

# Nagorno-Karabakh: Why do Peace Processes Fail ‘From the Inside’?

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**Abstract:** The leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan and the representatives of the OSCE announced in Paris, in January 2019, the firm intention to move forward for a peace compromise on the long-standing conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. The prospect of peace however triggered anxieties among the Armenians fearful of losing the territories gained in war, as well as among the inhabitants of Nagorno-Karabakh, while the Azerbaijanis maintain that any future peace compromise cannot start without the withdrawal of the Armenian forces from these lands. Peace became a source of anxiety and entrenched attachment to old narratives overcame, for the moment, the optimistic rhetoric shift of state leaders. The article thus looks into the possible reasons for a peace process to fail ‘from the inside’, to be rejected by the very populations affected by an abiding conflict, bringing insides from cognitive approaches to conflict and security, namely from the ontological security body of literature to this purpose.

**Keywords:** Nagorno-Karabakh, conflict, peace, OSCE, diplomacy, security

## Introductory remarks

In January 2019, one of the most enduring protracted conflicts in Europe, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, took a noteworthy turn of rhetoric when the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan announced, during the Paris meeting of the Organisation’s

for Security and Cooperation (OSCE) Minsk Group, that they agreed to take “concrete measures to prepare the populations for peace” (OSCE, 2019). This narrative shift is particularly important after almost three years of intensified geopolitical, hard security-oriented narratives around Nagorno-Karabakh, after the April 2016 events when the highest degree of armed violence since the ceasefire in 1994 has resurged. It had brought the South Caucasus back on the table of the conflict and security talks among

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the main regional state and institutional players and it questioned once more the efficiency of the regional peace processes. What is however notable, besides the change in the narratives of the conflict parties, is their call upon the necessity to prepare the populations to accept a peace deal and the initial unpopularity of this decision for compromise within the general public of Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan, despite three decades of conflict.

The article thus looks into the possible reasons for a peace process to fail 'from the inside', to be rejected by the very populations affected by an abiding conflict. To this goal, it explores the internal limitations that come to complement the external ones in resolving the conflict and reaching sustainable peace. The central argument I make is that there are material, but also psychological benefits to maintaining the status quo and to this point I bring insides from cognitive approaches to conflict and security, namely from the ontological security body of literature. In support of my argument, I include information collected based on the on-the-spot reactions in the regional media in Armenia and Azerbaijan after the Paris meeting statement.

## **1. External limitations to conflict resolution and implementing peace in Nagorno-Karabakh: structural and functional restraints to regional institutional cooperation**

The international major peacekeeping actors, such as the OSCE and the European Union (EU), have long been criticised for their structural and functional limitations in relation with their capacity to contribute to an efficient management of the conflict and a sustainable peacebuilding in the South Caucasus, particularly in the light of the 'de-freeze' of the conflicts in South Ossetia in August 2008 and in Nagorno-Karabakh in April 2016. Simultaneously, there has been a predominant focus in the literature on the role of external actors in the conflict and peace dynamics in the regions, namely on the international organizations, the parent states (Azerbaijan, Georgia) and the patron states (Armenia, Russia) of the breakaway regions in the South Caucasus. Little agency has been granted to the secessionist entities themselves, most often portrayed as weak, failed or dependent pawns at the mercy of their external patrons. Internal constraints come not to exclude, but to complement the external limitations of the main international peacekeeping actors (Andrei, 2018), explored here below.

### *1.1 General overview of the peace processes dynamics in the South Caucasus: functional overlaps and limitations of the OSCE and the EU in conflict prevention and management actions.*

The OSCE has been present in all the three peace processes in South Caucasus. Thus, it acts as the main international institutional peace actor in the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and, at the same time, it co-chairs the Geneva International Discussions,

along with the EU and the United Nations (UN), a framework of international talks dedicated to the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, set up after the resurgence of the South Ossetian conflict in 2008. Although the OSCE's presence as a peace mediator in the Caucasus conflicts has been a constant throughout the past decades, the organization has been long criticised for its limitations or even failure in managing the existing conflicts and, most notably, in preventing their outbreak again, as it happened in April 2016 in Nagorno-Karabakh. Nevertheless, the OSCE's limitations cannot be dissociated from those of the other major international peacekeeping actors, as their actions or non-actions have been closely intertwined and often impacted on each other's efficiency.

