

# Ukrainian Discourse on the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict

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When the conflict escalated in the Nagorno-Karabakh war zone in September 2020, different opinions emerged in Ukraine on how the clash should be understood and which of its sides Ukraine should support. Most Ukrainian commentators compared the legal situation of the occupied territories belonging to Ukraine to the occupied territories belonging to Azerbaijan. This is why Kyiv officially stands for Baku. Nevertheless, Ukraine's support is limited to a diplomatic declaration only. Apart from the official position, there are also individual voices in Ukraine demanding either Kyiv's greater involvement in helping Azerbaijan or, on the contrary, support for Armenia. The Ukrainian discourse on the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict does not have to coincide with the assessments of the parties directly involved in the clash, because the Ukrainians interpret Caucasian events through the lens of the Ukrainian-Russian war. This paper highlights the Ukrainian discourse over the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. The commentary focuses on both the Ukrainian mainstream political declarations and media perceptions of the Armenia-Azerbaijan clashes.

**Keywords:** Nagorno-Karabakh region, Donbas, Crimea, hybrid war, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine



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### *Introduction*

When the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia intensified in September 2020, the world community reacted to it in a rather typical and predictable way. The majority of countries either remained silent or voiced their concerns and appealed for returning to negotiations on the resolution of the conflict. In the latter case, their diplomatic notes were dominated by trite clichés such as “negotiations serve as a warranty

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for peace”, “strengthening confidence”, “mutual understanding”, etc. Nevertheless, several states have stood up for one or another side of the conflict. Ukraine was among them with its open support for Azerbaijan. The Ukrainian position, however, was not so unambiguous in the earlier stages of the conflict. A radical change of political language in Kyiv occurred only after the Russian annexation of the Crimea and

the outbreak of the war in the Donbas region of Ukraine. The reason is apparent: Ukraine has started associating the situation in the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan with its own territorial problems.

### *Onset of support*

Going back to the beginning of the 2010s, the formula of Kyiv’s political declaration did not differ much from the ones heard among the international community today, except for some peculiarities. The first mention of Nagorno-Karabakh was registered in an announcement of the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of 15 March 2011 in which the Ukrainian MFA recommended that the country’s citizens “*refrain from visiting ... the Nagorno-Karabakh region of the Republic of Azerbaijan*”.<sup>1</sup> A careful reading shows Ukraine’s attitude towards Nagorno-Karabakh region’s territorial affiliation to Azerbaijan. Such administrative identification of the Nagorno-Karabakh region as within Azerbaijani state borders is presented in Ukraine’s next warnings addressed to its citizens travelling through the Caucasus.<sup>2</sup> It suffices to compare the Ukrainian documents with, for example,

1 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, “On the security situation in the Nagorno-Karabakh region of the Republic of Azerbaijan” (translation from Ukrainian), March 15, 2011, Available at: <https://mfa.gov.ua/news/291-shhodo-bezpekovoji-situaciji-u-nagirno-karabaskomu-regioni-azerbajdzhanskoji-respubliki> (Accessed: December 16, 2020).

2 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, “Recommendations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Citizens of Ukraine Planning a Trip to Azerbaijan” (translation from Ukrainian), November 1, 2012, available at: <https://mfa.gov.ua/news/4-rekomendatsii-mzs-gromadyanam-ukraini-yaki-planuyut-poizdku-do-azerbaydzhan> (accessed: January 9, 2021)

Russian diplomatic notes that contain only general phrases such as “the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict”, “regulations in Nagorno-Karabakh” or “the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast”. The latter is a fragment of consular touristic information addressed to the Russian citizenship. The only connecting link between the Nagorno-Karabakh region and any internationally recognized state is included in the warning: “*It should be taken into account that citizens who have visited the territory of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast and seven adjacent administrative districts without special permission from the Azerbaijani authorities are refused entry to Azerbaijan in the future*”.<sup>3</sup> Against this background, the Ukrainian discourse around the Nagorno-Karabakh region seemed beneficial for Azerbaijan, although not directly articulated.

