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THE ATTITUDE OF AZERBAIJANI PEOPLE IN GEORGIA TOWARDS THE LOCAL ARMENIAN POPULATION

This study examines the complex dynamics of Azerbaijani-Armenian relations within Georgia's multiethnic landscape, focusing on the attitudes of ethnic Azerbaijanis toward the local Armenian population. While historical coexistence between these two largest minority groups has been characterized by pragmatic cooperation, functional bilingualism, and shared municipal institutions—particularly in mixed villages such as Tsopi and Khojorni—interethnic relations have become increasingly strained due to external political influences and regional conflicts. The research traces the evolution of these relations from predominantly neutral and cooperative patterns to heightened polarization, particularly following the 2020 Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. Key findings reveal that Azerbaijani state-sponsored propaganda, including hostile publications distributed through Georgian libraries, pseudo-scholarly revisionist materials, and coordinated disinformation campaigns on social media platforms, has significantly influenced the attitudes of Georgia's Azerbaijani minority. The study demonstrates how nationalist narratives from external kin-states can penetrate local communities through digital communication channels, educational materials, and cultural programming, transforming latent tensions into visible social polarization. Documented incidents of violence, alongside systematic hate speech on Telegram channels and the political instrumentalization of ethnic minorities in electoral processes, illustrate the fragility of interethnic harmony in the absence of robust institutional safeguards. The research concludes that while everyday coexistence remains resilient at the micro-level, the sustainability of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations in Georgia depends critically on effective conflict-prevention measures, media literacy initiatives, and proactive civil-society engagement to counteract the erosive effects of cross-border nationalist mobilization.

Keywords: ethnic minorities, Georgia, Armenian-Azerbaijani relations, nationalism, disinformation, interethnic conflict, diaspora politics, minority integration

In the aftermath of the Soviet Union's dissolution, and particularly throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the Caucasus experienced a pronounced resurgence of ethnic nationalism. Although Georgia formally acceded to a number of minority-rights conventions, the practical implementation of these commitments remained limited, despite the existence of relevant institutional and legal frameworks. A central impediment to minority integration was the language barrier: insufficient proficiency in the Georgian language significantly constrained ethnic minorities' access to education, employment, and avenues for civic participation.

Consequently, their engagement with state institutions remained restricted, resulting in marginal levels of political and societal inclusion¹.

However, the challenges facing ethnic minorities in Georgia extended beyond linguistic and integration barriers. Relations between the two largest minority groups—ethnic Armenians and ethnic Azerbaijanis—were further shaped by a long and complex history marked by episodes of conflict, mutual suspicions, and competing national narratives. Although these tensions did not always manifest in open confrontation within Georgia, they nonetheless influenced patterns of social interaction, trust, and community cohesion. The legacy of broader regional conflicts, particularly those between Armenia and Azerbaijan, often reverberated at the local level, complicating efforts to foster interethnic cooperation and fully integrate minority populations into the Georgian socio-political landscape.

Armenian–Georgian relations have been documented extensively throughout history. Although the earliest surviving books and documents date to the 5th century, they often recount events from earlier periods. Prominent Armenian historians, such as Movses Khorenatsi, Koryun, and Pavstos Buzand, among others, frequently address Armenian–Georgian interactions in their works, tracing them back to ancient times.² Following the collapse of the Armenian kingdoms, many Armenians settled in the Georgian kingdom. One of the earliest works written in the Georgian language, composed in the 5th century, recounts the martyrdom of the Armenian princess Shushanik, who married a Georgian nobleman and refused to renounce her Christian faith to appease a Persian overlord. The *Passion of Saint Shushanik* (Georgian: ნამებდა წმიდისა შუშანიკისი დედოფლისაჲ), authored by Iakob Tsurtaveli, preserves this account.³ These sources demonstrate that the presence of Armenians in Georgia is long-standing, with roots extending back many centuries.