As such, throughout the 1990s, the EU played a distant role and hesitated to engage directly in managing the conflicts in the South Caucasus (Baev, 1997; Whitman & Wolff, 2010; Simão, 2012; Pashayeva, 2015; Relitz, 2016; Shelest, 2016). The conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh remained largely outside of the EU's area of interest and actions, leaving the OSCE to act mostly on its own, as the main responsible actor dealing with the conflicts of the region (Whitman & Wolff, 2010; Pashayeva, 2015; Paul, 2015; Shelest, 2016).

However, starting the 2000s, the EU marked the transition towards adopting conflict prevention as a key objective of its external relations policy. This occurred in the context of Russia's rise as a more self-aware and assertive regional player aiming to be recognised as a global power, but also as a consequence of Brussels' interest in the gas and oil reserves around the Caspian Sea (Baev, 1997; Whitman & Wolff, 2010; Simão, 2012; O'Loughlin, Kolossov, & Toal, 2014; Paul, 2015), the EU started to take an increased interest in settling the conflicts in the South Caucasus, as a measure to secure the safe and undisturbed transit of hydrocarbons from Azerbaijan, through Georgia, to the European markets.

As a consequence of EU's involvement in the region, since the 2000s, the OSCE and the EU have been facing a geographical overlap in the field of conflict prevention in the South Caucasus. Nevertheless, despite the OSCE's constant and enduring presence in the region, the EU and NATO seem to remain the favourite security organisations in the former Soviet Union (De Wilde, 2006; Stewart, 2008), while the OSCE and the Council of Europe rather play the role of "stepping stones for the true rewards: NATO and EU membership" (De Wilde, 2006, p. 90). In addition to the geographical juxtaposition of the OSCE and the EU in the South Caucasus, a functional overlap has also emerged, with both organizations focusing on similar goals: a fast export of democracy, human rights and liberal market principles to all conflict parties involved, namely the parent states and the secessionist entities of the region. These goals and areas of action have further overlapped those followed by the NGOs promoting peace and democratization in the post-conflict areas of the Caucasus. As a consequence, feelings of confusion and distrust among the conflict parties emerged, making the parties to the conflict often

reluctant to the peacekeeping efforts and more in favor of maintaining the status quo (Pashayeva, 2015).

Moreover, neither the OSCE nor the EU have the financial and the military capacity necessary to compete with Russia's rising presence and engagement in the conflicts of the region. Moscow has been able to use a combination of hard and soft power tools in order to consolidate its role and influence in the South Caucasus, ranging from the deployment of peacekeeping forces, the securitisation and patrolling of borders, provision of warfare equipment and energy supplies, to offering funding for the reconstruction of war-affected areas, Russian passports, scholarships (Kirova, 2012; Fischer, 2016; Gerrits & Bader, 2016), free movement facilities and employment opportunities (King, 2001; Fischer, 2016) for the inhabitants of the conflict-torn secessionist areas. Neither the parent states from which these regions seceded, nor the democratic international actors, such as the OSCE or the EU have managed to provide similar military, financial or social incentives for the breakaway regions. As a consequence, this has arguably contributed to a more limited impact and leverage on the secessionist entities during the peace negotiations.

Under the conditions above, is there still room for a cooperation between the OSCE and the EU which could lead to a successful prevention and management of the conflicts in the South Caucasus? The optimist views in the literature look at the mutually-reinforcing nature of the interaction between the two organizations, where they can effectively join their efforts, since the OSCE has the mandate, thus the legitimacy, while the EU has the means, hence the military and financial capabilities (Freire, 2001). Also, it has been argued that the EU can benefit from the OSCE's experience in the former Soviet Union, in order to better implement its Eastern Neighbourhood Policy and the Central Asia Strategy (Stewart, 2008). The sceptics, however, see the OSCE losing its relevance to other regional players and highlight its functional limitations. Thus, the OSCE has been criticised for focusing its activity mainly in the Eastern part of Europe (Meyer, 1997; Stewart, 2008), ignoring similar structural problems in the West. The OSCE has equally been regarded with pessimism due to its structural limitations, namely a reduced institutional capacity, with a limited and frequently changed staff (Mychajlyszyn, 2001; Stewart, 2008). Moreover, missions are said to have unclear mandates in terms of object and duration, while, at times, the organization has been criticised for compromising for lower human rights standards (Stewart, 2008).

