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The concepts of victory and defeat in the recent Nagorno-Karabakh war. The narrative of the Armenian side

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Abstract

The Second Karabakh war that lasted 44-days in the fall 2020 has dramatically changed the political and social landscape in the region. Throughout the entire duration of the military action along with traditional media, social media was engaged in active story-telling and narrative development that supported the positions of one or the other side. Within the Armenian digital media space one of the most shared hashtags was an Armenian language hashtag #հաղթելուենք: Translated as an assertion of future victory the hashtag was widely accepted and shared by the Armenian social media users. At the same time, no discussions of what victory

meant in the context of the ongoing war was happening in Armenia.

This paper investigates the public perception of the meaning, intent and usage of the hashtag, as well as attempts to understand how victory and defeat are seen by Armenians today. Through this investigation, paper attempts to highlight the possible future development of the Armenian side of the narrative around the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and its implications for its resolution.

Introduction

On September 27, 2020, Armenians in Armenia and Diaspora woke up to the news of shelling of Stepanakert, the capital of the unrecognized Artsakh Republic (Nagorno-Karabakh). The region has been trapped in a perpetual cycle of conflict since the late 1980s and early 1990s, and this three-decade-long conflict was often considered frozen. At the same time, periodical escalations along the contact line and across the internationally recognized Armenian-Azerbaijani border were not new or surprising for the local population. The four-day or April war of 2016 was the largest and most deadly military escalation along the Armenian-Azerbaijani contact line since the cease-fire was signed in 1994. This was followed by another escalation along the contact line in July 2020. All these instances were short and were contained within a short period of time. However, September 27th felt different, and indeed, it was different. For the first time in over 25 years shelling of civilian settlement was happening. From the first days of military actions, the Armenian population in Armenia and all over the world showed unprecedented unity in response to what was called the Azerbaijani aggression against the peaceful civilian population of Nagorno-Karabakh. The mass mobilization took different forms, including extensive social action and media campaigns. Social media was flooded with posts and

media content that was aimed to raise awareness about the situation, especially in the world that was destructed by the US presidential elections and COVID-19 pandemic.

In the digitally connected world, the news about renewed fighting spread like a wildfire. Personal posts, news articles, commentaries appeared in the digital space almost instantaneously. Twitter, Telegram, Instagram and Facebook, were flooded with posts about the new war, analysis of what is happening, speculations about why it all started, and prognosis on how it will end and when. Almost immediately several hashtags started to dominate the digital media space: #ArtashStrong, #StopAzerbaijaniAggression and #հաղթելուենք (#WeWillWin). These hashtags acquired an additional form of iconic representation – Facebook profile picture frames were created, edited photos with hashtags were circulated. #հաղթելուենք hashtag quickly became one of the most popular hashtags in the Armenian social media space. It was turned into logos on masks, other products, TV, and street banners. It was widely shared by ordinary citizens as well as officials representing different state institutions including the office of the Prime Minister, Ministry of Defense, and others. At the same time, the form and content of the hashtag were never discussed. What does winning represent for Armenians in this conflict context? How it can be measured and conceptualized? For many years, the Armenian society lacked the discussion of what peace with Azerbaijan would look like. The discussion of these questions becomes even more important today when the government of Armenia has signed a peace deal that is being largely questioned and boycotted by the public. The political crisis that followed November 9th agreement adds another layer of complexity to the conceptualization of peace, victory, and defeat within the Armenian discourse.

This paper builds on the new research conducted within the Armenian society and Armenian speaking diaspora on the conceptualization of "victory" and "defeat" through the use

of #հաղթելուենք hashtag. It also attempts to understand how the Armenian society sees the future after the war and how it perceives the role of different structures in the society in building peace and/or preparing for another war in the future.

Digital activism and hashtag movements

With the expansion of the world wide web, availability of mobile devices, and mobile internet, people started to live in two parallel but at the same time intersecting realities. The digital world often reflects events, beliefs, and moods from the ground, while also information (and misinformation) circulated in the digital and virtual space impacts the lives of millions of people daily. Social and political processes are among those that often are caught in the intersection of these two worlds and shaped and influenced by the currents of both. It is practically impossible to imagine a protest, social activism around the world nowadays that does not have its digital representation. Hashtag activism is another form of digital activism that represents a "discursive protest on social media united through a hashtag word" (Yang 2016, 13). #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, #BringOurGirlsBack are only some of the examples of hashtags that supported and accompanied the social action targeting a particular cause. Scholars studying social movements and mobilization have emphasized the importance and centrality of narrative development for the success of the social movements (Polletta 2006; Selbin 2010). Usage of the hashtags not only allows to convey individual stories of people using them but also facilitates merging all these small stories into a larger narrative that supports the underlying cause of the social action. Comments, retweets, post shares, likes, and other digital interaction with the digital content united via a single hashtag word create a story around a certain event, phenomenon, places it in temporal order and assigns it a narrative form. Yang argues that this

organic process of hashtag activism centers around the development of narrative agency (Yang 2016).

Social media platforms defer from one another with their rules and regulation, allowable length of a post, possibilities to like, share, and add to the original content, and so on. However, the introduction of the hashtag feature as a unifying and easily searchable tool allowed the expansion of digital activism. Like any narrative form, hashtag activism has a plot, escalation (crisis/conflict), and the end (Clark 2016). In addition, these narratives are dynamic in form and are co-produced by ordinary people by "hashtagging their personal thoughts, emotions, and stories" (Yang 2016, 14). An important feature of hashtag activism is its ability to grow, evolve and invite interaction from other users. It facilitates the development of a larger narrative that has the potential to take roots within a particular society.

And finally, the linkage between online and offline activism needs separate attention. While there is some skepticism about the ability of online activism to lead to offline engagement around the same or similar causes ("slacktivism"), current research and literature on the issue suggest that there is a correlation between these two levels of actions (Wilkins, Livingstone, and Levine 2019; Greijdanus et al. 2020).

The use of social media activism for constructing collective identity and social mobilization

Different social media platforms, in particular Twitter and Facebook, have been studied during the past decade to establish a connection between their usage and participation and support in different protest campaigns. Anti-government and pro-democratization movements across the globe increasingly have a digital component (Sullivan 2009; Friedman 2014; Breuer, Landman, and Farquhar 2015). A number of studies linked different political and revolution

movements to the use of Twitter and other social media platforms such as those in Egypt, Tunisia, Venezuela, Moldova, Turkey, and elsewhere (Breuer, Landman, and Farquhar 2015; Tufekci and Wilson 2012; Genç 2014; Mungiu-Pippidi and Munteanu 2009). While in each of these cases the impact of social media on the protest campaign and movement was different, some of the aspects that are highlighted are the ability to mobilize the population for the action (Tufekci and Wilson 2012) and facilitation to develop “national collective identity supportive of protest action”(Breuer, Landman, and Farquhar 2015, 30).

Social media and hashtag activism also are used to frame social movements, and through telling a particular story explain what is going on, why it is important, why the world needs to pay attention, and how others can be helpful (Noakes and Johnston 2005). For example, Markhorthykh and Lyebdyev (2015) studied the #SaveDonbassPeople hashtag to investigate "how did the supporters of the opposing camps frame the conflict in Eastern Ukraine?" (Makhortykh and Lyebdyev 2015, 244). Their research highlighted five types of frames that were used during the #SaveDonbassPeople campaign: historical, geographic, religious, ethnic, and political. The application of different frames allows not only highlights certain aspects of the conflict situation but also depending on an applied frame helps to position the conflict in a larger international, geopolitical and historical context (Makhortykh and Lyebdyev 2015).