The presence of Turkic-speaking peoples in Georgia is documented significantly later than that of Armenians. The populations that today identify as Azerbaijanis were historically Turkic-speaking Muslims of the South Caucasus, who began settling in Georgian territories around the 13th–15th centuries, particularly during the period of the Seljuk invasions of the region. Following the establishment of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic in 1920, Turkic-speaking

¹ J. Popjanevski, “Minorities and the State in the South Caucasus: Assessing the Protection of National Minorities in Georgia and Azerbaijan”, Silk Road Paper, September 2006, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Silk Road Studies Program, available: https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/30280/15_Minorities_State_South_Caucasus.pdf, visit: 28.11.2025

² «Հայկական սկզբնաղբյուրները Վրաստանի մասին (Ե-Ժ դարեր)», Մատենաշատ Հայ-վրացական հարաբերությունների, Գիրք Գ, Երևանի Պետական Համալսարան, Հայագիտական հետազոտությունների ինստիտուտ, Երևան 2016, հասանելի է http://publishing.y-su.am/files/Haykakan_skzbnaghbyurnery_Vrastani_masin.pdf, մուտք՝ 28.11.2025

³ I. Tsurtaveli, “The Passion of Saint Shushanik”, available: <https://www.allgeo.org/index.php/en/673-iakob-tsurtaveli-the-passion-of-saint-shushanik>, visit: 28.11.2025

Muslim populations in the South Caucasus were officially classified as Azerbaijanis.

Armenians and Azerbaijanis have coexisted in Georgia over the decades, developing patterns of coexistence that vary across regions and historical periods. While Armenians are predominantly concentrated in the Samtskhe–Javakheti region and Azerbaijanis mainly reside in Kvemo Kartli, numerous rural localities continue to host both communities side by side. The villages of Khojorni and Tsopi stand as notable examples where everyday Armenian–Azerbaijani coexistence has long been embedded in local social life.

According to the 2014 national census, Azerbaijanis constitute 6.3% of Georgia’s 13.2% ethnic minority population, while Armenians represent 4.5%,⁴ making them the two largest minority groups in the country. For this reason, the preservation of peaceful and constructive relations between these communities is considered vital for Georgia’s internal stability, social cohesion, and regional integration. Historically, Armenian–Azerbaijani relations within Georgia have been predominantly neutral and, in many cases, cooperative, shaped by shared economic interests, localized bilingualism, and long-standing interdependence.⁵

Research on interethnic coexistence in mixed villages, such as Tsopi and Khojorni, demonstrates that Armenians and Azerbaijanis frequently participate in parallel yet interconnected social structures. Children often attend the same schools—though in linguistically segregated streams—play in common spaces, and families engage with the same municipal institutions. In these settings, pragmatic coexistence, routine interaction, and functional bilingualism are well-documented. Such dynamics suggest that at the micro-level, communal relations have historically been sustainable and characterized by mutual accommodation.

Nevertheless, the stability of these relations has been periodically challenged by external political events, nationalist narratives, and the influence of regional conflicts. Importantly, the roots of contemporary tensions predate the 2020 Second Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) War. In 2019, several Georgian and regional media outlets reported that the Azerbaijani government had distributed books to Georgian public libraries containing hostile and inflammatory rhetoric against Armenians. These publications reportedly featured explicit territorial claims, derogatory language, and disinformation, including fabricated assertions that Armenians had committed genocide in areas described as “Western Azerbaijan.” Some members of Georgia’s Azerbaijani community publicly expressed concern that the dissemination of such materials might disrupt local interethnic relations, particularly among young readers. Civil-society actors and Armenian community

⁴ 2014 General Population Census Results, National Statistics Office of Georgia, available: <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/737/2014-general-population-census-results>, visit: 28.11.2025

⁵ Zviadadze, D. Jishkariani, “Identity issues among Azerbaijani population of Kvemo Kartli and its political and social dimensions”, available: https://socialjustice.org.ge/uploads/products/pdf/Qvemo-Qartli_merged-eng_1547217506.pdf, visit: 28.11.2025

representatives further warned that such content could “plant seeds of ethnic tension,” reinforcing stereotypes and encouraging antagonistic attitudes.⁶

Despite such episodes, Armenian–Azerbaijani interaction in Georgia remained largely peaceful prior to 2020. Nationalist expressions did occasionally occur, yet they did not fundamentally destabilize the broader framework of coexistence. The situation changed markedly with the outbreak of the Second Artsakh War, which produced a visible polarization within Georgia’s minority communities. The conflict acted as a powerful emotional and symbolic trigger, activating strong diasporic attachments among both Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Georgia.