The next interesting diplomatic note, dated 5 June 2012 and concerning potential business contracts between Ukraine and Azerbaijan, mentioned that “*An important issue that was discussed during the talks was the prospects for resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, especially in the context of Ukraine’s chairmanship in the OSCE in 2013*”.<sup>4</sup> This was a promise that gave clear hope not for a full conflict resolution, but for restoring the problem to its correct international proportions using diplomatic means. Especially since that would happen under the aegis of Ukraine, which remained virtually neutral but was well versed in the relations prevailing in the post-Soviet space. A year later, during the Ukraine’s presidency of the OSCE in December 2013, the Heads of Delegation of the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair Countries and the Foreign Ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia issued a Ministerial Statement in which they agreed to continue working together on the peaceful resolution of the conflict.<sup>5</sup> Ukrainian diplomacy was very satisfied that such a document was approved, but no specific actions followed from this. In spite of the great hopes placed in that statement, it turned out to be another general diplomatic expression that in no way brought the problem closer to a solution. This was a clear sign of Ukraine’s lack of political will to move beyond the *status quo* of the protracted conflicts. However, the Ukrainian authorities were

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3 Konsulskiy informatsionniy portal, “Azerbaydzhan,” Available at: [https://www.kdmid.ru/docs.aspx?it=Азербайджан.aspx&lst=country\\_wiki](https://www.kdmid.ru/docs.aspx?it=Азербайджан.aspx&lst=country_wiki) (accessed: December 13, 2020).

4 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, “Negotiations were held between the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Ukraine Kostiantyn Hryshchenko and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan E. Mammadyarov” (translation from Ukrainian), June 1, 2012, available at: <https://mfa.gov.ua/news/2198-u-ramkah-oficijnogo-vizitu-do-azerbajdzhansykoji-respubliki-ministra-zakordonnih-sprav-ukrajini-kgrishhenka-vidbulisy-peregovori-z-glavuju-zovnishnyopolitichnogo-vidomstva-azerbajdzhansy> (accessed: December 16, 2020).

5 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, “Ministerial Statement,” December 6, 2013, available at: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/7/109348.pdf> (accessed: December 16, 2020).

undoubtedly more interested in tightening economic cooperation with Azerbaijan than with Armenia.<sup>6</sup>

### *Nagorno-Karabakh region, Crimea and Donbas*

The situation started to change in 2014, when the annexation of the Crimea took place. Since then, declarations supporting Azerbaijan have been heard in Ukrainian political discourse. First and foremost, this was a response to Azerbaijan's support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Simultaneously, Ukraine–Armenia relations have deteriorated. The main reason is that Armenia voted against the resolution of the UN General Assembly that declared the Crimean referendum illegal.<sup>7</sup>

Armenia's vote was, on the one hand, influenced by Ukraine's position of not recognizing the so-called "independence" of the separatist regime established by Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, but considers it as a part of Azerbaijan. On the other hand, it happened because Armenia is interested in maintaining good relations with Russia, which it treats as a guarantee of security (which, in retrospect,

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seems less obvious). It is also worth recalling that Ukraine denies the so-called "Armenian Genocide". The reasons were clearly explained by the Deputy Foreign Minister of Ukraine, Vasyl Bondar, in his letter to Ukrainian state authorities on 26 March 2020. Apart from the argument used so far by Ukraine that the "events that took place in the Ottoman Empire in 1915 do not fit the definition of the term 'genocide' adopted by the UN on December 9, 1948",<sup>8</sup> Bondar stated that Armenia, as an area of Russian influence, is "constantly voting against resolutions important for Ukraine and did not recognize the Great Famine."<sup>9,10</sup> Last but not least,

6 Avetisyan, LV, "Genesis and prospects of the development of Armenian-Ukrainian cooperation" (translation from Ukrainian), *Politychne zhytya*, 2016, p. 77.

7 The United Nations, "Territorial integrity of Ukraine: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly," March 27, 2014, available at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/767565?ln=en> (accessed: January 10, 2021).