Social discourse and communication are used also for identity construction. In the modern digitally connected world memes, hashtags, logos, visual symbols that are widely shared across different social media platforms create what Bourdieu called “habitus” (Bourdieu 1999). When members of a group share and/or in other ways interact with digital content created through the use of hashtags they participate in meaning-making, thinking, and socialization that strengthens their sense of belonging to a particular group and ideology (DeCook 2018).

Contemporary social media, through the use of hashtags and other visual content, allows the participants to participate in what can be called "social imagining". "Social imagining is a collective process that brings a movement into being through a narrative shaped by people involved in the movement itself and by societal institutions and public reaction to the movement" (Jenzen et al. 2021, 432). The international reach of social media and its ability to cross all physical borders implies that these platforms can be used to expand and extend the boundaries of the groups, attract more participants and disseminate information far beyond the initial in-group.

Is there a theory of victory?

How do we conceptualize and understand winning and losing? Do we all have the same definition, criteria, and approach? How can we make sense of a situation that we find ourselves in? Most of us are familiar with the concept of victory and defeat through our everyday routine life – we all watch sports, we all played video games, card games, board games. Most of these engagements have set rules, some objective or at least defined criteria that we can use to be evaluated against to determine who is the winner and who is the loser. However, does such criteria exist when we are talking about the war and societal perception about winners and losers in a military conflict? Theories of war rarely include a theory of victory and mostly are concerned with how to achieve military advantage (Bartholomees 2010). In a conflict or crisis situation, the concept of winning and losing is very vague and often can't be evaluated against objective criteria. Bartholomees argues that "victory in war may or may not have anything to do with objective criteria" (Bartholomees 2010, 80). Winning or losing a war, conflict or crisis is largely a matter of evaluation, assessment, and perception rather than a fact. Perceptions about the outcome of the conflict and/or a crisis are always subjective. At the same time, these perceptions have "significant political, social and security implications contingent upon who is

that people think have won” (Johnson and Tierney 2004, 351). For conflict resolution and peacebuilding purposes it is also important to understand the relationship between the concept of victory, defeat, and peace is. Does victory mean peace? Does defeat mean more war? Lack of grounded answers to these questions leads to situations when many modern conflicts can be described as "winning the war but losing the peace." Further, the paper will explore how victory and defeat are perceived among Armenians and what future implications for regional peace and conflict these perceptions might have.

The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Thirty years of war-no peace

Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is one of the post-Soviet conflicts that traces its roots to the complex and complicated administrative and political division of the Soviet Union. The Soviet state structure that was united under the Communist ideology of "brotherhood and unity," largely neglected ethnic compositions of constituent administrative units (Soviet Republics), which eventually was detrimental for the survival of the state. Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast was one of the administrative units within the Soviet Union, that despite its majority ethnic Armenian population was included in the jurisdiction of Soviet Azerbaijan (even though initially it was placed within the administration of Soviet Armenia) (Fraser et al. 1990). While initially framed as a pro-democratic movement against the authoritarian Soviet regime as part of glasnost and perestroika policy, several episodes of violence on both sides quickly escalated the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to full-scale war (Ayunts, Zolyan, and Zakaryan 2016). The first Nagorno-Karabakh war lasted from late 1991 to May 1994 and ended with the signing of a ceasefire agreement and establishment of OSCE Minsk Group - a group of impartial mediators (France, United States, and Russia), that were tasked to help parties to find a peaceful solution to the conflict. For over two decades OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs presented the parties with

different options of peaceful settlement, which were not accepted as negotiation framework by the leadership of Armenia, Azerbaijan, or de facto Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (Abasov and Khachatryan 2005).

The negotiation process entered a stalemate in 2009, which resulted in an increased number of cross-border and across the contact line armed clashes, intensified arms race, and increasing military rhetoric (International Crisis Group 2011). Since 2010 every year skirmishes and fighting between Armenian and Azerbaijani armed forces were recorded. April 2016 saw the largest and most deadly escalation of the conflict since the ceasefire was signed in 1994. Over a hundred military personnel were killed on both sides, and parties used heavy military equipment including tanks, helicopters, drones, and other assault weaponry (Jarosiewicz and Falkowski 2016; Czachor 2017). Cross-border skirmishes and ceasefire violations often happen not only across the contact line in Nagorno-Karabakh but also across the internationally recognized Armenian-Azerbaijani border. The most recent clashes happened in July 2020 in the northern region of Tavush that is bordering Azerbaijan's Tovuz region. Both sides blamed each other for violation of the ceasefire (The Washington Post 2020; BBC News 2020). While the accurate number of casualties since 1994 is unknown the expert estimate is around 3000 on both sides.

Throughout the years both sides blamed each other for stalling the negotiation process, exhibiting unconstructive positions, presenting maximalist demands, enhancing military rhetoric, and not preparing populations for peace. The political elite on both sides capitalized on the unresolved Karabakh conflict and for many years used it to consolidate power and remain in the driver's seat¹.

¹ The 2018 Velvet Revolution in Armenia resulted in the change of regime, and for the first time in the post-Soviet history of Armenia, the country was headed by a person who had no connection to the Karabakh movement, Karabakh war, and never held any power position within the state structure.

Second Karabakh War in media and social media

On September 27 Armenians woke up to the news of renewed fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh. For the first time since 1994 civilian settlement, including the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh Stepanakert was military shelling (Al Jazeera 2020). Very quickly it became evident that this is not another cross-border skirmish between Armenian and Azerbaijani military forces but is another full-scale war in the South Caucasus. Armenia immediately declared martial law and full military mobilization (Voice of America 2020). Unlike the previous cases, this time around external actors were highly involved as a proxy in this local conflict. Turkey's direct support to Azerbaijan was decisive in ensuring military advantage of the latter, while Russia made it clear that its commitment to provide Armenia's security as a CSTO member does not extend over Nagorno-Karabakh (International Crisis Group 2020). After six weeks of heavy fighting, the war came to an abrupt end through an agreement brokered by the President of Russia Vladimir Putin. Azerbaijan regained control over one-third of the soviet-period Nagorno-Karabakh region (including the city of Sushu), as well as seven disputed territories surrounding the region. Armenia suffered heavy territorial and human losses, with an estimated 5000 military casualties and around 200 prisoners of war still in Azerbaijani custody (News.am 2021; Mejlumian 2021).

The coverage of the resumed fighting in the South Caucasus was extensive. CNN, Al Jazeera, BBC, NBC, Reuters, Associated Press, RT, and many other international news channels and news agencies covered the events that unfolded during the 44-days of fighting. In addition, countless local and regional news agencies convened talk shows, expert interviews, and roundtables to provide analysis of the ongoing war. As expected, both sides accused different

sources of biased and one-sided reporting at different times, emphasizing that not enough attention is being paid to what is happening on the ground and to the human sufferings of each side. State propaganda completely consumed space for any possible peace journalism, leaving only a slight opening for war journalism. While Atanesyan (2020) argues that due to higher level of freedoms and levels of democratization Armenia has more space to offer for alternative media coverage compared to the authoritarian regime in Azerbaijan, the sharp escalation of the conflict and introduction of martial laws on both sides completely shut down even that limited space (Atanesyan 2020).