During the war, both communities organized rallies, demonstrations, and humanitarian initiatives in support of their respective homelands. Some individuals expressed readiness to volunteer in the conflict, and social media became a major arena for nationalist mobilization. Online platforms were flooded with competing narratives, accusations, emotionally charged language, and misinformation. Digital conflicts frequently spilled over into offline interactions, contributing to interpersonal strain, social fragmentation, and the deterioration of long-standing friendships. These developments revealed the enduring emotional, cultural, and political ties that members of both minority groups maintain with Armenia and Azerbaijan, even when holding Georgian citizenship.⁷

The war not only escalated tensions but also revived older stereotypes and historical animosities that many had believed were fading. Public protests, symbolic commemorations, and counter-demonstrations—such as those related to the “Khojaly Massacre”—highlighted the fragile nature of interethnic harmony. Civil-society actors noted that joint commemorative or peace-focused initiatives were met with limited success, given the heightened emotional environment and mutual suspicion.⁸

Social media played an especially influential role in shaping public perceptions during this period. Its rapid dissemination of unverified information, nationalist propaganda, and emotionally charged content intensified divisions between the two communities. The digital environment often amplified polarizing narratives rather than promoting dialogue or mediation. Despite the clear risks of escalation, observers noted that Georgian state institutions took limited proactive measures to mediate disputes, address misinformation, or implement structured conflict-prevention initiatives within minority-populated regions.

⁶ Rahim Shaliyev, “Libraries full of hate: from Azerbaijan to Georgia”, OC Media, May 30, 2019, available: <https://oc-media.org/libraries-full-of-hate-from-azerbaijan-to-georgia/>, visit: 28.11.2025

⁷ “The implications of the Second Karabakh war on Georgia’s non-dominant ethnic groups”, Social Justice Center , Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA, Tbilisi, 2021, available: <https://socialjustice.org.ge/en/products/qarabaghis-meore-omis-gavlenebi-sakartvelos-aradominantur-etnikur-jgufebze>, visit: 28.11.2025

⁸ “Georgia’s Armenian and Azerbaijani activists at odds over commemorations of the Khojaly Massacre”, OC Media, March 1, 2017, available: <https://oc-media.org/georgias-armenian-and-azerbaijani-activists-at-odds-over-commemorations-of-the-khojaly-massacre/>, visit: 28.11.2025

Taken together, these developments indicate that the attitudes of ethnic Azerbaijanis in Georgia toward the Armenian population cannot be characterized as uniformly positive or negative. Instead, they reflect a complex interplay of localized coexistence, historical memory, external political influence, and the spillover effects of regional conflicts. While everyday life in many communities demonstrates a pattern of pragmatic interaction and mutual accommodation, this stability remains vulnerable to external pressures, including imported nationalist narratives, geopolitical tensions, and the influence of the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict⁹.

As a result, Armenian–Azerbaijani relations in Georgia should be understood as both resilient and sensitive—capable of sustaining long-term coexistence, yet susceptible to disruption during periods of heightened regional tension. The Georgian state’s relative absence from preventive mediation further underscores the importance of local civil-society initiatives, educational policies, and community-based peacebuilding efforts in maintaining interethnic harmony.

Social media was saturated with organized disinformation campaigns related to the war, serving as an additional mechanism to provoke tensions among ethnic minorities. The deliberately disseminated false or misleading information aimed to influence perceptions and coordinate attitudes between communities, thereby exacerbating interethnic divisions. Monitoring by the Democracy Research Institute of posts and articles across multiple Telegram channels, Facebook pages, and websites confirms that these manipulative narratives are both widespread and strategically targeted.