8 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, "On measures to commemorate the tragic events in the Ottoman Empire on April 24, 1915" (translation from Ukrainian), March 26, 2020, available at: <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/news/2020/08/6/7112934/> (accessed: December 16, 2020).

9 Great Famine (Ukrainian: Holodomor) – an artificially created famine in Soviet Ukraine in 1932/33 that killed millions of Ukrainians.

10 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, "On measures to commemorate the tragic events in the Ottoman Empire on April 24, 1915" (translation from Ukrainian), op. cit.

Bondar openly admitted that Turkey is a strategic partner of Ukraine, and Kyiv did not intend to raise issues that could affect the dynamic Ukraine–Turkey dialogue.<sup>11</sup>

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Ukraine's support for Azerbaijan has caused discontent on the Armenian side. This has manifested, among other signs, in protests in front of the Ukrainian embassy in Yerevan, where demonstrators threw objects at the Ukrainian diplomatic post.<sup>12</sup>

Ukraine's choice of *realpolitik* combines its territorial and strategic interests with those of Azerbaijan. It is sufficient to follow the subsequent statements of the Ukrainian MFA that have appeared in various phases of the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict. After the Russian annexation of the Crimea and the beginning of the war in Donbas, all Ukrainian diplomatic notes have repeatedly expressed Ukrainian support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. For example, the Ukrainian MFA's comment, dated 5 April 2016, on the aggravation of the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict reads as follows: "*Ukraine supports a sustainable political settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, based on full respect of the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of the Republic of Azerbaijan within its internationally recognized borders*".<sup>13</sup> Now, when the conflict has escalated, the current Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Dmytro Kuleba, has also emphasized that "*We have consistently supported the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, just as Azerbaijan supported our territorial integrity within the internationally recognized borders, and this principle remains unchanged for us*".<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, when the Azerbaijani side was outraged because of a TV programme called 15 Republics reporting the unauthorized visit<sup>15</sup> of journalists from the Ukrainian channel 1+1 to the Nagorno-Karabakh

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ukrayinska Pravda, The Embassy of Ukraine in Yerevan was doused with borscht because of the statement of the Foreign Ministry on the conflict with Azerbaijan (translation from Ukrainian), July 15, 2020, available at: <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2020/07/15/7259463/> (accessed: December 26, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, "Comment of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine in connection with the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict" (translation from Ukrainian), April 5, 2016, available at: <https://mfa.gov.ua/news/5440-the-ministry-of-foreign-affairs-of-ukraine-comment-on-the-aggravation-of-nagorno-karabakh-conflict> (accessed: December 16, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Ukrinform, Kuleba voices Ukraine's position on Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, September 30, 2020, available at: <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-polytics/3109149-kuleba-voices-ukraines-position-on-nagornokarabakh-conflict.html> (accessed: December 16, 2020).

<sup>15</sup> The programme was broadcast on November 23, 2014. There is no information on when the journalists violated the Azerbaijani law. Judging by the season of year shown in the video, it was summer 2014.

region of Azerbaijan without the necessary permissions from Baku, the Ukrainian embassy in Baku immediately expressed regret over the Ukrainian citizens' behaviour and emphasized the unchanging position of the Ukrainian government, saying:

*Officially Kyiv has always supported and will continue to support the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Azerbaijan within its internationally recognized borders. Therefore, this video should be considered a personal vision of the situation of individual journalists of a Ukrainian television channel.*<sup>16</sup>

Ukraine's President, Volodymyr Zelensky, announced that Ukraine would not provide military assistance to any country.<sup>17</sup> In this way, he ended all speculation triggered by a member of parliament (MP) for his party, Lyudmila Marchenko. During her interview with the Ukrayina 24 television channel, she spread information that Ukraine was ready to assist Azerbaijan both in humanitarian and military terms.<sup>18</sup> Her statement also met with a strong reaction from Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba. Nonetheless, the Ukrainian foreign minister seemed more concerned about the responses of the Azerbaijani and Armenian minorities in Ukraine than about the international repercussions.<sup>19</sup> Ukraine, which is in a state of hybrid war with the Russian Federation and understands Russian mechanisms of playing out ethnic conflicts, is trying not to upset the internal balance of power. Marchenko very quickly retracted her statement, arguing that it had been misunderstood by a journalist.<sup>20</sup>