In addition to traditional media, social media become an active part of the narrative creation machine during the Second Karabakh war. War-related hashtags started to trend on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and Telegram. In addition to the military battlefield, a full-scale information war unfolded in the digital space. New accounts flooded Twitter during the first two days of the outbreak of the fighting. Thomas and Zhang identified at least over 7000 accounts that were created on Twitter between September 27 and 29 that were supporting one of the other sides of the conflict (Thomas and Zhang 2020).

Table 1: Top hashtag mentions between 27 and 29 September 2020

Hashtag	Frequency	Hashtag	Frequency	Hashtag	Frequency
Azerbaijan	45,278	NagornoKarabakh	19,616	KarabakhisAzerbaijan	5,175
Armenia	38,237	Turkey	12,904	ArtsakhIsArmenia	4,999
ArtsakhStrong	36,726	StopAzerbaijaniAgression	12,622	ArtsakhStong	4,292
Artsakh	23,029	KarabakhNow	12,578	Stepanakert	3,820
Armenian	22,887	NKstrong	10,540	stopErdogan	3,442
NKpeace	22,424	Azerbaijani	8,472	Pakistan	3,036
StopAzerbaijaniAggression	21,918	Karabakh	7,536	Martakert	3,003
AzerbaijanIsNotAlone	21,623	ArmeniaStrong	6,228	DefendArtsakh	2,946
ՀԱՂԹԵԼՈՒԵՆԸ	20,827	StopArmenianAggression	6,044	StopTurkey	2,693
StopAliyev	20,223	Martuni	5,251	Smerch	2,601

Source: Thomas, Elise, and Albert Zhang. 2020. "Snapshot of a Shadow War." Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

The table above shows some of the most popular hashtags that were used on Twitter in relation to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between September 27 and 29, 2020. A very simple analysis of most of these trending hashtags allows to quickly identify which side the users are supporting. While a comprehensive analysis of the narratives created through the use of these hashtags can provide valuable information about the conceptualization of conflict in the digital space, I have selected to focus on a specific single hashtag #հայրենիք: Unlike other trending hashtags that were in English, #հայրենիք was used exclusively in Armenian and was specifically targeting the Armenian speaking community. In addition, all other hashtags were framed in a way that either were targeting the international community with a call for action, for example, #StopAzerbaijaniAgression or #StopAliyev, or were trying to inform and develop certain narrative, again aimed mostly at the international community, such as #ArtsakhisArmenia, or #DefendArtsakh. #հայրենիք hashtag clearly had a call directed at the Armenian community. The hashtag was used over 222 thousand times on Facebook, over 283 thousand times on Instagram, and 288 thousand times on Twitter. At the same time, no specific definition of what #հայրենիք meant was circulated in the Armenian digital space.

Methodology

For this study data was collected through an online survey that was disseminated through social media channels – Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. The 20 questions online survey was created using Google Forms. The survey was posted on the researcher's personal Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter pages as a public sharable post with an invitation text targeting the Armenian-speaking community. According to the available data, over 300 people saw the post on Twitter, over 100 on Instagram and the post was shared over 10 times on Facebook even

beyond the immediate social circle of the researcher. The survey link was live and accessible to the respondents for a week between April 16 and April 23, 2021. Throughout that period 250 responses were collected, out of which 7 were invalid (missing answer to at least 30% of the questions). In total 243 responses were included in the final analysis. At the end of the survey, the participants are asked if they are interested in participating in a follow-up interview. Those who self-identified as interested in participating in an in-depth interview were requested to leave a contact email for the research team to get in touch with them. About 71 people provided their email addresses for follow-up interviews. While the final research will include the analysis of the qualitative data as well, this paper focuses only on the quantitative data collected through the online survey.

The study was interested in understanding the perception of victory and defeat among the overall Armenian community both in Armenia and abroad. Based on that the study population was estimated at 9 million (a rough estimate of Armenians in Armenia and outside). The confidence level for the study is 95% and the confidence interval is 6.3%.

The following section presents the preliminary data analysis based on the responses collected through the online questionnaire.

Data Analysis

Overall, 243 valid questionnaires were included in the analysis. Out of all respondents, 80% were residing in Armenia and 20% percent were residing somewhere outside Armenia. The geographical distribution of the Diaspora Armenians was wide and included Russia, Kazakhstan, Romania, France, Spain, United Kingdom, Germany, Czech Republic, Canada, the United States, Switzerland, Austria, Georgia. The largest group within Diaspora that participated in the

survey was residing in the United States and in Germany. 89% of respondents had a university degree, 64% of which advanced degree (MA or Ph.D.). One of the limitations of the survey was its disproportionate gender representation. Only 33% of the respondents were male.

Origins, popularity, and usage of the hashtag

As it was expected 99% of the respondents were familiar with the #հաղթելու ենք hashtag and the overwhelming majority cited social media platforms as the place where they have first seen the hashtag. It is important to note that while hashtag is largely regarded as a feature of social media space, the hashtag image was used in the print media and TV as well, and at least 13% of the respondents reported seeing it on TV for the first time. It can be argued that this interconnectedness of fully digital space of social media and more visually engaging TV allowed creating continuity of the narrative and make #հաղթելու ենք accessible to all generations. The Armenian society was not just the passive consumer of the narrative that was created around the hashtag/slogan but they also actively participated in the development of the narrative by engaging with the hashtag/slogan. Table 1 shows how the Armenian public engaged with the latter. Over half of respondents indicated that they have engaged with it in some ways. It is important to note that around 43% of the population actively participated in the development of the narrative around the concept of victory through creating social media text posts tied to the hashtag. In addition, the public engagement with the hashtag resulted in the enlargement of the hashtag. For example, on Instagram, there are over 25 variations of the #հաղթելու ենք hashtag that add additional dimensions to the narrative. Some of them feature the Armenian flag emoji, others add the fist emoji, prayer hands emoji, etc. The narrative is further developed by adding additional characteristics to it such as #հաղթելու ենք_սասնով (wewillwin_withGod),

#հաղթելուենք_խաչով_ու_սրով (wewillwin_withcross_and_saber). These additional details were aimed at highlighting that just fight of the Armenian people, as well as emphasizing the salient aspect of the Armenian identity – being the first Christian nation in the world. In this sense, the hashtag/slogan was creating a narrative where Armenians were seen as fighting against evil.

