept per se. The opposition of security interests and the fundamental principles of democracy in public perception is strengthened in political discourse against the backdrop of domestic political processes. Thus, the Karabakh conflict and the issue of war and peace have always been important topics in the political discourse. The stereotypes circulating in these discussions worked in favor of the war discourse. Conversely, the preponderance of the war discourse has promoted some undeniable approaches:

- In the conditions of a conflict, we cannot observe democracy: the war discourse and authoritarian rule are necessary to mobilize the society (authoritarian approaches are seen as a guarantee of strength and security).
- The existing social and economic difficulties should be treated with condescension, in view of the constant military threat and defense costs that are a priority for the country.
- The resolution of the Karabakh conflict in favor of Armenians is directly connected with concrete persons in power (those who are the most informed, are from Artsakh by origin and who have taken part in the war).

- Post-election rallies and actions against falsified elections work in favor of hostile neighbors and instigate border clashes.
- The official negotiating party does not speak of concessions, in order to avoid public mistrust.
- Peace discourse is perceived solely as a willingness to compromise.

However, the discourse of war and peace, as well as the perception of security, acquired new meaning after the April war in 2016 and the April Revolution in 2018.

Two Decisive Events: War and Revolution

After the war in 2016 and the revolution in 2018 stereotypes and taboos formed over the years break down in the context of domestic political changes in Armenia.

After the April war, a clear emphasis was laid on the discourses of war and peace, a new wave of discussions about the settlement of the conflict arose, there were changes in public opinion and in the perception of Russia as the only ally.

The discourse of war, in its turn, contributes to the legitimization of war and the militarization of the society. As L. Baghdasaryan notes, after the April war in 2016, the "right to war" ceased to be exclusively the monopoly of the Azerbaijani discourse.¹⁰ In addition to the objective causes of the war, the authorities themselves contributed to militarization, implementing various programs and using the opportunities of the media. The concept of "Nation-Army" can be an example of the above-mentioned, through which an attempt was made to focus the attention of the population on the objectives of defense and the army and to create a program of "military-patriotic education of students" as well. As the results of media discourse analyses on the Nation-Army program show, communication between the army and the nation is strengthened in the context of strengthening security.¹¹ Many experts qualified this concept as a program for the militarization of society and linked it with the authorization of power, however the concept of "Nation-Army" and a number of programs prepared under this concept are not implemented after the Velvet Revolution of 2018.

Although the issues of security issue and the mobilization of the society for defense purposes presented themselves more acutely after the April war in 2016, the problems identified during the war, corruption disclosures, the practices of private contributions within the framework of the "Nation-Army" concept questioned the perception of the army as an unconditionally trusted and mature institution, as well as the priority of

¹⁰ Багдасарян Л. Метаморфозы дискурса мира и войны на армянских и азербайджанских публичных площадках после апреля 2016 г., Исследовательский центр "Регион", 2017 (<http://hetq.am/rus/news/75606/metamorfoziy-diskursa-mira-i-voyniy-na-armyanskikh-i-azerbaiydzhanskikh-publichniykh-ploshchadkakh-posle-aprelya-2016-g.html>).

¹¹ "Armenian Media Discourse on the Nation-Army Concept – 2017", Region Research Center, Yerevan, 2017 (<http://www.regioncenter.info/en/node/1542>)

ensuring security and defense over socio-economic difficulties and concessions in democratic processes.

Perhaps this had an impact on the mass revolutionary engagement two years later, i.e. in 2018. This time the long-circulated myth that due to their historical memory, conservatism and wisdom the people of Armenia will not go for domestic political perturbations, realizing the threats emanating from the enemy environment and war, did not work. Although throughout the civil disobedience actions and rallies a thesis and information were being voiced and disseminated about the Azerbaijani armed forces accumulating and clustering at the border and the threat of hostilities, they not only failed to suppress the protesters, but were met with counterarguments, that such civic participation and the reign of the spirit and strength of the people, on the contrary, could contribute to defense. The anti-corruption actions of the new government of Armenia, the undertaken steps towards democratization and legitimacy of the government in practice have shown positive results.

Thus, the revolution, by virtue of internal political processes, has transformed the myth of the manipulation with war and security. The legitimacy of power and the pursuit of democratic values can become a new negotiating and security resource for Armenia.

Information Space and the Language of Discourse

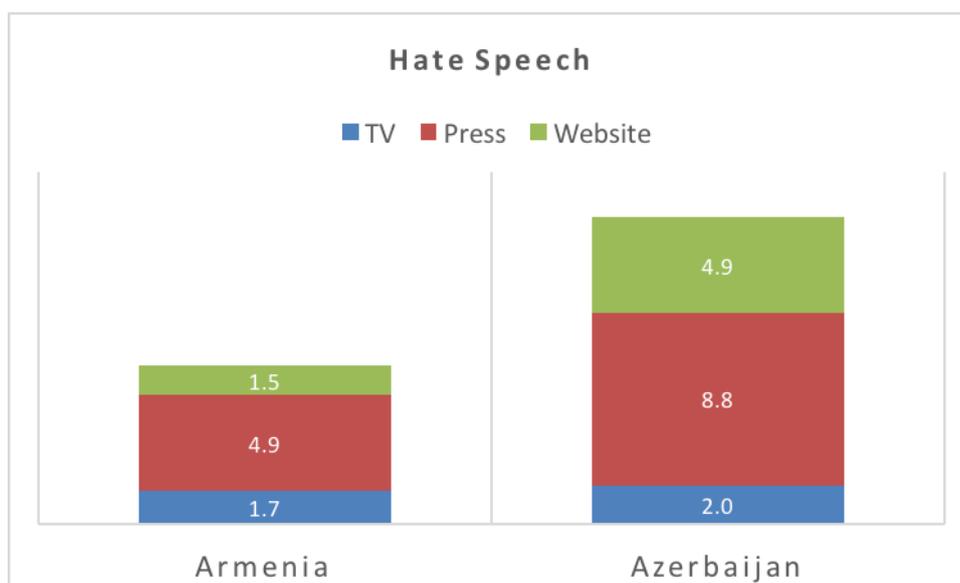
However, in addition to the domestic Armenian discourse, the Azerbaijani one is also very important, because the asymmetry of these discourses, in its turn, contributes to the development of the discourse of war. Military rhetoric and propaganda, distortion of facts and information affect not only the internal audience, but also generate rivalry and an information war .