Beyond popular media and textbooks, propaganda also appears in pseudo-scholarly or revisionist publications. For example, the journal *Caucasus and the World* published several articles containing anti-Armenian and pseudo-scientific content, which were criticized by the Geghard Foundation for promoting hostility and historical falsifications.¹⁰

Such publications often seek to reframe historical narratives, appropriating Armenian cultural heritage or contesting Armenian identity — for example, by denying Armenian historical presence in territories or re-labeling Armenian monuments under Azerbaijani or “Caucasian Albanian” names. This fits into a broader pattern of cultural-historical revisionism tied to nationalist ideology.¹¹

The combined impact of hostile publications, state-driven propaganda, coordinated disinformation campaigns, and conflict-related nationalist mobilization has significantly reshaped the attitudes of segments of Georgia’s

⁹ “Armenophobic and Anti-Azerbaijani messages spread through disinformative media campaign”, Democracy Research Institute, 05.02.2021, available: <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/510/>, visit: 28.11.2025

¹⁰ “Letter of protest from the Geghard Foundation regarding anti-Armenian publications in the journal “The Caucasus and the World””, Geghard SAF, 23.07.2025, available: <https://geghard-saf.am/en/682/caucasus-world-antiarmeniancontent/>, visit: 28.11.2025

¹¹ “Anti-Armenian hatred are observed in almost all Azerbaijani textbooks”, Armenia information, analytical agency, 12.20.2017, available: <https://armedia.am/eng/news/55763/anti-armenian-hatred-are-observed-in-almost-all-azerbaijani-textbooks.html>, visit: 28.11.2025

Azerbaijani minority toward the Armenian population. While everyday coexistence, pragmatic cooperation, and intercommunal ties were long characteristic of Armenian–Azerbaijani relations in Georgia, these bonds have increasingly come under strain. The emotional mobilization triggered by the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war reactivated dormant stereotypes and historical grievances, transforming latent tensions into more visible forms of mutual suspicion and social polarization.

Moreover, the circulation of hate-speech, territorial narratives, and historically revisionist materials—sometimes appearing in educational and cultural spaces—has further undermined the possibility of coexistence based on equality and mutual respect. Such materials contribute to a generational transmission of prejudice, embedding antagonistic attitudes that may destabilize long-term prospects for interethnic harmony. The case of Georgian Azerbaijanis illustrates how minority communities can be strongly influenced by the political discourse, symbolic narratives, and identity-shaping strategies of their external “kin-state.” Through media, digital communication, educational outreach, and cultural programming, Azerbaijan’s domestic nationalist narratives increasingly filter into the social fabric of Georgia’s multiethnic environment.

These developments show how external conflicts can fracture local communities even far from the battlefield. Coordinated disinformation on Armenian and Azerbaijani Telegram channels, including explicit calls for violence and dehumanizing language, has reinforced hostilities and strengthened antagonistic attitudes among their respective audiences. Without strong institutional safeguards—such as media literacy programs, regulation of hate speech, inclusive educational reforms, and proactive interethnic dialogue—propaganda and conflict-related narratives risk eroding decades of peaceful coexistence. For scholars of nationalism, ethnic conflict, and minority integration, Georgia provides a compelling example of how cross-border information flows and nationalist propaganda can reshape interethnic relations in a fragile, multiethnic state.

Monitoring by the Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) demonstrates that in the period leading up to and during the 2023 hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenian- and Azerbaijani-aligned Telegram channels became major hubs of coordinated hate speech, disinformation, and explicit incitement to violence. According to the investigation, dozens of channels on both sides circulated highly provocative content, ranging from dehumanizing insults to the public celebration of killings. This activity was not sporadic but organized: many channels operated in a networked manner, systematically forwarding each other’s posts and amplifying narratives that encouraged hostility toward the opposing ethnic group. A notable pattern identified by the researchers was the widespread use of derogatory slurs and symbolic language intended to strip the “enemy” of humanity. The scale and reach of these channels intensified the problem. As the conflict escalated, the circulation of violent and dehumanizing content became faster, more frequent, and more aggressive. Because the channels referenced, quoted, and reacted to each other, hostile narratives became repeatedly reinforced, giving users the impression that violence and hatred were not only

justified but widely endorsed. Through this mechanism, online spaces helped normalize antagonism at a societal level and contributed to the erosion of boundaries between virtual hostility and real-world interethnic attitudes.¹²