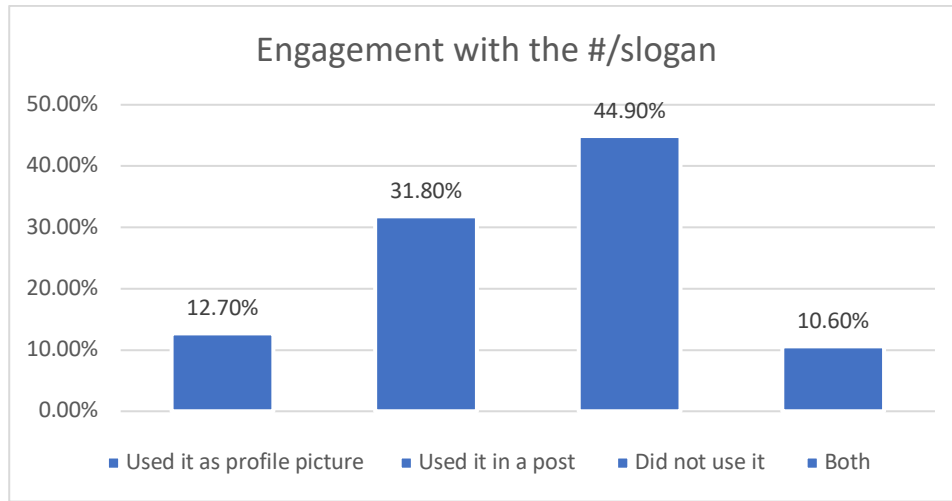


Table 1: Armenian public engagement with the hashtag/slogan

The role of the government in promoting a specific narrative can't be underestimated. The data showed that the majority of the population accepted the active role of the government in the development of the slogan. The fact that so many actively shared and engaged with the hashtag speaks about the willingness of the population to consciously become consumers of the narratives developed by the government. While almost 59% of the respondents believed that the hashtag was created either by the government or/and the Ministry of Defense/Army, an interesting indicator was the number of those who believed in the individual agency of developing a trending narrative. 32% of the respondents believed that the hashtag/slogan was created by the active Armenian social media users, emphasizing the bottom-up approach to narrative development. And another 10% of the population believed that the hashtag was created

spontaneously in response to the ongoing war without any designated authorship or leadership. These figures allow arguing that while the Armenian society, acknowledges the role of the government in assigning a particular direction to public discourse, especially at the time of crisis, a significant segment of the society still recognizes its own independent agency of actively participating in narrative development by either claiming or assigning authorship of narrative elements to those outside of the main political power structure.

The perceptions about the target audience of the hashtag largely coincided with the initial assumption based on the choice of the language in which the hashtag was used. The overwhelming majority of the respondents believed that the slogan was specifically directed at the citizens of Armenia residing in Armenia at that moment.

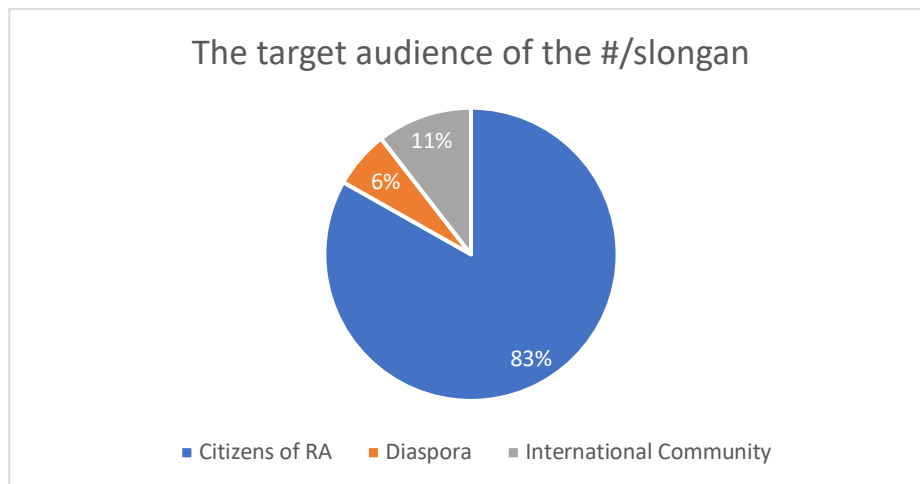


Table 2: Target audience of the hashtag/slogan

#հաղթելու ենք was not the only trending hashtag during the 44-day war. Several others have been collected and documented by Thomas and Zhang (see above), however, the study allowed to reveal that the majority of Armenians conceptualized all of those separate hashtags as falling within one united narrative of victory. Over 60% of the respondents believed that #հաղթելու ենք hashtag was very popular and widely used both within Armenian digital space and outside and

considered "translations" and similar versions in other languages as a representation of the same idea. A quick analysis of the same digital space showed that verbatim translations of the hashtag/slogan (Russian, Spanish, German, English) were used a hundred-fold times less frequently than the original one. However, the popularity and active usage of other hashtags in English allow us to assume that all of them in an amalgam are seen as supporting the narrative of victory for the Armenian society.

Meaning and intent of the hashtag

Now that the origins and usage of the hashtag are outlined, it is important to turn to the discussion of the intent and meaning behind it. As it was already mentioned, while the hashtag entered the digital space almost immediately after the resumption of hostilities, the society that was fully consumed by military action and the COVID-19 pandemic did not have time to engage in any debate or discussion about the content and meaning of victory that the slogan was propagating. The study makes a distinction between the intent and the conceptualization of the meaning behind the hashtag. This separation is done to draw a distinction between the consumption and active co-development of the narrative as well as emphasize the differences between the agencies of the consumers and co-creators.

The table below highlights the spectrum of the answers regarding the intent/goal behind the creation of the hashtag. It becomes evident that the Armenian society believes that the road to victory is multidimensional and it is possible to achieve it through pan-Armenian mobilization that supports the army morally and financially and is augmented by dissemination of accurate information and countering/debunking misinformation disseminated by the other side. While this complex conceptualization of the intent behind the hashtag allows us to speak about the ways

that the Armenian society saw the road to victory, given the digital era that we currently live in it is important to pay separate attention to the role that people assign to media wars in the modern military conflicts. Almost 13%² of the population thought that digital content is created to win parallel wars in the media field. This underlines the importance of social media, digital narratives, and hashtag activism as structural pillars of modern-day conflicts. Through active engagement with the digital content via hashtag activism, ordinary citizens develop an additional identity of “cyber soldiers” that are fighting for the just cause. For example, a Facebook Group called “Armenian Cyber Army” that has around 8 thousand members³ used the digital space provided to post diverse content in different languages about the military actions that were taking place in Nagorno-Karabakh. In this sense, victory is being conceptualized as not only winning the physical battlefield but also the digital, which arguably has a much wider audience.

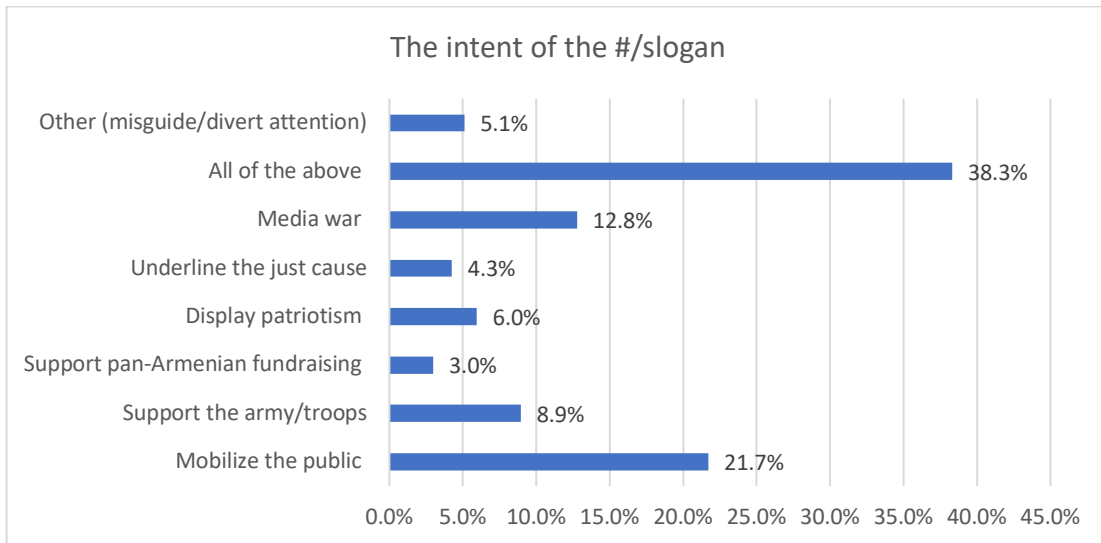


Table 3: Perception about the intent behind the hashtag/slogan

One of the limitations of the study was the timing when the survey was conducted. The results of the military actions, the territorial and human losses suffered by Armenia, and the subsequent

² If we add to this number those who answered “all of the above,” the number will be significantly higher.