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16 Embassy of Ukraine in the Republic of Azerbaijan, "Comment of the Embassy on the situation around the program '15 republics' of the Ukrainian TV channel '1+1'" (translation from Ukrainian), November 27, 2014, available at: <https://azerbaijan.mfa.gov.ua/news/3239-komentar-posolystva-shhodo-situaciji-navkolo-programi-15-respublik-ukrajinsykogo-telekanalu-11> (accessed: December 23, 2020).

17 Espresso, "This authority does not apply to any deputy": Zelensky on the idea of 'servant' Marchenko to supply weapons to Azerbaijan (translation from Ukrainian), October 3, 2020, available at: [https://espresso.tv/news/2020/10/02/quotce\\_povnovazhennya\\_ne\\_stosuyetsya\\_bud\\_yakogo\\_deputataquot\\_zelenskyy\\_pro\\_ideyu\\_quotslugyquot\\_marchenko\\_postachaty\\_zbroyu\\_azerbaydzhan](https://espresso.tv/news/2020/10/02/quotce_povnovazhennya_ne_stosuyetsya_bud_yakogo_deputataquot_zelenskyy_pro_ideyu_quotslugyquot_marchenko_postachaty_zbroyu_azerbaydzhan) (accessed: January 13, 2020).

18 Kolomyiech, V., "The deputy of the 'servant' says that Ukraine will support Azerbaijan militarily if necessary. Avakov offers to look for medicine for her" (translation from Ukrainian), *Hromadske*, October 2, 2020, available at: <https://hromadske.ua/posts/deputatka-marchenko-zayavila-sho-ukrayina-za-potrebi-vijskovo-pidtrimaye-azerbaydzhan-avakov-zaperechuye> (accessed: January 13, 2020).

19 Ukrinform, *Kuleba urges deputies not to play with people's emotions with statements about military aid* (translation from Ukrainian), October 2, 2020, available at: <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-politics/3110723-kuleba-zaklikae-deputativ-ne-gratasa-z-emociami-ludej-zaavami-pro-vijskovu-dopomogu.html> (accessed: January 13, 2020).

20 Ludmyla Marchenko, Facebook, November 2, 2020, available at: [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=3395024333910644&id=100002093322118](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=3395024333910644&id=100002093322118) (accessed: January 13, 2020).

### *Similarities and differences of the conflict's nature in the Ukrainian discourse*

Ukrainian politicians and political commentators recognize the foremost similarities between the Ukrainian and Azerbaijani legal situations of their occupied territories. For Ukraine's President, Volodymyr Zelensky, the problem has another important dimension. In his opinion, the example of the "Nagorno-Karabakh conflict" shows that "*there are no frozen conflicts, [that] they can be frozen only for a certain time [and] each frozen conflict opens up the risk of both diversion and provocation*".<sup>21</sup> Thus, Ukraine's Donbas region may become such an inflammatory focal point from the perspective of dozen or so years hence. The fights for this area have been going on for over six years, that is, longer than World War II in Europe. "Hot" Donbas is bleeding Ukraine slowly out, but frozen Donbas will become a time bomb that will block Ukraine's entry into the European Union, not to mention its accession to NATO. It is obvious that the possibility of expanding NATO to Ukraine is one of the reasons for the Russian aggression in Donbas. Moreover, it will always be a field of manipulation and a tool of pressure for the Russian Federation. This is why such situations "should be solved quickly", as the president said.<sup>22</sup>

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However, this is where parallels between Ukraine's and Azerbaijan's attitudes toward their occupied territories end. Ukraine did not even manage to introduce restrictions on entry to the Crimea, unlike Azerbaijan, which urged foreigners against entering the occupied territories without prior authorization from Baku.<sup>23</sup> There are also clear voices in the Ukrainian media that believe that the two conflicts cannot be compared. In this context, Yuriy Panchenko and Serhiy Sydorenko, in their articles published in *Yevropeyska pravda*,<sup>24</sup> argued for two fundamental differences that make it impossible to establish a common denominator between the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict and the Russia-occupied territories in Ukraine. The first is the historical background; Panchenko

21 Office of the President of Ukraine, "The President of Ukraine communicates with the media of Bukovina" (translation from Ukrainian), Facebook, Facebook video, November 2, 2020, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/296958677115673/videos/329201118170684/> (accessed: December 25, 2020).