### *1.2 The OSCE Minsk Process in Nagorno-Karabakh: sustainable peace set back*

In the ethno-federalist architecture of the Soviet Union, Nagorno-Karabakh has been an autonomous oblast within the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan, populated by a majority of Armenian ethnics. The region is a mountainous enclave, physically disconnected from its kin Armenia. In 1988, the people of Nagorno-Karabakh voted to

secede Azerbaijan and join Armenia. Azerbaijan's refusal to recognize the vote escalated into armed confrontations. In 1991, Nagorno-Karabakh declared independence, which Azerbaijan refused to recognize, offering a broad autonomy status instead. A violent conflict erupted and ethnic cleansing measures drove most of the Azeri minority away from Nagorno-Karabakh. By 1994, Armenian forces secured the annexation of the enclave and imposed control of an additional territory around it, including the Lachi corridor connecting the breakaway region to Armenia.

As a consequence, in 1992, the OSCE became officially involved in the settlement of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, through the Ministerial Council's decision to organize the *Minsk Conference*, intended as a negotiation forum reuniting ten participating States, along with Armenia, Azerbaijan and the representatives of Nagorno-Karabakh (Geukjian, 2006). However, the conference has never convened and it has been transformed into the *Minsk Group*, co-chaired by Russia, the United States and France, an ad hoc working group of the OSCE, on which a subsequent peace process has been based, namely the *Minsk Process*.

The Minsk Group has nevertheless failed to broker a peace settlement between the parties and Russia took the unilateral initiative of mediating a ceasefire between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh, in 1994, known as the 'Bishkek Agreement'. Although criticised for shortcutting the OSCE official framework for negotiations, Russia has been at times credited for managing to impose a lasting ceasefire, which the OSCE failed to do (Freire, 2001). However, the agreement did not succeed in resolving the conflict, nor in putting an end to hostilities which still occurred intermittently along the years, until April 2016 when the highest level of violence since the ceasefire in 1994, erupted with tens of casualties on both sides.

At the start of the conflict, in 1992-1994, the Minsk Process had envisaged the provision of an appropriate framework for conflict resolution, the cessation of fire and, most important, the deployment of an OSCE multinational peacekeeping mission (Freire, 2001). However, the mission was never deployed and the OSCE was criticised for failing to honor its commitments to the parties in conflict. Repeated disagreements with Russia over the nature, the size and the leadership of the peacekeeping mission hampered the initiatives (Geukjian, 2006) and inflicted upon the organization's credibility and on the dynamics of the conflict. Furthermore, the OSCE's support for the principle of territorial integrity as opposed to that of self-determination, justified as rejecting secession leading to independence, especially when it is exercised through violence and without mutual consent, caused the secessionist forces in Nagorno-Karabakh, aiming for self-determination, to reject all the OSCE's proposals in this sense (Mychajlyszyn, 2001). The nature of the process itself has been criticized for the lack of a convincing involvement and presence at a high level of the OSCE officials, as well as for the secretive nature of negotiations (De Waal, 2010). Moreover, unlike in the initial phases of

the peace process, the OSCE did not invite at the negotiations table the representative of Nagorno-Karabakh, due to their contested legitimacy by Azerbaijan.

In 2007, the co-chairing countries of the OSCE Minks Group presented the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan with a revised version of a peace settlement proposal, known as the 'Madrid Principles'. The Principles, updated in 2009, call for: return of the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani control; an interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh providing guarantees for security and self-governance; a corridor linking Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh; future determination of the final legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh through a legally binding expression of will; the right of all internally displaced persons and refugees to return to their former places of residence; and international security guarantees that would include a peacekeeping operation (OSCE, 2009). Although the conflicting parties agreed over time to several of the provisions, the first one, the return of the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani control has been the main element of contention and deadlock.

As the second part of this article will reveal, the public reactions in Armenia, Azerbaijan, but also in Nagorno-Karabakh itself that expressed skepticism and even rejection of the peace compromise announced in Paris in January 2019, revolved around this issue. The prospect of peace under this framework triggered anxieties among the Armenians fearful of losing the territories gained in war, while the Azerbaijanis maintain that any future peace compromise cannot start without the withdrawal of the Armenian forces from these lands. Peace became a source of anxiety and entrenched attachment to old narratives overcome, for the moment, the optimistic rhetoric shift of state leaders.