³ The membership was significantly higher during the 44-day war.

political crisis that developed in Armenia, most likely have affected the way some respondents retrospectively assessed the intent behind the hashtag/slogan. In particular, 5% of the population believes that the outcome of the conflict/war was pre-determined before even the outbreak of the hostilities, and the patriotic slogans and hashtags were used to divert the attention from the political covert processes that were underway that resulted in “capitulation.”

Conceptualization of victory

The concept of victory is highly underdeveloped within the Armenian society. The recent war underlined this large gap within the Armenian public discourse even more dramatically. Just under 50% of the population thought of victory as military defeat of the other side without any territorial advancements. The previous status quo in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict dominated the public discourse since 1994. The cease-fire that resulted in significant territorial gains for the Armenian side and de facto security for the ethnic Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh through the establishment of a controlled and demarcated contact line was framed as a victory. While the analysis of the essence and value of the victory in the First Karabakh war is outside of the scope of this paper, the earlier conceptualization of victory that is based on the lived experiences of a significant segment of the Armenian population arguably has affected the current perceptions of victory.

Separate and parallel narratives of both sides about each other, security concerns that the Armenian population has not only based on their lived experiences, historical trauma, and intensified military/nationalistic rhetoric from the Azerbaijani side results in the conceptualization of victory in the exclusionary terms. International recognition of Artsakh is regarded as a guarantee for the physical, cultural protection of ethnic Armenians living there, as

well as a culmination of the just fight for self-determination. 28% of the population framed victory within the international law realm equating it to international recognition of Artsakh.

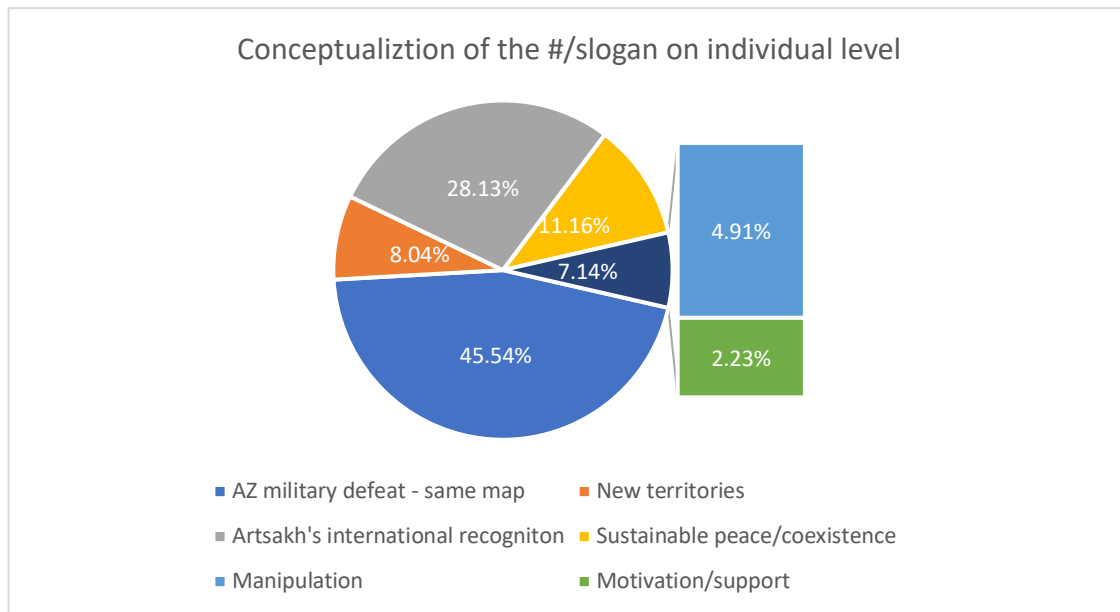


Table 4: Perception of the concept "Victory"

The narratives that emphasized separation, differences, and exclusiveness on both sides for over two decades, as well as several widely publicized cases of xenophobia and ethnic hatred (Ramil Safarov’s pardon by the Azerbaijani president, inability of the Armenian delegation to participate in Eurovision song contest in Baku due to security concerns, inability of the Armenian soccer player to travel to Baku as part of the English Primer League team again due to security concerns) further framed victory in very exclusive and segregated terms. Only 11% of the population envisioned victory as a situation where sustainable peace and coexistence with the neighbors are ensured.

Armenian society is diverse. It includes not only Armenians in Armenia but also a very large Diaspora almost in every country in the world. Diaspora itself is also very diverse. It includes immigrants from the late 1800s, a large wave of those who escaped the Genocide of 1915, and a new wave of immigrants during the post-Soviet stage. While the earlier generations

of immigrants might have an only emotional connection to Armenia as homeland, the recent immigrants often have family, friends, and other relatives still living in Armenia. The difference in perception among representatives of Diaspora and Armenia was significant especially regarding military and diplomatic dimensions of victory. While residents of Armenia who are in the proximity of the conflict and experience first-hand the consequences of any escalations, largely framed the victory in military terms. On the other hand, representatives of the Diaspora were almost twice as likely to view victory through a diplomatic lens. One can argue that exposure to the host country's participatory governance processes, democratic values have influenced perceptions about possibilities of conflict resolution that fall beyond immediate military actions. Given the difference in emphasis on military and diplomatic framing of victory among the representatives of these two groups of Armenians, it was interesting to find out that there was no significant difference between the conceptualization of inclusive peace among the respondents.