On July 12, 2020, Azerbaijanis attacked Armenians in Sadakhlo, Georgia, and subsequently fled the scene. Similar incidents targeting Armenians occurred not only in Georgia but also in Europe, Russia, and the United States, including assaults on individuals and the burning of a car belonging to the Armenian Embassy in Germany. These events followed heightened tensions along the Armenian–Azerbaijani state border.

In 2021, according to the Armenian Embassy in Tbilisi, Armenian heavy trucks were pelted with stones and sustained damage while passing through a region of Georgia predominantly inhabited by ethnic Azerbaijanis. In its report, the Embassy noted that the incident occurred in the vicinity of the village of Qvemo Panichala.¹³ This episode represents another documented instance of aggression targeting Armenians by members of the Azerbaijani community.¹⁴

The Azerbaijani government has consistently leveraged the ethnic Azerbaijani population in Georgia to exert influence over the Georgian political landscape. Traditionally, representatives of ethnic minorities in Georgia predominantly vote in favor of the ruling party. However, unlike other ethnic minority groups, during the 2024 parliamentary elections, the Azerbaijani-populated regions are consistently influenced by either the Azerbaijani government or SOCAR, Azerbaijan's state oil company and Georgia's largest investor. It is worth noting that during all recent electoral processes and campaigns in Georgia, the indirect involvement of Azerbaijan was important for the ruling party. Meanwhile, the opposition has sought to mobilize this electorate around its platform. A ballot-stuffing incident was detected in Marneuli, after which two individuals were arrested, one being an ethnic Azerbaijani and a representative of the ruling Georgian Dream party in the local government.¹⁵ This case represents yet another example of Azerbaijan's influence on developments in Georgia concerning ethnic Azerbaijani communities, while also illustrating attempts to shape Georgia's broader political processes through its ethnic minority networks.

Conclusion

¹² Givi Gigitashvili, "Armenian and Azerbaijani telegram channels incite violence against each other", September 21, 2023, DFRLav, available: <https://dfrlab.org/2023/09/21/armenian-and-azerbaijani-telegram-channels-incite-violence-against-each-other/>, visit: 28.11.2025

¹³ "Armenian trucks "Attached in Georgia"", January 26, 2021, Azatutyun radio station, available: <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/31069720.html>, visit: 28.11.2025

¹⁴ M. Mkrtchyan, "Turn reached Georgia: Azerbaijanis beat Armenians in Sadakhlo", Khachkar Studios, empowering good news, July 27, 2020, available: https://arminfo.info/full_news.php?id=53926&lang=3, visit: 28.11.2025

¹⁵ "Interference of Azerbaijani SOCAR and state media in Georgia's elections", Armenpress, November 29, 2024, available: <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1206332/amp>, visit: 28.11.2025

The attitudes of ethnic Azerbaijanis in Georgia toward the Armenian population reflect a complex dynamic shaped by historical coexistence and external nationalist influences. At the local level, pragmatic cooperation through shared institutions, bilingualism, and economic interdependence has historically sustained peaceful relations. However, this stability has proven increasingly fragile due to systematic propaganda from Azerbaijan, including anti-Armenian publications in Georgian libraries, revisionist materials, and coordinated disinformation campaigns on social media.

The sustainability of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations in Georgia depends critically on proactive state intervention, which has been notably absent. Without robust institutional safeguards—including media literacy programs, hate speech regulation, and structured conflict-prevention initiatives—cross-border nationalist narratives continue to erode decades of peaceful coexistence. The case demonstrates how kin-state nationalism can reshape diaspora attitudes through digital communication and cultural programming, illustrating that interethnic harmony in multiethnic states requires sustained commitment from government institutions, civil society, and international actors to counteract divisive propaganda and reinforce shared citizenship over imported antagonisms.