## **2. Internal limitations to overcoming status quo: material and cognitive gains to delaying peace**

The major international peacekeeping actors in the South Caucasus, such as the OSCE, have encountered structural and functional limitations in settling the conflicts and enabling a sustainable peace. Nevertheless, the internal factors that have been contributing to the maintenance of status quo and re-escalation of conflicts must equally be considered. This section argues that, along with the parent and patron states, the unrecognized entities themselves, in this case, Nagorno-Karabakh, have contributed to the maintenance of the status quo for as long as this served to their own goals and corresponded to their security needs of the moment. As a consequence, the breakaway regions have engaged in constant strategic adjustments of their positions vis-à-vis the democratic international peacekeepers, the wider international community, the parent states and their patron states (Andrei, 2018). To this goal, I argue that there are material, but also psychological benefits to maintaining the status quo. Sometimes, peace anxiety overcomes and conflict becomes a deliberate choice.

2.1. *Material gains and status quo preservation:  
the case of Nagorno-Karabakh*

On 16 January 2019, the representatives of the OSCE Minsk Group met the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan in Paris, on which occasion a press statement of the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group was released, stirring the reaction of officials and media in the two countries, as well as in the unrecognised entity of Nagorno-Karabakh. The statement announced the agreement of the ministers in Armenia and Azerbaijan to take “concrete measures to prepare the population for peace” (OSCE, 2019) and to enhance the economic cooperation between the two contending countries. While the declaration raised positive and encouraging reactions from the EU, the UN, Russia and other public officials in Europe, it was received with far less optimism at home, in Azerbaijan, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh and even triggered responses of skepticism and rejection, particularly in the latter two. While the statement marked a noteworthy shift in the rhetoric of the past decades, it followed the dynamics of significant changes both at a diplomatic level between Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as at domestic level, in all three entities.

On a diplomatic level, the Paris meeting has already been the fourth encounter between Azerbaijan’s and Armenia’s foreign ministers since the ‘Velvet Revolution’ in Armenia in April 2018 (Kucera, 2019a). In addition, the newly appointed prime-minister of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, who came to power after the 2018 events, had already met the Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev three times before the Paris meeting declaration (Kucera, 2019b). Nikol Pashinyan’s accession to the leadership of Armenia raised hopes for a fresh boost to the peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Pashinyan replaced Armenia’s former president Serzh Sargsyan who was known for his rigid approach to a compromise with Azerbaijan, being himself a native of Nagorno-Karabakh and a hardliner in the peace negotiations.

The Paris statement has been surrounded by a shift in narratives, towards possible prospects of a *détente*, at the highest levels in Baku and Yerevan. On 14 December 2018, the Azerbaijani president Aliyev, quoted by Eurasianet, tweeted: “The year 2019 will give a new impetus to the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement process” (Kucera, 2019c). After the Paris meeting, on 30 January 2019, the Armenian prime-minister Pashinyan declared that the “government is conducting a policy on Karabakh that no one has ever conducted before” (Kucera, 2019b), thus marking a clear break with the previous governments of Armenia.

But more important, at the same time, Armenia entered an unprecedented public dispute with its decades-long protégé, Nagorno-Karabakh. During the parliamentary elections in Armenia, the spokesman of the *de facto* ministry of defence in Nagorno-Karabakh, still retaining close connections with the former regime in Yerevan ousted by Pashinyan, criticised the campaign of Pashinyan’s alliance, claiming that they sacri-

ficed the goal of the liberation war in Artsakh<sup>1</sup> for the sake of achieving success for the popular protests (Mejlumyan, 2018a). In response, during an electoral rally, Pashinyan delimited himself and Armenia from Nagorno-Karabakh's long-term influence over the Armenian politics: "Why are they making these comments and trying to interfere in some way during the election campaign of Armenia?" (Mejlumyan, 2018b). The dispute is one example of Nagorno-Karabakh's exercise of agency and rather interdependence than dependence on its patron state, Armenia.