22 Ibid.

23 Azar, I., "Andrey Deshchitsa: Nashi voyska gotovy otrazhat voyennoye napadeniye", *Radio Ekho Moskvy*, April 7, 2014, available at: [https://echo.msk.ru/blog/azar\\_i/1295112-echo/](https://echo.msk.ru/blog/azar_i/1295112-echo/) (Accessed: December 24, 2020)

24 Panchenko, Yu., Sidorenko, S., "Karabakh, unlike Donbass: 8 answers to questions about a new war in the Caucasus" (translation from Ukrainian), *Yevropeyska pravda*, October 1, 2020, Available at: <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/articles/2020/10/1/7114911/> (Accessed: December 26, 2020)

and Sydorenko define the conflict in Donbas and Crimea as “artificial”, in contrast to the Armenia–Azerbaijan clash, which, in their opinion, has been motivated by historical and ethnic reasons. It is hard to resist the impression that the authors overlook the consequences of Stalinist policies, in particular the Great Famine (1932–1933) and the deportation of the Crimean Tatars (1944), that changed the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic structure of the eastern and southern Ukrainian regions, thereby greatly facilitating Russia’s current hybrid attack. Second, and most significant for them, is their conviction that every change of power in the Nagorno-Karabakh region leads to ethnic tensions, which is impossible in Ukraine, even when it recovers its lost territories.<sup>25</sup>

### *Clash of civilizations?*

After the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict escalated, the first association that came to the analysts’ attention was Samuel P. Huntington’s theory of the “clash of civilizations”.<sup>26</sup> The commentators immediately split into two groups. The first defined the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict according to Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” paradigm; the second group believes that the cultural factor is not dominant and that political decisions are based solely on economic motives (so-called *realpolitik*). As Huntington himself admits, “religious beliefs shape identity. Still, they do not determine national interests, much less state behavior”.<sup>27</sup>

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Ukraine has chosen the path of *realpolitik*, at least in its official discourse, owing to its geopolitical conditions. However, this does not mean that there are no dissenting opinions in the Ukrainian public sphere. In October 2020, the Embassy of Azerbaijan in Kyiv expressed outrage at Ukrainian MP Ilya Kyva’s statement calling for a support towards Armenia as a Christian country, seeing the “millennial standoff between the Christian and Muslim world” in the Azerbaijan–Armenia clash.<sup>28</sup> Kyva, in turn, commented on the Embassy’s protest, claiming that “Muslims are

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Rahimov, R, “Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict: Clash of Civilizations?”, *The Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume: 17 Issue: 142, October 13, 2020, Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/armenian-azerbaijani-conflict-clash-of-civilizations/> (Accessed: December 27, 2020).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> “Kiva causes outrage in Azerbaijan by calling for support for Armenia in ‘confrontation with the Muslim world’”, *Religious Information Service of Ukraine*, November 8, 2020, Available at: [https://risu.ua/en/kiva-causes-outrage-in-azerbaijan-by-calling-for-support-for-armenia-in-confrontation-with-the-muslim-world\\_n112499](https://risu.ua/en/kiva-causes-outrage-in-azerbaijan-by-calling-for-support-for-armenia-in-confrontation-with-the-muslim-world_n112499), (Accessed: December 29, 2020)



against Christians calling to protect Christians!”.<sup>29</sup> Kyva’s statement impacted not so much on Ukraine–Azerbaijan diplomatic relations, but on internal affairs in Ukraine itself.