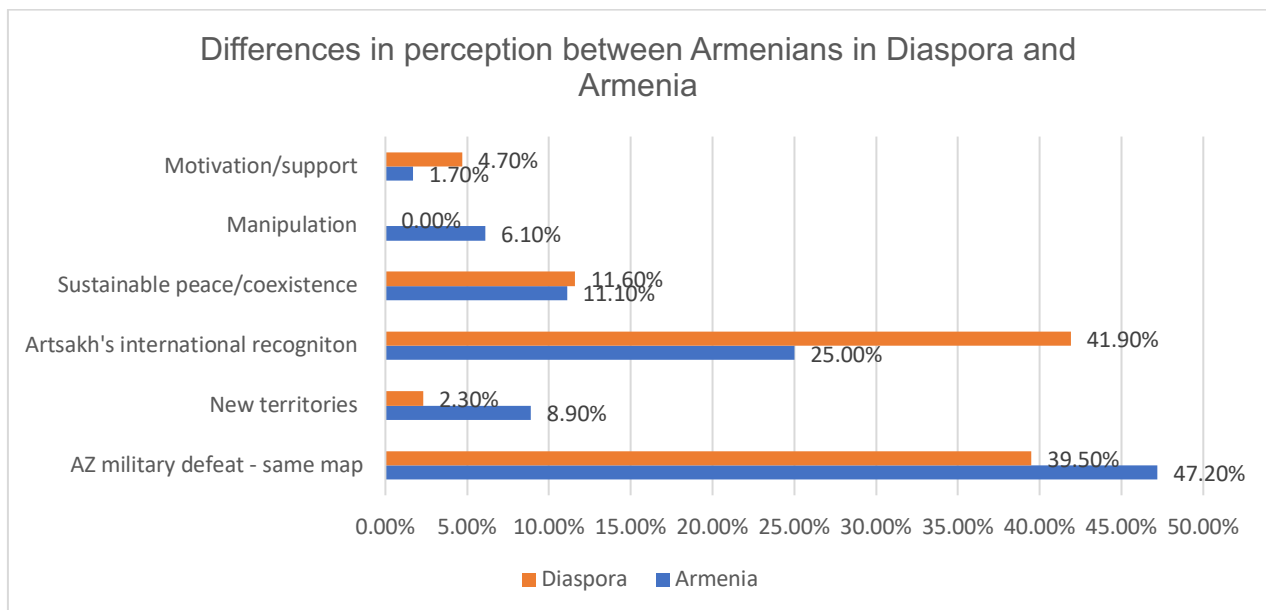


Table 5: Conceptualization of peace among Armenians in Armenia and Diaspora

#հաղթելունը slogan was widely used within the Armenian digital space both by

Diaspora Armenians and residents of Armenia. Largely regarded as a creation of the government institutions the hashtag/slogan generated significant support within the Armenian public and was further shared and developed to mobilize the public, underline the just fight of the Armenian people, support the troops among other things. Retrospectively thinking some respondents currently view the slogan as a tool for manipulation in the hands of the Armenian leadership that was used to divert attention to back door deals that some believe led to Armenia's defeat.

The concept of defeat within the Armenian public discourse

The Second Karabakh war ended on November 10, 2020, as abruptly as it started. The majority of the Armenian population was blindsided by the announcement of the nine-point agreement that included surrendering significant territories by the Armenian armed forces. Almost immediately a wave of public outrage rolled through Armenia. Angry crowds stormed Prime Minister's residence, National Assembly and even assaulted the Parliament speaker (Daily Sabah 2020). Public anger over being misguided throughout the 44 days of the war, a significant number of casualties, several hundred prisoners of war, and lack of responsible and accountable leadership has created deep divisions within the Armenian society and resulted in an ongoing political crisis. Within this uneasy and unstable political and social context, it becomes even more important to understand how defeat is conceptualized within the Armenian public discourse, what actors are seen as being primarily responsible for the defeat, and what vision of the future does the Armenian society hold today.

The outcome of the Second Karabakh war is hardly contested. The overwhelming majority of the Armenian population believes that Armenia lost the war. Surrendering of the territories, including the town of Shushi, leaving behind numerous cultural and historical sites

such as Dadivank Monastery, St. Ghazanchetsots church and virtually losing land connection with the remaining of Artsakh is clearly viewed as defeat by the majority of the Armenian population.

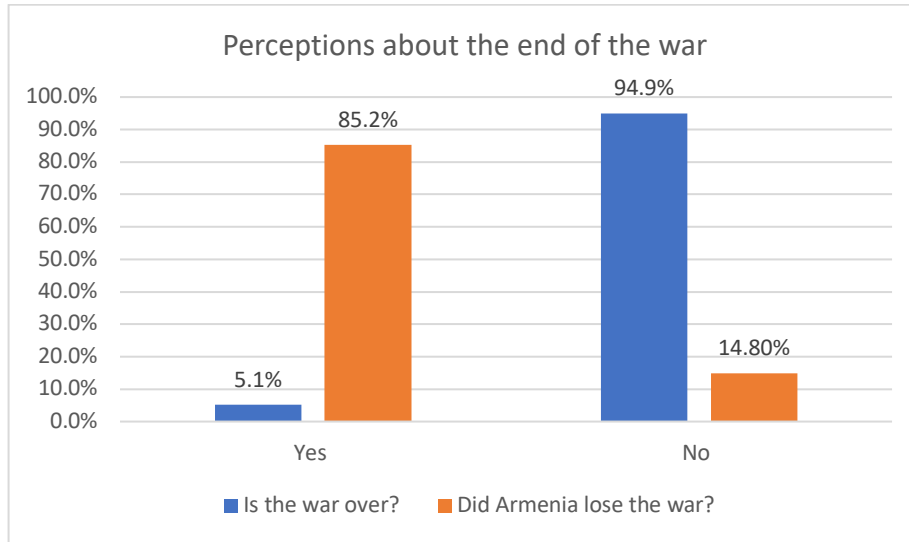


Table 6: Perceptions about the outcome of the war

Even though at least 15% of the population thinks that the war was not lost, it can be argued that this conceptualization is reflective of public perception that Azerbaijan did not win either. The presence of a significant Russian military contingent as peacekeepers on the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, perhaps, is framed as Azerbaijan’s defeat, since it was not able to gain full control over the territory. This conceptualization that falls largely under the lose-lose category, needs to be further explored during the follow-up in-depth interviews.

Armenian and Azerbaijani societies have lived in a situation of perpetual conflict for over three decades now. The military advantage has changed several times during these 30 years. And even though the most dramatic changes happened in 1994 and 2020, in the minds of most of the Armenian population, the war did not end there. The conceptualization of this situation as a transitory between this and the next stage of open military confrontation is fraught with further politicization of the conflict at the national level, and manipulation of the threat of war for

political purposes. In addition, it also implies that the Armenian society is not ready yet to transition to a qualitatively new stage of conflict resolution that excludes a military solution to the conflict.

The defeat in the Second Karabakh war resulted in a widespread sense of loss within the Armenian society. While Armenians grieve the loss of historical lands, cultural and historic monuments, the lost human life is a central narrative element that will shape already traumatized Armenian identity for the years to come. As a nation that has not recovered from the trauma of the Armenian genocide over a century ago, the Armenian public is extremely sensitive to any action that targets the existence of the nation at its core. The majority of casualties during the recent war were military conscripts aged 18 to 20. The social implications of such a significant gap in the demographic fabric of the country are very much recognized in Armenia, which makes the Armenian public sensitive to not only the emotional dimension of the lost life but also its long-lasting effects on society.

In addition to physical loss (human life and land), Armenians conceptualized the defeat in a form of a moral loss. The concept of "moral victory" holds a specific place within the Armenian public and historic discourse. Historically many military defeats against unequal revalry were baptized as "moral victory." This concept is so deeply embedded with the Armenian public discourse that is being applied to such areas as sports games, international song contests, and much more. Indifference and non-involvement of the international community, as well as the fact that Armenia lost the war to two parties which it considers historical enemies (Azerbaijan and Turkey) stripped the Armenian public from any possibility of claiming "moral victory." This new dimension of moral loss coupled with the human and territorial losses creates a situation where the defeat in the war is equated to a total loss.