The Paris statement, as well as the détente-indicating declarations of the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan, have also been accompanied by not-so-coincidental staff reshuffles in Stepanakert<sup>2</sup> and in Baku. Thus, on the same day (14 December 2018) when the Azerbaijani president Aliyev raised the possibility of a positive change in the negotiations with Armenia over the conflict in the secessionist region, the de facto leader of Nagorno-Karabakh, Bako Sahakyan, rumoured to act on Yerevan's orders, dismissed the chief of the military forces of the breakaway entity (Mejlumyan, 2018a). In its own, the leadership of Azerbaijan proceeded to notable staff changes in the country's foreign policy apparatus. As a consequence, more moderate voices have been offered key positions related to the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. Turan Ganjaliyev, an Azerbaijani native of Nagorno-Karabakh, has been appointed the head of the government's organization representing Azerbaijani displaced persons from Nagorno-Karabakh (Kucera, 2019c). The change might be seen as an intention of the government in Baku to include the Azerbaijani community of Nagorno-Karabakh in the peace negotiations, similar to Pashinyan's demand for the peace talks to take place only with the participation of the Armenian representatives in Nagorno-Karabakh. While the move might have been conceived merely as a counter-reaction and attempt to balance rival Armenia, it may eventually contribute to raising more agency for the unrecognized state and to fostering more impact this might have on the peace dynamics.

The change in the rhetoric in Yerevan and in Baku as reflected in the various declarations made by the leaders of the two countries and in the Paris meeting statement, has also been backed up by a media campaign by the Armenian public television, well-known for its close connections with the government. Thus, only five days after the OSCE meeting, on 21 January 2019, the public station broadcasted a reportage featuring interviews with the residents of a village on the border with Azerbaijan, recalling their friendly relations with the Azeris in the neighboring village across the frontier, before the war. The footage raised a significant number of counter-reactions among representatives of media, social platforms commentator and former TV station leaders, quoted by the news portal Eurasianet, discontented with the fact that Armenia was the first one to

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1 Artsakh is the Armenian name for Nagorno-Karabakh

2 Stepanakert is the de facto capital of Nagorno-Karabakh

speaking about a peace compromise and not Azerbaijan, as well as by the fact that the reportage classified the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as a territorial dispute, while it is largely accepted in Armenia as a matter of self-determination for the Armenians in the entity (Mejlumyan, 2019).

The Paris meeting announcement has been generally met with skepticism and even disapproval by some, particularly in Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia, while the reactions in Azerbaijan have been more retained and mostly followed the same rhetoric of the past decades. The reactions of some politicians in Stepanakert have been the most straightforward against any peace compromise. Thus, Vardges Baghryan, a member of the de facto parliament of Nagorno-Karabakh, quoted by Eurasianet, declared in an interview: "I do not see anything good for us" (Kucera, 2019d). In Armenia, the Paris statement raised concerns that a peace compromise with Baku might lead to Armenia returning the occupied territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan. The Armenian diaspora, known for its hard-line position on the conflict, had already launched, through the Armenian National Committee of America a campaign against the OSCE's Madrid Principles (Kucera, 2019b), vocally advocating against any territorial compromise by Armenia, the de facto winner of the conflict, despite the international provisions for an eventual withdrawal of the Armenian forces and return of the occupied territories.

In Azerbaijan, the initial reactions to a possible peace compromise have been more mixed. Tural Ganjaliyev, the newly appointed head of the government's organisation representing Azerbaijani displaced persons from Nagorno-Karabakh after the foreign policy staff shuffles, expressed, in a press release, the hope for the "Azerbaijani community of the Nagorno-Karabakh region of the Republic of Azerbaijan [...] for a speedy peaceful settlement of the conflict and ensuring co-existence with the Armenian community" (Kucera, 2019d), in a possible response to the opposition in Azerbaijan towards the inclusion of the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh in the peace negotiations. On the other hand, the Azerbaijan's chief of general staff, Necmetdin Sadikov stated, in an interview, that the Azerbaijani military "is ready to fulfill any command at the highest level of professionalism and to free the occupied territories. In Armenia, they should not think that they will be able to maintain the status quo in negotiations" (Kucera, 2019d).