Kyva is a member of a pro-Russian party, “Opposition Platform – For Live”, that supports the so-called *Russkiy Mir* (Russian world), that is, Russian political doctrine being imposed on Ukraine by force, which has resulted in, among other events, a hybrid war against Ukraine. *Russkiy Mir*’s idea is to unite the East Slavic world under the aegis of the Kremlin and the Orthodox religious order, represented by Moscow as the “third Rome”. A public opinion polling centre in Ukraine, the Razumkov Center, has announced that there are more representatives of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) in the “Opposition Platform – For Live” than in any other Ukrainian political party.<sup>30</sup> This is why we can hypothesize that Kyva’s “crusade” aims to unite the Orthodox world, rather than the general Christian one. Moreover, this process is taking place under the leadership of the Moscow Patriarchy, an ideological arm of the Kremlin and an executor of its political will.

The second issue that cannot be forgotten in Kyva’s anti-Muslim speech is the problem of the Crimean Tatars. After the annexation of Crimea, they are the biggest Ukrainian allies and the only chance for Ukraine to recover Crimea using political and diplomatic means. At the same time, they are the ethnic group most persecuted by the Russians because they refused to cooperate with the Russian authorities. Putin’s supporters began to actively use the “Islamic” issue against the Tatars, accusing them of being “extremists”, “separatists”, and “terrorists”.<sup>31</sup> Under these circumstances, Kyva’s appeal for “Christian unity” and “the holy war against Islam” can also be interpreted in Ukraine as a blow against the Crimean Tatars and, through them, Ukraine itself.

### ***The Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict: Conclusions for Ukraine***

Ukraine is very closely following the events of the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict. The decisions that will be made in Kyiv may depend on the

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29 5.ua, *Azerbaijani embassy reacts to Kyva’s scandalous statement about Nagorno Karabakh* (translation from Ukrainian), November 8, 2020. Available at: <https://www.5.ua/polityka/u-posolstvi-azerbaidzhanu-vidreahuvally-na-skandalnu-zaiavu-kivy-shchodo-nahirnogo-karabakhu-225990.html>, (Accessed: December 29, 2020)

30 Ukrainian religious life is characterized by great pluralism. About 35,000 religious organizations are registered in Ukraine (Institute for Religious Freedom 2020), of which the most numerous are: Orthodox Church of Ukraine (34.0%), Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) (13.8%), and Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (8.2%) (Tsentr Razumkova 2020).

31 Werleman CJ, “How Russia is trying to erase Tatar Muslims,” *Middle East Eye*, September 2, 2018, available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/how-russia-trying-erase-tatar-muslims> (accessed: December 29, 2020).

solutions used in the Caucasus. The Ukrainian media primarily draws attention to the fact that the only effective action to recover occupied territories is the military variant. Azerbaijan has been preparing for that for a long time. This proves that diplomatic ways of resolving border conflicts have lost their *raison d'être* in the current geopolitical conditions.

Moreover, the events revealed the total powerlessness of the OSCE Minsk Group, which is also engaged in the mediation of the conflict in Ukraine. *“After decades of diplomatic deadlock, military force proved decisive in a matter of weeks”*, writes Taras Kuzio, a British expert in Ukrainian affairs.<sup>32</sup> It is enough to recall that, according to the Minsk agreements, the eastern Ukrainian city of Debaltsevo should have been returned to Kyiv’s control in 2015, but remains occupied by so-called “pro-Russian separatists”.

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The Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict has also shown that a country at war, in order to win, needs a credible ally. After the annexation of Crimea, Ukrainian public opinion strongly criticized the “Budapest Memorandum” of 5 December 1994. The security assurances provided by its signatories turned out to be worth less than the paper they were written on. Two parties to the Memorandum, the United States of America and the United Kingdom, were not interested in fulfilling their obligations. The third, Russia, has become the aggressor. In the case of the Armenia–Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh) conflict, Azerbaijan has found an ally that is directly involved in the region’s geopolitical arrangements and has the ambition to become a significant

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player. In Taras Kuzio’s opinion, Azerbaijan’s victory was determined by Turkey, *“which was a major factor in deterring Russia from direct or indirect intervention in support of Armenia”*. This fact is more important than it seems. It turns out that Armenia, which is allied with Russia, cannot rely on Moscow. This is a terrible signal for the leaders of the self-proclaimed

“republics” in eastern Ukraine, who can see that Russia does not have to be the guarantor of their position and that it can withdraw its support at any time. Especially since the Kremlin officially denies that its troops are participating in the conflict in Donbas region. This is why Kyiv should follow the example of Azerbaijan and look for a similar solution.