In Armenian and Azerbaijani societies, the asymmetry of the discourses of war and peace is expressed in political rhetoric, in the media, social networks, educational programs (in the textbooks of history and other subjects, "patriotic" upbringing, and so on.)¹², arts and other fields.

The role of the media is especially important in the formation of these discourses, since they are the main source of information not only for the domestic audience, but also for the audience of the opposite side. Given that in the media the discourse of war is usually expressed, first of all, by the language of hostility, this indicator can stand out as an important marker. The mass media of Armenia and Azerbaijan (2014) identify the asymmetry of hate speech: according to their results, the language of hostility is particularly pronounced in the Azerbaijani Media (see Chart 6).

¹² The war discourse is extremely aggressive in the educational programmes in Azerbaijan. Textbooks and other educational materials can be found in the following website: <http://azerichild.info/books-education-azerbaijan-hatred-from-childhood.html>:

Chart 5. Hate speech in the mass media of Armenia and Azerbaijan (the ratio of materials with the elements of "hate speech" to the total number of materials studied in this type of media,%)¹³



In order to ensure the emotional involvement of people in the conflict, the parties are divided into "good" and "bad", a struggle is constructed between "truth" and "lies". In this discourse of war the conflict seems insoluble, the parties state the heroic deeds of their people and the atrocities of the opposite party, humanize their political and military leaders, soldiers, victims, civilians, thus completely dehumanizing the images of the opposing side.

According to the study on the Azerbaijani and Armenian media (2008-2013)¹⁴, the clichés spread by the enemy in the context of the settlement of the Karabakh conflict are mirror-opposites in most respects. For example, the media of both countries use certain clichés against each other: the aggressor, occupation, the Armenian/Azerbaijani propaganda, atrocity, barbarism, terrorism, militant politics, changed toponyms, and so on. They also use clichés of the opposite meaning (for example, liberated/occupied territories), expressions and words in quotation marks ("the NKR", "the Armenian Genocide", and so on) and used by only one party (Artsakh, Armenian/Karabakh separatists). The stereotype of the uncompromising stand is also circulating in the media, as a matter of fact, due to the reluctance of the enemy to make concessions. However, the option of resolving the conflict through military operations is found exclusively in the Azerbaijani media. In the Armenian media, most often it is stated that Armenia is a supporter of peaceful resolution, whereas Azerbaijan supports a military solution to the conflict.

¹³ "Язык вражды" в средствах массовой информации Южного Кавказа (На основе мониторинга СМИ Азербайджана, Армении и Грузии), Ереванский пресс-клуб, 2014 (http://ypc.am/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Hate_Speech_October_2014_rus.pdf).

¹⁴ Глоссарий языка вражды в СМИ Азербайджана и Армении, Баку-Ереван, 2008-2013 (http://ypc.am/upload/GLOSSARY_rus.pdf)

Given the different degrees of their freedom, the media in both countries (of course, in different ratios) do not ultimately provide the audience with reliable information about each other.¹⁵ This information gap, to some extent, is supplemented by social networks, which present themselves as communication tools, on the one hand, and as information warfare tools, on the other. Social networks provide an opportunity to promote peace discourse which is impossible without the understanding of the histories of the conflicting parties, without taking into account the views of the participants and respect for the victims, without distinguishing political and military leaders from the ordinary people. In fact, social networks are not yet widely used in the peace discourse of the two peoples and are rather and mostly used as an instrument of information warfare.

Thus, the perceptions of peace and war are not generally based on real facts and truthful information. Media technologies shape these perceptions, disseminate and reproduce discourses of war and peace. The latter actually act as important tools of soft power.

At present, the discourse of war is undoubtedly dominant and, in principle, the societies of the opposing countries are not ready for peace, despite declared statements¹⁶.

Peace discourse, following irrefutable standards of truth, is capable of discovering the contradictions and deconstructing the polarity of war discourse. It is called upon to rethink myths and identify common values, indicate the cost of victory, determining the harm to culture, economy, social relations, etc., and to examine the possibilities for conflict transformation and the possibilities for reconciliation and peacemaking.¹⁷

¹⁵ According to the Freedom House Report on the Freedom of Speech in 2017, Armenia occupies the 137th position, and Azerbaijan comes the 190th among the countries with the lowest rating in the world..

¹⁶ According to our observations, the war discourse in Azerbaijan is of a more extreme and complex character.

¹⁷ Kempf W. Deescalation-oriented conflict coverage? The Northern Ireland and Israeli-Palestinian peace processes in the German press, IAMCR Scientific Conference at Leipzig (Germany), 1999 (<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.871.4250&rep=rep1&type=pdf>).