Various Azerbaijan's media outlets insisted on public officials' declarations, following the Paris statement, that emphasized Baku's main element of contention during the decades-long peace negotiations: the unconditional withdrawal of the Armenian military forces from the occupied territories, bringing in support of their demand various international resolutions and documents in this sense. Thus, Mahmud Mammad-Guliyev, the Azerbaijan's deputy foreign minister, stressed that any peace compromise must revolve around the withdrawal of the Armenian forces, along with provisions for the safe return of the internally displaced persons to their previous places of residence and to restoring contacts and dialogue between the two communities of Nagorno-

Karabakh (Azernews, 2019). In her own turn, Lyla Abdullayeva, spokesperson for the Azerbaijani's foreign ministry, declared that the cornerstone of the negotiations on the settlement of the conflict is the withdrawal of the Armenian forces (Azernews, 2019; Report News Agency, 2019). In addition, Abdullayeva emphasized that a conflict settlement in Nagorno-Karabakh would benefit Armenia economically and will boost the independence of Armenia (Report News Agency, 2019). This reference to Armenia's economic independence has been made in the context of the declining relationship between Armenia and Russia, Yerevan's main political, economic and military support, as well as of the long-standing economic isolation of Armenia, which has been excluded from all the main commercial, energy and transport projects which have been booming in the region in the past decades. It implies that a peace compromise with Azerbaijan might put an end to Armenia's isolation and it would open the door to including it in the major projects of the region, thus decreasing its dependence on Russia.

To summarise, resisting peace and maintaining the status quo has its benefits which often prove difficult to trade off. Armenia, the de facto winner of the war, may find it particularly hard to renounce the territories occupied and return them to its long enduring rival, Azerbaijan. The authorities in the unrecognized entity of Nagorno-Karabakh are likely to resist the most a peace compromise that will bring along important territorial and demographic changes. Time plays an essential role in sedimenting the status quo. For Nagorno-Karabakh, despite not being recognized, the past three decades marked important steps towards state-building and a new set of routines have been set in place, which will prove very difficult to set back. For Azerbaijan, any peace compromise must be connected with a very concrete material benefit, taking back the occupied territories and thus it attempts to bring forward any material gains for Armenia as well, such as the end of its economic isolation and possibly access to the energy and transportation infrastructure of the region.

However, material benefits cannot explain alone the reluctance to peace and the attachment to the status quo, be it a state of prolonged conflict. There are also cognitive, psychological gains that individual and collective actors draw from resisting change and that come not to exclude, but to complement the material, rational ones. The next sub-section will discuss the cognitive factors that impact on peace dynamics, by introducing a discussion about the role of peace anxieties and ontological (in)securities in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

## *2.2 Peace anxieties and ontological (in)securities:*

### *internal mechanisms to maintain status quo in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict*

Traditional approaches to conflict and security in international relations (IR) assume that states' main goal in their relations with other states is survival (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001), thus the preservation of their physical security and existence.

This understanding has long been dominating the academic and political debates around conflicts and reflects a generally state-centric and pessimist view on the world affairs and on the prospects for conflict defuse, cooperation and ultimately peace. Furthermore, a tell approach tends to be overwhelmingly concerned with the material conditions that foster conflict or peace, looking particularly at the rational choices actors make after calculating the costs of benefits of engaging in conflict in relation with concrete, material factors such as: military capacity, territory's specific conditions, financial gains and losses, access to local resources, etc.

However, in the past years, steps have been taken in the IR scholarship to acknowledge and to include the role of cognitive factors, complementing the material, rational ones, in driving the actors' choices for conflict or peace. Thus, stemming from the work of the psychoanalyst R.D Laing in his book "The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness" and from the later contribution of the sociologist Anthony Giddens in "Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age", one particular cognitive approach to security made its debut in the IR, bringing forward the central argument that collective actors, such as states, nations or peoples, are not concerned to preserve only their physical security, but also "their identity as a corporate actor" (Mitzen, 2006, p. 2), their way of life (Goldgeier, 1997; Steele, 2008). They are thus preoccupied with their *ontological security* (Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008).