The fact of the defeat of the Armenians in the Second Karabakh war can hardly be contested. The American president John F. Kennedy is often quoted for saying “Victory has a thousand fathers, but defeat is an orphan.” Who lost the war and who is responsible for the defeat? The answers to these questions can help think about the future and outline actors that can be tasked with building peace. While the majority of Armenians believe that this was the first and foremost government's defeat, the understanding that in the long run, it was the Armenian public and Armenian people that lost is also dominant within the society. Armenian people lost a substantial segment of young and capable generation, the only territorial gains that Armenia had since Bagratid Dynasty are lost, the democratic advancements of the past several years have been undermined by a deepening political crisis and the faith of prisoners of war is still unknown. Even though the majority of the population believes that it was the government that was defeated in the war, the Armenian public discourse draws a line between all government agencies and the army and soldiers. Within this discourse, the Armenian army is placed outside of the Ministry of Defense and is viewed as sacred. Soldiers are conceptualized as “sons of Mother Armenia” who are defending the motherland and fallen soldiers are eternally glorified. So, while both the government (with all its branches and agencies) and the Armenian people lost the war, the Armenian army and the Armenian soldiers are viewed as those who paid the ultimate scarifies and remained undefeated.

The Armenian society accepts the fact of the defeat and loss in the war, however, there is a significant division in the perceptions about the main actors who are responsible for this defeat. The deep political crisis that unfolded in Armenia immediately after the signing of the November 10 agreement underlined the division within the society of those who support the current government and the previous regime. Even though many people believe that both governments

are responsible for the current outcome, the current government comes under attack for the outcome of the second war. Within this large spectrum of perceptions, the one that requires separate attention is the perception about the role of outsiders in this process. The dominance of the perception about the central role of outside actors in deciding the outcome of the war points to the perception of lack of agency in resolving the conflict on their own. The tendency to explain and justify things using larger geopolitical and even colonial narratives can have significant negative implications for Armenian society. Inability to develop and enhance own agency can result in increased susceptibility to outside narrative patterns and create more polarization and division within the society.

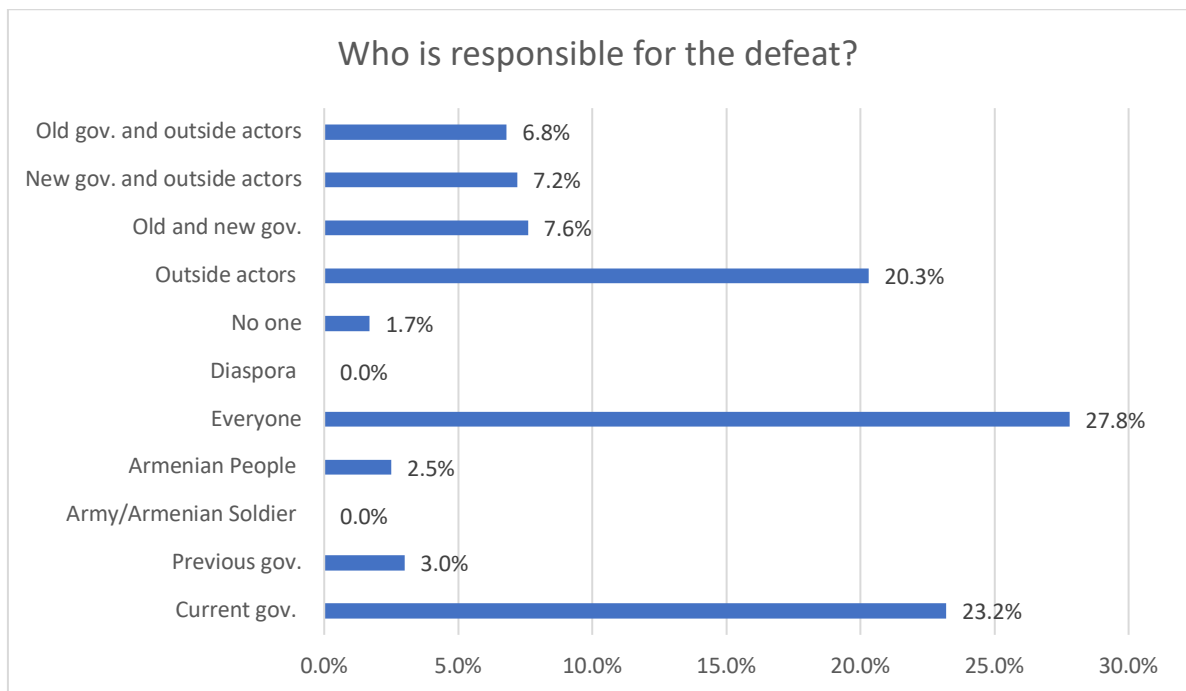


Table 7: Responsibility of defeat

The perceptions about the role of external actors in the outcome of the war are also part of the popular narrative about the reasons behind the defeat in the war. The Armenian public largely attributes the defeat to external rather than internal factors. The majority of the

population believes that the defeat is a result of a combination of both internal and external factors, however, the external factors outweigh the local factors. Over 70% of the population believes that the reason why Armenia lost the war was Turkey’s strong military support to Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan’s significantly larger military budget that enabled it to create a more advanced and technically better-equipped army is cited as another reason by over 65% of the population. Within the Armenian discourse, the recent war is viewed as an unequal fight between a small Christian nation of three million against a giant Turkic alliance of over 90 million. While the centrality of external factors within the popular discourse overshadows internal factors, many Armenians looked within for reasons that lead to such devastating outcomes for the Armenian society. Among the local factors, lack of resources, inability to build a strong army, and incompetence of different parts of the government stand out. In fact, among those respondents who selected one single factor of defeat, 22% believed that incompetence is the leading reason.

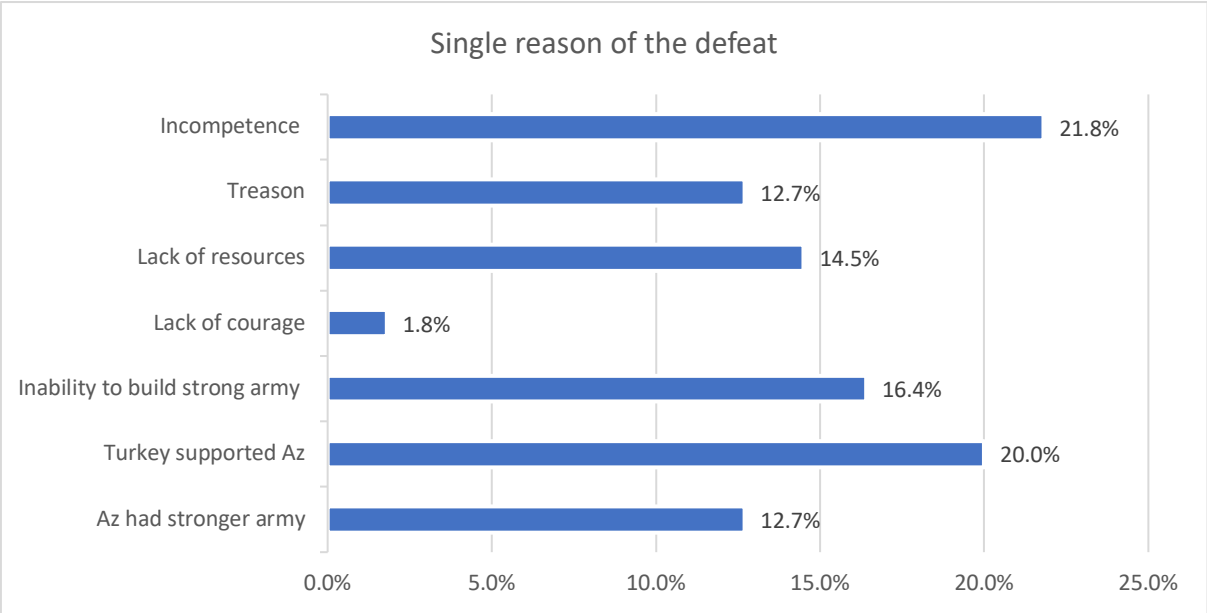


Table 8: Participants who've selected one single reason for defeat (28% of respondents)