32 Kuzio, T., “Ukraine can learn from Azerbaijan’s recent victory,” *Atlantic Council*, November 17, 2020, available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/ukraine-can-learn-from-azerbajjans-recent-victory/> (accessed: December 30, 2020).

Kuzio emphasizes that “*Ukraine and Turkey are in many ways natural allies. The two Black Sea neighbors have no significant geopolitical differences of opinion and share a common interest in reducing Russia’s regional influence*”.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, a fundamental lesson that should be learned, and not by Ukraine alone, is that Russia will not miss any opportunity to deploy its troops into regions it considers to be in its sphere of influence. In the case of the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, the Kremlin did so in the form of “peacekeeping missions”—which sounds like an oxymoron to Ukrainians. Ukrainian commentator Vitaly Portnikov writes that:

*Ukraine must look closely at what is happening in the Caucasus today, because the Kremlin will try to impose the same option on Ukraine, namely “direct negotiations” with Moscow’s puppets in the “DNR/LNR” [although Azerbaijan has never been involved in “direct negotiations” with the separatist regime in the Nagorno-Karabakh region—Author] and the deployment of Russian “peacekeepers” in the Donbas. Or—a new war and again, more Russian “peacekeepers”.*<sup>34</sup>

In Portnikov’s opinion, Russia used this tactic in Georgia (with Abkhazia) and in Moldova (with Transnistria) and now it is the turn of Armenia and Azerbaijan, where the Russian authorities have once again shown that they are incomparable in managing the chaos that they themselves cause (Portnikov considers Russian politics to be the source of this conflict).<sup>35</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The perception of the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict in Ukraine is influenced by Ukraine’s own experience, shaped by the Russian annexation of Crimea and the warfare in Donbas. This is the prism through which Ukrainian commentators and political analysts observe the recent developments in the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Portnikov, V., “Putin as ‘peacemaker’ in Karabakh is a warning signal for Ukraine,” *Euromaidan Press*, November 10, 2020, available at: <http://euromaidanpress.com/2020/11/10/vitaly-portnikov-putin-as-peacemaker-in-karabakh-is-a-warning-signal-for-ukraine/> (accessed: December 30, 2020).

<sup>35</sup> “Vitaliy Portnikov o konflikte v Nagornom Karabakhe: ‘Turtsiya zdes’ ne igrok’”, *After Empire*, Youtube video, November 12, 2020, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jaSIBsZwXAo&t=45s&> (accessed: December 30, 2020).

The escalation of the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict acts like litmus paper in Ukraine, revealing not so much the divergence of opinions regarding Ukrainian foreign policy as the country’s internal political divisions, in which Ukrainian–Russian relations are always the “zero meridian”.

Ukraine, searching for a way to solve its own problems, is carefully observing the warfare in the South Caucasus. The conclusions drawn by the Ukrainian politicians and commentators come down to four issues: (1) Ukraine supports the international legal order and stands for Azerbaijan’s right to its territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders. This position is the result of Ukraine’s own territorial losses. (2) Ukraine appreciates the efficacy of Azerbaijan’s military activities. This attitude was triggered by growing disillusionment with diplomatic methods of solving problems relating to the violation of the territorial integrity of Ukraine. (3) Ukraine is watching with concern the Russian peacekeeping mission in the Nagorno–Karabakh region, as there are opinions in Ukraine that the presence of the Russian army is aimed solely at strengthening Russian military power in the post-Soviet arena. (4) Ukrainian support for Azerbaijan does not go beyond the symbolic and diplomatic spheres owing to the internal and external political circumstances in which Ukraine is involved.