The ontological security is the state where the actor, be it an individual or a collective one, feels in control about their identity and capacity for action (Rumelili, 2013). Consequently, ontologically secure actors are those able to maintain a coherent story, a narrative about the Self in front of the others and of themselves, an ability which consolidates their self-identity (Giddens, 1991), about who they are and the role they play in the world. Ontologically secure actors engage in habitual relationships with other actors, based on a system of basic trust that offers them essential support when confronted with the changes and crises of life (Giddens, 1991; McSweeney, 2004). In addition, they develop routines that provide them with a comforting sense of stability and continuity, a sense of existential security (Giddens, 1991; McSweeney, 2004; Mitzen, 2006).

When out-of-the-ordinary events occur and these everyday routines are being perturbed, the actors' self-narratives may become destabilized and they may experience deep anxiety, affecting both individual, as well as corporate actors, such as states, nations or peoples. These perturbing existential crises (Giddens, 1991) or critical situations (Croft, 2012) may thus lead to a state of ontological insecurity (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2017; Browning, 2018a; Browning, 2018b). Finding themselves in a state of perturbing destabilisation of their routines and narratives about the self and the others, the actors will try to either take all necessary measures to reinstall the previous routines which have been offering so far a sense of security, or to embrace new ones (Browning,

2018b), developing new narratives and identity claims (Browning & Joenniemi, 2010). Ontologically insecure actors will find themselves destabilized and will be constantly preoccupied with preserving their identity and confirm it in front of themselves and of the others (Laing, 1960).

Moreover, the actors may feel drawn or maintained in a state of ontological insecurity by the narratives and the actions of other actors trying to build or regain their own ontological security (Mitzen, 2006). The actors, already engaged in a conflict, will tend to stick to those habits and routines which used to make them feel secure, but, by rendering the others insecure, they will instead reproduce and maintain conflict (Loizides, 2015). When the collective identity of an actor has been built on narratives and routines of conflict that have become deeply entrenched, the attempts to eliminate the conflict on which it has been forged may be perceived as a cause of anxiety, as a threat to the identity itself. These actors, facing the loss of their ontological security, will take seemingly contradictory steps in order to preserve their identity and their sense of stability (Huysmans, 1998; McSweeney, 2004; Steele, 2008), even if this means endangering their physical security (Mitzen, 2006). Under these circumstance, conflict may become a preference (Mitzen, 2006), a routine in itself (Rumelili, 2015a).

In the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the announcement during the OSCE Minsk Group Paris meeting in January 2019, that the populations of Armenia and Azerbaijan, and consequently of Nagorno-Karabakh should prepare for peace, after three decades of conflict, may have initially acted as a perturbing existential crisis that came to disrupt long-time entrenched routines and narratives of conflict and enmity. Although deep-seeded habits and self-narratives have the potential to change and to be reformulated over time, I argue that the actors' resistance to change, in this case to peace, may be instrumentalized as a mean to preserve their sense of stability, their self-identities, and thus their sense of ontological security. Although a peace compromise is expected to enhance their physical security, the collective actors engaged in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict may find it initially more secure to maintain the old self-narratives and identities of adversaries and a rhetoric of war.

Especially in the case of protracted conflicts, such as the one in Nagorno-Karabakh, actors find it difficult to change their narratives and the enemy images developed about their traditional rivals (Loizides, 2015; Rumelili, 2015a), even when the adversaries signal their intention to cooperate (Rumelili, 2015a). As a consequence, when confronted with the possibility of the conflict to end, they might develop "peace anxieties" (Rumelili, 2015a, p. 13) and they may choose to maintain conflict as a mean to preserve their ontological security (Rumelili, 2015b; Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2017), their previous stability and routine.

In addition to Loizides' and Rumelili's theoretical inputs on actors' difficulty to change their narratives about their adversaries when they manifest their intention to cooper-

ate, I argue that, when confronted with the perspective of a sudden change, in the form of a peace compromise, the actors may find it hard to renounce their previous self-narratives and images about themselves even when the signal for cooperation comes from their own community. Therefore, it is not a lack of trust in the long-term enemy that impedes actors to embrace peace, but their own insecurities about the disturbance the change would bring.

Armenia, the de facto winner of the war, will, in this context, look at both material and cognitive benefits of peace. Therefore, a change in the status quo might be resisted for the fear of losing the territories under its control, but also its self-identity entrenched during the past three decades of conflict, namely the status and prestige of a winner and protector of Nagorno-Karabakh. Moreover, the change would imply a difficult-to-accept shift in its self-narrative and image about its enduring rival, Azerbaijan, from enemy to potential partner in the region. For some Armenian politicians, who have been long using the war in Nagorno-Karabakh as a strong catalyst for electoral gains, peace would imply an important disruption in their narratives that would perturb their own identity claims which have been forged on Armenia's image as an enemy of Azerbaijan and winner of the war.