An important element of the current narrative about the defeat in the war is an emphasis on treason at the highest level of the leadership. Within this narrative domain, the defeat is

explained not by the difference in the level of technical equipment of the armies, external allies, or manpower but by calculated steps of the Armenian leadership to negotiate backdoor deals with the enemy. This narrative not only supports the noble image of the Armenian soldier, emphasizes its courage and resilience but also picks up the elements of the historical Armenian narrative that all major defeats and misfortunes that happened in Armenian history were a result of treason.

Considering that the majority of the population believes that the war is not over yet, understanding the vision of the future of the Armenian society becomes critically important. The political instability in the country, conflicting information that is available through local media, and wide availability of outside media sources, including information from Turkish and Azerbaijani sources increases the level of uncertainty about the future.

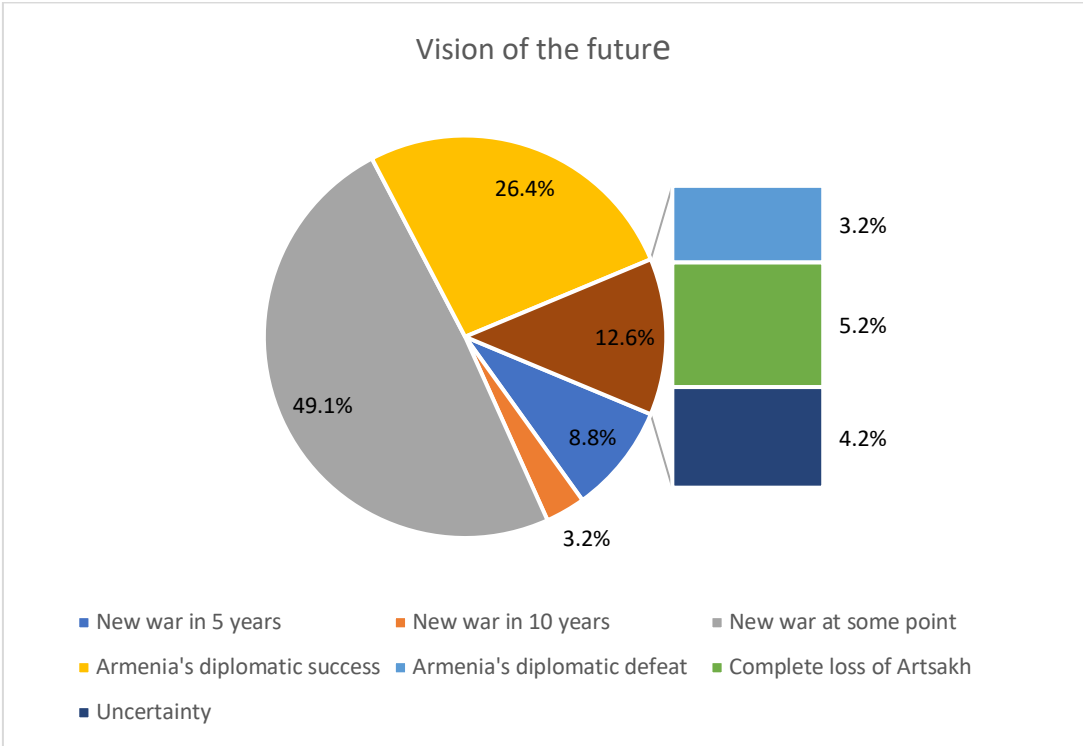


Table 9: The vision of the future

Current perceptions of the future are very dark within the Armenian society. The

presence of the Russian peacekeepers in the region for the next five years provides some sense of stability and security for this immediate future, however, the overwhelming majority of the population firmly believes that another war is inevitable between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This conceptualization of the future will certainly support stronger militarization of the country and can lead to the development of even more exclusive narratives. While over a quarter of the population believes that a diplomatic solution to the conflict is still possible it can be argued that this "victory" is also framed in very exclusionary terms that largely rules out co-existence between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. While military defeat has led to a major disappointment within the Armenian society, nevertheless, at least one-third of the population still believes in the message of #հաղթելուենք hashtag/slogan. This implies that in the future the Armenian public will readily support the development of the narratives that fall within the current conceptualization of "victory," which as we saw are very exclusive and are framed within the "win-lose" narrative framework.

To summarize, the defeat in the second Karabakh war not only was an only political-military loss but also represented a moral defeat for the Armenian population. Conceptualized as a defeat by the government and a major loss for the Armenian people, in the long run, defeat was nevertheless placed outside of the immediate agency of the Armenian people. The current public discourse not only draws the line between the external and local actors but also clearly separates the Armenian people and army from the official leadership and government institutions. Blame and responsibility for the defeat are assigned to the incompetence of the leadership, geological alliances, and other external factors. Within this environment, the Armenian army/soldier emerges as the only noble actor that sacrificed everything for the protection of the homeland.

Key takeaways

1. Social media has become a powerful tool for narrative development, transfer, and co-creation. The Second Karabakh war demonstrated that the narrative elements can catch on and continue to develop on their own even without a solid content and conceptualization behind them.
2. Armenian public is not only a passive consumer of the narratives that are developed by the government and state institutions but also actively participates in the co-creation and dissemination of these narrative patterns.
3. While highly underdeveloped, the concept of victory is framed in very exclusive terms within the Armenian social consciousness. Even though it does not imply military advancement or additional territorial gains and losses of the other side, it certainly implies complete separation from the enemy. Such exclusive conceptualization of victory does not allow for space for reconciliatory conversations to develop. Even though very little time has elapsed from the end of the war, and many painful issues such as the return of prisoners of wars, complete count of casualties, etc., are still outstanding, some preliminary conversations about the meaning of victory and the future need to be developing within the Armenian society.
4. Even before the war Armenian society had a very difficult time separating the conflict with Turkey from the conflict with Azerbaijan. The unresolved trauma of the Armenian Genocide that is central to Armenian identity has affected the perceptions of several generations of Armenians about friends and foes in the region. Unfortunately, Turkey's open and heavy involvement in the recent war and celebration of victory in Azerbaijan permanently added this narrative layer to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict making the

survival of the Armenian state and the nation the central element of it.

5. The conviction of the Armenian population that another war is inevitable, the recent experience in the war, will certainly lead to the development of more exclusive, nation-centric narratives where survival of the nation and the Armenian state will be emphasized.

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