For the de facto leadership of Nagorno-Karabakh, which has had a major influence on the Armenia's politics over the past decades and it even provided its patron state with two presidents, a change in the status quo would not only disrupt the physical security of being politically, militarily and economically protected by Armenia, but also a critical perturbation in its narratives about the Self and Other. Thus, it would have to change the enemy routines into accepting back the Azerbaijanis and narrate them, from now on, as co-existing neighbors. As a consequence, the return of the occupied territories to Azerbaijan and a peace compromise would imply not only a perception of a possible threat to Armenia's and Nagorno-Karabakh's physical security, but also an essential disruption of their ontological security, of an essential part of their self-identity which has been constructed around the war.

For Azerbaijan, an initial refrain from embracing a peace compromise would mainly revolve around the anxiety of not losing its ontological security, although such an evolution would enhance its physical security, as well as that of the Azerbaijanis in Nagorno-Karabakh. Whilst Azerbaijan would have the most to gain in terms of material benefits and physical security, we have seen that, in the face of a peace prospect, the self-narratives of some of its officials remained rigid and centered around the same discursive routines that have modeled the political and military identity of some of its central figures over the past decades. To this, it might have also contributed the self-perception of status and prestige developed during the past years, due to Azerbaijan's economic boost following the revenues from natural gas and oil exports, which have also facilitated the development of its military power, successfully tested during the April 2016

clashes with Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh. A status that a part of Azerbaijan might find it difficult to reconcile with the image of a compromising, good-willing neighbor. For this reason, Azerbaijan is a good case of the argument above, according to which an actor might choose to take all necessary measures to maintain their ontological security, their entrenched routines and narratives, even if this might limit their physical security.

## **Conclusions**

The international major peacekeeping actors (such as the OSCE and the EU) have long been criticised for their structural and functional limitations in relation with their capacity to contribute to an efficient management of the conflict and a sustainable peacebuilding in the South Caucasus. In the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the OSCE's Minsk Group has been particularly pointed at for failing to broker a peace settlement despite its involvement as main peacekeeper as early as 1992.

In addition to the external limitations to resolving conflict and reaching peace, the internal factors that have been contributing to the maintenance of status quo and re-escalation of conflicts must equally be considered. Furthermore, when discussing the role of the local and regional actors in preserving the status quo, the article argued that material benefits cannot explain alone the reluctance to peace and the attachment to status quo, be it a state of prolonged conflict. There are also cognitive, psychological gains that individual and collective actors draw from resisting change and that come not to exclude, but to complement the material, rational ones.

To the support of the arguments above, I introduced the theoretical framework of ontological security in order to debate on the local actors' possible resistance to a peace compromise, as a way to safeguard their self-identities, routines and narratives forged during three decades of conflict. To this point, I employed the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, looking at the initial local reactions following the OSCE Minsk Group announcement in January 2019 that the populations must be prepared for peace to demonstrate that collective actors, such as states, nations or peoples, are not concerned to preserve only their physical security, but also their ontological security, their sense of being in the world and in relation with the others.

For Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, a peace compromise providing the return of the occupied territories to Azerbaijan would imply not only a perception of a possible threat to Armenia's and Nagorno-Karabakh's physical security, but also an essential disruption of their ontological security, of an essential part of their self-identity which has been constructed around the war. For Azerbaijan, a compromise with Armenia might trigger the anxiety of having to trade its enhanced status gained as an energy and military regional power during the past decades for that of a good-willing neighbour, an exchange of ontological security for more physical security which might prove hard to accept initially by part of its society.

Therefore, in addition to the structural and functional limitations of the main international peacekeeping actors, internal factors play a crucial role in maintaining status quo and delaying peace. Among these, material benefits of resisting change are being complemented by cognitive, psychological ones. Although a peace compromise is expected to enhance their physical security, the collective actors engaged in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict may find it initially more secure to maintain the old self-narratives and identities of adversaries and a rhetoric of war.

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